

Education + Training



Thresholds for dis/trust: exploring the impact of standards-based reforms on process of being and becoming a VET teacher in England and Austria

Journal:	<i>Education + Training</i>
Manuscript ID	ET-09-2023-0386.R1
Manuscript Type:	Research Paper
Keywords:	education policy, teacher professionalism, trust, distrust, vocational education and training, neoliberalism

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3 1 **Thresholds for dis/trust: exploring the impact of standards-based reforms on the process of**
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5 2 **being and becoming a VET teacher in England and Austria**

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13
14 5 **Abstract**

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17 6 *Purpose*

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21 7 This paper seeks to illustrate how interventionist education reforms shape dis/trust building
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23 8 processes, and its impact upon teacher professionalism in vocational education and training (VET)
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25 9 across national contexts. Using trust as the object of analysis, we discuss the affective mechanisms
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28 10 of becoming a professional in a standards-based neoliberal environment.

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31 11 *Design/methodology/approach*

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34 12 Through an analysis of VET teacher narratives in England and Austria, the paper draws attention
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36 13 to the ways in which policy instrumentalism has created a culture of distrust in VET. Drawing
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38 14 upon foundational work on system trust developed by Niklas Luhmann, we illustrate how
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40 15 conditions for trust sit at *symbolic thresholds*, which set the conditions for professional recognition
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43 16 within VET.

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46 17 *Findings*

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49 18 Our analysis revealed that attempts to standardise VET strategy is fuelled by the need for
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51 19 existential security and predictability, leading to tensions in the cultivation of system trust.
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53 20 Conditions for professional recognition were based on practices of *documentation* and
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56 21 *subordination*, narrowly constituting *legitimate self-expression* in organisations. This constitutes

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3 22 a crisis of trust in VET teacher professionalism which undermines pedagogical autonomy and
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5 23 integrity.

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9 24 *Practical implications*

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11 25 We seek to highlight the impact that reduced trust in the governance of VET can contribute to
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13 26 issues associated with teacher motivation, wellbeing and retention. The consideration of trust is
14
15 27 therefore essential both for policy design and implementation in VET organisations.

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19 28 *Originality/value*

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22 29 The application of trust theory offers a distinctive lens through which to understand the impact of
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24 30 accountability, performativity and governance processes upon teacher subjectivity within VET
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26 31 across national contexts.

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29 32 **Key Words:** Trust; Distrust; Teacher Professionalism; Vocational Education & Training; Policy

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32 33 **Paper Type:** Research Paper

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34 34 **Introduction**

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36 35 The vocational education and training (VET) [1] sector sits in a unique position in international
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38 36 education systems. Stakeholder interest is far reaching, and VET is often centred as simultaneously
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40 37 the *cause of* issues of a failing economy, and the *solution to* a successful one (Heyes, 2013). At
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42 38 the European level and beyond, VET systems are confronted by the problems associated with this
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44 39 logic inherent in much education policy. This impacts upon how its purpose is conceptualised,
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46 40 where tensions emerge between the discourses of ‘lifelong learning’ and ‘skills’ (James *et al.*,
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48 41 2022). The ideological alignment of VET with economic objectives has led policymakers to

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3 42 become increasingly instrumentalist in their approach to education policy, leading to a ‘technical
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5 43 rationalism’ (Avis, 2009, p. 658) and the gradual standardisation of VET strategy to the
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8 44 marginalisation of values-based orientations related to the social, moral and philosophical
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10 45 purposes of education (Gleeson *et al.*, 2015; Duckworth and Smith, 2018).

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13 46 The observable impact of current policy reforms hinges upon the understanding that trust is a
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15 47 multi-level phenomenon (Lumineau and Schilke, 2018). Policy enactment at the macro-level is
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17 48 thus intrinsically linked to the intersubjective experience of trust at the individual level. Much trust
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19 49 research focuses on the phenomenon at single layers of analysis (Niedlich *et al.*, 2020), and
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21 50 Lumineau and Schilke (2018) argue that this risks painting an overly simplistic picture of trust
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23 51 which neglects the fact that organisations (and the broader structures within which they operate)
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25 52 are inherently multi-level entities.

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30 53 Existing research on trust in education predominantly focuses on interpersonal and organisational
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32 54 forms of trust (Cerna, 2014). There are rarely studies on institutional or system trust, and their
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34 55 focus is mainly on the extent to which the education system is trusted (e.g., Six, 2018; Niedlich *et*
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36 56 *al.*, 2020). To date little is known about teachers’ experiences of being trusted in the context of
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38 57 education policy or how reform processes influence trust and distrust towards teachers (e.g.,
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40 58 Donovan, 2019; Hautz and Thoma, 2021). Therefore, it is of interest to gain deeper insights into
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42 59 the role of dis/trust in the enactment of standards-based reforms and how this shapes expectations
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44 60 for trust within the VET system. We argue that ‘practices of trusting’ (Möllering, 2013, p. 296)
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46 61 are shaped and structured through prevailing discourses, by constituting the conditions under
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48 62 which certain individuals, groups or institutions are trusted or distrusted.

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53 63 As national reform discourses are strongly influenced by global educational agendas, similar
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55 64 governance trends are visible in many countries (e.g., Sahlberg, 2006; Avis *et al.*, 2021). In order

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3 65 to better understand how the dominant European neoliberal narrative perpetuates a culture of
4
5 66 dis/trust in VET across national contexts, it is of interest to investigate how policy discourses in
6
7 67 different countries are converging. For this purpose, we have selected two very distinct European
8
9 68 VET systems for this study. VET in England and Austria differ considerably in terms of their
10
11 69 structure, underlying principles and objectives (Busemeyer and Schlicht-Schmälzle, 2014). To
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13 70 highlight one key aspect, in contrast to the ‘skills-based model’ (Brockmann *et al.*, 2008, p. 549)
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15 71 of VET in England, the Austrian system can be characterised as a ‘knowledge-based model’ that
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17 72 follows a holistic conception of VET, focusing not only on the needs of the labour market, but also
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19 73 on civic education and the personal development of students (Avis, 2014; Hautz and Thoma,
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21 74 2021).

