



# Academic drifts in vocational, professional, and continuing education: A multi-perspective approach for the case of Switzerland

Jörg Neumann<sup>1</sup>, Thomas Ruoss<sup>1</sup> & Markus Weil<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Swiss Federal University of Vocational Education and Training, Switzerland

<sup>2</sup> Zurich University of Teacher Education, Switzerland

(joerg.neumann@ehb.swiss)

## Abstract

In this article, we examine the phenomenon of ‘academic drifts’ within vocational education. Our objective is to gain a well-informed epistemic understanding of various aspects of academic drifts, considering their complexity and enabling meaningful conclusions. By heuristically exploring three different cases at their systematic, institutional, and functional levels, as well as temporal junctures of the Swiss education system, we show the different developments in the distribution of vocational and academic education, leading to a broader and less simplistic understanding of ongoing academic drifts. The cases under study cover three areas of vocational education in which we want to empirically identify aspects of academic drifts: vocational education teacher training, professional education and training, and continuing education and training at universities. We find that all three cases show different variations in academic drifts within the same education system, which is why we deliberately speak in the plural. According to our thesis, these drifts create different areas of tension for vocational education: academic drifts appear as external and internal tertiarisation, formalisation of qualifications and competences, and marketisation trends in education. The Swiss education system serves as an example, demonstrating that even in a country with a strong focus on vocational education and measures to support it, intended and unintended academic drifts take place within and around vocational education.

**Keywords:** vocational education and training (VET), VET teacher training, professional education and training, continuing education and training, academic drifts, universities, Switzerland



## Introduction

The changing dynamics of technology, economics, and society demand that national education systems adapt to ensure that students obtain the necessary knowledge and skills. Contrary to the fear that the importance of vocational education is declining compared to general education, the expansion and development of vocational education and training (VET) at higher levels in the sense of academic drift is seen as an opportunity. This applies both to the status of vocational education and to the development of general education in our knowledge society (Cedefop, 2020). This article aims to provide a well-informed epistemic and heuristic approach to the areas of tension in academic drifts by examining different perspectives within one education system: Switzerland's vocational education system.

Academic drifts in their heterogeneity have been a topic of initial VET (Cedefop, 2019; Kriesi et al., 2022). Considering the multifaceted nature of vocational education, we analyse three additional key areas that were exposed to various academic drifts: the training of VET teachers at the tertiary level (VET TT), professional education and training (PET) at the tertiary level of the education system, and continuing education and training (CET), officially positioned outside the formal education system, in our case offered by universities. While VET TT, PET, and CET represent different parts of the education system, they share a common characteristic: they are not principally categorised as academic education. This is surprising because in Switzerland, the tertiarisation of teacher training, the founding of universities of applied sciences (UASs), and the greater formalisation of continuing education have taken place with the Bologna and Copenhagen Processes since the early 2000s (Bieber, 2016; Cedefop, 2023; Eberle et al., 2009; European Commission et al., 2024). Following Forneck (2011), we can distinguish between internal tertiarisation and external tertiarisation. The foundation of new types of universities (of applied sciences and of teacher education) has been an act of external tertiarisation. Identifying fully as a university with its functions and staff would be an act of internal tertiarisation, which takes much longer and involves processes and functions within that institutional external tertiarisation.

In the sense of tertiarisation, academic drifts are inherently linked to their specific contexts. Our multi-perspective approach aims to underscore some general aspects of recent developments in vocational education. Depending on the level under consideration, the specific interests of stakeholders or the relationship to alternative educational pathways, it is imperative to recognise academic drifts in their varied forms (Cedefop, 2020). These drifts converge on formal education at universities, evident in their alignment with them, imitation of their structures, or the requirement of corresponding degrees. Consequently, academic drifts cannot be reduced to a simplistic model because they stem from

diverse causes, yield distinct consequences, and hold different values contingent upon their contextual nuances (Deissinger & Gonon, 2016; Markowitsch & Hefler, 2019). Our understanding of academic drifts is based on the preliminary work of Cedefop and its structuring of VET into three perspectives: education system, epistemological/pedagogical, and socioeconomic/labour market perspective (Cedefop, 2020; Markowitsch & Bjørnåvold, 2022).

### Methodological approach and outline

In Switzerland, there is a lively debate regarding academic drifts within vocational education (Baumeler, 2021; Kriesi et al., 2022; Kriesi & Leemann, 2020; Neu & Elsholz, 2022; Osbahr, 2023). Each of the three cases under analysis represents distinct and significant shifts in the landscape of vocational and academic education across different educational levels and time frames. These cases are embedded within multifaceted contextual factors, including changes in workplace practices, labour market demands, economic conditions, and responses of the education sector to these transformations (Elsholz, 2014; Klebl, 2015).

We emphasise the importance of gaining a deeper understanding of vocational education within a distinct context to facilitate informed decision making, enhance clarity in (comparative) research, and elucidate the limitations of each individual perspective. By focusing on the systematic, institutional, and functional levels, we conduct a streamlined analysis that uncovers specific synergies and disparities among three cases to ensure a comprehensive exploration of academic drifts within the Swiss vocational education system. We base this on the Cedefop (2020, pp. 30–31) analytical model described above and derive three areas of tension from it.

