

## **Establishment of a School-Based Pathway to Universities of Applied Sciences in Switzerland. Conventions of Higher Education Access in Vocational and General Education**

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*Abstract:* How did the upper-secondary specialised school (SpS) establish itself as a school-based pathway to the universities of applied sciences in Switzerland? The sociology of conventions serves to analyse how actors justify and assess this type of school. The analysis of interviews and educational policy documents shows that the specialised school has been a recurring target of criticism from advocates of the VET system. It had to make compromises with the world of work to gain recognition as a pathway to the universities of applied sciences.

*Keywords:* Specialised schools, higher education access, VET, general education, conventions

### **La mise en place d'une voie d'accès scolaire aux Hautes écoles spécialisées en Suisse. Conventions d'accès aux études supérieures dans la formation professionnelle et générale**

*Résumé:* Comment a l'École de culture générale (ECG) pu s'établir en tant que voie d'accès scolaire vers les Hautes écoles spécialisées (HES) en Suisse? L'économie des conventions sert à examiner la justification de cette école par les acteurs. L'analyse des entretiens et des documents de politique éducative montre que l'école a été critiquée plusieurs fois du côté de la formation professionnelle. En conséquence l'école a dû faire des compromissions avec le monde du travail par référence au curriculum, afin d'être reconnue comme une voie d'accès aux HES.

*Mots-clés:* ECG, accès aux HES, formation professionnelle, culture générale, conventions

### **Die Etablierung eines schulischen Zugangswegs an die Fachhochschulen in der Schweiz. Konventionen des Hochschulzugangs in Berufs- und Allgemeinbildung**

*Zusammenfassung:* Wie konnte sich die Fachmittelschule (FMS) als schulischer Zugangsweg zu den Schweizer Fachhochschulen etablieren? Die Rechtfertigung und Bewertung dieses Schultyps durch Akteure werden konventionensoziologisch untersucht. Die Analyse von Interviews und bildungspolitischen Dokumenten zeigt, dass die Fachmittelschule immer wieder Kritik seitens der Berufsbildung ausgesetzt war. Als Konsequenz musste sie Kompromisse mit der Arbeitswelt in Bezug auf das Curriculum eingehen, um als Zugangsweg zu den Fachhochschulen anerkannt zu werden.

*Schlüsselwörter:* Fachmittelschule, Hochschulzugang, Berufsbildung, Allgemeinbildung, Konventionen

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## 1 Introduction

The upper-secondary specialised school (SpS) has established itself alongside the vocational education and training (VET) and grammar school as a third upper-secondary path toward higher education in Switzerland.<sup>1</sup> This is the result of an extended transformation process that began in the 1970s and was completed in 2004. Traditionally, the school sought to provide girls with a school-based track of advanced general education after compulsory schooling to prepare them for professional education, specifically in the fields of nursing, social work and early childhood education (KDMS 2001, 11). Up until 2004, young people could not enter such professional education before the age of 18. The reason was that they were to be protected from a “too early exposure to a harsh professional reality that is often difficult to cope with” (ibid., 2001, 11). Against this backdrop, the SpS served as a moratorium during which it prepared students for nursing, social and pedagogical professions by providing “general education in close touch with reality”, developing the ability to “establish and cultivate interpersonal relationships”, assisting in the choice of profession and devoting “special attention to personality development” (EDK 1987, 2). Although the SpS had established itself as an important educational option to prepare students for these professional fields, the lack of official pathways that its graduates could move onto frequently led to perceiving the SpS as a dead end (EDK 1996, 24, 33).

In light of an educational landscape that underwent dynamic changes, this article focuses on the last phase of the transformation process of the SpS between 1990 and 2004.

The collectively shared cultural-cognitive belief that higher education and science are indispensable for modern societies (Meyer et al. 2007; Meyer and Ramirez 2009) resulted in political demands in Switzerland that increasing parts of the professional workforce receive academic education and training, graduation certificates be compatible across Europe, there be greater permeability between vocational and academic education and educational programmes be better coordinated and harmonised (Weber et al. 2010; Rosenmund 2011; Kiener 2013). This led to profound reforms in higher education and vocational education at the upper-secondary level. These reforms undermined the position and profile of the SpS and put the school under pressure to justify itself (Kiener 2004). One aspect was that the creation of universities of applied sciences (UAS) in the early 1990s out of the existing institutions of professional education required clarification of who was to

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1 We would like to thank Stephan Elkins (SocioTrans – Social Science Translation & Editing) for his careful and thorough work in translating the manuscript from German to English. All quotes referred to in this text have been translated from German.

prepare students for these new universities and how access should be regulated.<sup>2</sup> At the level of vocational education, the reforms involved the introduction of the vocational baccalaureate in 1994, which qualifies students for admission to study courses in a related profession at a UAS (Kiener and Gonon 1998). This reform inevitably raised questions concerning the status of the SpS (EDK 1996, 39). One of the SpS representatives' most urgent concerns was whether the SpS would also be granted the right to prepare its students for the UAS and issue a formal certificate qualifying its graduates for admission to higher education. Another aspect was the institutionalisation of specific VET programmes in the fields of health and social work. Upon completing compulsory education at the age of 15 or 16, young people could now immediately begin these new VET programmes in these fields and move on to a UAS upon attaining a vocational baccalaureate. The introduction of this parallel educational pathway in areas in which the SpS had previously been the only upper-secondary institution to provide preparatory education further increased the pressure on the SpS to justify itself. Representatives from the VET field in particular had always been critical of the SpS as a third upper-secondary educational pathway (Leemann and Imdorf 2019a). In the late 1990s, these dynamics forced the SpS to secure its position and defend its profile by seeking recognition as a route to the UAS – at least in the traditional areas of health and social work.<sup>3</sup>