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27 75 Despite these differences, both England and Austria have been subject to comprehensive
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29 76 standards-based educational reforms in recent years that impact on conditions for professional
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31 77 recognition in VET. By focusing on these two countries, in this paper, we seek to analyse *how*
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33 78 trusting is shaped by neoliberal education reforms across national contexts and examine the extent
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35 79 to which this constitutes a ‘crisis of trust’ (Möllering, 2013, p. 299), affecting teacher
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37 80 professionalism and subjectivity in VET.

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41 81 Key questions which have guided our study of dis/trust in VET are:

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44 82 1. In what ways are current standards-based reforms creating a culture of dis/trust in VET in
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46 83 England and Austria?
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49 84 2. How do changes of dis/trust in VET shape teacher professionalism and subjectivity across
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51 85 national contexts?
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54 86 3. What are the symbolic thresholds for dis/trust that shape professional recognition in VET
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56 87 teachers?

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3 88 We will first outline the VET policy frameworks across both national contexts, with a view to
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5 89 illustrate how dis/trust manifests from a multi-level perspective. Secondly, we will introduce
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8 90 Niklas Luhmann's (2017) theory of system trust as our theoretical framework before describing
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10 91 the methodology. Finally, we will use Luhmann's theory of system trust to analyse how regulatory
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12 92 frameworks constitute 'thresholds' for trust and professional recognition, as well as the impact of
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15 93 system dis/trust on VET teacher narratives.
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19 95 **VET governance in England and Austria**

20 21 22 96 *The English Policy Context*

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25 97 Further education (FE) in the English context has a long and complex history. 'FE' is an umbrella
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27 98 term for the post-compulsory (post-16) sector which comprises adult education courses (both
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29 99 accredited and unaccredited) in community education, sixth form colleges offering academic
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32 100 routes into higher education, and general further education colleges which offer full-time, part-
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35 101 time and apprenticeship provision into technical and vocational work, as well as some higher
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37 102 education. The rich diversity of the sector can be traced back to a distinct social, cultural and
38
39 103 political history of working-class education which flourished on the fringes of formal education –
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41 104 often in spite of government-led initiatives (Bowl, 2017).
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45 105 The formalisation of VET/FE in the post-war period coincided with gradual movements towards
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47 106 regulation, accompanied by what has become a perennial debate around the question of purpose
48
49 107 in relation to VET and adult education in England (Donovan, 2019). Bowl (2017, p. 32) argues
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51 108 that notions of citizenship have become reorientated towards the individual's 'responsibility to
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53 109 accept their place in the economic world order'. The skills discourse now prevalent in FE policy
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3 110 was accelerated by the 1992 Further and Higher Education Act, which removed the sector from
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5 111 the control of local authorities, and placed them under centralised government control, within a
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7 112 ‘quasi-market’ system that forced existing providers to compete for students, and opened up new
8
9 113 markets that allowed private firms to offer competitive provision. This was accompanied by a
10
11 114 centralised, performance-driven governance structure which channelled funding through a
12
13 115 restricted curriculum offer, audited and controlled by agencies reporting to central government
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15 116 (Lucas and Crowther, 2016). This also signalled a new era of ‘self-responsibility’ for FE
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17 117 organisations, which were granted autonomy over their everyday operations, albeit within strict
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19 118 parameters.

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25 119 Today, central arms of government in FE constitute the Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted),
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27 120 the Education and Skills Funding Agency (ESFA) and the FE Commissioner. Together, they
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29 121 continue to have a heavy-handed influence upon the sector through quality assurance in the
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31 122 curriculum, funding allocation and fiscal accountability (FETL, 2020). Coupled with the chronic
32
33 123 underfunding that the sector has experienced over the last decade (IFS, 2018), the current structure
34
35 124 of FE allows the government to exert significant control over the practices of FE organisations.
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37 125 While more recently, the policy agenda has seen a return to localism, the maintenance of
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39 126 centralised regulatory frameworks mean that capacity to innovate continues to be stifled (Boocock,
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41 127 2017).

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46 128 This top-down approach to assessing quality in FE has embedded a culture of performativity in
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48 129 organisations (Ball, 2003), as meeting government targets serves to distract colleges from their
49
50 130 core activities. FE college leaders face unique challenges as regulatory agencies actively shape
51
52 131 decision-making at the organisational level, to the point where college leaders report that they
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54 132 cannot afford to achieve anything less than an ‘outstanding’ inspection grade from Ofsted (FETL,
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3 133 2020). In effect, the powerful influence of centralised government levers negates the need for trust
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5 134 in FE providers to deliver quality education on their own terms, whilst the competitive
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8 135 environment creates anxiety through threats to organisational survival (Donovan, 2019).
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10 11 136 *The Austrian Policy Context* 12

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14 137 VET has a long tradition in Austria. Similar to Germany and Switzerland, the origins of
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16 138 apprenticeships can be traced back to medieval trade organisations. A specific feature of the
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18
19 139 Austrian initial VET system is that, in addition to the dual system, state-run full-time vocational
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21 140 schools were established during the 19th century and have been an essential part of VET ever since
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23 141 (Lassnigg, 2011). Thus, the Austrian initial VET system has a unique architecture, comprising dual
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25 142 apprenticeship training and full-time schools (see in detail Oead, 2023). It is characterised by a
26
27 143 ‘dualistic structure’ (Lassnigg, 2011, p. 417), since both sectors allow different qualification
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29 144 possibilities in similar vocational fields at upper secondary level.
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34 145 Part- and full-time VET schools are included in the state’s centrally coordinated education policy.
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36 146 The schools are provided and regulated by the Federal Ministry of Education, Science and
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38 147 Research. The Education Ministry develops framework curricula for each school type, which are
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40 148 mandatory. In addition, there are regional school authorities that are run by the state and are
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42 149 responsible for the realisation of quality assurance, school supervision and control. Social partners
43
44 150 and teachers’ unions have traditionally been involved in policy formation at ministry level and
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46 151 thus influence developments and changes in the VET school sector (Hautz and Thoma, 2021).
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51 152 Contemporary forms of governance in Austrian VET include both centrally prescribed quality
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53 153 targets and controls as well as indirect mechanisms of steering ‘at a distance’ (Hautz, 2022).
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55 154 Several VET reforms in recent years have led to extended standardisation (e.g., through the
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3 155 introduction of national education standards), the implementation of competence-based and
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5 156 learning outcome-oriented curricula and the mandatory introduction of a school-wide quality
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7 157 management system, which includes systematic monitoring and evaluation of schools. In parallel,
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10 158 schools have been given new freedoms, for example, in the context of the so-called ‘autonomy
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12 159 package’ in determining school hours, class size, in the selection of teachers, etc.

