

# Overshadowed By Royal Roads: Vocationally Oriented Middle Schools as Pathways to Higher Education in Switzerland

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## Abstract

In Switzerland, four different educational pathways lead to higher education (HE): baccalaureate schools, upper-secondary specialized middle schools, vocational middle schools, and dual vocational education and training (VET) combined with a federal vocational baccalaureate. The four pathways are not equally supported by Swiss education policy: Baccalaureate schools and dual VET plus a federal vocational baccalaureate are politically treated as the two royal roads to HE, while specialized middle schools and vocational middle schools, in this study grouped under the term vocationally oriented middle schools (VOMS), receive only little political attention. This holds true even though VOMS have a high transition rate to HE and are considered to have the potential to bring young women into male-typical HE programs and attract high-achieving youths with a migration background. The study investigates from a governance perspective how (in practices and processes) the conception of the royal roads to HE is constructed and reproduced as well as how this affects the positioning of VOMS as pathways to HE in Switzerland. The study refers to the theoretical framework of the sociology of conventions and the concept of valuation practices. The data basis consists of publicly available documents and qualitative interviews. The findings show that commensurations, categorizations, visualizations, and the interplay between a variety of human and non-human actors reinforce two highly stable and powerful cognitive formats of royal roads to HE. At the same time, these same practices construct an image of VOMS as less significant additional pathways to HE by rendering their qualities and potentials as such pathways comparatively invisible or tabooing them in the service of educational policy interests. With these findings, the present study contributes to the international scholarly discussion on permeability between VET and HE.

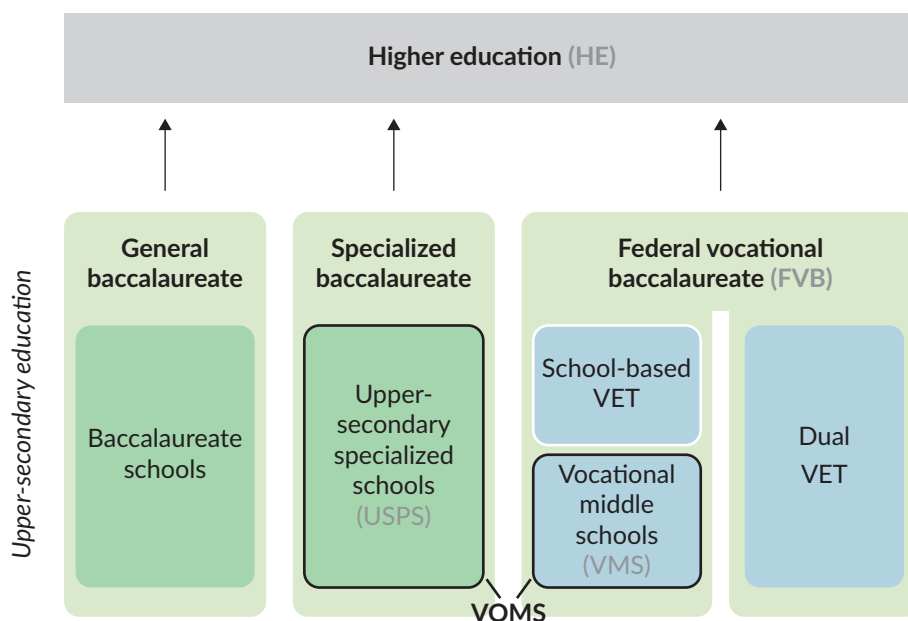
## Keywords

governance; higher education; invisibilization; policy; power; royal roads; sociology of conventions; upper-secondary; valuation practices; VET; vocationally oriented middle schools

## 1. Introduction

The Swiss education system today—as a result of a contested historical process of institutionalization and transformation—offers academically high-achieving students four different post-compulsory educational pathways to higher education (HE) at the upper-secondary level (in this study, the term HE, unless explicitly noted, refers to cantonal and federal universities, universities of applied sciences, and universities of teacher education, and does not include tertiary-level professional education): baccalaureate schools, upper-secondary specialized schools (USPS), vocational middle schools (VMS), and apprenticeships that have been complemented with a federal vocational baccalaureate (FVB). Each of these pathways leads to one of three officially recognized university entrance certificates: the general baccalaureate, the specialized baccalaureate, or the FVB (Figure 1). In 2021, 42.7% of young adults acquired one of these three baccalaureate certificates, whereby the proportion of graduates with a general baccalaureate (22.6%) was higher than the share of those with a specialized baccalaureate (3.9%) or vocational baccalaureate (16.2%; see Federal Statistical Office [FSO], 2023a). The attention and support that these four different pathways to HE receive from educational policymakers in Switzerland varies considerably.

With the establishment of the universities of applied sciences and the universities of teacher education, the Swiss education system has, over the past three decades, institutionalized other pathways to HE in addition to the baccalaureate school, which has conventionally been regarded as the royal road to traditional universities (Burger, 2021; Leemann et al., 2022). In 1994, the FVB was introduced, and with it initially a pathway to HE for those with an apprenticeship (Gonon, 1994, 1997). In present-day Switzerland, the FVB, which can be acquired only upon successfully completing vocational education and training (VET), is seen as the royal road to the universities of applied sciences (Gonon, 2013; Meyer, 2016; Swiss Coordination Centre for Research in Education [SCCRE], 2018) and enjoys major support from educational policymakers.



**Figure 1.** Pathways to HE in the Swiss education system. Source: Author's illustration based on the Swiss Conference of Cantonal Ministers of Education (2023).

As part of the Swiss VET system, the full-time VMS offer young people another pathway to HE, which in German-speaking Switzerland is overshadowed by dual VET (Esposito, 2024, 2023a), where training takes place at two learning venues, in the company and at the vocational school. VMS are frequently criticized. Furthermore, the education policy debate only rarely addresses them as promising pathways to HE (Esposito, 2024, 2023a; Imlig et al., 2021) even though some consider them to have the potential to (a) get more young people into HE than through the dual model (Luethi, 2024), (b) train skilled workers in areas with corresponding demand, (c) bring young women into male-typical HE programs (e.g., IT), and (d) attract more high-achieving youths with a migration background to VET than dual VET, as the selection procedures and criteria for VMS are less susceptible to discriminatory mechanisms than dual VET (Esposito, 2024; Kanton Graubünden, 2024; Seibert et al., 2009).

