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**Access to Higher Education: the French case**

Marie Duru-Bellat

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Pôle AAFE – Esplanade Erasme – B.P. 26513 - F 21065 Dijon Cedex

Tél.+33 (0)3 80 39 54 50 - Fax +33 (0)3 80 39 54 79

[iredu@u-bourgogne.fr](mailto:iredu@u-bourgogne.fr)- <http://iredu.u-bourgogne.fr>

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# **Access to Higher Education: the French case**

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Marie Duru-Bellat,

Sciences Po-Observatoire Sociologique du Changement (Paris)

Et

Institut de Recherche sur l'Education (Dijon).



## Introduction

International comparisons are especially complicated concerning access to Higher Education (HE). That is because, while students' behaviors at that level may appear as the results of individual choices or investments, they are, at the same time, embedded not only in the whole structure of the education system but also in the economic environment in which students aim at finding a social position. No comparisons may be reliable without taking into account this broader frame. More precisely, the importance of these structural contextual factors requires to focus not only on the transition from secondary to higher education. It is rather necessary to widen the spectrum both to upstream inequalities, concerning the previous steps of the schooling career, and downstream ones, in the subsequent steps, that is within school and after it, when students have access to the job market.

Among the main educational structural factors that matter, one should bear in mind what Müller and Karle (1993) call the "survival pattern" at the successive transitions, resulting into unequal proportions of a generation attending the different levels of schooling. According to some sociologists as Hout (2004), social inequalities in overall educational attainment are inversely correlated with the prevalence of tertiary education. Consequently, it is necessary to take into account this point -the "timing" of the selection process- when comparing the countries. As far as France is concerned, about 74% of a generation pass the baccalauréat -the exam to be taken at the end of secondary school, necessary to gain access to tertiary education; one can assume then that, due to its rather large openness -since today, -, the French educational system generates weaker inequalities at the HE level, and greater inclusion than some other countries, unless some extra inequalities are generated through other processes such as more qualitative forms of differentiation, or a developed private sector or other less visible mechanisms.

On reverse, wherever the previous selection has been substantial, the student population eligible to higher education will be more homogeneous, and if this selection has been grounded on academic basis, it will probably homogenize also students' chances of success once attending tertiary studies, while leaving more leeway for social selection at that level as well. For example, when comparing France and Germany (Duru-Bellat, Kieffer and Reimer, 2008), one observes that the social selection that took place prior to the degree required to enter higher education is both less marked and occurs later in the former country, with the consequence that inequality at the transition to higher education proves larger there. So, in a nutshell, the issue of access to HE should be nested in the whole schooling career process.

Moreover, to understand how students are selected and make choices, it is necessary to take into account the economic structure and the capacity of economy, both to allocate funds for HE and, even more important, to absorb degrees holders. Especially relevant for students are the costs of the studies, both direct ones and indirect ones, such as the loss of income resulting

from being a student and not a worker –the so-called opportunity cost. Besides, one may possibly think of a “psychological” cost, when one’s behavior and status are a-normal rather than widespread: that is the case of not being a HE student at 20 among many rich countries. The expected economic and social benefits of the studies should be taken into account as well.

Here, we will not deal with all these issues but we should keep them in mind. In a first part, we will recall the principles that shape the present organization of the French system; then, we will describe the present frame in which HE issues are nested; in a third part, we will focus upon the main problems one may consider about the functioning of access to HE, before setting out the main reforms which have been implemented to address them. However, we will see in a fifth part that some recurrent problems do remain, before evoking the ongoing debates and making briefly a parallel with the Greek ones.

## **1. The French Higher Education system: broad principles, tradition of access, present organization**

The French Education system as a whole shares some specific characteristics, embedded in the main features of the French society: first, it is characterized for its broad considerations of neutrality and secularism; it is also centralized and unified, State oriented and overtly egalitarian. Moreover, it is open and free and is supposed to provide an equal service to every French child, as a criterion of justice, so that, through access to similar school resources and services, a genuine equality of opportunities may be guaranteed.

Consequently, at all the successive steps of schooling, an official centralization and standardization prevails. The national government exerts a central control since the large majority of the expenditure on education comes from the State, and only limited autonomy is given to the schools. However, that is slightly changing in the last decades, especially as far as Universities are concerned. However, while this standardization aims at delivering a common core education, the French system is characterized also by a strong stratification, starting at the secondary level.

Stratification, in the description of educational systems, refers to the clearly differentiated kinds of tracks, offering unequal quality of training or academic programs. That results in unequal opportunities for additional schooling, and chances to reach higher levels of academic achievement.

The French system has long been strongly stratified from the lower secondary level until the 1970s; but since the 1980s onwards, every French pupils attends the unified “collège” (the so-called “collège unique”), from age 11 to 15, without any previous formal tracking. In a second stage (upper secondary), from age 15 to 18 or 19, pupils are tracked between 3 kinds of baccalauréat: general, technical (leading to broad professional fields) or vocational (delivering more specialized training). The two latest tracks are much more recent than the traditional general baccalauréat (respectively created in 1965 and in 1987). Today, 48.4% of students having passed the baccalauréat hold a general one, 20.5% a technological one and 31.1% a vocational one. All across the board, the proportion of baccalauréat-holders per generation, which was around 5% in 1950, rose from 20% in 1970 to 29.4% in 1985, 43.5% in 1990 and 62.7% in 1995. However, while rates of access to the baccalauréat level have increased very strongly since the 1980s, they seem to have been stabilized nowadays, at around 74%<sup>1</sup>. However, even if more widespread, access to this level of education remains selective. That is

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<sup>1</sup> The majority of the figures given in this text are available in the « Notes d'information » -here NI-, or in the annual booklet ‘L'état de l'enseignement supérieur et de la recherche en France »; both of them may be downloaded on the web site of the « Ministère de l'Éducation Nationale”

([www.education.gouv.fr/stateval/ni/ni.htm](http://www.education.gouv.fr/stateval/ni/ni.htm)), or the one of the Ministère de l'Enseignement Supérieur et de la Recherche ([www.enseignementsup-recherche.gouv.fr](http://www.enseignementsup-recherche.gouv.fr)).

Other figures are drawn for surveys achieved by the CEREQ, a French center of research devoted to qualifications ([www.cereq.fr](http://www.cereq.fr)), especially on topics such as students' access to jobs; we also refer to studies whose references are given in the text.

especially so because there exist many hierarchical specializations within the general baccalauréat. In these distinct tracks, the focus is either on Humanities, social Sciences or Sciences. These specializations are *de facto* hierarchized, with the best and most socially privileged pupils attending the scientific track (the baccalauréat S, which counts for 25% of the baccalauréat-holders); in the meantime, both the academic level and the social origin of the holders of a vocational or technological baccalauréat are much less privileged. Therefore, students reach the tertiary level with unequal assets and face different academic tracks in which their probabilities of success are unequal.

However, although secondary tracks are specialized, with both unequal academic requirements and different curricular emphases, all kinds of baccalauréat provide access to HE: a strongly ingrained norm in France is that any holder of the baccalauréat is allowed to enter HE, although there exist dominant linkages between types and contents of baccalauréat and types and contents of tertiary institutions. And having access to HE is not only conceived as a fundamental right, it has become a social norm and is perceived by students and by their families as an inescapable and imperative investment. Today, nearly 100% of the students with a general baccalauréat enter HE, while that is the case for 78% of those with a technological baccalauréat and 29% of those with a vocational one; the latest students are formally devoted to enter the labor market, but since they have got a baccalauréat degree, they are formally allowed to enter HE. All in all, today, about 55% of a generation enters HE, and 42% will obtain some tertiary degree.

Actually, the diversification of HE structures is conceived as a means to manage this diversity of the eligible students; and as some diversification of tracks has been implemented at the secondary level precisely to manage the increasing number of pupils, we will see that similarly, at the tertiary level, some diversification of the tracks has been promoted in the last decades. Today, while nobody would question the right given to every student having passed the baccalauréat to enter HE, a large proportion of the existing tracks in HE have implemented some matriculation devices, restricted intake or entrance examination. Actually, only University courses, attended by 58% of the students (all cycles mixed) are officially open, the reminding students attending selective tracks (prestigious elite schools or short vocational ones). In this open sector, large failure or dropouts rates, and all across the board low completion rates are observed in the first years and are currently denounced as the main problem HE is facing. It has been the rationale of numerous reforms on which we will come back later.

Today, the French HE system is structured in 3 tiers. That is specific to this country, since most of European countries have a 2 tiers system, with a first tier of academic institutions and a second one with vocational tracks (Arum et al., 2007). The very selective “Grandes Ecoles” constitute the first-tier elite sector, offering programs of study with a length from five to seven years. Medicine also is a very selective track, even if it is located within universities. University tracks require nearly the same duration of study as the elite schools, but are formally open to all the baccalauréat-holders. Students can also enroll in short vocational



programs at the tertiary level (Brevet de Technicien Supérieur –BTS- and Diplôme Universitaire de Technologie –DUT-), which are moderately selective and were requiring till recently only two years of study; a third year (generally a work experience scheme) has been added since the 2002 LMD reform (Licence-Master-Doctorate), following the new European frame launched in Bologna in 1999 (see *infra*). During the past two decades, the different postsecondary tracks have been expanding unequally. While the elite tracks have limited their student intakes to prevent credential inflation, the expansion of the tertiary level resulted entirely from the University tracks, due to their open access.

Today, the University is attended by about 50% of the total number of students entering HE (this figure is greater -58%- when considering the whole number of students, because University courses are generally longer); the remaining student population strives to enter a selective track. This can be an elite school, leading to engineering or business, after a competitive entry exam prepared most often in “classes préparatoires aux grandes écoles” (selective classes incorporated into secondary public or private upper secondary schools); about 13% of students with a general baccalauréat enter this selective track (and nearly 0% of the ones with a vocational baccalauréat). Also selective are the short vocational tracks leading in 2 years (today in 3) to middle jobs but allowing also to continuing in Universities or even, more and more frequently, in elite schools as well. There exist also a number of schools leading to social or paramedical jobs, or lower positions in business, advertising (etc.), often private ones; they are attended for by about 8% of eligible students, a bit more among students with a general baccalauréat.

So, it is important to underline that, because France has a multi-tracks system of higher education, it would be inaccurate to consider tertiary studies in a general sense. One should distinguish the different tracks not only by their specialty or curricular content, but also according to two parameters: their selectivity and their vocational character. It is necessary to separate the selective high-standards tracks (with five to seven years of study), from universities, which are open to everyone and require nearly the same duration of study, and from the short vocational tracks, requiring only two or three years. Here, one may insist on the total openness of University tracks: they are the only nonselective option! In other words, they must welcome any baccalauréat holder, whatever his or her characteristics. Knowing that the most able pupils tend to be enrolled in the selective tracks (the long and prestigious ones, but also, even if less selective, the shortest vocational ones), universities are doomed to accept a very heterogeneous population: both a relatively small proportion of academically good students and the majority of the least able ones, those which have not been accepted in the selective tracks... This brings about the recurrent issue of low completion rates during the first years of HE, an issue to which we will come back later on.

Within University, the majority of these courses are (nearly) free of charge: only modest private contribution is due. More precisely, at the University level, there exist nominal fees fixed each year by the French Ministry: in 2013, from 183€ for a L course to 388€ for a doctorate; one has to pay also about 200€ for the entering into the national health system.

Moreover, students whose families have income below a certain threshold don't pay any fees and receive a grant (about 37.5% of the whole student body); and some specific aid may be also given for accommodation. Last but not least, one has to take into account the fiscal deduction granted to parents having a child in HE (we will come back to this point in part 4.2).