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16 160 The expanded autonomy places increased self-responsibility on the schools for the performance of
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18 161 their students. According to the Ministry of Education, they should try to create the most attractive
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20 162 educational programmes possible through their new freedoms, supported by internal quality
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22 163 management and self-evaluations, and thereby increase students’ performance according to
23
24 164 predefined targets (FMESR, 2018). Altrichter (2021, p. 156) characterises this ‘new’ governance
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26 165 system as a ‘re-written evidence-based model’, which reinforces performance measurement,
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28 166 control and monitoring mechanisms, but slightly modifies these instruments by assigning more
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30 167 weight and responsibilities to schools.

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35 168 The aim of this strategy is to encourage teachers towards increased participation and reduced
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37 169 resistance in implementing standards-based reforms ‘by signalling that accountability is not meant
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39 170 to substitute, but to complement trust in teachers’ professional capacity’ (Altrichter, 2021, p. 153).
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41 171 However, a recent study of the perspectives of general education school teachers in Austria – who
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43 172 are facing similar changes to those in VET schools – shows that they tend to see the current
44
45 173 revisions of evidence-based governance as creating distrust and constraints on their actions
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47 174 (Altrichter *et al.*, 2022). Yet it is largely unclear whether VET teachers perceive the changed
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49 175 professional context as an environment of dis/trust and how this affects their subjectivities (Hautz
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51 176 and Thoma, 2021).

177 *The neoliberal turn in VET*

178 Despite significant differences with regard to the structure, purpose and cultural understandings of
179 the VET systems in England and Austria, both policy contexts demonstrate a common trend
180 towards a centralised, standards-based regulatory environment, underpinned by neoliberal logics
181 of self-responsibility and competitive individualism. James *et al.* (2022) assert that this can be
182 traced back to the influence of educational agendas at the supranational level in the lifelong
183 learning discourse, where productivity and human capital goals proliferate. Slater (2015, p. 2)
184 argues that the dominant discourse in education shapes institutional attunement to a ‘neoliberal
185 rationality’, in which individual subjectivities reproduce this ideology in practice.

186 Donovan’s (2019) previous research has explored how interventionist policies serve to further
187 erode trust over time, reinforced by high-risk, high-stakes accountability measures, which enlist
188 organisations towards meeting governmental objectives. In turn, the conduct of VET teachers is
189 influenced by a combination of subjugation through centralised requirements, monitoring and
190 control mechanisms, and ‘self-governance’ (Boocock, 2015, p. 185) through subtle and indirect
191 forms of governance that operate ‘at a distance’ involving the powers of expertise, professional
192 responsibility and inscription (Hautz, 2022).

193 This excessive standardisation and control can affect trust in teachers (e.g., Donovan, 2019; Hautz
194 and Thoma, 2021; Hautz, 2022). Teachers feel they are constantly monitored, observed and
195 controlled, leading to ‘an erosion of teachers’ authority’ and ‘reduced pedagogic freedom’ (Hautz
196 and Thoma, 2021, pp. 803-804). Such reforms constitute ‘a violation of trust associated with the
197 increased surveillance of teachers, which has reduced the scope for individual autonomy and
198 creativity’ (Donovan, 2019, p. 202).

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3 199 In one of the few comprehensive reviews of trust in education, Niedlich *et al.* (2020) found that
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5 200 low-trust accountability in education governance can impact upon trust within educational settings,
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8 201 often due to a disregard for what teachers consider to be valuable in their practice. In both the
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10 202 English and Austrian policy contexts, the centralisation of VET governance seems to be an attempt
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12 203 to over-simplify processes in order to align with rigid policy goals associated with a global skills
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14 204 discourse, which has the effect of undermining the complex praxis of teaching. The following
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16 205 section outlines how Luhmann's (2017) conception of system trust can deepen understanding of
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18 206 how distrust manifests itself within systems, where modes of regulation are determined by the need
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20 207 to control and produce predictable outcomes.

24 208 **Niklas Luhmann, trust and the complexity problem**

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27 209 Luhmann's (2017) seminal work on *trust* understands this very concept as a process of *systemic*
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29 210 *complexity reduction*. For the purpose of this discussion, our interest in complexity reduction in
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31 211 particular derives from a concern with how large social systems manage complexity in the
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33 212 negotiation of trust; a discussion of relevance to multi-level education governance but often
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35 213 neglected in the literature (Niedlich *et al.*, 2020).

