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Leaving school without diplomas, and educational inadequacy

According to the "Generation 2001" investigation carried out by the CEREQ (Centre for study and research into qualifications) (2005) on a sample of 10.000 young people who left the education system in 2001, **18% left without any diploma and 45% with only one diploma from secondary education**. Of the latter, 12% reached a level corresponding to one or two years of study after the baccalauréat, but without obtaining the diploma they had studied for. Only 37% of the sample left with a higher education diploma.

Measures tending to limit premature exit from the education system, together with the profile of the pupils mainly involved, have featured in much research. The governments of the OECD countries have, for more than 20 years, been sizing up the social, political and economic issue that is the professional future of these young people from often chaotic school or university backgrounds.

After our *Lettre d'information* on "Career and educational guidance policies" (March 2007), this month we will be mainly looking at these pupils who, no longer being obliged to continue schooling, stop their studies, by choice or through lack of motivation. But *"in an imperfect world school diplomas remain the surest path towards greater justice"* (Duru-Bellat, 2006) and for better social and professional integration.

Through French and international scientific literature, we will initially see how and why these pupils leave school or university; we will then look in detail at some approaches that are of assistance in obtaining diplomas. Lastly, we will tackle the question of what is at stake where success in higher education is concerned.

Warning to readers

- *Most of the links correspond to the relevant files in our bibliographic database, which includes complete references and, where applicable, access to the articles quoted (some offer free access and some require payment, depending on the article and the electronic subscription taken out by your institution);*
- You can inform us of your reactions to this Newsletter, suggest relevant themes or ask for more specific details by leaving a comment beneath the corresponding *post* in our blog: "Écrans de veille en éducation".

Preliminary remarks

In the interests of simplicity:
- we will use the term "*baccalauréat*" to indicate the diplomas that validate the end of secondary schooling;
- we will use the term "retention" to indicate incentives for high-school pupils and students to remain in their school or university in order to obtain a diploma;
- we will use the expression "rate of attrition" to indicate the dropout rate in higher education.

We would also like to point out that:
- the move "9th-10th grade" in the American school system corresponds to the move from the French *collège* to the *lycée* (age 15-16);
- the age up to which education is compulsory - 16 years in most countries - has just gone up to 18 years in the United Kingdom and the United States.

Some data

Measurement of school leaving without diplomas can be considered in various ways. Before making an international comparison, using the OECD or Eurydice data, for example, it is important to take a look at the variables used in France.
The indicators used in *Les chiffres de l'école* (2006) analyze two main sets of data: school-leaving without qualification and school-leaving without diploma.

Leaving the education system "without qualification" conventionally indicates dropping out of studies before the final year of preparation for the vocational training certificate (CAP) or the professional studies certificate (BEP), or just after the *collège*. School-leaving without qualification stabilized in the first half of the nineties, after having greatly decreased during the previ-

ous decades. In 2005 this figure concerns only 6 % of young people (50 000), as against 12.5% in 1985, 20% in 1975 and 33% in 1965.

According to the reference criteria of the Lisbon strategy, 17% of young people aged between 20 and 24 years are insufficiently trained in France. **This proportion continues to decrease, however: it was 23% in 1996 and more than 30% at the end of the seventies.**

The concept of leaving the education system "without diploma" is clearer to define: it concerns young people who stop their studies without obtaining the CAP, the BEP or the *baccalauréat*. In 2005, these "early leavers" accounted for 13 % of the 18 to 24 age group. "No diploma" does not, however, mean "no qualification" since more than half of school-leavers with no diploma have a qualification: for example, a school-leaver from the final year of the CAP who has not obtained this diploma nevertheless has a qualification, whereas a young person who gives up in the first year of the BEP after having passed the *Brevet des collèges* has no qualification but does have a diploma.
In 2005, only 4 % of young people stopped their studies without either diploma or qualification.

In secondary schools, in France

Analysis of these figures performed by the DEP (Assessment and Forecasting Department), in 2005 and 2006, confirms that the majority of these young "dropouts" had school difficulties, and come from underprivileged environments, often of foreign origin. The 2006 analysis proposes a battery of data on the correlations between diplomas and unemployment, and between diplomas and the time taken to find employment.

The recommendations which accompany this grim picture concern both upstream action, during the second cycle or in the *collège*, involving the families, and a good guidance policy at the end of the final year of *collège*. It will be seen later that other assessment and remedial tools can be implemented at later stages in life.

A more detailed analysis shows than access to the level of *baccalauréat* has moved through three main phases:
- slow growth, until the middle of the eighties: 10 % of the age group at the end of the fifties, 30 % in the mid seventies, and around 35 % at the beginning of the eighties;
- faster growth in the following years: as high as 71 % of the age group in 1994, with the creation of the professional *baccalauréat* and an inrush of an increasingly large number of young people into the final year of the *lycée*;
- stabilization at around 69 % (69.9 % in September 2004).

This rate of access depends on several factors such as the choice between a general /technological, and a professional school path at the end of the fourth year in *collège*, or pupils continuing after a BEP towards a professional *baccalauréat* (60% of young people are directed towards a general or technological cycle in the first year of the *lycée*, 40% towards a professional cycle in this same year). After a BEP or a CAP, approximately 50% of young people continue their studies in a technological or professional second year; and of these, 14% of pupils in the professional cycle drop out.

In higher education

More than 80.000 young people drop out of higher education without obtaining a diploma each year (more than 90.000 according to the 1998 generation survey of the CEREQ, a stable figure for the 2001 generation), or "10% of a generation, who are therefore struck by feelings of personal failure and placed in a tricky situation on the labour market" (Brax *et al*, 2007).

