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Becoming a “Space Defector” or when Inequalities Meet Social Justice in Architectural Education

The Case of the Nantes School of Architecture

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This survey of architecture graduates of Nantes School of Architecture (ENSA Nantes) from 2015 to 2018 offers an analysis of their career paths, from access to studies to professional integration, in the light of their social origins. In fact, the recruitment process for architecture schools favors the admission of students from middle and upper socio-professional categories, who seem to benefit from a combination of cultural, economic and social capital, compared to the minority of underprivileged students admitted. Once these students have successfully entered the school, what strategies do they implement to succeed? To help us understand what happens before, during and after studies in terms of reproduction and distinction, we looked at the figure of the "defector", as a way of exploring what individuals and institutions "can" do to counter determinism. The analysis of their educational trajectories shows that these defectors are able to compensate for their socio-cultural gaps by multiplying their professional experience during their studies and by being coopted by teachers. Lastly, although the defectors succeed in finding employment in the short term, they nevertheless find themselves in a position of reproducing the canonical practice of architecture in the form of salaried employment, taking on few responsibilities.

Keywords: architectural education; graduates; defector; professional integration; professional trajectory

Introduction

This study follows on from a doctoral thesis on the professional socialisation of architecture students and graduates at ENSA Nantes (Horsch, 2021). While that study

focused on graduates from 2011 to 2014, this new survey, conducted among graduates from 2015 to 2018, analyses their professional integration in the light of their social origins. The way schools of architecture are recruiting students favours the admission from mainly middle and upper socio-professional categories¹ (SPC). Their overall capital (cultural, economic and social) seems to give them an advantage over the minority of working-class students admitted, as well as for admission to the schools as for professional integration. Thus, the quantitative analysis shows that the social inequalities taking place at admission seem to be replayed at professional integration. The system favours young architects from the so-called ‘privileged’ classes even though the school seemed to have ‘compensated’ for these inequalities in terms of academic performance of the various social categories surveyed².

What can schools of architecture do to prevent the reproduction of these inequalities, which seem to be at stake both at admission and graduation? Is social determinism so powerful that everything is played in advance? Can schools compensate for inequalities or do they even contribute to reproduce them? What levers can be used by the institution, by those who teach and those who study to counter determinism?

To understand what happens ‘outside’ and ‘inside’ school in terms of reproduction and distinction, we looked at the figure of the ‘defector’, in order to explore what individuals and institutions ‘can’ do to counter determinism. The trajectories of the

1 Indeed, the rate of students whose fathers belong to the higher socio-professional categories enrolled at ENSA Nantes in 2016 (50%) is thirty points higher than the national average (20%) (Horsch, 2021, p. 148).

2 In this respect, see parallel research on the acquisition of a specific spatial capital enabling an understanding of space and its translation into architectural and urban planning projects, a capital greatly valued by the institution (Horsch and Ouvrard, 2023).

defectors are to a large extent made possible by the school as an instrument of training in knowledge and know-how specific to architects (compensation for cultural capital) and more particularly by the fact that the school offers spaces for socialisation in the worlds of architecture (compensation for social capital). This contributes to the distinction of these defectors in relation to their social group of origin. In this way, the trajectories of the defectors provide us with information about the way in which specific forms of socialisation help to counter determinism, such as the network built on the school benches or interactions with teachers or architects during internships in architectural firms.

In addition, the trajectories of graduates from so-called 'advantaged' categories who perceive their professional integration as difficult document the way in which the institution may have displaced them. It has led them to adopt various more or less innovative and committed practices that may explain the perceived difficulty of professional integration. We temporarily refer to them as 'downgraded' graduates. We have identified four figures: the 'semi career changers', the 'career changers', the 'pioneers' and the 'dispassionate pragmatists'. Those figures will help us to understand how these profiles of young graduates may contribute to shifting the boundaries and to renewing the practice of architecture. However, the figures presented here should not be taken to imply that they represent a majority of graduates, since most of them work as salaried architects in architectural firms.

Our methodology is based on the analysis of 122 semi-structured interviews with graduates from the classes of 2015 to 2018, conducted in March 2021 as part of the

‘Worlds of Architecture’ course³. Those interviewed had graduated three to six years earlier. A questionnaire on geographical, educational and social origins, and their way to employment completes the survey⁴.