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37 214 For Luhmann (2017), social systems must manage the 'overwhelming' complexity of the world in
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39 215 order to make life 'liveable' (Sztompka, 2019). He argues that, unique to the human condition, one
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41 216 must both comprehend a world that exposes us to unknowable risks *and* that we share that world
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43 217 with others. This consciousness of our own subjectivities, and our intersubjective relationship with
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45 218 those of others' can heighten our sense of vulnerability, which makes dealing with these existential
46
47 219 threats to vulnerability urgent to survival. In this sense, trust becomes a solution to the problem of
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49 220 complexity, allowing individuals to achieve a sense of existential security (Sztompka, 2019). The
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51 221 basis of individual conduct, therefore, is to strive to live alongside others while simultaneously

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3 222 being conscious of the ‘other’s’ freedom to act. Importantly, this necessarily means that trust is
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5 223 not about predictability or control. Instead, trust can be defined as the *reduction of complexity ‘in*
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7 224 *the absence of certainty’* (Luhmann, 2017, p. 17). In accepting the freedom of the other to act, trust
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9 225 increases tolerance for ambiguity, making systems more flexible and adaptable.
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14 226 *Trust as ‘bounded and structured’ uncertainty*
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16 227 In addressing how systems facilitate trust, Luhmann (2017) draws attention to the intersection of
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18 228 ‘personal’ trust with ‘system’ trust, through which we can understand how the individual interacts
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20 229 intersubjectively with the structures they encounter. What he refers to as ‘system’ trust describes
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22 230 the ways in which we ‘select’ our environments, and how these environments regulate expectations
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24 231 of behaviour, while ‘personal’ trust describes how an individual’s self-presentation interacts with
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26 232 others in the system. From this perspective, trust can be considered a form of ‘bounded and
27
28 233 structured’ uncertainty (Luhmann, 2017), which is held by latent expectations for trust within
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30 234 systems. These expectations allow individuals to make reasonable assumptions about future action,
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32 235 and in doing so grasp and reduce the complexity associated with unknown, future eventualities.
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38 236 *Trust as a ‘functioning fiction’*
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40 237 Möllering (2006) conceptualises the ‘leap of faith’ associated with trust as a ‘quasi-religious’
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42 238 experience which necessarily involves the individual suspending doubt in order to embrace
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44 239 vulnerability, and act ‘as if’ their faith will not be misplaced. For Luhmann (2017, p. 74), this
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46 240 challenges ‘the ontological opposition of reality and illusion’. The reflexive relationship between
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48 241 what is known and what is unknown positions the phenomena of trust as a ‘functioning fiction’.
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50 242 System trust supports this through the suspension of doubt, allowing actors to embrace
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52 243 vulnerability; making the illusion of a future in which trust is upheld, a practical reality.
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3 244 These latent expectations for trust within systems make social relations manageable, albeit within
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5 245 defined conditions. However, this equilibrium is fragile. For Luhmann (2017) trust remains a
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7 246 substitute for the original problem of complexity. Risk is inevitable, and so threats to trust depend
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9 247 on the capacity of the system to absorb risk and respond to new or unexpected information.
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13 248 *The complexity of the world is felt as a break, a schism – between the familiar and*
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15 249 *the unfamiliar. (Luhmann, 2017, p. 22)*
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19 250 *Thresholds for dis/trust*
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21 251 Trust needs to be built on solid foundations (Luhmann, 2017). Weak foundations for trust may
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23 252 make it more likely for breaches to occur, producing distrust, which can be understood as
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25 253 ‘confident negative *expectations*’ (Skinner *et al.*, 2014, p. 208) towards other people or a system.
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27 254 Highly mechanised systems with narrow conditions for trust may find it harder to absorb risks,
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29 255 meaning that trespasses more easily produce ruptures in trust.
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33 256 *Anyone who does not trust must turn to functionally equivalent strategies for the*
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35 257 *reduction of complexity ... he must hone his expectations into negative ones and so*
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37 258 *must, in certain respects, become distrustful. (Luhmann, 2017, p. 79)*
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41 259 Luhmann (2017) describes trust and distrust as sitting at ‘thresholds’. As experiences are processed
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43 260 and simplified, attitudes towards others become intersubjectively orientated towards these
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45 261 expectations. In this process, particular ‘objects’ and ‘events’ associated with experience can gain
46
47 262 particular relevance in the interpretation of future situations. The accumulated history of ‘turning
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49 263 points and thresholds’ (Luhmann, 2017, p. 83) come to define situations in which trust is given or
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51 264 withdrawn. Since systems and persons are understood as a ‘complex of symbols’, whether trust is
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53 265 granted depends on ‘symbolic thresholds’ (Kroeger, 2019, p. 119). Distrust within a system drives
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3 266 a similar desire for complexity reduction. However, in this form there is little room for uncertainty
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5 267 or doubt, and so strategies to reduce complexity may be blunt or ineffective. Luhmann (2017)
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8 268 argues that when the conditions for trust are narrowly defined, it can lead to coercion or corruption
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10 269 within a system, as the drive for existential security is urgent.

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13 270 *A person who distrusts both needs more information and at the same time narrows*
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15 271 *down the information he feels he can rely on. He comes more dependent on less*
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18 272 *information. (Luhmann, 2017, p. 80)*

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21 273 Möllering (2013) builds on this by arguing that a crisis in trust can occur when individuals (1) feel
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23 274 they lack information, (2) are no longer sure of their identity (or role) within the system and (3)
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25 275 the system they use to support their trusting falls apart. This conceptualisation of the evolution of
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28 276 dis/trust within systems turns our analytical attention to the powerful mechanisms within a system
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30 277 which shape trust (or distrust) building processes.

31 32 33 278 **Research Design**

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35 279 To advance the thinking outlined in this paper, we have undertaken a re-reading of two qualitative
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38 280 datasets with the goal of further exploring the processes which contribute to issues relating to the
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40 281 de/professionalisation of teachers across the English and Austrian contexts. We draw upon
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42 282 Möllering's (2013, p. 293) conceptualisation of trust as 'becoming', where the decision to trust
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45 283 becomes entangled with identity. He contends that to study trust is to study identity, and thus calls
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47 284 for qualitative-interpretive methods that allow researchers to explore how contexts for trust-
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49 285 building influence one's self-image. By paying closer attention to trust as a process of becoming,
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51 286 we intend to draw attention to the question of how dis/trust is (re)produced in VET settings, as
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54 287 well as how institutions contribute to this process.

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3 288 Though not within the scope of the analysis presented here, it is important to note that the
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5 289 qualification and recruitment practices for VET teachers are very different across the contexts
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8 290 under analysis (Grollmann and Rauner, 2007). This carries significance for participants'
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10 291 understanding of professional recognition (Richardson *et al.*, 2023), and therefore latent
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12 292 expectations for trust within these systems.

