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When holders of the *baccalauréat* return to education or training

Increasing numbers of young people who left school with the *baccalauréat* are returning to education or training in the first few years after their departure from the education system. This trend does not simply reflect a strategic withdrawal in the face of a difficult labour market situation. While not all the qualifications obtained by these young people are awarded by higher education institutions, they are almost always vocational in nature. Holders of the *baccalauréat* from working-class families or those with a vocational *baccalauréat* are less likely than the others to seek further qualifications.

qualifications
higher education
secondary education
education to work
transition cohort

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Is the decision to leave education becoming increasingly reversible in France? It is becoming increasingly common, particularly for the many young people who leave education with just the *baccalauréat*, to embark on a course of education or training leading to a qualification or even to obtain a degree after leaving education at the age of 18. For example, of the holders of the *baccalauréat* who left initial education in 2010, 30% returned to education or work-based training in the following three years. At the end of the 1990s, the share was 15%.

Despite the increasing numbers involved, these trends towards an early return to courses leading to qualifications have gone more or less undocumented in France. They have long been interpreted as a temporary withdrawal from the labour market in reaction to a difficult employment situation. However, the scale of the trend and its steady advance over the last two decades suggest that this explanation is no longer sufficient.

A quarter of the young people who left education with the *baccalauréat* in 2004 had obtained a new qualification by 2011

In 2004, more than 170,000 young people ended their initial education with just the *baccalauréat*,

either immediately after obtaining it or after dropping out of a higher education programme without any qualification. The 2004 *Génération* survey, carried out in 2011, provided an opportunity to measure not only the scale of the return to education but also the proportion of these young people who were obtaining new qualifications, having left education for the first time with just the *baccalauréat*. It transpired that, seven years after leaving initial education, 25% of them had obtained a new qualification.

This return to education or training usually starts early, within the first three years of leaving initial education, before becoming gradually less frequent. By 2011, the propensity of the 2004 cohort of holders of the *baccalauréat* to return to education was becoming very weak. Thus what is being observed is a certain degree of permeability between the end of education and the start of the working life rather than an increase in life-long learning.

Fewer than 60% of the new qualifications obtained by the 2004 cohort after their re-entry into education were awarded by higher education institutions. Slightly more than one fifth were at the same level as the *baccalauréat* – often vocational diplomas or vocational *baccalauréats* – and a similar proportion were at CAP-BEP level. Thus not all of the returners by any means were completing a course of higher education that had been broken off rather

VKW • Validation of knowledge acquired at work.

VKE • Validation of knowledge acquired through experience.

BEP • Brevet d'études professionnelles.

CAP • Certificat d'aptitude professionnelle. Lower level vocational qualifications obtained in secondary school.

AFPA • Association pour la formation professionnelle des adultes/Association for adult vocational training.

GRETA • Groupement d'établissements, a national network of public adult education and training centres.

prematurely. On the other hand, while these new qualifications were not always of a higher level than the *baccalauréat* they had already obtained in 2004, the vast majority of them were vocational in character and of much more immediate relevance to their working lives than if they had returned to academic study, even to complete a degree course.

In many cases, finally, this return to education or training seems to represent a change of direction of one kind or another. Barely 26% of the qualifications obtained after 2004 were in the same speciality as that of the last qualification obtained in initial education, or one similar to it. Health and social work specialisms are very popular, accounting for a quarter of all the qualifications obtained by holders of the *baccalauréat* after 2004. They are perceived as promising in terms of future employment opportunities and for some unemployed youngsters there may be funding available from a number of regional training schemes. Furthermore, entry is often selective, so that it sometimes takes time (for preparation or searching for information or financial support) before a place is obtained.

