

Training & Employment

n° 113 September-October 2014

Obtaining a post-initial qualification: a second chance for young people with at best lower-secondary qualifications to access better jobs?

In France, one quarter of young people who left initial education in 2004 with at best lower-secondary qualifications obtained a further qualification during the first seven years of their working lives. Young women seem to derive considerable benefit from this, with increased access to more highly skilled and better paid jobs. However, things are very different for young men, who tend to go into less regulated occupations than young women.

labour market
entry wages
post-initial
qualification
unemployment
lower-secondary
diploma qualifications

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Reducing the number of young people leaving the education system with at best lower-secondary qualifications has long been a goal of public policy and has now been reaffirmed as such. The entry of young people with at best lower-secondary qualifications into the labour market has been made more difficult by the economic crisis and the early years of their working lives have become increasingly chaotic. At the European level, the member states have set themselves the goal of reducing to less than 10% the share of young people aged between 18 and 24 not in some form of education or training and without at least upper-secondary qualifications. In France, there are 620,000 young people in this situation and the country has set itself the more ambitious target of reducing the share to 9.5% by 2020.

The French government has just adopted an action plan, affirming its commitment to 'a comprehensive, integrated, three-point policy: prevention, intervention and remediation'. One element in this last strand is the 'right to further education or training leading to a formal qualification', which was established by decree in December 2014 in pursuance of the framework act on the reorganisation of public (i.e. state) schools. Thus young people aged between 16 and 25 who left education without an upper-secondary or a professional credential have the option of requesting an interview with a rep-

resentative of the regional public careers advice service. Following this interview, they will be able to choose the training programme best suited to their profile and career plans. However, what do we know currently about the acquisition of a post-initial qualification and its effects on young people's labour market trajectories?

The *Génération 2004* survey shows that one quarter of young people who left the education system in 2004 with at best lower-secondary qualifications obtained further qualifications during the following seven years. Measuring the effects on their long-term employment situation is tricky. Nevertheless, comparison between those with and those without these additional qualifications produces very different results for men and for women. Young women's employment situation seems to improve markedly following the acquisition of post-initial qualifications: they are more likely to be in employment and the jobs they hold tend to be more highly skilled and better paid. Young men, on the other hand, seem to derive less benefit from gaining post-initial qualifications.

One quarter of young people with at best lower-secondary qualifications obtain a post-initial qualification

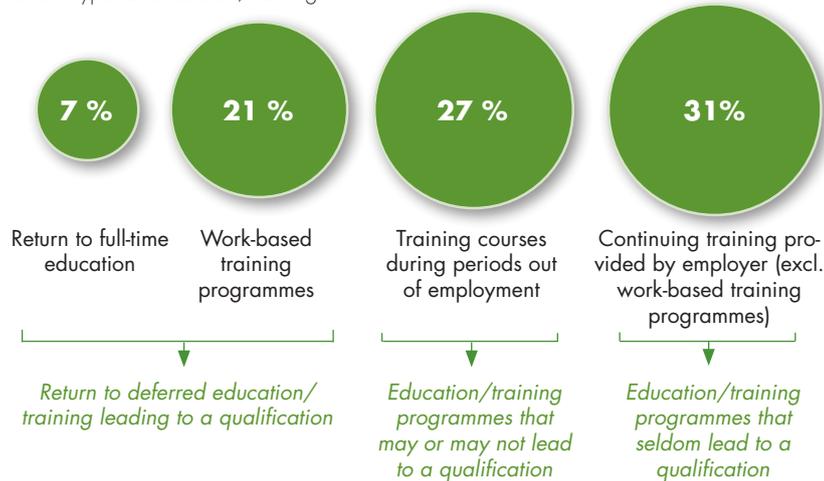
In 2004, 123,000 young people left the education system with, at best, lower-secondary quali- ●●●

ifications. Two thirds of them were young men, many of them from working-class backgrounds (6 out of 10 of them had a father in a manual or lower-level white-collar occupation) and were mainly on short vocational training programmes (60%). These young people left school (or apprentice training centre) for a variety of reasons. Like most of the young

people who left the education system in 2004, the majority of those with at best lower-secondary qualifications (6 out of 10) stated that they had left education 'in order to start work'. However, while those who had obtained upper-secondary qualifications also said they had reached their desired level of education, those without such qualifications tended rather to say they had left education because they were tired of it.

