

JEAN-FRANÇOIS GIRET, CHRISTINE GUEGNARD  
AND CLAIRE MICHOT

## THE VOCATIONALISATION OF UNIVERSITY PROGRAMMES IN FRANCE: ITS CONSEQUENCES FOR EMPLOYABILITY AND MOBILITY

### OVERVIEW OF THE FRENCH HIGHER EDUCATION SYSTEM

France has a multi-track higher education system which includes four key components: *Grandes Écoles*, short vocational training tracks, specialised higher education institutions (in social work, healthcare and the arts), and universities. Access to higher education is traditionally defined by the contrast between universities (which enrol all holders of the *baccalauréat* without any selection process) and the extremely selective *Grandes Écoles*. The other tertiary courses are not directly accessible to all *baccalauréat* holders who wish to enrol because the number of study places is limited; applications to these tracks involve a selection process (based on educational records or a competitive entrance exam, test, interview, etc.).

Until 1960, the French higher education was characterised by a contrast between the *Grandes Écoles* and the universities. In the 1960s, two technological degrees were created to provide a more vocationally oriented programme in tertiary education (short vocational tracks): the *Diplôme Universitaire de Technologie* (DUT), conferred by autonomous university institutes (IUT), and the *Brevet de Technicien Supérieur* (BTS), a higher education vocational course offered by secondary schools (*lycée*). While recent studies conducted in a range of countries have emphasised the “academic drift” of tertiary education (Teichler, 2007), French higher education seems to be driven by an opposite trend. In the last three decades, universities have offered new vocational programmes (*DESS, Miage, IUP, Magisters*) and more recently vocational Bachelor degrees. Their purpose was to offer vocational training in universities, comprising work placements and the involvement of professionals. This was partly an attempt to improve a university system which was widely criticised for being too theoretical and academic and for producing a growing number of unemployed graduates (Agulhon, 2007).

In France the *baccalauréat* is the final certificate of upper secondary education and the entry qualification to higher education. *Baccalauréat* holders can enrol in first-year undergraduate courses at universities where the *licence* degree is awarded after three years of study. Students can choose a general (*licence générale*) or a vocational Bachelor degree (*licence professionnelle*). A clear distinction is maintained between these according to student access, their programmes, and their opportunities.

The introduction of vocational Bachelors in 1999 was designed to develop the “vocationalisation” of French university education. Before 1999, universities only offered a purely academic, general Bachelor degrees based on subject-specific teaching and training. The award of the Bachelor degree was conditional on fol-

lowing three years of university study (in humanities, science and technology, engineering, law and economics). The Bachelor level was not considered an appropriate professional entry qualification, except for careers in teacher education and public administration. By establishing a close partnership with potential employers in the design of curricula, the vocational Bachelor degree was designed to provide a specific response to the local demands for high-level vocational training, particularly in the private sector. It is a one-year training course offered to holders of a diploma awarded after two years of tertiary education. It includes a 12- to 16-week work placement in a company. Some 77 per cent of vocational Bachelor graduates had completed a placement lasting for at least three months, as compared to 30 per cent of general Bachelor graduates (Calmand, Epiphane & Hallier, 2009).

One of the major objectives of the vocational Bachelor programme was to promote the transition from higher education to work after three years of post-*baccalauréat* study (Giret, 2011). It is expected to correspond to the first level of the European structure of higher education diplomas defined in the Sorbonne and Bologna Declarations. The *licence* is now commonly considered as equivalent to a Bachelor's degree in international terms and represents the first stage of the three-cycle *licence/Master/doctorat* (LMD equivalent to Bachelor/Master/doctorate, 3-5-8) of European harmonised degrees (associated with 180 European Credit Transfer Systems). Unlike general Bachelor degrees, access to vocational Bachelor programmes in France is selective. Selection is based on students' educational record and on evidence of a professional project.

Moreover, vocational Bachelor degrees were intended to attract second-year students studying for a general Bachelor degree who wished (following a period of general study) to enrol in a vocational course that would enable them to enter the labour market directly after graduation. Yet it quickly became apparent that most of these graduates opted for the third-year vocational Bachelor programmes: More than half hold a BTS and more than one third a DUT, while only 12 per cent had completed two years of general university studies. Thus, these new Bachelor programmes have become a way of extending training for those students who have already completed a post-*baccalauréat* vocational track. While students from general programmes are reluctant to pursue such training, graduates from BTS and DUT tracks generally view it as further vocational development and as a precondition for securing a more highly qualified job. Some vocational Bachelor programmes had already existed in DUTs and also, although less frequently, in BTS tracks, whereby the degree was awarded officially by a university.

In principle, vocational Bachelor degrees, like other Bachelor degrees, are also entry qualifications to Master-level studies. Yet, the recommendations of the French Ministry of Higher Education, which have been largely adopted by the course providers, discourage these graduates from pursuing Master-level studies. The proportion of students continuing their studies after a vocational Bachelor degree is approximately 17 per cent, i.e. well below that of those pursuing post-graduate studies after a general Bachelor degree.

