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Paying for vocational education: the marketization of inequality in collective skill formation systems

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ABSTRACT

Rather unnoticed by policy-driven research, for-profit private vocational education and training (VET) providers are establishing themselves as a market niche within collective skill formation systems. In Switzerland and Germany, for example, an increasing number of students complete their vocational training at private schools that charge tuition. With tuition fees that are substantial yet significantly lower than those charged by elite private institutions, these private vocational schools target a broader student population and explicitly promise educational opportunities for those marginalized by the exclusionary logic of selective school and company-based VET systems. Drawing on narratively reconstructed case studies, this article examines students' decision-making processes regarding fee-based vocational education in relation to the reproduction of social inequality. Paying for VET thus seems not merely an expression of school choice but rather a form of socially embedded agency within educational regimes in which vocational education is increasingly expected yet not systemically guaranteed. It thus appears to privatize and marketize existing education and social inequalities, both at the individual and the structural levels.

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Private vocational schools in collective skill formation systems

Rather unnoticed by research and policy, the share of students completing vocational education and training (VET) in Switzerland at for-profit, fee-based private vocational schools is increasing (Preite et al., 2025). While for-profit private VET providers and fee-based training models are not unusual from an international perspective (Down, John, et al., 2019; Pasura, 2014, 2015; Simmons, 2010; Simmons, 2024; Wheelahan, 2015a), the practice of paying tuition fees for VET at the upper secondary level – rather than being employed as apprentices and remunerated with an apprenticeship wage – appears to run counter to established understandings and narratives of the Swiss VET system. From a comparative political economy perspective, Switzerland is commonly referred to as a 'liberal collective skill formation system' (Emmenegger et al., 2019, p. 263), which means that it is characterized by a dominant

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labour-market orientation, company-based training models, and a comparatively weak and institutionally constrained role of trade unions in shaping training conditions and curricula. In transnational VET policy agendas, such skill systems and labour-market orientations are predominantly framed as universally applicable models of success, in disregard of national path dependencies and the socio-historical institutionalization of VET systems (Brockmann et al., 2008; Clarke & Winch, 2006; Clarke et al., 2013). In doing so, these discourses reproduce and reinforce the failed promise of upskilling inherent in orthodox human capital theory and shift attention away from the capitalist and neoliberal labour market's structural inability to provide secure and sufficient employment (Brown et al., 2020). Structural contradictions are reframed as problems of skill deficits and employability (see Wheelahan et al., 2022). This obscures social inequalities as well as the historical, political, and economic conditions that shape training and labour market opportunities (see Allais & Marock, 2026; Wheelahan, 2015b).

Sociological and historical studies focusing on Swiss VET are increasingly challenging this dominant narrative of success. Their analyses reveal tensions that remain obscured in policy accounts, including the system's persistent failure to provide sufficient apprenticeship spots since the 1990s (Büchel et al., 2026; Sacchi & Meyer, 2016) and the declining 'protective effect' of upper secondary vocational qualifications on the labour market (Meyer & Sacchi, 2020, p. 111). This disproportionately affects marginalized youth, especially young people who are racialized and positioned as migrants. They face discrimination in accessing apprenticeship places (Imdorf, 2017), are at higher risk of VET dropout (Busse et al., 2025), and are more likely to be channelled into shortened VET programmes with limited access to higher education (Scharnhorst & Kammermann, 2020). Bonoli and Emmenegger (2021) refer to this problematic as the limits of the collective skill formation system in terms of inclusiveness. Baumeler and Lamamra (2019, p. 466) highlight the systemic 'tension between production and education', a tension that is particularly pronounced in small and medium-sized enterprises, where most company-based training takes place.

