

# Training & Employment

CENTRE D'ETUDES ET DE RECHERCHES SUR LES QUALIFICATIONS  
A FRENCH NEWSLETTER FROM CEREQ AND ITS ASSOCIATED CENTRES

## New Directions for Vocational Education in France?

Seen from abroad, the French system of vocational training generally raises a certain number of questions, notably concerning the confused and inconsistent use of the terms "technical" (technique in French), "technological" (technologique) and "vocational" (professionnel) ; the importance attached to diplomas even though these do not lead to well-established recognition in the occupational field concerned; and, because of the crisis in youth employment, the proliferation of organisms involved and measures proposed. These different issues emerge as part of the same system when examined in the context of the educational policy choices of recent decades.

### VOCATIONAL EDUCATION INTEGRATED INTO THE INITIAL TRAINING SYSTEM

(See diagram on inside pages.)

#### Growing Integration

Since the 1960s, the **academic conversion of apprenticeships** [Prost 1981] has been carried out through a substitution of school-based apprenticeships for apprenticeships on the production site. The number of apprentices trained in the latter situation, within the framework of a specific work contract [see Table 1] had declined sharply, going from 233,000 in 1970-1971 to 167,000 in 1975-1976 [DEP 1993]. At present, the annual flow of apprentices has returned to a level close to that of 1970. Nonetheless, the number of apprentices has remained stable since 1980, representing slightly less than a third of the students in the vocational second cycle (first two years of higher education).

**Table 1: Number of Apprentices Relative to Students in Vocational Second Cycle**

(In thousands)

Years	1970-1971	1974-1975	1980-1981	1991-1992	index (*)
Apprentices	232.6	164	222.8	206.1	89
Students in Vocational Second Cycle	650.6	746.3	773.2	687.1	105
% apprentices	36	22	29	30	83

Source: DEP-MEN - (\*) Level 1992/level1971x100

In relation to the distinctions made in other countries, the French system can be characterised as one of **vocational education** (*education professionnelle*) in which school-based preparation for an occupational activity holds an important place. [See Table 2.]

**Table 2s Number of Students in Second-Cycle Vocational and Technical Education by Diploma in Preparation**

Diplomas	1985-1986	1991-1992	Fluctuation
3-year CAP	409,000	87,000	- 79%
2-year BEP and CAP	391,000	486,000	+ 24%
Vocational <i>baccalauréats</i>	1,300 (initial year)	114,000	-
Technicians diplomas	23,000	24,000	+ 5%
Technical <i>baccalauréats</i>	241,000	290,000	+ 20%

(By comparison, the number of students preparing for the general *baccalauréat* over the same period went from 490,000 to 707,000, representing an increase of 44 percent.)

Source: DEP-MEN

The French case illustrates a strong **integration** of general and vocational education. It manifests itself in the continuities established between the two, the internal fluidity of their respective tracks and the double purpose of the vocational diplomas (access to the labour market and prerequisite for further studies).

In terms of **continuities**, the clivage that can be observed in England, for example, between initial general education (corresponding to compulsory schooling) and



subsequent vocational education is practically non-existent. The trends towards prolonged studies eliminate all symbolic meaning for the threshold of sixteen years fixed by the legislators; it does not mark any statistically significant point of abandoning studies. At that age, the rate of school enrollment is 95 percent; at seventeen, it drops to 91 percent, and at eighteen, to 81 percent [DEP 1993].

Furthermore, the options for advancement within a track and passage from one track to another have multiplied to such an extent that, in principle, there is every possibility for internal fluidity within the system (the following figures are taken from DEP tables concerning student flows between 1991-1992 and 1992-1993):

- Passage from a general track to a vocational (27%) or technical (16%) track at the end of the first cycle (third form) and--to a lesser degree--after the fifth and second forms (less than 10% in each case);
- Passage from a vocational track to a technical track after the BEP through entry into an adaptation class (19%);
- Advancement within the vocational track, which has linked the CAP and BEP (23%) and developed further studies after these two diplomas through the creation of the vocational *baccalauréats* (28%).

A new intermingling is produced by access to higher education, with a fifth of general *baccalauréat*-holders going towards university diplomas in technology (DUTs) and higher technician diplomas (BTS), while a comparable proportion of technical *baccalauréat*-holders orient themselves towards the university [DEP-MEN 1993] and more than 10 percent of vocational *baccalauréat*-holders continue in higher technician sections (STs) [Eckert 1994];

Finally, the rate of continued studies among DUT-holders was 50 percent in 1990, and for BTS-holders, 30 percent [Dubois 1993].