The – professional or research – *Master degree* is awarded to students who have successfully completed five years of study after the *baccalauréat*. It was intro-

THE VOCATIONALISATION OF UNIVERSITY PROGRAMMES IN FRANCE

duced in the academic year 2002/2003 and replaced the *Diplôme d'Études Supérieures Spécialisées* (DESS, vocational) and the *Diplôme d'Études Approfondies* (DEA, research). The implementation of the new LMD system also encouraged the *Grandes Écoles* to reflect the general trend. The degrees they currently award are usually regarded as Master-level qualifications. Some *Grandes Écoles* encourage students to obtain a university degree as well. The creation of the LMD system led to an increase in professional Master degrees at the expense of research Masters. Common Master programmes (i.e. research and professional) were created to compensate for the declining numbers of students wishing to pursue a career in research. Moreover, access to doctoral studies became progressively more open to holders of a professional Masters degree. This may lead to a gradual disappearance of the research Masters programmes.

The shift to the LMD system occurred while the number of higher education students declined. There were 2,232,000 students in the academic year 2008/2009 (Ministry of Education, 2009).

Both the gradual increase in the number of degrees awarded in the (third-year) vocational Bachelor programmes and the transition from the former maîtrise programmes to the new Master programmes are documented in [table 1](#).

*Table 1. The Number of Diplomas and Degree awarded at Higher Education Institutions in France 2000, 2004 and 2008*

|  | 2000    | 2004    | 2008    |
|--|---------|---------|---------|
| BTS  | 95,530  | 108,839 | 106,025 |
| DUT  | 47,478  | 47,018  | 46,714  |
| General Bachelor (Licence)                     | 135,017 | 137,307 | 124,289 |
| Vocational Bachelor (Licence professionnelle)  | •       | 17,159  | 37,665  |
| Maîtrise                                       | 93,304  | 94,146  | 1,915   |
| DEA  | 23,428  | 26,339  | 7       |
| DESS   | 32,612  | 47,351  | 110     |
| Master (professional)                          | •       | 2,415   | 65,111  |
| Master (research)                              | •       | 2,544   | 23,218  |
| Master   | •       | 581     | 7,069   |
| Grandes Écoles (Engineering, Business studies) | 42,966  | 51,996  | 50,865  |
| Doctorate                                      | 9,991   | 8,931   | 10,678  |

Source: Ministry of Education, Repères et statistiques

About 56 per cent were female. The number of students in public universities (roughly 1,400,000) decreased to a slightly lesser extent than in private study programmes (private BTS and business schools). Private tertiary education only represented about 17 per cent of the total enrolment. At universities, 56 per cent of stu-

dents were enrolled in Bachelor programmes and 39 per cent in Masters programmes, while 5 per cent undertook a doctorate. There is an increase in the number of university students in vocational programmes, while the number of students in general university programmes (particularly in the first years of the Bachelor degree) is declining.

Vocational programmes at French universities have recently been established or extended to bring the professional world closer to the educational system, promote the professional transition of students and respond to the skills required for the world of work (Dupeyrat, 2002). Continuously increasing numbers of vocational Bachelor graduates enter the labour market, sometimes at levels which they had never entered before. This is particularly the case of the L level (i.e. three years of post-*baccalauréat* university study), which was not previously considered to be an appropriate level for leaving the educational system. The inflow of these graduates in the labour market raises the issue of their professional prospects amid changing economic and social circumstances. Are they well prepared for forthcoming social changes? The aim of this paper is to provide some indications concerning vocationalisation and employability based on an analysis of the current links between training courses and the jobs of young people and recent Bachelor graduates.

#### THE CEREQ "GENERATION 2004" GRADUATE SURVEY

This article focuses on the specific studies and subsequent employment of students in vocational programmes at French universities. It analyses how they progress from study to professional life. Data from Cereq's surveys is used. In spring 2007, Cereq surveyed by phone 65,000 persons who had graduated from their initial education in 2004 at all educational levels – a sample representative of 737,000 leavers of the educational system. This survey, called "Generation 2004", analysed the first three years of active life after initial education. It includes information on young people's characteristics (family's socio-economic status, age, highest grade obtained, highest grade attended, university area, job during their study, study time abroad, internship, etc.) and their work history from 2004 to 2007. The employment situation of 2004 graduates will be compared with the findings of a previous Cereq survey conducted in 2004 of the 2001 graduates, i.e. the first cohort of vocational Bachelor graduates.

In the sample of 2004 graduates, 2,226 respondents left higher education with a Bachelor degree: 671 a vocational Bachelor, 1,207 an academic Bachelor in humanities and social sciences, and 407 an academic Bachelor in mathematics, physics or engineering sciences. They are representative of the 50,748 Bachelors graduating in 2004 in France. However, the survey does not interview graduates who continue their studies after 2004.