International comparisons show that the financing of HE in France is, to a greater extent than many countries, mainly public (about 70%, 2/3 of this public spending being devoted to the staff; see OECD *Education at a Glance*), while private funding (from families) is rather weak (about 8.4% of the total cost). One may add that the different tracks have also unequal duration and consequently unequal costs for the State: the mean public expenditure for student is 11 630€, it varies from 15 080€ in the “classes préparatoires aux grandes écoles” to only 10 770€ for University students. Moreover, they also have unequal expected private benefits: the former students will have much more opportunities in the job market and also belong to more privileged families, which is regularly underlined as a social justice problem. In the meanwhile, they also have a larger ability to pay: in the private selective elite tracks, fees are much higher (for example, about 15000€ per year in one of the most prestigious business schools), and the trend is to make fees comparable to those of some American institutions. In private short vocational tracks, fees are very variable, possibly up to 10 000€ per year. However, these fees are tolerated, since more and more schools compute a “rate of return”, taking into account their students' mean wages when entering the labor market and the fees they have paid...

## **2. The present context of HE access: economic constraints, evolution of the eligible population, evolution of HE student body...**

Before setting out the different acts and reform which have deeply reshaped HE in France and consequently the process of access to HE itself, it is necessary to describe the global context in which they have emerged, putting the stress upon the economic environment and on the broad French education policy. However, we should not forget that Europe has been more and more assertive on Education issues since the 2000's. At the end of the 20th century, the European policies in the area of education were dominated by the restrictions posed by the subsidiarity principle. This principle allowed countries to translate European guidelines into national and regional policies by setting specific targets and measures. Let us recall that the Treaty of Maastricht -1992- explicitly excludes any harmonization in education and training. However, with the 1980's crisis, in order to face economic competition and boost employment, Education progressively took the first place on the agenda.

In 2000, the European Union heads put forward what is now called the Lisbon strategy, aimed at making Europe the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world and at creating a European educational space, especially at the HE level. Education –now, one says human capital- is then conceived as an investment for a country nested in a global economic competition and economic constraints. So, this promotion of education is accompanied by considerations about the need to better prepare pupils to meet the challenges of the future, to understand the world, to adapt to a changing economic environment, to be able to continue learning throughout life, etc. Concretely some benchmarks have been defined about the share of a generation having access to HE towards the objective of 50%; other benchmarks concern the amount of public funds devoted to HE or the productivity of public research. We will come back to these trends and benchmarks which did, without any doubt, influenced the French policy.

### **2.1. The French economic and social context...**

The changes which have concerned the organization of HE and the student body itself are linked with the transformations of the economic environment. Especially relevant is the growth of young people unemployment and their increasing precarious situation. Obviously, the rising aspirations towards higher education and the choices of subjects as well should be put in perspective with the characteristics of young people integration into the labor market.

A first point to be recalled is that from the 1980' onwards (following the second oil shock), the French economy entered a cyclic phase characterized by a less marked growth, and still more important an erratic one. This latter aspect is all the more significant as young people employment is especially affected by the present economic circumstances. Since that period, unemployment has become a massive phenomenon in France and young people's rate of unemployment is regularly about the double of the total population's one: in 2013, among the

under 25 year-olds, the rate of unemployment is 24%, to be compared with about 11% in the total population. Since the 1990s, young people situation has also become more and more precarious and the odds of having a secure job have fallen dramatically. However, the level of education and the degree possessed do matter. For example, the longitudinal studies made by the CEREQ show that, in 2005, a few years after having finished their studies, among young people with no degree at all, 29% had a secure job and 33% were in total unemployment, the corresponding figures being 66% and 6% of those having a tertiary M degree.

Another significant trend on the labor market is the development of tertiary jobs, in business and trade, transports and communications, all kinds of public and private administrations. Moreover, the percentage of executive and qualified positions has increased, positions that require a high level of education. For these reasons, young people strive to invest in longer and longer studies: getting a higher degree than one's own parents is perceived as the one and best way to get a higher social position. In other words, education and especially higher education is perceived as a "social lift" (the popular wording in French is an "ascenseur social").

More broadly, in an uncertain economic context, both parents and students themselves see access to education –especially HE- as an insurance strategy for the future. Actually, there is a consensus on this point in France, since any increase in access to HE meets the interests of all the actors concerned. For the State, expanding education requires substantial funds but has the advantage of keeping a mass of young people away from the job market (and so from unemployment). Moreover, it was well considered (until a very recent period, when downsizing public spending has become the priority!) to create jobs in civil service, especially for education. Of course, teachers themselves were satisfied, due to this expansion, to see their labor market enlarged and their influence reinforced in the French society. For parents, it looked reassuring to have their children better and better educated to cope with an uncertain future and unknown jobs, and the same was true for employers themselves; moreover, the latter were all the more favorable to this expansion of public education as they didn't pay anything for it, and would have the opportunity to offer the same jobs (with the same wages) to better educated employees.

From a (still) more global perspective, it is certain that the "youth" period is getting longer and longer, while the role played by parents themselves is reinforcing. This expanding length of youth is visible when considering the main traditional steps in the access to adulthood: age when leaving school, age at the first job, age when leaving the parents' home, age at marriage and first child. In the sixties, whatever their social background, aged 25, all girls and boys were no more living in their family, they were most often married and with a secure job. The traditional threshold which marked the entry into adulthood have become blurred: access to a secure job and to an independent home, and founding a stable couple and having children as well, have all being delayed. For example, the median age when leaving school was 19 at the beginning of the 1980s, it is now about 23. All that compounds a more uncertain pathway to adulthood and in any case, entering HE is both a reassuring step and a strong social norm.

## 2.2 The evolution of the population eligible for HE

It is impossible to understand how access to HE “works” without bearing in mind the recent evolution of the eligible population. Actually, deep changes have occurred in France in this respect, in the recent decades, generated by increased participation rates at the secondary level.

Until the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, French education policies were dominated by the purpose to both expand and democratize education in phase with the global post-World War II European context. The general trend was to “go comprehensive,” i.e. unify schooling, especially at the lower secondary level, both to increase the mean level of education and promote equal opportunity.

In France, several institutional reforms have been launched between 1959 and 1975 in order to both raise the level of education and unify the secondary level structures. The previous educational tracks (with vocational short tracks for the weakest pupils from age 14) were cancelled out and a common unified curriculum was made compulsory. In addition, any track selection was postponed till the end of the lower secondary level (at age 15 or 16). However, it took some time (and several subsequent acts) for this to be truly achieved, and it is only since the 1980s onwards that it became mandatory for every French pupil to attend the whole 4 years of lower secondary school. In any case, these acts did produce an initial wave of expansion in the number of students attending school (Duru-Bellat, 2007, 2008). However, the strong social inequalities that French sociologists (such as Pierre Bourdieu) had denounced in the 1960s were not cancelled out, rather delayed at the end of lower secondary school (the “collège”), when students were tracked either toward upper secondary schools (the “lycée”) or toward vocational tracks, so that the inequalities only shifted to a higher level.

Thus, a second wave of reforms was implemented in the late 1980s, again both to raise the mean level of education and to try to reduce the gap between social groups in this respect. The easiest way to achieve this was to widen the access to upper secondary school, which was actually done: France has experienced a dramatic educational expansion since the 1960s and especially during the 1980s. After a steady increase in the percentage of a generation passing the “baccalauréat”, from about 5% in 1950 to 28% in the early 1980s; the political objective of “80% of a generation achieving the baccalauréat,” was set in 1981, as proclaimed by the left wing Ministry of Education A.Savary. It involved reducing the number of pupils repeating a year in primary school and abolishing early tracking towards vocational education which meant, until the mid-1980s, that the weakest pupils –also most often working class ones- left secondary school at the age of 14-15. These changes reduced the selectivity in school careers, even if pupils’ academic level did not significantly improve. Some authors even spoke of a relative under-selection of working class pupils that was liable to affect their later educational trajectory (Convert, 2006). One may add that this fall of selectivity in the schooling career

was not accompanied by more numerous failures when taking the baccalauréat; on reverse, while the rate of success was about 66% in the 1970s, it is now about 87%.

Anyway, a more diverse population was now on attending the four years of the unified « collège » (lower secondary school) and staying there without any diversion till 15-16, having then the possibility to enter higher secondary school in a more diversified system. In particular, a “vocational baccalauréat” was created in 1985 and awarded for the first time in 1988; it was devoted for students who had been tracked at the end of college into a 2-years vocational course; with 2 years more, they could pass a baccalauréat (a vocational one, but with the quasi magic word of baccalauréat!).

This new track and more broadly the diversification of the « supply » did play a substantial part in the growth of the total number of baccalauréat-holders. Actually, the increase in the rate of access to the baccalauréat level, from less than 30% in the early eighties to about 74% in 2013 is mainly due to the growth of the number of technological and vocational baccalauréat-holders. The percentage of a generation passing the general one has increased “only” from about 20% in 1985 to 35% today, representing so about one half of the total number of baccalauréat-holders (to be compared with about 2/3 in 1985).

Concerning the evolution of the diverse specialties, what is observed is a continuous fall of the Humanities track (about 53% of the total number in 1950, less than 10% today). This drop has been compensated by the rise of the economic baccalauréat, while the weight of the scientific one was more stable (about 27% of the total number, but 52% when considering only the general baccalauréat number). These shifts are certainly due to the students’ perceptions of the opportunities available on the labor market.

Since the access to the baccalauréat has dramatically increased, it is no surprise if it is less socially selective. Today, nearly the whole of a generation reaches the end of the « collège », so that no more inequalities exist, at least visible ones (concerning the trajectories, whatever the genuine level of learning). As far as social inequalities remain substantial concerning achievement, and since tracking at the end of collège takes into account the level of achievement, large social inequalities are expected there. It has been shown that the social inequalities that were visible in the 1950s at the entry into college are now delayed at the outset of the college, so that they are not truly lower, just delayed... (Duru-Bellat and Kieffer, 2001).

At the lycée level, the diverse specialties and kinds of baccalauréat are *de facto* hierarchized: they require unequal academic assets, and open unequal perspectives in higher education. They are also socially diverse. And again, that is very stable (Sautory, 2007). So, to conclude about democratization at that level is not so straightforward. From one side, since the 1970s, some reduction of inequalities in secondary education is undisputable, and so it is concerning the decrease of social selectivity in access to upper secondary school -the lycée-, with

increasing proportions of students obtaining the upper secondary certificate, the baccalauréat. However, this level of education has become more strongly horizontally stratified, with weaker and less privileged students over-represented in the technological and vocational types of baccalauréat. In the meantime, the general baccalauréat remains the most prestigious type, with over-representation of the most privileged students and the best opportunities for access to tertiary education. So, while the dramatic increase in students obtaining the baccalauréat has resulted in a reduction of inequalities, it can be described as a ‘segregative democratization’ (Merle, 2000), taking place within distinct tracks, with unequal opportunities for further schooling (especially unequal access to elite school, but also unequal chances of success in tertiary education in general).

Consequently, if several recent studies show that access to HE has been democratized, this has resulted in a lesser manner in a democratization of the degrees passed at that level (Duru-Bellat and Kieffer, 2008). Again, that is because, due to the opening of the system, students from lower socio-economic backgrounds (SES) do get the baccalauréat more often, but they do so in tracks that give them less assets to succeed in HE later on. So, without any doubt, the student body reaching HE is today more heterogeneous both academically and socially speaking.

### 2.3. The HE student body: more numerous, more diversified, more heterogeneous...

Globally, we have been facing a dramatic increase over the last fifty years: from about 310 000 students in 1960 to about 2 300 000 in 2012, with an especially dramatic growth between 1985 and 1995 (with the numbers nearly doubling). So, without any doubt, being a student has become common within fifty years: while less than 5% of the 20-24 age-group were attending University in 1950, this figure has risen till 33% in 1990, and it is nowadays about 50%. This figure is rather high, since in most OECD countries, between 28 and 50% of the relevant age group of 20-29 years old attend tertiary education. But this is a recent change, and, taking into consideration the 25-64 year-olds, France is still lagging behind, with a figure of 30% with a tertiary level compared to the 32% mean in OECD countries.