Drawing on a qualitative analysis of educational policy documents as well as on expert interviews, this article aims to understand how the SpS managed to establish itself in the face of this dispute as a legitimate pathway to the UAS. What reasons did the various actors involved in this controversy give to justify or question the legitimacy of the SpS as a pathway to these universities? What qualities of education were perceived to be the prerequisites for these young people's university readiness? How did the SpS reform its programme to meet criticism? With its roots in pragmatic French sociology, the sociology of conventions (Boltanski and Thévenot 2006) provides a suitable foundation to understand this endeavor, since it directs attention to the actors and their reasoning and assessments, which are based on different conventions in the sense of orders of justification. We assume that the political dispute over the role and function of the SpS in the education system reflects the different conventions upon which the actors draw. In the following, we examine which conventions became powerful in these disputes and which compromises the SpS made between them to position itself as a legitimate pathway toward the UAS.

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2 Today, the Swiss universities of applied sciences offer tertiary-level study programmes in the fields of technology, life sciences, architecture, economics and others as well as in health and social work. The date of institutionalisation of the universities of applied sciences in Switzerland varied across language regions and fields of study; here, the fields of engineering and technology – characterised by a strongly industrially as well as entrepreneurially oriented logic – played a pioneering role (Zosso 2006).

3 This article does not address the developments in the teaching professions and access to the schools of education because these involved a different dynamic.

Section 2 shows the state of research and lays the theoretical foundations. Section 3 describes the study and its methodological approach. Section 4 and 5 first reconstruct the conventions which the two groups of actors referred to in the debate over access to UAS and then show which requirements had to be met in their view to grant it. Section 6 presents the institutional solutions that played a substantial part in recognising the SpS as a pathway to the UAS, summarises the results, highlights our contribution to advancing the theoretical approach and provides an outlook on research desiderata.

## 2 State of Research and Theoretical Framework

### 2.1 The Early Institutionalisation of the Specialised School

In the early 1970s, VET and grammar school were the two recognised pathways of post-compulsory education in Switzerland. According to Baethge (2006), vocational and general education are characterised by different institutional orders. This leads to differences between the two educational pathways in terms of regulations, expectations and beliefs regarding educational objectives, types of knowledge, methods of teaching and learning, the status of the learners, the training of the teaching staff, funding as well as supervisory mechanisms. In the dual-track VET system, the apprentice is in an employment relationship. Via practical integration into the working process, the apprentice develops the professional skills required in the labour market. General education, by contrast, is removed from practice and seeks to form the student into an educated personality. Conveying a canon of representative knowledge serves to develop an academic mindset. Both in Germany and in Switzerland, we can observe a “commitment of the major groups in society to the dual-track VET system” (Baethge 2006, 22), which explains why the SpS was criticised and opposed by powerful actors in the VET and labour-market policy arenas.

Early 1970 was the first time that political demands were raised for a solution to the municipal and cantonal SpS throughout Switzerland. This triggered a debate on the potential status and desired profile of the SpS (Leemann and Imdorf 2019a). As a third educational pathway, the SpS was required to position itself within a system defined by the two existing pathways, VET and grammar school, and justify its worth in a classification system based on the binary code of “vocational versus general education” or “practice versus theory” (ibid.). At the time, the principle of legitimation which the actors relied on was a compromise between civic and moral competencies and qualities. The SpS was to prepare youths for taking responsibility in society and working with others in their future professions, in which interpersonal relationships and shared responsibility play an important role. These criteria of worth materialised in a compromise according to which the SpS’ major educational

objective would be to form its subjects into “mature personalities” in order to enable this new type of school to adopt a unique profile.

The political consultation process (Vernehmlassung<sup>4</sup>) concerning the potential position and profile of the SpS revealed that important representatives of educational institutions were against the SpS. They found fault with the school-based form of personality development and advocated dual-track VET instead. Moreover, they criticised that the schools, being removed from practice, resulted in young people not receiving the proper professional training and not being trained in accordance with labour-market demand. The SpS representatives feared that the VET side might perceive the SpS as a competing “gentlemanly” path to cadre positions without having to do any real work (Leemann and Imdorf 2019a). In the end, the idea of a third educational pathway prevailed in the educational policy arena. In 1988, the SpS was officially recognised in Switzerland (EDK 1989, 3) after a process that took nearly two decades and involved disputes over the status and profile of this third pathway.

