

The vocational baccalaureate: a gateway to higher education?

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SUMMARY

Keywords

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Access to the baccalaureate and higher education in France has become more democratic. The introduction of the vocational baccalaureate has been part of this process, but remains a modest step forward given the very low take-up of vocational baccalaureate courses. If vocational education pathways in France are to become true gateways to higher education and social mobility, career guidance and lifelong learning need to become more effective and the French higher education system needs to be rethought to achieve integrated pathways that complement one another and at the same time differentiate themselves from one another, replacing a sterile, counter-productive hierarchical system.

Introduction

Improving the standing of vocational education in Europe has been a major concern since the early 2000s (Leney et al., 2004). In the countries of the the European Union this has manifested itself in different ways depending on the structure of their education systems. In France, the system of secondary education is a hierarchical system with a strongly dualistic structure. It was altered by the introduction of the vocational baccalaureate diploma (*baccalauréat professionnel or Bac Pro*) (Gendron, 2006). This was created in order to offer students who fail in general education a way of continuing their education, to stabilise the dropout rate and to open up access to studies at baccalaureate level. The target pursued by the Ministry of Education since the 1980s, of bringing 80 % of a cohort to baccalaureate level, has assumed considerable importance and consequently this diploma has become a major educational yardstick (Hanchane and Verdier, 2003). Indeed, a desire to improve the status of vocational education made itself felt in France well before the Lisbon Summit as a response in particular to the need for, and lack of, people with a technical training who were also sufficiently adaptable. This approach already attempted to address the issue of exclusion and dropout from the school system, a concern that became apparent at European level at the start of the 2000s (Leney et al. 2004, p.108). One of the main policy measures in France consisted of lengthening the vocational and technical education pathways by introducing new diplomas: in secondary education these included the vocational baccalaureate, which corresponds to level 3 of the International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED) and gives access to higher education. In fact the baccalaureate has come to represent an important crossroads in a student's educational career, a decisive moment at which the questions of whether to continue in education and of a future career need to be considered. Given that one of the priorities of the European Union is to ensure that general, technical and vocational education pathways enjoy parity of esteem (Lasonen and Manning 2001), the question to be asked in France today is this: has the vocational baccalaureate diploma become a genuine gateway to higher education?

In answering this question, we will briefly examine the structure of the French system of initial vocational education. On this basis and using statistical data, we will go on to demonstrate to what extent this new diploma has opened up access to higher education. Secondly, we will take a more critical view and endeavour to show

that the realities underlying this data are rather different and that if progress has been made, it remains modest when measured against the European recommendations.

The system of initial vocational education

The structure of initial vocational education at secondary level

The organisation of vocational education in France is somewhat unique in that it is widely established in institutions offering upper secondary education under the authority of the Ministry of Education. Vocational education is also found at vocational *lycées* governed by the Ministry of Agriculture and in the form of apprenticeships at apprentice training centres (CFA). The present study, however, will refer only to training courses that are the responsibility of the Ministry of Education.

In France, secondary education coming under the Ministry of Education consists of three pathways at upper secondary level (see Table 1): the general, technological and vocational pathways. The latter is the one we are interested in here. After completion of studies at lower-secondary level, the vocational pathway prepares students of around 14-15 years of age to take a *certificat d'aptitude professionnelle* (CAP, certificate of vocational aptitude) or a *brevet d'études professionnelles* (BEP, vocational studies certificate), which can lead on to the vocational baccalaureate.

Creation of and access to the vocational baccalaureate: what is the impact on training at lower levels (Level V)?

What are the vocational baccalaureates?

Created in 1985 the vocational baccalaureate was intended to 'enrich' secondary-level vocational education in France by adding a Level IV training course corresponding to European diploma Level 3. It was designed to 'enrich' the system in three important ways. First, the creation of the vocational baccalaureate allowed students who had obtained the BEP (vocational studies certificate) to continue their education (see diagram). Second, the prestige associated with the mere title 'baccalaureate' helped to raise the status of the vocational pathway. Obtaining the baccalaureate of whichever stream (general, technological or vocational) is of tremendous significance to a student's family. Finally, as a diploma obtained on completion of secondary education,

Table 1. **Simplified diagram of the French system of secondary and tertiary education (and apprenticeship system)**

		Principal certification within general curriculum (in the education system: student status)			Certification by Apprentice Training Centres (CFA) (apprentice status)	
Higher education	18 years and above	Level II-I	Doctorate		Graduate engineer	
			New structure following implementation of the Bologna process (3+2+5) Doctorate			
			Advanced Studies Degree (DEA) Higher Specialised Studies Degree (DESS) Engineering Degree			
			Master's Degree (maîtrise)			
		Bachelor's Degree (<i>licence</i>) Vocational Bachelor's Degree (<i>licence professionnelle</i>) Post-DUT/BTS		Post-DUT/BTS Bachelor's Degree (<i>licence</i>) + Vocational Bachelor's Degree (<i>licence professionnelle</i>)	Vocational Bachelor's Degree (<i>licence professionnelle</i>) Post-DUT/BTS	
Secondary School	15 to 18 years 3 to 4 years of study	Level III	University technology diploma (DUT) Higher technical certificate (BTS)	Diploma of general university studies (DEUG) Higher technical certificate (BTS)	University technology diploma (DUT) Higher technical certificate (BTS)	DUT, BTS
			Level IV			Baccalaureates (general, technological and vocational)
		Level V	Other pre-baccalaureate vocational diplomas: Vocational Studies Certificate (BEP), Certificate of Vocational Aptitude (CAP) (¹)			BEP, CAP

Note: For all abbreviations, see glossary on page 23.