The three case analyses originate from three different projects of the authors. Methodologically, they are based on document analyses and the evaluation of register data (publicly available statistics). Thus, this article is not based on a standardised data corpus but on a comparative analysis of the results of these three projects. It is only through this multi-perspective approach that the individual cases can be related and their significance for the areas of tension of academic drift in the Swiss system can be identified.

The three cases are described briefly as follows:

*Case 1 – VET TT and academic drift:* A strong academic drift of VET TT has been evident in the past two decades in the sense of a tertiarisation of educational institutions (Ruoss & Imlig, 2023). The pedagogical training of VET teachers today takes place at universities. Nevertheless, this academic drift remains clearly limited in terms of the meaning of VET teacher qualifications. Such an academic drift within VET TT conflicts with an image of VET teacher

professionalism primarily combined with professional-technical knowledge and skills (see the centre of Figure 1).

*Case 2 – Shifting dynamics in PET:* With the transfer of colleges of higher education into UASs, a noticeable academic drift of professional education towards universities has taken place. This has resulted in the decreased relative importance of PET at the tertiary level, falling behind its main competitor – UASs – as well as traditional universities and universities of teacher education (Kriesi et al., 2022). The orientation of PET and UASs towards traditional universities will likely continue, followed by additional titles in PET, mimicking university titles, and the introduction of a third cycle at UASs (see the upper left part of Figure 1).

*Case 3 – Academic drifts in CET:* In the last two decades, universities have formalised CET programmes and positioned them in the ‘education market’ (Weil & Eugster, 2019). These academic drifts of CET at universities show the competing forces of opening formal programmes of higher education by means of CET and, at the same time, formalising structures and qualifications, which keep access and permeability limited (see the upper right part of Figure 1).

As demonstrated in the aforementioned three cases, academic drifts should not be understood as a homogeneous development; rather, they create tensions and asynchronies. In this article, we conclude with these tensions and asynchronies as a potential for balancing academic drifts as external and internal tertiarisation, as formalisation of qualifications and competences, and as economic and pedagogical approaches for education because only with appropriate contextualisation can we genuinely discuss the aims, developments, and impacts of academic drifts in vocational education.

## Contextualising vocational education in Switzerland

In the examination of academic drifts as an international phenomenon, the Swiss case holds significant relevance from a comparative standpoint; it is widely regarded as prominently illustrating a robust dual VET system that has successfully resisted the global trend towards academisation. The Swiss dual VET system receives worldwide attention from countries that would like to strengthen their respective (dual) vocational education systems to experience a lower level of youth unemployment (Kriesi et al., 2022).

Figure 1 locates our three cases of academic drifts in the stratified Swiss education system.

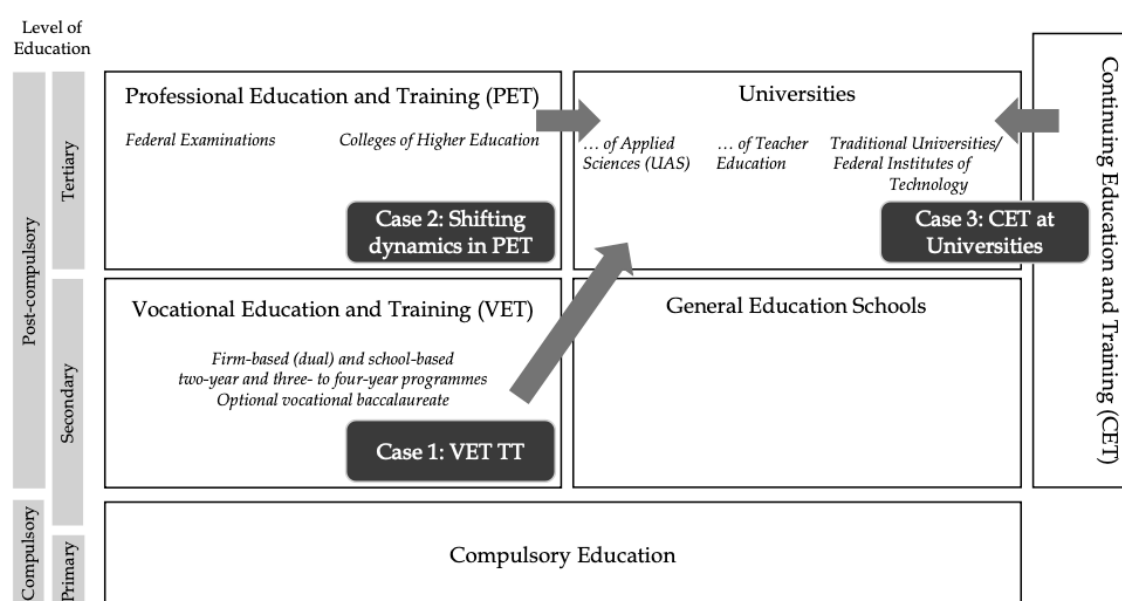


Figure 1. Three cases of academic drifts located on a sketch of the Swiss education system (source: own elaboration; SERI, 2019).