In the early 2000s, the general educational USPS leading to the specialized baccalaureate were recognized as a third post-compulsory pathway to HE (Leemann & Imdorf, 2019). Like the VMS, the USPS have since their inception been perceived and criticized by advocates of dual VET (especially in German-speaking Switzerland) as competing with the latter and are rarely ever mentioned as a valuable pathway to HE in their own right (Esposito, 2022, 2023b).

As VMS and USPS are subject to similar dynamics of being drawn into question and marginalized in educational policy discourse, this article subsumes these two types of schools into the same category of vocationally oriented middle schools (VOMS) and considers them jointly across the boundaries of general and vocational education (a detailed explanation is provided in Section 2.5).

Summing up, in Switzerland two main pathways to HE are recognized and regulated by educational policy accordingly: the general baccalaureate schools for entry into traditional universities, and dual VET with an FVB for access to universities of applied sciences. In contrast, the VOMS pathways receive hardly any attention. This negligence of VOMS by educational policymakers calls for an explanation in light of the continuously increasing demand for tertiary education (Kriesi & Leemann, 2020) and the growing need for skilled labor with tertiary qualifications in fields such as IT (see, e.g., The Adecco Group, 2023). Additional factors include educational policy efforts to increase the national rate of holders of an FVB (State Secretariat for Education, Research and Innovation [SERI], 2018), statistics that show that school-based VET is more likely to get youths into HE than dual VET (Luethi, 2024), and shifting educational aspirations among parents, who are increasingly encouraging their children to continue school-based education (e.g., Brühwiler et al., 2014).

Internationally, the governance of upper-secondary education pathways to HE shows considerable variation. Many countries face the challenge of balancing academically oriented pathways with vocationally oriented options and ensuring equal recognition and permeability between these tracks. In many European countries, an increasing pluralization of the education and vocational training systems can be observed, with the boundaries between vocational and general education becoming increasingly blurred (Frommberger & Schmees, 2020; Kriesi et al., 2022). For example, Austria has seen a significant strengthening of school-based vocational education. Vocational qualifications acquired at vocational middle and higher schools, which combine elements of both vocational and general education, have gained considerable importance. Today, only a minority of vocational qualifications in Austria are obtained through the traditional dual system. The popularity of school-based vocational qualifications likely stems from their dual benefit: they grant access to both the labor market and HE (Frommberger, 2019). Similarly, Germany has experienced

an increasing pluralization of its vocational education system (Hippach-Schneider, 2018). Switzerland, in contrast, has so far resisted this trend towards convergence. The country maintains a highly distinctive education system, characterized by a clear separation between general education and VET and the currently highest proportion of students enrolled in dual vocational education at the upper-secondary level among all OECD countries (Kriesi et al., 2022). Within this distinctive education system the dominance of two well-established and institutionally supported pathways to HE has evolved: academic baccalaureate schools leading to traditional universities and dual VET complemented by a FVB, providing access to universities of applied sciences. At the same time, and in contrast to other European countries such as Germany, Austria, and Scandinavian countries (Frommberger & Schmees, 2020), hybrid pathways to HE, such as full-time VOMS, which integrate characteristics of general and vocational education, are marginalized in Switzerland.

Against this backdrop, the present study examines, first, from a governance perspective, by what practices and processes the conception of these two royal roads to HE (baccalaureate school and dual VET with an FVB) is constructed, maintained, and reproduced within the governance of upper-secondary education in Switzerland. Based on this, the study, second, investigates how this affects the positioning of VOMS as pathways to HE. To do so, the study draws on the theoretical framework of the sociology of conventions (Boltanski & Thévenot, 2006; Diaz-Bone & de Larquier, 2022) to investigate the positioning of the four pathways to HE along the lines of the concept of valuation practices proposed by Kornberger (2017; commensuration, categorization, visualization, and engagement of a variety of actors) for the analysis of attributions of value.

The present article is organized as follows: Section 2 describes the characteristics of the different pathways to HE and outlines the respective educational policy discourses. Section 3 sketches the sociology of conventions as the theoretical framework for this analysis and Kornberger's (2017) concept of valuation practices. Section 4 describes the data and the methods applied. Section 5 presents the findings and Section 6 the conclusions.

## 2. Pathways to HE in the Swiss Education System and the Surrounding Discourses

### 2.1. *Baccalaureate Schools as the Royal Road to Traditional Universities*

The full-time general baccalaureate schools offer young people with very good school grades a four-year pathway to traditional universities via the general baccalaureate, without the need for additional examinations. Enrollment at a university of applied sciences or a university of teacher education is subject to certain additional requirements (e.g., completing an internship). The rate of transitioning to a cantonal or federal traditional university within 54 months upon completing a general baccalaureate was 79% in 2022, while the rate of transitioning to some form of tertiary education (including universities of applied sciences and universities of teacher education) was overall very high (96%) among the holders of such a certificate (FSO, 2023b). In Switzerland, baccalaureate school is seen as being the royal road to traditional universities (Burger, 2021; Leemann et al., 2022). Over recent decades, there have for various reasons been increasing aspirations among parents and students that the latter attend baccalaureate schools (Abt, 2023; Schneebeli, 2021). At the same time, Switzerland has a fairly low rate (even by international standards) of general baccalaureate graduates (22.6% in 2021; FSO, 2023a). Especially in German-speaking Switzerland, this is the deliberate product of controlled selective access to baccalaureate schools (Hafner et al., 2022; Leemann et al., 2022), which has earned them the reputation of being an elite pathway (Reh & Landolt, 2024).

## 2.2. Dual VET Combined With the FVB as the Royal Road to Universities of Applied Sciences

Admission to dual VET does not depend on lower-secondary school grades, but on criteria set by the training companies. They decide to whom they will give an apprenticeship contract. As an additional qualification to the federal VET diploma, an FVB can be obtained in two ways: via accompanying training while in dual VET or, the option chosen more often, via after completing VET with a federal VET diploma (SERI, 2022). Holders of an FVB therefore have both successfully completed VET and acquired eligibility to enroll in a university of applied sciences. Upon passing an additional optional exam (*Passerelle Dubs*), they may also gain access to traditional universities (Swiss Conference of Cantonal Ministers of Education, 2023). The FVB is considered a “success story of Swiss educational policy” (Kost et al., 2017). The proportion of VET graduates who have obtained an FVB has hovered around 16% despite substantial efforts (e.g., information and advertising campaigns, easing of requirements for enrollment) by policymakers in the field of VET, the Swiss Confederation, the cantons, and professional organizations to increase this rate and thus to strengthen the vocational “royal road to the universities of applied sciences” (Gonon, 2013, p. 136; SCCRE, 2018, p. 230). As for the goal of transitioning FVB graduates to tertiary education, the rate for 2022 was 80% overall, 61% of whom enrolled in a university of applied sciences (FSO, 2023b).

