



# Transition to higher education in France: how high schools frame and support students' choices

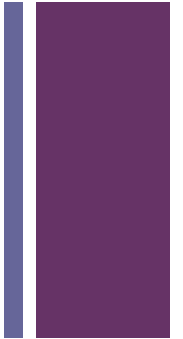
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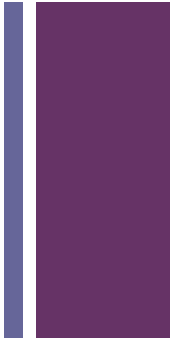
# The research study



- A six-year study of inequalities of access to higher education in the Parisian region comprising two phases
- Phase I (September 2012-August 2015)
  - Questionnaire distributed to 3000 pupils in 8 secondary schools following the last two years of secondary schooling
  - Two-year ethnographic study of four secondary schools in the Parisian region including observations of quarterly class councils and of various activities and events and interviews with principals, professors, guidance and educational counselors, students and parents
  - Qualitative analysis of open doors events (23) and HE fairs (15)
- Phase II (September 2015-August 2018)
  - Analysis of national and local policies of access to higher education and their implementation by secondary schools and higher education institutions
  - Analysis of the central application system (APB) and of the choices of the students from the Ile-de-France region who used the system in 2014-2015
  - Analysis of rankings, guides and coaching and testing services and of institutional websites



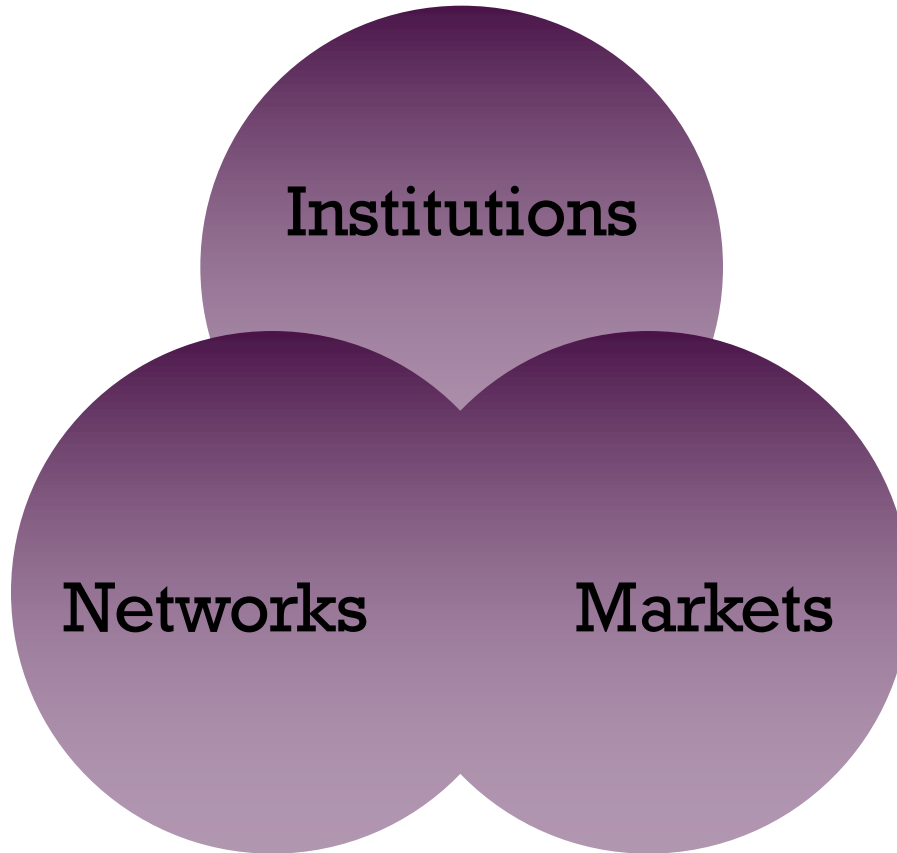
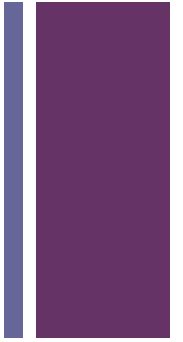
# General theoretical framework



- The focus is on how choices are affected by multiple interrelated and interdependent processes and actions from diverse agents and organisations with the purpose of bringing to light known and less well-documented influences and various possible configurations.
- The focus is also on consequences, on how these dimensions operate as ‘social closure’ mechanisms (Parkin 1974, Murphy 1988) based on processes of exclusion and selective inclusion driven by social groups and institutions, especially by the most powerful among them, and also by the state. These processes can maintain existing power relations and inequalities or alter them through the production of new inequalities and/or the reduction of existing ones (Bourdieu and Passeron 1977; Collins 1979; Karabel 1984)