## 2.2 The Institutionalisation of the Specialised School since the 1990s in the Context of Debates over Qualification Requirements in the Knowledge Society

The process of establishing the SpS since the 1990s can be analysed in the context of the discourse revolving around the question of which kinds of knowledge will be crucial for mastering societal change toward the postindustrial knowledge and service society and what kind of institutional entities and forms of teaching and learning are most suitable for developing such knowledge (for an overview, see Dietzen 2015). Although dual-track VET imparts general education as part of its school-based training (at least 360 hours for a three-year apprenticeship [BBT 2006; SBFI 2006]) as well as transversal competencies in general (Scharnhorst and Kaiser 2018), the above-mentioned discourse was increasingly critical of the VET system. The critics claimed that the types of knowledge with its large emphasis on learning by doing on the job under the guidance of an on-the-job trainer and aligned along a narrow job profile were no longer sufficient to meet the demands in the working world, both today and tomorrow (Kruse 2012; Minssen 2012). In view of rapid developments in the economy, in the organisation of work and in technology, they therefore called for building broader types of knowledge that are independent of specific business operations and professions as well as for putting greater emphasis on general education and theoretical-systematic knowledge (Baethge 2004; Baethge et al. 2007). The emphasis on general education was not least to equip individuals with key qualifications or soft skills (Griffith and Guile 2004). Theoretical-systematic knowledge should enable individuals to engage in analysis,

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4 The Swiss legislative procedure involves a preparatory phase in which the cantons, political parties and interested circles (e. g., associations) are invited to submit their opinions on a draft version of a bill.

reflection, meta-cognition and innovation and – when acquired at an academic level – to expand and innovate knowledge.

These new types of knowledge are to a greater degree imparted in school-based, didactically structured teaching and learning environments that are not incorporated into business operations geared toward manufacturing or service provision. These school-based learning environments are thus more or less removed from the concrete daily practice on the job. However, in countries with a pronounced dual-track VET system, such as Switzerland or Germany in particular, one-sided school-based systems of learning that are removed from practice have always been subject to criticism. Fritz Böhle (2015), for instance, directed attention early on to the relevance of experiential knowledge based on sensory perception and intuition.

Against the backdrop outlined above, we expect the debate over the status and profile of the SpS to evoke controversies as to which types of knowledge will be required in the future and to what extent the SpS is suitable for developing them.

### 2.3 Justifications and Qualities of Education: The Plurality of Conventions

Our examination of the different justifications and qualification requirements for access to UAS draws on the sociology of conventions (Diaz-Bone 2011; 2018), which has gained currency in educational research in recent years (Imdorf et al. 2019). This approach rests on the seminal work of Luc Boltanski and Laurent Thévenot presented in their book *On Justification. Economies of Worth* (2006) and aspires to integrate a structuralist and pragmatic-ethnomethodological perspective.

Conventions are general principles (orders of justification and worth, logics of action) that have evolved historically in social practice, have proven themselves in their socio-cultural environment and have become reality via objectification. Actors draw on conventions to coordinate action in situations of uncertainty, justify positions and evaluate qualities. Boltanski and Thévenot (2006) reconstructed six conventions that are geared toward specific conceptions of the common good that underlie social cohesion. Jean-Louis Derouet (1992) transferred these conventions to the field of school and education. Later, in their work on postindustrial society, Boltanski and Chiapello (2005) developed a seventh convention: the project convention. Each of these conventions of quality (Eymard-Duvernay 1989) involves an order of justification that guides the design of educational programmes and thus generates its own quality of education. This presupposes principles of comparability – so-called principles of equivalence. These principles attribute qualities and worth to things, subjects and processes in situations involving evaluation and tests of worth and make these attributions comparable (Diaz-Bone 2018). Imdorf et al. (2019) provide an up-to-date overview of educational research based on the theoretical framework of the sociology of convention. The studies collected in this volume deal with questions of inequality, justice, governance and the construction of

Table 1 Quality Conventions in Education

Convention	Quality of education	Types of knowledge, methods of teaching and learning	Test of worth (evaluation)
Civic convention	General education Primacy of the collective, solidarity, inclusion, equality	<i>Savoir</i> , theoretical-abstract/ systematic, canonical knowledge Shielded from reality	Non-discrimination, equality, democratic principles, equity General interest
Domestic convention	Trust, intimacy, tradition, hierarchy, character building	<i>Savoir-vivre</i> , practical experience	
– Company setting	Interpersonal relationships in work community, character building by confrontation with (on-the-job) reality	Physically grounded experiential knowledge, instruction as integral part of the working process, learning by doing, manual labour, master– apprentice relationship	Practical experience, social fit
– School setting	Interpersonal relationships in school community, character building in a sheltered environment	Didactically structured learning, systematic instruction, orientation toward the individual	Community building
Industrial convention	Expertise, efficiency, performance, long-term nature	<i>Savoir-faire</i> , know-how, planning, developing skills and competencies, problem- oriented learning	Professionalism, performance indicators
Project convention	Capacity for teamwork, being mobile and autonomous, self-management	Key competencies, soft skills Project work, teamwork, life-long learning	Straightforwardness, mobility, cooperation and networking
Convention of fame	Fame, renown, reputation		Prestige, acknowledgment, visibility

Sources: Derouet 1992, 87 ff. ; Boltanski and Chiapello 2005, 168 ff. ; Boltanski and Thévenot 2006, 159 ff. ; Diaz-Bone 2018, 162 f. ; Leemann and Imdorf 2019b.

persons and institutions in education, as well as with evaluations in the educational system and the design of curricula.

The five conventions listed below (see Table 1) provide the foundation for our analysis. Drawing on Derouet's transfer of these conventions to the field of education, Table 1 shows our working hypotheses on the quality of education, types of knowledge, methods of teaching and learning as well as tests of worth associated with each of these conventions.

