This chapter builds upon the theoretical exploration of elites conducted in Chapter 2. The starting point for what follows in this and later chapters is the argument that business careers are the product of multiple 'structuring structures' and the capacity of individuals, as practical strategists, to master the rules of the corporate game. We eschew any form of determinism. Neither in France nor in the UK is it possible to predict whether someone at an early stage in life will reach the top. There are simply too many variables to contend with, many relating to circumstances, and many others relating to personal qualities. This is not to say, however, that there are no observable regularities in recruitment to the elite. Numerous studies have shown that individuals from more privileged social backgrounds, with an elite education, are more likely to succeed than less privileged individuals. Yet, even so, there is a great diversity of experience. Many high flyers have shown a remarkable propensity to overcome adversity, and our own research adds weight to the evidence that business elites are regenerated through the recruitment of individuals who have started out in life from towards the lower end of the social spectrum.

The importance of education to the study of elites is twofold and to a degree paradoxical. On the one hand, education is widely acknowledged as one of the principal mechanisms for elite reproduction, as a powerful means by which families from the upper strata of society advantage their offspring. On the other hand, education is the main source of opportunity for those born into families lower down the social order, serving as a primary mechanism for personal capital accumulation and upward social
mobility. In this chapter, we examine this duality, which legitimises the rhetoric of meritocracy deployed by the ruling class while at the same time perpetuating the practices of social inequality and disadvantage. To this end, the chapter compares and contrasts the ways in which business elites are educated in France and Britain. It reflects on the historical development of education, particularly of elites, in the two countries, and examines the current situation. It considers previous studies of elite education in Britain and France, and their relevance today, examining some of their main conclusions in the light of findings from our own research.

We live in a socially stratified world. In both France and the UK, in all fields of activity, there is a hierarchy of positions running from the most dominant to the most subordinate. Education is no exception, and the very fact of its stratification makes it a key structuring structure, serving as a primary gateway to privileged business positions. It is through education that the recruitment of elites takes place, and that elites are replenished and renewed. In Britain, annual league tables published in broadsheet newspapers bear witness to the jockeying for position in which British universities are almost constantly engaged. Actual positions may vary, but invariably top of the list are Oxford and Cambridge, followed closely by University College London (UCL), Imperial College London (IC), the London School of Economics, London Business School (LBS) (the Oxbridge-London triangle as it is known), and widely esteemed provincial universities like Birmingham, Bristol, Durham, Edinburgh, Glasgow, Leeds, Manchester, St. Andrews and Warwick.

In France, the most prestigious establishments are the leading grandes écoles, identified by Bourdieu as ‘avenues to the highest social positions’. These include the Ecole Polytechnique, known as ‘X’, geared to grooming France’s captains of industry; the Ecole Normale Supérieure (ENS) in the rue d’Ulm, described as ‘the seedbed of France’s high intelligentsia’, which Bourdieu himself attended; and the Ecole Nationale d’Administration (ENA), which produces high civil servants and cabinet ministers, and which has arguably replaced the ENS as the most prestigious form of higher education in contemporary France. Other leading schools include the Institut d’Etudes Politiques de Paris (‘Sciences-Po’), the Ecole Centrale des Arts et Manufactures, and the engineering schools, the Ecole Nationale Supérieure des Mines de Paris and the Ecole Nationale Supérieure des Ponts et Chaussées. To these may be added the leading business schools, including the Ecole Supérieure des Sciences Economiques et Commerciales (ESSEC), the Ecole des Hautes Etudes Commerciales (HEC), and INSEAD (European Institute of Business Administration), which Marceau compares to Harvard. Of the Ecoles Supérieures de