



**UNIVERSITÉ DE GENÈVE**

**FORMATION CONTINUE**

## **The Refine Project**

### **Academic project, coherence and pedagogical mentoring: presentation of an alternative tool for recognizing informal and non-formal education**

#### **1. Introduction**

Although at present no official procedure for recognizing informal and non-formal education is in place in Swiss Universities, for many years local institutions have developed a number of practices that enable professionals who do not have the required degree to enrol in some universities. We have analyzed the practice at the Educational Sciences Section, University of Geneva, and focussed on the tool used by them in the admission procedure and mentoring of candidates. It strongly resembles the recognition of informal and non-formal learning. Although this procedure does not correspond to Refine's objectives in the strictest sense, we felt that the University of Geneva's long tradition in welcoming professionals who apply for undergraduate programmes, and its strong interest in the recognition of informal and non-formal learning, would make the presentation of this report meaningful in the context of the Refine project. First, we will summarize the Swiss educational systems and briefly present how the Swiss educational system, outside universities, recognizes informal and non-formal learning. Then we will concentrate on the procedure used by the Educational Sciences Section, Faculty of Psychology of the University of Geneva.

#### **2. Context**

In the debate surrounding lifelong learning, the theme that predominates in Switzerland at the moment is the recognition of informal and non-formal learning. Several factors have influenced the management and development of this dossier within Swiss society, over the past few years.

On the macro-economic level, increasing unemployment rates and the transformation of the labour market since the 1980s (because of new technology, relocation of production facilities to countries outside of Europe, the opening of the employment market, and increased competition in certain areas) have brought about change in the Swiss economic situation.

In order to fulfil the requirements of the employment market, it is imperative that employees update their knowledge and skills throughout their career. Professionals now encounter, and must deal with, situations that are more and more complex and unstable, both in the workplace and when looking for a job. Therefore, training and employment should be related from this new perspective.

Switzerland's decision to sign the Bologna Convention and to participate in the Copenhagen Initiative, illustrates the country's political determination to fully integrate the educational landscape of Europe. The objectives focus on the comparability of diplomas, the transparency of study programmes, student mobility, and the permeability of educational fields. These objectives will completely modify the current conception of educational systems.

### **3. The Swiss educational system**

After completing compulsory education (primary and lower secondary levels), several pathways are open to students (upper secondary education). They either lead to vocational training (apprenticeships or vocational secondary schools) or to general education (upper secondary schools), which prepare students for university entrance (through the achievement of a “maturité” or “baccalauréat”). Tertiary level consists of two types of training institutions: advanced vocational institutions and higher education (ten cantonal Universities, two «Ecoles polytechniques fédérales» and seven “Hautes Ecoles Spécialisées” also called HES. The HES offer advanced vocational training to prepare students for professions that are considered to be demanding. The traditional Swiss division between vocational and academic training is changing. The HES (management, health, social, technical and arts) are now competing with Universities since their training programmes are being recognized as university level. They are developing new skills in applied research, and are beginning to offer postgraduate training. Universities, for their part, are redefining their position versus the employment market, even though training in research remains a major objective for study programmes. By defining educational objectives, and integrating internships into some Bachelor and Master programmes, university training is developing operational skills for the employment market.

The boom in continuing education and its expansion in the Universities and the “Hautes Ecoles Spécialisées”, thanks to the financial support given by the Swiss Confederation, have brought about a significant valorisation of lifelong learning.

### **4. Recognition of informal and non-formal education in Switzerland**

In order to facilitate the pathways between the different forms of vocational training, in 2002 a federal law authorized the implementation of procedures to recognize informal and non-formal education in the area of vocational training (upper secondary). The Swiss Confederation is currently working to harmonize cantonal recognition practices.

No official procedure for recognizing informal and non-formal education exists at tertiary level (“Hautes Ecoles Spécialisées”, Universities, “Ecoles polytechniques”) at this point in time. Universities are part of a cantonal department (e.g., the Department of Public Education in Geneva), and are subject to cantonal laws and regulations. In accordance with the law for aid to Universities, the Swiss Confederation orients university policy and partially finances them. Yet, for the most part, Universities are managed by the cantons, which also orient policy. However, with the application of the Bologna Reform, the distribution of activities and responsibilities is changing, and part of the decision-making process is being transferred to the Confederation.

Five Universities (Lausanne, Neuchâtel, Fribourg, Geneva and Swiss Italian) have deployed measures to facilitate access to undergraduate programmes (with the exception of those dispensed by the Faculty of Medicine, as prescribed by Federal Law) for non-holders of the prerequisite upper secondary diploma (in Geneva, the “maturité”).