(¹) **Differences between the CAP and BEP:** The BEP (vocational studies certificate) offers more general and broader training than the CAP (certificate of vocational aptitude), which offers opportunities for gaining more specific skills. In practice the CAP mainly leads to employment, which is why the CAP covers a larger number of specialist subjects than the BEP (200 compared with 40). The BEP, on the other hand, offers training that is less specific, training, which can therefore lead on to the vocational or technological baccalaureate.

the baccalaureate gives access to higher education and constitutes the first stage of higher education, even if its primary aim is to facilitate entry onto the labour market. Its objectives were ambitious: to establish training for future workshop technicians, to promote vocational training and to foster cooperation between schools and enterprises through alternance training. In this respect, it was in the vanguard of European endeavours to increase the standing of vocational pathways.

What was the impact of this diploma on vocational education diplomas? A breath of fresh air

Since the establishment of this diploma there has been a significant increase in the number of students obtaining the BEP and conversely a fall in the number of those taking the first diploma, the CAP, along with strong growth in the vocational baccalaureate. The following observations can be made on the basis of the statistical data in Table 2 below:

**Table 2. Access rates to educational level IV
(all initial training courses combined)**

	Metropolitan France		Metropolitan France + Overseas Departments			
	1980/81	1990/91	2000/01	2004/05	2005/06	2006/07
General baccalaureate	22.1	33.4	34.0	34.6	35.1	35.1
Technological baccalaureate	11.9	17.6	21.6	20.4	19.9	18.8
Vocational baccalaureate	0.0	5.0	14.0	14.7	15.2	15.8*
Total	34.0	56.0	69.6	69.7	70.2	69.7
MEN*	33.0	54.0	63.2	63.5	63.8	63.2
Agriculture	1.0	1.4	2.7	2.5	2.5	2.6
Apprenticeships	0.0	0.6	3.7	3.7	3.9	4.0*

Figures for apprenticeship training are based on estimates.

Source: MEN-MESR-DEPP

* MEN: Training courses under the authority of the Ministry of Education
Taken from *L'état de l'école 2007 (The state of education 2007)* No 17 page 57. Available from Internet: <http://media.education.gouv.fr/file/05/5/7055.pdf> [Accessed on 11/01/2008] (°)

(°) The *première d'adaptation* class allows students holding a BEP (vocational studies certificate) who perform well in general subjects to prepare for the technological baccalaureate. This class acts as a bridge, focusing on general subjects that are not covered as fully in the BEP due to its vocational emphasis.

(°) *L'état de l'école 2007 (The state of education 2007)* is also published in Spanish http://media.education.gouv.fr/file/espetat17/19/9/espetat17_21199.pdf and *L'état de l'école 2006 (The state of education 2006)* in English and Spanish
EN: <http://media.education.gouv.fr/file/68/0/3680.pdf>
ES: <http://media.education.gouv.fr/file/68/1/3681.pdf> (Editor's note)

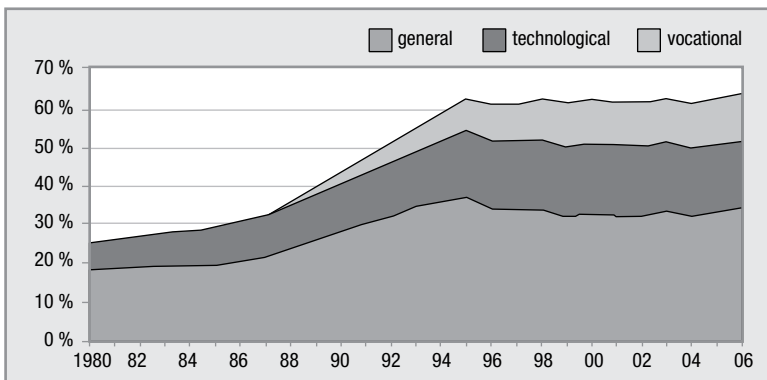
- Firstly, one student in two continues their studies after obtaining a CAP-BEP, with more going on to take the vocational baccalaureate or vocational certificates than the *première d'adaptation class* ⁽²⁾ (general and technological stream in upper secondary).
- Secondly, after the introduction of the vocational baccalaureate, nearly 14.5 % of a cohort of students achieved vocational baccalaureate level in 2004 compared with 5 % in 1990-91.

In other words, almost 70 % of a cohort of students achieved baccalaureate level (ISCED Level 3), of whom 35 % obtained the general baccalaureate, nearly 20 % the technological baccalaureate and around 15 % the vocational baccalaureate.

If the introduction of the vocational baccalaureate has helped to make access to the baccalaureate more democratic, how many students obtain the diploma?

As a qualification, the vocational baccalaureate is becoming an increasingly important feature of the educational landscape. While today some 85 % of candidates pass the general baccalaureate, the success rate for the vocational baccalaureate reached 75 % in 2005. The overall proportion of students gaining the baccalaureate in 2004 (see Figure 1: Proportion of students in a cohort obtaining the baccalaureate) was in excess of 61.7 %, of whom 32 % were in the general stream, 17.7 % in the technological stream and 11.7 % in the vocational stream. Of 100 students who were successful, 52 hold the general, 29 the technological and 19 the vocational baccalaureate.

