

# Preceding and then Participating in the Swiss Apprenticeship System

Dave Turner

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## **SECTION 1 – INTRODUCTION**

### **1. Preamble**

In recent years, there has been growing and public recognition of the positive performance of the Swiss Apprenticeship System and the preceding collaboration between key stakeholders (especially schools and employers). International studies of vocational education and training carried out by such bodies as the ILO, OECD and the European Community consistently refer to the Swiss system as offering valuable practice. An increasing number of American and British journalists have written in glowing terms about the Swiss experience. A range of these articles and reports are available from the researcher.

### **2. The OECD Skills Strategy**

The relevance of the Swiss experience to current international thinking on skills and pathways for young people is made clearly evident in the 2012 OECD Skills Strategy and the associated document “Better Skills, Better Jobs, Better Lives, Strategic Approach to Skills Policies”.

For access to the document please refer to [www.oecd/education/SkillsStrategy](http://www.oecd/education/SkillsStrategy) The OECD Skills Strategy makes the following key points:

- Skills development is simply much more effective if the world of learning and the world of work are linked together.
- Learning in the workplace allows young people to move beyond the classroom and develop both the hard skills (working on the most modern equipment) and the soft skills of real world workplace.
- Hands-on workplace learning can motivate disengaged people to learn and to create a smoother transition.
- Helping young people to gain a foothold in the labour market and into jobs must be a priority.
- The success of a Skills Strategy depends upon:
  1. Firms developing best-practice management techniques and aligning business strategy and human resource practices
  2. Quality and independent career guidance must be a critical feature of public policy
  3. Fostering competition, entrepreneurship and the spirit of enterprise
  4. Collaboration between education and employers is essential.

### 3. School – Employer Collaboration – Leading up to Apprenticeship

An integral component of the Swiss system is the work between schools, employers, parents and students that prepares the students to make informed choices about learning and work pathways at around 15 years of age. The recently published UK report “Closing the Gap – how employees can change the way young people see Apprenticeships” praises this collaboration between school and employers – “in Switzerland work experience is very much about career exploration and it is preceded by career fairs and workplace visits; multiple placements are common”(page 5). In the same page of this Education and Employers Taskforce and Price Waterhouse Coopers report, is a statement from the Assistant Director at the UK Commission for Employment and Skills (Judith Compton). For reference please refer to [http://www.pwc.com/et\\_EE/EE/publications/assets/pub/closing-the-gap\\_1.pdf](http://www.pwc.com/et_EE/EE/publications/assets/pub/closing-the-gap_1.pdf)

*“People around the world regard the Swiss model of Apprenticeship as world-beating. One of the things that make it so good is its strategic approach to initial Apprentice recruitment. Employers work closely with schools to make sure that young people have a real understanding of what their Apprenticeships have to offer..... Such effective recruitment strategies play a key role in explaining the high retention and success rates of Swiss Apprentices”.*

4. **This research project and report** examines the key ingredients of this preceding collaboration (in years 7 – 9 of general schooling). With the assistance of the Swiss Embassy (London) and a local Swiss German contact person/interpreter (Ms Heike Kamm), this report has been produced. The researcher has visited Switzerland regularly (over the last 30 years) and has a significant network of friends who all have a strong commitment to the value of VET and apprenticeships. Interviews were conducted with:

- 10 young apprentices
- 6 parents
- 5 teachers
- 4 employers
- The Career Counselling Service (Zurich Canton).

The research occurred in the Swiss German region of Switzerland (Zurich and surrounds – 70% of the Swiss are Swiss German speaking). The report also outlines the Swiss Apprenticeship System, and the culture that underpins Swiss commitment to apprenticeships. The final section of the report comments upon the relevance of the Swiss experience to Australia.

## SECTION 2 – THE SWISS APPRENTICESHIP SYSTEM

1. **The Swiss Apprenticeship System** is at the very heart of the strong teenage labour market of Switzerland (teenage unemployment rates are lower than 5%). It is also an integral, and numerically the most significant component of 15 – 19 education provision. Nearly 70% of all Swiss young people undertake an apprenticeship between the ages of 15 – 19 and there is a 91% completion rate. Apprentices spend 1 – 2 days in a school and 3 – 4 days in the workplace. In general terms, one day/week is spent on occupational related training, and one day a week on Language, Communication and Society (general education).

Since 1994, apprentices who have strong academic skills can also undertake a vocational Baccalaureate and apply to a University of Applied Sciences without taking an entrance examination. In 2011, 13% of all VET graduates had obtained this accreditation.

