

# Introduction to the European Education Systems

Stephen Lamb

Historically, in European nations school dropout was not an issue that received much research attention. Secondary school systems were largely designed to be selective and dropout was a natural consequence. The traditional academic secondary school, such as the *lycée*, *gymnasium* or *grammar school*, provided a classical education preparing a selected few from the wealthy classes for higher status positions and lifestyles. By their nature these schools were selective, serving the filtering and preparation needs of universities and the professions.<sup>1</sup>

The modern need for expansion of secondary education saw the development of alternative forms of school and the diversification of programs, though academic selection remained a dominating feature. Programs at upper secondary level have diversified to include shorter and longer cycles of study, often without common standards of learning and achievement – meaning that while some streams of study prepare students for higher education, others are short-term and terminal, preparing students for the labour market rather than further study.

Therefore, nowadays not all streams of study or training in upper secondary education in European countries give access to tertiary education. In many countries, schools are divided into different types. Some types are more vocational, others are academic. The most obvious example is Germany. Here, many children (although in declining numbers) enter the *Hauptschule*. This ends with the *Hauptschulabschluss* – a certificate which does not give access to tertiary studies. Many children also enter the *Realschule*. This is concluded by the *Realschulabschluss*. If students do well enough, they can then transfer to a *Fachoberschule* (a vocational college). If they graduate with the *Fachhochschulreife*, they can then enter a *Fachhochschule* or a *Gymnasium*, from which they can access university or other

---

<sup>1</sup> See Benavot's paper (The diversification of secondary education: School curricula in comparative perspective, *Revista de currículum y formación del profesorado*, 10(1), 1–26, 2006) and the study by Mueller, Ringer and Simon (*The Rise of the Modern Education System*, Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1987) for more extensive discussion of these issues.

S. Lamb (✉)  
Centre for Post-Compulsory Education and Lifelong Learning,  
University of Melbourne, Australia

types of tertiary education. Thus children who enter either a *Hauptschule* or a *Realschule* and successfully complete their studies are not able to go directly into tertiary-level courses. They must do further studies and be successful at these higher levels.

Some other countries such as Switzerland and Poland have similar systems, so the German model can be considered important and of fairly wide relevance.

Another example is France. Many children there enter vocational school after finishing lower secondary education. In vocational school, they study towards either a *certificate d'aptitude professionnelle (CAP)* or a *brevet d'études professionnelles (BEP)*. Neither of these qualifications gives access to tertiary-level courses, and most young people who do enter vocational school leave for work. This pathway involves a large number of young people. The problems that it poses by not providing access to tertiary level courses have been officially recognised. As a result, these days an increasing number of young people who do the BEP are taking further vocational training by enrolling in the *baccalauréat professionnel* (or *bac pro*). This can lead to tertiary study, but the great majority (around two thirds) of *bac pro* students leave for work. If they do continue, only about three in ten actually finish the tertiary course because they do not have the academic preparation.

Spain also has important differences between curriculum streams. High school students who undertake intermediate-level vocational studies (*Ciclos Formativos de Grado Medio*) go to work or further training (*Grado Superior*). If they wish to go to university, they must either enrol in the *Bachillerato* and gain their *Título de Bachiller*, or graduate with the *Técnico Superior* which then gives access to university.

Briefly, also, England and Scotland offer various alternative streams of study to young people at the end of compulsory education. Traditional 'A levels' (England) or *Advanced Highers* (Scotland) can be taken by students wanting to enter university, while other students may take a range of alternatives including vocational qualifications leading to work or further training.

Germany, France, England, Scotland, Switzerland, Poland, and Spain do things differently. But importantly, all of these countries have internally different streams and types of schools that (1) take in young people with different characteristics, and (2) lead in different directions. Thus differences between young people come to be associated with different directions. The implications of these differences for rates of dropout and completion vary between the countries, as the following case studies reveal.