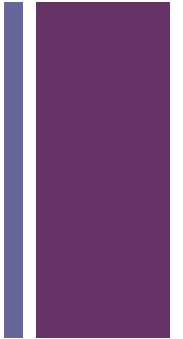
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# A three-dimensional model





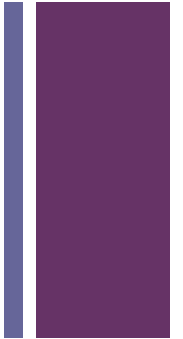
# The French educational system



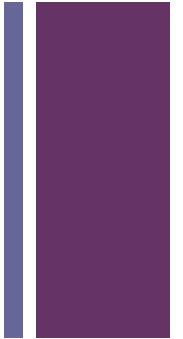
- Preschool (3 years, not compulsory but attended by 98% of all children at age 3)
- Primary school (5 years)
- Middle school (*collège* – 4 years – same curriculum for all, but some optional subjects)
- High school (*Lycée* – 3 years):
  - Academic track (with three sub-tracks: scientific, literary and economic-social)
  - Technological track (with several sub-tracks)
  - Vocational tracks (with a wide variety of sub-tracks (until 1985 not giving access to the *baccalauréat*))



# The French higher education system



- *Grandes écoles* et *écoles*: selective public and private professional schools, the most prestigious of them, which now deliver master degrees, recruit their students after two years of preparatory classes (CPGE) – these classes are located in secondary schools but considered part of higher education
- Universities (officially not selective, almost all public, deliver 3-year bachelor degrees, 5-year master degrees, and Phds – Now some of them have developed new selective tracks
- Institutes of Technology (IUT - are part of universities, but can select their students and deliver 2 year technological degrees)
- *Sections de Techniciens Supérieurs* (STS – are located in secondary schools but considered part of secondary education - can select their students and deliver 2-year vocational degrees

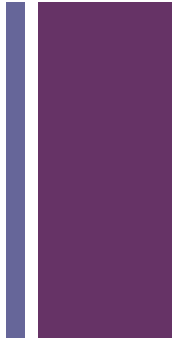


# External pressures and recent changes

- EU and government pressures for rising the proportion of higher education graduates among the population
- Government pressures to develop a better adjustment between secondary school tracks and higher education tracks especially for students holding a professional *baccalauréat*
- Creation of a central application system = Admission Post-Bac (APB)
- Decreasing reputation of universities for the last 50 years and recent efforts to improve it through the creation of selective tracks
- Growing popularity of professional schools and rapid development of private professional schools
- Growing popularity of institutional and market marketing and judgment devices” (rankings, open doors, fairs)



# The four high schools

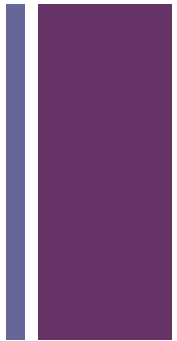


High schools	Social and academic make up	Institutional status	Results at the <i>baccalauréat</i> in 2014	Type of HE provision in the school
François 1 <sup>er</sup> (Paris -centre)	Upper-class with a high proportion of intellectual fractions and a small number of extremely 'talented' middle and lower-class students	Public but can select its students	99%	A large number of prestigious CPGE
St. Paul (City at the East of Paris)	Upper and middle-class – good and average students	Private but subsidized by the state	89%	Some STS
Arthur Rimbaud (Paris-Outskirts)	Upper, middle and lower class – average and failing studentd	Public	70%	One very specific but not very prestigious CPGE
Maryse Bastié (City at the North of Paris)	Mostly lower-class – Average and failing students	Public	70%	One not very prestigious CPGE and various BTS





# Differences in the framing of students' futures. Professional and educational destinations



<b>HIGH SCHOOLS</b>	<b>TYPE OF FUTURE JOBS AND HE TRACKS ENVISIONED FOR STUDENTS</b>
François 1er	Elite positions & jobs Selective preparatory classes/Selective professional schools/Selective university disciplines and « bi-tracks ”
St. Paul	Managerial & professional jobs Selective professional schools/Selective university disciplines and « bi-tracks »/Selective vocational tracks
Arthur Rimbaud	Intermediate management & skilled employees Non-selective university disciplines/Non-selective vocational tracks
Maryse Bastié	A few entrepreneurs and high-level managers + intermediate managers & skilled employees and manual workers Not very selective preparatory classes & professional schools/Non-selective university disciplines & tracks/Non-selective vocational tracks