A recent *Note d'information* (Dethare, 2006) draws **an alarming portrait of dropouts without diplomas from the French higher education system**. While nine *baccalauréat*-holders out of ten in 2002 continued their studies, two of them stopped after one or two years of training. According to the figures of the CEREQ (1998 generation), out of 90,000 young people who left higher education without a diploma, 53,000 came from the DEUG (general university diploma after two years), 31,000 from the BTS (high-level technical diploma) and 6,000 from the DUT (university technology degree).

The type of *baccalauréat* obtained is not without impact on the path taken: 2/3 of professional *baccalauréat*-holders and 1/3 of technological *baccalauréat*-holders drop out, as against only 8% of those who hold a general *baccalauréat* (Endrizzi, 2007).

More than half a generation now has access to higher education, but a fifth of these young people will not leave the system with a diploma: this is the case for 11% of general *baccalauréat*-holders, 30% of technological baccalauréat-holders, and 61% of professional *baccalauréat*-holders. The highest dropout rate without diploma is to be found amongst those newly signed on to the STS (high-level technician course) (27%), particularly among professional *baccalauréat*-holders (52%). But there is also a very high dropout rate among technological or professional *baccalauréat*-holders signed up for the DEUG (or, as is now the case, for the *licence*, or first degree).

In OECD countries that have comparable data, on average 32% of young people who are old enough to obtain a higher education diploma successfully terminate A type training (first degree, master's degree, engineering diploma, etc), whereas this proportion is as much as 40% in Australia, in Finland, in Iceland and Poland, but does not exceed 20% in Germany, Austria and the Czech Republic. In France, this figure is 26.7%.

For B type diplomas (DUT, BTS, paramedical or social diplomas, etc), an average of 18.6% for France, Spain, Ireland, Japan, the United Kingdom and Switzerland can be observed, whereas the average for all OECD countries is only 9.3%.

The New Zealand minister of education publishes regular studies (Education Counts) on subjects to do with education. Concerning dropping out in higher education and relationships between school, employment and the economy, a recent report (February 2007) assesses "completion", i.e. access at the end of an academic cycle marked by obtaining a diploma. "Completion" is regarded as a very useful indicator for calculating educational effectiveness, as well as for judging the quality of the higher education (tertiary) system. In 2004, New Zealand was classified second after Iceland out of 24 OECD countries, with 48.4% of an age group likely to continue tertiary studies who obtained an A type diploma, and 20.1% a B type diploma. So on average 39% of students who begun studies actually obtained a diploma.
According to the American ministry, 70% of high-school pupils obtain their *baccalauréat*. Of these, 53% go to university and 35% of these obtain their diploma (Adelman, 2004).

Observed inequality

In France, although the objective of a rate of access to higher education diplomas of 50% has not yet been achieved overall, there is a great amount of variability between young people from underprivileged backgrounds and the others. The EPD studied the paths of pupils who entered the first year of the *collège* in 1989: between 54% and 72% of the children of teachers, executives, or intermediate occupations leave with a higher education diploma, as against only 21% of the children of unskilled workers. In this last social category, 30% of young people obtain neither CAP, nor BEP, nor *baccalauréat*.

Several EPD studies highlight stumbling blocks: the guidance given to young people from underprivileged backgrounds at the end of the final year of the *collège*, but also when they enter higher education, and the low success rate in higher education, in particular for technological *baccalauréat*-holders.

There seem to be two possible ways of improving access to the baccalauréat level:

- fight against dropouts after general or technological first or second *lycée* year (about 10.000 young people) or a professional second *lycée* year,
- direct more young holders of a BEP towards the professional *baccalauréat*, in particular through apprenticeship.

A further way would be to encourage lifelong training to allow those generations who have already left the education system to obtain a higher education diploma later on.

❑ And also

The Economic Surveys by OECD country, which generally devote a chapter to higher education and to failure / success rates.

Dropping out and inadequacy

In France, dropping out of the educational system without qualification each year concerns between 110.000 and 170.000 young people, depending on how this is calculated (Dubreuil *et al.*, 2005). For the authors, one of the major factors causing dropouts is the path chosen at the end of the final year of the *collège*, which, for weaker pupils, usually means choosing vocational training, at the *lycée* or in apprenticeship. In addition, systematic guidance into a general first *lycée* year also leads to a great many dropouts by pupils who do not wish to undertake a long secondary cycle with little professional benefit (see also Endrizzi, 2007).

In secondary education

Dubois-Dunilac & Macaire (2006), shed further light on the effects of changing ones educational path, which leads out of the education system and onto the job market: "It is when changing educational path that certain *baccalauréat*-holders leave the education system. **While almost all of them wished to continue higher education before obtaining the *baccalauréat*, close to one on ten enters the job market**". Analysis of the reasons why *baccalauréat*-holders change educational path sheds further light on the complexity of the project. Of the 8.000 general and technological *baccalauréat*-holders of the *Centre* region of France questioned, a quarter had their initial project refused. 71% changed project, 54% changed project and changed region, and 18% changed region. Technological *baccalauréat*-holders had their project refused proportionally more often, and more than one third of them turned to the job market (as against 13% for the general *baccalauréat*-holders).

In the United States, since secondary schools are obliged to announce graduation rates, researchers and politicians are taking more and more interest in pupils who leave the system without diplomas. A document published by the Institute of Education Sciences (IES) shows at what point first year pupils from public or private schools (*10th graders*) stop their schooling, data which are correlated with the number of "*course credits*" that they obtained (*Issue Brief*, Aprill 2007).