That is why the word –not a pejorative one- of massification is currently used. However, as in the previous stages of schooling, this expansion has been accompanied by diversification. And this expansion has been more or less dramatic according to the different tracks: during the period under study, these tracks have expanded unequally; because elite schools (and their preparatory classes) and Medicine courses (within University) have limited their student intake to prevent credential inflation, the expansion of the tertiary level resulted entirely from the openness of the University.

#### 2.3.1. A deep trend of diversification within HE structures

While the numbers in HE have been continuously increasing during the 20th century, the relative proportion of the students enrolled in universities has decreased in the same way,

because of the creation of new structures. While this weight was about 70% in 1960, it is now about 57%, not very far from only one half... That is because these “other structures” have grown more rapidly during the period, especially to react to a strong demand for more vocationally oriented tracks.

That is the case of STS (“Section de technicien supérieur”, created in 1959). Here, the growth of the numbers has been quite dramatic: 8 000 in 1960, 26800 in 1970, about 242 000 today, with about one third being private. The number of students attending the IUT (“Institut universitaire de technologie”, created in 1966) has also increased dramatically, since it has been multiplied by 5 in thirty years, counting today about 116 000 students. The other tracks or schools having recorded also a strong increase are quite diverse. Schools leading to engineering (118 000 students, including all kinds of schools: public and private), schools preparing to business and management (41 000), and schools preparing to social work and paramedical professions (about 124 000). Last, the “classes préparatoires aux grandes écoles” have increased their student body as well, but in a more moderate manner (79 000 students, and among them 62% in the scientific track leading to engineering).

So the main trend is the expansion of the tracks perceived as preparing to some job in a more overt manner than University traditionally intended to do; moreover, these tracks are also selective at the outset. For these reasons –vocational focus and selection-, they may appear as more reassuring in the uncertain context students are facing.

University itself has reacted in a very assertive manner to this students’ demand for more vocationally oriented tracks. From the 1970s onwards, they have created specific courses devoted to meet specific demands on the job market. For example, within foreign languages departments, applied curricula have been created, with 2 languages at the same academic level and a supplement in Administration and Business (« Langues Etrangères Appliquées », 1972); or, within the old faculties of Law, was created in 1973 a track mixing Law, Economy and Management (“Administration Economique et Sociale”). At the master level, in order to satisfy new demands on the job market, tracks devoted to ITC applied to Management (“Maîtrise d’Informatique Appliquée à la Gestion”, 1970), and a number of masters focused on Management have been created (“Maîtrise de Sciences de Gestion”, 1973).

This continuous creation of new vocational tracks within University itself has not declined since. During the 1980s, some universities have created autonomous schools leading to engineering within their own structures, after a selection of their students, aiming to compete that way with the traditional elite engineering school. Last but not least, within the new European frame implemented in 2002 to harmonize higher education, the adoption of the LMD system (Licence/Bachelor-Master-Doctorate) has incited universities to develop their vocational tracks (for example, a new “licence professionnelle” has been created besides the more academic courses). So, that is a long-lasting trend and University proved able to change much more than what is currently supposed!



### 2.3.2. Within University: the evolution of the subjects and geographical locations

Since the 1950s and in spite of the dramatic increase of the total students number, the respective weights of the different University courses have not changed that much. Humanities (“Lettres et Sciences Humaines») have remained the most numerous courses, while there has been a swap between Sciences and Law and Economics: Sciences courses were nearly as numerous as Humanities in the fifties, but Law and Economics have increased dramatically from the seventies onwards. The numbers have also increased a lot in Medicine, but a “numerus clausus” has been implemented from 1971 onwards to regulate the numbers of French physicians, so that the total number of students has been rising at a slower rate than in the other specialties (+130% from the 1950s, instead of +200% for the others courses).

A few remarks can be made here. First, some evolutions look like sudden and brief fads. That is the case for the Sport course (the so-called STAPS, “Sciences et techniques des activités physiques et sportives”), whose numbers have increased up to 120% between 1995 and 2003; this course leads mostly to teaching but may have appeared as attracting in itself and possibly giving new opportunities on the leisure job market; however, students have been warned that it was not so obvious and this “fad” looks out of date to day... In any case, in an open system like the French one, these sudden rushes do raise problem; here, a number of University teacher positions had to be created to supervise these new students, resulting in more human resources for research as well (since University teachers are researchers as well).

Another remark is the long-lasting difficulty to attract students in Sciences in France. Paradoxically, the implementation of a numerus clausus in Medicine has incited still more students to choose this track, which appeared, due to the resulting selection, more secure as far as job opportunities were concerned. At the same period, the development of other selective routes, such as IUT and engineering schools had obviously increased the panel of choices of the scientific baccalauréat-holders (whose number was itself diminishing, due to the development of the economic baccalauréat). Even if that looks detrimental for the country, it is, again, difficult to fight against this trend in an open system.

All in all, in 2012, the numbers in “Lettres et Sciences Humaines” compound about 33% of the total University numbers, and Sciences (including Sports) about 22%, while Law and Economics count for about 28 %, and Health for 15%.

Another evolution to be underlined is that the student body has become more widespread on the whole country, so that the relative weight of Paris has strongly declined: while nearly the half of the total University student population has long been studying in Paris (till the mid-seventies), it is nowadays the case for less than one quarter, taking into account the new sites that have been created all around Paris in the 1980s (the so-called Paris VIII, IX, X, XI, XII and XIII).

All over the country, the disparities between the different regions, which were rather large, have blurred. Beyond the fact that the largest sites –Lyon, Lille, Toulouse...- have developed, some smaller ones have emerged in medium-sized cities (Limoges, Amiens, for example). Moreover, still smaller sites have been created to facilitate access to HE especially for the less well-off students (we develop this point in part 3.1).

### 2.3.3 The evolution of the social and gender profile of the student body

Numerous surveys (for instance Albouy and Tavan, 2007) show some changes in the social profile of the HE student body. That is not a surprise, since access to HE has increased for all the social groups. From the generations born in the outset of the 1930's to those born in the mid-seventies, the percentage of executives' children having got a HE diploma has risen from 38 % to 77 %, while, for manual workers' ones, the figures have shifted from 2 % to 25 %. Today, even if the figures go on increasing, especially for the students from lower SES, one should stress the importance of the remaining gap: 85% of access for high SES students, compared with less than 43% for manual workers' ones (and even 29% when considering only unqualified manual workers' ones).

In spite of that, the relative weight of students from lower SES is increasing, from about 6% in 1960, up to 11% today, with a large variety between the University courses themselves (from 5,6% in Medicine up to 11, 5% in Humanities or Sciences). In the short vocational courses, the weight of manual workers is higher (14,7%), but what is observed is a trend towards more and more advantaged students; these are attracted by this selective track, which looks more reassuring than University and less demanding than the « classes préparatoires aux grandes écoles ». Concerning this latest track, the weight of manual workers children slightly weakens over time, while executive children are more and more over represented: today, they count for 51% of the total number (which must be compared with the weight of this group in the adult population, which rates about 17%). A consequence is that the student body of the elite schools themselves is always as remote from the global population profile as it was fifty years ago, with about 80% of high SES children in the most prestigious elite schools...

So, the changes have mainly concerned University, due to its openness and also to its expansion; all the selective tracks have limited their expansion, making it more difficult to widen their students' social background in a context of harsh competition. This is all the more so as the democratization of the previous steps (access to baccalauréat), has been a segregative one, as evoked previously (see 2.2).

Concerning the differences between boys and girls, the evolution is less mixed. While in 1900, the weight of women in the HE numbers was about 3%, this figure raised up to 33% in 1950 and 40% in 1960. From the outset of the 1980s onwards, more than 50% of the students are women. Today, they count for about 56% in universities, a rather stable figure.

However, girls remain less numerous in the IUT (about 40%) and, more strongly, in engineering schools (about 26%). On reverse, they count for 60% in Medicine and Pharmacy, for 70% of the total number in Humanities courses, and even much more in para-medical and social studies. So, in spite of vigorous campaigns aiming at attracting more girls into Sciences or engineering, their distribution across HE subjects remains in France as traditional as in the majority of the OECD countries: in all of them, while vertical segregation (with less women in the highest degrees) has often vanished, horizontal segregation looks much more difficult to change.

To conclude about the evolution of the student body, from the middle of the last century onwards, a marked diversification has occurred obviously, which concerns both supply and demand. This is certainly the result of both an adaptation to the baccalauréat-holders profile, and a necessary condition for the expansion of HE itself.

In a nutshell, one should emphasize that while in the 1960s 70% of the students were attending non selective and non-vocational courses, this figure is today about 55%. International comparisons show that French HE is original as far as the weight of short vocational tracks –a higher one- is concerned. Moreover, as evoked, within « traditional » University courses, the weight of vocational ones itself has been increasing. So, without any doubt, we have witnessed a trend toward professionalization within HE.

Another point to stress is the deep transformation of the student body itself, at least in some courses. Today, students are no more just “inheritors” as Bourdieu and Passeron described them in the mid-sixties. The difference is mainly that today, the students’ social background varies strongly from one track to another, while they were more homogeneous in this respect at that period. That confirms the “segregative” dimension of the democratization of HE, following the segregative democratization of higher secondary education itself. That is linked to pupils strategies of course (we come back to this point later on), but also to the diversification of HE itself, which makes choices much more complex. Another consequence is that the relationships between the assets you have when leaving the lycée and the tracks in which you are able to succeed in HE are tighter and tighter. While in the sixties, the baccalauréat-holders –a selected minority- had the feeling that, at the outset of HE, everything was possible and that all the opportunities were open, it is very different today. This may be an efficient adaptation to the increasing heterogeneity of the baccalauréat-holders: the selection work has to go on and even to reinforce once entered HE!

### 3. The present functioning of the access to HE: what do we know, which problems?

Sociological research has produced numerous studies focused on access to HE. As evoked, most baccalauréat-holders enter HE: 78%, considering all types of baccalauréats, but about 100% among students having a general one (78% and 29% respectively for technological and vocational). For the former, 55% enter University, in subjects varying according to the specialty of their baccalauréat: Law, Humanities and Social Sciences rally the choices of students with a Humanities baccalauréat, while those with a scientific one concentrate on Health and Sciences (even if that counts only for about one third of their choices within tertiary study). What is more typical for these latter students (the most selected in secondary schooling) is their choice for the “classes préparatoires” for elite schools (18%) or for schools leading directly to business or engineering careers (19%). Actually, it is among these students that post-secondary choices are most diversified, and that is precisely why this scientific secondary track has been elected: when pupils do not know what to do in the future, both teachers and parents advise to them to prepare a scientific baccalauréat even if they are not especially fond of Sciences.

Another point to stress is that quite a number of students with a general baccalauréat enter a short vocational track (19%), although they are formally aimed for students with a technological or vocational baccalauréat. Actually, even if it is formally possible for any baccalauréat-holder to enter in all the University tracks, students implement a self-selection process, taking into account their chances of success (these are null in the Health sector if you have not got a scientific baccalauréat for example). The selection is overt and explicit in all the tracks other than University and again, students implement some self-selection before applying for them. However, due to the increasing number of these tracks, it has been observed that short vocational ones (IUT and STS) or even the classes préparatoires themselves do not prove so selective (some of them even have vacant places in some specialties). Another current observation is that University courses in Sciences are less and less often chosen –since 1995, about -33% of new entrants in University Sciences (Mathematics, Physics, Biology)-, which is considered as a problem in our country.

These students’ HE choices are not especially regulated by school at the lycée level, contrasting with what concerns the choice of a specific baccalauréat, for which a very explicit and formal process –the so-called orientation process- is implemented. The quality and nature of information is thus all the more significant. Students declare they got it mainly from their families and friends, and a bit less often from their teachers; they evoke specialized staff devoted to guidance (“conseillers d’orientation”) still less often (less than 50% of them do so). Since 2007, teachers are invited to give some written advice to every student, but this is only an advice and freedom of choice remains the rule at that level (we come back to this point with the “orientation active” disposal in the 4.1 part).