## 2.3. VMS as a Marginalized Pathway to Universities of Applied Sciences

As part of the VET system, VMS target pupils with good school grades and provide another pathway to acquire an FVB. VMS are specific four-year full-time school-based VET programs offered in such fields as commerce and IT (German: *Handels & Informatikmittelschulen*; French: *écoles de commerce et d’informatique*; Italian: *scuole di commercio e d’informatica*). VMS are geared towards HE and have a longer internship as an integral part, where apprentices acquire practical skills. These schools are demanding educational programs in that they structurally combine a federal VET diploma (formal qualification for entrance into the labor market) and an FVB and thus target high-achieving youths. In contrast to dual VET, where admission requirements are at the discretion of the training companies, in the case of VMS, these decisions rest with the cantonal educational administration. Even though VMS are subject to the Federal Act on Vocational and Professional Education and Training (Swiss Confederation, 2002) they feature pronounced middle-school characteristics (Cortesi, 2017): They are full-time schools, impart propaedeutic knowledge and thus prepare for HE, have plenty of school vacations, their curriculum has a disciplinary structure, students can enroll in electives, they receive no pay, and so on. Moreover, these schools are often institutionally tied to bacalaureate schools.

The access opportunities to HE are the same for VMS graduates as for those who have completed dual VET and an additional FVB (see Section 2.2). The available statistical data does not permit any statements for Switzerland as a whole on the rate of transitioning to tertiary education upon graduating from a VMS (for an explanation of this see Section 5.1). Imlig et al. (2021) examined VMS in more detail for the canton of Zurich. According to their calculations, approximately 90% (for VMS in the field of commerce) and 91% (for VMS in the field of IT) of the cohort under study had transitioned to tertiary education within four years upon graduation, the majority to a university of applied sciences.

Even though strengthening the FVB is an important goal of Swiss VET policy, VMS, as one possible educational pathway toward acquiring it, have received only little attention and support from educational policymakers, especially in German-speaking Switzerland. On the contrary, the existence of these schools

has been repeatedly questioned by certain actors both past and present. In some cases, even policy measures to restrict VMS have been adopted because they are seen as competing with dual VET (Esposito, 2024), even though these schools accounted for only 2.3% of all upper-secondary certificates in 2022 (as per my own calculations based on data from the FSO, 2023c). Moreover, compared to the dual VET system, VMS are an under-researched topic in Switzerland.

#### 2.4. USPS With Their Specialized Baccalaureate as a Little-Recognized Pathway to HE

USPS (German: *Fachmittelschulen*; French: *écoles de culture générale*; Italian: *scuole specializzate*) are full-time schools of general education attracting youths with good school grades. The selection requirements and processes for USPS differ across the Swiss Cantons. In 2022, USPS accounted for a share of 7.4% of all upper-secondary certificates (as per my own calculations based on data from the FSO, 2023c). By taking the USPS route, young people can obtain a specialized baccalaureate in a specific field within four years and gain access to universities of applied sciences or universities of teacher education. Holders of a specialized baccalaureate can also gain access to traditional universities (as can holders of an FVB) by passing an additional optional exam (*Passerelle Dubs*; Swiss Conference of Cantonal Ministers of Education, 2023). In 2022, a total of 92% of all USPS graduates enrolled in tertiary education (50% of these in a university of applied sciences, 30% in a university of teacher education; FSO, 2023b). Despite this high transition rate, educational policy discourse has hardly ever discussed the potential of this pathway to access HE. Instead, it has repeatedly been questioned in German-speaking Switzerland (especially by advocates of dual VET) and criticized for competing with dual VET (Fleischmann, 2023). Esposito (2022) showed this specifically for enrollment in tertiary education in the health field. From the very beginning, VET advocates adopted a critical view of establishing a pathway to university via the specialized baccalaureate. Hafner (2022) examined the controversial process of institutionalizing the USPS as a pathway to universities of teacher education compared to baccalaureate schools.

#### 2.5. VOMS

The study at hand groups USPS and VMS across the institutional boundaries of general and vocational education into the category of VOMS and considers them together in terms of their role as pathways to HE besides the two royal roads for two reasons: First, the two educational pathways feature a pronounced middle-school character while both also have a *vocationally qualifying* or *vocationally oriented educational mission*. Second, the two pathways are similar in terms of their *marginal relevance*: For one thing, VOMS are of only marginal quantitative significance in upper-secondary education in German-speaking Switzerland. For another, their *raison d'être* in relation to baccalaureate school and dual VET—which in Switzerland are the two unquestioned pillars of upper-secondary education—has been *criticized* and *questioned* from the vantage of educational policy, and certain educational policy measures have been implemented to *constrain* the number of available places at VOMS.

### 3. Combining the Sociology of Conventions and the Concept of Valuation Practices as a Theoretical Framework

#### 3.1. Quality as the Result of an Attribution Process

From a functionalist perspective, society and the labor market demand a variety of educational qualifications, which in turn necessitate diverse educational programs, each with distinct characteristics. These characteristics, along with the corresponding qualifications, are assigned different meanings and values. This leads to the question of how the quality and value of educational programs are socially constructed. In contrast to the understanding of quality in common educational policy discourse (Hupka-Brunner et al., 2015), the sociology of conventions framework (Boltanski & Thévenot, 2006; Diaz-Bone & de Larquier, 2022) does not view quality as something that can be determined ontologically, objectively, and universally. In this view, quality is rather the result of processes of attribution by actors on the basis of different orders of worth (quality conventions; for quality conventions in education see Imdorf & Leemann, 2023). Eymard-Duvernay (2012a) has called this process of attribution “valuation.” In this context, Favereau (2017) emphasized that quality is the product not only of valuation processes but of devaluation processes as well.

