Training & Employment

Students who leave University without obtaining degrees are not all poor attenders. Many young people enrol at University after ruling out other options, and when they start off, they have to learn the job of being a student, which is not an easy task. Four types of "early leavers" were defined on the basis of two subjective criteria: the value students attach to University degrees and their ideas about their future transition to work. If these categories of students could be spotted using properly established and recognized criteria, it might be possible to reduce the drop-out rates.

Leaving University without a degree

Four types of early leavers

Most French school-leavers undergo higher education studies after passing the baccalauréat: according to the Ministry of National Education's records, 98% of those with a general baccalauréat, 78% of those with a technological baccalauréat and 23% of those with a vocational baccalauréat subsequently take long or short higher education paths. However, some of them leave University without obtaining degrees. Based on Céreq's latest "Generation" study, the drop-out rate from higher education amounted to 20% in 2004. Although these youths' trajectories naturally depend partly on factors such as the type of baccalauréat, age, gender and the field of study they choose at enrolment, it is hard to explain why they decide, or are obliged to drop out of their courses without obtaining the qualifications targeted. Further to the above quantitative surveys on this topic, a series of interviews were carried out on 60 early University leavers with a view to elucidating the internal logics underlying their pathways, in the light of their personal account of events.

The respondents' statements show that the image of early University leavers, who are often assumed to be students who fail to turn up at lectures and examinations, needs to be qualified in terms of their lifestyles, their approach to their studies and their representations. Although the least assiduous students may be spotted by their institutions as potential early leavers, other more hard-working students sometimes leave University without completing their degrees after becoming discouraged because their investment has not paid back. All the young adults questioned described the paths which led from enrolment to departure from University. Based on the results obtained, four categories of early leavers were defined, taking these ex-students' attitudes towards qualifications and their future transition to work as criteria.

University enrolment: a passive choice

Most of the youths questioned said they had taken it for granted that they would pursue their studies after the baccalauréat, and enrolling at University was their first choice. Only ten of the sixty respondents said they had been previously refused entry to other tracks, such as the BTS (the Higher Technician's Certificate). The same applied to one quarter of those included in the "Generation 2001" survey who left University without completing the general 2-year DEUG degree course. When asked to describe the decision-making process which led them to opt for University, nearly all the respondents showed a lack of knowledge about the options available in higher education and the corresponding specificities. The fact that they did not envisage the whole range of post-baccalauréat avenues suggests that a second rate choice was at work, where the University was perceived as the least expensive and most convenient study option. Those who were short of explanations said that enrolling for a first-level degree was "the most logical step" to take ("*after the bac, you go to the Fac*").

The respondents nevertheless claimed that enrolling at University was a personal decision, which no doubt attracted them because of the lack of constraints and the appeal of life on the campus. The various explanations given may have involved some retrospective ●●●

••• rationalisation: some said it was the obvious choice or safest one, or the one giving the widest range of opportunities, and those whose previous educational record hardly justified opting for long studies said it looked like an opportunity to be grasped. Some of them declared that they had chosen their field of study quite freely and had felt confident in their ability to succeed. They had not given much thought to their future projects, whether or not they really intended to obtain a University degree. But then, they had never had to defend their decision to enrol at University. Other young people explained that they had enrolled because they wanted to *"have a go"*, despite their teachers' and parents' warnings. Having had to repeat a year at school or being diverted towards the technological streams were not taken by these young people to constitute warning signals. They declared on the contrary that they had taken these events into account when opting for University studies. They seem to have been motivated by the challenge of catching up with life. After being barred from taking the general baccalauréat, they wanted to obtain a University degree all the same.

Young people's expectations and motivations about their studies were found to be extremely varied. They covered the whole range from highly specific to extremely vague: to obtain a degree, to train for a specific occupation, to find out what being at University was like, to give their projects time to mature.

Becoming a good student: decoding the rules

When these new students started off at University, their perception of the situation differed considerably: some of them said they had studied hard all the time and tended to deplore the lack of supervision, whereas others took advantage of what they took to be their free time to engage in the extra-curricular activities to which their newly acquired student status entitled them. The picture which emerged from their statements was never that of a model student. Their levels of involvement tended to fluctuate, in terms of attendance at lectures as well as the use of University libraries and the amount of reading and revision carried out. The most frequently expressed idea was that University students are free to approach their studies as they please, depending on their personal expectations and objectives.