Similarly, Allensworth & Easton (2005) of the *Consortium on Chicago School Research* (CCSR), using a complex calculation of the number of credits compared to the time spent in school, assess whether pupils actually acquired the skills and knowledge corresponding to the discipline being studied. For example, a pupil is considered "on track" if he gets the average in at least ten subjects (five subjects per six-month period) and if he gets no more than one "F" in a so-called basic subject (English, maths, sciences, etc.).
This analysis highlights the correlation between the fact that a pupil fails his first year and the strong probability that he will not get his *baccalauréat*. Also, the authors stress how important the first year of the *lycée* is and warn parents and teachers to be especially vigilant to provide effective supervision.
Another interesting point shows that "average" pupils in all subjects are more likely to succeed than those who excel in one or two disciplines.
Lastly, the authors conclude how important the establishment effect is: the culture and context of the establishment, its capacity to motivate the pupils and to encourage them to persevere.

Why do pupils drop out? This is the question that Russel W. Rumberger raises in the book directed by Orfield (2004). He describes two conceptual frameworks which might explain why pupils leave the *lycée* prematurely: the framework of the individual and the framework of the institution, which includes factors related to the family and the educational community. The first framework looks at the pupil from the standpoint of his motivation and his perseverance in wanting to study.
The tendency to drop out is the product of three characteristics related to learning: lack of academic success (such as is measured by tests and marks), instability in the school environment (internal and external) and failure to acquire knowledge and skills (validated by successfully completed six-month periods and the diplomas obtained). The parents' level of education, their income, how the family is composed, the size of the school, the number of pupils in the class are all factors which can influence the pupil's academic perseverance. How the establishment is run, its culture and its climate contribute to the progressive withdrawal of the pupil if the leaders do not apply a policy of dropout risk measurement and prevention. Lastly, the author discusses the factors which impact the ability to obtain a diploma, such as ethnic origin.
He also notes that the process of dropping out is the fruit of several years of instability combined with the loss of motivation and the failure to validate skills.

Lisa Abrams & Walt Haney (in Orfield, 2004) work on the critical period of pupil dropout during the transition between 9th and 10th grade. Their work shows that the number of pupils of this age who drop out has tripled between 2001 and 2004. The authors deplore the impact of national assessment, the results of which have an impact on pupils' schooling, leading some to stop and encouraging others to persevere.

The states need support at federal level to boost graduation rates. In a report published jointly with the foundation *Jobs for the Future*, the *Center for American Progress* indicates that the graduation rate has not exceeded 70% for several decades; this is 50% or 55% for Hispanic and Afro-American young people. The social and economic repercussions are greater for those who do not have a diploma as they leave the *lycée*: they are half as likely to find employment, they obtain less promotion and cannot hope for adequate health insurance. The Center for American Progress wants Congress to play a key role in reducing the non-graduation rate by voting in the *Graduation Promise Act of 2007,* which would make it possible to set up the remedial strategies suggested by researchers (Steinberg *et al.*, 2006).

❑ And also

- Barton Paul E. (2006). « The Dropout Problem: Losing Ground ». *Educational Leadership*, vol. 63, n° 5, p. 14-18.
- Barton Paul E. (2005). *One-Third of a Nation: Rising Dropout Rates and Declining Opportunities*. Princeton: Educational Testing Service.

In higher education

In Canada, in spite of a very high rate of participation in post-secondary studies, Mylène Lambert, Klarka Zeman, Mary Allen & Patrick Bussière, in their investigation into young people in transition (2004), deplore the constant problem of dropping out during university studies. On the basis of the postulate that university studies are recognized as a key aspect determining the economic and social health of their country, they look at the reasons and the factors involved in dropping out and question the conditions of access and the level of perseverance of Canadian students.

As Marc Romainville points out, the authors think that young people who have a strong feeling of belonging to their school and who obtain good results at secondary school are more likely to continue their studies. Their work is based on an investigation into a panel of students who begun a cycle in 2001. 15% of the young people aged between 20 and 22 who had continued studies after secondary level gave them up without finishing their programme. In addition, young people who drop out of secondary studies before finishing them are more like those who did not begin studies than the other average students.

Moreover, the researchers found that commitment at university level can provide a good indication of the rate of retention or attrition. Consequently, certain universities have drawn up special programmes which might make it possible to increase the commitment of first-year students and, as a result, to improve the rate of retention, in particular by making use of tutors (older students), mentors (from the professors) or incentives to take part in the extra-curricular activities (sport, social activities, voluntary work, etc.).

❑ Factors leading to failure

For M. Romainville (2000), predictive studies of the factors leading to failure are not reliable because they are based on characteristics which are not applicable to all contexts. He therefore suggests measuring the modifiable characteristics: those for which training could be effective and transposable to different establishments.

The first thing is to identify the causes of failure and their origin:

- the personal characteristics of the student: his background, his learning abilities, his age, etc.
- the phases involved in moving from one status to another: "unfamiliarity time", "learning time", "affiliation time". The transition from secondary to higher education is a difficult one to make when the process of institutional affiliation is transformed into the inability to understand this new "trade". Romainville quotes the Tinto model (Tinto, 1993) who also believes that this is the most decisive phase: if the student is not socially integrated into his group, then he gets lost and can no longer continue his studies;
- the characteristics of university education: how teaching is designed, teaching practices, assessment methods, lecturing and all the aspects involved in university teaching can also be factors of failure.