Figure 1. **Proportion of baccalaureate holders in a cohort (1980-2006) in metropolitan France**



Source: Ministère de l'éducation nationale

Taken from *L'état de l'école 2007 (The state of education 2007)* - No 17 page 65

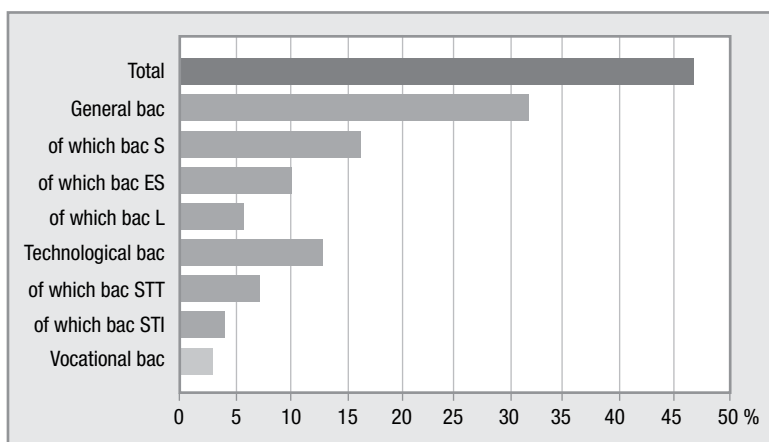
The vocational baccalaureate: a doorway to higher education?

How many students continue their education, where and with what success rate?

Overall situation:

Of the total 62 % of students obtaining the baccalaureate of whichever type, almost 50 % of a cohort went on to higher education in 2005, of whom 33 % held a general baccalaureate, 13.5 % a technological baccalaureate and 2.6 % a vocational baccalaureate.

Figure 2. **Rate of access to higher education of a cohort by type of baccalaureate**



Note: For all abbreviations, see glossary on page 23.

Source: MEN-DEPP

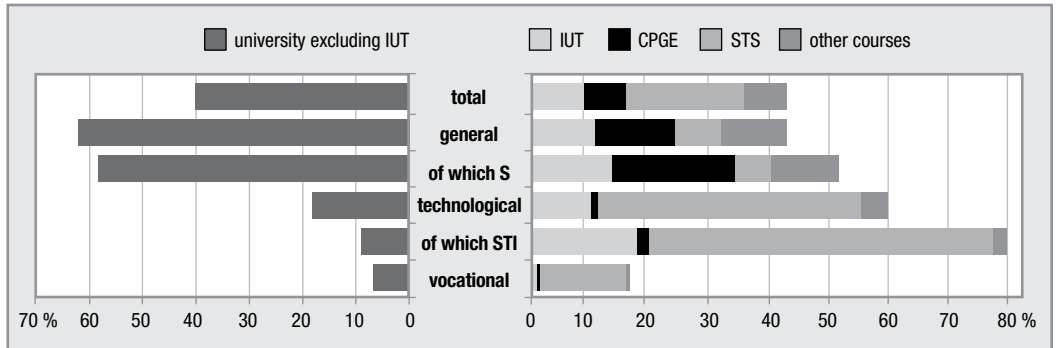
Taken from *L'état de l'école 2006 (The state of education 2006)* - No 16 page 61.

Available from Internet: <http://media.education.gouv.fr/file/07/9/3079.pdf> (Accessed on 11/01/2008)

How many vocational baccalaureate holders continue in education?

Unlike the other baccalaureates, the vocational baccalaureate leads only a few people to continue on to higher education (23 %), with the majority entering the labour market (77 %). Students are encouraged in this direction by those who provide educational guidance and by teachers, since this diploma was originally intended to help people into work.

Figure 3. Rate of access to higher education of a cohort by type of baccalaureate



Note: For all abbreviations, see glossary on page 23.

Source: MEN-DEPP

Taken from *L'état de l'école 2005 (The state of education 2005)* - No 15 page 67.

Available from Internet: <http://media.education.gouv.fr/file/07/6/3076.pdf> (Accessed on 11/01/2008).

Is access improving? What courses are students moving on to and with what success rate?

The increase in the number continuing their studies has now begun to stabilise, from 17 % ten years ago (1997) to 23 % today. Those continuing in education are split between non-university and university pathways. Thus of the 23 % who continue immediately after the bac, one in four takes a BTS, one in 10 chooses a supplementary training course (*Mention Complémentaire or Formation Complémentaire d'Initiative Locale*) and less than one in 10 goes on to university.

What courses are students moving on to immediately and with what success rate?

WHAT ARE THE *BREVETS DE TECHNICIENS SUPÉRIEURS* (BTS, HIGHER TECHNICAL CERTIFICATES)?