After completing six years of primary school and three years of lower secondary school subdivided into several tracks (compulsory education), most young learners enter post-compulsory education at the upper secondary level (SCRE, 2023, p. 113; see Figure 1). Approximately two-thirds of students engage in dual VET within companies, while 7% are enrolled in a school-based VET programme (SERI, 2023). The remaining third selects from general education pathways offered at baccalaureate schools, which confer the academic baccalaureate, or specialised schools providing both the specialised school certificate and specialised baccalaureate. Additionally, proficient apprentices enrolled in three- and four-year VET programmes leading to a Federal VET Diploma may pursue a Federal Vocational Baccalaureate (FVB). This qualification integrates VET with broader general education at vocational baccalaureate schools. At the tertiary level, there are different education pathways in the form of PET, UASs, universities of teacher education, and traditional universities along with federal institutes of technology.

In summary, as Figure 1 shows, Switzerland has a vertically and horizontally stratified education system. The educational levels can be distinguished vertically in compulsory and post-compulsory – or primary, secondary, and tertiary – education, as can be seen on the left. At the secondary and tertiary levels, the formal education pathways are subdivided horizontally into VET and PET (left centre) and general and university education (right centre). Alongside

these, there are non-formal education and informal education, indicated by CET on the right side of Figure 1.

The three cases can be contextualised in the Swiss education system: Between VET at the secondary level and university education is *VET TT*. There are diverse pathways to becoming a VET teacher, whether through a vocational or an academic route. In any case, there is a clear distinction between subject-specific and didactic-pedagogical knowledge. Subject-specific knowledge can be acquired through all tracks, depending on the subject. In the 'Swiss model', it is essential to note that all VET teachers typically teach for up to five years before acquiring didactic-pedagogical training and attaining qualification as permanent VET teachers. To secure a permanent full-time teaching position after this initial period, a didactic-pedagogical qualification comprising 60 European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS) credits must be obtained from a university of teacher education, with different criteria applying for FVB teachers and part-time instructors (Barabasch & Fischer, 2019; Ruoss & Imlig, 2023).

Individuals holding a Federal VET Diploma but neither acquiring the FVB nor becoming a VET teacher can opt for *PET*. This can take the form of federal examinations or can be pursued at colleges of higher education. The latter option permits direct entry for graduates possessing a specialised school certificate. UASs welcome holders of the FVB or individuals with an academic or specialised baccalaureate, provided they demonstrate a certain level of work experience. Access to traditional universities is restricted to those with an academic baccalaureate, while universities of teacher education require either an academic or specialised baccalaureate.<sup>1</sup>

*CET* is positioned outside the formal education system as non-formal and informal education (SERI, 2019; see Figure 1). Various providers – also universities – offer non-formal CET programmes. However, the main part of CET can be considered as existing outside universities, being offered as non-formal programmes or perceived as informal education, such as in workplaces. Continuing education is part of the four service areas of universities – together with study programmes, research, and services – and has become part of the systematic and institutional frameworks (Schweizerische Eidgenossenschaft, 2019).

## VET TT and academic drift

One aspect often overlooked in a systemic analysis of VET is the preparation and certification of 'VET professionals' who train and teach apprentices. This encompasses vocational trainers within companies and teachers at vocational schools, on which we concentrate specifically here. As our first case, therefore, we look at teacher training and academic drifts in VET. The (dual) VET system

primarily emphasises a substantial amount of practical experience, with apprentices typically spending three to four days a week engaging in productive activities within companies under the guidance of their vocational trainers. While minimum pedagogical qualification standards of at least 40 hours are required for these trainers, they do not align with any discernible academic drift. However, the scenario differs somewhat for teachers at vocational schools.

### **Reform of VET TT**

Since the revision of the VET Act in 2004, there has been a significant elevation in the qualification requirements for teachers at VET schools (Barabasch & Fischer, 2019; Gonon, 2019). Consequently, at a formal level, we can observe an academic drift within VET TT over the past two decades. As a result of this revision of the VET Act, dual VET in Switzerland experienced a phase characterised by questions regarding the coordination and recognition of diplomas for VET teachers. Simultaneously, new providers emerged in VET TT, introducing competition for existing degree programmes. Since the 1990s, former teacher colleges (for compulsory schools) situated at the upper secondary level have transitioned into universities of teacher education. VET TT followed this development about a decade later with the VET Act revision.

In contrast to the situation before the revision of the VET Act in 2004, wherein the Swiss Federal University for Vocational Education and Training had predominantly overseen the qualification of teachers at vocational schools since 1972 (Baumeler, 2021; Straumann, 1997), numerous new programmes have been established in various universities of teacher education. At the same time, the number of available study places to become a VET teacher has increased. This proliferation of training programmes at diverse universities of teacher education has been perceived as competition, sparking concerns about a decline in performance standards, a phenomenon colloquially termed a 'race to the bottom' (Caduff, 2010). However, with the transformation of former teacher colleges into universities of teacher education, the adaptation of VET TT after the revision of the VET Act in 2004 and, therefore, the recognition of their diplomas and their adherence to the Bologna standards (modularity of training and the allocation of ECTS points) were eventually ensured.

