

When Training Is Not Enough: Preparing Students for Employment in England, France and Sweden[☆]

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Abstract

The proliferation of work placements and the rise of professionalisation in higher education are, in France, frequently condemned as evidence of a quest for greater employability, driven by a skills-based approach. A comparative analysis of the methods used to prepare students for employment shows the degree to which the social mechanisms are homogeneous in England (*employability*) and in Sweden (*bildning*). In France, the transition from higher education to employment entails a process of *pre-professionalisation*. This is characterised by the dominant role of professional skills and their incorporation into the structure of initial higher education itself. Rather than the outcome of a process of marketisation, this mechanism of pre-professionalisation is explained by the persistence of an idealised conception of “matching” that still profoundly marks the relations between education and employment in France.

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The adaptation of education to job-creating sectors since the end of the *Trente Glorieuses*, France’s three decades of post-war boom, has prompted extensive sociological research on the competence of governments to organise this section of the economy. Indeed, with respect to public policies, this connection between education and employment would seem to remain “unattainable” (Tanguy, 1986) and, in terms of the social actors (students, companies, institutions), the attempt to find a match represents an “endless quest” (Agulhon, 1997). Historically, research on the

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connection between education and employment¹ has tended to focus on the vocational education and training sector.² Higher education represents another — less frequently studied — facet of the relationship between education and jobs. French universities have seen a proliferation of work placements and career preparation modules, and students' choices are increasingly guided by the quest for openings into the labour market. This article seeks to cast light on the French term “professionalisation”³ as used by the social actors (students, teachers, businesses...) and analysed by sociologists specialising in higher education (Agulhon, 2007) and in issues of training and qualifications (Maillard, 2012). We will mainly here use the English term “professional” even though the French term lies somewhere between professional and vocational. For many observers, this trend towards professionalisation constitutes a change in the national model, presaging the triumph of neoliberalism. We will markedly qualify this perception with reference to the Swedish case, but also to the English higher education system, which is frequently — but wrongly — tasked with an affinity with the idea of professionalising students. More precisely, our aim here is to show that the fact of favouring, within the educational system, the acquisition of professional skills directly applicable to a given career, is characteristic of the French model, and that the boom in “professionalising” work placements and courses is nothing more than a new version of the idealised “matching” principle specific to France.

All higher education programmes are, to a varying degree, vocational. Nevertheless, they differ in the degree of specificity of the sectors and careers for which they prepare students. They can be divided up as follows:⁴ academic vocational programmes, often accessed by competitive examination, leading to qualifications that are an essential condition for the exercise of certain specific careers (doctor, lawyer, teacher, etc.); vocational programmes, where the target career is a professional field rather than a specific job, and where the attainment of a qualification, usually preceded by a long work placement, does not always guarantee access to employment (business and engineering schools, vocational degrees and higher degrees, DUT⁵); and finally, so-called general education, which provides access to a wide range of jobs, with the exception of those targeted by the previous two types of education described.

What we are seeing today is a growth in vocational programmes to the detriment of academic vocational programmes, which notably provide entry to public service careers. The change in the balance between these two types of education is purported to reflect a shift from a focus on knowledge to a focus on skills, whose traces can be observed even in changes in the meaning of the notion of professionalisation. In this view, therefore, it is no longer understood as a process that notably entails “the institutionalisation of a recognised curriculum, the positioning of the

¹ The substantiation of the question about “a” relation between education and employment should not mask the fact that the links between these two orders of phenomena are multiple and vary between sectors and individuals (Tanguy, 2008). Here, we will describe the “highest common denominator” in a country’s relation between education and employment.

² The scope of the relation between education and employment essentially covers the issues of vocational training. Our question is very close to this — trivially, it is about how higher education helps in finding a job — but, given the fact that our study is limited to higher education, it would be more accurate to talk about the relation between higher education and employment, or indeed higher education and work (Jobert et al., 1995).

³ In the rest of this article, the term “professionalisation” will be employed, although it is much less commonly used in English than in French.

⁴ Gayraud et al. (2011) provide a typology of “professionalising” education, which we draw upon here. We have removed a final type, representing only 7% of their sample, replacing it with so-called general education that also provides preparation for employment, but with a wider spectrum of careers and sectors and skills that are more crosscutting than vocational.

⁵ *Diplôme universitaire de technologie* — a two-year technical degree.

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