These are short two-year training courses including in-company traineeships that are based on what might be called a 'traditional' approach to an occupation, the principle being to provide specialised technical training at an advanced level for those who will go on to work as technicians (in industry) or in medium-level jobs (in the service sector). While the BTS is the principal form of further training

Table 3. **Immediate enrolment of baccalaureate holders in the various higher education pathways***

Metropolitan France and Overseas Departments				
	1997	2004	2005	2006
General baccalaureate				
University excluding IUT	66.7	62.1	61.3	58.8
IUT	9.8	10.7	10.4	10.5
CPGE	13.0	13.6	13.3	13.2
STS	9.0	7.8	7.7	7.8
Other training	7.7	10.8	11.1	10.8
Technological baccalaureate				
University excluding IUT	22.0	18.1	18.1	17.4
IUT	10.2	10.2	10.4	9.9
CPGE	0.9	1.1	1.1	1.1
STS	46.1	44.1	44.0	42.5
Other training	3.0	4.7	5.0	5.0
General and technological baccalaureate combined				
University excluding IUT	51.7	46.5	46.5	45.0
IUT	9.9	10.5	10.4	10.3
CPGE	8.9	9.2	9.1	9.2
STS	21.5	20.6	20.1	19.3
Other training	6.1	8.6	9.0	8.9
Vocational baccalaureate				
University excluding IUT	6.8	6.4	5.9	5.8
IUT	0.8	0.7	0.8	0.7
CPGE	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
STS	8.9	15.2	15.7	15.5
Other training	0.8	0.6	0.6	0.6
All baccalaureates together				
University excluding IUT	44.5	38.9	39.1	37.5
IUT	8.5	8.7	8.7	8.4
CPGE	7.5	7.4	7.4	7.4
STS	19.5	19.6	19.3	18.6
Other training	5.3	7.1	7.5	7.3

* **Excluding apprenticeships**

Note: For all abbreviations, see glossary on page 23.

Source: MEN-MESR-DEPP

Taken from *L'état de l'école 2007 (The state of education 2007)* - No 17 page 65.

chosen by vocational baccalaureate holders (*i.e.* 15.5 % of students obtaining the vocational baccalaureate enrol for a BTS), entry to this form of training is selective (based on school reports or requiring grades of 'Good' or 'Very Good' for the baccalaureate). In 2004 the pass rate was a mere 45 % across all specialisms. Some of these students also completed it by means of alternance training.

With regard to supplementary training courses (*MC, mentions complémentaires* or *FCIL, formations complémentaires d'initiative locale*), about one baccalaureate holder in 10 chooses this route, where they can specialise or acquire skills in two areas over a one-year period. Fewer than one in 10 go on to university. Indeed, of the 23 % of vocational baccalaureate holders who continue their studies immediately, 0.7 % enrol at University Institutes of Technology (IUTs) and 5.8 % take a bachelor degree (*licence*) at university.

WHAT ARE DUT COURSES?

These are two-year training courses that are more theoretical than the BTS and culminate in the university diplomas in technology (DUT) awarded by IUTs. Access to these courses is highly selective, with IUTs taking 0.7 % of vocational baccalaureate holders, who moreover account for no more than 2 % of first-year students. While access to the DUT is limited for vocational baccalaureate holders, those who undertake this training are relatively successful: 51 % of vocational baccalaureate holders enrolled at IUTs succeeded in obtaining their diploma in 2004 (even if they represented less than 4 % of the total number achieving a DUT).

WHAT ABOUT THOSE WHO CONTINUE WITH A BACHELOR'S DEGREE AT UNIVERSITY (EXCLUDING THE IUTS)?

Since entry to university in France is not selective, 6.4 % of vocational baccalaureate holders enrolled at university in 2004. However, this proportion fell in 2005 to 5.9 %. These 6 % of baccalaureate holders represented just 3 % of first-year university students. It is fair to say that the university option is fraught with risks and extremely unsuitable for vocational baccalaureate holders because courses leading to a bachelor's degree, three years after the baccalaureate, are highly theoretical and a far cry from the education received at the vocational *lycée*. Consequently, only one vocational baccalaureate holder in 10 who goes on to university will manage to obtain their degree (3-5 years of study).

Table 4. Assessment of the educational career of baccalaureate holders in the 1989 student panel, by principal type of baccalaureate

	Entering higher education*	Obtaining a higher education diploma			Non-certificated higher education courses
		Total	of which bac + 2	of which bac+ 3 or +	
bac ES	97.5	84.1	23.3	60.8	13.4
bac L	96.2	78.3	18.3	60.0	17.9
bac S	98.5	92.5	19.9	72.5	6.1
General bac holders	97.7	86.8	20.4	66.5	10.8
STT	89.0	55.9	44.6	11.3	33.1
STI	94.3	74.8	62.0	12.8	19.5
Other technological	81.9	52.6	23.6	29.0	29.3
Technological bac holders	89.1	60.2	45.3	14.9	28.9
Vocational bac holders	31.1	10.4	9.5	0.9	20.7
All bac holders	86.2	69.1	25.6	43.5	17.1

*At the start of the academic year after they obtained their baccalaureate or the start of the subsequent academic year.

How to read this table: 97.5 % of economic and social (ES) baccalaureate holders go on to higher education, where 84.1 % obtain a diploma.

Note: For all abbreviations, see glossary on page 23.

Source: 1989 Student Panel MEN-DEPP

Taken from *L'état de l'école 2006 (The state of education 2006)* - No 16 page 67.

What conclusions can we draw?

While it can be observed that the number of pupils following vocational pathways towards the baccalaureate is increasing and that more students are continuing into higher education, behind the figures for entry to higher education the realities are rather different, depending on baccalaureate type.

Differences in access due to past educational pathway

The rate of entry into higher education for a given cohort varies, depending on the type of baccalaureate achieved: it is relatively low for students with the vocational baccalaureate, at 2.6 %, compared with over 30 % for those with the general baccalaureate. Furthermore, success in higher education also depends on the

type of baccalaureate obtained. The highest failure rate is found among those with the vocational baccalaureate: 10.4 % achieve a higher education diploma compared with 86.8 % of students with the general baccalaureate.