Apprenticeships are dedicated to the initial entry of young people to the labour market. Nearly 100% of apprenticeships in Switzerland are taken by teenagers. “They are not seen as a default pathway for those who are facing difficulty in their transition” (Swiss Embassy).

At approximately 15 years of age, students with parental support, choose between academic and vocational pathways. At the age of 19, apprentices are ready and free to travel, party and/or build upon that platform. They can take a range of options – vocational, professional and university degree studies.

The early age for making such a decision must be seen in context with the **connectivity** of the mainstream (academic and vocational) pillars of education and training. Parents and students firmly believe that the young person can change their mind and/or progress in their learning beyond the apprenticeship. Apprenticeships are not seen as limiting options, and they are definitively not considered to be second rate, a dead-end-street or represent one-way-traffic.

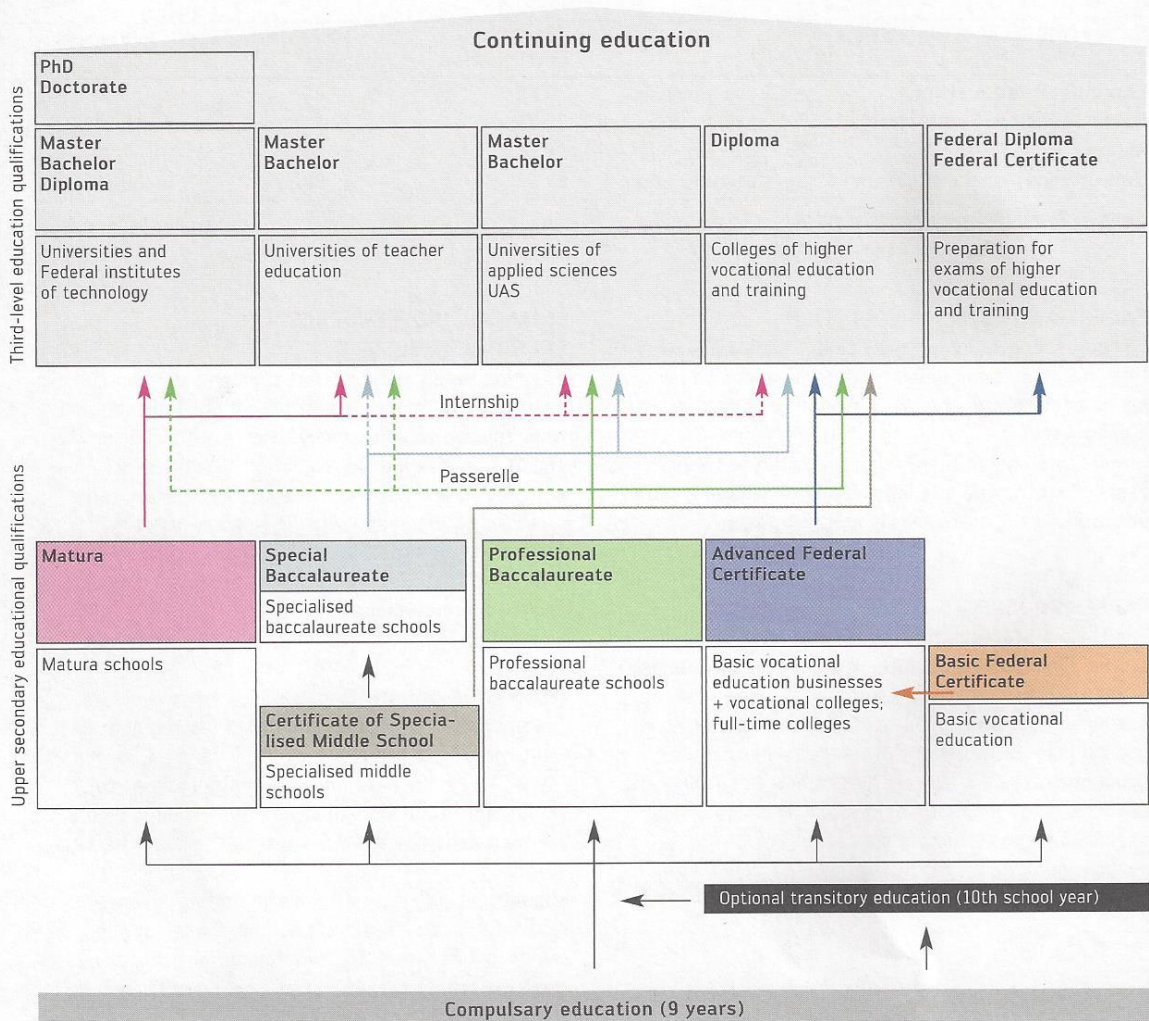
The connectivity of the system and its key component points is illustrated in the following diagram.