Against this background, it is interesting to observe how fee-based private vocational schools are increasingly gaining ground due to these system-inherent limits of collective skill formation systems. With advertising slogans such as 'No apprenticeship? We have the solution' or 'Make your career wish come true', for-profit private providers not only seek to capitalize on the structural constraints by offering fee-based training alternatives but also to further expand the (failed) neoliberal promise of human capital accumulation in an even more privatized and commodified form. While private vocational schools have historically played a niche role in Switzerland in certain vocational programmes (office administration, art and design, health and care), their contributions have often been overlooked in research and policy, underscoring the dominance of industrial occupations and hegemonic masculinity in company-based VET (Weitz & Ludwig-Mayerhofer, 2024). Three core aspects of fee-based private vocational schools appear to fundamentally challenge the self-understanding of collective skill formation systems: first, that training takes place in a school rather than a company setting; second, that tuition fees must be paid rather than students being reimbursed with an apprentice wage; and third, that access to vocational education is, in theory, made available to anyone for a fee regardless of company-based selection and exclusionary logics.

The aim of the paper is to better understand how young people come to pay tuition fees for VET in collective skill formation systems. The article therefore examines how students' decision-making processes regarding fee-based private vocational schools are interlinked with the reproduction of social and educational inequalities. These questions are empirically explored through case studies of students who opted for a fee-based private vocational school in the Swiss context. The case studies were reconstructed as part of a qualitative research project that included episodic narrative interviews (Mueller, 2019) with 44 students at fee-based private vocational schools. Through the approach based on constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006) and thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2023), it became apparent that none of these students attended a private vocational school as their first 'choice'; their enrolment was rather shaped by experiences of exclusion from selective schools and the company-based VET system. Thus, contrary to the dominant rational-choice premise of school and career selection, students' agency and decision-making processes are conceptualized as shaped – but not unequivocally determined – by social inequalities and power relations (see Eschweiler & Pultz, 2021; Wilson & Scarbrough, 2018). This ensures that students' decision-making processes and trajectories are not (mis)understood as acts of free choice, but as processes embedded in structural relations of inequality, domination, and power (see Bourdieu, 1977; Willis, 1977).

For-profit private VET institutions and providers

Both VET research and research on private schools have paid limited attention to private vocational schools in the context of collective skill formation systems like those found in Switzerland and Germany. Research on private schools tends to focus on elite upper secondary schools and international schools as institutions that reproduce elites and exclusion (Lillie & Delval, 2024; Nikolai & Helbig, 2021). VET research examines firms and companies as private actors, but it has ignored private schools (Büchter, 2021). Although there are several articles on school-based VET (see Esposito, 2024), these studies do not distinguish between public schools and private schools that enrol and train vocational students as paying customers. This is surprising given the fact that in Switzerland a tenth of basic vocational IT and business administration training and vocational baccalaureate programmes are currently completed at private schools, and these quotas have doubled over the last 10 years (Preite et al., 2025). A similar trend – albeit to varying degrees – can also be observed in Germany (Büchter, 2021; Feller, 2004), particularly in the vocational school sector, but also in higher education more generally, with a growing number of students enrolled at non-elite private universities (Herrmann, 2019).

Considering that tuition fees at private vocational schools in Switzerland range between 35,000 and 70,000 CHF for the entire programme, these institutions cannot be classified as 'budget private schools' (Tooley, 2007, p. 38). At the same time, at least in the Swiss context, they remain considerably less expensive and more affordable than private gymnasiums, which cost three to four times as much and can be far more in the case of elite boarding schools (see Lillie & Delval, 2024). Unlike public upper secondary schools and company-based apprenticeships models, these private vocational schools do not apply grade-based admission criteria or company selection procedures (Preite et al.,

2025). Their business models and profit margins seem accordingly closely linked to the inherent systemic limits of a selective school and company-based VET system, where vocational education is increasingly expected but not systematically guaranteed. Based on online research of provider websites that was conducted for a project proposal, initial exploratory findings suggest that beyond the small number of rather traditional private providers, the field is also attracting multinational education companies (Preite et al., 2026). In some cases, these companies are backed by private equity and operate across the entire educational spectrum, from early childhood education to higher education. Nevertheless, research on this topic remains limited, and very little is currently known about the ownership structures, key stakeholders, or profit intentions of these companies.