The trajectories of this population prior to returning to education are also characterised by a certain degree of heterogeneity. Almost three quarters of them had not experienced unemployment in the year preceding their re-entry into education, although only one in four had a permanent job. Thus their experience of the labour market frequently played a role in their decisions to make an early return to education or training. However, other factors also played a part, to varying degrees. Together, they form a patchwork

of toing and froing between strategies that had been envisioned since the end of initial education, more or less unexpected and belated changes of direction, straightforward delays in accessing the desired courses, the gradual formation of career plans, desires for career progression... all against a background of educational provision that varies in extent and accessibility at local level.

The types of courses leading to these new qualifications were also varied. One third of them involved a return to standard, full-time education, whether in school or at university. Another third consisted of work-based training programmes. This mode of access to qualifications seems to be a popular route for those seeking to complete their initial education. These two pathways – a return to conventional education and work-based training – are slightly more likely than the others to lead to higher education qualifications. Work-based training programmes attract proportionately more holders of vocational *baccalauréats*, although the other groups are also well represented. Besides these two major routes to qualifications, some of the qualifications were obtained at the end of courses provided by AFPA, GRETA or other training organisations or via less conventional routes, such as distance learning, evening classes, self-education etc. These accounted for a fifth of the qualifications acquired after 2004. The rest were obtained in employment situations (continuing training, validation of non-formal and informal learning, whether of knowledge acquired through experience (VKE) or of knowledge acquired at work (VKW), training concluded by mutual agreement on recruitment, etc.).

Return to education/training characterised by a certain degree of social selection

The holders of the various kinds of *baccalauréat* are not all represented to the same extent among the returners to education or training. Those with the general *baccalauréat*, most of whom had already started higher education before 2004, account for a much higher share than those with the technological *baccalauréat*, who in turn outnumber holders of the vocational *baccalauréat*. For each type of *baccalauréat*, the young people who left education immediately after obtaining it accounted for the highest share of those obtaining a new qualification, followed by those who left after the first or second year of a university degree course and then those who dropped out from 2-year post-bac courses (STS/IUT) (see Table 1). The only exceptions are the small number of holders of the vocational *baccalauréat* who dropped out of the first or second years of a degree course; they stand out because of the higher share of them (31%) obtaining qualifications after 2004.

The new qualifications obtained differ very widely in terms of the employment prospects they offered

Table 1 • The number of new qualifications obtained by young people leaving education with the *baccalauréat*

In 2004, they left initial education...	and their highest qualification was...	Total number	They obtained a new qualification between 2005 and 2011	making the total number of new qualifications...
...immediately after the <i>baccalauréat</i>	General <i>bac</i>	7,100	53 %	3,800
	Technological <i>bac</i>	23,100	40 %	9,200
	Vocational <i>bac</i>	66,800	12 %	8,000
Nbr./% of bac's holders leaving education		97,000	21.6 %	21,000
...drop-outs from 1st or 2nd year of university degree courses	General <i>bac</i>	30,100	41 %	12,200
	Technological <i>bac</i>	11,300	31 %	3,400
	Vocational <i>bac</i>	3,500	31 %	1,100
Nbr./% of university drop-outs		44,900	37.3 %	16,700
...drop-outs from STS or IUT	General <i>bac</i>	4,800	33 %	1,600
	Technological <i>bac</i>	15,200	23 %	3,500
	Vocational <i>bac</i>	8,600	9 %	700
Nbr./% of drop-outs from STS/IUT		28,600	20.4 %	5,800
Total		170,500	25.5 %	43,500

Field: all young people in the 2004 cohort leaving education with the *baccalauréat* as their highest qualification. Source: Céreq.

Interpretation: 7,100 young people left initial education in 2004 directly after obtaining their general *baccalauréat*. Of them, 53% obtained a new qualification before 2011, a total of 3,800 young people.

in 2011 and the profiles of those obtaining them. Four groups of qualifications can be identified, depending on whether or not they were awarded by higher education institutions and whether or not they were obtained through work-related training or a job.