# + Differences in the framing of students' futures. Predictions & recommendations

High schools	Success/failure	Recommended attitudes
François Ler	Success based on matching between intellectual strengths and academic expectations	“Be strategic” “Make the most of your strengths and capacity to navigate through the system”
St. Paul	Success based on matching between intellectual & personal qualities & institutional and jobs requirements	“Know your strengths and weakness”, “Be ambitious but realistic”
Arthur Rimbaud	Failure because of academic weaknesses & wrong track choices	“Think of your professional future first”, “Don’t be too ambitious”
Maryse Bastié	Success or failure depending on academic profiles but also motivation & capacity to seize opportunities	“Be watchful of opportunities, if you are motivated” “If not, be realistic”

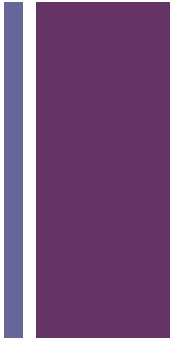
# Differences in the organization of transition to higher education.

## Curricular and counseling adaptations

<b>HIGH SCHOOL</b>	<b>CURRICULUM</b>	<b>COUNSELING</b>
François 1er	Early & strong adaptation to the curricular expectations of CPGE and competitive examinations	Counseling starts on year 9 with strong insistence on strategic choices of tracks and options
St. Paul	Early adaptation to the behavioral requirements of managerial jobs and schools	Counseling starts on Year 9 with strong emphasis on matching personality profiles and choices of professional & educational careers
Arthur Rimbaud	No specific adaptation to higher education	Counseling starts on Year 11 with mild emphasis on: “It’s time now”
Maryse Bastié	No specific adaptation to higher education except in some outreach activities organized by selective HE institutions	Counseling starts on Year 11 with mild and non consensual emphasis on rising students’ aspirations

# + Differences in the organization of transition to higher education.

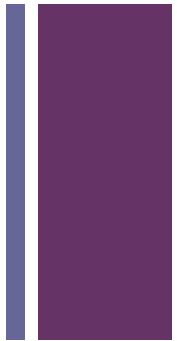
## Consensus & role specialization



<b>HIGH SCHOOL</b>	<b>Consensus</b>	<b>Role specialization</b>
François 1er	Strong consensus on expected educational levels & choice of HE tracks. Limited conflicts with parents	Principal & Deputy principal: Control of the whole process Professors: advice on academic profiles and potential Educational counselors & parents: collection & treatment of information
St. Paul	Large consensus of professionals on expected educational level & tracks but some conflicts with parents	Not very strict division of work among professionals who are all involved in providing information and advice
Arthur Rimbaud	Large consensus on students' not very exciting futures on HE but less on what to do about it	Mutual delegation of responsibility for counseling. Strong variations among professionals concerning engagement and type of advice given to students
Maryse Bastié	Lack of consensus on students' chances and need to raise their aspirations	Strong involvement of the principal and a few teachers on distributing information & raising aspirations



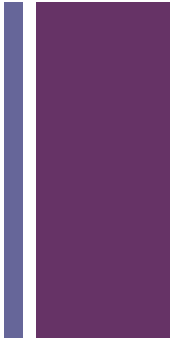
# Differences in the organization of transition to higher education. Degree of rationalization & personalization



<b>HIGH SCHOOL</b>	<b>PLANNING</b>	<b>PERSONALIZATION</b>
François ler	Careful planning, reproduced identically every year	All professionals give advice after careful consideration of academic & personal profiles
St. Paul	Careful planning but with strong leeway for professional initiatives	All professionals give advice after considering students' personality, motivation and academic profiles
Arthur Rimbaud	Almost no planning, the dominant logic is "bricolage"	Generic advice predominates with a focus on dates, procedures and requirements as well as on local provision
Maryse Bastie	Unsuccessful planning efforts by principal. Limited planning by teachers	Personalized advice to some students, especially in outreach activities but mostly generic advice



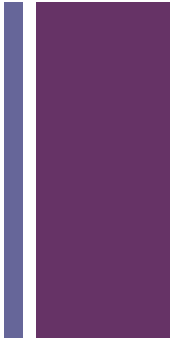
# Filtering institutional and market influences. APB & Rankings



HIGH SCHOOL	APB	RANKINGS
François l er	Strong focus on strategic use of APB presented on the website and on collective meetings with parents & students & encouraged by the use of index cards that circulate among teachers and the principal to anticipate the APB ranking	Officially despised as not capturing subtle differences between institutions but massively used by parents & students
St. Paul	Focus on good use of the APB system but with a focus on personal matching rather than only on matching of academic profile and institutional selectivity	Rankings considered as one tool among others, extensively used by the most ambitious parents and students
Arthur Rimbaud	Focus on APB as a bureaucratic tool with the organization of a yearly meeting to teach each class minimal use and navigation and a focus on dates and technical requirements	No consideration of rankings
Maryse Bastié	Focus on APB as one possible tool to raise aspirations but also on APB as a bureaucratic tool	No consideration of rankings