THE VOCATIONALISATION OF UNIVERSITY PROGRAMMES IN FRANCE

Table 2. *Socio-biographic Background and Course of Study of 2004 Higher Education Graduates in France (per cent)*

|  | BA<br>(Uni) | BA<br>(Voc.) | BA<br>other | BAC+<br>4 | MA<br>(Uni)<br>Bac+5 | MA<br>(Other)<br><i>Grandes<br/>Écoles</i> | Trad.<br>long<br>cycle | Total   |
|--|-------------|--------------|-------------|-----------|----------------------|--|------------------------|---------|
|  | 1           | 2            | 3           | 4         | 5                    | 6  | 7                      | 8       |
| Female graduates   | 70          | 37           | 58          | 61        | 55                   | 33   | 49                     | 56      |
| Entry qualification other than <i>baccalauréat</i>         | 0           | 0            | 2           | 1         | 0                    | 0  | 0                      | 1       |
| Father in professional/managerial position                 | 33          | 26           | 24          | 37        | 43                   | 53   | 56                     | 33      |
| Mother in professional/managerial position                 | 20          | 17           | 13          | 24        | 26                   | 32   | 36                     | 20      |
| Father in associate professional occupations               | 10          | 14           | 12          | 13        | 12                   | 14   | 9                      | 12      |
| Mother in associate professional occupations               | 7           | 8            | 6           | 8         | 9                    | 9  | 10                     | 7       |
| Prior HE diploma of Bachelor graduates                     | 12          | 88           | •           | •         | •                    | •  | •                      | •       |
| Total years of study in higher education (arithmetic mean) | 5.5         | 3.8          | 3.4         | 5.8       | 6.5                  | 5.9  | 10.6                   | 5.9     |
| Age at time of graduation in 2004 (arithmetic mean)        | 24.0        | 22.5         | 22.2        | 24.3      | 24.8                 | 24.1                                       | 28.7                   | 24.4    |
| N  | 38,441      | 12,307       | 135,241     | 37,207    | 38,981               | 30,611                                     | 14,214                 | 307,003 |

- (1) BA (Uni): General Bachelor (Licence Générale, Bac +3)  
(2) BA (Voc): Vocational Bachelor (Licence Professionnelle)  
(3) BA other: BA or other diploma (ISCED5b) (BTS, DUT, DEUG, DEUST, Bac +2 healthcare & social work, other Bac +2)  
(4) BAC +4: Maîtrise, Bac +4, MST + MSG, Bac +4 Écoles de commerce  
(5) MA (Uni): Bac +5, DEA, Master Recherche, DESS, DRT, Master Pro, Magistère  
(6) MA (Other): Grandes Écoles de commerce, d'ingénieur  
(7) Trad. long cycle/university: Doctorate

Source: Cereq "Generation 2004" survey

It should be noted that the data are not representative, as far as international mobility after graduation is concerned. This is because graduates living abroad were not included.

### THE SHARE OF BACHELOR GRADUATES

The cohort of students in this survey carried out their studies in a context of significant change. The LMD system was implemented in the framework of the Bologna Process in order to create a convergent system of higher education programmes and degrees throughout Europe which, in France, led to an increasing vocationalisation of higher education. In recent years, the provision of training at L-level has developed significantly (Calmand et al., 2009): In 2004, students could choose from some 1,600 vocational Bachelor degrees (as compared to 178 in 2000). The introduction of vocational Bachelor degrees enabled holders of a vocational diploma (BTS or DUT) to continue their higher education studies.

However, of the almost 307,000 graduates leaving the educational system in 2004 (out of 737,000 young people leaving education), only a small number left tertiary education at L-level (i.e. as a rule after three years of study). This indicates that Bachelor-level degrees continue to be viewed primarily as the entry qualification to a Masters programme. Bachelor graduates represented only 17 per cent of all tertiary education graduates leaving the education system in 2004 (see table 2). Almost 44 per cent had obtained a short post-*baccalauréat* vocational degree (ISCED 5 B), 23 per cent held a five-year degree (Masters and *Grandes Écoles*), and 5 per cent entered the labour market with a doctorate (including a corresponding degree in medicine).

### GRADUATES' SOCIO-BIOGRAPHIC BACKGROUND

For many years, women have accounted for the majority of higher education students in France. Ten years ago, they represented 55 per cent and this trend has continued to this day. However, differences according to type of institution and field of study persist. While women represented only one third of *Grandes Écoles* graduates, they accounted for 90 per cent in health care (nursing, etc.) and social work. Their proportion varied between 37 per cent of vocational Bachelor degree holders and 70 per cent of general Bachelor degree holders (see table 1). 34 per cent obtained a Bachelor degree in management and 26 per cent in language and literature, while 44 per cent of men graduated with a vocational Bachelor degree in science and technology.

Compared to other European countries, students in France rarely interrupt their studies to take a sabbatical year or to work in a full-time job. Delays in educational careers are more commonly related to failure and drop-out in the first years of study. This is most frequent in university Bachelor programmes, where less than half the students spend the first two years without having repeated at least a year. The mean age at the time of graduation (for the total number of tertiary graduates) is 24. The mean length of tertiary studies ranges from three to four years for graduates from vocational courses to 11 years for those awarded a doctoral degree; as is seen in table 2, it is six years. Vocational Bachelor graduates were among the youngest, with a mean age of 22 on entering the labour market.