The civic convention emphasises the values of an enlightened civil society which gives importance to general education, the collective and individual equality. Theoretical-abstract knowledge and the general interest are the key orientations in education. This convention provides the major foundation for what Baethge (2006) described as the institutional order of general education. In the domestic convention, by contrast, we find the rules, values and self-conceptions to be most dominant that are associated with the institutional order of VET (see also Boltanski and Thévenot 2006). Its model of community is that of the family with its intimate relationships based on familiarity. In real coordination situations, conventions articulate themselves differently depending on the concrete constellation and the dispositif of the setting. Therefore, we assume that the domestic convention materialises differently in a company compared to a school setting. This considered, we further differentiate Derouet's conception of the domestic convention in education and call these two forms 'domestic-school convention' and 'domestic-company convention' (see Table 1). This is an attempt to conceptually grasp different articulations of the domestic convention in specific (school vs. company) educational settings. This distinction also captures the different institutional orders of general education and VET, as proposed by Baethge (2006), as well as the different forms of knowledge and knowledge appropriation associated with them, as outlined by Dietzen (2015).

In the industrial convention, the quality of education relies on the potential for performance, the expertise and professionalism of people and processes. In the project convention, quality is characterised by the ability to work in teams and in the form of projects (e. g., project-based learning), to be mobile and flexible, and to easily integrate into a changing, network-like working environment. In the convention of fame, educational quality is based on visibility and a well-reputed educational pathway which benefits the community as a whole. The sociology of conventions enables us to show that both educational pathways – general and vocational education – are characterised by plural orders of worth. The aim of this article is to take a closer look at the domestic convention in both institutional pathways and learning environments to which they are bound.

Since most social situations involve more than one convention that has proven its worth and is considered socially legitimate, different interpretations of education are confronted with one another, each of which can claim validity. Boltanski and Thévenot (1999) call this confrontation "radical criticism", which means that a conventional order of justification and worth is rejected as not appropriate to the situation. However, it is also possible that a dispute will emerge over the valid principle of equivalence and the appropriate test of worth for evaluating a quality within a convention – which Boltanski and Thévenot call a less radical criticism. Hence, the coordination of action implies the need to situationally mediate plural, competing and contradictory orders of justification, deal with criticism and disputes, and find solutions. In conflicts over the appropriate interpretation of the situation,

one convention or principle of equivalence can prevail or compromises between different measures of worth might be struck. It is also possible that conventions make positive reference to one another and form compromises by drawing on the logics and strategies of another order of justification to strengthen their own conceptions of quality (Diaz-Bone 2018, 175, 205f.).

Conventions and compromises are generalised and stabilised, in the sense of objectification, through investments in material (e.g., curricula) and immaterial forms (e.g., cognitive schemata) (Thévenot 1984). This is accomplished by means of standardisation, that is, by sacrificing alternatives and variants (Thévenot 2009; 2011) as well as through instrumentation, that is, by equipping the situation in which coordination takes place with cognitions, information, rules, programmes and procedures that facilitate and secure the collective pursuit of certain qualities (Diaz-Bone 2017). Such dispositifs of valorisation expand the temporal and socio-spatial scope – and thus enhance the power – of a convention to achieve coordination in accordance with its understanding of quality (Thévenot 2014).

Against this backdrop, we have derived the following three sets of research questions:

1. Which orders of justification did actors who sought to enable SpS graduates to access UAS rely on? How did critical voices justify their opposition? (Section 4)
2. Which educational qualities did the various actor groups see as necessary prerequisites for studying at a UAS? Which disputes can be reconstructed? What standards were set and which sacrifices made to ensure the qualities called for? (Section 5)
3. What compromises and investments in forms enabled the SpS to position itself as a legitimate pathway to the UAS? Which conventions were able to expand their scope? (Section 6)

### 3 Data and Methods

To understand how the SpS managed to establish itself as a legitimate pathway to higher education, we analysed situations in the period from 1990 to 2004, during which the SpS was forced to reposition itself and develop a new profile in the wake of the emerging UAS. The process involved a lively, critical debate among SpS and VET actor groups about the profile of the SpS. Among the influential actors championing the SpS were the Swiss Conference of Cantonal Ministers of Education (EDK), especially its SpS Committee, as well as the Rectors' Conference of Upper-Secondary Specialised Schools (KDMS). The group of VET advocates consisted of representatives of federal conferences and commissions as well as business organisations, particularly the Federal Office for Industry and Labour (later renamed the Federal Office for Professional Education and Technology [BBT]), the

Swiss Directors' Conference of Commercial-Industrial Vocational and Technical Schools (SDK), the Swiss-German Conference of VET Departments (DBK), the Federal Vocational Baccalaureate Committee (EBMK) as well as the Swiss Federation of Small and Medium-Sized Enterprises (SGV).