Choice of higher education course and social background

While a majority of students following prestigious higher education courses (CPGE, preparatory classes for the *Grandes Écoles*) are the children of executives and hold the general baccalaureate, the children of working-class parents are more likely to hold the vocational baccalaureate and to study for the BTS (higher technical certificate). This difference stems from the way in which these pupils are still to a very large extent guided towards the vocational *lycée* on the basis of social background. Even if it is clear today that social background is not the only factor in educational success, it still remains extremely significant: 'Socio-economic groups attending the vocational *lycées* are invariably distinguished by their humble origins and relative failure in general education,' (Solaux, 1996).

Differences in the duration and cost of courses

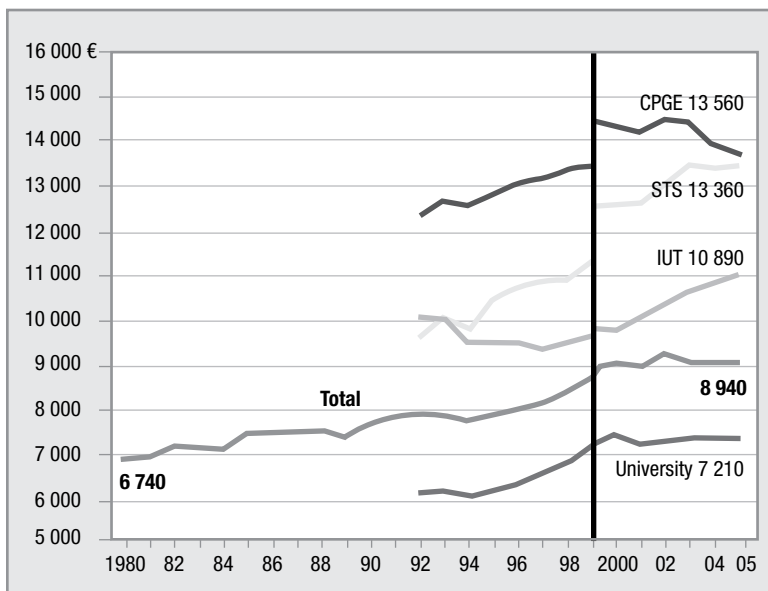
The courses chosen by holders of the vocational baccalaureate are not the most expensive. The CPGE courses, mainly taken by general baccalaureate holders, are the most costly. In order of cost and expenditure, we find that vocational baccalaureate holders account for 0 % of those on CPGE courses, 15 % of first-year BTS students, 2 % of first-year IUT students and 3 % of first-year university undergraduates ⁽⁴⁾. Nor do they choose the courses of longest duration: indeed, holders of the vocational baccalaureate study for a shorter period in higher education than those with the other baccalaureates.

Does continuing education help to reduce these differences?

This question refers to the link between initial training and continuing education. In France, the boundaries between initial training and continuing education are less fluid than in most other European Union countries (*Céreq Bref*, 2006). Indeed, while continuing education (CE) and accreditation of prior learning (APL) were designed to offer 'a second chance school' and the opportunity to return to

⁽⁴⁾ See *The state of education 2006* No 16 page 63, Table 02, showing the proportion of holders of different types of baccalaureate in higher education sectors in 2005.

Figure 4. **Evolution of average expenditure per student (1980-2005) at 2005 prices in euro**



Note: For all abbreviations, see glossary on page 23.

Source: MEN-DEPP

(Ministry of Education - Department of Evaluation, Forecasting and Performance)

Taken from *L'état de l'École 2006 (The State of Education 2006)* - No 16 page 59.

education by having experience accredited, CE continues primarily to benefit better qualified employees while APL seems to fall short of all it promised for social mobility. The same goes for vocational baccalaureate holders, who are most likely to find jobs as manual or white-collar workers on obtaining their diploma. Scarcely one manual or white-collar worker in three had access to vocational training in 2004, compared with half of technicians and supervisors and almost the same proportion of engineers and senior executives. Moreover, access to continuing education increases with the level of diploma: only 13 % of those without any diploma or at best a certificate of primary education (*certificat d'étude primaire*) (30 % of those surveyed) had access to training in 2000, against 51 % of those with the baccalaureate plus three years of study (9.6 % of those surveyed). This means that, instead of converging throughout their working lives, the different socio-economic groups are growing further apart in terms of qualifications.

Table 5. Entry to continuing education by type of diploma (%)

	Entry to continuing education	Proportion of the population
Bac + 3 and above	51.3	9.6
Bac + 2	46.8	10.9
Baccalaureate	36.8	13.2
CAP, BEP	25.0	28.6
BEPC	25.9	7.2
Certificate of primary education or no diploma	12.9	30.3
Did not respond	19.3	Ns
Total	27.8	100

Note: For all abbreviations, see glossary on page 23.