As has already been pointed out, the *baccalauréat* is the usual entry qualification for higher education. Less than one per cent of the 2004 graduates had another equivalent entry qualification (2 per cent of those graduating from social and paramedical higher schools, as is shown in [table 2](#)).

Various reports and studies have challenged the idea of an increasing democratisation of higher education in France in terms of the students' socio-economic background (e.g. Prost, 1986; Merle, 2000). In their book *La Reproduction*, Bourdieu and Passeron (1970) had already pointed out that the increase in enrolments in higher education did not necessarily lead to democratisation. Access to the *baccalauréat* and thereby to higher education remains a privilege. According to 1995 longitudinal data provided by the French Ministry of Education, the children of managers and professionals, while making up 16 per cent of pupils entering *sixième* (i.e. first year of secondary school), made up 23 per cent of *baccalauréat* holders seven years later. Children of working-class parents made up 38 per cent of those entering *sixième*, but only 29 per cent of *baccalauréat* holders (Lemaire, 2008). The process of selection and orientation at every stage of a pupil's educational career, influenced by various educational, social, economic and geographical factors, continues beyond access to higher education: Students with parents in professional and managerial occupations make up almost a third of the number of higher education students (see [table 2](#)). We note substantial differences by sector: Students with parents in professional and managerial professions are substantially over-represented in the *Grandes Écoles* as well as in many university science programmes (particularly medical studies). In contrast, many students in vocational two-year programmes and vocational Bachelor programmes come from a more modest socio-economic background. Of the graduates from vocational Bachelor programmes who leave the education system, only 26 per cent had fathers and 17 per cent had mothers in managerial and professional positions, while 14 per cent of fathers and 8 per cent of mothers worked in associate professional occupations.

#### WORK EXPERIENCE DURING THE COURSE OF STUDY

Work experience during the course of study tends to be seen as a means of enhancing students' professional competences. Therefore, an overview is provided here of various types of work experiences during the course of study.

In France, few students are employed while studying. However, apprenticeships have spread significantly in recent years. In the academic year 2006/2007, almost 80,470 students were concurrently apprentices; this figure has increased by almost 12 per cent every year over a decade; this phenomenon is most frequent among students heading for a BTS (about half) (Ministry of Education, 2008). Altogether, about 20 per cent of the vocational Bachelor graduates surveyed and less than 1 per cent of the general Bachelor graduates had studied as apprentices, notably those graduating from management and business studies.

However, many students in France work during their course of study, either to fund their studies or to be more independent. According to the *Génération 2004* survey, about 80 per cent of tertiary education graduates (85 per cent of the Bache-

lor graduates among them) had worked during their course of study, mostly in summer or part-time jobs (see Calmand et al., 2009).

Just 11 per cent of vocational Bachelor graduates stated that they had regular work during the course of study in compared to 37 per cent of the general Bachelor graduates. The low rate among the formers reflects the character of the vocational programmes: regular attendance is often compulsory while attendance tends to be optional (except for a small number of lessons) in general courses. The number of weekly hours also is inclined to be higher in vocational courses. In addition vocational programmes require students to complete a formal period of work placement during the academic year, which means that students are rarely able to have a professional activity alongside their studies.

It might be added here that almost 50 per cent of the graduates in France continued to work in the same regular job after graduating – thus having a period of gainful employment in the process of transition between higher education and full-time employment. Almost ten per cent of all graduates were still working on a job they had held during the course of study, when they were surveyed in the Cereq study about three years after graduation.

Almost 77 per cent of the vocational Bachelor graduates had participated in internships lasting more than three months during their course of study. This only slightly higher than among students in Master programmes and in *Grandes Ecoles* study programmes but substantially higher than the figure reported by general Bachelor graduates, i.e. 30 per cent (Calmand et al., 2009).

#### INTERNATIONAL MOBILITY DURING THE COURSE OF STUDY

The number of foreigners moving to France to pursue their higher education studies increased to 266,400 (Ministry of Education, 2010) in 2009. In ten years, their share grew from 7 per cent to 12 per cent of the total number of students. In 2008, almost half were Africans (25 per cent from the Maghreb and 19 per cent from other Africa countries). Less than a quarter was from Europe, of whom 18 per cent were from the European Union (about two thirds of the latter were women). A quarter was from Asia and 8 per cent were from the American continent.

Of the higher education graduates who responded to the Cereq survey in 2004, only 4 per cent were foreigners. As is seen in [table 3](#), their share is relatively high among those with a Masters degree. One must bear in mind, though, that the Cereq survey did not address graduates living abroad and therefore only covered a relatively small proportion of foreign graduates.

A considerable number of graduates studies abroad for some period. In the academic year 2008/2009, about 28,300 French students studied in another European country in the framework of the ERASMUS programme and France has regained its position as “champion of student mobility” (a position it had conceded to Germany since 2003/2004). The top foreign destinations were Spain (22 per cent) and the United Kingdom (19 per cent), followed by Germany (12 per cent), Sweden and Italy (7 per cent each).