15 293 *Dataset*

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18 294 The data we draw upon derives from two datasets from distinct research projects which were
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20 295 carried out in England and Austria. The first data set (England) aimed to explore teachers'
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22 296 perceptions of trust in the FE context. The second (Austria) aimed to understand VET teachers'
23
24 297 experiences and views of recent policy reform. Both studies were interested in the influence these
25
26 298 phenomena had upon the processes of being and becoming a professional VET teacher.

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30 299 For this study, a secondary thematic analysis was carried across these datasets, using Luhmann's
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32 300 conceptual thinking on trust as a theoretical lens. In particular we were interested in the *symbolic*
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34 301 *thresholds* at which trust was granted or withdrawn, with an aim to understand conditions for
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36 302 professional recognition in both contexts. The introduction of a novel analytical tool allowed us to
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38 303 arrive at the data anew, and come to fresh conclusions with regard to the role of system trust in the
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40 304 formation of professional identity (Robertson *et al.*, 2010).

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44 305 The dataset consisted of ten in-depth narrative-based interviews with VET teachers based in
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46 306 England (4) and Austria (6). Each interview was between 50-90 minutes in length, and discussions
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48 307 included aspects relating to each teacher's biography, their professional experience and the impact
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50 308 of policy upon their daily practice. A systematic thematic analysis was undertaken (Braun and
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52 309 Clarke, 2006), from which three key themes emerged which each constituted a *symbolic threshold*

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3 310 for the granting or withdrawing of trust: *documentation, subordination and modes of legitimate*
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5 311 *self-expression.*
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8 312 **Findings and analysis**
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11 313 *Documentation*
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14 314 A central theme emerging from both contexts was the ever-increasing number of externally
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16 315 determined performance standards, quality assurance measures and documentation obligations
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18 316 with which teachers are confronted. Teachers in England and Austria point to an increasing
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20 317 bureaucratisation in the VET system and report on a technocratic approach to reform
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22 318 implementation (Lloyd and Payne, 2016; Hanley and Orr, 2019; Hautz and Thoma, 2021), which
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24 319 creates a feeling of being governed by data (Rose, 1991) and heightened scrutiny of one's
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26 320 professional conduct:
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31 321 *There is an insane amount of extra work now, a lot of bureaucracy. Everything has to*
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33 322 *be recorded, catalogued, all the boxes have to be ticked, etc. I feel that the pressure*
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35 323 *has increased. (Andrea, Austria) [2]*
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39 324 *If this box isn't ticked in some way, then you're not doing your job. And the box often*
40
41 325 *has nothing to do with what you achieve and manage with the students around you.*
42
43 326 *(Charlie, England)*
44
45

46
47 327 *I would like, if talking about [school] quality, to get away from this numerical data.*
48

49 328 *What we have to do is actually only about numbers in the first place. (Robin, Austria)*
50
51

52 329 *It does become tick-boxing. They [the exam board] write briefs for you. So as a tutor*
53
54 330 *you can write your own briefs or just go to the website and download [theirs], and the*
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3 331 *temptation, because you're [tired] and [worried] is that you go straight to that. You*
4
5 332 *just go well, that's nice and easy. Paperwork's done. I don't have to think of anything.*
6
7
8 333 *... just get 'em through, get 'em through ... (Rowan, England)*
9

10
11 334 Most of the teachers had the impression that they are judged in particular on the correct execution
12
13 335 of standardised documentation practices. This indicates a highly mechanised system that narrowly
14
15 336 defines the conditions for trust by setting clearly specified expectations for professional behaviour.
16
17 337 In both countries, interviewees describe a perceived narrowing of their room for manoeuvre and a
18
19 338 shift in their work profile from educators to administrators as a result of the current reform
20
21 339 processes, leading to insecurity about their role within the system:
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26 340 *If you constantly feel that someone could walk into your classroom at any time and*
27
28 341 *make a judgement on your teaching at any time, then you're gonna make sure what*
29
30 342 *you're doing ticks all the boxes ... if they walked in, looked at your paperwork*
31
32 343 *compared to what you're doing in a lesson they'd fail you on your observation.*
33
34 344 *(Rowan, England)*
35
36
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38 345 *Of course, there are a lot of "annoying" things like filling in all sorts of forms, which*
39
40 346 *is terrible. There are school leaders who judge a teacher more on whether they do all*
41
42 347 *the organisational things well, whether everything is filled in and so on. So, if you do*
43
44 348 *all the bureaucratic stuff properly, then you're a good teacher in the eyes of the*
45
46 349 *authorities. (Andrea, Austria)*
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50
51 350 The interviewed teachers in both countries expressed that due to the intensification of
52
53 351 accountability related administration, they have less time and resources for pedagogical activities.
54
55 352 This leads to 'an erosion of their educational mandate' (Hautz and Thoma, 2021, p. 804) and
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3 353 creates doubts and demotivation among teachers about their professional role. Most of the
4
5 354 interviewees therefore report that they feel that ‘the system that used to support their trusting is no
6
7
8 355 longer effective’ (Möllering, 2013, p. 299). For example:

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10
11 356 *I actually feel like a firefighter. I’m supposed to record everything they [the students]*
12
13 357 *do: if they raise their hand, I’m supposed to record it; if they don’t do anything, I’m*
14
15 358 *supposed to record it. That’s why they don’t get to think at all. And that’s why I don’t*
16
17 359 *like to do it. (Jules, Austria)*

18
19
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21 360 *Now everything is simplified in such a way that it becomes more measurable and thus*
22
23 361 *a lot of quality is lost. Of course, we also learn to teach in such a way that we meet*
24
25 362 *these quality measurement instruments, but something is definitely lost in this process.*
26
27 363 *(Audre, Austria)*

28
29
30
31 364 *If we’re talking about classes next year now, I’m not optimistic about how those are*
32
33 365 *gonna run, so I’m not optimistic. They’ll run and we’ll do good things with the*
34
35 366 *students, but I’m not optimistic they’ll be as good as they could be or have been.*
36
37 367 *(Charlie, England)*