#### 3.2. Valuation Practices

To capture these concrete practices and processes of attributing value, Kornberger (2017) introduced the concept of “valuation practices.” Valuation practices are not neutral means of representing a given quality but rather concrete practices and processes that play a situational part in constituting the value of things, people, or, as in the present case, pathways to HE. Following this practice-based perspective directs our analytical attention to the specific everyday activities that constitute the process of evaluation as well as the resulting outcomes, thus “through which valuation practices  $x$  is constituted as more valuable than  $y$ ” (Kornberger, 2017, p. 1759). This means, that “valuation practices do not merely mirror or bring to the fore pre-existing values, but that valuation practices are actively involved in the constitution of values” (Kornberger, 2017, p. 1759). Kornberger (2017) has proposed four ideal-typical practices of valuation, whereby it is partially difficult to distinguish clearly between these practices or they may take on a hybrid form: (a) commensuration, (b) categorization, (c) visualization, and (d) engagement of a variety of actors. In the following, I will explain the mechanisms involved in these practices.

##### 3.2.1. Commensuration

The mechanism of commensuration renders previously incomparable things comparable by introducing a measure. In the process, individual qualities—for example, qualities of different educational pathways—are ignored in favor of a common dimension—for example, the statistically calculated transition rates—that allows a comparison of the different educational pathways. In the process of commensuration, the respective qualities are translated into quantities through techniques, which frequently involve quantification in numerical form. School rankings are another example of such a commensuration mechanism that simplifies complex, diverse, and difficult-to-evaluate qualities into clear, organized orders (Espeland & Sauder, 2007). The research questions of this study examine the practices and processes through which the conception of the two royal roads to HE—baccalaureate school and dual VET with an FVB—is constructed, maintained, and reproduced. What is important in this regard is that the mechanism of

commensuration exercises power by deciding what counts for the valuation and what does not (Kornberger, 2017). Commensuration is therefore “a double act of highlighting and hiding” (Espeland & Lom, 2015, as cited in Kornberger, 2017, p. 1760).

### 3.2.2. Categorization

While commensuration breaks down and simplifies its objects (e.g., educational pathways), categorization involves reorganizing them according to externally defined criteria, which create connections between them (Kornberger, 2017). The mechanism of categorization therefore links certain elements (e.g., all educational pathways provide access to HE) while acting as a marker of distinction toward others (e.g., pathways of general education to HE vs. VET pathways to HE). In this way, categorizations “create a space for things to be situated next to each other, to relate to each other, and to differentiate themselves from each other” (Kornberger, 2017, p. 1761). Categorizations have important mediating effects, as the defining of categories represents a “frame-making activity establishing cognitive schemata that guide the distribution of attention” (Espeland & Sauder, 2016, as cited in Kornberger, 2017, p. 1761).

### 3.2.3. Visualization

Valuation practices are not simply abstract concepts. Instead, they are organized through specific practices, which require a material foundation—concrete technologies and visual tools that facilitate and enhance their functioning. As a result, valuation practices take on tangible, material forms with distinct aesthetic characteristics. These practices include lists, matrices, star ratings, diagrams, and other visual representations (e.g., videos), with their influence partly deriving from this aesthetic aspect (Kornberger, 2017). Visualizations reinforce attributions of value, expand these (spatially), and lend them persuasive power. The visualizations that stem from valuations should not be dismissed as mere illustrations; rather, they combine proof and power to convince others (Kornberger, 2017).

### 3.2.4. Engagement of a Variety of Actors

Valuation practices are not only driven by human actors in the role of e.g., experts, critics, etc.; non-human actors (e.g., graphs, rankings, digital tools, etc.) also influence and shape the processes of valuation (Kornberger, 2017). Therefore, valuation processes involve several (non-)human actors, which require special attention when investigating the practices through which valuation is constituted. From an analytical perspective, this emphasis on distributed cognition implies that valuation should not be seen as fixed information or judgments about objects. Rather, valuation must be understood as a dynamic process that moves through networks of (a) key actors pursuing their interests and political agendas (e.g., strengthening dual VET, maintaining the predominance of dual VET, fostering the rate of the FVB, preserving the image of an elite pathway to traditional universities, etc.), (b) intermediaries (e.g., career and educational counselors) as human “frame-makers” that are “engaged in constructing others’ bounded rationality” (Kornberger, 2017, p. 1760), and (c) non-human actors.

## 3.3. Valuation Practices as Investments in Forms That Structure the Distribution of Power

Valuation practices must not be misunderstood as being mere abstractions, individual cognitive schemata, or societal norms. Rather, they require a material basis that enables and amplifies their operations (Kornberger,



2017). The concept of valuation practices is therefore closely tied to the sociology of convention's concept of investment in forms (Dodier, 2010; Thévenot, 2011). Investments in forms must be understood as instrumentations of valuation and thus as part of a valuation dispositif (Eymard-Duvernay, 2012b) that actors draw on to produce and ensure equivalence, value, and generalization. In this context, the concept of investment in forms comprises both the process of forming and its results.

From the perspective of the sociology of conventions framework, instrumentations of valuation (and thus the practices of valuation as well) are closely tied to the distribution of power in the situations of negotiation and coordination between various actors. This is because the question of who possesses these instrumentations is essential for the distribution of power, while power from the vantage of the sociology of conventions framework is understood as being distributed and not as a substantive resource or a natural attribute of actors (Diaz-Bone, 2017). With the concept of investments in forms, the sociology of conventions framework has provided a tool that enables us to examine not only how actors are able to temporally, socially, and spatially stabilize and generalize value and forms of coordination (Diaz-Bone, 2018), but also how they expand, stabilize, and intensify in certain situations the reach of power and its effects.

From this, it follows that strategic action can be understood in terms of the actors' abilities to deal with and influence these valuation practices, and that rivalry and competition take place at the level of valuation practices, which can be conceived of as spaces where value conceptions are constructed and contested. In other words, "competition takes place on the level of valuation practices as they exercise the power to categorize and consecrate goods as worthy" (Kornberger, 2017, p. 1766). Against the backdrop of the competitive dynamics between general education and VET described in the introduction as well as in Section 2 and observed within the Swiss VET system in general, the concept of valuation practices embedded in the sociology of conventions framework provides an interesting theoretical approach for examining the subject under study here.

