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# The Vocational Drift of French Higher Education and the Employability of Graduates

*Claire Bonnard*

## INTRODUCTION

As in other European countries, the employability of students is at the heart of higher education policies in France. The Bologna Process has redefined the role of higher education (Sin & Neave, 2016), one of the objectives being to strengthen the attractiveness and quality of higher education in a knowledge-based economy. Particular emphasis is placed on the transition to employment of higher education graduates and the development of their employability (Soldano, 2018). In the face of these European initiatives, a diversity of reforms in higher education has been observed according to national contexts, depending in particular on “*institutional and ideal legacies, as well as on the balance of power between the various groups of actors in university policy*” (Kavka, 2017).

The French university has seen its missions evolve since the 2000s. Since 2007, the mission of the professional integration of students has

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been added to the teaching and research missions of universities. The emphasis is placed on the employability of students, which has resulted in a vocational drift within the various university courses. The vocational drift of higher education will take not only different forms such as the creation of vocational higher education diplomas but also the development of different modules such as work placements within the university curriculum. The aim is to adjust the training offer to the needs of employers and the labour market and to increase the “employability capital” (Tiffon et al., 2007) of students by developing a set of skills that will enable them to enter the labour market in a sustainable way.

The concept of employability promoted by current policies can be understood within the framework of the development of the knowledge economy, and more generally of the human capital theory (Tomlinson, 2007, 2012). Many authors (Tiffon et al., 2007; Tomlinson, 2007) emphasise that, according to this approach, employability is inherent to graduates who have to build their own pathway. It is their responsibility—their difficulties in accessing the labour market can be attributed to them and considered as personal failure (Brown et al., 2003). The dominant approach to employability is decontextualised (Morley, 2001; Tomlinson, 2010) and does not make it possible to explain the differences in employment outcome according to social class, gender and minority group (Holmes, 2013). The literature has highlighted the importance of proposing an alternative approach to employability. Mobilising Bourdieu’s concepts of *capital*, *habitus* and *playing the game*, authors show that, according to their social capital, students will have different access to the labour market and attitudes towards managing their employability (Burke et al., 2017). Graduates will not have the same understanding of the “rules of the game” and what is expected by employers (Brown et al., 2003; Burke et al., 2017). Some authors take a different approach by emphasising the importance of taking into account the subjective dimension of employability by the construction of “identity toward labor market” (Tomlinson, 2010), “pre-professional identity” (Jackson, 2016) and “graduate identity” (Holmes, 2013). The identity towards employability will be formed by one’s history, academic background and also different interactions with the world of work. These approaches allow to better take into account the attitudes of students and young graduates towards employability and how they are formed.

The purpose of this chapter is to underline the interest in mobilising alternative approaches to the dominant approach to employability and

how these approaches would provide a better understanding of how students manage their employability and mobilise the various employability-related measures developed in higher education. To this end, we review empirical research studies on the vocational drift of French higher education and the employability of students. Studies have generally focused on the effect of the vocational drift of higher education on the academic and professional career of graduates in terms of efficiency and equity. Studies analysing students' attitudes towards the labour market and employability are relatively underdeveloped except in elite education (Brown et al., 2016; Tholen et al., 2013).

In the first part of this chapter, we introduce French higher education, which is characterised by a strong segmentation and hierarchisation of the different fields of study. In a second part, we return to the employment of graduates and the strategies of employability implemented within these fields. Finally, studies on the vocational drift of French higher education are presented. The main results are developed while highlighting how alternative approaches to employability offer new perspectives in the analysis of the effects of the vocational drift of higher education on students' employability.

## FRENCH HIGHER EDUCATION SYSTEM

In France, the “democratization” of access to the baccalaureate, following school explosion in the 1980s, has led to an increase in enrolment in higher education. According to the Ministry of Higher Education, in 2015, enrolment in higher education was eight times higher than in 1960. The arrival of these “new” students has resulted in a diversification of the educational offer in higher education (Duru-Bellat et al., 2008) which has reinforced the “segmentation of higher education” (Verley & Zilloniz 2010) with a hierarchy of higher education courses. Some authors (Pinto, 2008) point to a “segregative democratisation” (Merle, 2000). Indeed, there are three types of *baccalauréat*: general, technological and vocational. The general and technological baccalaureate should enable students to continue in higher education. The vocational baccalaureate is intended to allow for professional integration or continuation in higher education. Orientation towards the different types of *baccalaureate* is generally based on the student's academic record. Orientation in higher education will also differ according to the type of *baccalauréat*. The French higher education system generally opposes “elite” selective courses

(Grandes Ecoles, preparatory classes), to short selective vocational courses (BTS, IUT) and “non-selective” university courses (Duru-Bellat et al., 2008; Verley & Zilloniz, 2010).