Which are the factors then taken into account? Of course, one will think primarily about the student's own tastes and self-confidence, and mostly plans for the future. We will deal with these dimensions; however, a very materialistic one proves to be important, the local "supply", i.e. which kind of track is available locally (Lemaire, 2005; Nakhili, 2005).

### 3.1 Choosing what is available in the proximate area...

The impact of the neighbouring supply has been shown for different kind of tracks. That is especially the case for the prestigious "classe préparatoire aux grandes écoles": this track is installed within some lycées, generally in rather large cities and in socially privileged settings. And, everything else being equal, students having prepared their baccalauréat in those lycées show a higher tendency to choose this track, to stay in the same school and probably also because it appears more familiar to them, and boosts their confidence. The same is observed concerning the choice of a STS (short vocational track), also installed in lycées (especially in those located in the working-class areas). One may add that choosing what exists locally minimizes costs (about 3 times less than when having to move to the University in another town) and may be perceived as more comfortable (one stays within his or her family, with friends etc.). Last but not least, one should note that the most prestigious elite schools are located in Paris (or in the proximity) so that it is certainly much easier for students living there to enter those tracks; but this is a rather taboo issue (and no data allow a precise investigation), since the students' correlative chances are supposed to be equal all over the country.

To uniform access to HE at least in a broad sense, the French government has initiated a dissemination of University sites –the so-called "antennes universitaires"–, especially conceived to attract in HE students from lower SES, more sensible to costs. It was also supposed to downsize some big universities and also helps develop some medium-sized towns, by holding back and keeping young people and giving a boost to their cultural and economic life. The first "antennes" were created in 1969, with the more widespread specialty being Law. This trend had continued in the 1980s, with about 50 towns concerned.

In 1988, an offensive policy –the so-called « Université 2000 Plan » was launched, with the aim of reducing the disparities of access to HE which were still observed between large cities and rural areas, and also downsizing some universities which had become very big following the long period of expansion. Inner Paris universities being in that case, 4 new universities were created in the surroundings (Cergy-Pontoise, Evry, Marne-la-Vallée, Versailles-Saint-Quentin-en-Yvelines), but still more numerous were the antennes disseminated in all the country, especially in the North part of the country, a very populous region (with the new universities "du Littoral et de l'Artois", which will have themselves, a few years later, their own small antennes in all the medium cities of the region, such as Arras, Béthune, Lens, Douai).

The creation of these new structures boosted the numbers of students: in 1991, 30 000 were attending these antennes, in 1993, they were 50 000... However, this progression did slow

down quite rapidly from the second half of the 1990s onwards, and their numbers have not increased that much since this period. And all in all, compared with the total number of students attending the “mother university” (as it is called), the weight of the antennes remained rather low. In the recent years, only about 10% of the total number of students attends such an antenne.

Is it a success or a failure? It depends on what was the major purpose of this reform. What is certain is that they have participated in the downsizing of some huge universities, that they proved a source of dynamism for some medium-sized cities (and boost the current political staff!), and sometimes fostered an adaptation of the courses delivered to the need of the local job market. However, the conclusions are more mixed as far as the educational aspects are concerned... Recall that a major objective was to reduce geographical and social inequalities of access to HE, an objective reiterated in the “Université 2000 Plan”. From the start, some voices have feared that these small structures might provide students with limited choices, a weaker quality of training, and a less lively cultural environment. What has been demonstrated is that in the “antennes universitaires”, the probability to choose the specialty proposed there proves all other things being equal, always greater compared with the distribution of choices in the “mother university”, where a larger span is available. In the antennes, it was common to teach Law (with qualified professionals available even in medium-sized cities), much less to teach Sciences and still more uncommon to teach Medicine (for which a large hospital is required). That is a first problem as far as democratization is concerned.

Recall that democratizing was the main aim of this innovation. And actually, it has succeeded in bringing into HE more students from lower SES background. In some antennes (as Nevers in Burgundy), lower SES children make up about the half of the student body, while in the « mother university » (here, Dijon), the corresponding figure is about 25%. However, this more frequent and cheaper access is paid by a strong limitation of choice, since students' choices are limited to what is available in the local antenne (Bourdon and others, 1994)

Another dimension of the democratization issue is whether the chances of success are strictly the same whatever the site. And again, the conclusions are mixed (see for instance Bourdon et al., 1994). Some studies conclude to lower rates of success in antennes (taking into account the students characteristics), while some conclude in the opposite direction (see for example, NI 00.25). Probably more relevant here, what is at stake is the specific impact of the site attended, in HE as it is the case for schools in the previous steps of schooling. What is certain is that welcoming students in smaller structures is not a magic solution to help the students most in risk to succeeding better. That raises the wider issue of the risk of a HE with unequal quality all around the country, or even the questions of whether it is even possible to avoid that ...

Other pieces of research have investigated more in depth the possible impact of the concrete conditions proposed to students for their studies (Romainville, 2000; Jarousse et Michaut, 2001), such as the number of lectures, the ratio students/teacher, the kind of help devices

available... Apart from the positive impact of the annual volume of teaching hours, no stable relationship can be established with students' success so far.

### 3.2 Choices driven by the expected chances of success?

HE is a risky business! That is especially so in the University courses open to every baccalauréat-holder, but more or less according to the student's previous academic level<sup>2</sup>. In the University courses, taking into account either students' chances to remain within the system till any degree or the chances of success in the first year, the kind of baccalauréat and also the mean grade obtained at this exam are the most influent factors. Considering the percentage of dropping out after one year in University, it varies from 3% among students with a general baccalauréat, up to 29% for students with a vocational one; one may add that for the latest students, entering University was more often a "second best" choice, after a refusal in the selective vocational tracks (MEN, 2005).

Considering the odds of passing the L (in 3-the normal length-, 4 or 5 years), and so obtaining a bachelor degree, the variations between students are also very large. A substantial percentage -83%- of those having passed a general baccalauréat with a mean of at least 12/20 will get a bachelor degree, and among them, 69% will do that in 3 years; that has to be contrasted with those student having a vocational baccalauréat -only 10% will succeed-, and with those students having a technological one, only 24%... Actually, the L course in University does not prove so risky for the students having a general baccalauréat, whatever their academic brio: all in all, 65% will pass the final exam-, even if only 44% will succeed to do it in 3 years. Consequently, repeating a year is very common, and also dropping as early as during the first year; about 25% of the students with a vocational baccalauréat do that, knowing that their entry into a University course is often a second choice, when they have not been selected in a vocational short track.

In the selective tracks, the picture is more mixed, depending on the kind of baccalauréat you have. Globally, in the short vocational tracks, a majority of students obtain the final degree (between 69 and 77%, after 2 or 3 years). But although they may look a priori better prepared due to their vocational training, students with a vocational baccalauréat show much more difficulties and only 48% succeed, compared with 87% among students with a general baccalauréat. It looks very difficult for them to compensate for their previously lower academic level (which precisely led them into the vocational track). In the very selective classes préparatoires, success is quasi guaranteed: if after 2 years (the official length) only 25.6% pass the entry into an elite school, that is the case for 78% of them if 3 years are considered (repeating is very common among those having failed at the end of the second year), knowing that the others will generally go on in University studies with success.

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<sup>2</sup> Figures concerning students' chances within HE may be found in several « Notes d'information » (available in the site of the French Ministry of Education): NI 05.19 (2005), NI 10.06 (2010), NI 13.02 (2013).

In any cases, failures and dropping out, and more broadly low completion rates are big problems in Universities. This is an old story, even if some fluctuations have been observed during the last fifties years. During the expansion phase of the sixties, the rates of failure have increased, before some stabilization at a rather high level. However, from the eighties onwards, failure and the correlated waste of resources has become a political issue and some measures seem to have had some impact: from the end of the eighties, rates of success have begun to increase, along with less numerous dropouts (about 15% in the early eighties, about 6% today). One may note that students leaving University without any degree cannot always be considered as failing. That is because some of them enter a variety of schools (for example social workers, paramedical staff, some private schools), and some of these schools prefer recruiting older and more mature students, due to the professions they prepare to; so they welcome students having some experience of HE, even without degrees. With the expansion and diversification of HE, this kind of alternative routes have developed, so that drop-outs from University may be less and less a genuine problem (except concerning the correlative cost!)....

Coming back to success, it is to be stressed that the observed trend towards better results has concerned mainly students with a general baccalauréat and much less those with a technological and a vocational one. So, today as before, success in HE is strongly linked to the student's academic past.

Concerning the students' characteristics associated to success, in all the studies and constantly along time, the student's academic level is the most relevant, more precisely the kind and specialty of the baccalauréat, the mean grade, the age when passing the exam, knowing that a high age means previous repetition and so difficulties (see NI 00.25, a very complete study, but focused on success after 2 years in HE only). Everything being equal, being the son (or the daughter) of a teacher or of an executive brings a slight advantage (above the fact that most often they have got the most efficient baccalauréat, the S one). Girls also appear to have slightly higher success within University tracks. Students having a paid job do succeed a bit less, which is probably linked to the fact that the time devoted to study (another slightly positive characteristic) is weaker; on reverse, everything else being equal, receiving a grant is linked positively to success. Last but not least, when students declare they attend their first choice track and are interested by their studies, this has a positive impact on their success, while students without any precise project may also stay as long as possible within the system (Grammare and Nakhili, 2010).

All in all, the kind of baccalauréat remains the most decisive factor: only 11% of the students with a general baccalauréat will leave HE without any degree, the corresponding figures being 30% for students with a technological one and 61% for students with a professional one.

### 3.3 Choices or social reproduction?

All across the board, choices take into account these both financial and psychological costs. However, these costs are put in balance not only with the chances of success but also with the



expected benefits to be drawn from their education investment. If one refers to the micro-foundations underlying the choices through which the intergenerational reproduction of inequalities is generated, one meets the rational choice model (Boudon, 1974). Even if this model is supposed to be accurate for the whole student population, it insists on the fact that the costs and benefits associated with the different tertiary alternatives tracks may be more or less relevant for students from different social origins. That way, even if this model focuses upon individuals making rational choices, it helps explaining social inequalities in the numerous choices schooling requires: families (and students) share unequal resources, which influence their evaluation of the risks and benefits associated with the different tracks under comparison, and they also develop unequal aspirations, since the latter (and the perceived benefits of the different tracks) are relative to their present place in the social structure. The aim pursued by parents goes further than the immediate educational perspective to include a concern for social reproduction.

Consequently, it can be expected that students from more privileged backgrounds will generally be over-represented in the highest ranked tracks in each country because they have larger financial and academic resources. Furthermore, privileged students may strive to gain access to the most lucrative tracks in order to avoid downward social mobility. In addition to these rational choice arguments, cultural capital theory (Bourdieu, 1978) might offer additional insight in student decision making processes. More privileged students will be better equipped to detect the best opportunities in a complex system of postsecondary choices, and may have distinctive preferences for some tertiary institutions or fields of study due to their families' cultural capital. All in all, the result is a socially diversified self-selection process, so that educational choices are stamped by social origin over and above inequalities in academic attainment.

So, as far as degrees are necessary to get a social position, there is no surprise if some social inequalities at that level since what is at stake is social reproduction. That is the case globally in France: as evoked previously, while 55% of a generation has access to HE, this figure varies from about 85% for high SES students to less than 43% for manual workers ones (even 29% for unqualified manual workers). This huge gap is produced mainly in the previous schooling career, resulting in unequal assets concerning HE courses and the correlative chances of success. However this is reinforced by the structure of French HE, and the choices that are nested at that level.

As evoked previously, there is a clear vertical ranking between the different postsecondary tracks in France: elite tracks lead to the most favorable occupational positions, while BTS-DUT graduate students' prospects are considerably lower and University graduate students' ones somewhere in the middle, or even lower in some specialties (NI 12.06). The different tracks are also more academically demanding and vary in duration and consequently in costs. So, the cost/benefit rationale may be quite relevant as choices are concerned.