#### 4. Data and Methods

The data on which this article was gathered as part of two research projects funded by the Swiss National Science Foundation (see Funding Section at the end of the article). In pursuit of data and method triangulation (see, e.g., Flick, 2012; Muri, 2014), these projects employed different sources and types of data and methodological approaches to address different aspects of the object under study, densify the interpretive foundation, and thus broaden the opportunities for gaining insights. The analysis is based on educational policy statements ( $n = 2$ ), websites ( $n = 5$ ), official statistics and related publicly available documents ( $n = 5$ ), the official graphic of the Swiss education system, as well as a video (KFMS, 2017). Each of these sources has been selected for its institutional relevance, visibility, and role in shaping the various educational pathways to HE in Switzerland. The sources outline the guiding principles, policies, and frameworks that govern upper-secondary education and the transition to HE, and are therefore essential for understanding how the "royal roads" to HE are constructed and maintained, while other pathways, such as VOMS, are marginalized.

In line with sociology of conventions's methodological aspirations to tap into the actors' internal perspectives, additionally, four guided qualitative interviews were conducted and used to especially give insights into how value is attributed through the mechanisms of visualization and the engagement of a

variety of actors (Sections 5.3 and 5.4). The interviewees were representatives of (a) the Conference of USPS, (b) the Conferences of VMS (one each in the fields of commerce and IT), and (c) a cantonal educational policy administrator. To ensure that personal data is protected, the names and functions of the interviewees have been anonymized. The research proceeded in a circular manner typical of qualitative research, alternating between data collection, analysis, and interpretation. Accordingly, the data basis was not defined conclusively a priori but rather repeatedly complemented and expanded in response to insights gained from the interviews. The data were analyzed against the theoretical backdrop of the sociology of conventions framework and valuation practices by means of a theory-driven qualitative content analysis (Gläser & Laudel, 2010).

## 5. Results

Starting from the widely differing educational-policy discourses surrounding the various pathways to HE, the present article examines the practices and processes by which baccalaureate school and dual VET combined with an FVB are constructed, maintained, and reproduced as being the royal roads to HE in Switzerland and how this affects the positioning of VOMS as further pathways to HE. In the following, this will be illustrated along the four valuation practices (commensuration, categorization, visualization, and engagement of a variety of actors) introduced by Kornberger (2017) by reference to various examples.

### 5.1. Commensuration: Spotlighting vs. Tabooing

An indicator that is often employed in educational policy discourse to make statements about the significance of different pathways to HE is their rates of transition to tertiary education as determined by the FSO (Table 1). The transition rate to tertiary education is a statistical metric that exemplifies how the practice of commensuration via the introduction of a “common metric” (Kornberger, 2017, p. 1,763) renders different educational pathways comparable that are actually not comparable in terms of their educational characteristics (e.g., educational objectives, curricula, types of knowledge) by deconstructing (flattening) them and “by the transformation of qualities into quantities” (Espeland & Sauder, 2007, p. 16). In the sense of a “double act of highlighting and hiding” (Espeland & Lom, 2015, as cited in Kornberger, 2017, p. 1760), the practice of commensuration differentially influences the attribution of value to the various pathways (enhancing or inhibiting them).

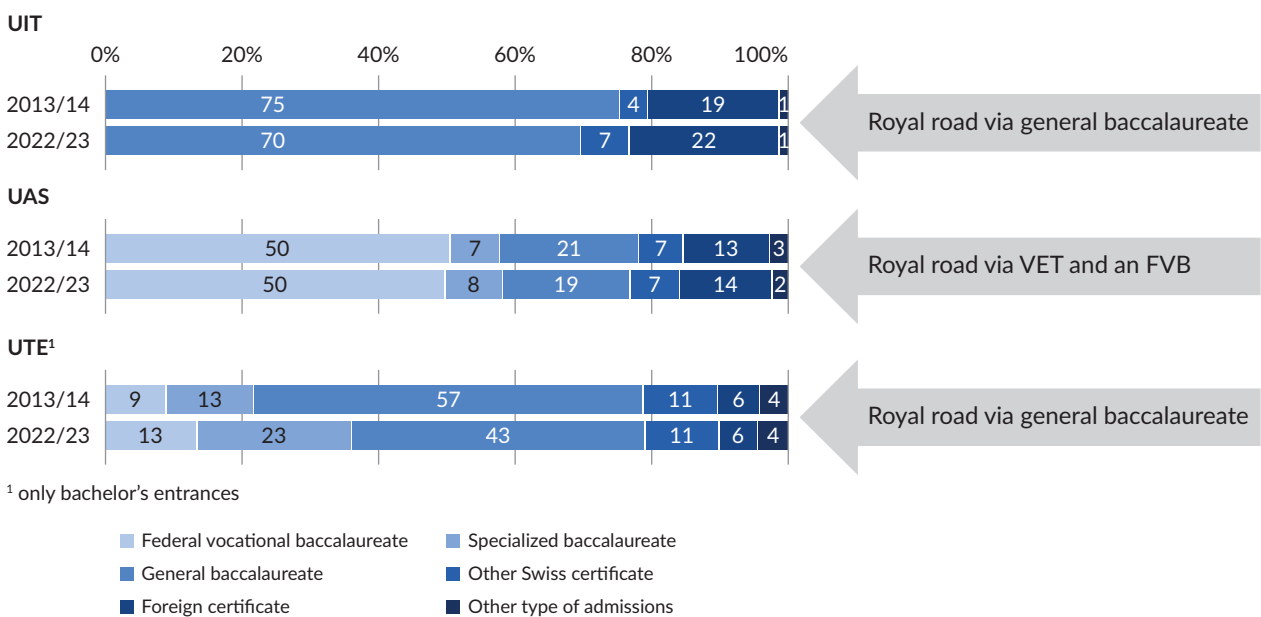
**Table 1.** Transition rates to tertiary education within 54 months of acquiring a university entrance certificate (baccalaureate) in 2017.

	Traditional university	University of applied sciences	University of teacher education	Transition rate overall*
General baccalaureate	79%	10%	6%	96%
FVB	7%	61%	4%	80%
Specialized baccalaureate	5%	50%	30%	92%

Note: \*The overall transition rate does also include the transition rates to tertiary-level professional education not listed in Table 1. Source: FSO (2023b).