Now the authors of many studies have stressed the importance of learning the explicit and implicit curricula which have to be mastered to be able to succeed at University: learning the job of being a student is the prerequisite to success. The respondents' statements show that some of them were completely unaware of this prerequisite.

This was certainly true of the respondents who claimed to have been good pupils during their secondary schooling. By consistently applying the scholastic approach at University, they cut themselves off from opportunities for "silent *socialisation*". While struggling to perform tedious exercises which felt like swatting for school exams, they failed to decode the Professors' instructions about how to handle what they had learned at lectures. They failed to grasp the new pedagogical rules and assessment criteria, which they described as unexpected obstacles, since they had been sure of their ability to learn. Being a good pupil, which used to be an advantage at school, turned out to be a disadvantage at University. They were at a loss to understand the reasons for this failure.

Those who enrolled at University rather half-heartedly suffered from feelings of exclusion which greatly reduced their chances of success from the start. Many of this group had obtained a technological or vocational baccalauréat, and blamed their failure on the resulting educational gap. They felt that their shortcomings and their "*lack of knowledge*" were responsible for their lack of success rather than the new learning requirements, their attendance rates or their grasp of the rules. Although these students were downgraded long before they gave up their University studies, they had nevertheless nourished the hope of catching up with the mainstream from which they had been excluded during their schooling. This hope soon began to recede, however, and they did not dare approach their lecturers or even older students for advice and support. As they put it, "*the upward step was too high*". Their repeated failures led them to see the hierarchy of qualifications in a new light. They started to praise the short professionalizing courses run at higher

education or even secondary level, since these courses seemed to have higher success rates and give those who succeed a passport for transition to work.

Another group of students who were failing their examinations used various strategies for catching up or bypassing the problem by making a change of orientation. By choosing specific options, finding ways and means of compensating for low marks, or applying for permission to pursue the course while re-sitting the examinations failed, they used all the means at their disposal for making the grade. In this case, they can be said to have mastered the job of being a student by learning to juggle with the compensatory strategies available, but these were all too often random and unsuitable strategies. The fact that these students at least tested these solutions suggests that success may not have been completely beyond their grasp.

While attempting to explain the reasons for their failure retrospectively, these youths were still focusing on their approach to their studies and comparing it with that of other students. How can good students be defined and by what yardstick should their success be measured? Should they obtain good marks in their main subjects or reach average thanks to optional courses? In addition, students are often obliged to make decisions which have more serious consequences than they have foreseen, such as whether they should repeat their first year or proceed to the second year, for example. Learning to master the job of being a student and how to succeed is an even more elusive task since these students were either not aware of its existence or they did not take it seriously.

Quitting University in a huff or in order to succeed elsewhere

The respondents' declared level of involvement in their studies sheds particularly interesting light on their decision to quit University. This outcome resulted more often from a gradual process of erosion of the links created at the establishment than from a sudden decision. Two major factors were found to be involved in this process: the students' attitudes to initial education and to the labour market. Some of them expressed the opinion that initial education is supposed to provide people with qualifications giving them access to employment; while others felt it had little value. Some of them had a definite picture of their future transition to work, while others had not looked so far ahead. Upon crossing these two factors, four categories of early University leavers were identified (see the table below).

Students in the first two categories had not given much thought to their transition to work, since the aim of obtaining a degree can have gating effects. Some of the ex-students who claimed to be hard workers but were disqualified because they had not mastered the modes of work and assessment and left University in a huff. Not only was their demise unexpected, but they lost their chances of entering the labour market on the strength of their qualifications. They had invested heavily in their studies, and only belatedly realized upon receiving their results that they were not properly equipped for the job of being a student. In the absence of any corrective mechanisms to help them improve their methods of work, they tended to revise their position. They decided to give up their studies not because they were tired of studying, but of failing. This decision was nevertheless systematically associated with the wish to return to University to work for a degree, despite the lack of common references with this institution, which they had ended up by distrusting.