Several empirical studies (Duru-Bellat, Kieffer and Reimer, 2008) show that in France, social origin mainly affects access to elite schools compared to all the other tracks. Considering only

students with a general baccalauréat, one observes a strong gap between choices towards which equality is nowadays nearly achieved (vocational tracks and, to a lesser extent, all the University tracks), on the one hand, and, on the other hand, the elite tracks which remain strongly socially selective (with some odds ratio above 7). That is because, although they are the “survivors” of the previous selection (all along the secondary schooling), students with a general baccalauréat do implement a strong self-selection before electing those elite tracks. And this self-selection is more or less marked according to the student’s social background; for example (Lemaire, 2005; Nakhili, 2007), with the same baccalauréat S, a student from a low SES chooses 2.8 times less often to enter a “classe préparatoire” compared with a high SES’s one. All in all, access to elite schools remains very distinctive: in the youngest generations: for men, the odds of attending an elite school vary from less 1% for the least qualified workers’ sons up to more than 20 % for the teachers’ ones... The latter draw the benefits of their better previous schooling and they also prove able to implement the most relevant strategies to maximize the economics benefits of their investments in HE

A consequence of the existence of the elite track is that social inequality between the remaining other tracks (University and the vocational ones) is reduced. As evoked previously, in order to understand social inequalities in diversified HE systems, one needs to take into account the specific institutional configuration of tertiary education in each country as well as the different pathways leading to eligibility. That is especially clear here: in France, where tertiary institutions are strongly differentiated, social inequalities mainly concern the choice of elite schools compared to all the other tracks. Comparatively, the choices of a precise field of study are much less stamped by social inequalities: while the different postsecondary tracks can be clearly vertically ranked, this is less straightforward concerning the different field of study, primarily because the choice of a field may result from preferences that are not related to social inequalities. Here, the impact of social background combines with the gender one. While girls look as ambitious as far as the total length of studies is concerned, they choose less often scientific and elite schools leading to engineering; however, they are nowadays more numerous than their masculine counterparts in rather prestigious tracks such as Medicine, some elite Business schools, some universities leading to the highest positions in the Justice sector<sup>3</sup>.

Whenever certain fields are more academically demanding or more costly, social background effects are particularly likely. Furthermore, fields of study can be ranked according to the more or less advantageous labor market outcomes they bring. When comparing different fields of study in terms of their academic requirements and their expected performances on the labor market, a divide between the ‘hard’ fields such as Mathematics or Physics and ‘soft’ fields such as the Humanities can be observed. Here, to get a rough impression of the relative labor market position of these fields, it is possible to compare the frequency of access to a qualified job (either an upper service class position or an intermediate one), across fields, 2

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<sup>3</sup> About gender differences (in choices of study, in chances of success), see the last edition (2014) of « Filles et Garçons sur les chemins de l’égalité », available on the site of the French Ministry of Education.

years and a half after leaving school (NI 12.06). At the master level, the situation is more favorable after a training in ITC or Mathematics (more than 97%), compared with foreign Language or Arts (about 66%). Generally speaking, while disregarding the type of tertiary institution, the opportunities are much better for students of the Sciences field compared with the Culture/Humanities field.

To conclude, in France, the diversification of the different types of baccalauréat makes it a conveyor belt of social inequalities for further schooling choices. All in all, social inequalities in HE result mainly from the previous schooling; they have been generated by two mechanisms of nearly equal importance: inequalities of achievement, inequalities of strategies and choices. However, the access to HE in itself adds some new inequalities to the ones embodied in the academic level achieved at the end of secondary school. Afterwards, once one has entered into HE, social inequalities prove less marked: while some inequalities of achievement exist, they are mainly due to previous selection, and they are not very large; more substantial are inequalities due to drops out and to the capacity to engage into other studies after a failure, which requires time and of course money.

#### 4. The major reforms of the post-WWII period: which challenges, which impact?

Since the end of the 1980s, no less than 4 important acts have been proclaimed specifically dedicated on HE: in 1968 (act “Edgar Faure”), in 1984 (act “Alain Savary”), in 2007 (act “Libertés et responsabilités des universités”, in short “LRU”) and in 2013 (act “Geneviève Fioraso”). They all reaffirm the general principles of Higher Education – open and free access, concern for equality, responsibility of the State –a quasi-monopolistic one- in the funding and deliverance of the degrees. However, they have progressively stressed the need of a better preparation of students to their occupational life, in a globalized world, and consequently to equip them with the most up-to date knowledge, which requires to develop also some excellent and competitive public research.

This trend is embedded in the European political context which has emerged from the turning of the 2000's. As evoked previously, it was boosted by European discourses about the need to increase and continuously update skills to remain competitive and employable in the global competition and in the “knowledge society” as well. Moreover, those discourses did express what has been described as the “Bologna philosophy” (Zgaga, 2012): the will to preserve the public good dimension of HE, the respect of democratic values, institutional autonomy and academic freedom, with the objective of strengthening social cohesion and reducing inequalities through education. At the Bologna Conference in June 1999, the European countries signed a common text, which was the start of the process of implementing a common space for HE (leading to the European Higher education Agenda in 2010). The objective was to make European degrees comparable and encourage students' mobility. To achieve this aim, the degrees pattern will be unified, with a first three-year cycle (L), giving access either to the job market, either to a two-year one (M); the studies will be certified by credits transferable to any HE European institutions, to encourage students' mobility as much as possible.

In France, the reform called LMD (« Licence – Master – Doctorat », with 3 cycles of 3/2/3 years) implemented this European policy in 2002. It took the place of the pattern prevailing till that turn (3 cycles of 2/1+1/1+3 years) from 1966. Besides this change implementing 3 main degrees, the reform cancelled any reference to national pattern for degrees, since now on, Universities themselves will conceive the degree courses and propose them for habilitation (every 3 years) to a national body, the CNESER (Conseil National de l'Enseignement Supérieur et de la Recherche). Using the European system of credits (ECTS, *European Credit Transfert System*), the global volume of any course will be explicit and comparable across sites. One should add that among the objectives of the European policy, there was also the reinforcement of the professionalization of HE studies, in relationship with the economic world.

The spread of the LMD pattern had many consequences on the courses provided to students and on students' trajectories as well. It has brought about some « credential inflation », with a growing number of Master specialties, along with increasing diversity in the names (or titles)

of the courses themselves. Concerning the trajectories, it is to be stressed that the LMD reform did differ the possibility to get the first HE degree (the first one, the DEUG was obtained after 2 years) till L (bac+3 for a Bachelor), and the same for obtaining the M, from bac+4 (the previous “Maîtrise) till bac+5 (for the Master); that is not without importance for the students’ possibilities to keep motivated and able to pay for their studies one year more or still more...

Within this broad frame, some reforms strictly devoted to HE have taken place. We will focus here on their aspects which concern specifically access.

#### 4.1 Actions aiming at improving success...

To limit the waste generated by the frequent failures occurring in the first years of HE has been the leitmotiv of all the successive reforms implemented since the mid-eighteens onwards.

The « Edgar Faure » act (1968), without strictly focusing on the students’ failure issue, implements a system of unit (“unités de valeur”), units to be accumulated to get a degree, which is supposed to make final success easier. With the « Alain Savary » act (1984), the increase of students’ achievement rates and fighting against students drop-outs become an explicit policy. It makes compulsory for universities to implement specific disposals to help students. Among the diverse measures supposed to go in that direction, we may evoke a specific period of time devoted to students’ information and guidance, a larger place given for optional subjects within the courses, so that students’ specialization may be delayed, and the development of teaching within small groups and individual help.

These changes have been reinforced during the 1990s: more room for options and pluri-disciplinarity, more information and guidance, facilities to change one’s track, units to be capitalized. More and more help is provided to students, the concrete modalities of which being diverse: help in the personal work, help to search documentation, help for self-assessment... These kinds of help are brought to first-year students by more advanced ones, under the supervision of teachers. However, only students who are volunteers participate to these actions and it has been shown that often, this is not the students who are most in need who are volunteers, which is of course detrimental to the global efficiency of the system, since they are seldom the students most in need !

These reforms have been implemented more or less completely in the universities. Certainly, they have had some impact on the increase of the students’ success rates observed from the mid-eighties onwards, even if it remains difficult to assess precisely this impact, due to the large diversity of the pedagogical functioning of the universities. From 2002 onwards, with the ECTS (*European Credit Transfert System*) system, the capitalization logic is reinforced, and students’ mobility across courses and European universities is strongly encouraged.

More recently, it has been judged necessary to accompany measures for better success with other ones devoted to helping students to choose the tracks in which their chances of success are higher, to minimize drops out and failure.

From 2007, the so-called “orientation active” process (we may translate by active guidance): implements a disposal of pre-inscription. During the last year of the lycée, the teachers boards, having taken into account what pupils intend to do the following year, are invited (in March) to communicate their appreciation to the Heads of the aimed at institutions, either favorable, or reserved. Then the latter react and may propose to the pupils whose secondary teachers did express some reserves to meet them, both to discourage them to enter this track and to see which other ones would be possible and more reasonable. However, in any case, the student remains free to enter the track he or she wants in the first place.

Today, this process is reinforced by a broad system called “admission post-bac” (APB, see the site: [www.admission-postbac.fr](http://www.admission-postbac.fr)), geared by the French Ministry of Education: every French pupil leaving the lycée has to fill a form on internet, in March (before he or she takes the baccalauréat) with the list of the tracks he/she wants for next year (with the possibility of 20 ranked wishes, in selective tracks or universities), this pre-inscription step being (eventually) followed by some advice from the school or the track concerned; he or she receives then a proposal for the highest choices possible, and has to matriculate in the track in which he/she is accepted, with some albeit limited possibilities of changes, mainly in case of vacancies in some tracks. This huge disposal makes pupils and parents very anxious and every February-March, how to fill at best the “APB” form is the leitmotiv of many media (TV, newspaper and internet sites)...

Besides the fact that it encourages every student to make plans and collect some information not at the last minute, this disposal is mainly conceived as a means to dissuade students with a technological and above all with a vocational baccalauréat to enter University; even if this system has not been precisely assessed, it seems to have partly reached this aim. But to be truly effective, this system should propose something to these students. As it proves often impossible for them to be selected in the short vocational tracks in which their chances of success would have been better (being in competition with students with a general baccalauréat), it has been decided in 2013 (with the “Geneviève Fioraso Act”) to implement quotas to warrant access of students with a technological and vocational baccalauréat to selective short vocational tracks of HE. One may note, between brackets, that what looks like a great fear of an invasion of University by these vocational bachelors is largely illusive, since the statistics produced by the French Ministry show that, compared with about 147800 students with a general baccalauréat entering University, only about 12100 students have got a vocational one...

Moreover, the implementation of disposals aiming at maximizing the chances of success goes on, with a new “plan de réussite en licence” (which can be translated as “device for success at the L level”), in 2011, which reinforces both information about HE studies within secondary high schools and students individualized help during the first years of L courses. One may add

that the 5000 new jobs announced for 2012-2017 in HE are supposed to reinforce staff in the L courses, again to maximize the help provided to the students. This help should go on after the study period itself and, from 2007 onwards, each University should have a “bureau d’aide à l’insertion professionnelle” (i.e a specific board for helping entry into the job market), also in charge with surveys on the students’ entry into the labor market, and with producing information and precise figures on this entry (frequency of unemployment, wages...).

#### 4.2 Delivering (more) subsidies to the students

To finance their studies and pay for their living, students need some direct resources. The medium student budget per month is estimated to 681€ (OVE, 2013), varying from 415 to 799€ depending on living or not with one’s own family. These direct resources may come from family support (about 52%), job (23%) and/or and public assistance (25%).