Box 1 • Young people with at best lower-secondary qualifications and post-initial education or training

The various options are not mutually exclusive: some young people may have embarked on various types of education/training.



Source: *Génération 2004* survey, 2011 follow up.
Field: all young people who left initial education with at best lower-secondary qualifications.

Many young people take advantage of existing education/training opportunities during the early years of their working lives. Seven per cent of the 2004 cohort adopted a real 're-engagement' strategy by choosing to return to full-time education. However, other options attracted more applicants.

The vocational training system does, after all, offer a variety of pathways depending on the labour market situation and the objectives being pursued (education/training course leading to a qualification, preparation for such a course, job search support, support in current occupation). Within this range of options, work-based training programmes occupy a dominant position for young people wishing to obtain a qualification. Thus 21% of the young people with at best lower-secondary qualifications were hired on apprenticeship contracts or the so-called *contrats de professionnalisation* ('vocational training schemes').

Young people with at best lower-secondary qualifications may experience varying periods of unemployment. Consequently, training courses during periods out of work played a relatively important role, with 27% of the young people taking part.

Finally, 31% of the young people with at best lower-secondary qualifications took part in continuing training programmes provided by employers. Such programmes, which seldom lead to a qualification, are often intended to help employees adapt to their jobs or to changes in the work environment.

Nevertheless, this did not prevent some of them from returning to education or training in the early years of their working lives (see Box 1). In some cases, they were able to acquire a certificate or even a higher qualification. In fact, of the young people who left initial education in 2004 with at best lower-secondary qualifications, one in four obtained a further qualification in the first seven years of their working lives. In six out of ten cases, the qualification obtained was an upper secondary vocational certification (mostly a CAP or BEP, corresponding to the ISCED 3C level). In the other cases, the main qualifications obtained were vocational or technological *baccalauréat*, or vocational diplomas (ISCED 3AB level). Logically enough, those who had quit short vocational programmes or lower secondary school were more likely to obtain a qualification corresponding to the ISCED 3C level (this applied to between 7 and 8 out of 10 of this group). Nevertheless, 40% of those who had quit general or technological courses in upper secondary school also obtained a qualification at this level.

The fact of having left education because they were 'tired of it' did not prevent these young people with at best lower-secondary qualifications from returning fairly rapidly to education or training programmes leading to further qualifications. Almost a quarter of those who acquired post-initial qualifications did so within two years of leaving initial education. On average, a little less than four years elapsed between initial exit from the education system and acquisition of a further qualification. Two out of three of the young people said they were unemployed or inactive when they started their courses. One out of ten received financial support to return to education or training.

Various factors affected individuals' chances of obtaining a qualification (cf. Figure 1). The level of the final class attended in the education system was an important determinant. Given the same social characteristics and identical starts to the career trajectory, young people leaving at the end of lower secondary school (*collège* in France) and from short vocational programmes had a lower propensity to acquire post-initial qualifications. Compared with those who left while in upper secondary school, whether from general academic or technological programmes, they were 50% less likely to obtain post-initial qualifications. This propensity was reduced all the more for those who quit programmes in a manufacturing/industrial specialism rather than tertiary-level programmes, particularly when their initial training took the form of an apprenticeship. The reasons for quit-