Diagram of the Swiss Education System – pages 6/7 of the publication “What Happens After School?” – information for parents, published by the Swiss Service Centre for Vocational Training/Study and Career Counselling SDBB Berne 2008

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Introduction

# Diagram of the Swiss education system (simplified)



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--- Education pathways (dashed lines): no direct access; additional entry requirements needed, e.g. Passerelle exam, 12-month practical work experience, a preparatory course and/or supplementary exam



## Education system – flexible yet coordinated

In 2004, Switzerland enacted a new law on vocational education and training which coordinates basic vocational education and higher secondary education. This means that the Swiss education system now offers a whole range of flexible education pathways.

After completing the compulsory education, your son or daughter can choose from a wide range of education and training courses.

### EVERY QUALIFICATION OPENS NEW DOORS

Each stage in the education system leads to a qualification which then in turn equips your child for the next educational level. The current design of the Swiss education system means that it does not matter greatly what initial educational or career choice your child has made. Of greater importance today is that he or she takes full advantage of all the educational opportunities available.

### COMMON AND NOT-SO-COMMON CAREER PATHS

Your daughter is gifted and very determined. She knows what she wants and is prepared to work hard to achieve it. She passes her matura and has the choice of going on to university or a federal institute of technology. Your daughter chooses an alternative route: she is still interested in further education but prefers more practice-oriented study programmes. So, she gets an internship, earns her first wages and goes on to study at a university of applied sciences.

Your son is rather easygoing and studying is not his thing. So, he opts for the two-year basic vocational education programme.

During this time, he realises that he enjoys this type of work-study. He goes on to study for and passes the Advanced Federal Certificate. He now really enjoys studying and sits his professional baccalaureate. He then takes the supplementary „Passerelle“ exam, which will entitle him to study at university.

### COMMITMENT AND INVESTMENT

In principle, your daughter or son can choose from any education pathway. For some, progress is slower, detours are made and it takes longer to reach goals. For others, the progression is more straightforward and shorter. The future career that your son or daughter finally pursues will depend on personal commitment, investment and perseverance.

## 2. Cultural Factors that underpin the Swiss System

There is a set of cultural factors that have helped to develop and then sustain the Swiss Apprenticeship System.

1. **The Momentum and Reputation of an Entrenched System** – The basic structure of VET in Switzerland has been in place for 40 years or more. The majority of parents of today's teenagers went through the same system and fully understand it, and appreciate its value. They see it as normal to not only encourage their child to take up an apprenticeship, but also to support their teenager financially (as they would an academic Matura student aged 15 – 19). They do not place any less value on the vocational route than academic. Parents sign the "training contract" with an employer and are involved in their child's career planning.

Many managers, supervisors and even business leaders have undertaken an apprenticeship themselves. They value the "practical route" taken by their employees and acknowledge the value of having 19 – 20 year old workers who are now apprenticed, yet keen to keep learning. They are able to combine the energy and innovation of "youth", yet be grounded in common sense and hands-on experience.

Teachers understand the system, recognise the connectivity and that "no options are closed". They are used to the idea of teaching that is flexible and can complement the 3 – 4 days a week of their students at work.

2. **Family Support** – The 14-15 year old teenager is in transition yet still a child. Naturally parents and teachers are keenly involved in the career development of their child. Apart from financial support, parents are generally well informed about the integrity and reputation of enterprises that seek apprentices. They know that any such enterprise is accountable to an independent Canton "Inspector" and that each firm must have a trained Apprenticeship Mentor. They also know their child will be attending school for 2 days a week and they will have the support of teachers.

Parents and the extended family are a very important source of support to current and prospective apprentices. The wages (10 – 15% of the average adult wage in year 1 and 40% year 3 and 4) are welcomed, but it is the quality of training, learning and career development support, that is of paramount importance to parents in Switzerland. Apprenticeships are viewed as a licence for the future, rather than a mechanism of cheap labour.

3. **The value placed upon careers education, independent information and advice and transition support** – Classroom and "home" teachers in years 7 – 9 take on a key role in monitoring the career and pathway development of their students (more details in section 3 of this report). Students who cannot decide between the academic and vocational or who cannot acquire an apprenticeship in year 9 can stay at school for an additional year (year 10). In that year, the focus for teachers and students is to "find a pathway".