The “elite” selective courses include the *Classes préparatoires aux Grandes Ecoles* (CPGE) and *Grande Ecoles*. The CPGE are accessible after the *baccalauréat* (usually *general baccalaureate*) on the basis of the student’s academic record and prepare students generally for two years for the entrance exams to the *Grandes Ecoles*. The *Grandes Ecoles*, including engineering and business schools, train students for top executive positions. Access to these schools is generally by *concours* (entrance examination). These streams are academically and socially selective, especially for the most prestigious schools. In 2020–2021, 49% of business school students had parents in professional and managerial position, as compared to more than 50% of CPGE and engineering school students (Ministry of education, 2021). This share exceeds 60% for the most prestigious schools. These courses have not really experienced any change in their social composition over the last fifteen years (Bonneau et al., 2021).

The short vocational courses include the *Sections de Technicien Supérieur* (STS) and the *Institut Universitaire de Technologie* (IUT). These courses were created in the 1960s to satisfy, in particular, the demand for middle managers. They are accessible after the baccalaureate on the basis of academic records and are more or less selective. The STS is a two-year technological course that prepares students for the *Brevet technicien du supérieur* (higher technological diploma). Of those entering STS, about a third have a technological *baccalaureate*, a third a vocational *baccalaureate* and the rest have a general baccalaureate or come from other higher education streams. The IUT is a three-year technological course since 2021 (previously two years), which prepares for the *Bachelor Universitaire de Technologie* (university technological diploma). Among the entrants to these streams, about 63% have a general *baccalaureate* and 34% a technological *baccalaureate*. Students from advantaged social backgrounds are under-represented in these courses. Indeed, in 2020–2021, only 15% of STS students have parents who are in professional and managerial position compared to 30% of IUT students. The short vocational courses were very attractive to students in the 2000s (Verley & Zilloniz, 2010).

The university courses welcome the largest number of students with heterogeneous educational, social backgrounds and aspirations (Verley & Zilloniz, 2010). Access to the first university cycle (Licence) is after the

*baccalauréat*.<sup>1</sup> The first academic cycle (*Licence*) lasts three years, and the second academic cycle (*Master*) lasts two years with the possibility of continuing to a doctorate. In addition, in the 1990s, a new professional degree, Vocational Bachelor's degree, was developed corresponding to an intermediate level of qualification between middle managers' degrees and those of engineers and managers (Giret, 2011). Within the university streams, a hierarchy of study fields exists (Bodin & Millet, 2011). The share of students in all university courses, whose parents are in professional and managerial position, is 33%, but it is 48% for health, 36% for law and 34% for science, compared to about 27% for humanities and social sciences. Moreover, in the 2000s, there was a "disaffection" in students from general university courses in favour of vocational courses in higher education. The heterogeneity of students admitted to university and the stagnation of enrolments in general university courses have led to a number of questions about the employability of students (Erlich & Verley, 2010).

#### GRADUATE EMPLOYMENT AND THE VOCATIONAL DRIFT IN THE FRENCH HIGHER EDUCATION

The vocational drift in the French higher education is often justified with graduates' poor labour market integration and high unemployment rate. In France, the unemployment rate of young people is much higher than that of the average working population. In 2016, one in five young people was unemployed three years after leaving the education system (Gaubert et al., 2017). The level of education remains a determining factor in access to employment. Indeed, the unemployment rate for higher education graduates is on average 10% compared to 46% for non-graduates and 22% for secondary school graduates. Nevertheless, among higher education graduates, differences in access to employment and job stability are observed according to the level of study and the type of study. There is also a hierarchisation of higher education streams in terms of access to the labour market, as shown in the Table 9.1.

Students from *Grandes Ecoles* have better access to employment than university graduates. The unemployment rate of *Grandes Ecoles* graduates, three years after graduation, is 7% compared to 12% for

<sup>1</sup> Since 2018, a digital platform, Parcoursup, has been managing the allocation of students' wishes for courses of study in higher education, introducing selectivity, particularly in the most popular courses of study.