Source: Céreq, January 1999 to February 2000

Table 6. Access to continuing education by socio-economic group (%)

	10 - 19 employees	20 - 49 employees	50 - 249 employees	250 - 499 employees	500 - 1 999 employees	2 000 employees and above	Total
Manual workers	7.9	14.5	26.1	31.8	35.7	41.7	29.0
White-collar workers	11.5	12.0	29.4	35.7	43.3	39.8	29.3
Technicians & supervisors	24.1	30.8	46.6	54.5	60.4	65.7	55.0
Engineers and senior executives	20.1	29.8	47.3	57.6	63.0	64.1	53.2
Total	12.5	19.7	33.9	42.1	49.2	50.4	39.0

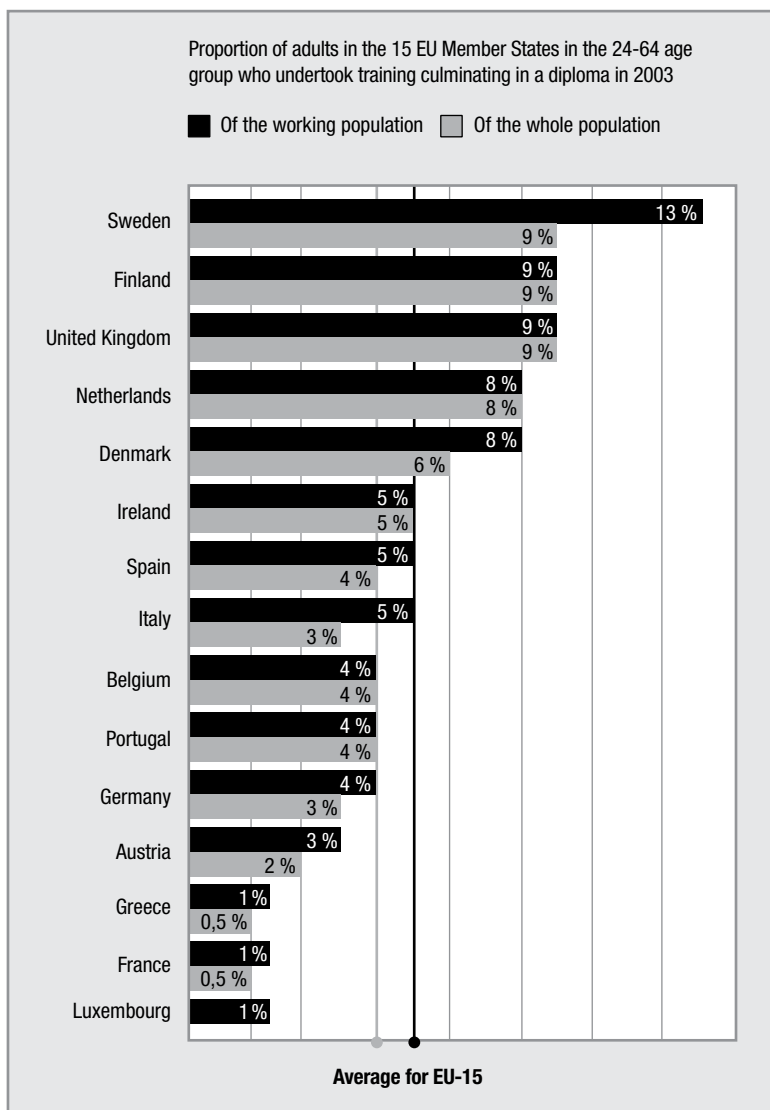
Excluding alternance training, individual training leave (CIF) and professional development contracts (contrats de professionnalisation).

Source: Céreq – *Analysis of employers' 2483 tax declarations for 2004*

This phenomenon also raises the issue of the relationship between the education system and the labour market in France, where the separation between periods of study and periods of work is more marked than in all other European countries. The proportion of adults aged 25 and over who continue in or return to education in order to obtain a diploma – those in formal education or training, to use the European terminology – is lower than anywhere else in Europe (*Céreq Bref*, 2006). As a result, France ranks among the European countries with

the highest proportion of 18-year-olds in education: 80 %, compared with 54 % in the United Kingdom and an average of 75 % for the 15 EU countries in 2003. On the other hand, the average number of years of education that a person in France can expect to receive in their lifetime is relatively low compared with the rest of Europe.

Figure 5. **Formal training in Europe for the 24-64 age group**



Source: Forces de travail 2003 survey. Processed: Céreq 2006.
Taken from *Céreq Bref*, No 235 November 2006, p. 2.

The creation of alternative routes to obtaining a diploma – such as the accreditation of prior learning (APL) – since the implementation of the Social Modernisation Law in May 2004 may offer a partial explanation of this situation stemming from the peculiar split in France between periods of initial and continuing training. The 2004 reform of the French vocational education system was designed to give new impetus to continuing training, an endeavour that was in line with European recommendations. This was particularly so when an individual right to training was established (*DIF, droit individuel à la formation*) entitling employees, on request and with company consent, to benefit from 20 hours of training every year. However, average take-up, i.e. the number of hours of training undertaken in a year divided by the number of employees, increased only from 11 to 12.3 hours from 2003 to 2005. Moreover, very few employees – significant numbers of whom are educated to baccalaureate level – exercise this right compared with the proportion they represent in the working population: only one in four under the 1985 system for validating acquired vocational skills and one in five with regard to the accreditation of prior learning.

Admittedly, this reform is too recent for all of its repercussions to be evaluated. Nonetheless, there is as yet no sign of the explosion in training expenditure and training hours predicted by some experts, which could have benefited those who are least qualified.