Viewed through the lens of institutional development over the past two decades, VET TT can be said to demonstrate an academic drift. Since 2004, training has been regulated by national framework curricula and offered by universities of teacher education, which compete for programmes and students. However, if we look at the qualifications of the VET teachers currently engaged in initial VET schools, a different picture emerges.

### Qualification level of VET teachers

A distinctive aspect of the qualification requirements for VET teachers lies in the possibility of catching up on missing qualifications up to five years after entering the teaching profession (Barabasch & Fischer, 2019). Most universities of teacher education even define an active teaching position as an entry requirement for their study programmes. The didactic reason for this model is, on the one hand, the direct application of theoretical knowledge learned in practice. On the other hand, this model is based on a market rationale: teacher training programmes aim to admit only those who have already demonstrated success in the job market rather than training teachers 'in reserve'. This approach structurally limits the potential for academic drift among VET teaching staff and aligns with market-orientated rationality. VET teachers' expertise is primarily associated with professional-technical knowledge and skills, to which pedagogy is subordinate.

Two key observations illustrate the preceding rationality, which we briefly discuss: 1) the subsequent qualification of teachers who no longer meet all requirements after the revision of the VET Act in 2004, and 2) the current empirical landscape regarding the qualification of VET teachers.

- 1) In November 2010 the first and only study programme in Switzerland was launched with the aim of establishing a specific retrospective qualification for existing VET teachers (Bühler, 2017). This initiative was undertaken on behalf of the federal government to elevate teachers at vocational schools to the level of qualification in vocational education prescribed since 2004. A survey commissioned for this purpose identified a need for over 1,300 teachers not adequately qualified in German-speaking Switzerland (Zufferey et al., 2011). As part of this initiative, 213 teachers were ultimately requalified between 2010 and 2014. However, in relation to the identified need in German-speaking Switzerland alone, this qualification effort reached only a comparatively small proportion of the target group (213 out of about 1,300, or 16%).

How has the situation developed in the meantime, and what does it look like today?

- 2) A corresponding cohort analysis has been carried out recently for the canton of Zurich, which has the most VET schools and apprentices (Ruoss & Imlig, 2023). As part of this analysis, the qualification status and development of over 7,500 VET teachers at 80 VET schools were evaluated. The findings reveal that approximately 40% of all active VET teachers still require further qualifications. This indicates that in the canton of Zurich alone, significantly more teachers at VET schools are still not sufficiently qualified compared to what was assumed in the context of the post-



qualification measures launched in 2010. For teachers with less than five years' teaching experience, this qualification requirement is inherent in the system and is therefore expected. However, it is surprising that approximately 83% of these new teachers fail to acquire the necessary qualifications within this initial five-year period. Moreover, 56% of all teachers who commenced teaching in 2014 were no longer employed at vocational schools within the canton five years later. This suggests that only a small fraction of new VET teachers pursue teacher training programmes and obtain the requisite teaching diplomas, and it indicates that teaching in VET is only a short-term activity that people engage in while pursuing a different career. This also means that around 30% of VET teachers who have been in the profession for more than five years are still not sufficiently qualified. Although empirical evidence is lacking, it is reasonable to assume that there are limited incentives and minimal pressure driving teachers towards the pursuit of academic qualification, as required by law. This observation raises concerns that the market-orientated rationality may be undermining legal mandates.

#### **VET TT between academic drift and market rationale**

In summary, the role of academic drift in VET TT within the Swiss context can be pictured as follows: The Swiss model of VET TT is characterised by an academisation of the few and by a workforce reservoir of the many. The extent of the academic drift appears to align with the rationale of the market for VET trainers. The 'Swiss model' is characterised by the possibility of teaching for a long period without full qualification and a high fluctuation of (partially) unqualified teachers. This flexibility serves to mitigate teacher shortages but does not necessarily enhance the quality of teaching or elevate the status of VET schools.

Looking ahead, the pace of academic development within VET TT appears to remain relatively moderate despite expectations of growth in apprenticeship training and vocational schools in the coming years in Zurich and in Switzerland as a whole (BFS, 2020; Imlig et al., 2021). In VET TT since 2004, qualification initiatives, institutional shifts, and market forces have significantly influenced the interpretation of academic drifts. If we compare the ideal-typical 'Swiss model' of VET TT with the actual status of qualification, we could speak of unfinished academisation on the ground. Empirically, the academic drift was effectively slowed down by the recruitment practices of the schools and the behaviours of the VET teachers.

## Shifting dynamics in PET

Our second case examines academic drifts in and around PET. This section addresses several key aspects. First, it addresses the past developments regarding the number of qualifications at the tertiary level, comparing the four main types to each other. The second and third points consider the previous introduction of UASs and the FVB. The fourth point provides an outlook on the titles of PET degrees and on awarding PhDs.