**Table 9.1** Professional situation in 2016 of higher education graduates, 3 years later

	<i>Unemployment rate</i>	<i>% in permanent employment</i>
<b>Short vocational courses</b>	12%	68%
<b>Licence, first year of the master's</b>	13%	68%
Vocational bachelor	9%	nd
Science, sport	12%	75%
Human and social sciences, management, Law	17%	64%
<b>Master</b>	10%	82%
Science, sport	12%	80%
Human and social sciences, management, law	10%	76%
Grandes Ecoles (business and engineering schools)	7%	90%
<b>Doctoral degree</b>	5%	71%

Source: Data from “Quand l’Ecole est finie” (Henrard & Ilardi, 2017, pp. 57, 59). Health and social sectors are excluded. Permanent employments include non-salaried employments

university graduates with a master’s degree in sciences and sports and 10% in human and social sciences, management and law. Moreover, more than 90% of Grandes Ecoles graduates have a stable job compared to 80% for master’s graduates in science and sport and 76% in human social sciences, management and law. Differences are observed between vocational and “general” study. Graduates of short vocational courses and vocational bachelor’s degrees have an unemployment rate of 12% and 9%, respectively. Among general study, undergraduates in certain fields such as human and social sciences have greater difficulties in entering the job market than graduates in science and sport. The unemployment rate of undergraduates in human and social science, management and law is 17% compared to 12% in sciences and sport. These results are usually put forward for the development of vocational courses (Béduwé et al., 2019) and the need for the vocational drift of university courses.

The arrival of “new students” and the questions about the student’s employability have led to a vocational drift of higher educations, particularly in university courses. Many authors (Agulhon et al., 2012) stress that the vocational drift of higher education in France is not recent. Historically, medicine and law train students for specific professions. The *Grandes*

*Ecoles*, training engineers and managers, traditionally has a professional vocation. In addition, as already mentioned, technology and professional degrees were created to meet the needs of the workforce in the economy. Nevertheless, following European initiatives, the vocational drift of higher education will take a different turn in the 2000s where the emphasis is on the employability of students (Gayraud et al., 2011). Indeed, the vocational drift of higher education concerns the “acquisition of professional skills but also the support of students for the entry on the labor market” (Gayraud et al., 2011). The mission of the professional integration of students was integrated into the missions of the university in 2007 by the law on the freedom and responsibilities of universities. The vocational drift is spreading to all fields and levels of study in higher education. Particular emphasis is placed on vocational drift in “general” university courses and, in particular, in the first cycle of university. The vocational drift of these courses of study should lead to better both the success and orientation of students and their entry into the labour market. Vocational drift will concern both the content and the pathway of the students (Crespy & Lemistre, 2017). This will result in the implementation of work-related learnings such as apprenticeships and work placements within the university curriculum. Apprenticeship in higher education is experiencing strong development with an increase of 188% in the number of apprentices between 2005 and 2019, and of 615% in master’s level (MESRI, 2020). The work placement is also strongly promoted in general university courses, with about 55% students in master’s programme having completed a work placement in 2018 (MESRI, 2020). In addition, as in other countries (Jackson & Tomlinson, 2022), universities have been encouraged to develop “employability-related modules” within the curricula or/and by the university’s services. These modules aim to help students build their professional project, highlight their skills (help in writing a CV, skill assessment, etc.) and/or have better knowledge of the labour market (Lemistre & Ménard, 2018).

#### ACCESS TO LABOUR MARKET AND REPRESENTATION OF EMPLOYABILITY, A REVIEW OF RECENT FRENCH STUDIES

Based on a review of the literature, we propose to analyse the effects of the vocational drift of higher education on student’s employability. For this purpose, we have identified empirical research studies on this topic that



adopt a sociological or economic approach. The first body of research analyses the effect of the vocational drift of higher education on students' academic and professional careers. A second less developed type of research focuses on the relationship to employment, the labour market and the employability of students. In France, while representations of student employability have been the subject of work in elite education (Brown et al., 2016; Tholen et al., 2013), other segments of higher education have been less studied. A series of studies, even if they do not directly mobilise alternative approaches to employability, allow us to understand students' relationship to employment, the labour market and employability and how they are constructed. We present studies on all segments of French higher education. Nevertheless, particular attention is paid to university courses, which are more affected by the vocational drift of higher education.