Reflections on the effectiveness of vocational secondary education in France as a gateway to higher education

Positive yet modest progress

Access to the baccalaureate and higher education has become more democratic. The introduction of the vocational baccalaureate has been part of this process, born of a readiness on the part of the Ministry of Education, as well as the Ministry of Labour, professional associations and trade unions, to promote vocational training. The implementation of the APL (accreditation of prior learning) has provided evidence of such willingness. However, this progress may be viewed in certain quarters as too tentative, on the grounds that the proportion of vocational baccalaureate holders going on to higher education, whether with immediate or deferred entry, is still

minimal; and because, despite the usefulness and immediate added value of continuing in education, the conditions involved and the price to be paid (in terms of hardship and failure) are problematic. Others, on the contrary, consider that vocational education is being devalued by the new hierarchical system of diplomas created by the baccalaureate. They take the view that as a consequence of the reform, training courses at vocational *lycées* have been reorganised around the new diploma, and so the BEP has become the minimum reference diploma. With this new approach, the CAP is felt to have lost some of its identity and become akin to a 'sub-BEP' diploma. Furthermore, this structure and hierarchical system of diplomas is currently being called into question because the government intends to abolish the CAP and propose a pathway culminating in the vocational baccalaureate over three years (*seconde, première and terminale*, the last three years at a vocational *lycée*) instead of four (two years for the BEP followed by two years for the vocational baccalaureate), with the intermediate diploma (BEP or CAP) included in the three-year pathway. While those who defend the CAP consider this a step backwards, others see it as progress for vocational education to be given a structure as similar as possible to the other baccalaureates.

The vocational baccalaureate: between theoretical rights and genuine access to higher education, what are the ways forward?

Although the vocational baccalaureate gives a theoretical right of access to higher education, in practice – given the options for continuing study available to holders – it is not easy to make effective and immediate use of this right as it stands and the chances of success are fewer than for other types of baccalaureate. In this situation, what paths towards change are possible?

A rationale which highlights the differences instead of the hierarchy between vocational diplomas

By continuing to take an approach which emphasises the hierarchy rather than the differences between vocational diplomas, and by constantly relating them to the dominant model of general education, their specific characteristics can go unnoticed. However, are these difficulties not related to the fact that over a 20-year period (1965-85), vocational education was integrated into the architecture of the education system without any questioning of the

one-dimensional hierarchy of knowledge that so strongly underpins the French education system? The current reform involving the three-year vocational baccalaureate represents a departure from this rationale towards an alternative approach that will require a complete overhaul of the way in which training is divided between the State and employers. Employers will be responsible for training people for specific jobs and the State for more general training, with a reduction in the number of specialisms within the vocational baccalaureate ⁽⁵⁾.

The need for a new approach: reforming the vocational baccalaureate to take three years

The reform of the vocational pathway recently implemented by the government, to become widespread by 2009, has several objectives and is designed to fulfil European recommendations on the promotion of vocational training in the context of lifelong learning. On the one hand, its stated aims include achieving a significant reduction in the number of young people leaving education without qualifications, increasing the number of those obtaining the vocational baccalaureate and making it easier for pupils and the company directors who recruit them to understand the nature of diplomas. On the other hand, in setting out the advantages for pupils of taking a vocational baccalaureate in three years, the reform proposals emphasise that it will facilitate the promotion of vocational education. The vocational baccalaureate will benefit from an increase in status if brought into line with the general and technological baccalaureates, which both take three years on completion of lower secondary school education (*collège*). Furthermore, the reform proposes to reduce the number of different vocational baccalaureate courses available from 95 to 20 specialisms. In addition, current students on technological courses will be split between courses leading to the vocational baccalaureates and those leading to the general scientific baccalaureate with an engineering science and technology option. These changes will mean that pupils completing lower secondary education and going on to the BEP and the vocational baccalaureate will have a higher level of initial training than is the case today.

⁽⁵⁾ This transfer of the vocational component of current training courses to employers may, however, also be viewed as a step backwards, with employers exclusively training young people for specific jobs so that it would be more difficult for such training to be recognised nationally.

The reform could thus contribute to raising the profile of vocational training. Another stated advantage of the reform is that by facilitating access to the baccalaureate, it will guarantee that pupils study right up to baccalaureate level within the same institution, which will reduce the dropout rate. Furthermore, it is thought that the reform will make it easier for people to continue on to higher education (BTS-DUT). This reform will therefore have an impact on access to higher education: future baccalaureate holders will be divided between the *lycées* for the BTS and the universities for the DUT, with holders of the vocational baccalaureate studying for the BTS and students with the general baccalaureate going on to the IUTs.

Conclusion

Now that the vocational baccalaureate has become one of the qualifications required to enter higher education, adjustments need to be made to this system in order to guarantee equal rights for all and to provide genuine opportunities for entry to and success in higher education. The latter is especially crucial in the context of lifelong learning. However, to ensure that the vocational baccalaureate remains a qualification designed to help people into work, only a minority should go on to further study immediately after obtaining it – without, however, closing the door to further study in the future. Thus to guarantee access to higher education, to which this diploma theoretically gives the right, what is necessary is to promote the vocational education pathway (and the current reform aims to address this) and to enhance the effectiveness of lifelong learning (continuing training and the accreditation of prior learning) and career guidance. On the other hand, improving guidance, that is, educating for change and equipping students at the vocational *lycées* to manage the changes they will inevitably face during their education and beyond, will be of vital importance. Indeed, the concept of ‘lifelong learning’ necessarily includes ‘lifelong career guidance’. More than ever, schools must enable their pupils to develop genuine skills in finding their career direction and obtaining information, throughout life, about the opportunities for continuing their education through lifelong learning.