The analysis of the questionnaires, by crossing the social origins of the graduates and their perception of their professional integration, shows that social inequalities are replayed during professional integration. It may be an evidence of a ‘glass ceiling’ encountered by students from working-class backgrounds (chapter 1). We will then briefly present the four ‘downgraded’ profiles: graduates whose two parents belong to the favoured social classes and who perceive their integration as ‘difficult’ or ‘fairly difficult’. We shall see that the apparent difficulty of professional integration may, for some, conceal realities that enable them to establish more favourable working conditions in the longer term (chapter 2). At last, we will analyse the trajectories *outside* the quantitative results mentioned above: the graduates whose two parents come from disadvantaged backgrounds and who perceive their integration as ‘easy’ or ‘fairly easy’. We shall see how these defectors manage to compensate for their socio-cultural gaps (chapter 3). The different trajectories will be represented graphically: a time scale and the various key moments on the x-axis; their social background, the perception of their professional integration and their architectural practice, whether innovative or by reproduction, on the y-axis.

3 This course, co-coordinated by the authors, offers the opportunity to gain an insight into the positions and practices of architects through a collective survey of architects' careers taken out by 3rd year bachelor's degree students.

4 Unlike the questionnaire used for the survey of previous years, mentioned above, a supplementary question has been added on a scale of perception of professional integration (easy, fairly easy, neither easy nor difficult, fairly difficult to difficult).

1. When inequalities are replayed during professional integration

Few qualitative and quantitative surveys have been carried out to gain a better understanding of the career paths of architecture graduates and the conditions of their professional integration. In a qualitative survey carried out by Olivier Chadoin (1996), the author identified ‘ideal career paths’: the ‘traditional’ path of the male heir, with a good knowledge of the field and moving into independent practice as a *maître d’oeuvre*; the ‘heterodox path of necessary diversification’, reserved for women and men with little social capital and little knowledge of the field, obliging them to diversify through additional training.

The quantitative surveys carried out each year by the Department of Culture's Observatory of Education and Professional Integration provide information on the proportion of graduates working in the field of architecture, urban planning and built heritage⁵. Although the SPC of the head of the family is included in the information collected by the questionnaire sent to young graduates, it is not included in the summaries published by the Department. However, based on raw data compiled by the Department, it is possible to conclude that graduates from parents of higher social categories are more likely to succeed in completing their studies than those from working-class families⁶.

5 *L'insertion professionnelle des jeunes diplômés en architecture - Enquête sur les diplômés de l'enseignement supérieur Culture (DESC)*. These surveys are published on the Intranet of the Department of Culture.

6 We compared the distribution of the SPC of the heads of household of first year students from 2006 to 2012 with those of graduates from 2012 to 2018 (Horsch, 2021, table 210, appendix 7).

Previous work based on the graduates from 2011 to 2014 (Horsch, 2021, p. 469) had shown that graduates from upper classes are more geographically mobile than other social groups. They find their first job both through the labour market, of which they have mastered the codes of access, and through the relationships they have been able to forge with professionals they met during their graduate studies. They seek to reinforce their legitimacy on the labour market through specialised training and accreditation⁷. The vast majority of graduates from working class families are quickly integrated into the field. They focus on accreditation, but relatively few go on to specialisation courses, often offered in Parisian schools or universities, where they settle less than graduates from the favoured categories. On the basis of these quantitative data, we concluded that the transition to working life was egalitarian, although many biases could blur these outcomes and research should be continued by adopting a qualitative approach.

The present survey shows clearly that inequalities are replayed when it comes to the perception of the ease or difficulty of entering the labour market, introduced to the questionnaire submitted to the classes of 2015 to 2018. In fact, while 30% of the surveyed graduates perceive their professional integration as difficult or fairly difficult, 38% of them have a working class background and 25% a favoured background (difference of 13 points). Conversely, half (51%) of the surveyed felt that they had found it easy or fairly easy to enter the labour market, although upper class graduates (63%) are much more concerned than working class graduates (40%, difference of 23

7 The French architects' accreditation, *Habilitation à la Maîtrise d'œuvre en son Nom Propre* (HMONP), is a 6th year course which can be done as an apprenticeship or based on validation of prior experience. It enables graduates to bear the title of architect and to work as an independent professional, subject to registration with the French Architects' Association.

points).