To answer our research questions, we consulted educational policy documents and conducted three expert interviews. The list of sources provided at the end of this article details the 17 documents analysed in which the relevant actors express their views concerning the development of the SpS. Apart from opinions issued as part of the SpS consultation process (1997<sup>5</sup>), we analysed reports on the SpS development project, guidelines and recommendations for its development as well as the SpS curriculum. Whereas the educational policy reports contain mission statements and models for restructuring the school, the consultation reports document tests of worth, that is, situations in which the participants assessed and gauged the worth of this new type of education. The latter are particularly well suited to reconstruct the disputes (e.g., regarding the appropriate quality of education) and orders of justification invoked in this context. We complemented the document analysis with three expert interviews to additionally obtain an inside perspective from actors who had been involved in the process of institutionalising the SpS as a pathway to the UAS (Meuser and Nagel 2009). We asked an EDK representative about the historical development of the SpS from 1990 on and its relation to VET and grammar school. We also interviewed an expert in the field of VET about reforms and reform attempts of upper-secondary education from 1990 to 2004. Finally, we sought information about reforms of VET, in the health sector among others, from a former BBT member.<sup>6</sup> We analysed both documents and interviews from the methodological standpoint of the sociology of conventions (Diaz-Bone 2018), using (theory-driven) qualitative content analysis (Gläser and Laudel 1999).

#### 4 Dispute over Legitimate Access Routes to the Universities of Applied Sciences

We begin by examining the dispute over whether the SpS should be recognised as an official pathway for access to the UAS. Our focus, on the one hand, is on the justifications offered by actors arguing in favour of a SpS baccalaureate allowing such access. On the other hand, we analyse the arguments of those who opposed this endeavour. Which conventions collided in this dispute?

5 Important documents from the consultation process in 2002 concerning the SpS are missing and can no longer be located. Therefore, we could not consider these documents in our analysis.

6 All data were collected as part of the research project «Die Fachmittel-/Fachmaturitätsschule (FMS) als eigenständiger Bildungsweg neben Berufsbildung und Gymnasium – Prozesse und Ergebnisse ihrer Positionierung und Profilierung (The Upper-Secondary Specialised School as an Independent Educational Pathway alongside VET and Grammar School – Processes and Outcomes of Its Positioning and Profile Development), funded by the Swiss National Science Foundation (SNF-100019\_162987) 3/2016–8/2019. Project managers: Regula Julia Leemann and Christian Imdorf.

#### 4.1 Legitimate Pathway to the Universities of Applied Sciences: Equal Treatment and Skills Shortages

As early as 1992, the EDK emphasised that it is important that the SpS provide access to the UAS (EDK 1992). A few years later, it even called this “indispensable” for the future existence of the SpS (EDK 1996, 9). For this reason, the EDK proposed introducing a “specialised baccalaureate” as a third type of baccalaureate alongside the long-established one offered by the traditional grammar schools and the vocational baccalaureate that was newly institutionalised in 1994.

The SpS advocates justified their demand by arguing that all recognised pathways to these universities should be treated equally across Switzerland, especially compared with the VET pathway via the vocational baccalaureate. This would also ensure “European compatibility” (EDK 1996, 9) of the SpS certificates. Moreover, the SpS would enable young women – in line with equal participation of women and men in education – to acquire a solid school-based education and thus offer them an opportunity for higher education. For this reason, the SpS must provide access to the UAS. Those actors invoked principles of justice, such as equality, fairness and participation, that are inherent in the civic convention and bolstered them by drawing on an argument rooted in the industrial convention, according to which the SpS makes an important contribution to maintaining the supply of next-generation professionals, especially in areas where it “has not been easy to find enough willing trainees” (*ibid.*, 1996, 11), primarily in healthcare and social work.

These efforts to position the SpS as an upper-secondary route to the UAS were met with criticism particularly from the VET side. Which orders of justification did VET advocates refer to in questioning the SpS as a pathway to higher education?

#### 4.2 Rejection of the Legitimacy of the Specialised School: Lack of Practical Experience and Defence of the “Golden Path to Applied Higher Education”

The proponents of VET rejected the civic justifications from SpS representatives. They argued that the SpS should no longer focus on the education of young women and thus “be largely gender-oriented” (DBK 1997, 2); rather, it should “clearly be at the service of business and provide a suitable foundation upon which advanced professional education and training can build” (*ibid.*). At the same time, this suitability was questioned by pointing out that the SpS did not award a vocational diploma and therefore lacked the prerequisites to convey “the practical knowledge and skills that are required for studying at a university of applied sciences” (EBMK 1997, 2). We can observe two things here. One is a situation of radical criticism. The measure of equivalence associated with the civic convention was rejected as a foundation for the test of worth (who is a legitimate provider of access to the UAS?). To make their argument, these critics drew on the domestic–company convention and determined that access to higher education required, as prerequisites, having been trained on the job in a business-related environment as well as practical

experience in the world of work. The other matter is a dispute in terms of a less radical criticism over the measure of equivalence in the domestic convention. The characteristics of domesticity within a business operation were given more weight than those of a (purely) school-based education.

One reference for this postulate was the draft of the new Vocational and Professional Education and Training Act (VPETA), which determined that dual-track VET would be the standard model and school-based forms of vocational education would play a minor role (EVD 1999). This enabled the VET advocates to refer to this bill and utilise it in this specific negotiation situation as an instrument of valorisation thus securing the scope of the domestic–company convention (SGV 2002). A further aspect was that the organisational combination of dual-track VET followed by advanced general education in the form of the vocational baccalaureate was considered the “golden path to the universities of applied sciences” (EBMK 1997, 1). The VET side was concerned that this standard route to applied higher education should not come under pressure from the SpS as a school-based pathway not requiring on-the-job training. Were this “golden path”

*forced to compete with a facile solution of a three-year SpS-education, then the increased appeal [of VET; authors' addition] that was actually intended [by introducing the vocational baccalaureate; authors' addition] would be lost again. (EBMK 1997, 2)*

Here, the VET advocates reinforce the domestic–company logic of justification upon which they base their argument of insufficiently experientially anchored, practical education and training by additionally invoking the convention of fame; they do so by defending the need to preserve the reputation and image of dual-track VET as the “golden path to the universities of applied sciences”.

