



speech

Speech by Xavier Darcos, French Minister of Education

Conference: “Managing transitions: life-long guidance in the European area”

Wednesday, September 17, 2008 - Lyon

Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is my great pleasure to speak to you today at the end of the first day of the conference “Managing Transitions: Life-Long Guidance in the European Space”.

In the proper sense of the word, self-guidance is about finding one’s way, which itself is the natural outcome to any education. Guidance is about helping people to find their way, the major objective of every educational system. So the issue of guidance is fundamental, for both our young fellow citizens and for us heads of education. It is for this reason that I have been looking forward to meeting with you in the framework of this European conference.

To my mind this event is important in three ways:

This conference is firstly important because it marks the **launch of the institutional chapter** of the French Presidency of the European Union when it comes to education. It thus inaugurates the cycle of five conferences on education and so precedes the conferences that will be dedicated to the teaching of science, to consideration given the disabled, to the governance and performance of schools in Europe, and lastly to the comparison between European educational systems.

- The conference is also important because it is dedicated to a **crucial question: life-long guidance in the European area**, a theme we have also decided to adopt as a major line of thought for the French Presidency of the European Union when it comes to education.

- Lastly, it is important because it registers with a **long process of thought and maturation which began in March 2000 with the definition of the so-called Lisbon strategy**. Indeed, building the Europe of knowledge to revamp the competitiveness of our economies, to boost employment and underwrite social cohesion involves re-defining

our vocational guidance and information systems. Moreover this was indeed emphasized by the Council's Resolution of May 18th, 2004, the fruit of community work since 2003 relative to the "strengthening of policies, systems and practices in the field of lifelong guidance."

As you know, Ladies and Gentlemen, it is this resolution that has now prompted us to **think of school and university guidance in the more global context of lifelong guidance**. Why have we gone for this change of perspective? And importantly why is the question of lifelong guidance being raised in such a crucial way these days in every European Union country?

This is the fundamental question that I should like to consider then try and answer in as many ways as possible with you today.

I- Why is the theme of guidance crucial today?

Four observations make the question of guidance an absolutely central issue today.

1. **Firstly, the question of guidance is absolutely crucial on account of the growing need for qualification.** In times gone by, the child who left school at the age of 14 could find a job and do most of his or her training inside a company. Today, the situation has changed drastically and academic learning and professional knowledge have become an obligatory prerequisite for every form of professional integration. Thus, in France, to talk about the situation I am the most familiar with, obtaining a diploma is undeniably a factor of professional integration, and the higher the diploma, the greater the potential for integration. For example, a youngster with a CAP or BEP certificate, i.e. level 5 qualification, has a 43% chance of finding a job within seven months. With a technical school baccalaureate, i.e. level 4 schooling, this chance rises to 61%.

We therefore need to work on career guidance options to enable each person to obtain the highest possible diploma.

2. And yet each year in France, **a hundred and fifty thousand young people leave school without any official recognition of their level of qualification.** This doubtless explains why unemployment among young people is today a reality of very great concern in France, where it is significantly higher than the average rate of unemployment. This situation is all the more paradoxical in that in many business sectors, French firms are still having a hard time finding the employees they need to develop their activity. Here again we need to work in-depth on career options so as to better synchronize the match between the aspirations of young people and the vocational opportunities that are offered to them.

3. Additionally, in the framework of an economy that is increasingly focused on learning, research and innovation, we have a **growing need for young high-level graduates** capable of making Europe an attractive centre. But, as you know, France is still a long way from its objective of 50% of a generation holding a diploma of higher education, set by the 2005 guidance act for the future of schools.

There are several reasons for this: on the one hand an extremely high failure rate over the first two years at university, and on the other – and the two are linked – high schools that no longer effectively prepare pupils to pursue their studies in an establishment of higher education, particularly owing to the excessively hierarchical structure of learning channels and options at high school. Today, career guidance options for secondary school pupils are fudged and need to be given new-found meaning.

4. Lastly, quite obviously the question of careers and guidance is no longer confined to schools alone, most notably on account of growing professional mobility. While in the past people would often ply the same trade throughout their professional careers, today this is something of a rarity. Nowadays, capacity for adaptation has become primordial to face the ups and downs of professional life. And redeployment in the course of a career has led to our careful studying of lifelong guidance, which amongst other things opens up the vast field of continuous vocational training.

II. Career guidance in Europe

While career guidance systems are very different in European countries, I believe that the observations I have just outlined are globally shared and that we Europeans have **four common challenges on our hands.**

1. The first is to limit the number of school-leavers with no qualification or diploma, and to combat the social factors that play a decisive role in academic failure.
2. The second is to limit academic failure in higher education.
3. The third is to adapt training to employment.
4. And the fourth, lastly, is to manage more effectively transitions between jobs and so create real meaning for the notion of lifelong guidance.

Improving career guidance systems is therefore all about trying to secure school and professional career paths. It is also about trying to help our young generation to forge and realize future projects without forasmuch trying to hide the difficulties and the reality of openings. It is lastly about re-thinking the articulation between time spent training and time in a professional activity; the two are no longer separated, on the contrary they are increasingly intermingled throughout life.