❑ Motivation, confidence, perseverance

The most important aspect, according to Romainville, is motivation. The student has a training project (intellectual interest), a professional project (he aspires to enter a certain type of job, because of its inherent interest or because of its social prestige) or a life plan (a vision of how he will integrate socially). A student who has chosen his university course for uncertain reasons, by default or under pressure from the family will be more inclined to give up at the first difficulty encountered. There is, however, an exception: the brightest students who are aiming at the most prestigious courses and for whom difficulties are the same as challenges. Everything is related to the problem of guidance at the end of secondary education.

Signing on for a university course does not just mean following a training course, which will probably lead to a professional career. But the poor employment prospects makes students sceptical as to the effectiveness of the course, in terms of social and professional integration.
Another perverse effect is that massification has pulled many students towards university who did not initially intend to follow a higher education course, and who are therefore even more lacking in motivation.
The concept of a personal project remains an abstract one for the student who cannot find a source of extrinsic motivation, when the university is not able to propose stimulating learning activities for him.

In addition, self-confidence, in his learning abilities and his intellectual abilities, remains a key factor for success; a positive image is essential if the student is not to be discouraged at the first unfruitful results, while keeping a certain distance because doubt is also a motivating factor.

❑ How to fight against failure

In his conclusion, Romainville sketches the broad outlines of an effective fight against failure:

- draw up an inventory of expected skills;

- set up systems for information and guidance;
- encourage confrontation between the conceptions of the different people involved;
- smooth over the sudden break-off in help with personal work (help which can be encouraged by continuous assessment, supplemental instruction (US), tutoring by other students, etc.;
- ensure early remediation;
- develop initiation into methodology;
- encourage transparency in objectives and assessments: give preference to methods which support in-depth learning (see above);
- give preference to open assessment;
- fight against fragmentation and inflation of curricula and examinations
- organize courses more flexibly;
- diversify courses;
- reassert the value of the teaching mission;
- provide initial and in-service teacher training for teachers.

These recommendations are also intended to act as an incentive to reconsider teaching practices and university courses, that Romainville holds to be responsible to some extent for the learning difficulties which make the student's progress still more difficult.

❑ The first year at university or freshman year

Chenard (in Chenard & Dorey, 2005) approaches the concept of the diploma from the American standpoint. This is built around various theories which have had a major influence and which have guided institutional research carried out in Quebec in 1980.
Access to the diploma is analyzed from four different angles:

- *Its conceptualization.* According to Vincent Tinto (1993), a distinction needs to be made between "**dropping out**" and "**interrupting**". These concepts are useful in defining the starting behaviour of the student, in time and space. In time, behaviour can be temporary or final; in space, the start can relate to the establishment (interruption) or the system (dropout). It should be understood that the individual is moving through a system within which are a great number of educational establishments and that he can leave the establishment to join another, or leave the system. These departures are the expression of very different decisions: leaving the establishment, leaving the system, changing strategy, life or career objective, etc. This theory makes it possible to evaluate the strategies which support access to the diploma.

- *In quantitative terms*. The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) carried out the first measurements. It noted that most departures occurred very early on in the students' course.

- *According to the teaching institution*. This is a medium, or culture in which the student must find his place. To understand how the decision to continue studies is made there are various criteria to be taken into account: socio-economic characteristics and educational profile of the student, his starting objectives and his vision of his environment. **Academic integration and social integration are two crucial stages**. These first experiences will allow the student to reassess his objectives, if need be, and to decide whether to continue his studies.

- *According to university teaching practices*. The National Resource Center for the First-Year Experience and Students in Transition of the University of South Carolina has focused its studies on how students are received and the experience of the first year, in order to set up strategies favourable to the continuation of studies. These teaching strategies, such as individualized student follow-up, valorising their progress, content stressed over form, have made it possible for certain American establishments to obtain very good rates of retention. The student and the supervision of his learning are the true priority.

- In the United Kingdom, following reports of an increasing number students dropping out of the system without qualifications, the researchers Moira Peelo & Terry Wareham (2002) held a symposium on university failure in 1999. Their book, *Failing students in higher education,* is the conclusion of various work carried out since these debates. Failure runs parallel to the massification of higher education (in the eighties) and to the installation of increasingly stringent assessment systems of both teaching and research (Research Assessment Exercise). Failure at university is an institutional problem and dropping-out is a reflection of institutional failure. Failure is associated with economic and social wastage, perceived as anti-egalitarian and discriminatory.
  Without wishing to propose a catalogue of what "works" or "does not work", **the selected contributions attempt to show the bonds between research and the work in the field, in order to influence practices.**

Research into the students who give up studies can be compared to medical methods, according to the analysis of Mantz Yorke (in Peelo & Wareham, 2002). Leaving university is regarded as a failure, for the student but also for the university. Analysis of this failure will involve identifying the symptoms to cure it, based on the results of similar experiments. Just as a disease which lasts or death are the results of failure of the doctor or medical system, students who want to stop their studies are a failure for the university system. The treatment requires that the scientist should concentrate on the patients to find remedies for the next patients, in order to prevent the disease.

Roderick Floud (in Peelo & Wareham, 2002) agrees with Romainville's conclusions when he points out the difference between foreseeable failure and unforeseeable failure, that which can be cured and that which cannot avoid be avoided: retention strategies must therefore be focussed on avoidable failures in order to be effective.
However, from a teaching point of view, the failure may be perceived as being part of a learning process. This is what Colin Rodgers puts forward when he states that the student can learn lessons from previous failures in order to build an anti-failure strategy: failure is a learning process of training, and as such is an integral part of ultimate success.

❑ And also

- Scott Peter (1995). *The Meanings of Mass Higher Education*. Bristol: Open University Press. Peter Scott notes the growth of mass higher education in the United Kingdom. He shows how universities initially reserved for the elite are gradually transformed into systems of post-secondary education open to all.