### **5. The University of Geneva**

In the Canton of Geneva, a number of measures have been taken to promote and support lifelong learning. The cantonal law on continuing education for adults came into effect in 2002 in support of education for professionals and for companies. Under the direction of the Cantonal Office for Orientation, Vocational and Continuing Education, a procedure was set to recognize informal and non-formal learning for certain professions (secretarial and masonry, for example). Since 1977, university regulations have authorized, under specific conditions, the admission of non-holders of the prerequisite “maturité”, to the first year of undergraduate programmes. This is a first step towards opening the

University to professionals. Moreover, continuing education programmes (certificate, diploma, Master of Advanced Studies) also accept candidates who do not hold a prerequisite diploma.

For the academic year 2004-2005, 14,685 students, 6,252 participants in continuing education programmes and 915 auditors were enrolled at the University of Geneva.

Students admitted without the prerequisite diploma make up approximately 2% of newly enrolled students each year.

Table 1.2.3. Academic status of all new students enrolled in the University of Geneva since 2000 <sup>1</sup>

Year of enrolment	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004
Total number of students with prerequisite diploma	2'773	2'927	2'940	2'977	2'773
Total number of students without prerequisite diploma	47	56	47	68	80

## 5.1 Admission of non-holders of the prerequisite diploma to the University of Geneva

The University regulations outline minimal requirements that must be met in order for an application to be considered: to be over 25 years of age and have at least three years of professional experience. Other regulations concern residency permits, and a French language examination for non-French speakers.

Once these conditions are met, each Faculty has its own admission procedure and specific requirements. The Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences, and the Faculty of Economics and Social Sciences, base their admission procedure on the examination of candidates' dossiers, while other Faculties require that applicants take an entrance examination. The Psychology and Educational Sciences Sections use more or less the same admission procedure.

Admission is only valid for a given Faculty or Section, and for the first year of a given curriculum.

Table 1.2.4. Enrolment of non-holders of a "maturité" by Faculty 2000-2004<sup>2</sup>

Year of enrolment	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004
Total number of students without prerequisite diploma	47	56	47	68	80
Faculty of Economics and Social Sciences	13	13	-	22	21
Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences	19	29	33	29	35
Other Faculties (except Medicine)	15	14	14	18	24

It is interesting to note that the two Faculties who base admission on examination of candidates' dossiers admit the most candidates without the prerequisite "maturité".

## 6. Educational Sciences Section, Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences

### 6.1 The student body

In 2004 the total number of students in the faculty was 2,183 (1,156 in the Educational Sciences Section, and 1,027 in the Psychology Section)<sup>3</sup>. The student body of the Educational Sciences Section included many adult students. According to the definition in use, an individual is considered an adult when she/he is older than 25 years of age. The mean age of students was 26, with ages ranging from 18-19 years (students who have just received their "maturité") to 45 and over (students with professional experience)<sup>4</sup>. 74.48% of students were women (861 women out of the 1,156 students enrolled).<sup>5</sup>

<sup>1</sup> University of Geneva Statistics 2004-2005

<sup>2</sup> University of Geneva Statistics 2004-2005

<sup>3</sup> Idem

<sup>4</sup> Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences Statistics for 1995-1999

<sup>5</sup> University of Geneva Statistics 2004-2005

The proportion of students with professional experience (full-time or part-time, skilled or unskilled) was at least 30%, compared to 70% of undergraduate students. However, as temporary and unqualified employment is not always mentioned at the time of enrolment, the real percentage is probably higher.

## **6.2 The Educational Sciences study programme**

The study programme for the “licence” (equivalent to the French “maîtrise, French “baccalauréat” plus 4-year studies”) consists of four years of full-time study in educational sciences, as well as a final dissertation. As of October 2006, the Section will offer the two following degree courses: a Bachelor in Educational Sciences (180 credits ECTS), and a Master in Primary Education, Special Education and Educational Sciences (90 credits ECTS).

The main areas of study treated in this Section are primary education, learning and teaching processes, special education and adult education. The Section has been mandated by the Department of Public Education to train the future teachers who will be employed in elementary, primary and specialized education (for 4-12 year olds) in the Canton of Geneva.

## **7. The Educational Sciences Section’s admission procedure for non-holders of the prerequisite “maturité”**

From the moment a dossier is submitted to the central administrative service, it takes approximately five months for a candidate to receive a response. The service is free of charge.