38
39
40
41 368 *We’re stretched quite thin and work across lots of different programmes and I think*
42
43 369 *I’m always running to catch up with myself, so sometimes I’m actually thinking when*
44
45 370 *I’m planning, I might think I’m doing a good job but actually, am I? (Aubrey, England)*

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47
48
49 371 VET reforms are seen as promoting a ‘regime of accountability’ (Holloway and Brass, 2018, p.
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51 372 363) as they seek to render teachers’ actions tangible, measurable and comparable. Avis (2009, p.
52
53 373 658) refers to this rather managerialist form of governance as ‘technical rationalism’. This

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3 374 approach strives to standardise and simplify complex educational processes in the quest for
4
5 375 ‘quantitative wholeness’ (Smith and O’Leary, 2013, p. 246), which tends to narrow thresholds for
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7
8 376 trust.

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11 377 In both contexts, policy changes were increasing the pressure to align professional action with
12
13 378 predefined standards and to account for them through documentation practices. Yet, systems that
14
15 379 stifle autonomy through accountability mechanisms have the ‘fundamental problem’ (Schleicher,
16
17 380 2021, p. xii) of limiting trust and capacity.

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19
20
21 381 In the absence of trust, individuals must replace trust with ‘functional equivalents’ (Luhmann,
22
23 382 2017), that allow them to maintain a sense of existential security. In this case, documentation
24
25 383 became a substitute for trust in teachers, and thus the effective and efficient completion of these
26
27 384 documents functioned as a symbolic threshold for trust, even at the expense of teachers’ self-
28
29 385 reported perception of quality in pedagogical practice. Attempts to render teaching predictable
30
31 386 makes conversations around educational desirability redundant (Biesta, 2009). Therefore, as a
32
33 387 functional equivalent for trust, documentation allows quality assurance agents to *rely more on less*
34
35 388 *information* (Luhmann, 2017). However, the quality of this information can be dubious, leading to
36
37 389 the risk of valuing only those aspects of education that are observable and measurable (Biesta,
38
39 390 2009). Luhmann (2017, p. 17) importantly reminds us that trust is not about perceived mastery, it
40
41 391 is instead about the ‘*tolerance of ambiguity in the absence of certainty*’. The risk of verification-
42
43 392 based trust is that it is predisposed to suspicion, and can easily cultivate distrust (Lewicki *et al.*,
44
45 393 1998). In this sense, trust-as-documentation becomes a ‘poisoned chalice’ where ‘requests for trust
46
47 394 are contrary to the trustee’s better judgement and create an uncomfortable obligation’ (Skinner *et*
48
49 395 *al.*, 2013, p. 212). The interviewees in this section illustrate that crossing this threshold for trust
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51 396 ultimately means sacrificing core educational values.
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3 397 *Subordination*
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5 398 The creation of a culture of distrust is reinforced by increased monitoring and control mechanisms
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7
8 399 in VET. In a high-stakes accountability environment, emphasis is placed on ‘hierarchical
9
10 400 oversight’ (Proudfoot, 2021, p. 813) of the performance of learners, teachers and educational
11
12 401 institutions. This makes ensuring the subordination of employees paramount. Most of the teachers
13
14 402 interviewed point to the sharp rise in control and surveillance of their actions within the framework
15
16
17 403 of standards-based reforms:
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19
20 404 *Now I’m saying to students “we’re being observed. They’re coming to observe me and*
21
22 405 *they’re coming to observe you” because I don’t see it as a positive experience now. I*
23
24 406 *used to see it as a developmental experience. Now I see it as a controlling experience.*
25
26
27 407 *(Charlie, England)*
28

29
30 408 *And with all these bureaucratic tendencies, I feel more and more that everything is*
31
32 409 *done for the sake of school controlling. All the figures have to be provided and*
33
34 410 *registered. I have the impression that there is a lot more control from above. (Andrea,*
35
36
37 411 *Austria)*
38

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41 412 While some forms of control can be perceived as having a positive effect on trust within and
42
43 413 between individuals and organisations, as it allows room for predictability on the part of the trustor,
44
45 414 excessive control can have the opposite effect for the trustee, who can experience control
46
47 415 mechanisms as felt distrust (Högberg *et al.*, 2018). In the data of both countries, the latter is
48
49 416 particularly apparent. Teachers feel that they are ‘over-monitored’ (Sarah, Austria) and relate this
50
51 417 to a perceived distrust of teachers not doing their work properly. This makes many teachers feel
52
53 418 that they are under suspicion of doing something wrong, as the following examples show:
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1
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3 419 *In my opinion, the control has increased a lot, but especially from the side of the school*
4
5 420 *management. ... I don't like the control from above or the suspicion from above that*
6
7 421 *is there from the very beginning. The teacher has to be watched, so to speak. There*
8
9 422 *are always these insinuations and they [school leaders] prefer to assume the negative.*
10
11 423 *Yes, and then there are these restrictions on our pedagogical freedom, but I just want*
12
13 424 *to have the choice of the decision and not be dictated from above. (Audre, Austria)*
14
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18 425 *I think the college has developed in some ways a culture of blame, and a culture of*
19
20 426 *fear and a culture of cutbacks, and almost ... a threat to staff. Staff feel pressurised,*
21
22 427 *staff feel underfunded, under-regarded, over-blamed and they are submitted to a whole*
23
24 428 *barrage of impositions from the higher management that the higher management think*
25
26 429 *should just happen like that [clicks fingers]. (Charlie, England)*
27
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29

30 430 *I do believe that the school management is convinced that by controlling the teachers,*
31
32 431 *the quality will improve. It's just that the teaching staff is so individual and so different.*
33
34 432 *I also believe that with some teachers control would not be bad... but to impose this*
35
36 433 *control on everyone? I lose the joy of teaching if I always have to justify myself and if*
37
38 434 *I am constantly under observation. (Caroline, Austria)*
39
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43 435 *There's a culture of "we've caught you, do it better" and if you don't do it better*
44
45 436 *you're in culpability. (Aubrey, England)*
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47