### Organising Relations with the Social Partners

The relationship with representatives of the social partners falls within this trend towards integration. It occurs essentially through the **advisory occupational commissions** set up in 1972. These are branch-level bodies called upon to formulate an opinion on all projected changes or initiatives concerning vocational or technical diplomas. Each commission includes representatives of employers, employees and public administrations, plus qualified experts. The presidency and vice-presidency alternate between employers' and employees' representatives on a biennial basis. These commissions allow employers to express their opinions and transmit their needs for competences to those who make training decisions and provide a bridge between the educational and production systems. This is all the more true now that the **reference system of occupational activities**, introduced during the 1980s to define training programmes and curricula, has allowed an escape from the constraints of an academic expression of knowledge organised by disciplines.

Nonetheless, the school system still has the upper hand insofar as it imposes the structure of its diplomas and training paths. As a result, the advisory occupational commissions' ability to make proposals comes up against the following limits:

- They deal only with the vocational part of the training curricula but maintain no links with the general training that these curricula include;
- They analyse occupational competences in terms of technologies to be mastered rather than socialisation to be acquired, since the former are much more easily formalised in terms of knowledge that can be transmitted;
- The lack of information about their activities on the outside means that the creation of new tracks, the disappearance of old ones, or changes in the content of diplomas appear to be manifestations of upheaval rather than the expression of vitality.

### Changing Meaning over Time

Vocational education has gradually come to represent a haven for students whose profiles did not guarantee their success in general education:

- The CAP mobilises the concrete supports of apprenticeship allowing students to acquire the abstract ideas that are directly transmitted in the general tracks.
- The BEP, technician's *baccalauréat*, BTS, DUT and certification from the applied university institutes (*instituts universitaires professionnalisés*) are diplomas intended for students who, at the different stages of choosing options, did not have the possibilities or motivations to commit themselves to a long-term track.
- The vocational or technical tracks offer students who have failed in general education a path for continuing their studies or indeed, catching up for tracks that are socially more prestigious.

As a result, **vocational education has played an important, if not determining role in the development of schooling for young people and the battle against academic failure.** In addition, it has contributed to the spread of new forms of knowledge generated by the technological revolution of the late 1960s and the transformation of work tools that this entailed.

Thus, as long as validation through the labour market was able to counterbalance the tendencies of the educational system, a form of equilibrium was maintained. Indeed, the educational system was accused of functioning on the fractional distillation model, but the circumstances of working life permitted compensation for the inequalities of cultural capital, and the increasing numbers of bridges between tracks manifested a concern for egalitarianism that was deeply rooted in the national culture.

With the onset of the crisis, this fragile equilibrium was broken. The rupture took two forms:

- Orientation of the educational system towards **sharp competition** for the increasingly rare jobs available to young people, who represented 17 percent of the



3,981,000 hirees in 1973-1974, 14 percent of the 2,558,000 hirees in 1984-1985, and 13 percent of the 3,367,000 hirees in 1988-1989 [CEREQ, DEP, INSEE 1991]. The situation was one of constant deterioration, even when a resumption of hiring seemed to be on the horizon. This meant increasing competition for access to employment, between young people at different levels of training on the one hand and between young people and adults already on the labour market on the other. In the face of this proliferation of competition, students and their families reacted by extending the period of studies on the basis of the generally confirmed observation that the higher the diploma level, the greater the chances for entering the labour market. This resulted in a hierarchy of tracks and fields of specialisation that, by accentuating vocational education's mission to encourage the pursuit of studies, thus tended to "devotionalise" it.

• **The growing domination of general education over technical and vocational education.** With decreasing possibilities for employment, the assignment of students to vocational education, especially at the first stages of choosing options, was based more and more on an implicitly remedial model. In such a model, apprenticeships built on concrete supports provide a detour for coming back to the paths of abstract conceptual reasoning from the academic tradition. This led to an increased gap between a "normal" general education and a less prestigious vocational one considered as a means of "rescuing" students with academic problems. As a result, vocational training programmes were impelled to adopt the values and evaluation criteria of general training in order to benefit from the identical status, and this trend was encouraged by the transformation of the faculty [Tanguy 1991], composed of fewer and fewer people who had worked in the production system and increasing numbers of those coming from the training apparatus.

The rise of unemployment among young people with higher diploma levels brought an awareness of the infernal character of the spiral that was thus set off, tied to the recognition of a crisis in occupational socialisation.

## EDUCATION AND OCCUPATIONAL SOCIALISATION

### A Recent Question

The problem of youth employment has brought out two dimensions of the socialisation of young people who were previously integrated within a context of daily family life: the occupational transition and the building of occupational identity.