Looking outside the German and Swiss national frameworks, private institutions and private VET training providers are well researched in further education (FE) in the UK (Simmons, 2010) and technical and further education (TAFE) in Australia (Pasura, 2014; Wheelahan, 2015a). In these national contexts, for-profit private training providers and institutions have steadily gained importance over the last 30 to 50 years. As political landscapes have changed and neoliberal educational reforms set in, these sectors have shifted from being a ‘traditionally [...] rather unspectacular activity’ to a ‘highly performative and marketized sector’ (Simmons, 2010, p. 363). These reforms aimed to embed a market and skill rationale – in the sense of a human capital ideology – in national VET systems, which were considered outdated, inefficient, and too far away from labour market needs (Wheelahan & Moodie, 2017). To this end, governments subsidized private training providers in a paradoxical and yet prototypical neoliberal way in order to establish ‘market competition’ between private providers and state-owned TAFE and FE (Chankseliani & Relly, 2015).

These reforms have been the subject of political and academic debates, which have questioned whether the creation of a ‘quasi-market’ (Simmons, 2024, p. 766) has actually led to the expected improvements or whether, conversely, it has opened up a marketization of VET with public funds (Yu & Oliver, 2015). In Australia, for example, the range of vocational training programmes offered by private providers is shrinking, although these reforms were intended to have the opposite effect by ‘encouraging multiple providers to trade in regulated contestable markets’ (Zoellner, 2022, p. 1). The reforms seem to have significantly impacted curriculums and teaching practices (Hodge, 2016; Locke & Maton, 2019; Pasura, 2014; Wheelahan, 2015a) while also contributing to the development of new markets within this quasi-market. For example, international students have become important since some institutions are heavily dependent on this funding source (Pasura, 2014, p. 576). While Simmons (2024, p. 766) estimates that in the UK currently ‘around 15–20% of vocational learners [are] enrolled as fee-paying customers with private providers’, there appears to be a lack of research addressing this topic from a students’ perspective (see Down, John, et al., 2019).

Even the prominent theoretical lens for studying educational privatization – the so-called six ‘paths towards educational privatization’ (Verger, Fontdevila, et al., 2017, p. 578) – falls short of explaining the increasingly complex and hybrid forms of privatization and marketization within VET. This model not only tends to overlook VET (see Zancajo et al., 2025, p. 482), it is also questionable whether privatization pathways like ‘scaling up privatization’ (Verger, Fontdevila, et al., 2017, p. 764) or ‘historical private–public partnerships’ (Verger, Fontdevila, et al., 2017, p. 769) can be meaningfully applied

to understand current shifts and developments in VET. As ownership structures and funding mechanisms are often entangled, private vocational schools have to be understood as ‘hybrid organizations’ (Honingh & Karsten, 2007, p. 137). Some programmes receive public subsidies, while others are entirely financed using tuition fees. It is precisely this starting point – hybrid institutions in quasi-markets – that has created ideal conditions for a global education industry (see Hogan, 2025; Hogan & Thompson, 2021; Jones & Ball, 2023; Rönnerberg, 2025; Rönnerberg et al., 2021). This development can be observed in both early childhood education (Carlbaum & Rönnerberg, 2024; Falkenberg, 2022) and upper secondary education (Bauer & Landolt, 2024; Forsberg, 2018), with implications for both educational quality and equity (Fjellman & Hansen; Forsberg et al., 2024).