The Cantons (like a State Education Department) monitor the schools performance, by placing an emphasis upon positive destinations of young people. School “league ladders” which highlight marks are not published in Switzerland.

4. **Independent Career Counsellors** are available to all young people. Their career development centres update teaching staff on both labour market trends and career planning tools and techniques. In the Canton of Zurich, 100 FTE independent counsellors are available to support a teenage population of approximately 170,000 young people.
5. **Professional and Industry Associations and Work Councils** are influential. They design the curriculum of a relevant apprenticeship, they are passionate advocates for skills, training and apprenticeships for young people. Almost 100% of apprenticeships are dedicated to young people and their entry into the labour market. Many parents, relatives and family friends of the teenager are workers themselves; employees who are connected to the skills agenda. The social capital between employers, schools and family seems to be strong. Perhaps this is strengthened by the Swiss commitment to quality, hard work, skills and what might be called “a predisposition to precision”. The Swiss economy is known for its investment in “high value added” skills and activity (manufacturing or service) – as well as international banking!!
6. **Swiss Neutrality and Independence** – a historical commitment by this nation to being non-aligned and self sufficient was presented to the researcher as a reason for the nation’s commitment to “growing your own talent”, through valuing skills development and practical hands-on learning. The idea of searching for excellence and striving for precision, the status accorded to the “master” of skills and practical knowledge, and the respect shown for the capacity to combine theory and practice are cultural traits that support a commitment to the Swiss Apprenticeship System and the vital role of VET in Education.

In conclusion, there are four observations from the researcher about the character of this culture which highly values apprenticeships;

- 99% of the Swiss attend state schools – there is no educational divide between “the elite” and “the apprenticed”. The 14 year old student and their parents believe that most CEOs will understand and value apprenticeships.
- 15 – 17 year olds who are not yet licensed to drive a car, are able to ride a moped (14), a scooter (16) or access a very good public transport system. Many Australian “minors” who wish to work and learn on the work site (and often at a range of sites) are placed at a distinct disadvantage due to their travel needs/requirements.
- The Swiss Apprenticeship System has served a fairly homogenous population in German speaking areas (where it is strongest) and it will face the increasing challenges of:
  - Cultural diversity in the youth population, especially from ex-Yugoslavia
  - Swiss companies being bought by “foreign” firms who do not have the same passion or cultural commitment to apprenticeships.

- The Swiss economy remains strong, “making things” remains important and the nation is even more wealthy (mean per capita income) than Australia (we are second, they are first); Businesses want, even need to recruit apprentices.

## SECTION 3 – WHAT HAPPENS IN YEARS 7 – 9 SCHOOLING?

“Who does what to support the 14 – 15 year olds to make such a big career decision”

### 1. The Class Home Teacher (in General Schooling years 7 – 9)

**The class/home teacher** is obligated to lead a one lesson on careers in each school week of year 8 and 9. They are a “consistent” adult figure in their students school life for they maybe a home or subject teacher for students in one, two or all three years (7 – 9) of this secondary and general schooling. They therefore know their students and they assist young people to compile a portfolio, they conduct careers education lessons and they review (annually) career plans and pathway preferences with the student and their parents. The portfolio is quite a substantial document and used when the student seeks an apprenticeship or work experience. It includes CV material, aptitude tests, self discovery reflections and a record of special courses or tests (e.g. fitness training for bricklayers). Teachers are encouraged to treat the destinations of their students as a priority (partially due to the urgency of the 14 year old decision making process) and teachers are relatively free of the pressure of school subject marks becoming the exclusive priority (no league ladders).

The home or class teacher is likely to be teaching core subjects such as German and Maths, and it is not unusual for some of that timetable space to be also dedicated to careers.

*“As we report to Cantons every year about the destinations of our year 9 students, we are recognised for our efforts to undertake such tasks as monitoring and making student portfolios, carrying out aptitude tests, and conducting pathway review sessions with both the student and parent” (Home Teacher – Rural School).*

Class teachers feel well supported by their colleagues and supervisors and it is not unusual for a student who has a close relationship with another teacher to go to that person and seek support. An IT apprentice (involved in this Swiss research) reflected back upon the role of a Maths teacher with whom he had a good relationship. That teacher called a meeting with the student and his parents as the student was unclear about pathway or preference. They agreed on a strategy for “last minute” work experience placements in IT, rather than in enterprises related to the previous and reducing vocational interest of the student in Building and Construction.