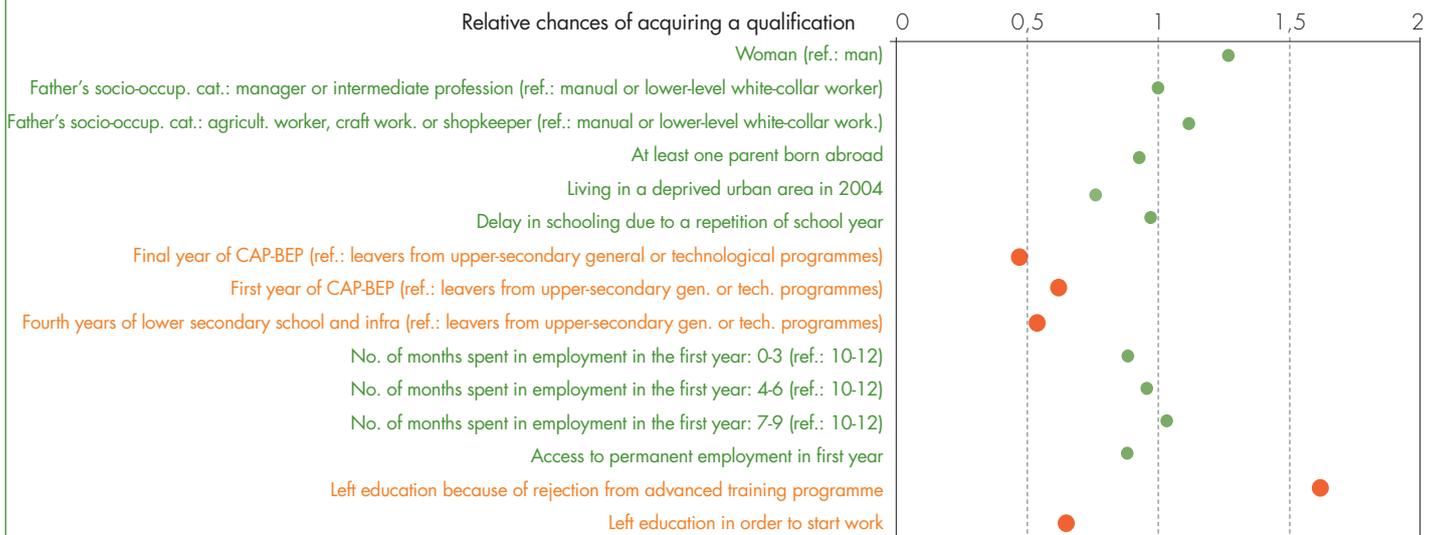
The Génération 2004 Survey 7 Years On

The *Génération 2004 Survey 7 Years On* provides information that can be used to describe the labour market trajectories of young people who left the education system in 2004 in France. A total of 33,000 young people were surveyed for the first time in 2007. Of this group, 16,000 responded to a second survey in 2009 and 12,000 to a third survey in 2011.

These surveys identify the young people who obtain a qualification during the first seven years of their working lives. Information is gathered on the qualification obtained, the date it was obtained and the circumstances under which they returned to education/training.

For further details on the *Génération* surveys, go to: www.cereq.fr and click on Access to data.

Figure 1 • The factors determining acquisition of a post-initial qualification



Interpretation: the odds of acquiring a qualification rather than not acquiring one are 0.47 times greater (i.e. $1/0.47$ or 2.1 times less) for young people who left in the final year of CAP-BEP programme than for those quitting upper-secondary general or technological programmes.

The results are derived from a logistic regression modelling the probability of acquiring a qualification rather than not acquiring one. The explanatory variables included in the model are all the variables listed on the left-hand side of the graphic. The orange circles indicate significant effects at the 10% level and the green circles indicate non-significant effects.

Source: Génération 2004 survey, 2011 follow up. Field: all young people who left initial education with at best lower-secondary qualifications.

ting also played a role and reflected different rationales at work among men and women.

Thus young men who left the education system in order 'to start work' were two times less likely to obtain post-initial qualifications than those who do not give this as a reason. This factor did not come into play among women. For them, it was the fact of having endured a rejection from a advanced training programme that was decisive: this more than doubled their chances of acquiring a qualification. Obviously, the rejection they suffered merely had the effect of delaying their plans to continue their education and obtain a qualification. More unexpectedly, those young people who landed permanent jobs right at the beginning of their working lives were as likely to acquire post-initial qualifications as those who had experienced a difficult start to their working lives. Thus difficulties in the labour market did not seem to lead these young people to embark on a course of education or training leading to a formal qualification.