First, a number of studies in France have sought to evaluate the effectiveness and equity of professionalisation measures, in particular, on students' entry into the labour market. Research shows that, at a given level of study, graduates of vocational higher education have a better integration into the labour market than graduates of general studies. However, this effect is reduced when the academic background of the students and the specialty of the degree are taken into account. The relatively favourable effect on the labour market of these courses is thus partly due to the selective recruitment of students by their academic level and the recruitment in particular segments of the labour market (Béduvé et al., 2019; Kergoat & Lemistre, 2014). Relatively similar findings were observed with regard to employability-related measures offered within university courses of study. Indeed, Giret and Issehnane (2012) show that work placements can facilitate access to well-paying jobs, but only under certain conditions, as the work placement must be of "quality", that is, long, rewarding and related to the studies. Furthermore, the authors show that the type of work placement is strongly dependent on the course of study, gender and social background of the student; women and students from working-class backgrounds have less access to a "quality" work placement. Regarding employability-related modules offered by universities (identifying skills, building a professional project, etc.), Lemistre and Ménard (2018) show that they can also have a positive effect on entry into the labour market. Nevertheless, these modules are more common in the vocational courses, and, for a given course, they are less used by women and students with a lower level of cultural capital. In addition, strong disparities have been

observed in the implementation of these measures between universities (Gayraud et al., 2011) and within the same university (Bonnard, 2020). The implementation of these measures will depend, in particular, on the teaching teams within the study programmes. Depending on the culture of the course of study and the student population, the question of employability and the professionalisation measures implemented in the course of study will take different forms (in terms of time volume, optional/mandatory, etc.).

In general, these studies show that the measures related to employability can, under certain conditions, facilitate the entry of young graduates into the labour market, but they are also likely to generate gender, social and educational inequalities. In order to better understand these inequalities, it is important to apprehend students' attitudes towards the labour market and employability.

Students' representations of employability will depend on the type of study as well as the discipline of study. Erlich and Verley (2010) underline "the division of higher education into socializing sectors" which will affect students' practices (Bodin & Millet, 2011), students' relationship to studies, work and labour market entry.

Firstly, the studies highlight the differences in the perception of employability or the employment of students between general and vocational courses. Delès (2017) shows that during their studies, students from generalist courses more frequently declare that they have a specific career plan than students from more vocational courses. The author explains that in the vocational courses, the career plan is self-evident and integrated into the contents of the course. In the context of generalist courses, especially in the literary and humanities fields, the link between degree and occupation is more distended, and students are required to construct their project and their integration pathway, and it is up to them to "sell themselves on a market of skills". Nevertheless, the professional project for these students is not always seen as a way of preparing their professional future but can be perceived as an "injunction to placement" for these students. Students in these tracks also show less confidence in the degree for accessing the job market (Zaffran, 2012).

The course of study has an influence on how students perceive their entry on the labour market but also in their relationship to work. In a recent study, Bene (2021) analyses the dimensions of work valued by third-year university graduates in general and vocational fields. The author highlights that graduates of vocational courses of study in higher

education will emphasise the “utilitarian” dimensions of work (salary, job security), whereas the “socializing and expressive” dimensions of work are judged to be more important by graduates from general courses of study. The social background of the student will also influence the dimensions valued, with graduates from the most privileged social classes valuing “social and expressive” dimensions more than other graduates. While these results can be explained in part by the different reasons for orientation in the various fields of study, nevertheless, they underline the formation of “discipline-based identities among students” (Jackson, 2016). These studies show that students’ relationship to the future and to the labour market is structured according to the fields of study, which are socially and academically segmented. Students’ strategies for their future professional integration will therefore be heterogeneous. Indeed, Couronné et al. (2021) stress that students’ participation in extracurricular activities and their valorisation differ according to the course of study and social origin. The authors show that the majority of students with low levels of participation in extracurricular activities are undergraduates from working-class backgrounds and who have obtained a vocational or technological baccalaureate. Furthermore, students participating in extracurricular activities will mobilise them differently in terms of employability. Students enrolled in medicine, law or teaching have extracurricular activities related to their future employment, while students in management sciences have more heterogeneous activities that they will be able to value on a “skills market”.