The supportive teacher knows that career education is a vital part of their job. They know that some students (who will apply for apprenticeships) will experience rejection and feel failure. They are trained and encouraged to support the year 9 students to deal with these matters and persevere.

## 2. The Independent Career Counsellor

The student, parent or teacher can access trained career counsellors for advice, information and career development materials from an independent career department. The CDC interviewed was from the Canton of Zurich. They had seven centres and 200 FTE career counsellors, half of which were dedicated to young people. The counsellors offer young people:

- Individual and independent counselling sessions to year 8 students
- A series of sessions (year 8/9) for students who are vocationally confused or at risk and/or for the year 10 students in transition
- Referral of an “at risk student” to a volunteer mentor (trained). Zurich has 200 – 300 such mentors and the success rate of support leading to positive pathway destination is 66%
- Procedure phone sessions for students who are seeking an apprenticeship.

In addition, the CDC:

- Refers apprentices to schools, so they can speak confidentially to students about their experiences
- Has at their disposal a large list of employers who are prepared to offer students work experience placements or trial apprenticeships
- Raises and maintains the profile of career education in the Canton Education Department. The Department has two Directorates, one of which is called “youth and Occupational Counselling”; so senior level advocacy for career education is strong.
- Develop and/or promote Social Media and other online resources for careers advice and development. Online resources play a key role in Switzerland. The UBS Bank, a major employer of apprentices mentioned three such resources. They were:
  - LENA – a government website that identifies all apprenticeship vacancies and it has a video on VET in Switzerland that enables a student or parent to “literally walk through the process” of applying for an apprenticeship [www.sbf.admin.ch](http://www.sbf.admin.ch)
  - OUTSY – a website that has the capacity to connect a student to an apprentice who is working and learning in the occupational area of interest to the student.
  - Kununa.com - a CDC video where a student can gain feedback from other apprentices.

If you seek more information about the role of CDC, the researcher has access to a detailed power point presentation (and the contact point ) prepared by Phillipp Dietrich, the Quality and Project Manager of the Occupational Counselling function at the CDC Zurich.

## Year 10 Safety Net

Naturally, there are certain 14 – 15 year old students in year 9 who do not know what they want to do, and often (but not always) do not have the academic grades necessary for the “academic” Matura. They may be considered as vocationally confused, or perhaps at risk of a successful transition. They may lack parental support and employer connections. Some of these young people will have tried to get an apprenticeship in year 9 and been unsuccessful. They are encouraged to participate in a year 10 Transition study.

The researcher met with a Year 10 Coordinator of such a Transition class who explained that the year 10 students at her school are divided into two groups. The less academic spend 2 days at school (core subjects such as German, Maths, General Studies) and spend 3 days a week on a work placement (long term). The second group, who are often students wishing to improve their academic performance and go to Matura or seek a more demanding apprenticeship, will be at school for 3 – 4 days a week and undertake a series of short term placements.

The year is about Transition – *“this is what year 10 is all about, finding a pathway and a career direction”*. The teacher also commented upon the overall Swiss approach. *“It is great for the restless young male (and sometimes female, as more girls than boys do the academic Matura), to get out of the classroom at 15 and work, then come back to school, professional education or University. My son is an example of this. We don’t have to motivate the student who really no longer wants to be at school”*.

### 3. The Parent (and/or Carer/Relatives)

**Parents** are expected to support their child in their apprenticeship, as they would support a child who is undertaking academic (Matura) studies. The parent must sign the training contract with an employer, on behalf of their 15 year old (apprenticed) child.

One cannot overlook the vital role played by parents, carers, relatives and family friends. Here exists a network of adults who are supporters of the apprenticeship and the 15 – 19 year old VET system. So many have undertaken an apprenticeship themselves, everyone knows someone who has!! *“You just grow up with it, so many adults around me did an apprenticeship, mum, dad and their friends” (Commerce Apprentice)*.

Parents play a key role in year 9 by:

- Attending “career journey” review sessions with home teachers
- Assisting their child to prepare applications and C Vs to possible employers
- Ensuring their child attends Career Expos and work experience placements
- Supporting the child to acquire work experience and/or trial apprenticeships
- Treating their apprentice teenager as they would an academic Matura student – same status, same financial support. *“Why wouldn’t we, it is the same but just a different way of doing your education” (Parent of IT Apprentice)*.