### Number of qualifications in tertiary education

As mentioned above, PET has lost its dominant position at the tertiary level compared to universities, while UASs have become more important, and the importance of traditional universities and universities of teacher education has remained stable. One measure of this trend is the number of qualifications at the tertiary level.<sup>2</sup> Although the absolute number of PET qualifications almost doubled (at a low level) between 2000 and 2010, it then grew only slightly until 2015 and has remained the same since then (BFS, 2022a). Importantly, the share of PET qualifications among all tertiary qualifications combined decreased from 60% in 2005 to 48% in 2019. On the contrary, the share of UAS qualifications almost doubled from 13% to 22% during the same period. Meanwhile, the share of traditional university and university of teacher education qualifications has remained relatively constant, at around 30%. Thus, while PET itself has not decreased, it has lost relative importance due to the expansion of all types of universities, particularly UASs (Kriesi et al., 2022).

The development would appear even less favourable for PET when considering foreign students who obtain their university entrance qualifications from general education schools abroad. They have been one of the primary, if not the single most important, driving forces for expansion at traditional universities. Their share of qualifications at universities has increased from 10–16% to 14–19% at the bachelor's level and has doubled from 12–15% to 28% at the master's level. However, their share in PET has remained at around 10% at both levels (bachelor's and master's), professional or equivalent (BFS, 2022a). Not even the COVID-19 pandemic could change this trend (BFS, 2022b).

According to official forecasts until 2029, the trends observed over the past two decades are expected to continue in the coming years, drawing a less favourable outlook for colleges of higher education (BFS, 2021). The academic drift described above has been facilitated by two key moments, which are explained in the following sections. A look at two ongoing debates then outlines future developments.

### **Introduction of UASs**

Until the mid-1990s, VET graduates had limited options for pursuing further education at the tertiary level, primarily through colleges of higher education as part of PET, alongside the Federal PET Diploma and Advanced Federal PET Diploma examinations (Wettstein et al., 2017, p. 60). However, VET graduates were given another opportunity for continuing and academic learning (BBT, 2009). With the introduction of the new UAS Act in 1995, Switzerland underwent major reform at the tertiary level. This political reform united 58 – but not all – colleges of higher education and turned them into seven UASs, thereby transitioning them from professional education to university education (Wettstein, 2020, pp. 44–45). Consequently, many UASs that were once part of PET are now clearly well-established parts of university education. Presently, there are nine publicly funded UASs and one private UAS, with around 78,000 students enrolled at the bachelor's and master's levels combined (SCRE, 2023, p. 256). This contrasts with 27 universities (of teacher education), with an approximate total of 155,000 students enrolled (SCRE, 2023, pp. 233, 294).

In the early years of UASs, graduates were awarded the title 'Engineer UAS', similar to the previous titles at colleges of higher education. Due to the integration of UASs into the Bologna Process, the first bachelor's programmes were introduced in 2005, followed by the master's programmes in 2008.

### **Introduction of the FVB as an 'ideal route' to UASs**

The development of UASs was significantly influenced by the decisive development at the upper secondary level. One crucial element of permeability between VET and tertiary education was the introduction of the FVB (Wettstein, 2020; Wettstein et al., 2017). The concept of the FVB has its roots in the 1960s (Criblez, 2001) and was designed to provide general education in addition to VET for high achievers (Wettstein et al., 2017, pp. 45–47). In Switzerland, it was officially implemented in 1993 (Wettstein, 2020, p. 16).

The FVB offers VET graduates direct access to UASs in the same field of study, eliminating the need for entrance exams. The number of FVB holders grew significantly in the two decades following the programme's introduction, stabilising at around 14,000 diplomas, accounting for 14% of all diplomas at the upper secondary level (BFS, 2021; Kriesi et al., 2022). Both types of FVB (alongside and after apprenticeship) have similar statistical importance, each responsible for 6% to 7% of all FVBs (Kriesi et al., 2022).

Data indicate that two-thirds of FVB holders seize the opportunity to transition from VET to universities, mainly to UASs (Trede et al., 2020, pp. 12–13). VET and FVB graduates remain the primary target group of UASs, although today there are also students with different backgrounds (SCRE, 2023, pp. 263–264). The established link between VET and UASs via the FVB has enhanced vertical and

horizontal permeability within the Swiss education system. This has facilitated an academic drift and has contributed to the growing significance of newly established UASs. It was one of the driving forces of the academic drift, apart from internationalisation trends and issues surrounding diploma recognition.

### **Outlook: Colleges of higher education awarding 'Professional Bachelor' and 'Professional Master' titles, UASs awarding PhDs**

PET in Switzerland continues to receive widespread support. With the last law reform, it has been embedded at the tertiary level, the same level as university education. However, PET currently finds itself somewhat overshadowed and under pressure due to competition with growing UASs. The relative importance of PET, as evidenced by the number of graduates, has been declining and is unlikely to see an immediate reversal. To bolster PET, there has been ongoing discourse for over a decade regarding the introduction of additional titles, such as 'Professional Bachelor' and 'Professional Master' (SBFI, 2023a; Wettstein et al., 2017, pp. 268–270). This initiative is in line with Germany's introduction of these titles in 2020 (Schneider et al., 2023). The aim of these additional titles is to enhance the visibility, reputation, and comparability of professional education in an increasingly internationalised Switzerland. This reflects a strong orientation of PET towards universities and can be considered an academic drift because it mimics the Bologna titles of universities. However, this commitment to PET regarding the strengthening of its profile is met with some controversy (Euler, 2024). The consultation in the Swiss Parliament cannot begin until 2025, with measures not expected to be implemented until 2026 (SBFI, 2023b).