In the sense of governance by numbers, the transition rates to traditional universities upon acquiring the general baccalaureate (79%) and to a university of applied sciences with an FVB (61%) underpin numerically the idea that there exist two royal roads to HE and are employed to legitimize educational-policy decisions in favor of these two pathways. At the same time, the importance of the USPS with a specialized baccalaureate as a pathway to HE is rarely mentioned in policy discussions. Although, as Table 1 shows, it has a 92% overall transition rate, which is higher than the FVB (80%), similar to the general baccalaureate (96%), and leads 50% of specialized baccalaureate holders to a university of applied sciences (compared to 61% for the FVB) and 30% to a university of teacher education. Despite these numerical facts, USPS are rather tabooed in the corresponding education policy discourses (Esposito, 2022; Hafner, 2022).

Another example that shows how the practice of commensuration stabilizes and reinforces the two royal roads compared to the VOMS is the percentages calculated for the various university entrance certificates as pathways to each type of university. Figure 2 illustrates that the relative strength of the various pathways is made comparable across the various types of universities.



**Figure 2.** Entry pathway at the bachelor level by type of university and entry certificate (FSO, 2024). Notes: UIT stands for universities and institutes of technology; UAS stands for universities of applied sciences; UTE stands for universities of teacher education.

The arrows to the right added to Figure 2 illustrate how the comparison shown in the graph contributes to constructing a value judgment in which the baccalaureate school appears to be the royal road to traditional universities and the universities of teacher education, similarly to the FVB when it comes to the universities of applied sciences. What is not or not clearly shown in Figure 2 is that the respective university entrance qualifications differ considerably in terms of the absolute numbers of certificates acquired at the upper-secondary level (in 2017, general bacc.: 17,009, FVB: 13,129, specialized bacc.: 2,654 certificates; see FSO, 2023b)—among other things as a result of the educational policy restrictions imposed on the VOMS as a class ceiling or additional access requirements (Esposito, 2023b). When we bear this in mind, it is not surprising that the specialized baccalaureate plays only a minor role when comparing the relative strength of the baccalaureate certificates. In the absence of this additional piece of information, the comparison

suggests—and thus creates the value judgment—that there are only two royal roads to HE and that the specialized baccalaureate is only of marginal significance. What this example also shows is that the practice of commensuration plays a role in constructing value judgments based on a generalized common metric at “the expense of a greater specification of detail” (Diaz-Bone, 2018, p. 87) and is a crucial factor in what becomes visible and invisible and how this affects these value judgments.

### **5.2. Categorization: Separation vs. Subsumption**

Until 2014, the FSO classified VMS in the field of commerce as a separate statistical category. Inconsistent data collection on school-leaving qualifications at VMS resulted in problems and inaccuracies of statistical analyses. For this reason, the statistical data on the VMS are no longer reported separately but are subsumed in the general statistics on initial VET (SERI, 2014). One of the consequences of this is that qualifications acquired at VMS and thus the university entrance certificates that they issue are no longer shown separately but are subsumed into the categories of the “federal VET diploma” and “federal vocational baccalaureate.” The lack of a specific categorization of this kind results in VMS no longer being visible as a specific upper-secondary educational pathway in the analyses of the FSO and there being no statistical cross-cantonal analysis available at the national level for this type of school. The FSO provides a limited selection of analyzed data (e.g., number of school-leaving certificates and gender distribution) upon request. While it holds raw data on transitions to HE and educational pathways, these are not further analyzed. If we assume with Espeland and Sauder (2016, as cited in Kornberger, 2017, p. 1761) that “categorizing is a frame-making activity” that establishes “cognitive schemata that guide the distribution of attention,” we can conclude for VMS that failing to report data for them as a category in its own right contributes to rendering them invisible and thus indirectly devalorizes them as a pathway to HE compared to baccalaureate school and VET.

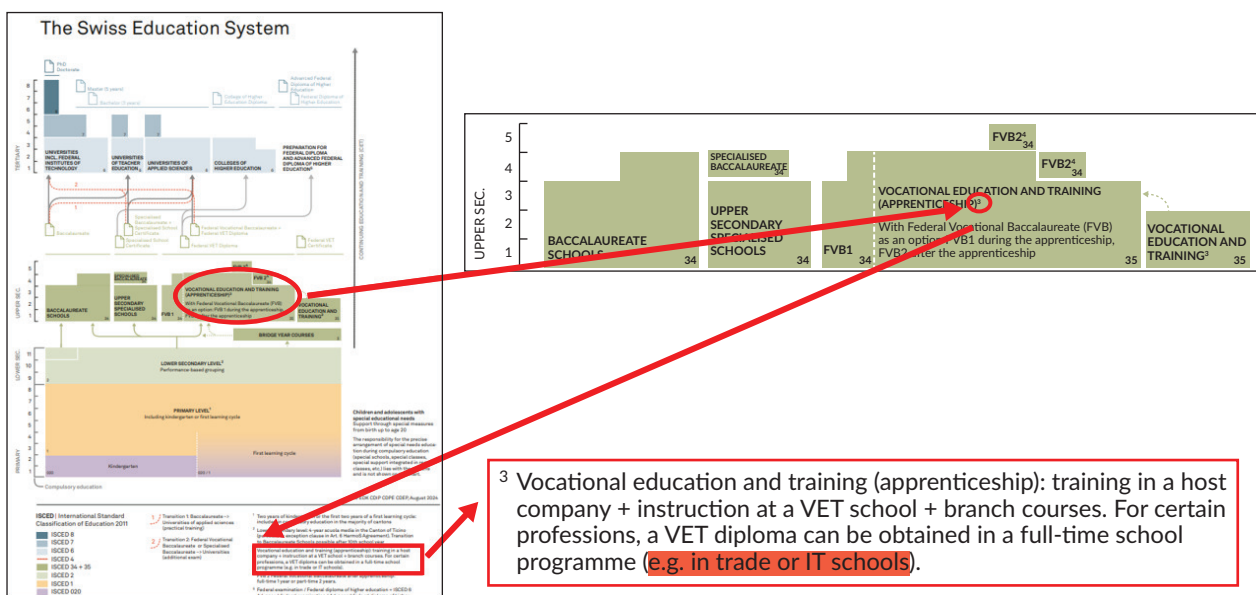
### **5.3. Visualization: Visibility vs. Invisibility**