■ The categories of *some typical* early University leavers	The value attached to qualifications	
	+	-
Planning ahead for transition to work —	**Hard workers** encountering unexpected difficulties (9 students out of 60)	**Drifters** (21 students out of 60)
Planning ahead for transition to work +	**The Rescued** subsequently enrolled for vocational training (13 students out of 60)	**Opportunists** hesitating between training and employment (17 students out of 60)

Those we have called "the Drifters", who did not compensate for their lack of occupational projects by investing in other studies, were in even greater difficulty. Not only did these students shift several times from one course of study to another, but they also tested the world of work, sometimes during their studies. Most of their activities were irregular, however. They seemed to feel they had been obliged to leave University, since they said they were no longer allowed to enrol. They were trying to find which path to take next and seemed to be postponing the moment of decision between various statuses (that of student *vs* employee, graduate *vs* non-graduate, short-term *vs* long-term employment, etc.). These young people's main problems seem to have been caused by their frequent changes of direction which they described as a process of trial and error.

The early leavers belonging to the other two categories did not regard University studies as a minimum requirement but as something they could live without. Their main concern was transition to work, which in some cases meant obtaining qualifications. Most of them had acquired some work experience, albeit of a very insecure kind. Those we have called "the Opportunists" said they had left University because of a job proposal. During their studies, they had been strongly engaged in occupational or associative activities which gave them plenty of opportunities to escape from their University. They expressed the opinion that social and occupational integration can be achieved without having to rely on qualifications. However, those who quickly joined the world of work paid the cost in terms of down-grading. They declared that they were satisfied for the time being with the insecure, part-time, poorly qualified jobs they had obtained as means of joining the world of work. This may have been a retrospective attempt to justify having giving up their studies.

Those we have called "the Rescued" were determined to obtain certification after leaving University, and often took CAP-BEP (vocational competence and vocational studies certificates) courses or those available at vocational baccalauréat level. Training for a job, preferably in the framework of an alternance training programme, was these ex-students' main objective. They too seem to have quit University because they were tired of failing. Most of them found more satisfactory responses to their expectations outside the educational system in which they had failed. Attractive alternatives were sometimes found via personal networks. Those in this category were less dependent than the hard workers on obtaining good marks, and seemed to seek for alternative solutions more reactively and autonomously. Céreq's "Generation 2004" survey showed in fact that 20% of the students who dropped out of higher education without obtaining degrees started undergoing education or training of other kinds during their first three years on the labour market.

A few years after dropping out of University, these young people ended up in a whole range of different situations. Some of them were only doing odd jobs, whereas others had achieved a fairly stable occupational and social status. Although dropping out of University was a fairly unexpected event in most cases, some of the respondents said there had been positive effects, whereas others still suffered from the stigma of exclusion. Those in the former group said their time at University had been a positive part of their lives which had helped them draw up new projects. Those in the latter group seem to find it harder to envisage finding alternative paths.

Profile-spotting might reduce the drop-out rates

Since quitting University usually involves a long and gradual process rather than resulting from a sudden, unexpected decision, it might be possible to take preventive measures by identifying the most highly exposed students and those whose profiles resemble those described above. Tutorship, active educational guidance and the "Plan licence", whereby students will benefit from personal supervision, were designed to deal with this situation, but these systems of support could certainly be improved on the lines described above. Special care will have to be taken, however, when defining the criteria to be used for identification purposes.

In the first place, a consensus will have to be reached at each University about these criteria, not only among the administrative and teaching staff, but also among those responsible for managing and studying student flows. University services responsible for information, labour market transition and guidance and/or agencies supporting labour market integration might be given special attributions on these lines. Secondly, the identification criteria adopted should relate to students' personal experience, while at the same time being compatible with large-scale data recording systems to ensure that they are of universal relevance. These criteria can be of the following six kinds: the type of difficulties encountered during the first semester, the type of absenteeism (recurrent or occasional, due to external constraints), the type of failure (in continuous assessments or end-of-semester exams), previous educational records, the existence of a training project, that of a career project, and the existence of alternative paths putting the drop-out process into perspective. Lastly, depending on the geographical region or the fields in which a University specializes, some of these criteria may seem more relevant than others, and they may have to be adapted accordingly. This adaptation will have non-negligible consequences, since it is liable to increase the population targeted three-fold, which would increase the cost of these preventive measures in similar proportions.

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Further reading

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