**The occupational transition** constitutes the passage between school and working life [Méhaut et al. 1987]. It represents the period when prior social codes, corresponding to those of school life, have been lost but those of their future work collective have not yet been acquired. Before the economic crisis, the fragility of this passage was compensated by the solidarity of immediate support networks that frequently intervened in vocational guidance and job-hunting for the neophyte. Family, marriage and neighbourhood ties offered paths of entry into the production system. When hiring stopped because of the crisis, this natural regulating process no longer guaranteed the integration of young people.

The building of **occupational identity** among young people raises the same kind of questions. During full employment, the process occurs naturally on the basis of models provided on the one hand by the family environment and the adolescent's different socialisation groups and, on the other, by the intermingling of generations that takes place within the company. The crisis situation blocks this dynamic, and the company has gradually forgotten about hiring young people. In 1975, those under thirty represented a third of the economically active population; in 1990 the proportion was less than one-quarter according to census reports.

### Different Institutional Responses

Initially, these problems were mainly dealt within the framework of continuing vocational training, and in particular, the inter-occupational agreements of 1983. In this way, a group of measures for the 16-25 age group was set up, combining hiring incentives and specific

### The Link Between Certification and Occupational Recognition

The official texts defining vocational diplomas specify the place that they are supposed to occupy in the production system. Thus, the university technology diploma "prepares for functions of technical and vocational management" (Decree n° 84-1004, 12 November 1984), the vocational *baccalauréat* "attests that its holders are capable of carrying out a highly skilled work activity" (Decree n° 86-379, 11 March 1986), while the higher technician's diploma "attests that its holders are capable of holding higher technicians' jobs" (Decree n° 86-496, 14 March 1986); the CAP "sanctions the recognition of sufficient vocational, technical and general competences for carrying out a skilled work activity" (Decree n° 87-852, 19 October 1987), and the BEP "attests to an occupational qualification . . . and sanctions the recognition of sufficient vocational, technical and general competences for carrying out one or several activities within

one occupational sector or a function common to several occupational sectors" (Decree n° 87-851, 19 October 1987). All of these references suggest the occupational position. The social reality is less rigid: those holding a . . . or BEP can certainly carry out a skilled work activity (they represented 48% of the skilled workers in 1990) or an unskilled work activity (26% of non-skilled workers held one of these diplomas at the same date); they can be technicians or supervisors (one-third are in this category) or company executives (nearly 10%). The same argument could be made for the diplomas cited above. The evaluation of the qualification follows rules defined by the social partners in the framework of the collective agreements; these may or may not refer to diplomas but pre-define the position of recruits in the classification grid and the production system.



training mechanisms. The latter took various forms generally involving alternating training under work contracts with goals ranging from familiarisation with the work environment to the acquisition of a qualification [Centre Inffo 1993], but also including successive modifications of the law on apprenticeship, including its recent extension to all vocational diplomas [*Liaisons sociales* 1993].

The Ministry of National Education has gradually set up a specific programme for youth labour-market entry (Dispositif d'Insertion des Jeunes de l'Éducation Nationale) which basically provides measures encouraging access to vocational diplomas that are complemented by local training programmes focussing on adaptation to employment. More important, it has introduced in-company training periods into the vocational *baccalauréat* programme. An average of sixteen weeks, distributed over the two years of training, are spent in the company; these are certified on equal footing with the instruction provided in the academic institution. The generally satisfactory results of this school-based alternating training have led to its extension to CAP training programmes.

### A Confusing Situation Nonetheless

There is thus an overlapping of mechanisms whose goals are fairly similar but whose institutional bases are hardly compatible. Indeed, it is possible to benefit from measures that are very similar in their ends, yet different in their means, the status accorded (students, trainees, employees) and the resulting certifications. At one time, this situation could be justified by the heterogeneity of the publics involved: it could rightly be assumed that adults in the process of reconversion and young people building occupational competences had neither the same expectations nor the same attitudes with regard to training. But the present period offers fewer and fewer opportunities to make such distinctions, and the majority of efforts focus on the 16-25 age group, whose training and work profiles defy traditional statistical categories. More broadly, this problem relates to that of the interface to be established between initial and continuing training. On another level, the distinction between different types of measures (depending on whether the goal is the acquisition of a diploma, access to a qualification recognised by the production system or labour-market entry) becomes increasingly difficult and is battered about by the ways in which they are used, sometimes determined by opportunity rather than real choice.

### Vocational Training in Search of Identity

It has become increasingly clear that the traditional form of fighting against inequality that was guaranteed by vocational education no longer works, and that credibility can only be established through the development of a new social bond. This implies redefining institutional relations between the educational system, the production system and the bodies responsible for the transition to working life so that with their support, the trainees succeed in entering the labour market and do not have to suffer the consequences of the contradictions that these relationships entail.

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