Regarding UASs, there has been a recent trend indicating a notable shift away from PET and towards traditional universities. Both UASs and universities of teacher education are striving to obtain the authority to confer doctoral degrees, a privilege currently exclusive to traditional universities (FH Schweiz, 2024; SGL-SSFE, 2023). There have been collaborative projects between UASs and universities of teacher education offering a select few UAS graduates the opportunity to pursue a PhD. This incremental process suggests a gradual rather than immediate transition towards full academisation. The ability to grant PhDs would afford UASs and universities of teacher education the opportunity to narrow the reputation gap with traditional universities. Moreover, it would represent a significant departure from their origins as colleges of higher education. While the potential introduction of titles such as 'Professional Bachelor' and 'Professional Master' may enhance the profile of PET, it is unlikely that these titles can match the level of recognition associated with a 'Professional PhD'. Consequently, UASs would hold a considerable advantage over colleges of higher education in terms of prestige and academic standing.

In summary, PET has historically undergone phases of tertiarisation, particularly with the transfer of colleges of higher education to UASs. Nowadays, PET suffers in the competition with its 'relative' UASs because of their remarkable rise and academic drift. Both colleges of higher education and UASs represent the vocational and academic aspects of the education system as well as the market value of qualification, which in turn constitutes a significant area of tension.

### Academic drifts in CET at universities

In the third case, we examine academic drifts in CET, which is positioned outside the formal education system and encompasses non-formal and informal education (SCRE, 2023). At the same time, CET can be an institutional part of universities and therefore connected to the tertiary level of the education system. Our goal is to demonstrate that the mentioned aspects of tertiarisation, formalization, and marketisation also occur in CET at universities, and they are relevant for a multi-perspective picture of vocational education.

#### Internal and external tertiarisation

As mentioned earlier, we can distinguish between internal and external tertiarisation, with CET at universities being a very good example of the latter. CET programmes (not all CET activities) follow the outer tertiary structure of cycles, workload, ECTS points, Bologna Process, etc., which are characteristics of universities. While CET provided at universities is part of that institutional rationale, in terms of the education system, it is still outside the formal education system. Forneck (2011) stated the same for the newly founded UASs and universities of teacher education: founding was an act of external tertiarisation. Identifying fully as a university with its functions and staff is an act of internal tertiarisation, which takes much longer and involves processes and functions. For Switzerland, it could be affirmed that CET at universities has undergone some aspects of external tertiarisation, but not yet a systematisation towards initial higher education.

#### Formalisation and structuring of CET

All types of universities are broadening their offerings beyond traditional study programmes, such as bachelor's, master's and PhD programmes, to include non-formal CET programmes. These programmes, distinguished by titles such as Certificate of Advanced Studies (CAS), Diploma of Advanced Studies (DAS) and Master of Advanced Studies (MAS), are exclusively offered by universities and are recognised among them. They are institutionally and structurally part of the universities and refer to academic aspects of admission, curriculum and qualification. This relationship indicates a contradiction while widening conceptual

frameworks to encompass CET<sup>3</sup> and, at the same time, formalising CET in an academic way.

Admission to CET programmes typically necessitates a university degree or recognition of an equivalent qualification, initially at the master's level, although bachelor's degrees and *admission sur dossier* are increasingly accepted. The distinguishing characteristics of CAS, DAS, and MAS programmes lie in their specific workload requirements:

- CAS: programmes certified with a minimum of 10 credit points, with each 'ECTS credit' representing a workload of 25–30 hours.
- DAS: programmes with a workload equivalent to 30 credits, which are often a combination of several CASs.
- MAS and equivalent programmes: programmes with a workload of 60 credits. The intention is to eventually standardise extended CET degrees as MASs, with exceptions including the longer Master of Business Administration and Executive Master of Business Administration programmes (swissuniversities, 2020; Zimmermann, 2019).

CET at universities has been progressively formalising the CAS-DAS-MAS system. This is primarily due to the integration of ECTS into CET, although ECTS points from CET programmes typically cannot be credited towards a bachelor's, master's or PhD degree or vice versa. Therefore, there are two separate ways of accumulating credits: one for higher education and one for CET at universities. The structure with three cycles (CAS-DAS-MAS) mimics the internationally recognised university structure of bachelor's, master's, and PhD degrees. As a result, a formal programme such as the Master's in Higher Education programme may be easily confused with the non-formal Master of Advanced Studies in Continuing Education programme. Nevertheless, an MAS is not a graduate degree of universities and does not allow holders to continue with a PhD (unless they already graduated at university master's level).

The formalisation of CET at universities therefore represents a formal academic drift, such as with an ECTS credit system and three cycles of degrees and how this rationale supports the 'trade' in credits or continuing education as a service offering. CET at universities in Switzerland is institutionally and legally regulated, including specified teaching and instruction lessons, along with credits. Nevertheless, the regulations are far less than in the initial study programmes and follow different steering mechanisms. While universities typically adhere to institutional steering mechanisms within an interregional framework, CAS-DAS-MAS programmes are regulated internally by a programme board or the university board. This differs from PET programmes, which follow more structured accreditation processes at the national level. Thus, CET at universities

and PET also have tensions in terms of regulatory boundaries and market access, which in turn lead to different funding mechanisms and market rationales.