### **7.1 The admission jury**

Members of the admission jury, named by the Faculty, begin to review dossiers in February, for the following academic year. It is composed of members of the teaching staff, and the Section’s guidance counsellor. No professionals participate to the jury. The jury analyzes and rates the dossiers, meets with the candidates, and submits its opinion to the Faculty for approval. A certain number of candidates are attributed each member of the jury, who examines dossiers in groups of two. The jury meets twice: the first time after all the dossiers have been examined, in order to attribute points; the second time after the interview with the candidate, in order to attribute the final score to the dossier.

### **7.2 The dossier**

After all the applications have been processed by the central administrative service and judged admissible according to the minimum conditions cited above, the dossiers are transferred to the Faculty. When a dossier arrives in the Educational Sciences Section, it consists of a letter of motivation and curriculum vitae, as well as the relevant certificates (work certificates, diplomas or attestations of continuing education, language certificates, etc.).

Each candidate must also complete a questionnaire. The questions cover four different areas: professional and personal plans linked to the chosen educational domain, professional experience (related or unrelated to educational sciences), previous training, and the feasibility of the project. Factual as well as motivational elements are examined and reported on the grid of criteria used for processing the dossiers.

### **7.3 The interview**

Each candidate is received by two members of the jury in order to clarify certain elements of the dossier, and to evaluate the candidate's level of motivation for his project as well as the relevance of the latter.

### **7.4 Mentoring**

During the admission process a number of different contact people and resources are available to non-holders of a "maturité".

At the beginning:

- The University's central administrative service staff provides basic information and collects the dossiers with required certificates;
- The University and Faculty websites list the minimum admission requirements, provide a description of the procedure, and give on-line access to the study plans and regulations;
- The student secretariat provides documents on request (study plans).

At all times:

One or more guidance counsellors are present in each Faculty. Reporting directly to the dean, these counsellors, who all hold a "licence" from their respective Faculties, are mandated to inform, orient, counsel student, and mentor them throughout their study project. They also act as an interface between teaching staff and students. They work with teaching staff to develop the study plans and regulations, and manage the students' individual curricula. Their services are available to all students, as well as to all persons outside the University who wish to enrol.

### **7.5 The guidance counsellor's role in the admission procedure**

#### 1) Before submission of the dossier

Inform

- Answer the first questions about the project: help applicants formulate their questions, orient their reflection in order to guide them through the process and toward its completion;
- Provide information on the institution and its programmes;
- Clarify components of the admission procedure, its progression and the evaluation criteria.

Counsel

- Help the candidate understand the different steps of the procedure, and how her/his study project and experience compare to the expectations of the Section;
- Alert the candidate to elements of his/her dossier that may need reinforcement (for example by a training period or another certificate);
- Help the candidate construct her/his study project according to her/his characteristics.

#### 2) During the procedure

Mentor

- Once the admission dossiers have been received, bring the candidates together, with their questions and resources, in order to explain the admission procedure, the study plan, and how the Section functions;
- During individual consultations, help the candidate express and analyze his/her experience through active listening;

- Help the candidate prepare his/her arguments for the interview with the jury and, therefore, socialize his experience.

#### Evaluate

- Participate as an ex-officio member of the jury, in the candidates' interviews;
- Participate, as an ex-officio member of the jury, in the final decision;
- Answer candidates' questions following the Faculty's formal decision.

#### 3) After effective admission

#### Realize

- Build an individualized study programme with the student;
- Remain available and mentor the student throughout her/his academic studies.

### **7.6 Analyze the admission criteria for non-holders of the prerequisite "maturité"**

The criteria chosen to evaluate admission dossiers concern the following aspects:

- 1) acquired experience and its relevance for the study project;
- 2) the arguments that justify the study project;
- 3) the feasibility of the foreseen studies: confirmation of academic abilities (either linked or not to the planned studies), and amount of time available for studying.

The jury judges both the relevance and the feasibility of each project. Its objective is not to sanction the candidate, but to assess the project's potential for success, not from a purely academic standpoint – i.e. specific competence or knowledge in the study area – but in terms of the coherence of the different elements that make up the candidate's dossier.

#### *Criterion 1: Professional experience*

Only past professional experience in the field of education is considered. In order to determine what type of professional activity can be considered as linked to educational sciences, the Section has ratified a list of activities considered to be pedagogic in nature. It covers social, health and adult education experience in the broadest sense.

Points are attributed in relation to the length of the experience. Details of the candidate's position, the level of responsibility and specific know-how acquired during professional activity are not assessed as such. This criterion holds the most weight on the evaluation grid.