Furthermore I know that a number of our European partners are already taking a new look at career guidance and have already engaged some significant reforms to their systems. Some of these have already been presented to you and for my part I shall confine myself to mentioning two examples:

- In 2001 the UK, or more precisely England, created its *connection services* by extending the competence of school career information and guidance services to the family, health, maternity and housing.
- At the same time, since 2003, after the worrying report that by the end of compulsory schooling 50% of pupils have no acceptable qualification, and that one pupil in twenty leaves school at 16 with no qualification, the British government has been studying a reform to its educational structure that would enable schools to go further down the road of specialization.
- In addition, a remote career guidance service called *Learndirect* has just marked its tenth anniversary. The service, which offers information over the phone or by the Internet, has been undeniably successful, as in the space of ten years it has received almost 10 million calls.

- In 2003, Denmark voted a new law on career guidance which is based most notably on a system of quality assurance designed to make career guidance advice as beneficial as possible for users. The evaluation criteria used include, for each educational institution, examination pass-rates and also the numbers of students dropping out of

courses. The aim is to help reach the Danish government's objective to qualify 95% of each generation, including 50% at higher education.

For my part, in keeping with the commitments made by the French President, I have engaged an overhaul of our career guidance systems with the objective of evolving from the age of imposed guidance to the age of chosen guidance.

- **The first line of work is to make it easier for pupils to discover professions from junior school age**, i.e. from the age of 12, in order to help our young pupils picture their future and, in time, take the career options that suit them. It is for this reason that occupation and training discovery courses have been introduced this autumn term in second form classes (12 to 13 year-olds). It is also the reason why I have insisted that pupils in fifth form classes (15-16 year-olds) are given the option of vocational discovery classes three hours a week.

In all, I am convinced that it is by giving young people the chance to discover the reality of professions way upstream that we can pass on to them the hunger for success, and help them to become players in their own career guidance.

The second line of work is the renovation of technical school courses, which in France do not receive the same consideration as in Germanic or North European countries. My goal is to see that every youngster who opts for technical school training obtains level 5 qualification (CAP-BEP), and to get more young people up to baccalaureate level so as to create value for the learning of trades in the school system.

- **The third line of work is the preparation of young people for higher education.** Indeed, I feel it is absolutely necessary that pupils should be perfectly informed of openings and of the characteristics of training to which they headed. This is why I have created, with Madame Valérie Pécresse, the French Minister for Higher Education and Research, active career guidance systems. In particular, they allow high-school students to visit the establishments of higher education they wish to attend and to get the benefit of advice from university teams.

This work, focused on preparation for higher education, is currently being prolonged in the frame of the reform of general and technology high schools. In particular, I wish to create a real pre-sixth form ascertainment facility, i.e. modules of exploration which will help prepare career options for sixth-formers (last two years at school). In addition, I wish to avoid the current partitioning of options and importantly give our students the room for error that does not exist at the present time.

- The three lines of work I have mentioned go hand in hand with a concern to **strengthen the role of teaching staff** in career guidance processes. Indeed, they are the people who see and know the talent and potential of their students and so can help them make the most relevant choices. Naturally that implies that they have specific knowledge of higher education channels and of the reality of the world of work. It also implies better recognition of their advisory and follow-up role, and I have begun the process by raising the career guidance indemnity paid to head teachers of 3-year technical school classes.

- **But there is still a fourth line of work that especially must not be forgotten: developing coordination between all players so that lifelong career guidance becomes a reality in the future.**

And it is precisely to achieve this that the President of the Republic has recently named a new inter-ministerial delegate for career guidance. Charged with facilitating the coordination of Government services and in particular with liaising between different ministerial departments, the inter-ministerial delegate for career guidance reflects the government's resolve to link the question of school careers guidance more closely with the question of lifelong guidance. In this framework, the relations between careers guidance public services and the public service for employment should be able to grow. This question is particularly crucial for young school-leavers without qualification, and for job-seekers.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

As you see, in France as elsewhere in Europe, the question of career guidance lies at the core of our thinking for the future of schools. But there is still a long way to go before lifelong guidance becomes a vector to secure professional career paths.

However, as we have seen, all European countries are having to cope with common issues when it comes to guidance. We do therefore need to grasp the opportunity to share our experiences and to put our heads together to find solutions that will enable our young and not so young fellow citizens to be successful in their lifelong career guidance.

I would also like this common thought process on guidance to be the opportunity to strengthen the European dimension of school and vocational courses, and consequently the mobility of our fellow citizens within the European area.

As you know, the French Presidency of the European Union will be the opportunity to finalize a new draft resolution on the question of career guidance, but I also wish to tell you that I intend to seek inspiration from your exchanges in order to draw up new perspectives for the organization of school careers guidance services.

I know that today's discussions have been fruitful. I wish for the same tomorrow, so that they may serve as a reference for drawing up the career guidance of the future.

Thank you...