While holders of the *baccalauréat* from modest backgrounds seem to have fewer opportunities than those from more favoured backgrounds to obtain qualifications after their initial education, the gap widens still further when it comes to higher education qualifications, all the more so if they are obtained through work-based training (or an employment situation) (see Table 2). These work-based training contracts are above all employment contracts and are highly prized. This is probably why various forms of selection are in force that tend to work to the disadvantage of young people from working-class backgrounds. These contracts maintain the social inequalities that exist in initial education. Finally, young women with the *baccalauréat* are significantly more likely than their male counterparts to have obtained a qualification after their initial education, regardless of what kind.

These disparities may simply come under the heading of structural effects, since the shares of young people from middle-class/managerial backgrounds and of those from working-class backgrounds, for example, differ considerably depending on the track or stream. However, *ceteris paribus* models confirm these differences. Social origin certainly continues to influence an individual's chances of obtaining a new higher education qualification, particularly through a work-based training scheme (or in connection with a job). And even one or more years after initial education, young women's general strong propensity to pursue higher education and to obtain qualifications does not falter.

While they are certainly a means of raising young people's educational levels, courses of higher education taken up after the initial exit from the education system, and particularly those involving

The *Génération 2004* survey in 2011 and the acquiring of new qualifications after initial education

The purpose of Céreq's *Génération 2004* survey is to analyse the school-to-work transitions of the 737,000 young people who left initial education in 2004 at all levels. This retrospective survey is built around a schedule that makes it possible to describe the paths individuals take after they leave education. In the 2011 wave, 12,400 individuals were contacted and asked specific questions about any qualifications they might have acquired after the end of their initial education.

Leaving initial education is defined as interrupting one's studies for the first time for at least one year. Although it constitutes an employment situation, an apprenticeship is part of initial education/training if it takes place immediately following the completion of secondary education. The so-called *contrats de professionnalisation*, which are for young people without qualifications or who have been unemployed for some time, are conventionally regarded as an interruption of education/training, even when they are taken up in the years following initial education. These contracts accounted for 6% of the 43,5000 new qualifications obtained by those leaving education with the *baccalauréat* in 2004.

work-based training, seem to perpetuate the processes of social and educational selection at work in initial education.

Qualifications obtained after 2004 improve employment prospects

The current upward trend in the level of the higher education qualifications being awarded may be suspected, at the population level at least, of contributing to degree inflation without actually improving young people's employment prospects. Nevertheless, those holders of the *baccalauréat* who obtained a higher education qualification after their initial education enjoyed considerably better employment conditions than those who did not obtain any further qualifications. The proportion of managerial or intermediate professional jobs increased from 34% for those with just the *baccalauréat* to 67% for those who obtained a higher education qualification through work-based training (or while employed). And that share went as high as 81% for those who obtained their qualifications via other routes (see Table 3). As was the case in initial education, ●●●

To access the detailed results of the study:

Quand les bacheliers reprennent des études. Qui, pourquoi, comment, quels effets sur l'insertion?, V. Mora, *Net.doc n°127*, november 2014.

Table 2 • After initial education, holders of the *baccalauréat* from working-class backgrounds are less likely to obtain tertiary-level qualifications than those from managerial/professional backgrounds (%)

	Young people with at least one working-class parent	Young people with at least one parent in a managerial job	Men	Women
No new qualification obtained after 2004	80	69	81	68
Tertiary-level qualification obtained after 2004 through work-based training or a job	5	10	6	8
Tertiary-level qualification obtained after 2004 unconnected with employment (return to regular education, AFPA, GRETA, evening classes etc.)	6	10	5	10
Secondary-level qualification obtained after 2004 through work-based training or a job	4	5	3	5
Secondary-level qualification obtained after 2004 unconnected with employment (return to regular education, AFPA, GRETA, evening classes etc.)	5	7	4	9
<i>All members of the 2004 cohort leaving education with the <i>baccalauréat</i></i>	100%	100%	100%	100%

Field: all young people in the 2004 cohort leaving education with the *baccalauréat* Source: Céreq
 Interpretation: of the 2004 cohort leaving education with the *baccalauréat*, 80% of those with at least one working-class parent did not obtain any new qualifications after their initial education
 NB : less than 2% of the young leaving education with the *baccalauréat* have one parent in a managerial job and one working-class parent.