THE VOCATIONALISATION OF UNIVERSITY PROGRAMMES IN FRANCE

Table 3. Inwards and Outwards Mobility during the Course of Study on the Part of 2004 Graduates in France

|  | BA<br>(Uni) | BA<br>(Voc.) | BA<br>other | BAC+<br>4 | MA<br>(Uni)<br>Bac+5 | MA<br>(Other)<br><i>Grandes<br/>Écoles</i> | Trad.<br>long<br>cycle | Total |
|--|-------------|--------------|-------------|-----------|----------------------|--|------------------------|-------|
|  | 1           | 2            | 3           | 4         | 5                    | 6  | 7                      | 8     |
| Total mobility<br>short and long   | 20          | 22           | 19          | 32        | 29                   | 54   | 33                     | 26    |
| Foreign graduates  | 3           | 3            | 2           | 5         | 6                    | 4  | 5                      | 4     |
| Temporary degree mobile<br>(at least 6 months)                               | 6           | 2            | 1           | 13        | 12                   | 22   | 11                     | 7     |
| Study-related stay abroad<br>in training institutions<br>(at least 6 months) | 3           | 1            | •           | 6         | 6                    | 8  | 6                      | 3     |
| Study-related stay<br>abroad in firms<br>(at least 6 months)                 | 3           | 2            | 1           | 7         | 7                    | 13   | 6                      | 4     |
| Short study-related<br>stay abroad<br>(less than 6 months)                   | 13          | 19           | 17          | 19        | 17                   | 32   | 21                     | 19    |

- (1) BA (Uni): General Bachelor (Licence Générale, Bac +3)  
(2) BA (Voc): Vocational Bachelor (Licence Professionnelle)  
(3) BA other: BA or other diploma (ISCED5b) (BTS, DUT, DEUG, DEUST, Bac +2 healthcare & social work, other Bac +2)  
(4) BAC +4: Maîtrise, Bac +4, MST + MSG, Bac +4 *Écoles de commerce*  
(5) MA (Uni): Bac +5, DEA, Master Recherche, DESS, DRT, Master Pro, Magistère  
(6) MA (Other): *Grandes Écoles de commerce, d'ingénieur*  
(7) Trad. long cycle/university: Doctorate

Source: Cereq "Generation 2004" survey

Periods of study abroad remain relatively undeveloped in university programmes, including those with a strong vocational purpose. Over half of *Grandes Écoles* graduates and a third of doctoral and Master graduates had completed at least one period of study in a foreign country as part of their higher education studies, as opposed to just 20 per cent of Bachelor graduates (see table 3 on the mobility). Most of these periods lasted for less than six months, and over half of them were carried out in English-speaking countries (Calmand et al., 2009). Two thirds of *Grandes Écoles* graduates, research Master graduates and doctoral graduates completed a period of study lasting less than six months. A greater number of general Bachelor graduates engaged in a period of study abroad lasting at least six months than vocational Bachelor graduates (6 per cent as opposed to 2 per cent). These periods of study were equally likely to be conducted in companies and training institutions.

## PROFESSIONAL SUCCESS OF VOCATIONAL BACHELOR GRADUATES

*The whereabouts of graduates*

The 2004 graduates entered the French labour market in a difficult economic situation, although it was less serious than during the economic crisis that hit France in 2008 (Joseph, Lopez & Ryk, 2008). Three years after entering the labour market, 7 per cent of Bachelor graduates were unemployed (see [table 4](#)). The proportion of graduates beginning a fixed-term contract remained constant at around 20 per cent.

*Table 4. Whereabout of 2004 Graduates Three Years Later in France*

|  | Count  | Per cent |
|--|--------|----------|
| <i>Bachelor graduates*</i>                       |        |          |
| Study  | 3,682  | 7        |
| Employment                                       | 42,302 | 83       |
| Neither study nor employment<br>nor unemployment | 1,486  | 3        |
| Unemployment                                     | 3,278  | 7        |
| Total  | 50,748 | 100      |
| <i>Master + Grandes Écoles Graduates</i>         |        |          |
| Study  | 1,362  | 2        |
| Employment                                       | 63,545 | 91       |
| Neither study nor employment<br>nor unemployment | 1,127  | 2        |
| Unemployment                                     | 3,560  | 5        |
| Total  | 69,594 | 100      |

\* Excluding those continuing study in the first year after graduation

Source: Cereq "Generation 2004" survey

Overall, the analysis of the first three years after graduation indicates that vocational Bachelor graduates have coped with the adverse economic conditions successfully by securing qualified and permanent jobs. In 2007, almost 90 per cent were employed, and the vast majority had secured a permanent contract (see [table 4](#)). The number of graduates working part-time was low. Vocational Bachelor graduates also tended to be better paid than general Bachelor graduates, even if access to manager and professional positions remained relatively rare. Three years after entering the labour market, 15 per cent of the vocational Bachelor graduates had been recruited as managers or professionals as compared to 17 per cent of the general Bachelor graduates, 63 per cent of the Master graduates and 81 per cent of the *Grandes Écoles* graduates (see [table 5](#)). A closer examination of the positions according to different fields of study confirms that the jobs obtained by graduates

THE VOCATIONALISATION OF UNIVERSITY PROGRAMMES IN FRANCE

were mostly qualified and related to their training. Overall, graduates in industrial fields seemed to be in a better position in the labour market than other graduates.