In that respect, there exist wide variations across European countries (Kamette, 2010), with 3 rather different models: in France and also Germany or Spain, the fees of study are rather low but direct public subsidies are low as well. In the United Kingdom or the Netherlands, fees are much higher but more subsidies are available, with also more widespread loans. Last, in Northern countries, there is nearly no fees and abundant public subsidies, but also more widespread students jobs.

So in France, family resources are especially important. Another thing to be stressed is that having a job is not very common for students. From the surveys made by the « Observatoire national de la vie étudiante » (OVE, 2013), about 46 % of the students have some paid job during the whole school year (this figure rises up to 75% including the summer jobs), but it is generally a part-time one and this is more frequent in some tracks such as Humanities, compared with Medicine or all the selective tracks. It has been shown that students having a job attend their lectures less regularly (students having a job declare 18 hours attending the lectures versus 21 when no job), they spend less time to personal work (14 hours versus 16), so that a job taking more than half-time weakens significantly the odds of success. In France, very few jobs are actually compatible with studies.

Public help takes very diverse forms in France. One may distinguish between direct subsidies (grants, loans and help for lodging), indirect subsidies (specific restaurants and rooms, health and cultural services, helps for students associations), and fiscal benefits.

We may put a specific stress upon grants. Their number has been in phase with the expansion of HE in France. While in the post WW2 period, about 10% of the students did receive one grant, one important date is 1955, when the “Centre National des Oeuvres Universitaires et Scolaires” (CNOUS) was created as a public center in charge with all the kinds of help provided to students. From that period onwards, grants became more numerous, especially on social criteria (although there exist also grants based on merit and punctual aids). In 1960, about 12.5 % of the students receive some aid, 14% in 1970, and 20% in 1990. However, some critics developed in that period, concerning the buying power of grants (which would be

diminishing) and the need to enlarge the criteria for them (not only parents' wages, but other ones, such as number of siblings engaged in studies, distance between the student's home and the place of study, etc.).

That is why a « plan social étudiant » (i.e a social plan for students) is launched in 1990. Its main proclaimed aim is to adapt the whole system of aids to the massification of HE. That takes the form of a simplification of students' social files (in which all the aids received are noted down), but also and mostly the willingness to revise the thresholds allowing a grant, so that more students may receive some and in a more equitable way. It organizes also new student loans, with the joined participation of the State and the private banks. A few years later, in 1995, more students do receive some grant (25 %) and more substantial ones (NI 92.44). On reverse, only 30 000 loans are given, which sounds as a failure, since about 600 000 was the aim fixed at the outset. Private banks withdrew themselves rapidly and the State had to go on alone with delivering some loans, loans to be paid back 10 years after the end of the studies. Today, no more than 6% of the students get a loan.

A second « plan social étudiant » is issued in 1997, with some quantitative benchmarks for the next 4 years, among which 30% of helped students. The thresholds are redefined, so that the family resources are better considered. And a new grant “echelon 0” –the lowest level- is created, which does not bring to the student any regular subsidies but allows him or her not to pay any fees when entering HE (and having free access to the student health service). The creation of this “echelon 0” grant produced a strong increase in the number of helped students (+ 12600 in 1999, about 35 000 in 2001). So, this grant “echelon 0” helped the government to reach its aim, without costing that much (however, from 2014 onwards, these students will receive also a small amount -1000€for the all year)... From 1997 to 2001, the total number of helped students rose by + 20 % (NI 03.15): in 2001-02, the proportion of helped students is about 30 %. In 2010-2011, it is 37.5%. Following this reform, the grants amounts have been increased; today, they vary from 1525€(for 10 months) for the weakest level, to 4370€for the highest one.

We may add that another interesting measure of this “plan social étudiant” was that it became also possible for students to keep the benefit of a grant when repeating a year or changing their subject or kinds of study. Moreover, one-shot aids are also developed to bring some rapid help to students in need.

Last, but significantly, merit grants were implemented: they are deemed to help students from low SES but having passed their baccalauréat with the highest honors to start study in some selective tracks (classes préparatoires aux grandes écoles, some elite schools, Medicine...); however, they are in a very small number (800 in 2005, 550 in 2010). All in all, grants based on social criteria remain the most numerous ones (90% of the total grants, the rest being mainly devoted to one-shot aids). There exist also grants based on academic criteria but they are still more uncommon (2.5%, mostly given to students in D, or preparing some entrance examination in the civil service).



This « plan social » has increased the social selectivity of grants: 2/3 of the student population receiving some grant have a father either manual workers, employees or without any job (unemployed or retired), while only slightly more than 11% have a father in the middle range of professions (NI 05.32). Some voices discussed the fact that middle-class children were discarded from this system of grants: when they belong to families earning between 3000 and 4000 € they are judged too rich to receive a direct aid although they may think that they are too poor to get well without it!

However, this critic forgets that there exist other kinds of aids available for all the students. That is the case for the “Aide personnalisée au logement” (individual help for accommodation), who can be received by all the students, depending only on the type of accommodation they have; it is all the more important as about 55% of the total budget of students not living in their family is devoted to housing. Moreover, those most in need can receive also an “Allocation de logement social” (social help for accommodation); these two subsidies amount to 1350 millions € in 2010, which may be compared with the total amount of grants and loans (1680 millions). Globally, about 1 out of 3 students receives some help for his or her accommodation. So, one may underline that the proportions of students receiving either a grant, either an aid for their housing are roughly similar.

Last but not least, the State does contribute through two substantial indirect forms of aid. That is first the so-called “oeuvres universitaires”, financing restaurants and specific accommodation for students (so reducing the price of these services for the students), and other forms of psychological and medical support. Still more substantial, the fiscal advantages offered to families having a child in HE; they can be estimated roughly to half the total amount of the direct aids (grants, loans and accommodation). So, it is clear that it is not a small contribution. One can note that international comparisons (as in OECD “Education at a Glance”), which take into account (most often) only grants and loans to estimate how much is given to students by the State under-estimate the public contribution in France: only 1.7 billions € is taken into account (resulting in a very bad ranking compared with other countries!), while the total of the public indirect aids (housing, fiscal advantages) amount to 2.8 billions €..

However, another problem may be judged still more important: the fact that with the increasing demand for autonomy, young people find more and more debatable that most of the public aid either is given to their family (through fiscal aid), either depends on their family’s resource (for grants). This may appear all the more debatable as there exists in France a minimum subsidy, guaranteed for every citizen... above 25 (about 500€ for a person living alone) ! Since several years, student unions have been promoting a “revenu minimal étudiant” (a student minimum wage) and some cities are making innovations in that direction, though financial restrictions lead them to take into account the student’s family resource.

Other voices have also raised the issue of the share of private funding in the global financing of HE. In France, private funding counts for 18% of the total expenditure; that is much weaker than in a lot of countries, even in Europe (Italy, Portugal, United Kingdom...). This

very large part of public funding is not only a heritage from the past; it is also justified by those who consider HE mainly as a social investment for the country. That is not necessarily false. However, one can also consider that HE is a private investment (not completely paid back with the taxes paid during the all life), so that it would not be unfair if students were asked to pay for a part of their study. That is all the more defensible that 1) students are a relatively privileged population, as far as their social background is taken into account, while public resources come from the taxes paid by the whole population, so that at the end a regressive distribution operates; 2) in France, access to HE is open and free, so that students may choose courses whose benefits for the country are not so obvious; as the State do not consider it has to pay for piano lessons as it is a private consumption, it may be judged debatable to pay for students studying subjects whose social benefits or economic prospects are low while private one may be valuable (history of art, for example). Even if recurrent debates exist on this issue of the financing of HE –in other words, the “publicness” or “privateness” of HE-, it remains, like selection at the entry, a taboo issue, even if, for one’s own children, most parents do not hesitate to pay...

All in all, despite all those reforms aiming at democratizing access and success in HE, some studies conclude that, at least between 1992 and 2004, the importance of social inequalities has not decreased (Grammare-Jaoul and Magdalou, 2013).

## 5. Main recurrent problems...

HE issues are frequently on the agenda in France, as the regular acts devoted to this level of Education demonstrate. We are facing some recurrent and very hard dilemma, with both taboo questions and genuine economic and social problems.

### 5.1 Students' success in an open system: an utopia?

The issue most discussed is certainly the difficulty of having both an universally open access to HE and a high level of academic success and completion rates: any baccalauréat-holder, whatever his or her characteristics, would be free to enter HE, and at the end, all the students would get a degree, as if that was automatic... Moreover, a lot of voices underline the incoherent allocation procedures of students within HE, since the best students (academically speaking) enter more often the selective tracks in which the environment is optimal for success, while the weakest ones attend universities, where the material and pedagogical context is much less favorable. In spite of the efforts made recently to improve students guidance, few people dare question the open access, while, in the meantime, everybody denounces a relationship between this open access and the large rates of failure.

While University emerges as the choice favored by the most privileged and most able students in most countries (for example, Germany), this is not the case in France. Here privileged students, when they do not gain access to elite schools, seem not to prefer University over the vocational short tracks. In these latter tracks, when one observes the very high rate of failure of students having got a technological or vocational baccalauréat, one is led to think either that some guidance or even selection would improve the efficiency of the system, or, alternatively, that something has got wrong with the vocational short tracks initially devoted precisely to these students (they would attract the most privileged students not because of their taste for vocational courses but mostly because they select their intake)... In the same way, when one observes the bias induced by unequal self-selection according to gender or social background, one may think, again, that some guidance or overt selection would better the global equity of the system, Last but not least, some guidance or selection could prevent students to engage in tracks without any economic perspective.

No doubt these ideas do progress; and when individual students have the possibility to pass with success some matriculation process to enter a selective track, they choose this reassuring way to enter HE. But the official discourse remains, especially among students unions: the right must be preserved, for every student to have access to culture at the highest level. One reason is also the fear that, in case of a generalized process of selection, some students may be rejected from any form of HE.

Some experiments do exist, such as the University of Paris IX (Dauphine): created after May 1968 with a derogatory status, this University specialized in Economy and Management (and located in the well-off boroughs of Paris), is overly selective (each year, 8000 applicants for

830 admissions in the first year) and students pay fees according to their parents' resources (from 0 to 4000€). So does Sciences Po, a mixed institution (both public and belonging to a foundation), devoted to Political Sciences, Economy and International relations. Actually, this kind of selective institutions does attract many students and warrant them good economic perspectives. As today about 50% of the French students enter a selective track, is it possible to let most of the University tracks apart from this global trend?

For the present time, the French government has chosen to keep apart from this delicate debate, and to focus on the reduction of failure. It develops students' information and advice (see the so-called « orientation active » evoked previously). The philosophy is to preserve the right to enter HE for every student, while disseminating the message that HE does not mean a quite new start, in other words that one's chances of success are strictly linked to the previous academic value and specialty. One thing is certain: giving a free and open access to all is not sufficient to warrant equality and justice!

Another debate concerns the optimal degree of specialization in the first years of HE. Today, in University tracks, students are facing teachers who are at the same time researchers, and so necessarily specialized. Although this trend is certainly weakening, students are exposed to specialized lectures; actually, confronting students to research is considered as the specificity of HE. However, that makes students' choices more complicated and also chances of success, motivation and changes of subject more hazardous. So, a recent act (the act "Fioraso" in 2013) asks University to implement less specialized curricula at the L level, and to inform students more clearly about the courses they plan to study; concretely, the variety of the courses titles have been reduced drastically, from 300 to 36. One may add that besides these more « generalist » L courses, new interdisciplinary ones develop in universities, such as Law and foreign languages, engineering and management, social Sciences and Sciences... So, even if debates about pedagogical issues remain very uncommon (in France, actually at all the levels of the education system), some considerations emerge about what students do learn during their studies –should they learn the necessarily specialized science research produces?- and about what they should learn to get some jobs later on.