- Center on Education Policy. (2003). *Effects of high school exit exams on dropout rates: Summary of a panel discussion*. Panel of experts convened by the Center for Education Policy on March 15, 2003. Washington, DC.
- Bridgeland John M., Jr Dilulio John J. & Burke Morison Karen (2006). *The Silent Epidemic: Perspectives of High School Dropouts*. Washington: Civic Enterprises.
- Hamilton Kathy, Sullivan Neil, Bundy Andrew & Fersh Lainy (2006). *Too Big To Be Seen: The Invisible Dropout Crisis in Boston and Amercia*. Boston: The Boston Private Industry Council.
- Rupert Sandra S. (2003). Closing the College Participation Gap: a national summary: Education Commissions of the States, Denver.

Preventive and remedial measures

Retention, or how to keep students at university

In the United States, many investigations into the life of students are largely centred on their experience within their higher education establishment. Stress is laid on socialization, how they integrate into university life (social relations between students, relationship with teachers, personal fulfilment and civic commitment), on the benefits that the students obtain for later, and more generally, on the quality of life and studies which the campuses offer them. "The dominating paradigm is that of the assessment of services rendered in this area by the higher education establishment to its students" (Rey, 2005).

Finding the best means of preventing students from dropping out has been an important issue in the United States for several decades, driven by both the concern of raising the level of qualification of young Americans and by the more commonplace one of maintaining the resources of colleges and universities (registration fee, foundation funding, etc.). Randy McClanahan (2004) offers an overview of the literature on this subject from the last 30 years.

Much research has been focused on the question of the first year of higher education, the majority of studies having noted **that most students disappear before the second year.**

In France, a report by the High Commission for education-economy-employment recommends that after first semester of higher education, an assessment of the *baccalauréat*-holders' choice of educational path should systematically be made, giving them the means to make a real change of path chosen from all the higher education branches.
It also wants **French universities to take as their starting point the examples of many other developed countries, based on the Degree-Master's-Doctorate credit system (ECTS) to make individualized student follow-up effective**. With additional resources, the Commission proposes a possible change of path for students at the end of the first year, including entry into selective entry branches (IUT, STS, specialised schools, etc.) or into training that leads to professional qualifications related to professional environments. Reorientation classes after the second year should also be a possibility so that the students from general branches can consider taking a professional degree (Brax *et al*, 2007).

Drawing on sociological (an adaptation of the work of Durkheim on suicide) or psychological work, American studies have gone beyond strictly educational considerations to clarify the importance of academic and social integration of students in order to prevent dropping-out. Difficulties in university results are often **the visible demonstration of a broader problem of acculturation in higher education**, and it even becomes difficult to solve this problem when the students reach the stage of exam failure and disappointment.
On the contrary, good integration into academic, cultural or sports student (peer) groups, just as good integration into studies (understanding the curriculum, the teachers, etc.) and into the teaching institution, the influence of student peer groups and their socialization role are often seen as paramount.
The theoretical models have led to various operational systems, usually known in most colleges and universities as "Freshman Seminars", which are **multi-sided programmes which endeavour to propose a whole range of services and activities for new students to ease them into their new life in higher education**.
Work relating to one of these systems (*University 101 program*) of the university of South Carolina showed the effectiveness of these programmes. Research has noted that students who are likeliest to drop out at the beginning ("high risk students") had, after taking program 101, higher rates of continuation than students who were, on the face of it, more privileged at the outset, but who had not taken part in the programme. So initially rather theoretical research is now moving towards work in the sociology of organizations, studying which are the most appropriate characteristics of such programmes, making it possible to improve how new students integrate (*Freshman Experience*). .
One of the best-known researchers in the field, Vincent Tinto, also underlined, en 1990, that the solutions provided by these programmes are neither very complex nor mysterious, « *if they [the institutions] only give serious attention to the character of their educational mission and the obligation it entails. In short, successful retention is no more than, but certainly no less than, successful education* » (Tinto, 1990).

Tinto (2003) comes back to this issue during a conference organized by the *Institute For Access Studies*, a British organization specializing in the promotion of higher education. He develops his theories on the means of encouraging the student's persistence and enumerates five essential conditions to be implemented by universities: the student will succeed better in a context in which it is expected of him that he succeed, if forms of support are made available to him (especially in the first year), if continuous assessment is effective and the results transparent, if the university team is available and attentive, and finally, and especially, if university teaching practices emphasize learning in teaching.

Chenard (2005) takes up the work of Richard J. Light (2001), a professor at Harvard University, who published a work on students' expectations: learning can take place outside the classroom, work in small groups is stimulating, teachers' diversity of culture is an asset… Students are very demanding with regard to themselves but also to the institution; it is therefore important to properly determine their true expectations if one wants to improve higher education.

❑ Using financial incentives?

The Canada Millennium Scholarship Foundation, a private, not-for-profit organization, has the vocation of making it possible for students to acquire post-secondary training "*enabling to develop the skills needed to achieve [their] goals*".
This involves encouraging access to these studies, in particular through funding, but also arousing the will in students to continue studies, to succeed and be committed within society. This incentive is based on a national network of organizations

and people concerned with post-secondary education. The grants awarded are either general grants (financial support), or grants awarded for excellence (motivation).
In 2001, the Foundation set up a research programme aiming at developing knowledge of the obstacles slowing down access to post-secondary studies and on the repercussions of the policies and government programmes implemented to overcome these obstacles.
This research collective publishes news bulletins, research reports, and an annual report, Price of Knowledge, the latest issue of which is devoted to the obstacles lying in the way of persisting in secondary studies (Berger, Motte & Parkin, 2007). Although the report deals with the financial obstacles, it also locates obstacles to do with teaching: there is a link between secondary school efficiency and participation in post-secondary studies. Many post-secondary programmes (in particular university) require good, if not excellent, marks for admission, and even for less-demanding post-secondary programmes, pupils who have had "difficult" schooling do not want to continue studies. The foundation even speaks about **resilience** (2007). Another considerable obstacle is the lack of information about continuation of studies. The report reveals that pupils with a low-income must face up to all these obstacles at the same time: « *They are substantially less likely to have any savings set aside for education; they have had fewer conversations about planning for post-secondary studies; they are less aware of the cost of higher education and what is available through student aid programs, although they would like to know more; they are less likely to have earned the grades needed to enter a post-secondary program* ».

