

“It’s too young to party”

The Young Person’s Perspective on the Swiss Apprenticeship System

1. Introduction

Dave Turner’s 2013 study of the Swiss Apprenticeship System incorporated a series of interviews with ten young apprentices, and a sample of parents, employers, teachers and career counsellors. The report that Dave has produced for Group Training Australia and the Department of Education and Community (NSW) explains this system and details the collaboration between all stakeholders (especially schools and employers) that precedes the taking-up of an apprenticeship by a 15 year old. This collaboration has been acknowledged as “best practice” by various commentators, most recently being praised by the UK Commission of Employment and Skills.

Dave has prepared an introductory note about this Swiss approach called “The Young Person’s Perspective”, (with some comments from parents). This note explains the feelings and beliefs of young apprentices and their parents to the rather unique system where 70% of all Swiss persons aged 15 – 19 are undertaking an apprenticeship, and there is a 91% completion rate. There is hardly any teenage unemployment in Switzerland!! (estimates are between 3 - 5%) Whilst the full report examines these issues in more detail, this introductory note entitled “It’s too young to party” concentrates upon the maturation of young Swiss apprentices through their teenage years. Whilst the full report remains in the hands of the funders, **this note has been placed in the public domain for discussion and debate**. Perhaps, the tone is a “bit rosy”, for it is not the full “research report” and only reflects the views of young people and their parents rather than seeking the expert opinions of relevant professionals. However this is a valuable perspective. The ideas of the young people about their apprenticeship experience with respect to “growing up” came initially unsolicited, but they made a mark on Dave and his Swiss-German interpreter whilst they were conducting the research.

Entitled “It’s too young to party”, the general thrust of this short note is that many young people at the ages of 15-19 (and their parents) want structure, and access to practical workplace and classroom learning. The young people from Switzerland sought accountability, to a boss, to co-workers and to undertaking and completing real tasks (in the short, as well as the longer term). Meaningful boundaries and rules, even discipline are in place whilst the teenager is in transition. This approach to the rites of passage and an entry into the labour market reminded Dave of the concerns and challenges raised by the valuable UK research around the concept of Freedom’s Orphans - that young people are disadvantaged by a lack of structure, of not having traditions handed down, and from their delayed separation from real tasks in the adult world, which incorporate both responsibility and accountability. Above all,

the young Swiss people who Dave interviewed were pleased to grow into a 19 - 20 year old with qualifications, experience, contacts and a platform to earn, learn and party. “Now it’s time to travel, have fun and make big choices” (Graduate Apprentice). More about this in Dave’s conclusion.

2. The Swiss System

70% of all Swiss young people (15 – 19) take up an apprenticeship (3 – 4 days in the workplace, and 1 – 2 days at school). There is a 91% completion rate!! 30% of all young Swiss people take on an academic (Matura) pathway of study. Interviews with ten 14 – 20 year olds who were engaged in the Swiss Apprenticeship System and their parents generated a set of fascinating insights into what many experts and commentators consider to be international best practice in vocational education and training.

3. Feedback from Young People and Parents

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The young people believe that their experience had assisted them to mature. The 16-20 year olds felt that their vocational qualification was a springboard from which they could earn, learn and travel. They felt that they had constructed a firm platform, and that they could now build upon their teenage years and were ready to make wise choices in lifestyle and careers.

“You grow up a bit faster, and if something goes wrong, you realise it maybe your fault and you have to take responsibility. You’re too busy and tired to go out in the middle of the week with your school (academic) friends”. (16 year old female Commerce Apprentice).

“You have to take care of yourself; it’s too hard to perform at work after a heavy night” (17 year old male Draughting Apprentice).

“Taking responsibility is really important, they leave you with a customer and you have to do it” (20 year old male Electrical Apprentice).

“I’ve got three children, two doing the academic and one an apprenticeship, she is by far the most able to take responsibility and get things done” (parent of female electrical Apprentice).

“My son is wiser with money, he is busy and he has been kept on track by the routine of the apprenticeship” (single mother male Apprentice).

There is no doubt that the apprentices felt that they benefitted from a secure structure of workplace and classroom learning that encouraged “growing up”; rather than learning in a school structure in which they felt that they would remain as more of a child. The apprenticeship had given the teenager a structure to:

- Work and earn
- Learn from adults and other apprentices

- Take responsibility and be accountable for one's own actions
- Appreciate the value of education and qualifications for career progression and earning power
- Create a firm and secure platform to work and party.

"I wanted to leave school and work at 15, now I know I want to study more" (20 year old Electrical Apprentice).