Tab. 1. Difficulty/ease of professional integration perceived by graduates surveyed, according to the father's socio-professional category (%)

Socio-professional category of the father	Upper (B)	Middle	Lower (A)	Total	Difference (A-B)
Difficult, fairly difficult	25	30	38	30	+13
Neither difficult, nor easy	13	35	23	19	+10
Easy, fairly easy	63	36	40	51	-23
Total	100	100	100	100	
Number	64	17	40	121	

The differences are fairly similar for perceptions based on the mother's SPC. Working class graduates are 8 points less likely to perceive their integration as difficult or fairly difficult, and 20 points less likely to perceive it as easy or fairly easy. Graduates whose mothers belong to the middle class are the least likely to perceive their integration as difficult or fairly difficult and the most likely to perceive it as easy or fairly easy compared with other socio-professional classes. Indeed, we have shown that a great part of graduates have a father and/or mother who are secondary school teachers with a high level of cultural capital (Horsch, 2021, p. 211).

Tab. 2. Difficulty/ease of professional integration perceived by graduates surveyed, according to the mother's socio-professional category (%)

Socio-professional category of the mother	Upper (B)	Middle	Lower (A)	At home	Total	Difference (A-B)
Difficult, fairly difficult	32	19	40	33	30	+8
Neither difficult, nor easy	13	24	25	0	19	+12
Easy, fairly easy	55	56	35	67	51	-20
Total	100	100	100	100	100	
Number	38	41	32	9	120	

We should also emphasise the role of mothers in the specific cultural socialisation of children (Octobre, 2011). It requires to consider the instruction and socio-professional categories of the mothers in the same way as those of the fathers.

We should keep in mind that the assessing of the difficulty or ease of professional integration is a *perception*. It is based on the comparison of the graduates with their peers or with the social expectations that obtaining a degree in architecture implies. It would need to be objectivised by more protruding elements (salary and contractual conditions, opportunities for advancement, satisfaction with the position held, responsibilities, etc.). The trend is clear, however, and questions the role and resources available to the institution to counter these determinisms and support all students more equitably in their professional integration.

2. Graduates from privileged backgrounds: downgraded or pioneers?

As mentioned above, we propose to summarise the key characteristics of the different figures of graduates from the privileged classes, before taking a closer look at the ‘defector’ in the final chapter.

Among graduates from privileged backgrounds who perceive their integration as difficult or fairly difficult, the ‘semi career changers’ are the most numerous. Those graduates have turned away from the canonical practice of architecture and are moving towards salaried positions in other segments of the architectural worlds. They soon develop an interest in fields other than architectural project management, particularly urban planning. This interest is aroused or reinforced by social sciences courses during their architectural studies. The semi career changers describe them as triggering an awareness of other possible career paths. The post-study period is marked by vacillation

and a professional quest. The respondents became temporarily involved in associations, travelled or pursued other activities. Some try their hand in architectural firms or as freelance, but don't see themselves working there in the long term. Semi career changers end up enrolling in further training in a field that they appreciated at school and in which they feel they have a greater future. They see this as a 'necessary step'. They therefore apply for an additional diploma in various specialisations or advanced courses, often in the Paris region, at different stages in their career: either directly after initial training, or one or two years later. These courses are often organised on an apprenticeship basis or conclude with an internship, which of most lead to a first job, also in Paris or the Paris region.

The majority of 'career changers' come from working or intermediate classes. Here, we are considering the minority of career changers from the favoured categories who perceived their professional integration as 'difficult' or 'fairly difficult'. These are quite special cases, rather unclassifiable, and would merit analysis using a larger number of individuals. On completion of their architectural studies, some go straight on to training in a completely different sector without having attempted to work in an architectural firm. These may be graduates who wish to pursue a long-standing or nascent passion, or a vocation that has been thwarted by family pressure or self-censorship (Negroni, 2007). Other graduates retrain after a few years of professional experience. The abandonment of architectural practice is triggered by one or more bad experiences, difficult working conditions or a loss of meaning in daily practice. It is following the example of graduates of the *Grandes écoles* of management, studied by Le Gros (2020). Many retrained graduates carry the knowledge acquired during their architectural studies with them into their subsequent professional lives. What they learn in architecture school is seen as an education, not just for their future professional life, but as a solid foundation

for life itself, a new relationship with the world. In hindsight, the training would ultimately be seen as an apprenticeship in overcoming difficulties. Its core activity, planning, can be applied more broadly to all life projects.