In this dispute over the SpS' access to the UAS, the different orders of justification meet. The proponents of the SpS awarding a specialised baccalaureate primarily refer to the civic convention by arguing for an equal treatment of different educational pathways as well as equal opportunity for girls and boys. Those defending the status of VET by relying on the domestic–company convention reject these demands and question the legitimacy of the SpS as a route to higher education as a matter of principle by declaring experiential learning on the job an indispensable prerequisite. What becomes apparent here is that this position is less concerned with the requirements of university study and revolves more around professional competencies and experiential knowledge gained on the job.

## 5 Dispute over the Quality of Education for Access to the Universities of Applied Sciences

In the following, we will contrast the aspects concerning the quality of education that the actors highlighted in the debate on the two pathways to the UAS. What qualities did they emphasise as criteria for university readiness? What qualities were criticised and deemed unsuitable and insufficient?

### 5.1 Advanced General Education and a “Stable Personality”

Against the backdrop of growing pressure toward higher qualifications and the generally increasing significance of general education for professional training at the time, SpS advocates considered advanced general education as being an important prerequisite for access to the UAS (EDK 1992). In addition to this quality, which is significant in the civic order of worth, the need for a “stable personality” (ibid., 1992, 1) was stressed especially for the professional fields of healthcare and social work. In this view, the SpS, owing to its pronounced focus on “developing the student’s personality” (ibid., 1992, 2), would provide an educational background specifically tailored to the needs of the respective professions and the most appropriate preparation by providing a sheltered environment for personal development. Furthermore, the SpS would educate their pupils to become “independently thinking and responsibly acting personalities” who also assume responsibility for the community (ibid., 1992). Moreover, this focus on personality development would promote skills relevant to studying at a UAS, such as personal responsibility and working independently (KDMS 1993). The youths would thus learn early on “to take responsibility for their own learning process” (ibid., 1996, 19).

Compared to the time around 1970 when the SpS pursued the educational objective of a “mature personality” as a compromise that sought to unite the civic and the domestic-school convention, we can identify new, additional characteristics at this point. On the one hand, we see that its proponents began to emphasise key skills such as personal responsibility and independence, which are prerequisites for mastering the demands of project-based learning at universities in accordance with the project convention. On the other, the SpS positioned itself as an expert organisation – an object of the industrial convention – that guaranteed that its graduates would be university ready and prepared to develop professional competence in the areas of healthcare and social work.

### 5.2 The School-based Acquisition of a Vocational Diploma: A Failed Compromise

In contrast to the SpS advocates, the VET proponents recurrently stressed the relevance of “genuinely qualifying VET” (SDK 1997, 3) as well as extensive practical experience on the job as prerequisites for studying at a UAS. However, some of the VET proponents were at the same time aware of the new academic demands and

floated the idea of utilising the SpS' longstanding experience in providing advanced education and preparing for VET in the fields of health and social work for their own agenda. They saw the future "mission" of the SpS "in the area of general education and professional propaedeutic especially in those professions [...] that require greater personal maturity" (SDK 1997, 4). Seeking a compromise and wanting to take a "future-oriented step in the development of educational policy" (DBK/EBMK 2001, 2), they suggested transforming the SpS in these areas into specialised vocational schools and thus institutionally into a type of education in line with the VET system (Schweizerischer Bundesrat 2000; Nationalrat 2001).

The draft of the new Vocational and Professional Education and Training Act indeed envisioned specialised vocational schools as a new type of education to provide VET programmes "that correspond with the increased need for school-based education without giving up the connection with on-the-job practice" (Schweizerischer Bundesrat 2000, 5712). These specialised vocational schools were conceived to be full-time vocational schools at the upper-secondary level, involving a larger volume of school-based learning than traditional dual-track VET as well as an internship during the last year of instruction (Wettstein 2001). Apart from a stronger focus on theoretical knowledge, these schools were supposed to stay true to the essence of the dual-track VET model – that is, its proximity to the labour market and professional practice – and, as a regular VET programme, award a professionally *qualifying* Federal VET Diploma (Eigenössisches Fähigkeitszeugnis, EFZ).

These VET advocates argued that, in regard to access to the UAS, the specialised vocational schools had two crucial advantages over the established SpS model: extensive practical education and training as well as a qualifying vocational diploma. The specialised vocational school was thus an organisational solution in terms of an investment in forms in the domestic–company convention that would avoid the feared competition between the SpS and dual-track VET and preserve the golden dual VET path.

Although the EDK stated in 2001 that the SpS was "open" to the idea of transforming itself into specialised vocational schools in the field of health and social work and making certain compromises regarding the volume of practical on-the-job training (EDK 2001, 2), SpS representatives "made a strong effort to hold onto their own profile, which was not compatible with VET" (former BBT representative). The demand for at least one year of practical training as part of the SpS curriculum was not compatible with the SpS representatives' self-conception of a school providing upper-secondary general education without the school "losing its identity" (former BBT representative).