Some add that making curricula more generalist would weaken (or at least differ) social inequalities, which are substantial as underlined previously, especially as far as choices are considered. Critical review of the system, developed mainly by sociologists, include the question of whether the expansion of HE did bring more inclusion or only diversion through access to different and unequal tracks. As Arum et al. (2007) conclude, diversification of the system is used by the best informed students to preserve their advantage and expansion in itself does not reduce social inequalities as long as the middle and higher classes do not reach saturation (with 100% attending HE), which is not completely the case in French HE. That leads sociologists to conclude that, as far as degrees are necessary to get a social position, social reproduction is achieved through access to education, so that social inequality is unavoidable especially at this final step that is HE.

Actually, among French sociologists, a certain consensus does exist on the fatality of social reproduction. On the one hand, Boudon (1974) asserts that as long as society remains unequal, we are bound to observe persisting differentials in the (unequal) positions aimed at by (unequal) pupils, since aspirations are relative to where you start from, which is also where you want to arrive at the end. On the other hand, even if the strategic dimension of action has long been, if not denied, at least under-estimated by authors such as Bourdieu, this author did reach the same conclusion as Boudon concerning the permanence of social reproduction, even though constant changes.

While Boudon focused on the relative importance of numbers –number of jobs, number of degrees- on the concrete operating of social reproduction, Bourdieu insisted more on the size of the pie to be shared and on the fact that social reproduction required a credential inflation to be achieved smoothly; Bourdieu (1978) explains: ‘The entering into the race and competition for degrees of young people belonging to groups who were till now using school in a very moderate way has pushed those groups whose reproduction was mainly achieved by school to intensify their investment to maintain the relative scarcity of their degrees and so doing their position in the social structure, so that the degree and the system delivering it become the main stake in a competition which generates a broad and continuous growth of the demand for education and an inflation of degrees’. At the same period, Collins (1979) presented “credentialism” (with upper and upper level of education required for access to qualified jobs) as a way of social closure and the credential inflation as the strategy (the ‘exclusionary tactics’) of the elite to preserve its advantages regarding its access to the best occupational careers on the basis of higher and higher degrees.

Even if this theory is lively discussed (see Brown and others, 2010), it is broadly in conformity with French observations: competition is increasing, fostered by the fact that any young people's opportunities depend on the opportunities of others, as predicted by Boudon. It also helps understand the necessity for the dominant group to encourage the expansion of schooling as a means to keep its children ahead. This perspective is integrated today, in France, in the overall analysis of inequalities between generations. Chauvel (2010) for instance underlines the fact that the present devaluation of degrees suits perfectly the interests of the older generations which retain all the best positions.

All these analyses underline (again) the impact of both the structural frame and the actors’ strategies on the operation of social reproduction; in this respect, the size of the pie is as significant as the way the pie is divided among groups. They also hold that to understand how inequalities are changing, it is very significant to take into account the dynamics of growth, with the prediction that in a context of growth and increasing diversification, it is easier for elites to find ways to keep ahead. No doubt both growth and diversification of the system are facilitating conditions for what Raftery and Hout (1993) calls ‘maximally maintained inequality’, that is actors’ strategies striving to preserve their advantage with the complicity of politicians, since the educational system is financed by public resources, and also because this may be the most easily acceptable policy. What is clear in that perspective is that, especially

at the HE level, social inequality is recreated constantly by those who draw some benefits from it!

## 5.2. Optimizing the link with the labor market, a difficult challenge!

Whatever the social (or even political) advantages of widening access to HE, growth cannot be unlimited since it is a final step, since the corresponding jobs are not unlimited either... Actually, individuals insert themselves into a society whose 'places' are predefined, and even if education is a relatively effective way of accessing the best positions, the definition of these places themselves (and more broadly how society is stratified) does not fundamentally arise from its action. Similarly, the educational system has no power upon the effective market value of the degrees it distributes, which itself results from the structural distribution of jobs and the peculiar relationships which prevail between degrees and qualifications. If, as has been observed in France over the last decades, the expansion of the socio-economic structure at its high end has been slower than the rate at which graduates who might fill this level are produced, there will be an adjustment which is paid for in the form of devalued credentials.

So, the question of the access to HE and of the relevant policies (among which the issue of democratization itself) is intimately embedded in the structural frame of the job market and its evolution. Whether we are presently facing a process of devaluation of degrees, along with their expansion, is a very lively issue in France today (Duru-Bellat, 2006, 2008). While a high level of education still protects against unemployment, students with a tertiary degree do meet problems since the beginning of the 1990's, and they are in competition with students possessing only a secondary qualification or less. The latter are more often relegated to unqualified jobs. It is a rather taboo issue in France, because it may hint that we have educated too much –and from an abstract view, one can never be too educated-, or that we have at least spent too much money in giving tertiary education to young people who may get a low-qualified job. Policy makers, promoting the development of education (in France as in Europe or OECD) prefer to contend that the evolution of jobs themselves requires more and more education. The problem is that very few qualitative observations of precise job requirements are available, neither are there precise explorations and assessment of the skills students acquire during their studies.

For the time being, what is observed (NI 12.06) is that only students from elite schools or with a Doctorate stand a very good chance at getting top level jobs. In that respect, the gap has increased between universities students and elite school ones. The situation is also more favourable with a "licence professionnelle" than with a general licence, and that will be still more marked in the coming years, since the recruitments in the public services are shrinking: in particular, the number of opportunities in public teaching has diminished and the same is true of the other civil service jobs, which were the most frequent destinations of University students, especially after Humanities courses. So the competition is harsher and harsher and today, in the civil service, 64% of the young people recruited are over-educated.

While in the sixties, 3 years after having left University with a L level, about 70-80% of the students had a job qualified as “cadres”(executive), today, with the same level, less than 20% are in that position. And the public statistics now mix executive and intermediate jobs, not to let this downgrading too much visible! All across the board, the devaluation of degrees is a continuous and significant phenomenon (Giret and others, 2006). It is also an old and international problem (Baudelot and Glaude, 1989; Bordigoni, 1995; in Europe, see Allen and van der Velden, 2001, Büchel and other, 2003).

Young people are conscious of this phenomenon, and that is not without any relationship to some contentions and strikes we regularly face in France every time the government try to change something either in the educational system or in the conditions of entry on the labour-market: even if they are very critical on the current functioning of the system, students are so anxious about the future than they are reluctant to any change...

Actually, what choice do the students face? It is very important to stress that a higher degree always brings some relative advantage: it's better to get some L degree than a baccalauréat. So, going further in the educational system remains a good investment, even if this relative advantage has slightly weakened since the 1970's. The problem is precisely that this devaluation of degrees goes along with the stability of the relative advantages they bring. So, it fosters a self-perpetuating trend. Individuals are caught in a trap compelling them to go further and further to get the same returns; and in this 'opportunity trap', as Philip Brown (2003) said, middle and upper class families, with the assets they have, prove able to maximise the benefit drawn from the degrees achieved. On the contrary, with the same degree (but may be also with a less valuable specialty), obtaining an under-qualified job is more common among children from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Here, it is justified to talk of 'credential inflation', in tune with Shavit and Müller (1998): 'in occupational space, the value of a credential consists primarily in its scarcity and position in the hierarchy of credentials rather than it derives from the specific skills it represents'. While this 'credential inflation' is quite a widespread phenomenon in the world, its importance is bound to be stronger in countries like France, where individuals are ranked in the file for jobs according to their level of education (rather than according to their specialty), a logic of 'level' prevailing upon a logic of vocational training. In other words, in France, the connection between the specific skills obtained in the education system and the labour market is less pronounced than in other countries (such as Germany; see Shavit and Müller, 1998); consequently, vertical ranking through unequal degree levels is generally more marked than a close correspondence between a given qualification and jobs. That maximises the risks of credential inflation.

Moreover, some undesired effects may emerge, especially a perversion of education itself, as it has been studied as early as 1976 by the American sociologist Dore, describing in several developing countries what he called the 'diploma disease'. Starting with the observation of an inflation of degrees and a growth in their value as positional goods for employers, he notes that this situation leads to examination-oriented schooling among students. This has in turn

some detrimental effects on the quality of learning as well as on attitudes towards learning, such as ritualism, and a less genuine interest in knowledge. Recent research in France shows, from the higher secondary school to some University tracks (Felouzis, 2001a), an increasing ritualism among students who look mostly interested in the marks they may get, the exams they may pass and which returns they may achieve with it, rather than by the content of the studies themselves. Curiosity or pleasure to learn seems often to fade out, and the main objective is no more to learn but to get the certification necessary to get a job. Moreover, when these utilitarian students enter the labour market, disillusion is often great. Bourdieu, as early as 1978, did evoke what he called a 'deceived generation', who, facing the gap between its diploma and the real opportunities on the job market, was bound to adopt a disillusioned attitude, both towards work and political life, or even a more offensive one leading to protest. And this it is not only a matter of disillusion, but also of personal suffering. Recent surveys led by the French Ministry of Education shows the about 35% of the students feel depressed...

Openness and the harsher competition it entails are also cruel in a second sense: as education is becoming mostly a positional good, it requires that a lot of pupils fail to master it, since the winners must not be too numerous if they are to win something. So failure, even if it is overtly deplored, remains a necessary part of the machinery of a selection whose necessity is admitted (but again overtly refused, especially at the entrance of the French universities), by students as well as by politicians, if a given value associated with the degree is to be preserved. At the macro level, the fact that competition is tougher and tougher and the growing sense of economic insecurity (which is very strong among French young people) certainly have also broader undesirable effects, not yet well identified. Again, the Brown's notion of 'opportunity trap' is relevant, for the society as a whole, just as it is for individuals.

However, despite this wasteful competition, one may consider all across the board that some symbolic efficiency is achieved, if the conviction that you deserve the rank you obtain in a continuous competition proves ingrained and if so, as Bourdieu would say, inequalities are legitimised. But the growing gap between degrees and jobs obtained may throw some doubt on the meritocratic way in which the whole system operates. It seems to be the case today: some recent studies (Duru-Bellat, 2009; Duru-Bellat and Tenret, 2009) show that students are not so numerous to think that educated persons deserve higher earnings and that merit prevails in the professional life... No need to underline that all these sociological studies foster some fatalism and a pessimistic mood especially widespread in France about educational issues!



## 6. Ongoing discourses and/or initiatives for the future

Finally, we will deal with some open issues lively debated in France, which do not only foster some ongoing political debates, but in some cases justify some reforms or at least plans for reforms... We will focus on those directly linked to access to HE. So we will not deal with questions such as the status of universities, even if it has of course some relevance for our focus question. Here, let's only say that, especially with the act "LRU" in 2007, a significant turn has been to give to universities more autonomy, drawn by the Bologna mood. In France, the capacities of universities to take their own decisions have always been limited, especially the power to implement themselves some specific policies or devices. One institutional reason is that, till the early eighties, universities were structured mainly by academic subjects: the obedience of all their teachers relied mainly towards their peers of the same subjects – notably, they decided about their career- based on their research work and ignoring their involvement as a teacher in their specific setting. Without changing completely on that last point, the act LRU gives more power to the University board, especially more leeway to manage public dotation and look for other resources, and consequently allows them to implement freely specific policies concerning students (information, diverse helps...), even if the global frame of national degrees remain geared by the State. However, there remains some reluctance towards the managerial mood which, for many academics, is engrained in the European discourses and policies.

In the same way, due to the focus on access to HE, we will not deal here with other significant issues put on the agenda by Europe (see Cural *et al.*, 2012), such as quality assurance as a key instrument for the modernization of HE and the role of students' assessment in this respect, or the mobility among students and staff, to be promoted, along with assertive policies to make European universities attractive for foreign students from all over the world. Actually, these issues are much less overtly debated in France, compared with the following ones.

