

## Book Review

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### THE HYBRIDIZATION OF VOCATIONAL TRAINING AND HIGHER EDUCATION IN AUSTRIA, GERMANY AND SWITZERLAND

**Author:** *Lukas Graf*

How can societies assure the necessary skills for the labour markets? This is a question that has gained attention both in European and domestic level policy debates about higher education (HE) and vocational education and training (VET). While education and training has *thus far* not been a core focus in European studies, a number of thorough theoretically driven studies are now being published. Lukas Graf's study is a good example of this growing interest in studying this sector.

In this book, Graf examines two sectors (HE and VET) in three countries, Germany, Austria and Switzerland, that can be seen as most similar cases in terms of skills formation with separated systems for HE and VET. He views the two sectors as unique distinct organizational fields with strong institutional barriers. The study focuses on the effect of recent policy developments on the permeability between these two institutional fields, by examining the rules, standards and ideas that frame such relationship. In the empirical analysis, Graf finds an increasing level of hybridization in the three countries through the development of distinct and unique organizational forms, which he argues to be a representation of institutional permeability. The study takes a longitudinal approach, examining national developments from the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century to 2012 through systematic process-analysis. The empirical sources for the book include 40 expert interviews with 48 individual experts, in addition to various documents and secondary sources.

The analytical framework (Chapter 3) primarily draws on historical and organizational institutionalism. Graf argues that 'the institutional divide between VET and HE runs deeper than superficial discrepancies at the level of bureaucratic etiquette and formal labels' (p.30). To exemplify this, Graf further looks into how this "educational schism" can be explained following three lines of explanation: power, legitimation and function. Common to this analytical toolbox is the focus on institutional resilience towards change – either through sustained power imbalances, legitimacy and taken-for-grantedness of the VET-HE divide, or stable environments due to persistence of national varieties of capitalism. However, as Graf identifies, these explanations fit poorly with identified empirical reality, as particular organizational innovations in these three countries can be identified. Consequently, if the existing theoretical tools would suggest that such highly institutionalized fields would not be easily transformed or changed, how does one explain such innovations?

Graf's study suggests examining this institutional transformation primarily through four kinds of institutional change: displacement, layering, drift and conversion. These different kinds of change also form a basis for examining the empirical cases as forms of hybridization. As hybridization in many cases appears to be a concept that is used rather loosely in the literature, Graf deserves recognition for his solid analytical clarification on what this hybridization actually entails and how it is different from other kind of institutionalized linkages between HE and VET. Specifically, he focuses on three elements: parity of esteem between HE and VET, the nature of degrees and governance arrangements. These specific forms for hybridization are linked to national contexts, as well as differentiated

Europeanization of these educational systems. In Chapter 5, Graf examines European integration processes with respect to skills and argues that European policies have had effects on national level already before the recent expansion after Lisbon Agenda. However, his primary focus is on more recent Bologna and Copenhagen processes that drive forward European integration in HE and VET respectively.

Chapters 6-8 analyse the three country cases. The theoretical assumptions of resistance towards change are challenged by all of them. In Germany, Graf identifies hybridization processes through the introduction of dual study programmes that are unique not only due to being at the “nexus” of VET and HE, but also being a de-standardized and heterogeneous group of programmes. As such, one can argue that Graf’s findings in the case of Germany highlight a rather interesting case, considering the multitude of pressures towards standardization in European higher education. Graf also finds hybrid forms in the case of Austria where environmental factors played an important role in the development of higher vocational schools (*Berufsbildende Höhere Schulen*, BHS). What is particularly interesting in this analysis is that Graf’s findings indicate that the processes linked to introducing the National Qualifications Framework (NQF) in Austria have made the HE and VET systems less permeable. This can also be seen as a case of unintended outcomes, as one of the primary aims of the European Qualifications Framework to which the NQF is linked is precisely for the improvement of institutional permeability and parity of esteem between HE and VET. Graf’s findings thus provide valuable insights to those interested in the relevance and the role of such European instruments on national level. In the case of Switzerland, the change Graf identified took place primarily through the introduction of the universities of applied sciences with dual apprenticeship training and a vocational baccalaureate, where sectoral dynamics are still not settled.

In chapter 9, Graf shifts the analysis towards a more comparative analysis of those three cases. As the three cases point towards the role of varied institutional environments, Graf suggests that ‘hybridization is a response to the existence of the rigid institutional divide between VET and HE in times of rapid environmental changes’ (p.190). While he identifies all three countries as forms of hybridity, the specific patterns in the three countries show distinct forms: historical contingency (Germany), long-term evolution (Austria), and deliberative institutional design (Switzerland). He links these patterns to the variety of capitalism argument. Next, returning to the analytical framework, Graf takes the three patterns of hybridization and shows us that they are the results of “blended worlds” through conversion, blending and layering processes that have emerged next to the persistent institutional divide between VET and HE. He further argues that potential institutional friction can emerge which can be reduced through sufficient ambiguity in terms of the institutional environment to allow variation in organizational practices. Having outlined the conceptual outlook, Graf then discusses this in terms of the three country cases.

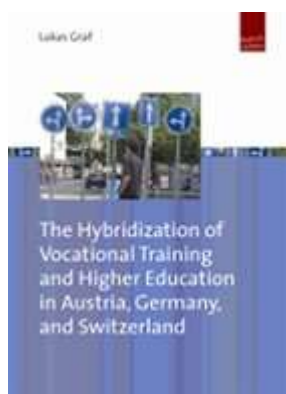
Finally, he turns to the role of Europeanization. His analysis identifies that some ideas promoted on the European level represent a mismatch in terms of existing traditions on the national level, and that current Europeanization processes do not sufficiently take into account the existence of hybrid forms. As these hybrid forms are located in various positions in the educational map in those three countries, the relevance of Bologna vs. Copenhagen varies. He highlights three central conclusions, pointing towards the fact that Europeanization can both maintain the institutional divide, as well as have potential adverse consequences for some existing hybrid forms, what he calls ‘paradoxical impact of the current Europeanization processes’.

The concluding chapter 10 summarises the empirical findings and conceptual insights with respect to the initial questions – how did the hybrid forms emerge? What kind of national variation is there? What is the effect of these hybrid forms on institutional permeability? And, what is the role of European processes in the emergence and dynamics of such hybrid solutions? The relative lack of cross-sectoral analysis of VET and HE is also noted the review section. Graf’s contribution can be seen

as a unique with its longitudinal analysis of system dynamics of those two sectors in the context of European integration processes. At a time where skills, qualifications and parity of esteem between HE and VET have become frequently stated in the policy agenda, improved understanding of the relationship between these two sectors is both timely and necessary. Empirically, it brings much needed insights into the processes and new organizational forms that emerge between educational sectors, an area that often gets neglected between the main lines of research with focus on the dynamics *within* particular sectors. Theoretically, it brings additional insights into analyses of institutional change by identifying how highly institutionalized fields where change would be termed unlikely, yield organizational innovations and novel hybrid solutions between particular fields. As such, it highlights the persistence of institutional divides and how these also persist through the emergence of hybrid forms.

In essence, it is a well-conducted study about the interplay between stability and change. Overall, this study also advances the linkages between the *literature* on VET and HE. One can just hope that more studies will follow Graf's steps, so that more permeability between the institutionalized divide *between the research traditions* for VET and HE can also be achieved to a much larger extent than has been the case until now. Further studies could focus on finding more contrasting cases to these three countries, to identify whether this hybridization processes can also be identified in other regions.

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## BIBLIOGRAPHIC INFORMATION

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