*Well, it [the idea of transformation of the SpS into a specialised vocational school; authors' addition] didn't go down well at all. [...] Those people [SpS representatives; authors' addition] actually stood fast on the issue. VET never*

*really interested them; they wanted to prepare for the tertiary level instead.*  
(VET expert)

What we see here is substantial ambivalence among SpS representatives in two respects. First, they were willing to make sacrifices and transform themselves into vocational special schools in the fields of health and social work since their refusal to do so could have threatened the existence of the SpS as an educational pathway in general, as the former BBT representative explained. Second, the institutional transformation of the SpS into a part of the VET system would have resulted in losing the core of its traditional identity, namely, as a school of general education.

Soon, however, these transformation attempts came to an abrupt halt. Influential advocates of dual-track VET still feared that introducing special vocational schools could create competition for the dual model. “Apparently, the prevailing opinion in educational policy was that VET enjoyed a lesser standing among the population than vocational schools” (Wettstein 2002, 1). To avoid internal competition in vocational education between dual-track VET and more strongly school-based vocational education, the concept of specialised vocational schools was ultimately rejected in the National Council’s final parliamentary consultation and removed from the final draft of the new Vocational and Professional Education and Training Act. This was the end of the idea of transforming the SpS into a specialised vocational school in the field of health and social work.

## 6 Institutional Solutions to the Dispute through Successful Compromise

In their 1999 recommendations for the further development of the SpS, the EDK formulated as the SpS’ key educational objective its “stronger integration in the VET system” (EDK 1999, 1). In 2003, this expectation was institutionalised by introducing occupational profiles in the regulations governing the recognition of qualifications awarded by SpS (EDK 2003). Since that time, SpS students have been required to opt for a specific occupational profile, usually at the beginning of the second year of training, and then take additional subjects specific to that profile in addition to their general-education classes. This has enabled the SpS to strengthen its identity as a school preparing for advanced vocational education in specific fields – in terms of a “planned supplier” (Diaz-Bone 2018, 149) to UAS – and formalise its function or quality within the industrial order of worth.

In this context, the EDK also included regulatory arrangements to secure its “future-oriented function as a school providing guidance in career choice” (EDK 2001, 4). By investing in the form of an obligatory non-school internship of at least two weeks in the first year of training, the SpS representatives not only anchored assistance for their students in making career choices in their curriculum but also institutionalised an opportunity for them to gain initial practical experience in the

world of work. However, the primary measure by which SpS representatives met the demand for job experience, which defined the dispute over the SpS as a legitimate pathway to the UAS, was to introduce the specialised baccalaureate. This involved two aspects that have remained to this day. First, during their fourth year of training students were to participate in an internship of 12 to 40 weeks' duration in their chosen occupational field (EDK 2003). This made job experience a major part of the SpS' educational programme. Second, students were required to prepare their own independent written specialised baccalaureate thesis related to their internship (ibid.). This was to demonstrate their command of important skills for university study, such as academic writing and the ability to do academic work. The requirement reveals the fundamental compromise between the civic and the industrial order of worth, constituting the self-conception of the SpS as an upper-secondary school of general education that seeks to ensure its graduates' university readiness and their preparedness to meet the increased skill requirements in the world of work.

We interpret this institutionalisation of elements of education and training that are geared toward an occupational field and professional practice as an investment in forms that falls within the scope of the industrial as well as domestic–company convention. It is also a compromise that addressed the criticism from the VET side that the SpS lacked qualities required for access to UAS. These new educational elements played a major role both in stabilising the SpS in a negotiation situation marked by considerable uncertainty and in establishing it as a route to the UAS. At the same time, the SpS managed to incorporate into this compromise its traditional civic quality of providing advanced general education and secure its role therein.

However, the idea of integrating practical experience into the conceptual design of the specialised baccalaureate in terms of “a practical component in a specific professional field or job experience in general” (EDK 1996, 19) never convinced the VET advocates. They held onto their view that the SpS failed to meet the requirements of an access route to the UAS.

*The new Vocational and Professional Education and Training Act calls the dual system the golden path. [...] The practical side of things comes up short to an extent that, although the SpS indeed provides a good general education, it has nothing to do with VET. [...] As far as access to the universities of applied sciences via a SpS is concerned, we resolutely object if it does not involve at least one prior year of skilled work on the job! (SGV 2002, 2–4)*

In this view, the internship required as part of the specialised baccalaureate is not sufficient to achieve the educational quality standards according to the domestic–company order of worth. This “broadening of one’s horizon” (DBK 1997, 3) does not “qualify as proof of vocational education and training” (SDK 1997, 3) and is nothing but “tokenism”. (DBK 1997, 3)

This position of the VET side links university readiness with expectations in the working world of prolonged learning on the job and experiential knowledge that have been incorporated into the curricula of the UAS – rather than giving more weight to general education, personality development, theoretical-systematic knowledge and key competencies. Today, this has consequences for the preparation of VET learners for studying at a UAS. Current statistics show that, within 42 months after graduating from an SpS, two-thirds of the SpS graduates in the health field attain a specialised baccalaureate (BFS 2018, 23), whereas only ten per cent of VET graduates in a health occupation move on to acquire a vocational baccalaureate (BFS 2018, 21).