In Switzerland, both the Swiss Confederation and the cantons within the scope of their powers are jointly responsible for the Swiss Education Area (Federal Constitution of 18 April 1999 of the Swiss Confederation, 2006, Art. 61a). To fulfill this responsibility, the Confederation and the cantons have, since 2011, agreed on a few key strategic objectives in a joint educational policy declaration (Federal Department of Economic Affairs, Education and Research & Swiss Conference of Cantonal Ministers of Education, 2023). The formulation of common education policy goals and thus the declaration is based on findings from the National Education Report and forms the framework for the shared responsibility for high quality and permeability of the Swiss education system between the cantons and the Confederation. Therefore, the declaration is an important document for education policy in Switzerland. The actors involved renewed these educational objectives in 2015, 2019, and 2023. The third objective of this declaration maintains, that having acquired the general baccalaureate entitles the graduate to enroll in a traditional university without any further examination (Federal Department of Economic Affairs, Education and Research & Swiss Conference of Cantonal Ministers of Education, 2023). This objective has remained unchanged from the beginning. Formatted and visualized in the joint educational-policy declaration in which the Confederation and the cantons state the objectives for the Swiss educational area, the pathway to traditional university via the baccalaureate school has received much attention from educational policymakers, educational administrators, and the public for many years. One example of this is the commitment of the Swiss Conference of Cantonal Ministers of Education and the Swiss Rectors’ Conference (2019) to work together

to optimize the transition from baccalaureate schools to traditional universities and, in this context, to ensure access to traditional universities with a baccalaureate school certificate without further examination. The high political attention given to this educational goal has reinforced the idea of a royal road to the traditional university via the baccalaureate school and the value judgment underpinning it.

Accessing HE via (dual) VET combined with an FVB as a pathway to the universities of applied sciences in Switzerland is rooted in various visual formats with high visibility and wide reach. One example of this is the online website [www.berufsmaturitaet.ch](http://www.berufsmaturitaet.ch), which the Confederation, cantons, and professional organizations launched specifically to strengthen the FVB pathway. There, the FVB is framed as the “pathway for high-fliers in VET,” which provides the “admission ticket” and thus “opens the door...for studying at a university of applied sciences.” Another example is the Federal Vocational Baccalaureate 2030 project, which is part of the extensive Vocational Education and Training 2030 joint initiative championed by the Confederation, cantons, and professional organizations to advance and strengthen VET in Switzerland. Their website praises the route via VET combined with an FVB as “the most important pathway to a bachelor studies program at a university of applied sciences” (SERI, 2018).

Baccalaureate school and dual VET combined with an FVB are thus positioned as the royal roads to university or university of applied sciences on highly visible stages of vocational educational policy. VMS, by contrast, are presented as part of the Swiss education system—for instance, in schematic representations—for the sake of completeness, but remain invisible. It is only in a footnote to VET at the bottom of such a schematic representation where it is explained that, “for certain professions, a VET diploma [first vocational qualification] can be obtained in a full-time school programme (e.g., in trade [commerce] or IT schools)” (Swiss Conference of Cantonal Ministers of Education, 2023). This is the only place where the VMS are explicitly mentioned and become visible (Figure 3).



**Figure 3.** Positioning and listing of the VMS highlighted and marked in the official graphic representation of the Swiss education system. Source: Swiss Conference of Cantonal Ministers of Education (2023).

Bearing in mind that “visualizations are a form of demonstration...that focus attention” (Kornberger, 2017, p. 1763), we can maintain for VMS that their invisibility in the visual representation of the Swiss education system—which is one of the most well-known and most significant visualizations (even internationally) that illustrate the various educational pathways and their roles as pathways to the Swiss HE system—expresses and underpins graphically the value judgment according to which they represent, in the words of an educational administrator, a “marginal phenomenon.”

Unlike the VMS pathway, the route to HE via the USPS is clearly depicted and positioned as such in the schematic representation of the Swiss educational system. Nevertheless, says an educational administrator, “far too little is known” about USPS’ role as a pathway to HE:

[Even among] people who, in my view, should know this, you notice that they have not fully understood these [USPS] structures....There is still a lot of educational effort needed....There are three kinds of baccalaureates. People have recognized the federal vocational baccalaureate but not the specialized baccalaureate.

In 2017, the Swiss Conference of USPS Rectors (CUSPS) made an effort to raise awareness of the USPS as a whole, but also in their role as a pathway to HE, by publishing an information video on the upper-secondary specialised school in Switzerland (KFMS, 2017). The aim was to strengthen the USPS as a “national brand” (representative of the CUSPS) and to make it visible as such through visualization strategies. The video positions the USPS as “your pathway to university studies in all of Switzerland” (KFMS, 2017). With this “promotional video,” said a representative of the CUSPS, the CUSPS intended to show that “there is a pathway in Switzerland that is just as valuable as the baccalaureate pathway or the VET pathway.” The reasoning of this representative of the CUSPS illustrates how advocates of this pathway attempted to influence how the value of the USPS is judged by investing in the visual format of a publicly accessible video. Publishing the video on the CUSPS website, however, made use of a channel with very limited reach.

The different examples presented here show how practices of visualization in the context of the governance of upper-secondary education position the different pathways to HE more or less visibly, and how this supports and sustains the notion of a royal road or some other pathway to HE.

#### ***5.4. Engagement of a Variety of Actors: Power vs. Powerlessness***

The previous discussion has shown that a variety of actors (education policymakers, federal department, statistics, graphical illustrations, etc.)—in the sense of an “assemblage of human and non-human actors” (Landri, 2015, p. 607)—influence, via various practices such as commensuration, categorization, and visualization, how the value of the different pathways to HE is perceived. Overall, the two royal roads are championed by a set of actors (such as the Swiss Confederation and the Conference of Cantonal Ministers of Education) that makes for a powerful lobby. Backing for the VOMS, by contrast, comes from the respective conferences, which, within their scope of possibilities, attempt to position these types of education as pathways to HE, but have almost no lobby and thus, as per an educational administrator, “lack power.” This powerlessness becomes manifest in the everyday coordination of action with the representatives of VET in statements like the following, by a representative of the Conference of VMS in the field of commerce:

We have to make sure that they [the VMS in the field of IT] are actually recognized...and that people [in the circles of VET] do indeed always keep them in mind....They [advocates of dual VET] tolerate us but don't want to promote us [VMS in field of commerce].