Table 5. Professional Situation of 2004 Employed Graduates Three Years Later in France

|   | BA<br>(Uni) | BA<br>(Voc.) | BA<br>other | BAC+<br>4 | MA<br>(Uni)<br>Bac+5 | MA<br>(Other)<br>Grandes<br>Écoles | Trad.<br>long<br>cycle | Total |
|---|-------------|--------------|-------------|-----------|----------------------|------------------------------------|------------------------|-------|
|   | 1           | 2            | 3           | 4         | 5                    | 6                                  | 7                      | 8     |
| <i>Period from graduation to first employment (in months)</i>               |             |              |             |           |                      |                                    |                        |       |
| Arith. mean   | 3.4         | 2.1          | 2.7         | 3.9       | 3.5                  | 3.2                                | 2.4                    | 3.0   |
| Median  | 2.0         | 0.0          | 1.0         | 2.0       | 1.0                  | 2.0                                | 0.0                    | 1.0   |
| <i>Duration of job search from 2004 to 2007 (in months)</i>                 |             |              |             |           |                      |                                    |                        |       |
| Arith. mean   | 3.3         | 3.2          | 3.4         | 4.3       | 4.6                  | 3.7                                | 3.6                    | 3.7   |
| Median  | 0.0         | 0.0          | 0.0         | 0.0       | 2.0                  | 1.0                                | 0.0                    | 0.0   |
| Full-time employment (per cent)   | 79          | 96           | 88          | 86        | 90                   | 98                                 | 85                     | 88    |
| Long-term employment (per cent)   | 70          | 80           | 73          | 71        | 77                   | 91                                 | 71                     | 75    |
| <i>Net income (in €)</i>  |             |              |             |           |                      |                                    |                        |       |
| Arith. mean   | 1,368       | 1,575        | 1,483       | 1,618     | 1,904                | 2,313                              | 2,383                  | 1,806 |
| Median  | 1,411       | 1,514        | 1,408       | 1,510     | 1,800                | 2,167                              | 2,150                  | 1,514 |
| Graduates in managerial/professional occupation (per cent)                  | 17          | 15           | 6           | 33        | 63                   | 81                                 | 91                     | 30    |
| Graduates in associate professional occupation (per cent)                   | 64          | 67           | 62          | 50        | 29                   | 15                                 | 7                      | 49    |
| Employment three years after appropriate to level of competences (per cent) | 61          | 60           | 61          | 54        | 63                   | 69                                 | 76                     | 62    |
| Employment three years after appropriate to level of education (per cent)   | 55          | 40           | 70          | 59        | 82                   | 88                                 | 97                     | 70    |
| Job satisfaction three years after (per cent)                               | 76          | 82           | 82          | 78        | 82                   | 85                                 | 89                     | 82    |

- (1) BA (Uni): General Bachelor (Licence Générale, Bac +3)  
(2) BA (Voc): Vocational Bachelor (Licence Professionnelle)  
(3) BA other: BA or other diploma (ISCED5b) (BTS, DUT, DEUG, DEUST, Bac +2 healthcare & social work, other Bac +2)  
(4) BAC +4: Maîtrise, Bac +4, MST + MSG, Bac +4 Écoles de commerce  
(5) MA (Uni): Bac +5, DEA, Master Recherche, DESS, DRT, Master Pro, Magistère  
(6) MA (Other): Grandes Écoles de commerce, d'ingénieur  
(7) Trad. long cycle/university: Doctorate

Source: Cereq "Generation 2004" survey

The Cereq surveys only address those who have left the education system for at least one year. Hence, they do not provide a full account of the number of graduates who continue their studies after having been awarded a degree. However, many graduates returned to education after having been employed for a while. As can be seen in [table 4](#), seven per cent of the 2004 Bachelor graduates (primarily graduates from the general programmes) having been employed for some time returned to higher education or were engaged in other further training (most often teacher training programmes).

Data provided by the French Ministry of Higher Education provides a more complete picture of further study and training subsequent to the Bachelor award. There is a clear dichotomy between the two types of graduates. Most General Bachelors graduating in 2004/2005 continued their education (82 per cent), notably in Master programmes (approximately two thirds), in teacher training (10 per cent) and in other training programmes (5 per cent). Two years after graduation from a general Bachelor, about 30 per cent obtained a Master degree. In contrast, only 20 per cent of the vocational Bachelor graduates continued their education and training in the subsequent academic year, of whom 17 per cent at universities (mostly in Master programmes) and 3 per cent in teacher training institutes (Ministry of Education, 2007).

#### *Enviably professional prospects?*

As most vocational Bachelor graduates held a vocational two-year diploma (BTS or DUT), the professional value of the vocational Bachelor can be established by the advantage of their employment situation in relation to that of graduates of two-year programmes. The available data suggest that the additional third year of study is very profitable: unemployment rates were lower and the number of permanent contracts and executive and intermediate positions was significantly higher. The average salary was also higher (by approximately 150 Euros). Most vocational Bachelor graduates (87 per cent) were employed in private companies.