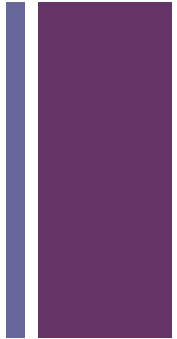
# Filtering institutional and market influences. Open days, forums & fairs



<b>HIGH SCHOOL</b>	<b>Open days</b>	<b>Forums &amp; fairs</b>
François 1er	Used by some professors to get additional information on some institutions & tracks. Strongly recommended to students and used by them & their parents	Attendance only to professional forums organized within the school by parental associations. Some visits to fairs gathering only selective institutions
St. Paul	Recommended by professors and used by students and parents	Attendance with professors and parents to a fair grouping mostly private institutions created by the principal and early visits to general fairs with parents
Arthur Rimbaud	Limited emphasis on open days, some teachers and the deputy-principal take year 11 classes to university visits	Annual visit with professors to one of the main general official fairs. Many students seem to go to fairs by themselves
Maryse Bastié	Limited emphasis on open days, some visits to the HE institutions involved in outreach activities	Annual visit to a local forum and to one of the main general official fairs. Some students go to fairs by themselves



# A typology of high school orientations

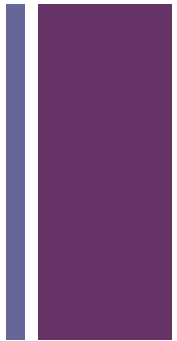


HIGH SCHOOL	MAIN ORIENTATION
<b>François Ler</b>	<b>Strategic matching.</b> A focus on ambitious projects and the careful matching of students' profiles and potential with institutions' academic expectations. Transition to HE consensually considered a key activity, carefully organized using external devices to maximize successful choices
<b>St Paul</b>	<b>Personal matching.</b> A focus on the matching of personal qualities and goals and institutional global expectations. Transition to HE perceived as an important dimension of all professionals' work and systematic use of external devices to increase self-knowledge and knowledge on HE
<b>Arthur Rimbaud</b>	
<b>Maryse Bastié</b>	





# A typology of high school orientations towards HE



## FRANCOIS 1<sup>er</sup>

**Strategic matching.** A focus on ambitious projects and the careful matching of students' profiles and potential with institutions' academic expectations. Transition to HE consensually considered a key activity, carefully organized using external devices to maximize successful choices

## St. PAUL

**Personal matching.** A focus on the matching of personal qualities and goals and institutional global expectations. Transition to HE perceived as an important dimension of all professionals' work and systematic use of external devices to increase self-knowledge and knowledge on HE

**FOUR HIGH SCHOOLS,  
FOUR ORIENTATIONS**

## ARTHUR RIMBAUD

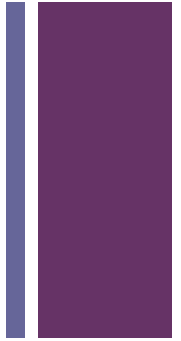
**Laissez-faire transition.** A pessimistic view on students' capacities and futures in HE coupled with strong resistance to engage in counseling and delegation to others and limited, bureaucratic use of external devices 4

## MARYSE BASTIE

**Uncertain transition.** Non consensual efforts to raise the aspirations and increase the chances of some students relying on institutional outreach activities more than other devices but predominance of pessimistic views and perplexity about students HE futures



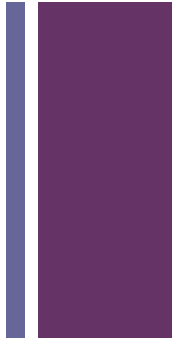
# Social and institutional inequalities



- Although affected by similar political and social pressures, high schools interpret policies and filter external influences according to :
  - Their social and academic make-up
  - Local provision and embeddedness into low-status or high status tracks
  - Institutional missions and values
- Given high levels of school segregation, high schools tend to reinforce existing social inequalities as upper-class students are encouraged and helped to make ambitious choices while lower-class students, especially if they have average or bad results, receive very limited encouragement and help
- Nothing new under the sun?
  - A transition from rather directive allocation to tracks according to social background and academic results to more uncertain, laissez-faire attitudes
  - A stronger focus on raising the aspirations of “talented” lower-class students



# Further analysis & possible generalizations



- Important to match institutional orientations with the actual choices of students using interviews and quantitative data
- Need to focus also on how institutional influences might be filtered through the messages provided by official or market devices and by those that students are subjected to within family and friendship networks
- Need to take into account the specific dimensions of the Parisian region such as the very high concentration of HE institutions and especially of prestigious institutions, with easy accessibility and strong mix of disadvantaged and privileged urban areas & schools
- Need to take into account the specific features of the French education and higher education system