#### 4. The Employer Community

**Employers** are willing to organise visits for year 7/8 classes to their workplace, they offer work experience to year 8/9 students, and they provide trial apprenticeships for year 9 students. In fact, it is obligatory that each student who is interested in a vocational pathway undertake 2 – 3 weeks of work experience in one year. Employers are prepared to do this for both pragmatic business reasons (recruitment) and because it is the “Swiss way” (the norm). It is seen as a duty of business to make such a contribution and the “burden” is therefore shared across the employer community. Business leaders from Switzerland are more than likely to have completed an apprenticeship themselves, and then undertaken further professional or academic education than purely undertaken academic study.

A more detailed examination of the contribution of Swiss employers is as follows:

- In the later years of primary school, employers host a day where students attend the workplace of their parent and are introduced to the world of work. The day is called a “Future Day” in Switzerland. Part of this day reinforces the value placed on apprenticeships as well as academic education. The visits are then debriefed in the classroom
- In year 7, or at the latest in the beginning of year 8, student classes participate in a site and group tour of an enterprise. Students shadow, ask questions and meet with apprentices. This occurs before a student chooses between an academic or vocational pathway (15 – 19)
- In year 8 and/or early year 9, employers offer students a 3 – 5 day placement in their field of interest. *“They do a mix of hands-on tasks and have discussions with apprentices and their Apprentice Mentor. At the end of the placement, they do a small test on what they have learnt” (HR Director NESTAL Precision Engineering Company)*
- Companies welcome students to participate in work experience at any time of the year, or in school holidays. It is the norm for many companies to have 14 year old students at all times of the year.
- Employers also participate in Swiss Career Expos. Career “Expos” are conducted by local businesses or by professional associations or by large firms. Increasingly, they take on a “hands-on” format and they feature conversations between students and current apprentices about the world of work, and also promote the value of work experience placements and trial apprenticeships. In the case of larger employers such as NESTAL and UBS (Bank), the business organises half day information sessions for up to 20 – 25 year 9 students followed by a 1 – 2 hour session for parents are provided. The business explains their apprenticeship program and apprentices talk to students
- In year 9, employers offer “trial apprenticeships” or provide further work experience placements to students who are in the process of making a decision about what kind of apprenticeship they will undertake. Students are encouraged to write an application (practice!!) and take responsibility for organising their own trial.

This kind of placement is used as a “try before you buy” experience for both the employer and the student. Placement can involve one, two or even more students at the same time. The researcher has met with one young person who did nine of these trial apprenticeships. It is quite normal for students to do two or three.

- Teachers and schools encourage students to participate in these opportunities. Teachers and career counsellors are often in regular communication with employers (especially local/small businesses) about collaboration i.e. how can we as teachers better prepare students for work, and how can you as employers make work experience more effective.

## 5. Why and How do Employers make such a Commitment!

- **The How first** -: any employer of an apprentice (no matter how small) must have at their place of work an **Apprentice Mentor**. He/she must have undertaken and apprenticeship themselves, they must participate in at least 3 – 4 days training as a mentor. They must have more than five years experience in the workplace, they must be respected for their professional knowledge (a Master) and above all, they must show that they can nurture and support the young apprentices. Apprentices, with whom the researcher met, consistently referred to the value they placed on the role of such a person. Parents of apprentices and their teachers also made comments about how important this role is in supervising and nurturing their teenage child or student. This role is a vital piece of the jigsaw that combines with others to make the “whole picture of the Swiss Apprenticeship System.

*“He was a good person that I could rely upon”. (male 19 year old Electrical Apprentice)*

*“As an apprentice in a bank, she is so important. She grades me against my six goals; she helps me if there is any conflict. She asks about school and the grades I get and above all she looks after me”. (female 17 year old Commerce Apprentice)*

- **Apprenticeship Mentors and Apprentices** organise and deliver work experience career expo, school visits and even Trial Apprenticeships for school students. This is the key resource which enables enterprises to plan for, and supervise so many young (13 – 15) school students in the workplace. The role of **peer support** (young apprentice interacting with school students) is a consistently used and is a valued mechanism within the world of work and within school – employer collaboration in Switzerland. **Apprentices are ambassadors;** they are keenly engaged in promoting the apprenticeship pathway to students. Hence the work experience and trial apprenticeships offerings are of high quality. The researcher was told by young people and employers that they will frequently incorporate the following elements into “work experience programs” for students and prospective apprentices:
  - Visits to various work sites and/or departments
  - Offering an overall picture of the enterprise
  - Interaction with other workers and apprentices
  - Confidential conversations with the apprentices
  - Hands-on real tasks – treated like a part of the team.