An analytical study by *Statistics Canada* sheds further light on this report. Marc Frenette (2007) uses detailed data relating to the aptitude for study, parental influence, financial constraints and other basic socio-economic characteristics to explain the significant variation in attendance at university from one level of income to another.
Results in standardized reading tests of, school marks obtained at age 15, parental influence and the quality of the secondary school are closely correlated (84%) with this attendance. Financial constraints explain the inequality of success for only 12% of those who took part in the study.

As an example, we quote a joint project of the government of Manitoba, several communities of the First nations and the *Making Education* foundation: 330 Aboriginal students from six communities in the north of Manitoba, living outside or inside the reservations, will be divided up randomly between a group benefiting from the programme, and a reference group. "*The project is designed to increase the post-secondary participation rate of Aboriginal students through a comprehensive set of interventions that includes better information, academic support, mentoring, community involvement (work experience, internships, job shadowing, summer employment, community volunteerism and career exploration) and an Aboriginal curriculum (elective courses in Aboriginal Studies, Aboriginal Languages and Law). Workshops, activities and training sessions with parents and guardians are designed as part of the project to help parents better understand and assist their children with their educational needs and objectives*".

The Institute for Fiscal Studies (IFS) is a British research organization which studies the effectiveness of social and economic policies. In a recent study undertaken by Lorraine Dearden (Dearden *et al.* 2005), the IFS asks about the effectiveness of the grants paid out to students in terms of the impact on the dropout rate. Their results show a decrease in dropouts, with a higher impact on students from underprivileged socio-economic backgrounds.

❑ Using special programmes?

Achieving the Dream is an organization whose aim is to help students to pass their diplomas, in particular those who have not been able to enter a major university but who continue their studies in a "community college" (see on this subject the university of Columbia site about community colleges, Community College Research Center, CCRS). (
Achieving the Dream concentrates its efforts on racial minorities and people with low-incomes: it publishes many studies and investigations into the possibilities of access to universities. In a recent report (Success is what counts, 2006), the centre takes stock of the situation of community colleges in the United States and of the way in which researchers develop improvement strategies to help "at risk" students, by making use of the results of longitudinal investigations, published regularly in *Data Notes* (*Keeping informed about achieving the dream data*, 2007).

Kerr & Legters (in Orfiled, 2004) use the results of their survey, carried out in 2000 in 138 public *lycées* in Maryland (USA), to evaluate the use of programmes intended to decrease the dropout rate and to improve pupils' results. The authors identified nine practices aiming at developing pupils' commitment and perseverance. Schools whose pupils come mainly from underprivileged social classes had already adopted several measures to counter failure and demotivation.
Two types of reforms caught their attention: « *Small Learning Communities*» (SLCs) and « *interdisciplinary teaming of teachers and students* ». **These practices helped to reduce the dropout rate by more than half, and to increase the rate of success from 10% to 16%.** The methods described here are not context-dependent and can be re-used in other establishments.

Danielle Pageau presents a summary of the strategies of the American *What Really Works* (in Chenard et Dorey, 2005) presented during the 15th annual conference, July 2001, by the firm Noel&Levitz, dealing with the issues of **perseverance and access to diplomas**. This firm specializes in higher education and sets up measurements aiming at encouraging access to diplomas.
Institutions with a good reputation are those whose success rate is excellent. Because the success of an institution is inseparable from the success of its students, it is necessary to unceasingly make over learning methods in order to maintain this rate of excellence. The principal ingredients of *What Really Works* are grouped into four categories:

- By paying great attention to students' satisfaction with teaching, supervision and the various services provided by the institution. This makes it possible to establish a link between student satisfaction and perseverance in studies. The satisfaction measurement makes it possible to identify the branches of industry in which the institution must work to improve this satisfaction.
- By developing a **real service-oriented culture**: the student really believes he is being listened to and is central to the concerns of each member of the institution. Making him feel that he is important is an asset for his success. Each initial experience must be a positive one: the first tour round the establishment, the first course, etc.
- It is therefore necessary to make all staff understand the meaning of their responsibilities towards the students. There must be a true human relationship between the student and the institution.

- By carrying out satisfaction surveys. The tool developed by Noel&Levitz is the *College Student Inventory* (CSI). This is a questionnaire about how people learn, but it also touches on affective issues. This method pre-empts the student's future difficulties and thus makes it possible not to wait for the end of the first year to act and find retention solutions.
- **By making commitment a priority factor in student perseverance.** Making the student feel that he has his place and his part to play within the institution. By taking part in all kinds of activities, getting involved in this studies, forming relationships with peers, the student appropriates his and is therefore less vulnerable. The institution must find the best means to mobilize students, it must therefore get to know them and meet them as a preliminary to determining their needs and their expectations.