That said, it is true that the reform process is still under way in respect of both continuing training and the vocational baccalaureate, and so it is not possible to give any assessment of whether access to higher education has improved for vocational baccalaureate holders.

At the moment there is considerable debate about the reform of the vocational baccalaureate. As for the measures introduced within the reform of continuing education, which aim to renew the links between learning and working, will they be sufficient 'to push back the boundaries of continuing education and set France on the path opened up by Europe, seeking to create a lifelong education and training continuum?' (*Céreq Bref*, 2006).

Glossary

ALE	Agence Locale pour l'Emploi	local employment agency
APL		accreditation of prior learning
bac ES	<i>Baccalauréat série Économique et Sociale</i>	baccalaureate in economics and social sciences
bac L	<i>Baccalauréat série Littéraire</i>	baccalaureate in humanities
bac S	<i>Baccalauréat série Scientifique</i>	baccalaureate in sciences
bac STI	<i>Baccalauréat série Sciences et Techniques Industrielles</i>	baccalaureate in industrial science and technology
bac STT	<i>Baccalauréat série Sciences et Techniques Tertiaires</i>	baccalaureate in tertiary science and technology
BEP	<i>Brevet d'Études Professionnelles</i>	vocational studies certificate
BEPC	<i>Brevet d'études du premier cycle (du second degré)</i>	certificate of lower secondary education (second stage)
BTS	<i>Brevet de Technicien Supérieur</i>	higher technical certificate
CAP	<i>Certificat d'Aptitude Professionnelle</i>	certificate of vocational aptitude
CFA	Centres de Formation d'Apprentis	apprentice training centre
CEP	<i>Certificat d'Éducation Professionnelle (supprimé en 1992)</i>	certificate of vocational education (abolished in 1992)
Céreq	Centre d'études et de recherche sur les qualifications	Centre for Study and Research into Qualifications
CIF	<i>Congé individuel de formation</i>	individual training leave
CITE	<i>Classification internationale type de l'éducation</i>	International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED)
CPA	<i>Classe préparatoire à l'apprentissage</i>	preparatory class for apprenticeship
CPGE	<i>Classes préparatoires aux grandes écoles</i>	preparatory classes for Grandes Ecoles
CPPN	<i>Classe préprofessionnelle de niveau</i>	pre-vocational class
CPQ	<i>Certificat Professionnel de Qualification, qualification professionnelle, principalement utilisée pour définir les salaires des travailleurs, gérés par les partenaires sociaux, souvent au niveau sectoriel.</i>	certificate of vocational qualification, vocational qualification, mainly used to determine salaries and managed by the social partners, often at sectoral level

DEA	<i>Diplôme d'études approfondies</i>	advanced studies degree
DEP	Direction de l'évaluation et de la prospective (ministère de l'éducation nationale); maintenant DEPP	Department of Evaluation and Forecasting (Ministry of Education), now DEPP
DEPP	Direction de l'évaluation, de la prospective et de la performance (du ministère de l'éducation nationale)	Department of Evaluation, Forecasting and Performance (within Ministry of Education)
DESS	<i>Diplôme d'études supérieures spécialisées</i>	higher specialised studies degree
DEUG	<i>Diplôme d'Études Universitaires Générales</i>	diploma of general university studies
DIF	<i>Droit individuel à la formation</i>	individual right to training
DOM	<i>Départements d'outremer</i>	overseas departments
DUT	<i>Diplôme universitaire de technologie</i>	university technology diploma
ILM		internal labour market
ISO	<i>Norme internationale de qualité</i>	international quality standard
IUT	Institut universitaire de technologie	University Institute of Technology
MEN	Ministère de l'éducation nationale	Ministry of Education
MESR	Ministère de l'enseignement supérieur et de la recherche	Ministry of Higher Education and Research
NVQ		National vocational qualification
PACA	Région Provence Alpes Cote d'Azur	Provence Alpes Côte d'Azur Region
PLIE	<i>Plan Local pour l'Insertion et l'Emploi</i>	local plan for inclusion and employment
PRC	<i>Point Relais Conseil</i>	council contact point
RNCP	<i>Répertoire National de Qualification Professionnelle</i>	national directory of vocational qualifications
SEDOP	Service d'Orientation Professionnelle [mis en place dans le cadre du Programme Régional de Formation du Conseil Régional Provence Alpes Côte d'Azur]	vocational guidance service [established within the regional training programme of the regional council of Provence Alpes Côte d'Azur]
STS	<i>Sections de Techniciens Supérieurs</i>	higher technical courses

National nomenclature of educational levels established by the National Statistical Commission on Continuing Education and Social Promotion

- Level VI:** Those leaving on completion of lower secondary education (6th, 5th and 4th classes) or one-year pre-vocational courses (CEP, CPPN and CPA).
- Level V a:** Those leaving on completion of the general 3rd class, technological 4th and 3rd classes or short-term courses of upper secondary education before the final year.
- Level V:** Those leaving on completion of the final year of short vocational courses or dropping out of long-term general secondary education before the final year.
- Level IV:** Those leaving on completion of the final year of long-term general secondary education or dropping out of post-baccalaureate higher education before reaching Level III.
- Level III:** Those leaving higher education with a qualification equivalent to the baccalaureate plus two years' study (DUT, BTS, DEUG, health or social care training colleges, etc.).
- Levels I and II:** Those leaving higher education with a qualification after the second or third cycle of university education or a degree from a *Grande École*.

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