The 'dispassionate-pragmatists' build their career path without any real strategy, out of opportunity or even avoidance. They are not passionate about their studies. Their commitment to courses and internships is partial: their student involvement is minimal and they have little experience prior to professional integration. The compulsory internship gives them the impression that there is a significant gap between what is taught at school and what they describe as the 'reality of the job' in the architectural firm. They are apprehensive about joining the workforce, and even deliberately delay it. The job search is proving difficult because these graduates have not built up a professional network. However, they do end up finding a job in an architectural firm and may accumulate a number of precarious working contracts. They feel inadequately prepared, may enjoy the work, but they are not passionate about it. In the end, it's 'just another job' that they don't necessarily plan to do for the rest of their lives. They don't follow up on current architectural events and clearly want to keep their professional and personal lives separate. Since they see themselves more as employees, they don't feel it's necessary to obtain the accreditation.

The 'pioneers' have built their careers by experimenting, both inside and outside the school. They claim a social approach of architecture in which the well-being of humans is a major concern. They turn their backs on salaried practice in architectural firms and wish to extend and apply the practices they identified during their studies as being more congruent with their convictions. They have started out working on renovation and furniture projects, as well as on small-scale community work for disadvantaged groups

that do not require them to be registered with the professional association. Those practices can lead to a form of precariousness, since this commitment is often voluntary and makes them perceive professional integration as 'difficult'. This entry into the profession gives young practitioners a long-term symbolic capital: they are noticed by the professional authorities, published in specialist journals, invited to give lectures, and even to join the teaching profession. However, they are quickly confronted with the regulatory framework that governs the profession. Practising under their own name and gaining access to certain commissions requires them to abide by the rules imposed by the profession. They eventually obtain their accreditation and establish a form of multi-positionality (Chadoin, 2007; Ouvrard, 2023), evolving between several positions : self-employed or associate, community work, and teaching.

3. The defectors: when inequalities are not replayed

We will analyse now the trajectories that stand *outside* of the quantitative results presented above: those of graduates whose two parents come from disadvantaged backgrounds and who perceive their integration as 'easy' or 'fairly easy'. As proof, no time elapsed between graduation and their first paid job for the majority of them.

A large majority have taken up the challenge of professional integration well before graduation. Some of them have adopted strategies, early during their studies, to increase the number of internships. Some express the need to discover 'the reality of the profession'. Others are afraid of not finding work at the end of their studies, either because of the repercussions of the economic crisis of the 2010s, or because of a lack of confidence in their abilities to be an architect. As they are obliged to earn money to finance their studies, they soon replace a 'student job' with a work placement in an architectural firm. For students from modest backgrounds, meeting professionals is a

way of compensating for their socio-cultural differences and lack of network, as described by this graduate from an immigrant background:

Well, the first thing I said to myself was that I don't come from a family with architects, so I didn't know any architects, well I only knew one and that was is, and I knew that I wasn't necessarily in the best position to get a first job, and I was really aware of that, because I could see that other friends had many contacts and that things were going really well for them. And I realised this especially for my first year internship, because I really struggled to find the internship, really really struggled, until finally I had a contact and that's how I got my placement.

In the Master's programme, while some students opt for a semester-long internship, others choose to work on an apprenticeship basis, spending one or two days a week in a firm and three or four days at school. These work experiences are often described as 'a trigger', where practical experience in a firm supplements studies at school to give students a glimpse of their future profession:

Well, I was aware of it [...] that's what I said to myself, I had to... I had to get a move on before I finished my studies. Basically, my objective was to have some experience in my bag when I finish school so that I can find a job more easily and also because I was under more pressure to find a job straight after school, I just couldn't afford not to work after graduation because I didn't have any money, I was living with my parents and I didn't want to end up living with them [laughs], so that was motivating.

Those graduates have in common that they found their first job through their internships and work placements, some in the firms they worked for as students, others through co-optation by a school teacher who also a manager of an architectural firm. 'It's all a question of networking', says one of the graduates interviewed. However, this way of finding employment is not unique to graduates from modest backgrounds. As we have shown, 23% of graduates from 2011 to 2014, across all socio-professional categories, were able to find their first job through internships and 14% through co-optation

(Horsch, 2021, p. 423):

I did another part-time internship with (name of the firm), so we became quite close [...], so in that last year [of studying] architecture I spent a few months with them, I got my diploma and they took me on straight away, so I stayed with them for a few months.

At the time of the interview, the vast majority of the defectors were on permanent contracts with architectural firms - most of them in Nantes - and were carrying out the 'classic' tasks of project management: architectural design, technical drawing, construction supervision. Thus, they reproduce as employees the canonical activities of architects that some of their (project) teachers have set up as a model. It is striking that these graduates all work in firms with a certain regional or even national reputation, who have won various architectural prizes and are regularly published in specialist journals. But the responsibilities borne by young professionals in these renowned firms seem rather limited. One graduate admits to 'going round in circles', while another says she has very little design autonomy.