*“I was interested in carpentry, but on work experience I was shown around the whole (building) business. When I had the chance to install a lamp, the light went on and I could see the result – that did the trick and I became an Electrical Apprentice” (20 year old Electrical Apprentice).*

- **The Why** -: secondly, what is behind this commitment of employers to school collaboration? Why do they invest in this approach? Two positions were presented to the researcher. They can be summarised as:

The hardnosed business case		The CSR (cultural and social responsibility)	
1.	Apprenticeships pay for themselves. Over the 4 years, productivity performance is superior to recruiting a trained person at 20 years of age.* The costs are wages and supervision (App. Mentors) but the benefits are the growing productivity of the young worker (at lower wages than an adult recruit).	1.	<b>“Cultural is used deliberately as it is an employer responsibility and accountability to a culture as well as to society”</b> The Swiss tradition and culture (see section 2 of this report) requires that companies assist in the integration of young people into the labour market. It is the norm, and a part of Switzerland.
2.	High completion rate (91%) and therefore recruitment pipeline assured (by our own, or someone else’s apprentice). “Grow your own” works for business.	2.	The burden is “lifted from the few”. Employers share this responsibility and share the investment. The employer community plays its role – for members and for the nation.
3.	Demographic time bomb (reinforced by a cautious approach to immigration) and always a need for quality young people who are practical and yet are innovative (a perceived advantage over academic graduates).	3.	We benefit in terms of community reputation, maintaining respect from our workforce (as they are parents/relatives of teenagers) and we as a country have high skills and a <b>low</b> teenage unemployment – helps us all.
4.	The employability and work ethic of our young people is developed and contributes to long term business performance. <b>Quality</b> Apprenticeships in Switzerland attract high quality young people, often with <b>good marks</b> .	4.	There is no strong financial (tax etc) incentive to take on apprentices. However, companies which make such a contribution and work with schools gain respect and a good reputation with government and community. In one Canton, companies who do not have an apprentice must pay a levy to the state.

\*NESTAL HR director conducted a productivity cost benefit analysis when her company changed ownership from a Swiss family business to a German (led) multi-national. Although apprentices are unproductive in years 1 and 2, they repay the investment in years 3 and 4.

This is not to say that **every** small or large enterprise in Switzerland employs apprentices and commits to school – industry collaboration.



*“Some over-train, most seek a balance between training members and her recruitment needs and some are unable to train – this is accepted for the apprenticeship system is dependent upon the labour market having the vacancies – that there is a market for apprentices. The situation remains positive in that there are more apprenticeships available than applicants. It is the hardnosed business case that drives apprenticeships forward in Switzerland” (Swiss Embassy Education Official London).*

In conclusion, the role of employers is both **serious and strategic** for their contribution is a central plank to the operations of the entire Swiss educational system. Their industry and professional associations design the curriculum of the 240 apprenticeships that are available in Switzerland. They see apprenticeships as a norm, a permanent feature of the learning of young people and their integration into the labour market and their transition into productive adulthood.

## **SECTION 4 – CHALLENGES FOR THE SWISS AND LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES FOR AUSTRALIA**

**1. The growing internationalism of Swiss employers** – Swiss business leaders understand and highly value apprenticeships. Many have done one, and then gone on to undertake further professional education or academic study. They know the benefits of having young workers who are energetic, innovative and yet practical. As more companies become not only global in their culture, but multi-nationally owned, new business leaders who are without that tradition, take their place. They can see the apprentices system as adding to not only the cost base of the company but also an addition to the headcount. The CSR reasons reduce in importance, and the hard business case dominates.

### **2. The increasing difficulty to find work experience opportunities in IT and Admin**

The CDC suggested that there was a very strong supply of work experience placements and trial apprenticeships in technology and manufacturing, but it was more difficult to find such opportunities in the areas of IT and Admin. “It is not so easy to bring the office alive for students”. The UBS bank do not (at central office) offer placements to students (although some local branch managers do!!). With their high financial rewards (to employees), they do not need to promote apprenticeships to get high quality students applying. However, the bank does offer 40-50 half day events for years 8/9 students. They do a tour of the premises and talk with workers and apprentices.

The IT/Commerce sector has responded to this challenge by:

- Exploring the value of online or virtual experiences – UBS is a major sponsor of the “OUSTY” website.
- Developing more career exploration activities as a single enterprise or as part of a professional association eg Economic Week (a week of conversations and tours about money, mortgages, careers etc).
- Integrating team project work and professional development courses for younger apprentices to practise skills and appreciate the culture of the bank.