Young women with post-initial qualifications more likely to obtain skilled jobs

Those young people who acquired post-initial qualifications consider it benefited them in more than one way. Of those who were unemployed or inactive before returning to education, approximately 40% believe it enabled them to find work again. In half of cases, it also encouraged them to learn a new trade and/or to retrain. For those who were in work, the benefits of acquiring further qualifications are varied. Four out of ten believe that the qualification

enabled them to learn a new trade or to retrain. It also opened up opportunities for progression, whether with their current employer or elsewhere.

So for the young people who went down this route, the returns turned out to be positive. The qualification effect was also assessed by comparing the situation, seven years after the exit from initial education, of those who had acquired further qualifications with those who had not (cf. Figure 2). The results reveal significant differences between men and women.

The young women who obtained a post-initial qualification were indeed less likely to be out of a job than those who did not return to education. Seven years after leaving initial education, their rate of non-employment was 18 percentage points lower (41% compared with 23%). They were also more likely to be in a skilled job (57% compared with 31%) and the same gap can also be observed in respect of pay. The picture for men is different, since the acquisition of post-initial qualifications did not improve their access to employment. True, the share of skilled jobs is higher among those who obtained further qualifications but this had no effect on access to wages significantly higher than the national minimum wage (SMIC).

Nevertheless, this comparison of the employment situations of those who obtained post-initial qualifications and those who did not may be biased. Are the differences observed really attributable to the newly acquired qualifications? The young people who obtained further qualifications have different observed characteristics to the others. Thus the probability of acquiring such qualifications depends on the level at which the exit from initial education

Further reading

Quand les bacheliers reprennent le chemin des diplômes, V. Mora, *Bref* n°325, Céreq, 2014.

«Une formation qualifiante pour les non-diplômés?», C. Gasquet, in *Les chemins de la formation vers l'emploi - 1ère Biennale formation-emploi-travail*, Céreq, Relief n°25, 2008.

Une formation qualifiante différée pour les jeunes non diplômés? Un éclairage à partir du cheminement de jeunes sortis du système éducatif en 1998, A. Lopez (dir.), Céreq, Relief, n°23, 2007.

took place. This variable also influences the employment situation. Moreover, it is likely that other characteristics, which remained unobserved in the survey, also serve to differentiate these young people from the others. For example, those who made the effort to acquire further qualifications might also have been more highly motivated to advance their careers. An appropriate statistical methodology that attempts to take account of these differences was therefore implemented.

This confirmed the results. For the women, obtaining a post-initial qualification did indeed reduce the probability of being out of work and increased that of having a skilled job. All other things being equal, the women who gained such qualifications were twice as likely to have a skilled job than those without them. This is reflected in earnings, with women with post-initial qualifications being 1.5 times more likely to earn significantly more than the minimum wage. Among the men, those with post-initial qualifications were 1.2 times more likely to be in a skilled job. However, this was in no way reflected in their earnings and their probability of being out of work was not significantly reduced.