### **Market orientation or marketisation of CET**

In addition to the trend towards formalisation, the academic drifts of CET at universities can also be characterised by a shift towards marketisation. This transition emphasises market-orientated aspects as a rationale for education, positioning universities – including CET programmes – as more customer-orientated and competitive and using academic degrees as unique selling propositions. This aligns the higher education system with vocational education by offering programmes relevant to the workforce and leveraging work experience as a valuable resource for academia. However, this intensifies competition with the traditional fields of VET and PET.

While the CET market has historically also considered economic aspects alongside educational goals, in the Swiss context, education at the tertiary level is primarily regarded as a public good and is not driven by market forces. Nevertheless, the trend of offering CET at universities – which has increased with the foundation of UASs and universities of teacher education – has led to a stronger emphasis on financial considerations, exerting pressure for a market-orientated focus in university-based CET.

From the perspective of the formal education system, Weil and Eugster (2019) proposed an alternative approach. They suggested that CET at universities could serve as an opportunity to open higher education at universities and make it flexible. By integrating CET programmes into university settings, ‘academic drift’ could be utilised as a dissemination strategy for research findings into professionally relevant settings rather than only addressing formal aspects of external tertiarisation. The roles of informal and non-formal learning are emphasised in this context as instruments to open doors to traditionally exclusive programmes in higher education. Unlike university degree programmes, which are closely linked to formal learning settings within the education system, CET can involve non-university environments, such as companies, where informal learning plays a significant role (Molzberger, 2008). However, the discussions around formalisation and flexibilisation have not led to a clear position; both ‘drifts’ occur simultaneously, while the formalisation trends seem to have been dominant in the last decades (Gonon & Weil, 2021).

In summary, CET at universities has the potential to open academia and promote flexibility within the education system. However, the described processes of formalisation and marketisation may hinder the realisation of these potentials. The example of CET at universities adds the dimensions of formalisation and marketisation to the discourse on academic drifts.

## Areas of tension in academic drifts: A summary

Our exploration aimed to provide a comprehensive understanding of academic drifts within the Swiss (vocational) education system. Through an examination of various perspectives within the system, we have illustrated the presence of diverse and sometimes conflicting academic drifts across different educational domains.

In the following paragraphs, we identify three central areas of tension that encapsulate the complexities of academic drifts within vocational education, inspired by the findings outside the 'mainstream' perspectives on initial vocational education: first, external and internal academic drifts as tertiarisation; second, qualification and competence drifts as formalisation; and third, education and market forces as marketisation.

Nevertheless, the aforementioned areas of tension are, of course, related to the development of VET, as discussed in different ways (Bonoli & Eigenmann, 2021; Wettstein et al., 2017). When balanced, these tensions reflect the different and occasionally contradictory rationales inherent in discussions about academic drifts. It is crucial to recognise that these tendencies extend beyond the realm of VET and exert an influence over the broader educational landscape of vocational education, as indicated by the cases (VET TT, PET, and CET at universities).

### **Balancing external and internal academic drifts: Academic drifts as tertiarisation**

In the Swiss education system since the 2000s, there has been a continuous process of structural and institutional adjustments influenced not only by national but also European dynamics. This external tertiarisation of institutions and systems has permeated various aspects of the educational landscape, leading to the establishment of UASs and universities of teacher education, the tertiarisation of VET teacher education and the incorporation of CET structures within universities. Tertiarisation – integrating parts of the education system into the university or higher education rationale – could be seen as an important aspect of academic drifts. As we have stated, external tertiarisation in structures and institutions differs from internal tertiarisation, which would also include the functions, identity, and culture of an educational area. However, this dynamic has introduced tensions with internal tertiarisation, particularly evident in the disparate temporal dimensions experienced by VET teaching staff. Despite the tertiarisation of VET TT, we find an unfinished academisation on the ground, with a considerable number of teachers remaining partially unqualified. The external academic drift of structures conflicts here with notions of the professionalism of teachers in the VET sector. Additionally, the role of traditional 'academic' privileges is being questioned, as evidenced by the absence of doctoral



rights for UAs and universities of teacher education. The ongoing discourse surrounding the 'Professional Bachelor' title awarded in PET or the MAS degree in CET underscores efforts to adjust to external tertiarisation. Nonetheless, discrepancies emerge. While the CET sector also aligns with external tertiarisation, it fails to fully clarify its position within the education system, hindering seamless integration with university programmes.

### **Balancing qualification and competence dynamics: Academic drifts as formalisation**

Discussions at the macro and meso levels often overlook the question of competencies at various educational stages and the significance of understanding the capabilities of both learners and educators. Access to education typically follows a qualification logic, and although various methods of recognising prior learning (*admission sur dossier, validation des acquis de l'expérience*) aim to acknowledge informally or non-formally acquired competencies, permeability between PET, CET, and universities remains elusive (Baumeler et al., 2023; Maurer, 2023). This field of tension is connected to aspects of tertiarisation but focuses on the aspects of formalising qualifications. Formal recognition of degrees can be considered a second aspect of academic drifts, which, based on our analysis, seems to be crucial in institutional and political decision making.