48 437 The findings clearly show the 'counter-productive nature of much teacher surveillance'
49
50 438 (Proudfoot, 2021, p. 813). Teachers report raised levels of frustration, stress, and even fear.
51
52 439 According to previous research (Cerna, 2014; Ehren and Baxter, 2021), high trust relations in
53
54 440 schools lead to more collaboration, teacher engagement and professional development. Coupled
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3 441 with a certain degree of freedom, this fosters the potential for innovation and creativity in teaching
4
5 442 and learning (Avis, 2003). However, in a climate of distrust, teachers are less likely to expose
6
7 443 themselves to the risk of ‘becoming vulnerable to judgement by others’ (Ehren and Baxter, 2021,
8
9 444 p. 11). Within this culture, to render oneself trustworthy, one must become (or at least be *seen* to
10
11 445 be) overtly compliant. Subordination, therefore, becomes a threshold for earning trust in VET
12
13 446 contexts. This implies ‘anti-educational consequences’ (Avis *et al.*, 2011, p. 125) and a danger of
14
15 447 growing ‘de-professionalisation’ (Gleeson *et al.*, 2015, p. 91) in VET, as dis/trust also shapes the
16
17 448 processes of being and becoming a professional VET teacher.
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22 449 *Modes of legitimate self-expression*

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25 450 The granting or withdrawing of trust strongly influences our self-understanding and how we
26
27 451 behave towards the people around us. Luhmann’s (2017) notion of trust as ‘bounded and
28
29 452 structured’ uncertainty hinges on shared expectations for conduct within systems, allowing us to
30
31 453 reasonably predict the actions of others in the system. Particularly in structures which value control
32
33 454 and *subordination*, trust in the individual is defined by adherence to system expectations (e.g.,
34
35 455 through *documentation*), making issues of self-presentation important. This suggests that for VET
36
37 456 teachers, aspects of identity may need to be obscured or hidden in order to gain trust. For the
38
39 457 interviewees in both countries, it was clear that their modes of self-expression must align with
40
41 458 latent expectations for conduct within their respective system. For some teachers, this logic became
42
43 459 internalised:
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49 460 *My opinion is that a good teacher should basically accept the system structure. ...*

50
51 461 *This organisation would not work if every teacher did what they wanted. I think a*
52
53 462 *good teacher should accept decisions from the school management, because not all*
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3 463 *information is always available to the individual teacher. There should be a basic*
4
5 464 *trust in the school leader. ... In other words, don't boycott and also try to think from*
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7
8 465 *an organisational point of view. Of course, this also means that you have to take your*
9
10 466 *ego back in certain aspects and critically question your own opinion. (Gery, Austria)*
11
12
13 467 *Instead of just adapting ... people just kick off and I'm sitting there in meetings*
14
15 468 *thinking like "why are you kicking off?". It needs to be done, it's a great thing. We've*
16
17
18 469 *recently just started to track what's called "final predicted grades" in the college,*
19
20 470 *so you have to try and predict using all kinds of data what the final grades will be*
21
22 471 *for every student across every course on the 16th of every month. So, it's a good*
23
24 472 *thing, it's constant tracking. People are kicking off about it and it's like students need*
25
26
27 473 *to know if they're on target, you need to know if you're falling behind. (Jamie,*
28
29 474 *England)*
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31

32 475 In these examples, both participants were conscious they must be overt in their production of
33
34 476 documentation and their subordination to management. In this sense, technologies of surveillance
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36
37 477 became 'simulation[s] of teaching' (Page, 2017, p. 1) in practice. For Page (2017), teacher
38
39 478 professionalism is constituted through standardised professional frameworks and trust is earned
40
41 479 via a teacher's ability to express their professionalism through simulated data. For one participant,
42
43 480 this rendered the practice of the individual teacher 'unimportant' (Aubrey, England). This echoes
44
45 481 Ball's (2003, p. 222) contention that 'if the identity produced by performativity is socially empty,
46
47
48 482 how does the actor recognise him/herself and others?' This loss of self in participants'
49
50 483 understanding of their teaching role had a palpable impact upon wellbeing:
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3 484 *Your position here is you're always quite doubtful about "what am I doing?", "am*
4
5 485 *I confident about things?" ... I'm stretched so far that sometimes I doubtful that I'm*
6
7 486 *doing any of it any good ... you're sort of doubtful about what's going on around*
8
9 487 *you. (Aubrey, England)*
10
11
12

13 488 *You need a lot of resilience, and also a lot of stamina, so that at some point you don't*
14
15 489 *say: "I'm not interested in this anymore." ... So that you don't get too caught up in*
16
17 490 *bad thoughts or let yourself be dragged down. You also have to be resistant, so that*
18
19 491 *you can go on and think for yourself: "I'll keep going; I still see a little sense in it;*
20
21 492 *let's approach the whole thing positively for once; let's sit down together; what's the*
22
23 493 *good thing about it, what were they trying to achieve?" (Jules, Austria)*
24
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26
27

28 494 *I doubt whether I've got it in me anymore ... if the college are so worried that the*
29
30 495 *course needs improvement because so many students are deemed to have left and*
31
32 496 *failed and so on then I can't be doing a good job, so then I doubt my confidence.*
33
34 497 *(Rowan, England)*
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38 498 Möllering (2013) suggests that a crisis of identity may occur when we are unsure of who we are
39
40 499 in relation to the system. Bottery (2003, p. 247) contends that macro policy enactments can have
41
42 500 profound consequences for teacher identity:
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45