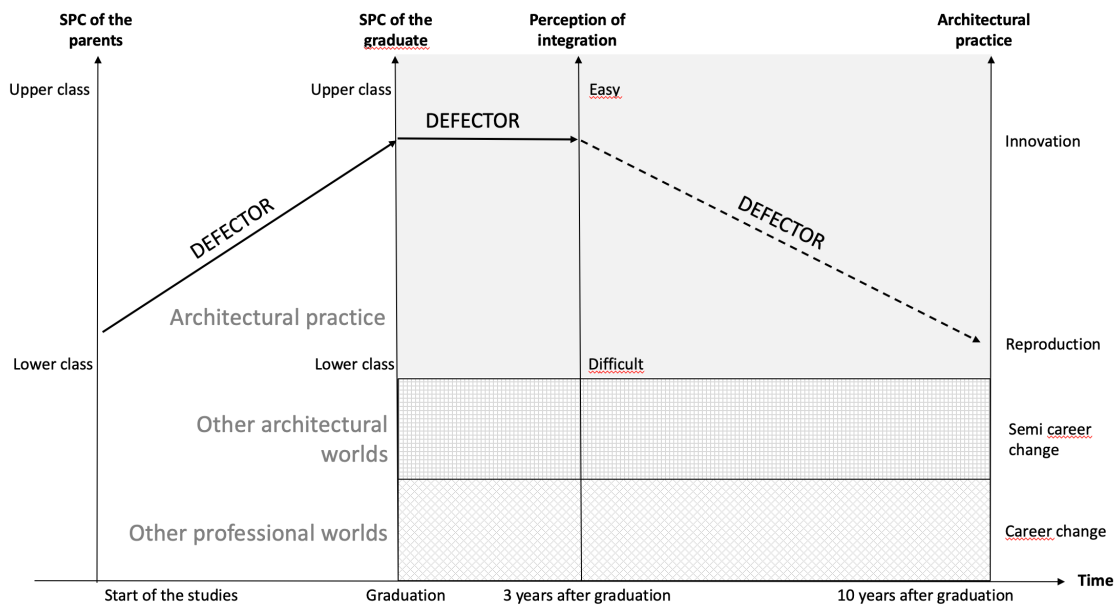
Our bosses, really, they're the ones who reserve themselves the design and... the architectural vision of the firm, it's them. And we're not going to copy their drawings either, but we're going to follow them, we're going to work very closely with them. And they're the ones who'll give us the guidelines, well... the main concepts, the main lines, we'll, it's almost never me or more experienced colleagues. Designing on our own... it's very, very rare.

At this stage, none of the graduates had taken any specialised training - unlike graduates from higher social categories. Some have obtained their accreditation, which they see as the end point of their architectural training. But they do not have any concrete plans to set up their own firm: 'I wanted it to be over, I wanted school to be over'; others wanted to 'get rid of it'. At the time of the interview, none of the defectors were registered

architects⁸. Their professional projection seems rather ambiguous, even contradictory, as if they were torn between a relatively comfortable salaried employment and the ideal of a self-employed architect or partner, like many of their project teachers at school.

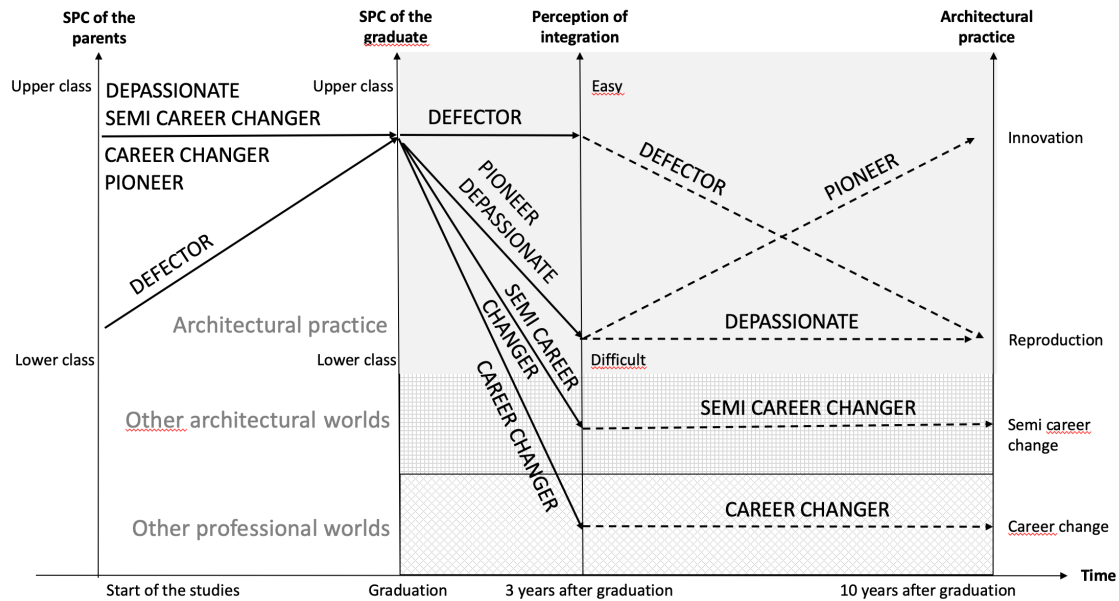
Virtually all of them have a positive relationship with their studies. ‘With hindsight, [...] studying is really about opening your mind and learning about architecture, and in fact all the stuff that's a bit boring, much more down-to-earth professional stuff, well, you learn it later in the firm and it works out really well’.