●●● obtaining a higher education qualification following a return to education increases an individual's chances of gaining access to the most highly skilled jobs, although such access is not, of course, guaranteed.

Those who obtained a new secondary-level qualification seem to have fared less well in the labour market at the end of the seven-year observation period. However, certain structural effects may serve to qualify this negative observation. The young people in question had found the school-to-work transition more difficult from the outset. And faced with these difficulties, they spent time acquiring qualifications rather than directly improving their labour market position. Our modelling, which takes account of the particular profiles and trajectories of the young people obtaining these qualifications, gives grounds for thinking that, in reality and despite everything, they help those holding them significantly to improve their employment prospects, including their chances of finding permanent jobs. On the other hand, they are not enough to resolve their labour market problems, which often pre-existed their return to education. At first sight, the secondary-level qualifications obtained at the end of work-based training contracts (or via a job) do not appear to have much improved the employment conditions of those who obtained them. Once again, however, when these young people's characteristics and their initial forays into the labour market are taken into account, it becomes clear that, despite everything, their situation did improve. Thus the secondary-level qualifications obtained after 2004 have had a positive effect on individual trajectories, although they are not in themselves enough com-

pletely to resolve their initial employability problems.

Access to qualifications after an initial exit from the education system is still characterised by academic, social and gender inequalities, particularly when it comes to obtaining tertiary-level qualifications, and all the more so if they involve work-based training. For all that, and even if it is tertiary-level qualifications in particular that turn out to be promising in terms of career prospects, to have successfully returned to education and obtained a qualification certainly seems in all cases to have improved the employment situation of these holders of the baccalauréat.

Publicising and facilitating the possibility of returning to education in order to obtain further qualifications after one or more years in the labour market is a challenge to be set alongside the battle against early exit from higher education. If this return to education is also to contribute to the qualitative democratisation of higher education, prior consideration will also have to be given to, for example, the processes of self-selection, pupil guidance and the conditions under which work-based training courses are accessed in higher education, all of which are factors likely to perpetuate the various existing forms of segregation. Nevertheless, by whittling away at the determinism linking initial education and subsequent labour market trajectories in France, this permeability between the end of education and the start of the working life might help above all to free young people from a feeling of irreversibility when they are making their educational decisions or taking their first steps in the world of work.

Further reading

« Les retours aux études : une expression de l'éducation tout au long de la vie ? », P. Doray, P. Kamanzi, B. Laplante, M. Street, *Formation Emploi*, n° 120, octobre-décembre, 2012.

« Quitter l'université sans diplôme : quatre figures du décrochage étudiant », N. Beaupère, G. Boudesseul, *Bref*, n° 265, 2009.

« Autonomie et insertion des jeunes adultes, une comparaison France-Danemark », C. Van de Velde, *Horizons stratégiques* 2/2007 (n° 4), 2007.

80% au bac... et après ? Les enfants de la démocratisation scolaire, S. Beaud, Paris, La Découverte, 2002.



Tableau 3 • Chances of obtaining managerial and intermediate professional jobs transformed by obtaining tertiary-level qualifications (%)

	Unemployment rate in 2011	Share of permanent jobs in 2011	Share of managerial or intermediate professional jobs in 2011
No new qualification obtained after 2004	9,3	86	34
Tertiary-level qualification obtained after 2004 through work-based training or a job	9,7	89	67
Tertiary-level qualification obtained after 2004 unconnected with employment (return to regular education, AFPA, GRETA, evening classes etc.)	9,2	78	81
Secondary-level qualification obtained after 2004 through work-based training or a job	10,1	79	41
Secondary-level qualification obtained after 2004 unconnected with employment (return to regular education, AFPA, GRETA, evening classes etc.)	18,5	69	27

Field: all young people in the 2004 cohort leaving education with the baccalauréat. Source: Céreq

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