Students paying for VET in Switzerland

To understand how students end up paying tuition fees for vocational education in Switzerland, it is important to first clarify the central place of VET within the Swiss education system at the upper secondary level. While federal authorities and VET representatives are keen to emphasize that two-thirds of all young people ‘choose’ VET, it is important to note that access to gymnasium is highly restricted because of cantonal quotas and school selection logics (Dahmen, 2021). This restricted and selective access to gymnasiums not only ensures a steady supply of young people for VET but also leads to a growing and contested market for preparatory courses for gymnasium entrance exams offered by private for-profit providers (Bauer & Landolt, 2024). Within an ‘employment-centred transition regime’ (Walther, 2006, p. 128), the majority of young people are thus structurally channelled into VET, but they are not guaranteed a spot in an apprenticeship. On the contrary, they must navigate a system in which companies apply internal selection criteria to decide who will be recruited as apprentices and who will be excluded (Fossati et al., 2020). Moreover, their engagement in general education and their opportunities for higher education remain limited (Meyer & Sacchi, 2020). Critical educational research has shown how selection in VET intersects with racist, classist, sexist, and ableist exclusionary logics (Déjussel et al., 2025; Imdorf, 2017; Lustenberger et al., 2025). Such research has yet to have any substantial political consequences or lead to any real reform. Ultimately, one-fifth of young Swiss people face exclusion from both school- and company-based pathways and end up in so-called transitional solutions (Sacchi & Meyer, 2016). In these institutions, which are not designed to lead to a certified qualification, young people are expected to lower what is politically framed as their unrealistic career aspirations and adapt to non-preferred and hierarchically subordinate vocational pathways as part of an activating-focused education policy (Dahmen, 2021). This transition system renders visible the structural limits of the standardized VET system. Within these transitional arrangements, socio-pedagogical interventions are required to compensate for what a supposedly free apprenticeship market fails to provide by directing marginalized young people towards subordinate and precarious vocational fields and working conditions (Pohl & Walther, 2007).

From a theoretical perspective based on Goffman (1952) and Clark (1960), this lowering of educational expectations within VET systems is often conceptualized as a ‘cooling-out’ (Walther, 2015, p. 20), a downgrading of vocational aspiration that is

institutionally and discursively structured yet individually experienced. Studies that focus on students' perspectives more strongly try to challenge the linear assumptions of cooling out, emphasizing instead the intertwined and relational processes of doing transition within different transition regimes (Cuconato & Walther, 2015). These perspectives situate such processes within existing inequalities and power relations, while highlighting their contingent character. Students are thus not treated as passive objects devoid of agency, but as actors navigating and contesting structural constraints (Hirschfeld & Lenz, 2022; Preite, 2019).

Against this background, this article turns to the questions of how students come to pay tuition fees at private vocational schools and how their decision-making processes are related to the reproduction of social inequality. The article draws on data from a study in which 44 young people in Switzerland were interviewed about their pathways into private vocational schools.¹ Around three-quarters of these students were attending such a school at the time of the interview, while the remaining quarter reflected retrospectively on their experiences. Participants were recruited through the schools and via rapid sampling strategies. Short-term field visits (Brockmann 2011) to schools offered both field access and initial ethnographic insights. The schools used different approaches to facilitate the interviews: some allowed the researchers to present the project in various classes, after which students could voluntarily provide their contact information, so individual interviews could be arranged later. Other schools organized specific half-day interview sessions with selected classes and students. Fifteen of the total 38 private vocational schools were contacted for this purpose. This selection was based on the vocational training programmes the schools offered to ensure the widest possible range in the sampling. However, since not all the schools contacted were willing to participate in the research project – some schools, concerned about media attention, coordinated their refusals – other sampling strategies (rapid sampling, social media calls for study participants) were considered to expand the sampling possibilities.

The research project followed constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006), developing through an iterative, interdependent process of data collection and analysis, from initial sampling through early memo writing and coding to theoretical sampling. The aim was to maximize the contrast between the cases (Dimbath et al., 2018), both in terms of schools and students. Ultimately, it was possible to interview students from almost all currently offered VET programmes at private vocational schools. The programmes were in office administration, information technology, art and design, and health and care. Given the exploratory character of the project, it would be presumptuous to claim that empirical saturation was fully achieved in the sense of constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006).

