

# Teenage kicks

Vocational training provides a defined career path for 15/16 year olds in Switzerland, offering practical training and theory for individuals in their chosen field. But is choosing a career at such a young age a good idea? **Professor Kurt Häfeli** and **Dr Claudia Schellenberg** explain their findings and why a vocational career may be more beneficial for some than others



**To begin, could you explain how the Vocational Education and Training programme (VET) in Switzerland works?**

At the age of 15/16, most young people leave school, choose from more than 250 different occupations and begin a vocational education. They spend three to four days a week in an enterprise and one or two days in a vocational school. Switzerland – and other countries such as Germany and Austria – has a strong VET system. Experts think that this early match between economic and individual demands is a key factor for the low unemployment rate among young people.

**What questions do you aim to answer in your research into the VET system?**

Switzerland was (and still is) a very prosperous country with a high standard of living, healthy economy and low unemployment rate. As a result, there seemed no apparent necessity to question how the economy and educational system function. However, globalisation, demographic changes and growing social inequality in Switzerland have led to fundamental societal concern about our educational system, leading to the creation of research projects such as this.

For us, the main questions to be studied were: how well does the transition from school to VET and from VET to employment work? Is the VET system flexible enough to meet the challenges in the economy? Another important question

was: to what extent are early influences in adolescence relevant for later career development and success?

**How did you approach this research challenge?**

The central topic of our investigation was to identify common career patterns, and differences between individuals and occupations in predicting these patterns. For example, one important question was: what are the determining influences for a successful career? We distinguished objective (status) and subjective (satisfaction) career success. This led us to ask: can we predict success with variables measured in adolescence?

Our results show that the completed school track and teacher's ratings at age 15/16 can predict middle-age career status. Factors such as cognitive ability and personality traits (self-esteem, conscientiousness, etc.) also play an important role.

For the subjective side of career success – satisfaction – these early variables are not relevant. Here, current work conditions (such as work autonomy or social climate) are probably more important than earlier influences.

**Gender is an important area of study in your research. How does the VET system affect men and women differently?**

In their vocational choice, women show preferences for typically 'feminine' (eg. social) and men for typically 'masculine' (eg. crafts, technical) occupations. In many cases, these occupations do not offer the same career possibilities. Women continue tertiary-level education far less often than men and frequently work part-time. All these factors hinder subsequent career

development and contribute to a lower professional status later on.

Gender was, and probably still is, an important factor in occupational status. Women start well, gaining good apprenticeships and jobs. But their progression slows during their 20s and early 30s. Men tend to invest in further education while a lot of women eventually become mothers, with about 50 per cent interrupting their career. Later on, the majority of women enter the labour force again, but mostly on a part-time basis.

**Do you feel that the VET system is working?**

Overall, we conclude that the VET system in Switzerland has worked well for the generation now in middle adulthood and seems to be working well for the younger generation as well. The system is open and flexible, and offers broad possibilities for further and continuing education. However, for young people at risk, the range of apprenticeships is still very narrow and the chance of finding a satisfying job is limited. Here, more effort is needed for constructive private and public partnership.

**How do you intend to continue your research in this field?**

Even though we have answered some important questions, many remain open which should be clarified in a follow-up study. We would like to investigate the careers and career patterns of different groups; for example, comparing occupational fields which are affected differently by technological change. We also want to study groups with precarious work patterns and living situations to look at possible risk and protective factors.



## A career for life

A team from the **University of Applied Sciences of Special Needs Education** in Switzerland is exploring how the choice of a vocational career at an early age affects young people throughout the rest of their lives. Based on a longitudinal study spanning more than 30 years, the researchers hope to see whether there really is a career for life

**THE WORD 'VOCATION'** derives from the religious vocabulary, literally meaning a 'call from God'. Whilst many would not necessarily see the religious significance of choosing to cut hair or training to become a carpenter, a job that people both enjoy and are competent in is something all workers aspire to.

In Switzerland, when children reach the age of 15/16, they can choose either to continue on an academic route or enter into a Vocational Education and Training programme (VET). VET provides a secure path into a range of different careers for youngsters and balances both practical and theoretical elements.

Youth unemployment in Switzerland is a fraction of that seen in the UK and other European nations. Whilst this statistic is not wholly attributable to VET, it is thought to play a part in providing a clear passage into the workforce.

### GENDER BIAS?

VET is not without its critics and significant questions have been raised as to its appropriateness. In Switzerland, as with the majority of central European countries, female educational attainment exceeds that of young males, yet the careers of those who

chose to follow the VET route reflect greater male success and achievement, although not necessarily satisfaction.

In a bid to analyse the successes and failures of VET, and in particular the gender differences in career development, a group of researchers in Switzerland – led by Professor Kurt Häfeli and Dr Claudia Schellenberg from the University of Applied Sciences of Special Needs Education in Zurich – aimed to elucidate whether the career decisions of a young individual translate into satisfaction in middle age.

### ESSENTIAL DATA

The Swiss team explored many fundamental questions in the study, such as whether VET participants experienced continuity or a change in their chosen career, and whether people were happy in their career and, indeed, what constitutes career happiness. The group also attempted to determine influences for a successful career. Delving deeper into the data, they looked into differences of experience amongst groups in different occupations, and particularly differences between the sexes.