## 6. Conclusion

By drawing on the educational policy discourse on the significance of the different pathways to HE in Switzerland, this article has examined how—that is, by means of which practices and processes—the conception of the baccalaureate school and dual VET combined with an FVB as being the two royal roads to HE is constructed, maintained and reproduced within the governance of upper-secondary education. Based on this the study investigated how this affects the positioning of VOMS as pathways to HE. These research questions have been answered against the theoretical backdrop of the sociology of conventions framework (Boltanski & Thévenot, 2006; Diaz-Bone & de Larquier, 2022) and with reference to Kornberger's (2017) concept of valuation practices (commensuration, categorization, visualization, and engagement of a variety of actors), based on a diverse corpus of data (educational policy documents, statistics, graphs, websites, interviews with relevant actors, video).

The findings show that, within the governance of upper-secondary education, powerful actors continuously stabilize and reproduce a conception and an attribution of value to what they perceive as being the royal roads to HE. They do so by engaging in various practices of valuation. These practices result in material and cognitive formats (such as statistical indicators, graphics, statements of educational policy intent, websites, etc.) that interact in ways that form a highly stable and powerful dispositif of valuation in favor of the two royal roads. The advocates of baccalaureate schools and VET have this dispositif at their disposal to position in clear view, protect, and maintain their societal and educational policy conception of each being a royal road to HE.

At the same time, many of these valuation practices and resulting formats reinforce the image of VOMS as inconspicuous additional pathways to HE. This is because their qualities (e.g., high transition rate to HE among holders of a specialized baccalaureate compared to holders of an FVB) and potentials as pathways of this kind often remain invisible, are kept opaque, or are tabooed in the service of educational policy interests. Accordingly, the advocates of VOMS have no such powerful dispositif of valorization—composed of far-reaching, stable formats—at their disposal to emphasize and strengthen the visibility and significance of VOMS as pathways to HE.

Based on these findings and in line with Favereau (2017), this article proposes to understand Kornberger's theoretical concept of valuation practices as always also involving devaluation practices—in the sense of two sides of the same coin. The following questions illustrate this:

- Commensuration: What are the relevant measures applied in making different things comparable and then evaluating them? What value judgment would result if an alternative measure was applied?
- Categorization: What is being categorized separately and thus becomes visible? And what is subsumed into an existing category and is rendered invisible in the process? What relevant details are concealed by the formation of categories?
- Visualization: What is showcased and what is obscured?

- Engagement of a variety of actors: Which actors are powerful or powerless? Whose voice is clearly heard and whose not, or who has definitional power and who does not?

Practices of valuation (and devaluation) are hence always a manifestation of educational policy interests and are intended to justify and legitimize educational policy decisions. Certain (desired) aspects are rendered visible and thus valorized accordingly, whereas other (undesirable, unsuitable) aspects are kept invisible and, in so doing, implicitly devalorized. We can maintain that the invisibility created around VOMS is often exploited by the advocates of (dual) VET as evidence of the marginality and irrelevance of VOMS. This in turn lays the groundwork for justifying governance measures that constrain VOMS as upper-secondary educations and as pathways to HE while adopting and implementing policies for further strengthening the royal roads.

Drawing on these findings, we can state for Switzerland that commensuration, categorization, visualization, and the interplay between a variety of human and non-human actors have formed and maintained two highly stable and powerful cognitive formats of royal roads in the sense of two standard pathways to HE. What the educational policy and societal discourses as well as the strategies, mechanisms, and instruments of governing upper-secondary education show is that the two royal roads, on the basis of “a trust in the established” (Diaz-Bone, 2018, p. 338), are accepted without question, reproduced, and referenced to legitimize educational policy decisions. At the same time, this leads to closing one’s eyes (Thévenot, 2009) to alternative forms, as this article has demonstrated through the example of VOMS as pathways to HE in Switzerland. What has become clear overall is that, to date, neither the general public nor educational decision-makers in politics and public administration perceive VOMS as pathways to HE that are on par with baccalaureate school and dual VET combined with an FVB, nor are they anchored as such in the minds of other relevant actors.

Different pathways to HE address different interests, skills, needs, biographical circumstances, and life plans of youths. The valorization and simultaneous devalorization of the different pathways to HE that have been demonstrated in this article are a manifestation of tendencies observable in Switzerland to channel the variety of pathways to HE toward the two favored royal roads at the expense of VOMS. These dynamics call for an explanation in the face of three aspects in particular: (a) the high rate of transition to tertiary education among VOMS graduates, (b) the potential of these schools to usher young women into typically male (tertiary) professions, and (c) their success in getting youths of immigrant background into VET and the latter at the same time with a structurally high likelihood of leading them to pursue a university education.

In recent years, Germany, Austria, and Switzerland have adopted different strategies to increase the permeability between dual VET and HE (e.g., Ebner et al., 2013; Nikolai & Ebner, 2012). Germany has focused on the recognition of vocational qualifications for admission to HE, while Switzerland and Austria have introduced double qualifications that allow students to obtain both a vocational qualification and a university entrance certificate at the same time. The introduction of these double qualifications in Switzerland and Austria was driven by two main factors: First, the dual VET system was less attractive to highly qualified young people, and second, there were appealing alternatives, such as Switzerland’s baccalaureate schools or VOMS and Austria’s full-time school-based VET programs (Nikolai & Ebner, 2012). The findings of the present study on quantitatively and politically rather marginalized and little-known educational (VET) programs as pathways to HE thus add new insights to the international scholarly discussion on the permeability between VET and HE as well as hybrid pathways to HE. The international



embedding of the results shows that, compared to other European countries, Switzerland, with its strongly distinctive education system, still pays little attention to and supports hybrid access routes to HE, such as VOMS, and thus continues to leave their potential unexploited. Rather, the relevant actors promote and maintain two main routes to HE: one via general education baccalaureate schools and one via dual VET combined with an FVB.

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### Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

### Data Availability

The analyzed data are available on request from the author.

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