The five students portrayed in the article are not intended to be statistically representative of the sample but rather 'analytical' cases (Yin, 2012, p. 18) in that they illustrate how students ultimately came to pay to attend a private VET institution. All the transcribed interviews were thematically analysed following Braun and Clarke (2023) to enable the reconstruction of themes and patterns in the interviewees' accounts of how they came to pay for VET and how they financed the tuition fees. Of course, the five cases discussed in this article could have been different. In this sense, the case selection should be understood as epistemologically pragmatic: the aim of the article is to provide detailed insights into the interviewed students' perspectives through a concretely manageable

number of cases. We therefore avoided grouping students into ideal types, as our epistemological aim was to present single cases in all their ambiguity and entanglements, without breaking them down analytically in a way that would compromise their integrity (see Passeron, 2008). Despite efforts to select students with attention to gender and ethnicity balance, the final selected included four men and only one woman.²

Paying for VET after leaving school: the cases of Philipp, Sandro, and Miralem

For both Sandro and Philipp, the decision to opt for a fee-based vocational school went hand in hand with leaving their previous upper secondary education – a public gymnasium in Philipp’s case and a public vocational school in Sandro’s case – after not being allowed to advance to the next year of schooling. This is how they found their way to private vocational schools with the aim of completing their upper secondary education. While this transition happened seamlessly in Sandro’s case, Philipp waited two years between leaving upper secondary school and starting at a private vocational school. Before then, he did not even know that private vocational schools existed. By contrast, Sandro and his family were already familiar with his private school. His mother works there in administration. His family could afford to pay the school fees: his father has a doctorate and is an executive in the pharmaceutical industry. Cantonal rules governing access to public upper secondary education meant that an apprenticeship was Sandro’s only remaining option after he left public vocational school. This also illustrates the specific logic of employment-centred transition regimes (Walther, 2006): after one leaves public school, the only remaining education option is to complete an apprenticeship, which requires selling your labour within company-based training. However, given their financial and educational background, it was out of the question for Sandro and his parents to consider an apprenticeship. Sandro therefore immediately turned to a private school that his parents could pay for after he left school.

By contrast, Philipp found himself at home for two years after he left gymnasium; he was not in education, employment, or training. Unlike Sandro, he applied for apprenticeships, but he described how leaving school weighed heavily against him and led companies to reject his applications. Rather by chance, he saw an advertisement for a private VET school in a newspaper. Curious and yet suspicious, he clicked through the website. Looking back, he was surprised at how easy it was to register. In the end, all he had to do was enter his contact details online for a non-binding introductory meeting, and the school contacted him. They showed him all his options and offered him the chance to start his training immediately. Philipp was impressed; for him it felt like a ‘new beginning’, especially compared to the rather difficult period he had experienced while out of education and employment. His parents also paid the school fees. Philipp’s parents’ financial situation was not comparable to Sandro’s. Philipp was the first in his family to attend gymnasium; his father works as a lift service technician, while his mother stayed at home with the children. For him, it was clear that this was a loan that he would pay back to them once he began to earn money. For that reason, and in contrast to Sandro, Philipp did not aspire to pursue further or higher education after completing his VET; instead, he agreed with his company that he would continue working there after graduation. This example further illustrates how financial circumstances shape the unequal burden of such investments among families: for some, they represent a costly yet manageable

steppingstone toward further educational aspirations, while for others, having to pay for school marks an endpoint.