Some examples of these measures in practice:

- The *Loyola University of New Orleans,* having observed a significant reduction in its enrolments, created a "special detachment" so that each member of staff understands that students' success is the number one priority. The general aim was to improve the quality of academic and student life. The rates of retention moved from 74% in 1995 to 85% in 2000. A philosophy centred on student success of the students is even being put into place.
- The *Edinboro University of Pennsylvania* does not allow the responsibility for student perseverance to rest on only one person but favours the concept of a team to mitigate students' problems. Making the teaching staff take part is, moreover, one of the keys of this project, allowing the pupils to feel more confident with people on whom they can count. The experience is as advantageous to the students as it is to the staff trained to supervise them.

These concerns are not only American. British studies have also shown that UK universities are asking about the degree of student satisfaction in terms of perseverance and that they are setting up retention programmes. Wilcox, Winn & Fyvie-Gauld (2005) introduce the concept of "social support" which puts student integration into the university structure at the heart of the problems to be solved.

Alternative paths

The American General Educational Development (GED) is a replacement examination for those who did not obtain their college diploma through leaving the school system too early but who nevertheless wish to validate their years of initial training. The GED tests five skills or disciplines: reading, writing, sciences, social sciences and mathematics. 95% of universities accept the GED in place of the baccalauréat. Unfortunately, even though the GED is academically equivalent to the baccalauréat, pupils who pass this examination are not considered on the same level and keep their label of "dropouts".

Published by the *American Youth Policy Center* (AYPF), whose aim is to connect practice, research and policy, *The college Ladder* (2006) The college Ladder (2006) reviews 22 programmes which allow high-school pupils to obtain their baccalauréat or university credits in advance, in order make a success of the transition between college and university. The AYPF study has the following concerns as a backdrop: how are these programs to be assessed? What funding mechanisms will guarantee fairness?
The programs tested belong to the Secondary-Post-Secondary Learning Options or SPLOs. The students can follow secondary or higher education courses. We should mention *Advanced Placement* (AP), *College Access programs*, *Middle College High School* or *International Baccalaureate* (IB).

In France, the Mission Générale d'Insertion (MGI), set up in 1993, allows young people over 16 to continue their studies or a suitable professional training course. The mission has two aims: to make those involved in the education system preventively aware of the issues surrounding the professional integration of young people, in order to avoid ending schooling, and to set up specific actions aiming at offering a second chance to young dropouts who want to obtain a qualification or a diploma. (Programme Nouvelles Chances). The actions of the MGI cannot however replace guidance processes, nor should they be used as ways of relegating students in difficulty. The head of the school is responsible for following up his pupils during the year after they leave the initial training system.

The MIG proposes several special programmes: information and guidance session, professional integration on block-release (CIPPA), exam re-preparation module on block-release (MOREA), lycée induction module (Modal), personalized pathway for access to qualification (ITAQ), integrated training (FI), integration assistance group (PROFIT). Few evaluations are available on the effectiveness of these actions.

Structured as an association, the second chance schools (E2C) have for the last ten years been pursing the goal of social insertion for people in the eighteen to twenty-five age group who have no professional qualification or diploma, offering to update their basic knowledge and providing in-company training. Each offers a personalized training course. Initiated by the European commission in 1995, the E2Cs were established in France (the first in Marseille) and in Europe. Their success rate (rate of placement) is high: 60% from 1998 to 2005. These schools want to propose an alternative to the traditional network, which allows young people from 18 to 25 years with learning difficulties and with no professional experience to leave. The goal is to help them acquire or supplement basic skills in order to be able to begin a training course or simply to find employment. The foundation for political innovation gives an update on this European school (2005).

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The value of diplomas

We have seen that the democratization of teaching or mass teaching have led to a target being set of 80% baccalauréat-holders or 50% graduates. And yet could it be that the race to obtain diplomas no longer has as much meaning for young people and, more generally, for society?

An immediately measurable value

A report from the New Zealand ministry (March 2007) informs us of the impact of the level of education on incomes, based on the fact that the success of an education system is measured partly in terms of the professional appropriateness which results from it: employment quality and durability and level of income. Several studies have shown that those with a higher education diploma were less likely to be unemployed, had better access to in-service training and earned more, on average. In New Zealand, the average income is 29% greater for people with a higher-education diploma. This figure is definitely lower than the average of the other OECD countries, which is 49%. Also according to this ministry report, the highest averages are 72% in the United States and 58% in Great Britain.

Just as in the research concerning Canadian and New Zealand students, the report by the high commission for education-economy-employment, *50% of a generation with a higher education diploma* (Brax *et al*, 2007), stresses **the influence of higher education diplomas on the employment rate of and on economic growth**. The authors base their work on the results of international comparisons to show that France is not in a very favourably placed as regards the number of higher education graduates.
For HCEEE experts, **there are two problems, as it is a question of limiting the number of students who leave higher education without a diploma**, which involves more than 10% of an age group, and of aiming at the effectiveness of continued higher education studies, in terms of professional integration, in keeping with the needs of future employers.

One of the points made by the report *De l'Université à l'emploi* (Hetzel, 2006) is to show that French students fear depreciation of their diplomas and precarity, but that, at the same time, they want to be involved in society and to be able to seize any opportunity to succeed. This report inspires P. Hetzelto the following recommendation: help students to connect university and the world of work by modifying the vision of a "cleaver diploma" and moving to courses that include the world of employment.

Céline Gasquet & Valérie Roux give a more detailed analysis of the results of the investigation by the CEREQ (Génération 98) in an article devoted to public measures intended to help young people entering working life without a diploma (2005). Only 4 out of 10 obtained employment quickly, and of these, 1 out of 4 had no experience of unemployment. Three years after finishing initial training, 20% of these young people are unemployed, or twice as many as secondary education graduates and 4 times as many as higher education graduates. These dropouts have been targeted by employment measures: 40% of those without diplomas had access to an employment assistance facility during their first 7 years of a working life marked by precarity.