**3. The cultural diversity of the young Swiss population** – the Swiss system is culturally driven and appreciated by employers, parents, teachers and young people themselves. Social capital is in abundance and this “makes the wheels turn”. Matters such as quality OHS, the fear of litigation if something goes wrong, and the concern of over 14 year olds disrupting the workplaces are dealt with in a quiet and efficient manner as the trust between stakeholders is strong. The apprenticeship system is seen to be both effective and efficient by all stakeholders. However, as more young Swiss come from other cultures (e.g. Ex Yugoslavia) they need to work harder to make connections and contacts and the system must put in place additional mechanisms to incorporate them e.g. creative communication channels with ethnic community leaders and apprenticeship mentors who became skilled in working across cultures. The Swiss system is reliant upon the idea that the parents can support their teenager in an apprenticeship, as they do an academic student. This may be more difficult for parents who are new to the culture, and perhaps more financially stressed.

#### **4. Excelling in Innovation, Creativity and Entrepreneurialism**

- The researcher interviewed two additional observers (Swiss residents, but from overseas) of the Swiss system. Both made the point that senior leadership positions for various enterprises in Switzerland were being filled by overseas citizens. They “wondered” whether the Swiss system was better at producing quality managers (cf to leaders) and a productive work ethic (practical and theory together with effect and perseverance) but not so effective in developing creative entrepreneurs.
- The major reason the researcher paid attention to this viewpoint is that a number of apprentices did comment that their **general** school studies (not professional/technical) did not seem to relate well to their learning in work. There was no integration of the activities of the two learning sites in terms of developing creativity, leadership and enterprise, or even these qualities being reflected upon in the classroom. However the researcher noted that the workplace learning of apprentices was **not** short of opportunities for young people to take the initiative and explore longer term issues such as people development and environmental and economic sustainability.

#### **5. Implications – for Australia**

1. There is not a rather naive assumption from the researcher that the Swiss system can be simply and completely transported to Australia. Our nation does not have a citizenry or employer community that articulates the same level of respect for practical learning, and apprenticeships, let alone a real passion for the integration of young people into the labour market (note levels of Australian youth employment). Our business leaders, employers and teacher fraternity (including their strong union) more than not, come from an academic tradition (often also from a private school background) where practical and applied learning has played second fiddle to academic study.
2. However there are a series of developments in the field of education and training in Australia that will find both some comfort and confirming ideas from the Swiss approach and experience.

- 1) The advanced level of the NTC initiative could take great heart form the Swiss experience and go back to its initial idea that young people (years 11 – 12) would predominantly learn in the workplace rather than in the classroom (with a bit of free work experience on the side).
- 2) The School-based Apprenticeship/Traineeship concept is endorsed by the Swiss system. Many Australian students want to learn and earn in the workplace. Retention in learning does not have to mean – staying at school. It is possible for students as young as 14 to be learning in the workplace.
3. Creative approaches to work experience that entail peer support, hands-on activities, the exploration of multiple career pathways and interactions with a range of adults that share their career stories, are consistent with the general practice developed by Swiss employers. “Try before you buy” placements are also valued by both partners. However Australian employers would need to “take on board” a mechanism such as the Swiss “Apprenticeship Mentor” and upgrade their investment in peer support (apprenticeship ambassadors) in order to guarantee the quality of both supervision and learning in the workplace.
4. Those responsible for the recent policy push on career development and transition support will be heartened by the Swiss approach. Partnerships between schools and employer and parents are essential within the Swiss system. The role of independent career advice and guidance is highly valued by all stakeholders – including the employers of apprentices.
5. Those who seek to encourage Australian employers to take a more strategic approach to social responsibility and education links can feel that their position is supported by the Swiss experience. Employers are an essential ingredient of education and have been there for the longer term. Teachers and employers “think and do” together. Parents have trust in both groups to closely work together and give their children options of academic and vocational education. Both theoretical and practical learning are valued whether that is in the workplace or classroom. There is a real choice in the minds of parents and their teenagers – equally valued and above all, connected so the young adult can progress and benefit from a “mix”.
6. In conclusion, the case for studying and learning from the Swiss experience can be summarised by comparing teenage unemployment rates, the participation of teenagers in apprenticeships, apprenticeship completion rates between Australia and the Swiss. The differing emphasis placed by schools and government upon academic marks rather than monitoring the career development and pathways of young people in years 8 – 10 between Australia and Switzerland is also relevant. We can learn a lot from the Swiss.