#### *Criterion 2: Past studies*

Diplomas related to the area of education receive a higher number of points than diplomas of the same educational level, that are unrelated.

Since 2004, attestations of continuing education may also be taken into account, if they are related to education.

It is not simply a question of demonstrating general competence of an academic nature, as of showing their relevance to the foreseen study project.

In any case, the jury does not consider the details of the educational experience, looking neither at the study plans and curricula, nor at the marks obtained. Its decision is solely based on the certificates provided.

Linguistic skills:

As studies require reading articles, texts, books, etc., in languages other than French, linguistic proficiency certificates have been taken into account in judging the feasibility of the academic project since 2004.

A detailed auto-evaluation of linguistic skills is not expected from the candidate; therefore a language portfolio is not necessary.

### *Criterion 3: Motivation*

The evaluation of this criterion is based on the letter of motivation, the questionnaire and the interview. No instruction is given to the candidate concerning the form and content of the letter of motivation. The relevance of the academic project is judged on the arguments put forward.

### *Criterion 4: Availability*

The candidate's availability must be indicated on the admission questionnaire (schedule of availability for attending courses, as well as number of hours available for studying). This criterion bears as much weight as previous studies and motivation, as it is a means for assessing the practical feasibility of studying for the candidate. It is important not to encourage a person for whom the study load could not be assumed. If less than 20 hours a week are available for the project, it is considered to be unfeasible.

No criterion, taken on its own, determines the jury's decision, although more weight is given to professional experience as related to the academic project. The candidate must receive a sufficient number of points on all the criteria.

The coherence of a dossier is estimated on the previous experience, the candidate's motivation and supporting arguments, as well as on the feasibility of the academic project.

## **8. Statistics**

### **8.1 Admission of non-holders of a "maturité", who have applied to the Section of Educational Sciences<sup>6</sup> since 2000**

Year	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004
Total	19	44	34	29	42
Treated dossiers	18	38	30	25	38
Admitted	16	25	21	16	28
Rejected	2	13	9	9	10
Withdrawn	1	6	4	4	4
Age (mean)	36	36	33	38	39

The rate of requests for admission is stable, as is the profile of candidates, the majority of them already having experience in educational sciences.

Each year approximately 70% of the admission requests are accepted.

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<sup>6</sup> Educational Sciences Statistics

## 8.2 Professional experience in the area of Educational Sciences (ES)<sup>7</sup> since 2000

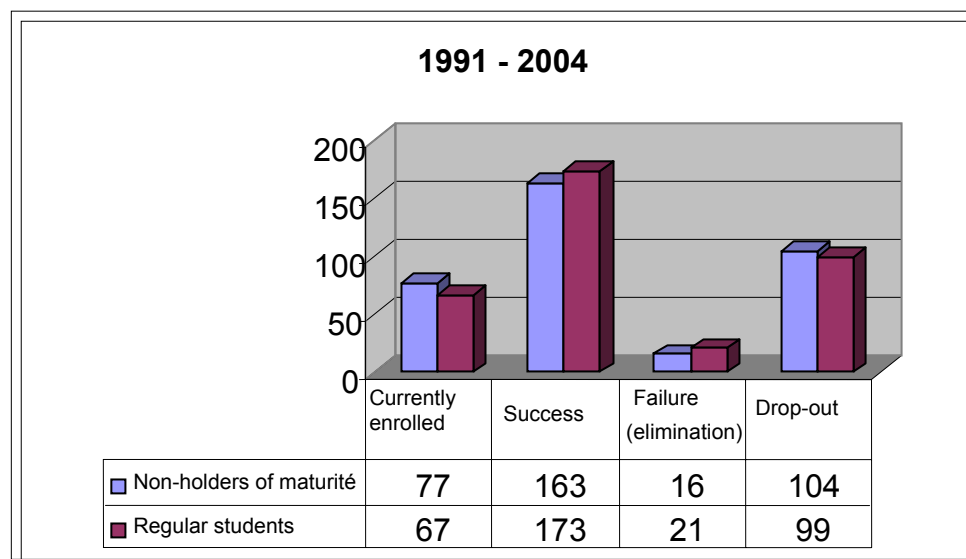
Year	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004
Treated dossiers	18	38	30	25	38
Admitted with professional experience in ES	13	21	18	14	13
Admitted without educational experience in ES	3	4	3	2	15
Refused with professional experience in ES	1	6	2	5	1
Refused without educational experience in ES	1	7	7	4	9

Except in 2004 (when the number of candidates without relevant professional experience was larger than the number of candidates with relevant experience), the majority of admitted applicants have professional experience in the area of Educational Sciences. However, some candidates with professional experience in the same were refused. As we pointed out when describing the selection criteria, this element per se does not give direct access to admission. Each dossier must be judged to adequately meet all criteria.