When considering this, however, we must take into account that the two groups differ to some extent in their social background and academic performance. SpS students are more likely to have parents with a university degree than three-year VET students (21 per cent versus nine per cent), whereas the two groups do not differ in terms of migration status.<sup>7</sup> Enrolling in an SpS requires slightly higher academic performance on average than being admitted to VET. While 22 per cent in VET come from the lowest track of lower-secondary education, this applies to only seven per cent of those in SpS.<sup>8</sup>

Of those with a specialised baccalaureate, 81 per cent (health) and 77 per cent (social work), respectively, move on to a UAS afterward, whereas only 49 per cent of those holding a vocational baccalaureate in the fields of health and social work do so (BFS 2018, 25, 29). Compared to the VET system, it seems that the SpS is more successful in providing its graduates a path to tertiary education. One important reason might be that the specialised baccalaureate is not a professionally qualifying credential. This provides a strong incentive for these graduates to continue studying further. Nevertheless, the SpS' success in bringing its graduates into the UAS and for occupations with increasing academic demands is highly likely to benefit its future legitimation. In 2017, 30.3 per cent of the first-year enrolments at UAS in the entire field of health relied on a general baccalaureate for admittance, 26.9 per cent on a vocational baccalaureate, 26.2 per cent on a specialised baccalaureate, and 16.6 per cent on other access criteria (our own calculations based on data from the Federal Statistical Office).

## 7 Conclusions and Outlook

This article has aimed to examine how the SpS managed to establish itself as a legitimate pathway to the universities of applied science in the face of controversy.

7 Übergänge und Verläufe auf der Sekundarstufe II: Aktualisierung 2016 (retrieved 31.10.2018 from <https://www.bfs.admin.ch/bfs/de/home/statistiken/bildung-wissenschaft/uebertritte-verlaeuf-bildungsbereich/sekundarstufe-II.assetdetail.1680607.html>)

8 These are our own calculations based on the data mentioned in footnote 7.

To do so, we have analysed the last phase of its institutionalisation process from 1990 to 2004. We have been able to show how the changing demands of knowledge in a working world marked by a growing provision of services influenced the SpS' development from a "dead-end" track to a recognised pathway to the UAS.

To the advocates of dual-track VET, it was always clear that extensive professional experience on the job and the professional qualifications acquired in the process were indispensable prerequisites for access to the UAS. They also believed that the SpS would compete with and undermine the status of dual-track VET as "the golden path to the universities of applied sciences". With reference to the domestic–company convention as well as the convention of fame, the VET advocates delegitimised the SpS' claim to represent an equal pathway to the UAS. The proponents of the SpS, by contrast, argued that advanced vocational education at the UAS required broad general knowledge, including theoretical-systematic knowledge and key competencies and – especially in the fields of health and social work – a stable personality. Whenever possible, the SpS representatives underpinned their compromise between the civic, domestic–school and project convention by reference to the industrial convention by emphasising the SpS' potential for securing the supply of young professionals (particularly young women) in the areas in question.

While VET representatives employed the domestic convention to oppose the SpS' aspirations to offer a pathway to the UAS, arguing that the latter's graduates lacked practical job experience, their SpS counterparts referred to the same order of justification to underscore the legitimacy of the school-based path by invoking the significance of personality development in a sheltered environment. We interpret the dispute between the representatives of general education and those of VET as a dispute *within* the domestic convention based on two different measures of equivalence to argue in favour or against the "quality" of the SpS as a pathway to the UAS. Whereas interpersonal relationships in the school community are crucial in the area of general education and the sheltered school environment promotes individualised personality development, interpersonal relationships in the work community are at the centre of company-based VET in an environment in which knowledge is gained through experience on the job. In terms of advancing the sociology of conventions theoretically in the area of education, differentiating the domestic convention according to specific educational settings – we have called them domestic–school convention and domestic–company convention – has proved to be relevant.

The "company" articulation of the domestic convention is geared toward labour-market demands and has prevailed as a powerful measure of equivalence in the dispute described above. This is reflected, not least, in the institutionalisation of various practical education and training components in the more recent SpS curriculum. Whereas the SpS had traditionally justified its quality by referring to the domestic convention by applying the educational yardstick of promoting community building at school via developing the students' personalities, providing its students

the opportunity to gain initial practical experience on the job has now become part of the SpS curriculum. We assume that the SpS representatives accepted this shift in the relevant measure of worth – in the sense of a compromise *within* the domestic convention – to take the wind out of the sails of their critics from the VET side and position the SpS as a legitimate and recognised pathway to the UAS. In so doing, the SpS advocates have kept with their articulation of the domestic world in line with the domestic–school convention.

Tapping the full explanatory potential of the sociology of conventions in the field of education would require further research that critically reflects on the suggested differentiation between a school-based and company-based accentuation of the domestic convention in the context of education. What is more, the convention-theoretical approach offers promising potential not only to bridge the systematic dichotomy of general and vocational education but also to question the assumption of an increasing hybridisation of general and vocational education in the context of a growing permeability of educational pathways. What we propose instead of the hybridisation thesis is to theorise the qualities and worth of different situations of teaching and learning as well as types of knowledge in terms of compromises between plural logics and thus to abstain from any simple attribution of a (single) logic to a specific institutional pathway.

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