In addition to Sandro and Philipp, other interviewees reported how they ended up at private vocational schools after their apprenticeships were terminated early. This was the case with Miralem. Although he found his former apprenticeship anything but pleasant in terms of his boss and the working and training conditions, he was determined to complete the training. Nevertheless, his company prematurely terminated his training contract based on his supposed lack of motivation and inadequate attitude towards work.³ For Miralem, the termination of his apprenticeship contract was a heavy blow, especially for his father. Having grown up witnessing his father, an immigrant worker, perform physically demanding labour in a low-status and poorly paid job, he felt as though he was betraying him by not being able and willing to accept such subordination. Marked by the termination of his apprenticeship, he struggled to find a new company where he could complete an apprenticeship. He therefore felt even more grateful towards his father for paying his tuition fees. For Miralem this shift towards a paid educational setting had a deep impact. As he put it: 'In the company, I was a servant, but here at school, I'm a customer' (interview with Miralem, December 2023). However, this safer position in the training context also increased pressure within the family, especially the obligation he felt towards his father to succeed 'whatever it cost'. Thus, for Miralem, paid VET coincided with the further 'cost' of hegemonic masculine expectations that are also self-directed and harmful: a social force that shapes the ways he treats himself and has also had a lasting impact on his relationship with his father and family. This educational investment will ultimately pay off only if he successfully passes the final exams; if he doesn't, the entire amount is lost.

Paying for VET after failing to gain access to the apprenticeship market: the cases of Arlinda and Siddharth

In addition to students who had not completed upper secondary education or vocational training, other students entered private vocational schools directly after completing lower secondary school or attending a transitional solution without gaining access to an apprenticeship. This was the case for Arlinda: she had been looking for an apprenticeship in childcare, a sector that is known for being poorly paid and in urgent need of qualified workers in Switzerland but that also offers only a limited number of apprenticeships. Driven by profit, childcare companies prefer to hire young people and young adults on a full-time basis as interns rather than training them as apprentices.

After completing several internships in daycare centres, all of which promised her a follow-up apprenticeship without keeping their promise, Arlinda opted to attend a private vocational school. For her, paying to attend a private school represented the only chance 'to be protected somewhere, as a student'; especially as the school 'can't just kick her out' because she 'pays' tuition. She was therefore grateful that her mother-in-law, who herself had attended a private school, paid the school fees for the first year of training in advance. After successfully completing her training and gaining employment that culminated in her promotion to the head of a daycare, Arlinda was able to repay her mother-in-law. Like Miralem's case, this example reveals the complexities in how tuition fees can shape familial and gender-related interdependencies. Although Arlinda

described her relationship with her mother-in-law as positive, the situation nonetheless raises the question of the extent to which financial indebtedness shapes family power relations.

Siddharth, on the other hand, tried to find an apprenticeship in IT. However, as a young person of colour who had been placed on the lowest track of lower secondary school, Siddharth faced discrimination on the apprenticeship market. Many companies rejected his applications. Despite such odds, he nonetheless applied for over a hundred open IT apprenticeships, unfortunately without success. The closer he got to the end of compulsory school, the more pressure his teacher placed on him to accept a so-called realistic career perspective in the sense of cooling out and to consider professions such as car mechanic or butcher. Siddharth was determined to become an IT specialist: ‘nothing except IT was ever an option’. In his case, the fact that he was ultimately able to complete IT training at a private vocational school is linked to a tragic story. His father, an immigrant factory worker, died unexpectedly when Siddharth was 10 years old. His mother left him his father’s pension fund with the words that it was now up to him ‘whether the family could continue to grow or not’. On the advice of his cousin, who had also started his IT training at a private school after unsuccessfully looking for an apprenticeship, Siddharth decided to opt for a private vocational school. After successfully graduating from a private school and studying business IT at a higher technical college, he now works in a senior position in cantonal administration. In return for paying school fees, the private school enabled him to pursue a career that – like Arlinda – companies had denied him by excluding him from apprenticeship.