The 2004 general Bachelor graduates transferring to employment – a small minority, as pointed out above – were in a less favourable position. Even though a slightly higher number obtained executive positions (see above), they earned on average 80 Euros less than vocational Bachelor graduates. The rate of unemployment was also marginally higher (7 per cent as compared to 5 per cent of vocational Bachelor graduates), particularly for those with a degree in language, literature, law and economics. The job stability three years after graduation was clearly lower for general Bachelor graduates: 70 per cent had a permanent contract as compared to 80 per cent of vocational Bachelor graduates, 77 per cent of Master graduates and 91 per cent of *Grandes Écoles* graduates. Part-time work was also more common: 21 per cent as compared to only 4 per cent of vocational Bachelor graduates. 30 per cent of the women among the general Bachelor graduates were in part-time employment as compared to 13 per cent of men.

In assessing the professional situation of general Bachelor graduates, we must take into consideration that almost 60 per cent of those in literature and the human-

ities were employed three years later as primary school teachers, supply teachers, teaching assistants or student monitors. A smaller number of graduates – notably in law and economics – were employed as professionals in intermediate positions, either in public administration or in private business companies. General Bachelor graduates in the public sector tend to be in unfavourable positions (Dauty & Lemistre, 2006).

Overall, vocational Bachelor graduates experienced fewer problems in the transition process than those with a vocational two-year diploma. They find more stable and better paid jobs and are employed in higher positions. Compared to general Bachelor graduates transferring to employment, the vocational Bachelor graduates did not obtain higher positions, but they had a higher income and more satisfying work.

Altogether, more than half the Bachelor graduates were still working with their first employer. Most had never experienced unemployment and the average period of job search was very short (3 months for Bachelor graduates, 5 months for Master graduates).

Among both general and vocational Bachelor graduates, women had a less favourable position in the labour market than men. Gender-related differences remain significant as regards income: Female students graduating in 2004 with a university qualification earned 15 per cent less than their male counterparts. There are also other socio-economic disparities. The children of immigrants, who were less likely to pursue higher education studies, were more at risk of unemployment, particularly those from North African countries (Frickey, Murdoch & Primon, 2004; Brinbaum & Guégnard, 2010). To understand these disparities beyond the strictly discriminatory phenomena highlighted in studies of the French labour market (Duguet & Petit, 2005), differences in inherited educational, social and economic capital (which generally tend to combine in making youth vulnerable upon entering the labour market) need to be taken into account.

#### *Work linked to training*

The relationship between study and work has been an issue of concern on the part of many experts and scholars who warned that the gap between the level of qualification and the level of employment and work would widen with higher education expansion (see for example Duru-Bellat, 2006). Yet tertiary graduates tended not to perceive such a gap when surveyed in 2007 three years after graduation. Almost 70 per cent stated that their level of qualification was necessary to carry out their job to a satisfactory level (see [table 5](#)).

As pointed out above, vocational Bachelor graduates seem to have a relatively favourable employment situation. The picture is less favourable with respect to their views about appropriate employment and work. Only 40 per cent felt that their jobs matched their level of education; this is low compared to the respective statements of general Bachelor graduates (55 per cent) and the average of all graduates (70 per cent). 45 per cent of the vocational Bachelor graduates stated that a lower qualification (two years of post-*baccalauréat* study) would be sufficient to

carry out their job satisfactorily. This relatively negative assessment can be explained by their difficulties in having access to executive positions and thereby demarcating themselves from tertiary technicians recruited after two years of post-*baccalauréat* study (BTS or DUT).

However, these results need to be put into perspective, because the ratings of the vocational Bachelor graduates are positive. 60 per cent consider that their employment matches their level of competences (as compared to 61 per cent of the general Bachelor graduates and 62 per cent on average of all graduates). 82 per cent wished to remain in their current job and were satisfied in it. Finally, 27 per cent of vocational Bachelor graduates believed that they were well or very well paid; this is higher than the average of all tertiary graduates (20 per cent).

For the most part, graduates enjoyed enviable professional prospects and had found employment quickly and permanently. One positive indication of professional integration is that nearly 60 per cent of Bachelor graduates stated that their skills were valued in their current job, reflecting the feelings of most higher education graduates. Two thirds wished to remain for as long as possible in their current job.

As is seen in [table 5](#), however, the lowest rate of job satisfaction is stated by general Bachelor graduates. Yet, their job satisfaction is relatively high: almost three quarters are satisfied with their job.

#### *Geographical mobility*

Three Bachelor graduates out of ten have worked outside the region since graduation. This ratio is low as compared to about half of the Master graduates and doctoral award holders.

Half the Bachelor graduates stated that they would be prepared to leave the region where they work to advance their career. This is higher than the actual mobility, but they are less prepared to leave the region than Master graduates (66 per cent) and doctorate holders (57 per cent). Other studies show that young people generally view geographical mobility as a requirement for career advancement (Centre d'études et de recherches sur les qualifications [Cereq], 2008).