Providing a strong basis for the investigation, Häfeli, Schellenberg and colleagues were able

to follow up on the Zurich Longitudinal Study 'From middle-school to adulthood' (ZLSE). ZLSE followed the lives and careers of almost 500 members of the Swiss population from 1978–2012, tracking their progress in 10 separate surveys. Participants entered the study at 15/16 years of age – a key time in educational development – and continued to participate until they were 49.

To tease out the information they needed from ZLSE, such as occupational status, personality and work environment, the researchers captured data using reliable and rigorous methodological frameworks. They also used various other methods, including regression analysis and structural equation modelling, to interrogate the raw data.

### TRICKY QUESTIONS

Interestingly, the Swiss team discovered that, when pushed to choose a career (as perhaps may be expected), the vocational choices of participants conformed to traditionally defined gender roles. However, what happened over the following years makes for interesting reading. Whilst young women entered the VET process with higher average educational attainment, over the following decades there were persistent

## INTELLIGENCE

### CONTINUITY AND CHANGE: DETERMINANTS OF PROFESSIONAL AND PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT

#### OBJECTIVES

To determine how well the transition from school to the Vocational Education and Training programme (VET) and from VET to employment works. Is the VET system flexible enough to meet the challenges in the economy, and to what extent are early influences in adolescence relevant to later career development and success?

#### KEY COLLABORATORS

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**PROFESSOR DR KURT HÄFELI** studied psychology, pedagogy and social psychology at the University of Zurich and University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, USA. He has worked in the fields of vocational and adult education in public and private organisations for many years. Since 2002, Häfeli has been Head of Research and Development at the University of Applied Sciences of Special Needs Education, Zurich.

**DR CLAUDIA SCHELLENBERG** studied psychology, psychopathology of childhood and adolescence, journalism and communication at the University of Zurich, before postgraduate research in career counselling and human resources management at the universities of Bern, Fribourg and Zurich. Since 2008, she has been a scientific collaborator in the Research and Development section of the University of Applied Sciences of Special Needs Education, Zurich.

gender differences in career success. During the mid-20s and 30s, the traditional period for career acceleration and advancement among men, the careers of female participants seemed to stagnate, with much slower progression than that of their male counterparts.

The team posits a number of explanations for this disparity. It may be that the career choices of women do not offer the rapid advancement open to men; women are more likely to take career breaks, particularly after the birth of children, and are also more likely to work flexibly. During this period, men were also more likely to have access to additional training and development opportunities, which seems to have propelled them to greater career heights. This is clearly seen in the most recent survey, with 49 per cent of men in supervisory positions at age 49 and only 27 per cent of women in such positions.

#### DEFINING SUCCESS

Fundamental to the research was defining just what career success means – a task rather more complicated than initial thoughts would suggest. Success is a concept rather than an absolute, and its measurement is challenging for researchers.

In tackling this, the group created its own gender non-specific measures of success, incorporating both objective and subjective factors. Objective measures included the job title and status afforded to participants, as well as their pay, role and responsibilities. Subjective variables consisted of the participants' sense of satisfaction and intrinsic happiness with their chosen career. Using these measures, the team was able to explore whether participants' success could be accurately predicted. Importantly, teacher ratings and academic success at 15/16 provided an accurate predictor for mid-career status and success.

More complicated and less predictable was career satisfaction. In this dimension, work conditions and personality traits have a far greater impact. It is also likely that intrinsic satisfaction may lie outside the workplace, with family and economic status important contributory factors.

## MORE QUESTIONS THAN ANSWERS

The study itself has helped to make clear the benefits of VET in providing an entry into the workforce for youngsters ill-suited to a career in academia. But it also poses many new questions for the researchers. In the future, the team would like to investigate the different career patterns of those in a range of industries, comparing both societal and technological impacts upon individuals and populations.

Another topic highlighted by Häfeli and Schellenberg's study was personality – an important dimension in the workplace, impacting upon career success and overall satisfaction in a multitude of ways. Certain personality traits are clearly beneficial in specific careers, and may lead to certain career choices. Equally, it is very likely that career choice has an impact upon personality. To shed light on this complicated interplay, Häfeli and Schellenberg have just received new funding for a follow-up study.

The Swiss scientists are also interested in exploring health problems in middle age. "A third of our sample complained about health impairments," explains Häfeli. "For this, we found early antecedents: substance abuse in youth (especially alcohol) has a detrimental influence on health even 35 years later, while physical activity has a protective influence." The impact of these findings on health policy are clear, so the team aims to look into this subject in more detail as a factor in career and life outcomes.

#### SATISFACTION GUARANTEED

The study has proven that VET is successful in providing an open door to rewarding careers for youngsters, but it seems to disproportionately benefit men. Whilst this is not seen as a failing within the system itself, it is a concern, and represents a clear challenge for policy makers.

The majority of participants remained in the career path they chose as teenagers. This demonstrates the importance of vocational preparation in school and counselling. It is encouraging that, for many, the decisions made at such a young age have been the right ones.



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