When asked whether he had ever felt, as a person of colour, that companies discriminated against him when reviewing his apprenticeship applications (‘Did you ever think that this was also xenophobic and racist?’), Siddharth explained:

Hm, no, it’s more about my self-esteem; that’s what gnawed at me. You don’t know anything else. You have to imagine it like this: you’re young. You don’t know the Swiss world. You don’t have any image of it, that I perhaps understand better now. And you think everyone else found an apprenticeship because they’re better than you. For me, there was the school thing on top of that. You just blame it on that. God has a different plan for you. You don’t even go to the racist level. You tend to doubt yourself; like you have no value; you are nothing; you’ll end up in an industry anyway. It’s more this mentality. There are still racist moments in life. You have them all the time. I always distinguish them based on two things: Is it meant as a joke? [...] Those are stupid jokes. I laugh at them. But as soon as it gets serious, I have two options. I tell myself very clearly that it’s racist; and: ‘I would like to talk to you about it; are you willing to talk about it without attacking each other?’ Then we can look at it. Otherwise, I’ll walk away. For me, there is no other option. I don’t discuss things with someone who isn’t willing to discuss them. (interview with Siddharth, November 2023)

Siddharth’s experience illustrates how racist and classist selection criteria for apprenticeships directly impact young people. At the same time, this case illustrates how these exclusionary logics, while not to be overlooked, can be temporarily and situationally circumvented for a fee in private schools. This constitutes these private vocational schools’ distinctive business model: educational opportunities are staged and offered as being independent of social background and origin within the framework of an ostensibly neutral service and a purely economic exchange.

In Siddharth's case, however, this also meant that he 'paid' twice for an education. First, he paid in the form of experiences of exclusion and discrimination, and then he paid tuition fees to attend a private vocational school. While paying for school played a decisive role in all the described cases, Siddharth was driven by a need to repay his mother as quickly as possible. In the context of family interdependencies, it was clear to him that he owed his educational opportunities to his mother, his late father, and his cousin.

Thus, after successfully graduating from private vocational school, Siddharth threw himself into an unbounded career as an IT specialist. In the interview, he emphasized that, once trained, 'no one cared any more about the grades he had achieved in school' (interview with Siddharth, November 2023). While companies had not given him any chance for an apprenticeship and considered him incapable of training, they now make full use of his self-funded VET under precarious working conditions. In IT, this practice is called body leasing: Siddharth's work is billed to the client at a senior engineering rate, while he himself is only paid at a junior level. He came to terms with these exploitative working conditions since his income – 'you get paid well in IT, there's no question about that' (interview with Siddharth, November 2023) – meant he was able to repay his mother the entire amount in a relatively short time. Furthermore, he was also able to finance his mother's early retirement. Like his father, who came to Switzerland as an immigrant worker, his mother had always worked in a large-scale industrial factory after following her husband to Switzerland. When she was asked to work night shifts again as part of a restructuring at the age of 61, Siddharth could no longer bear it. He persuaded her to quit and supported her financially. He also paid her minimum contributions to old-age insurance so that she could receive a full old-age pension at the age of 64. To protect his mother's body from further capitalist exploitation, he decided to take on this burden himself. Tragically, Siddharth was diagnosed with depression with symptoms of exhaustion four years after completing his vocational education at a private school. This reflects the ongoing reproduction of social inequality within selective and marketized transition systems, which only allow educational advancement at the cost of tuition fees, discrimination, (self-)exploitation, and physical exhaustion.

More than individual cases: privatization and marketization of educational inequalities in VET

Drawing on narratively reconstructed case studies of five young people, this article explores the decision-making processes of students who paid for vocational education at fee-based private schools in the Swiss VET system. By taking these students' perspectives into account, it shows that their opting for paid VET contrasts with the predominant theorization of school choice as an act of free will and instead highlights the embeddedness of educational trajectories within social inequalities. These young people were de facto steered towards these paid alternatives while facing exclusion in a selective education and company-based VET system. Furthermore, these fee-based pathways reopened the training options that had been denied to them by companies. Their training nevertheless took place within publicly accredited private schools that confer the same federally recognized VET diploma as company-based apprenticeships.