## 9. Validation of this procedure

A comparison of the academic progress of students admitted to the Section without the prerequisite diploma, to that of “regular” students (who held the required diploma), was carried out for the variables success, failure (elimination from the curriculum), and drop-out, for the years 1991 to 2004. 360 students without the required diploma were admitted during this period. In order to compare these two categories of students, 360 “regular” students were randomly chosen from the same time period.

No significant difference was found for these three variables.



The academic progress of non-holders of the prerequisite diploma is not different from that of “regular” students. They therefore seem to have the necessary aptitudes for academic studies, at least in the same proportion as students who were “regularly” admitted on the basis of prior upper secondary

<sup>7</sup> Idem

diploma. This finding seems to validate the selection criteria and procedure based on the candidate's motivation along with the relevance and coherence of his/her dossier.

## **10. Points specific to the procedure**

The admission procedure used by the Educational Sciences Section differs from the common practice of recognition of formal, informal and non-formal learning in France on the following aspects:

- The structure: no specific reception facilities are provided for non-holders of the "maturité".
- The procedure: takes place once a year, for the following academic year, and concerns admission to a specific Faculty/Section of the University.
- The objectives: to evaluate the candidate's capacity in relation to his/her study project (in terms of coherence and feasibility). While the Europass curriculum vitae emphasizes aptitudes and skills (social, organizational, technical, computer-related, artistic, etc), this procedure evaluates experience quantitatively (length of experience) rather than qualitatively (type of skills acquired). Previous training is taken under consideration on the basis of certificates or diplomas, but details on the courses taken or marks received are not required.
- Linguistic skills: are taken into account when certified. An auto-evaluation of skills is not demanded of candidates, contrary to the Europass and the Language Portfolio.
- The admission jury: is not composed of any professional.
- Mentoring: the guidance counsellor is present before and during the procedure. He mentors candidates all throughout their studies. Her/his role is not limited to non-holders of the "maturité" as he attends all students enrolled in the Section.
- The programme: once the candidates are granted admission, they follow the same programmes as the other students, and pay the same taxes. They are not enrolled as participant to a continuing education programme.
- The cost of the procedure: free of charge.

## **11. Conclusion**

By emphasizing the cohesion between the different elements in the application dossier, the admission procedure (evaluation grid and mentoring) implemented by the Educational Sciences Section of the Faculty of Psychology offers an interesting alternative to the tools currently used for the recognition of informal and non-formal learning. Its appeal lies in its efficacy, as demonstrated by the Section's statistics, and because it proposes a "light" procedure, therefore less demanding for all concerned.

This procedure is interesting because the stress is placed on the study project. For non-holders of a "maturité", such admission procedure is in fact an evaluation of a particular moment in their lifelong learning, when they are asked to reflect critically upon what they have learned in relation to their study projects, which may be more or less close to their professional choices. Certain skills, such as the ability to anticipate, the understanding of the institution's rules, the capacity to find information essential to the procedure, awareness of one's motivations, and the ability to present oneself and one's plan for the future, contribute to build up the project. These skills will be helpful for the candidate in creating useful learning strategies once he/she is admitted to the Section. The guidance counsellor and the admission jury place particular importance on making the candidate aware of the conditions to be met in order to achieve his/her academic project.

The effectiveness of this procedure is perhaps limited by the area to which it is applied. It works with experienced professionals, and perhaps with people graduated in a field related to educational sciences. Other professionals, with different knowledge and skills, will find it harder to complete this process, even if the weighting of points is not meant to penalize them.

Another limit lies in its application, as it only permits access to undergraduate education.

This procedure only addresses a very small minority of the students enrolled in the University of Geneva. A more numerous student body would certainly imply a readjustment of the mentoring offered and an increase of the resources put at their disposal.

In the near future, because of the changes in study plans following the Bologna agreement, and the division of undergraduate studies in two degrees (Bachelor and Master), the recognition of informal and non-formal education will become an acute issue as regards access to Master programmes for non-holders of the corresponding Bachelor degrees. In consequence, it will be of concern to the University of Geneva as a whole. In the present context of harmonization and reciprocal recognition among educational institutions, it is particularly important to compare and analyze the different practices currently in use.

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