May lead to observable downgrading

Philippe Lemistre (2007) tackles the problem of downgrading, of the unfavourable shift between educational level and employment qualification level obtained, between skills acquired and skills required.
What can be drawn from this that is relevant to the topic of this newsletter is the analysis of the effects of this downgrading on equal opportunity. Downgrading is more significant for women, students of rural origin and young people from modest social backgrounds.

The primary goal of the rise in educational levels was the democratization of teaching but, as Marie Duru-Bellat (2006), underlines, *"the result in terms of social mobility is quite poor"*. For P. Lemistre, it seems that the current objective is no longer democratization, but maintenance or reinforcement of mid- and long-term international competitiveness (this is how he would explain the choice of the 80% *baccalauréat*-holders and the 50% higher education graduates).

Any positive effect of downgrading, possible in the long run, can be effective only if diplomas retain a certain value. Currently, the trend is more for diplomas to pile up at the base of the hierarchy: the *baccalaureat* has become a bastion against unemployment but is no longer a "ranking criterion" on the job market, as can be observed in France only recently but for a long time in the United States.

"*The oft-repeated assertion that **lengthening studies** and raising the level of school qualifications are a good thing in themselves is based both on statements of the obvious and on **illusions***": downgrading could be at one and the same time the cause and the consequence of students' choosing to raise the level of their diploma, according to M. Duru-Bellat & F. Dubet (2006). Those with the lowest diplomas are more at the mercy of the downgrading mechanisms, and in parallel, school diplomas are seen to be worth less and less from the standpoint of the labour market.

Towards a depreciation of diplomas?

For Laurence Lizé (2006), "*the chosen assumption is that downgrading can be analyzed as a queuing problem…*". There would be too many graduates for the number of executive jobs available, leading to a shortage of work.

In France, many studies have highlighted the presence of young, overeducated employees on the job market. By using the investigations of the CEREQ into those who left higher education in 1984 and 1996, Jean-Pascal Guironnet analyzes the evolution of the causes and effects of over-education. By means of endogenous modelling of over-education in wage determination, he takes account of the selection skew induced by unemployed graduates. According to his results, the phenomenon of over-education is far from being marginal, the proportion of downgraded employees has doubled in 12 years. The link between diplomas and access to employment was strengthened for those leaving higher education but, paradoxically, the probabilities of getting one of the top jobs in the professional hierarchy got significantly lower between 1987 and 1999 (this presentation was submitted during the XVth SESAME days at Rennes, 2005).

During a conference organized by the Éducation et Politique research team on the topic « Repenser la justice dans le domaine de l'éducation et de la formation », Marie Duru-Bellat questioned the utility of the diplomas issued by certain branches, which could be more damaging than educational, and wondered "*if there isn't a time when studies become "de-socializing" or "dis-educational*". (Duru-Bellat, 2006). In her book *L'inflation scolaire* (2006), she shows that the chase after diplomas is the consequence of a drop in professional yield and that it might contribute to increasing inequality between young people who, although they have followed increasingly long university courses, are not finding the hoped-for relevance their between their diplomas the employment they are in.

The impact of diplomas on incomes and economic growth

For Marc Gurgand (2004), "*seen from an economic standpoint, education is an investment. Today, it is an expenditure which must be productive, tomorrow it represents extra richness and wellbeing… Does more education produce more richness and under what conditions? These are the two questions posed to the economy of education, with a view to* ***assessing the return on educational investment***".
The equation involving education and economic growth is generally based on empirical data that are difficult to correlate with each other and to analyze. But the convergence of certain results indicates that education has a positive impact on growth and on development insofar as it is thought to make workers more effective in a given productive structure or, at another level, to transform that structure making it more innovatory. In the first case, **education has a vocation to professionalize;** in the second it prepares people for changes and allows them to adapt faster and more efficiently.

The education-economy pair is, however, increasingly complex. Hanuschek & Wöessman (2007) point out the need for the governments of countries with a developed economy to reform school structures institutionally. The role of improved education, a major factor in the strategies of most OECD countries, is a controversial issue, because the expansion of school and university diplomas does not guarantee economic expansion. The authors analyze the role of quality education in improving social and economic wellbeing. They conclude that cognitive skills are more important than academic success in terms of incomes and economic growth. It is **the quality of teaching** which has an impact on social and economic development rather than the amount or level of education. More and more research is unanimous on the point that "a good teacher" is the key to success as regards school performance (see our *Lettre d'information* n° 26, April 2007).Unfortunately, the definition of what quality teaching is cannot easily be quantified and does not make it possible to set up measurements that are durable and not context-dependent.

The question of educational can be analyzed on two levels. Marie Duru-Bellat (2006) does not dispute the "**individual yield**", which is justification in itself for a lengthening of the duration of studies. But she does wonder about education as an economic growth factor, generating "**social yield**". She confirms the difficulty "of bringing out a cause and effect relationship for the development of education" on growth

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❑ Sitographie

- College Results Online
- National Information Center for Higher Education Policymaking and Analysis
- Higher Education Funding Council for England
- School Dropout Prevention Program
- Projets pilotes européens écoles de la deuxième chance

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Written by: Marie Gaussel

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Veille scientifique et technologique
Institut national de recherche pédagogique
19, allée de Fontenay – BP 17424 – 69347 Lyon cedex 07
Tél.: +33 (0)4 72 76 61 00 – Fax.: +33 (0)4 72 76 61 93