In addition, within the same course of study, students may approach their entry on labour market in different ways. Cohen-Scali (2001) identifies four profiles of attitudes towards the labour market entry of students enrolled in a short vocational course in higher education: “pessimists”, “wait-and-see students”, “explorers” and “strategists”. According to these profiles, students do not consider the same level of difficulty and do not adopt the same strategies for their future labour market entry: the “pessimists” anticipating difficulties in integrating, the “strategists” already having strategies for their future integration, the “wait-and-see attitude” having no real strategies and the explorers favouring other types of experience before entering the labour market. The author points out that apprenticeship students, more represented in the profile of the “strategists”, differ in their approach to employability compared to non-apprenticeship students. In a second study, the author compares the representations of the entry into the labour market of apprentices within

different study programmes according, in particular, to their perception of one's own integration within the organisation where they are doing their apprenticeship. The author shows that the quality of integration into the organisation is a determining factor in the way young people envisage their entry into the labour market and their employment. The first labour market experiences of students are thus likely to influence their relationship to employability.

Finally, studies (Bonnard, 2020; Bonnard et al., 2020) have analysed the representations of employability and access to work placement for students enrolled in a bachelor's degree of various generalist courses in a French university. These studies show that access to non-compulsory work placements during their study year is strongly dependent on the students' educational and social capital. This result can be explained by a set of barriers for students to work placement. Indeed, although the majority of students declare the interest in doing a work placement, a proportion of them declare not to have carried out a work placement because they could not find one or because they needed to have a student job. A proportion of students also stated that they preferred to focus on their studies. In addition, on the basis of a quantitative survey, the author constructs a typology of four profiles according to the students' perception of the labour market and employability. Some students described as "pessimistic" perceive the labour market as competitive, discriminatory and non-meritocratic and have low confidence in the diploma for their entry into the labour market. In contrast, the "optimists" do not perceive any difficulties when entering the labour market and consider the labour market to be rather meritocratic. For these students, non-academic experiences such as work placements and the various forms of networks are not considered important for success in the labour market. Other students, called careerists, emphasise personal effort and the degree in accessing employment. In a labour market considered competitive, they strongly value the professional network and the work placement. Finally, "strategists" will primarily seek a "positional advantage" (Brown & Hesketh, 2004) in particular through the mobilisation of various forms of networks on the labour market. These different profiles are strongly dependent on the student's social background, academic level, work experience and course of study. According to these profiles, students will not mobilise and apprehend the work placement in the same way, especially in its valorisation during the study course and on the labour market.

These different empirical research studies highlight that students' attitudes towards the labour market and employability are not homogeneous. The segmentation of higher education in France leads to different representations of employment and the labour market by students with different employability issues. Furthermore, the way in which students manage their employability will depend on their field of study, social background and first experiences on the labour market. Students do not all have the same understanding of the "rules of the game" and will not give the same meaning to employability-related measures. They also do not have the same resources to value them, especially in university courses which receive a heterogeneous public. These results raise questions about a conception of employability based on human capital theory and the implementation of employability-related measures within the curricula.

## CONCLUSION

A range of policies in higher education aim to develop the employability of graduates through the creation of new degrees, the development of work experience or/and the implementation of different employability-related modules within the curriculum. The objective of these different measures is to produce "work-ready" graduates. Students are expected to acquire a set of skills and work-related experiences that they can use in the labour market. Based on a review of the literature, we show that the vocational drift of higher education can, to some extent, facilitate entry into the labour market, but that it is also a source of inequality. It is generally students from more privileged backgrounds and enrolled in certain higher education courses that benefit from these different measures.

Alternative approaches to employability provide new perspectives in the analysis of these inequalities and student's employability. Indeed, they allow to take into account students' perspectives and their representations of employability and how attitudes towards employability differ according to the field of study, social background, academic and labour market experiences. Furthermore, they provide a better understanding of the differences in resources for students in the mobilisation of employability measures, particularly in university courses.

This type of research should be further developed. Indeed, some studies question the extent to which these measures are not primarily a "signal" for employers and could allow a "pre-selection" of candidates for the employers (Glammann, 2015; Patroucheva, 2014). This can thus reinforce

inequalities within an already highly segmented higher education system and to some extent legitimise inequalities in access to employment (Lemistre, 2015). In general, the employability of graduates will depend on the conditions and opportunities available to them on the labour market, and structural inequalities in the labour market cannot be solved only by implementing such measures in higher education (Tholen & Brown, 2017).

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