The apprentices all agreed that at the age of 15, they wanted to do practical and hands-on learning. They did not want to stay at school and take the academic pathway (Matura).

"It's hands-on work, much better than sitting in the classroom" (14 year old student about to take-up Bricklaying Apprenticeship).

They also knew that taking an apprenticeship route was not a dead-end or one-way street. In Switzerland, this pathway does lead to options of professional education and training and/or University studies. It is part of a connected set of learning pathways that move across the academic and vocational divide.

"We know we can take an apprenticeship, and then change to academic studies or another career" (20 year old male IT).

It is not all rosy and wonderful, there are challenges to face.

"Being with different people and doing practical work and the money are all good, but it is hard physical work, and I have to get up early and there are no women" (16 year old male Plumber Apprentice).

The Swiss Apprenticeship System provides not only an entry for a teenager into the labour market, it also offers a structure for their rites of passage into adulthood. The passing down of traditions and the opportunity to work and learn with adults and peers, supports their transition from dependent child into interdependent adult. At the age of 20, they feel like "practically orientated professionals" who have the freedom to take pathways of work, learning, leaving home, play and travel.

4. What do Parents, Schools and Employers do to encourage this Process?

In Switzerland, it is not possible to study and then comment upon the performance of their Apprenticeship system, without examining the work that happens in years 7 – 9 of schooling. It is this mix of careers education, transition support and education – employer collaboration which enables students (and their parents) to feel comfortable about making an informed and satisfying pathway choice at the age of 14 – 15.

"Schools and employers are important but so are my parents. They support me just like they support my sister who is doing academic studies. It's just the same, and I have taken the apprenticeship way".

“It’s the same, the norm and of course we will financially and emotionally support our child through either an apprenticeship or academic studies” (parent).

The apprentices identified three critical support roles in **their year 7 – 9 experience of general schooling**. Students make a decision to undertake an apprenticeship at the age of 14 – 15. Those roles are:

1. **The classroom/Home Teacher** – a teacher who is interested in the students plans for their career. Classroom and home teachers deliver at least one lesson of careers education/work per week, and assist students to compile a portfolio and monitor progress – including reviewing that progress with parents.
2. **School teachers (year 7 – 9)** and employers work together to ensure the student has the information and insights to make an informed decision. They are assisted by **independent career counsellors**. If the student is confused about options or having difficulty at school, the teacher or student can access this resource.
3. **The employers who provide work visits (year 7/8)**, work experience (year 8/9), and trial apprenticeships (year 9) to those students who have indicated that they wish to undertake a vocational education and training (15 – 19). Apprentices and an allocated (and trained) Apprenticeship Mentor play a key role in providing these opportunities to school students.

“I really did not want to stay at school and in year 8/9 I did nine trial apprenticeships to help me decide what apprenticeship I really wanted”. (Refrigeration Apprentice – Male 16).

“My work experience in year 8 was so important to me. To see a lot of the business, to go out to different sites, to talk to workers and other apprenticeships. I thought my choice was carpentry, but I got to install a lamp and the light went on, and I could see a result – that was for me”. (Electrical Apprentice – 20).

Employers collaborate because they want to recruit the best possible apprentices. They know that if most employers contribute, they will all win, whether a particular student that comes to them decides later to apply and take up their particular offer or not. They also are committed because it is the Swiss way – the norm to introduce young people to work and learning and to a productive adult life.

4. **Parents, relatives and neighbours** play a key role in supporting the young person to make an informed decision. So many of them did an apprenticeship when they were young, so many know of enterprises that are willing to help out, and so many believe that the vocational route is a valuable and secure structure for their child – to build a platform for adult choice and progression at 19.

Please find attached a chart of the advantages/disadvantages of the Swiss approach; a list gleaned from the perspective of young people, their parents, and teachers and employers.

5. Conclusion – the Researcher’s Perspective

In conclusion, the success of the current Swiss experience, coupled with the researchers own professional experience of youth policy and research, has influenced the tone of this note. Many Australian and British teachers who have been in close contact with the researcher do seek to engage young people in the classroom and yet know that those same young people would really prefer to be elsewhere. Secondly, the researcher has a deep appreciation of the analysis and concerns raised by the UK research on Freedom’s Orphans. The combination of these factors has led to a set of observations that may stimulate further debate:

- The Australian policy framework and the associated systems and structures of education and training for teenagers (15-18) need to be re-imagined, both by educationalists and employers. We are still failing too many of our young teenagers.
- The Swiss experience suggests that education policy that strongly emphasises youth attainment and retention in the classroom, **without** simultaneously investing in apprenticeships for 15 – 19 year olds may not “put a big dent” in their teenage or youth unemployment rates. For example the Finnish “school based” system is lauded by many (attainment levels), yet the youth unemployment rate remains at just over 20%, whilst the Swiss rate is 7.9% (15 – 24) and only 3 – 5% (teenage). Not all this difference can be explained by the state of the overall economy (Swiss 3.4% unemployment and Finland 10.8%). To further elaborate, Australia has an overall rate of unemployment of 5.9%, yet has a teenage rate of unemployment of 17%, and a youth rate of 11.7%. Perhaps the character of education and the connectivity it provides between young people and employers can positively impact on levels of teenage and youth employment.
- There are many young Australians aged 15-18 who do not develop and mature as quickly as they can, for they do not fully benefit from an appropriate balance between serious endeavour and fun, between real adventure and “cruising”, between challenging engagement and passivity, and between taking responsibility and having the kind of freedom that lacks any helpful accountability.
- Many academic young Australians, VET students and student leaders are fully engaged in learning and life, yet many others will only find satisfying roles, recognition and responsibility from working and predominantly learning in the workplace. This is the essence of their transition to both productive adulthood and their entry into the labour market. Australian governments, employers and parents can afford such an investment. Please note that we are the richest nation in the world (median per capita income), and second only to the Swiss in terms of mean wealth per adult. Yet Australia’s performance in terms of tackling youth unemployment and developing the necessary work and learning pathways, is poor in comparison with the Swiss. The challenge is both how we invest our wealth in the future of our teenagers and how we resource education and training both in the classroom and in the workplace.

A snapshot of Perspectives on the Swiss System

	Advantages	Disadvantages
Young People's Views	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Access to practical and hands-on learning when I wanted it. • Earning money, and learning from people in work helped me to see the relevance of further study. • Structure earlier and when I needed it was good, and now being free at 19 to study, earn, travel and party. • Having a trained Apprenticeship Mentor in the workplace is so important. • Always knew that I could change my mind and connect to academic or professional studies. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A young age to make such a decision especially if the apprenticeship you seek is not available to you (can do a year 10). • Difficult to do without family support. • Sometimes the learning at work and in school is not closely linked together. • Small and local world feeling about this kind of learning (in small businesses). • Hard work and early hours.
Parents Views	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The maturation and developing sense of responsibility of my child – structure and motivation is in place. • The careful preparation at school and then the safeguards of quality and nurturing (Apprenticeship Mentors). • The motivation to learn generated by practical learning and hands-on tasks. • The contacts and the nationally recognised standard that comes from an apprenticeship and the connectivity of the system (academic and vocational). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • It is a great system as long as the parent/career is prepared to play a key role (13 – 19) e.g. parents are engaged in annual reviews. Difficult for those young people who do not have that support. • Some concern that if the young person drops-out of the apprenticeship, will they be able to find an alternative pathway. • Concern about the level of career development support for academic teenagers (Matura). Only the vocationally orientated concentrate on pathways in years 8/9/10.
Employers Views	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A great way to grow our own skill base and have access to 19 year olds who are both practical and willing to further learn – beat the demographic “time bomb”. • 20 year olds in our business who are both practical and have the 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The costs of employing apprentices and their Apprenticeship mentor – the headcount factor at a time of restructuring. • Meeting the continuous need for school students to undertake

	<p>energy to innovate – and yet “grounded” in our culture.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Maintains staff morale – many are parents of teenagers and feel good about the company’s commitment to young people. • A more productive approach to recruitment than employing an adult (cost/benefit analysis done). 	<p>work experience and trial apprenticeships.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Clearer information about the productivity of apprentices required – as ownership of companies moves from Swiss to more international business - need to highlight the business case.
<p>Teachers Views</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Students who are apprentices are motivated to learn at school, because they can see immediate relevance to career goals – not having to deal with the young person who “waits in the classroom” but really wants employment. • Can get on with students who really do “want to be there”. • Makes career education and motivation to learn alive in years 8/9 – immediate relevance. • Place high value on collaboration with employers, access by students to independent career advice and engagement of parents. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Difficult for some students (especially boys) to make career decisions at 14 – but it is our job to monitor career development and provide a year 10 safety net (additional transition and pathway year). • Difficult to keep up with changes in the labour market and technology. • Always juggling timetable and lesson plans to enable students to explore and then lean in the workplace. • More challenging to assist new arrivals, and young people from a range of cultures.