### 6.1 Professionalization and the risks of the "commodification" of HE

Universities are firmly invited to be very attentive to their students' integration into the labor market, and that is often a true challenge for them. A recurrent difficulty for them is how to convince students to take into account the economic perspective of their study. For instance, on this issue of the choices of subjects and tracks, a debate has been launched following the last edition of "Education at a Glance" (2013), concerning the students disaffection of Sciences all over the OECD countries, since one student out of three does choose to study social Sciences, Law or Business. That is not quite a new debate in France, but this problem does exist still today since about 40% of French students do so. In the meantime, few students choose Sciences (9% in OECD, 20% in France) or engineering (15% in OECD, 9% in France). A number of information campaigns have been launched in France in the past, to attract students towards Sciences but without great success. That is probably because Mathematics and Physics are considered as difficult subjects, the ones on which the previous selection has been achieved, and also because Business looks much more attractive...

It may look easier for universities to develop some professionalization in every track, since there is no more lively debates about that: even if some voices resist to this evolution considered as exploiting HE for economic needs, arguing that the main function of universities is to produce and deliver a « useless » knowledge and culture, the majority is conscious that University welcome today not only those that Bourdieu called the « heirs » (in French, les héritiers), rather a wider and much more popular student body who has to be trained for earn one's living. The times have gone when the obsession was not to “vendre l'université au patronat” (to sell University to the employers), an obsession widespread in the 1960's and even till the 1980s. On reverse, it has become quite fashionable in the present times to implement school courses combined with work experience (which is easier with some decentralization). Today, about 10% of the French students attend this kind of courses, with a complete and continuous shift –what we call “alternance”- between on the job training and lectures. Strongly promoted in the last decades, its weight has doubled during the last ten years, and today, it is mostly developed in some fields such as Information Technology or Management, but some experiments are also made in social Sciences for instance. This kind of studies allowing students to discover concretely their future work and often bringing to them some financial albeit modest resources is very popular. Surveys about students' satisfaction (see for example OVE, 2013) show that the more a course gives some room for work experience and vocational training, the more satisfied students are.

Moreover, universities compete to make agreements with foreign institutions (within or without the Erasmus system), with the delivery of double-signed degrees, again because it appears as a way of securing their students' professional chances. Some of them, with the same objective in mind, implements courses in English, although that is currently criticized by those fearing that the French language may be progressively sacrificed. Some of the most prestigious French institutions (3% of them, for example, Sciences Po, Ecole Polytechnique) are even launching MOOC (massive online open courses), to increase their audience and their reputation...

There remains a genuine difficulty: is it ever possible to regulate the students' numbers in the diverse tracks and subjects according to the “needs” of the labor market? Following the majority of the courses, there is no such thing as a strict correspondence between the degrees and the jobs obtained. For instance, among students trained in Humanities, only about 38% have a job linked to the content of their studies... However, if it proves impossible to regulate strictly the students' numbers according to the labor market, one may think that the State has the responsibility to define broad limits for the tracks and subjects it is financing, rather than letting them widen or shrink according to some students' fads, or to the teachers' will to welcome more students, one reason for this being that the number of academic positions, for teaching but also for research, is determined by those numbers... It is not very reasonable that, due to students' fads, the number of academics in Sport has considerably increased in the 1990's in France, while the corresponding number in Science was lagging behind...

Anyway, these are controversial issues, also because University has obviously other roles than preparing young people to enter the labor market: some students are here for the pleasure to study, for having a socially acceptable status, or just because they need some time to choose... If these latter reasons are to be discussed, one should give young people other means or paths to find their place in society!

## 6.2 “Democratizing” the elite...

Anyway, the ongoing trend for universities and schools is to adapt themselves to a continuously changing economic world. In this global mood, the issue of the French elite schools is lively raised. What is especially at stake is the existence of the “classes préparatoires aux grandes écoles”, still more than the existence of these “grandes écoles” themselves, although the debates concern centrally the French elites.

The “classes préparatoires” are criticized from a variety of points of view. As evoked, they are very socially selective, even if it is mostly the result of all the previous social selection. However, they are also much more expansive than the University tracks (the cost per student is about the double), so that more public funding is devoted to the more advantaged students... Of course, they appear as an efficient path to enter an elite school –about 80% succeed doing so-, but more and more often, University students enter also these schools and at a much lower cost for the State. Actually, elite school try to diversify their student body and in that perspective, students coming from the University appear often more creative, more autonomous and as qualified to succeed. So the specific value brought about by this parallel system is questioned.

Moreover, many side-effects are underlined: the co-existence of “classes préparatoires” and universities makes the latter a “second best” choice, which is not favorable for the recruitment of brilliant students able to engage themselves, later on, in high quality research... Most students leaving the elite school will work in the private sector, and will not look for cooperation or funding with a structure –University- that they have never attended. Last but not least, elite schools have hesitated to open their numbers to protect their economic perspectives and this malthusianism is strongly criticized as well. Today, most of the French members of the elite come from a very small number of prestigious schools (Ecole Polytechnique, the Ecole Nationale d’Administration). A recent study (Gumbel, 2013) shows that among the about 546 top executives belonging to the 40 largest companies (those forming the CAC 40), 84% had attended an elite school, and 46% were coming from 3 of them (the two evoked just before and the Hautes Etudes Commerciales, the most prestigious Business school). In a globalized world, this narrowness of the basis of the elite (and also its endogenous character) is more and more perceived as a problem...

## 6.3 More HE or more justice both upstream and downstream?

Last, we are presently witnessing a turn in the French educational policies, with a weakening of the priority given to the expansion of HE in the recent decades. That may be because of a threshold has been overpassed –with more than 43% of young people entering the labor

market with a HE degree-, or because of the continuous downgrading of degrees themselves... Anyway, the policy dominated by “more of the same thing”, that is, simply increasing access to education, is no more on the agenda (or in a less overt manner). The official quantitative target -50% with a tertiary degree- is always there and it has been internalized by students: 32% of the French students wish to study at least up to a “bac+6” degree (i.e six years of tertiary studies), while they were 22% in that case in 2010. However, the quality and not only the quantity of education is now debated, and also what kind of education, for whom and for what purpose.

In France, where education is an important and politically sensitive matter, the general interest is supposed to prevail, and especially in the present context –with strong financial constraints- priorities must be asserted and trade-offs must be made. These may not be popular: pre-schooling or life-long learning versus promoting tertiary education, for instance, which concerns either the least advantaged group or the most advantaged one, the latter being generally the most influential. Research suggests (even if these issues are obviously open to debates) that is not the same Education one will develop if social cohesion or rather economic innovation is to be promoted: in the first case, pre-school or common-core curriculum for every member of the community will be favoured (Dubet, Duru-Bellat and Véré tout, 2010; Janmaat *et al.*, 2013), while in the second one, that will be tertiary and competitive education for the best ones.

Moreover, in the perspective of social cohesion, education should not be focused only on academic success; the development of social skills and the promotion of well-being may be judged as equally important. So, each time some economic trade-offs are necessary, and it is always the case, not only in France, since no country is able to allocate the whole of its resources to education, and if social cohesion is really aimed at, the priority should be given to high quality pre-primary and primary education; of course, that may be at the expense of some more limited development of tertiary education or even secondary education (especially expansive in France). That is precisely the priority which has been proclaimed by the French government in 2012, and many sociologists of education may feel that their opinion has been listened to...

However, the sociologist should recall also that schooling is not a panacea. One reason is that education is nested in the whole society. Research shows that disparities between children emerge before they enter school, due to unequal environments outside of school. Attention to the local context in which pupils live and learn, which is now largely widespread in most European countries, results in more concern for housing conditions, urban renewal, income support for families, and local employment among others. In this perspective, adult training becomes a crucial issue. It delivers a double benefit: investing in adults will transform either the way they work or the way they bring up their children. Besides, all forms of adult training, life-long learning and offering second chances are significant issues, for economic purpose, as most often underlined, but also for equity considerations and social cohesion. On this point, France has still a large leeway for progress and in February 2014, the French government has

launched a project for making easier for adults to have access to some on the job-training or even changing one's specialty to adapt oneself to a rapidly changing economic world.

So HE policies are definitively not the only one mean to move towards more economic efficiency and social cohesion. Policies aiming at the children well-being, the youth social and economic integration and the adults continuous support are as necessary and even more valuable.

## Conclusions

Many of the problems met by the French HE system are widespread in Europe. Concerning more precisely the case of Greece<sup>4</sup>, one may underline that many of the problems pointed out by OECD studies (OECD, 2011) and the on-going research in Greece itself concern also France and without any doubt other European countries. That is especially the case for 4 of them.

The first one is the difficulty of allocating the students in an efficient way, among the existing institutions, and the low completion rates which are considered as a consequence of that fact. This problem is all the more acute as tertiary education concerns today a large part of a generation, and as access to this level of education is considered as a legitimate right. This problem is not wiped out when some specific device for this students' allocation operates as it is the case in Greece: the selection process, as the one implemented in this country, does not seem to solve all the problems... While in Greece, some debates exist concerning its "technical organization" and the possibly negative consequences of a national entrance examination, in France, the pedagogical issues remain rather despised, and the issue of selection is dealt with in a very general (and somewhat ideological) way; even if a new device has recently been launched to allocate students (the so-called APB system), that would be unacceptable, for the French society, that student's choices may be restricted.

A correlative issue is the importance of social inequalities at the entry of HE. The selective disposal which exists in Greece looks unable to tackle this issue, notably because of private education or the possibly flight towards foreign countries to escape this selection. In France, this latter phenomenon is very limited; only students having failed in selective tracks such a Medicine or paramedical studies sometimes leave for countries in which this selection looks weaker. Moreover, private education takes a substantial place in the social reproduction which, in France, prevails in elite schools and their preparatory classes. And we have seen that in a system with no official selection, large social bias impinges on self-selection. Consequently, social inequalities may remain large whatever the pedagogical organization, and the reason is that, beyond previous inequalities of achievement, social reproduction is at stake here, so that social strategies are very assertive, and that is all the more true as the difficulties to get a job are considerable. One may suggest that one way to counterbalance this phenomenon would be to develop "second chances" –though on the job training and qualification-, so that students having met difficulties during their early years, or having received few help from their families, may have a chance to better their situation. In other words, access to tertiary studies should not be the one and only path to social upwards mobility, and there should exist also alternative routes to get higher education degrees..

The third issue, underlined in OECD reports is the difficulty of articulating tertiary provision with the needs of the labour market, an unsolvable problem as far as economic previsions in

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<sup>4</sup> This report was produced as part of a European comparative project on access to higher education, and presented at the closing conference of the project in Athens November 22, 2014.

this respect are often hazardous and as the links between degrees and jobs are themselves often weak and moreover changing over time. On the present times, the difficulty to attract students in the scientific fields is often underlined, since they look more oriented towards lucrative ones such as business or engineering. More globally, the rhetoric of “excessive demand” toward tertiary studies, when taking into account the level of competencies truly required on the job, is developed in the two countries, and it is not easy to document it on solid empirical basis. It is more comfortable, for politicians, to just increase provision at the tertiary level, at the risks of neglecting the social and economic dimensions of such a high percentage of tertiary degrees in the young generations... In the meantime, in the two countries, some voices fear young people may divert themselves from tertiary studies, to look for immediate employment, which would not be the best way, at the country level, to face the global economic competition (this rhetoric being especially widespread in the European institutions)... To develop sufficiently non-specialized studies and provide abundant supply of life-long training are the only ways to face this genuine difficulty.

A fourth problem, shared by the two countries and pointed out by OECD is what is considered as the low level of non-public funding, especially the students’ limited cost-sharing. Of course, what lies behind these remarks (made by OECD) is a specific model of what HE should be, an efficient conveyor belt to private economic returns or a public institution open to all for private cultural consumption, bringing in both cases not only private but also public (at the country level) benefits. That should remain open to debates: what is an “excessive demand” or a “normal” one, what should be the weight of purely academic versus applied tracks, what would be a fair contribution of public versus private resources, all these questions are political ones. There is no “one and best way” emerging from international comparisons, but political choices, sometimes rather idiosyncratic ones, are quite legitimate in that respect!

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