Fig. 1 : Trajectory scheme of the defectors



8 One of the graduates registered with the professional association at the beginning of 2022 (i.e. seven years after obtaining her diploma and three years after her accreditation) and is practising under her own name. However, she works in a relatively unglamorous segment: interior design and individual homes.

Fig. 2 : Trajectory schemes of all figures



Discussion

The notion of ‘downgrading’ that we introduced to describe the careers of graduates from advantaged socio-professional backgrounds who perceived their integration as ‘difficult’ needs to be weighed, as it conceals several realities. For the semi career changers, it reflects a search for professional interest in which the traditional practice of architecture is not seen as fulfilling. However, they build their career on the foundations of their initial training, while capitalising on additional specialist training that ultimately leads to a smooth transition into working life. Pioneers aspire to defend the social values and public utility of architecture by questioning the neoliberal aspects of canonical practice. Their perceived difficulties stem from their refusal to submit to the professional rules established by the profession and their choice to experiment with other ways of doing architecture. Not just anyone can be a career changer or a pioneer. The capital acquired before and during their initial training enables the former to capitalise on complementary training and the latter to act as pioneers of new practices and defenders of social, political and/or ecological values. Despite their difficulties, they

have accumulated educational and symbolic capital that will stand them in good stead in the long term.

The dispassionate pragmatists reproduce or even undergo - as salaried employees and with limited responsibility - the canonical practice of architects. Their partial commitment to their studies and to their work runs the risk of downgrading them, even though their social origins and secondary socialisation in a prestigious higher education establishment predestined them to succeed and flourish. Ultimately, school has not been a framework conducive to a stimulating and fulfilling practice for them. The teaching methods have failed to meet their expectations and they have not found their place.

Even if the defectors succeed in entering the profession in the short term, they find themselves reproducing the canonical practice of architecture as employees, taking on few responsibilities. At this stage, their way of working does not contribute to a renewal of architectural practice. Being at the start of their careers, it is interesting to question whether the initial socio-cultural gaps are likely to re-emerge in the longer term. In this respect, women are particularly affected, as once they become mothers they have to make choices between their personal and professional lives. A survey of these graduates some ten years after graduation could provide interesting insights.

This work opens up a number of paths for further investigation, one of which is a survey of women's occupational integration. A quantitative analysis of the difficulty/ease of professional integration perceived by women compared with men - which we have chosen not to address here - confirms once again what we have already noted in our previous work (Horsch, 2021): women perceive a more difficult integration than men. What are the perceived and real reasons for this? One of our hypotheses is the supposed lack of legitimacy that leads to strategies to build on educational and professional

achivements.

A second path concerns ‘drop-outs’. This study analysed the trajectories of graduates. But what about those who abandon their studies at a more or less advanced stage? In this respect, an investigation of the link between social origins and dropping out could enlighten the role that school and teachers play in supporting students as they move towards professional life.

It should also be noted that the work presented here has the bias of a narrative built retrospectively by the graduates. It would be interesting to adapt the survey methodology to collect what the respondents think they are doing in the course of their trajectory *in itinere* and not *a posteriori*. This could be done through a series of *recurring* semi-structured interviews, i.e. once a year during their studies and the first years of their professional integration. That will make it possible to understand how representations are shaped as individuals become socialised into their future profession and how the institution can support them, ‘displace’ or even compensate for the socio-cultural gaps that exist beforehand.

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