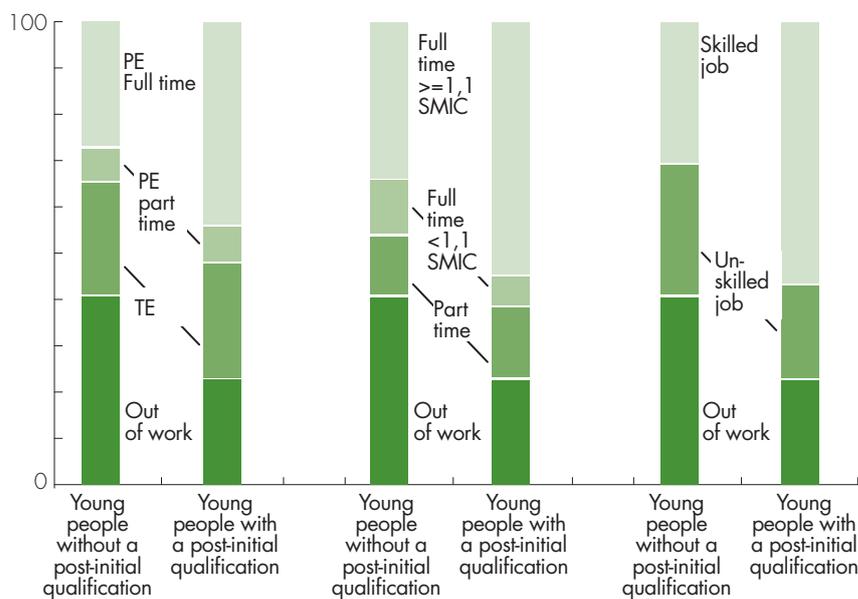
These gender differences could be explained by the fact that men's and women's jobs are segregated. A significant share of women do, after all, have regulated jobs in the health and social care sector. It is entirely possible, therefore, that for them the additional qualifications are a criterion that more often determines access to employment. It might reasonably be assumed that, for men, such access depends on factors other than an ISCED 3C qualification. Nevertheless, this rather surprising result really does require further investigation.

Even before the right to return to education in order to obtain further qualifications was enacted by ministerial decree, a quarter of the young people with at best lower-secondary qualifications had already obtained post-initial qualifications. The conditions under which the acquisition of such qualifications may be worthwhile are still being analysed in greater detail. Such analyses could usefully inform policies intended to offer young people with at best lower-secondary qualifications the opportunity to obtain further qualifications.

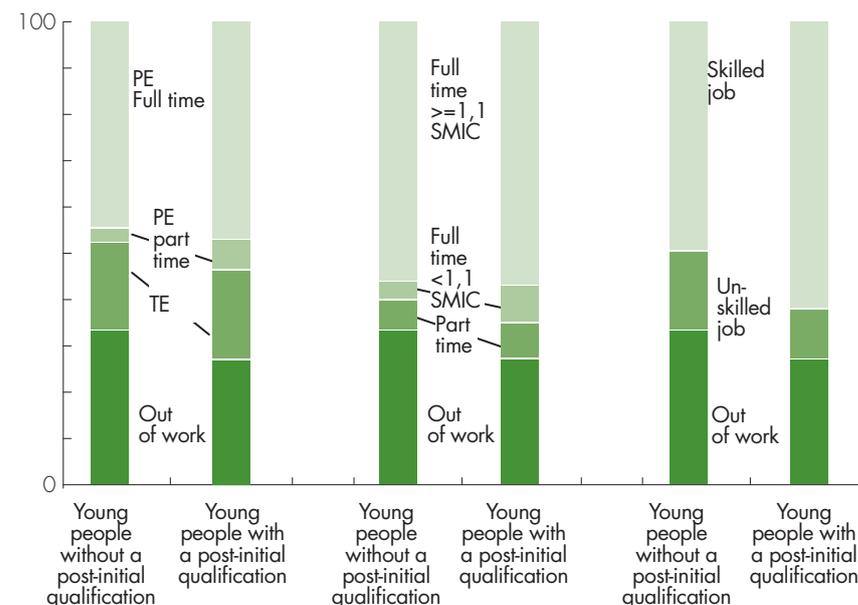


Figure 2 • Employment situation in 2011 of young people who left initial education in 2004 with at best lower-secondary qualifications

Women



Men



PE • Permanent employment (employees on open-ended contracts, civil servants and non-wage workers)
 TE • Temporary (fixed-term) employment
 SMIC • Salaire minimum interprofessionnel de croissance/national minimum wage. The threshold of 1.1 x SMIC was used to define wages substantially higher than the national minimum wage.
 Unskilled work includes unskilled manual and lower-level white-collar work. The socio-occupational classification categorises manual workers by skill level: the unskilled manual workers category includes industrial (67) and artisanal (68) unskilled workers and agricultural workers. In the case of unskilled white-collar workers, the classification used is that proposed in 2002 by Olivier Chardon.

Source: Génération 2004 survey, 2011 follow up. Field: all young people who left initial education with at best lower-secondary qualifications.