Contrary to a first impression, fee-based private vocational schools should therefore not be positioned as external to the collective skill formation system, but rather as a privatized and marketized form of training within an ‘employment-centred transition regime’ (Walther, 2006, p. 128). In this respect, it is important to distinguish how students ‘pay’ for their vocational education in this VET constellation: on the one hand, through the commodification and sale of their own labour within company-based training; on the other, through the payment of tuition fees in private vocational education. In both cases, however, VET is ultimately ‘paid’ for in one form or another.

This, in turn, points to a central critique of collective skill formation systems: namely, that the actors involved – firms, companies, employers’ associations, but also federal governments – generate profit at the expense of students’ education. This VET net profit – regularly calculated in studies on educational economics and particularly pronounced in liberal skill formation systems (see Emmenegger et al., 2019, p. 270) – is prominently used in federal marketing campaigns to highlight the ‘profitability’ of the Swiss VET system in national and international contexts. That private schools are now also seeking to capture this net profit for their own economic gain can be seen as paradoxical and troubling manifestation of economic imperialism (see Allais, 2012) in VET. Young people who are excluded from company-based training and labelled as lacking ‘vocational maturity’ (Pilz & Zenner-Höffkes, 2025, p. 393) are subsequently left to pay to enhance their employability through private educational investments. In this sense, educational exclusion generates a source of profit: it first reproduces a pool of marginalized youth and then enables the marketization of their educational marginalization (see Wheelahan & Moodie, 2022). Beyond the student perspective, future research should incorporate an institutional viewpoint that focuses on providers’ rationalities, ownership structures, and profit practices. This is crucial to better understanding and contextualizing fee-based private vocational schools and providers in relation to the emerging global education industry, which is increasingly colonizing new spaces of educational provision (see Rönnerberg, 2025; Verger, Steiner-Khamsi, et al., 2017).

Notes

1. The interviews with students were reviewed and approved by the Ethics Committee of the FHNW School of Education. Each participant agreed that the interview data could be used for research purposes in the form of a written and signed consent form obtained prior to the interview and double-checked afterwards. Participants were of legal age and were able to freely decide whether they would participate, even if in some cases initial contact was made through their school. They were also given the opportunity to withdraw their consent after the interview if they felt uncomfortable at any point. We assume that the procedures adhered to the standards outlined in the Helsinki Declaration. To ensure anonymization, the interview data will not be published on any data repositories, not even as metadata.
2. While the research project did engage with the dimension of gender-inclusive language, these reflections were not pursued systematically. Although it was important to us to use neutral formulations (e.g. ‘students’ or ‘young people’), we did not explicitly ask the students how they preferred to be addressed in passages where they are directly cited. Ultimately, the decision not to use gender-inclusive language in passages where we discuss their perspectives reflects our own adult, male perspective on these young people more than their perspectives or choices. We have therefore decided not to change this terminology retrospectively into a gender-inclusive form. This decision is not intended to delegitimize

gender-inclusive forms of writing. We rather sought to avoid claiming gender-inclusive language without having consistently incorporated it into the research process itself. This reflects our intention to explicitly ask participants in future research how they wish to be addressed.

3. Currently, around one quarter of all apprenticeship contracts in Switzerland are prematurely terminated (Bosset et al., 2022). The existing policy-driven research does not specify whether these terminations are initiated by employers or by apprentices. These terminations can be discussed as another structural limitation of the collective skill formation system, as they reveal that young people enter a deregulated labour market at the age of 16, with 45–50 legally mandated weekly working hours, as well as extended allowances for night and weekend work. Unsurprisingly, terminations particularly affect apprenticeships in precarious or physically demanding sectors, such as construction, childcare, and hairdressing (Preite, 2026).

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Author contribution

Luca Preite and Andreas Walther were involved in conception, design, analysis and interpretation of the data, drafting the paper, revising it critically for intellectual content, and the final approval of the version to be published. Both authors agree to be accountable for all aspects of the work.

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