#### *Change over time*

As Cereq has undertaken a similar survey in 2004 of the 2001 generation of graduates in France (see Giret, Molinari-Perrier & Moullet, 2006), a change over time can be observed. As [table 6](#) shows, the 2001 vocational Bachelor graduates have differed in their employment situation three years later from the general Bachelor graduates of their generation: also the 2001 vocational Bachelor graduates reached more often a stable employment and a higher education income and were less frequently unemployed, while fewer were employed as professionals and managers than general Bachelor graduates.

THE VOCATIONALISATION OF UNIVERSITY PROGRAMMES IN FRANCE

Table 6. *Employment of Bachelor Graduates 2001 and 2004 in France  
Three Years Later (per cent)*

|                               | Unemployment<br>rate | Employed as<br>professionals<br>& managers | Permanent<br>employment<br>contract | Median net<br>monthly<br>income<br>(Euro) |
|-------------------------------|----------------------|--|-------------------------------------|---|
| <i>Graduates 2004:</i>        |                      |  |                                     |   |
| Vocational Bachelor graduates | 5                    | 15   | 80                                  | 1,514                                     |
| General Bachelor graduates    | 7                    | 17   | 70                                  | 1,411                                     |
| <i>Graduates 2001:</i>        |                      |  |                                     |   |
| Vocational Bachelor graduates | 9                    | 17   | 78                                  | 1,380                                     |
| General Bachelor graduates    | 12                   | 22   | 67                                  | 1,300                                     |

Source: Cereq “Generation 2004” and “Generation 2001” surveys

There are similar differences between the 2001 cohort and the 2004 cohort both for general Bachelor graduates and for vocational Bachelor graduates. We note a slight improvement of the employment situation in two respects: the unemployment rate decreased by 5 per cent and 2 per cent respectively; similarly, the proportion of graduates with a permanent employment contract increased by 3 per cent and per cent respectively. The increase of the net income by about 8-9 per cent must be seen as being linked to inflation. But the employment in professional or managerial positions decreased slightly by 5 per cent and 2 per cent respectively.

SOME CONCLUDING REMARKS

At the end of this analysis, the findings of the survey need to be viewed in a more general theoretical framework. One of the objectives of any transition survey is to establish the extent to which the qualification obtained at the end of training is used by graduates in employment. The human capital theory suggests that training is one of the best ways of securing a good job and satisfactory work conditions. Our results confirm these findings in the French labour market. A higher education degree constitutes a relative protection against unemployment and nearly two thirds of young people claimed that their skills were recognised in their current professional activity. At the other end of the scale, young people with no diplomas were highly exposed to unemployment: 32 per cent were still unemployed after three years in the labour market (Cereq, 2008). In France, a Bachelor-level degree is currently deemed to represent a first threshold. This is confirmed among vocational Bachelor graduates. While the employability of Bachelor graduates is undeniable, the level of international mobility does not appear to be a determining factor for French graduates. Only students in engineering courses are strongly encouraged to undertake a period of study abroad to achieve the level of proficiency in English required as part of their degree.

Overall in 2004, vocational higher education graduates entered the labour market in better conditions than their predecessors. After three years, a greater number had a permanent job and were better paid. A diploma has never been a more valuable asset than today. Despite unfavourable economic circumstances and significant changes in the provision of training, the hierarchy of diplomas remains unchanged. It is worth recalling that the careers and income of higher education graduates are significantly more favourable than those of school leavers, with the likelihood of a rapid and permanent access to employment being very high. Tertiary graduates also tend to be less exposed to the effects of changing economic circumstances, despite continuing disparities between *Grandes Écoles* and university graduates.

These observations highlight the continuing influence of forms of higher education inherited from the past (Brennan & Tang, 2008) – an influence that is likely to change as a result of the increasing vocationalisation of university education, not unlike the changes affecting other European countries. As noted by Teichler (2007), the debate surrounding the conflict between general and vocational courses is seldom addressed in British universities, while vocationalisation is becoming increasingly important in France and to a lesser extent in Germany. This reflects the levels of job satisfaction felt by students and recorded in Cereq and REFLEX (*Research into Employment and professional Flexibility*) surveys (Allen & van der Velden, 2007; Guégnard, Calmand, Giret & Paul, 2008). In the British context, job satisfaction is primarily related to income, while in Germany it is more closely related to the type of job or professional occupation.

Human capital and employability constitute a crucial challenge for all the countries. At the moment when Europe and the rest of the world are moving towards a knowledge society, an effective higher education and an efficient vocational system appear more important for the economy and society. Recent and current developments in the French educational system have raised a number of issues concerning the competition between vocational and general programmes in a context of significantly expanding training provision. Attempts to build bridges between training courses to enable students to continue their studies more easily have also raised a debate concerning the gap between vocational and general courses. Some training programmes initially designed to be vocational and to result in entry in professional life have lost their unique appeal and distinctiveness. The current difficulties encountered by providers of vocational courses who are keen to integrate the LMD system reflect the ambiguous status of such programmes in French higher education, while their graduates are highly valued by industry employers.



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