The 'Swiss model' of VET TT can be understood as an implicit form of permeability; it allows access from different educational tracks and is itself categorised as continuing education rather than initial (higher) education. Nevertheless, this lack of seamless integration poses challenges for academic drift, potentially resulting in more academically orientated degrees and pathways. The role of academic competencies in this evolution, however, receives less attention in public discussions, which often lean towards emphasising vocational competencies and skills. A broader debate on professionalisation, professional development, and professionalism might yield more fruitful outcomes than a sole focus on academisation.

### **Balancing education and market forces: Academic drifts as marketisation**

Market forces cannot be overlooked in the discourse surrounding academic drifts. Rooted in the Bologna Process's vision of European countries becoming the most competitive knowledge-based societies, a global context of marketisation has emerged. The primary focus is on securing a strong position in the competition. At the same time, we find a trend towards market-orientated vocationalisation and employability within university curricula (Kern, 2020), which can be observed internationally as well (Boffo, 2019). VET TT programmes are clear examples of demand-orientated regulations for training places at universities. The market for VET teachers defines the supply and creates

competition for potential employees and VET teacher students. A more candid perspective on VET TT in Switzerland might frame it as an academisation of the few and a workforce reservoir of the many. While the societal value of degrees, exemplified by CET, can be effectively marketed, it reflects the institutional logic of marketisation. Competition is also evident in the realm of CET at universities, extending to research funds and teaching, influenced by funding criteria tied to student enrolment numbers. Considering marketisation, the academic drift aims for 'more value for money' in the international market and serves as a 'cash cow' locally for universities, fostering investments and selling academic degrees.

### Limitations and outlook

Our methodological approach towards academic drifts in vocational education in Switzerland has been primarily heuristic and exploratory. The three cases of VET TT, PET, and CET were not grounded in systematically comparable data collection methods. Instead, we recognise that the multifaceted nature of vocational education requires contextualisation and an awareness of the layers of argumentation. The presentation of our three cases of academic drifts could broaden the approach beyond initial VET and serve as a foundation for further research in vocational education.

Academic drifts inherently raise questions about society and social inequality. Understanding the extent to which social inequality is either reduced or reinforced through the education system requires methodical investigation. From the perspective of universities, these developments towards tertiarisation, formalization, and marketisation also have another side. The expansion of the entire higher education landscape with the formation of three different types of universities has created a competitive situation that is driving all types of universities to position themselves more strongly in terms of employability. This phenomenon should be taken into consideration when studying the complexity of academic drifts.

Beyond this, a focus on students' career paths could illuminate individual educational and vocational trajectories within the shifting landscapes, which could be another topic for further research. Thanks to panel studies that have been running since the Programme for International Student Assessment study, we are well informed about individual careers and transitions between school systems in Switzerland (see, for example, Gomensoro & Meyer, 2022). However, our knowledge is limited, for example, regarding the mobility of VET teachers or on CET.

Further investigation is warranted at the macro level to explore the political discourses and interests that drive accelerated or decelerated academic drifts in vocational education beyond VET. Understanding the roles of market rationales

and the statuses and responsibilities of stakeholders in vocational education is central to this investigation. Such drifts have historical roots, and they can hardly be understood without a theoretically embedded and empirically well-informed approach. Applying historical institutionalism to the process of academic drift has already been proven to be fruitful (Graf, 2017). After all, the question of what 'academic' is and how much 'general' or 'vocational' education it contains cannot be answered without reference to the temporal and spatial contexts.

## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> In theory, the Swiss education system is designed to facilitate both vertical and horizontal permeability across its levels and sectors: from upper secondary to tertiary education as well as between VET and general education or professional education and universities. However, in practice, not all available pathways are typically utilised (SERI, 2023, p. 7).
- <sup>2</sup> The focus lies only on native learners, excluding students who acquired their university entrance qualification at general education schools abroad, because they mainly come to Switzerland to study at traditional universities and UASs, and they do not know much about the alternatives that PET offers.
- <sup>3</sup> It is important to clarify that universities also provide shorter CET formats, including modules, courses, workshops, conferences, and other similar offerings. Additionally, CET at universities represents only one segment of continuing education, which can also be offered by other institutions. The example of CAS-DAS-MAS is used to demonstrate aspects of academic drifts.

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## Notes on contributors

**Jörg Neumann**, M.A., is a scientific collaborator at the Swiss Observatory for VET at the Swiss Federal University for Vocational Education and Training (SFUVET). His research interests are VET, educational trends, empirical methods, and statistics.

**Thomas Ruoss**, PhD, is senior researcher and head of the bachelor degree programme at the Swiss Federal University for Vocational Education and Training (SFUVET). His research interests lie in (vocational) educational history, educational policy analysis, and economics education.

**Markus Weil**, PhD, works as Head of the Department for Higher and Adult Education at the Zurich University of Teacher Education (PH Zurich). He is interested in continuing higher education, internationalisation as well as in didactics of university teaching and learning.

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