46 501 *while macro-economic and political policy tends to view individuals as resources to*
47
48 502 *be controlled and directed ... it remains the case that much of the core of human*
49
50 503 *existence is a deeply felt personal project ... when governmental and organisational*
51
52 504 *policies fail to meet or depress the realisation of such existential needs, then*
53
54 505 *individuals will be profoundly damaged.*
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3 506 Trust and subjectivity are tangled in process (Möllering, 2006), and so the decision to trust is only
4
5 507 made possible through ‘relations of familiarity’ in both interpersonal and institutional contexts.
6
7
8 508 How we understand our position in a system speaks to those individuals and institutions in which
9
10 509 we place our faith. It therefore stands to reason that if modes of legitimate self-expression
11
12 510 undermine an individual’s sense of self, they can become alienated. It was clear from the
13
14 511 interviews in both countries that teachers felt that their professional identity was not recognised.
15
16 512 In Tully’s (2022) study of professionalism in FE, staff reported that the concept of professional
17
18 513 recognition was linked to autonomy and trust. He further stresses that recognition places a
19
20 514 significant duty upon those individuals and institutions with the ‘*power to recognise*’ (Tully, 2023,
21
22 515 p. 30) and legitimise the professional judgement of staff. In this case, a lack of professional
23
24 516 recognition caused teachers to lose faith in the school management and/or the VET system as a
25
26 517 whole, and the prescribed outcome-oriented standards led to a restriction of their educational
27
28 518 freedom and conflicted with their pedagogical ethos.
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34 519 **Conclusion**

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37 520 The narratives in this paper expose the fragility of the VET system within the global skills
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39 521 discourse. High trust cultures tend to enjoy long periods of stability, what Sztompka (1999, p. 122)
40
41 522 refers to as ‘normative coherence’. For Luhmann (2017), the more experienced and stable the
42
43 523 system, the more ‘elastic’ the trust within it becomes, making the system adaptable and durable.
44
45 524 Conversely, fractures in trust (i.e., the evolution of distrust) can render systems brittle. The need
46
47 525 to assure VET for as yet unimagined futures becomes difficult in an increasingly de-regulated
48
49 526 market economy. James *et al.*’s (2022) work points to the inherent complexity associated with
50
51 527 defining purpose within the context of international agenda-setting. They argue that ‘economic
52
53 528 growth has become intrinsically valued’ (James *et al.*, 2022, p. 7) in international policy. For
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3 529 teachers in this sample, this disregards educational values and undermines the complexity of the
4
5 530 pedagogical encounter.
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8 531 In understanding trust as vehicle for ‘complexity reduction’ (Luhmann, 2017, p. 9), and thus the
9
10 532 capacity to embrace the vulnerability associated with placing faith in others (Möllering, 2006), we
11
12 533 argue that in the VET context ‘top-down’ policy-making at the macro-level hinders the ability of
13
14 534 organisations to produce trust cultures (Donovan, 2019). Motivated by the desire to reduce or
15
16 535 overcome risk in the pursuit of rigid policy goals, sector leaders are driven to excessively control
17
18 536 educational outcomes; something that Page (2017) has referred to as the desire to know the future
19
20 537 as if it has already passed. Thompson and Wolstencroft (2018) have further illustrated that heavy-
21
22 538 handed political influence on VET strategy has meant that college leadership have had little say
23
24 539 over the strategic direction of their organisations, characterised by a shift from ‘trust into mistrust’
25
26 540 in teacher effectiveness.
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32 541 Biesta (2015, p. 18) contends that complexity reduction in education is manifested through the
33
34 542 standardisation and ‘total control’ of educational environments, where the system is orientated
35
36 543 towards desired educational outcomes, without sufficient engagement with ideas around what
37
38 544 *purpose* the system serves. He argues that defining educational purpose via output control can lead
39
40 545 to the cultivation of systems which are ‘*non-educational*’ (emphasis added). Moreover, teachers
41
42 546 are often excluded from discussions regarding the form and nature of ‘good work’ in VET (Tully,
43
44 547 2023). We suggest, therefore, that current policy mechanisms largely constitute the conditions for
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46 548 professional recognition within the VET sector, often *at the expense* of teachers’ core pedagogical
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48 549 values.
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3 550 The growing divergence between VET policy and teachers' values threatens the foundation upon
4
5 551 which trust is built. In this sense, the struggle over purpose in VET can be understood as an
6
7 552 important antecedent for the breakdown of system trust. For Luhmann (2017), individuals within
8
9 553 a system must believe in shared notions of 'truth' which hold the system together. We contend that
10
11 554 such 'truth' in VET has become contested. The desire of regulatory bodies to arrive at simplicity
12
13 555 at the expense of complexity is an attempt to circumvent the necessary risk associated with a
14
15 556 meaningful educational process (Biesta, 2013). In doing so, systems of governance in VET have
16
17 557 re-shaped conditions for professional recognition for teachers, setting narrow thresholds for trust
18
19 558 which allow teachers to be controlled and their professional judgements undermined. The
20
21 559 narratives presented here show how the evolution of distrust cultures in VET have had a significant
22
23 560 impact upon teachers' professional self-understanding. Teachers interviewed report higher
24
25 561 workloads, less time to dedicate to their craft and a significant impact upon self-confidence. Taken
26
27 562 together, these cultures of distrust carry risks for the wellbeing and retention of VET teachers.
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33 563 The consequences for teacher professionalism are profound, and as illustrated in this paper,
34
35 564 represents a 'crisis of trust' (Möllering, 2013) which extends beyond national borders. Despite the
36
37 565 divergent VET traditions and contexts studied here, the effect of neoliberal rationalities in VET
38
39 566 governance upon teachers have proven similar. This indicates convergence towards a meta-
40
41 567 discourse around purpose in VET, which is making conditions ripe for system distrust to seed at
42
43 568 the supranational level. This paper thus highlights the need to further explore the phenomenon of
44
45 569 dis/trust in future studies and to systematically consider it in VET research and practice.
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52
53 571 **Endnotes**
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3 572 [1] While we will use the term ‘VET’ to refer to the education and training system, the terminology
4
5 573 differs between England and Austria. For this reason, at times the authors may instead use the
6
7
8 574 terms ‘FE’ (Further Education) when referring specifically to the English context.
9

10 575 [2] All interviews from Austria were conducted in German and translated by the authors.
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