Making a success of the transition into higher education

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While the massification of higher education has been proven, its democratization is only partial. Inequalities have not disappeared, but have moved. The transition from secondary to higher education remains characterized by self-selection, and the social composition of the various courses of study, selective or not, remains marked.

The phenomena of failure and dropping-out in great numbers are to be noted in France as elsewhere: one student out of five leaving higher education still has no qualifications three years later.

The contextual and individual factors predicting these difficulties are now known. By way of example, at the university, the chances of success are significantly less for a boy from a working-class family, with a technological baccalauréat and enrolled in the first year of a general administration degree course, or for a girl from a modest background, who just scraped through her baccalauréat later than usual, and enrolled in a psychology degree course.

But such a categorization cannot give an account of all the difficulties that students encounter as they set out: those who fail are also sometimes those who succeeded in secondary school and who have not managed to adapt to their new environment. Students’ ability to anticipate these difficulties and to find alternatives is regarded as a determining success factor.

The diversity of courses and experiences should therefore make one try and put the diagnosis of immediate failure into perspective and give preference to a multidimensional approach to the assistance that needs to be provided, in keeping with the complexity which is such a feature of them. It is no longer a question of setting up tutoring systems to counter all failures. Assistance for success also leads to transformations in terms of the training offer (less specialized at the beginning), of educational organization (better supervision, continuous assessment, etc) and teaching methods.

This is especially true as the measures for personalized assistance do not reach their supposed target: it is those students who already have significant chances of succeeding who take part in them. Concentrating efforts solely on this type of measure, also means not recognizing the weakness of the relations between students and teachers, which are, however, necessary to the process of affiliation.
The importance of having powerful tools available, both to identify the disciplinary and transverse prerequisites and to locate those who are likely to drop out, has been highlighted in recent research. Evaluation of quality teaching, in particular by students, is also a lever for action. It means to take better account of the heterogeneity of the student population, encourage regulation between students and teachers and more generally promote an educational process of clarification. The enjoyment of learning is what will guarantee that students will invest in their new occupation.

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