

Quality of the partnership in vocational and professional education and training

Summary of the report of the Parliamentary Control of the Administration for the attention of the National Council Control Committee

of 2 November 2015

Overview

A specific characteristic of vocational and professional education and training (VPET) in Switzerland is that it is the joint responsibility of the Confederation, cantons and professional organisations (social partners, industry associations). Following criticism of the way in which the partnership between these players functions and considering the importance of this field, the parliamentary control committees mandated the Parliamentary Control of the Administration (PCA) to evaluate the steering of the VPET system. In July 2014 the FDF/EAER sub-committee of the National Council Control Committee decided that this evaluation should concentrate on the quality of the partnership in strategic and operative steering. Firstly it looked at how responsibilities are shared between the various players. Secondly it considered the partners' ability to define a strategic framework and to steer the established measures, and also examined how the steering of the partnership functions when activities or projects in which the Confederation plays a key role take place.

The PCA analysed the legal bases, the documentation of the bodies tasked with steering VPET, and documents on a range of projects. It also conducted in-depth conversations with around 30 persons. In view of the wide scope of the VPET domain and the very high number of players involved, the PCA also organised an online questionnaire among all professional associations operating at national level and a telephone questionnaire among the heads of the 26 cantonal offices responsible for VPET.

The partnership in vocational and professional education and training is valued by the players involved and functions relatively well. Responsibilities complement each other, the various bodies are able to cooperate, and there is communication between the different players at strategic and at operative level. However, in practice there are shortcomings with regard to certain fundamental tasks, which are only loosely defined in the legal bases. This means the partnership reaches its limits in terms of strategic steering; although the partners are willing to set common goals, cooperation does not extend to allocating tasks clearly and to monitoring their implementation.

Extensive delegation of responsibilities but lack of means to monitor

The legislator intended the Vocational and Professional Education and Training Act to be a law which sets objectives and largely delegates responsibilities. The law is coherent according to this concept. The VPET partners are given considerable scope to respond to the needs of the labour market and to identify future developments in the best manner. However, as clearly defined steering and monitoring instruments are lacking, implementation of the law is only assured in part.

Bodies with potential for improvement

The VPET partnership has developed on the basis of a number of bodies in which players from the Confederation, cantons and professional organisations work together. These bodies provide a forum for exchange and discussion and contribute to the development of VPET and the quality of the partnership. Some of these bodies, however, attracted criticism, owing to their composition, limited transparency regarding their activities and the unclear definition of their role.

Partnership only partially suitable for comprehensive strategic steering

The VPET partnership is only partially suited to mastering the strategic steering of the VPET system. Although the partners are able to jointly establish short- and medium-term courses of action and strategic objectives, their responsibilities are not clearly defined and there is no long-term vision or strategy. Furthermore, there is a reluctance to monitor the implementation of the agreed courses of action and so to steer the system comprehensively.

Complex partnership in conducting projects

The partnership proves to be complex, time-consuming and resource-intensive when projects are carried out. Nevertheless, in general the partners are able to cooperate effectively. The Confederation has limited possibilities in terms of steering, and does so in a very restrained fashion, ensuring it refers to all the partners. The Confederation's limited involvement in the steering of the VPET system is in line with the principles of the partnership. As there is an unwillingness to compromise in certain situations, projects in which two partners with differing interests are involved, and in which the Confederation does not wish to assume a leadership role, tend to get blocked.

A role to be assumed fully by the Confederation

The Confederation is relatively restrained regarding the steering and strategy of the VPET system and in communicating with the VPET players. The right level of involvement has yet to be found – the ideal middle ground between intervening too much, which no one wants, and playing the role of an observer that sometimes reacts too late.

The full report is available in French and German; the Italian version should be ready around June 2016 (www.parliament.ch).