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About qualification inflation

Marie Duru-Bellat

Key Note Talk

Why is overeducation such a lively and controversial issue?

There is a variety of reasons... In any democratic society, in which meritocracy is supposed to prevail, a tight fit between degrees and jobs is both equitable and efficient. However, this issue i) is difficult to document with unquestionable indicators; ii) can be dealt with on the basis of different level of analysis; iii) may be also, to certain extent, a value-laden issue...

1. At the micro level... no problem?

There is no non arbitrary way to characterize the fit between what the present job requires and the variety of skills or attitudes individuals possess due to the education or training received. In France, a logic of "level" prevails upon what is in other countries a logic of qualification (to follow Shavit and Müller, in *From school to work*). In the first case (logic of level), the more education you get, the more able you are supposed to be to fulfil the "best" jobs; while in the second one (logic of qualification), the skills you possess entails you to some specific jobs.

At that level, when one observes that higher-educated people obtain the jobs that were previously held by less qualified workers, it is often difficult to distinguish between overeducation and an upgrading of the skills demanded in the job. In the case of overeducation, we are facing an excess of supply of high-skilled workers; in case of upgrading, it may reveal an increasing complexity of the jobs. Some various measures may here be useful, especially subjective ones, versus normative or statistical ones... However, they don't allow distinguishing whether overeducation is an adjustment mechanism in the labour market, drawn by students themselves; or whether it may be also a strategy of firms, to speed up skill-biases technological changes. One thing is sure, one should not put forward the notion of employers' "need", as some studies do because the job market is a market, where an "offer" (the students) meet a demand, and the outset is nothing but a temporary equilibrium, not necessarily a valuable one...

Going back to individuals, another thing certain is that they are forced to adjust, since it's better to get some higher education degree than a bac. So, going further in the educational system remains a good investment for individuals, even if this relative advantage has slightly weakened since the 1970's. The problem is precisely that this devaluation of degrees goes along with the stability of the relative advantages they give. So, it fosters a self-perpetuating

trend. Individuals are caught in a trap compelling them to go further and further to get the same returns; and in this 'opportunity trap', as the sociologist Philip Brown (2003) said, middle and upper class families possess advantages.

Here, it is justified to talk about 'credential inflation', in the terms Müller and Shavit (1998, p.7) used; they wrote: 'in occupational space, the value of a credential consists primarily in its scarcity and position in the hierarchy of credentials rather than it derives from the specific skills it represents'. While this 'credential inflation' is quite a widespread phenomenon in the developed world (see for instance Felix Büchel and others, 2003), there exists some controversy concerning the precise numbers, and a lot of voices, most often among economists, underline that this phenomena of overeducation is over-estimated for different reasons :

. there would be selection biases, if over-educated workers have lower ability, less favourable attitudes...

. more broadly, the overeducation would not be so real, since the academic level guaranteed by degrees would be weakening. Overeducation would result from a problem of quality among the candidates to a job...

. apparently overqualified people would gain more than people in the same jobs but not overqualified...

. last but not least, overeducation would conceal a transitory phase,

Moreover and more hypothetical, this overeducation would conceal a redefinition of what qualification is... Numerous studies show that the job (or the salary) one gets does not result entirely from the degree possessed. For example, Bowles and Gintis (2002) have shown that some attitudes (such as the sense of personal efficacy) or some personal characteristics distinct from professional skills (being good looking for example) may have a more important impact on salaries than the degree possessed. Anyway, the question of what degrees certify - attitudes, skills, or only a statistical information about certain basic attributes of potential employees- is a fundamental one...

However, for a number of researchers and all across the board, overeducation would be a less serious phenomenon than currently suggested; it would be a short-run disequilibria, since employers will always adapt their modes of production so as to exploit the human capital available; or the French economist Jean-Michel Plassard: "beaucoup de bruit pour rien" (much noise about nothing)... It would not be so detrimental for individuals either, since the evaluation they make for their present situation is relative... and they have no choice!

So at the micro level... no problem!

2. At the macro level... *the issue of qualification inflation is embedded in the broader one of the effects of educational expansion...* which is not a simple issue!

2.1. starting with the economic perspective...

At first sight, educational expansion brings necessarily a bunch of *positive aspects*: it fosters a dynamic of change and technological progress, it may facilitate the further development of the

most competitive and dynamic knowledge based economy... But the expansion of education has not always brought the expected economic benefits: concerning the positive impact on growth, experts and politicians have justified their positions by presenting international comparisons showing that in a large sample of countries there was a relationship between the mean level of education and economic parameters, such as, growth or labour productivity. But this kind of relationship is much more uncertain if only the richest countries are taken into account (for a discussion, see Coulombe and Tremblay, 2006; or Prichett, 2001).

In other words, above a certain threshold, developing even more education does not automatically produce significant economic benefits. Even the OECD publications have recently expressed some doubt in this respect : in 'Education at a glance' (OECD, 2006, p.157), one reads: 'cross-country growth regressions assume that the impact of education is linear and constant across countries. However, research suggests that the assumption of constant growth effects of education across countries is unfounded. There is also evidence of diminishing effects on growth above an average of 7.5 years of education. This is well below the OECD average of 11.8 years in formal education'.

In any case, one must again distinguish between the micro and the macro level: it is not because, at the individual level, "learning is earning", that at the macro level, more education results in more economic wealth.... This *kind of discrepancy between effects of more education at the individual level and at the global one* is also observed as far as other social effects of education are concerned. Let's start with the notion of *social cohesion*...

2.2 So doing, we turn now to sociological perspectives...

Historically, Education has always been supposed to promote social cohesion. As the French sociologist Emile Durkheim puts it (1922): "Society can only exist if there exists among its members a sufficient degree of homogeneity. Education perpetuates and reinforces this homogeneity by fixing in the child, from the beginning, the essential similarities that collective life demands". This is especially true for the late 18th and the early 19th century Europe, when mass public education appeared. It was then conceived as a tool for building cohesive national identities. It is only later on, from the mid-19th century onwards, that the focus shifted to the specific role of education to provide training in order to acquire the new skills and knowledge required by the industrial revolution, and, even more recently, by the so-called knowledge-based economy.

For individuals, this means getting specific training, which will induce a new stress for the society as a whole. That's because these are two different perspectives – to unify, but also to diversify-, so there may exist a tension between these two objectives, and too much vocationalism may prove detrimental. Moreover, especially in the European discourses and policies, there has been in the recent years a growing trend considering that education is a crucial tool to foster social cohesion at the macro-social level.

However, what does research show? Using a variety of macro-social indicators of social cohesion, Green, Preston and Janmaat (2006) did not find any significant correlation with the level of education. This is certainly because the overall features of societies, such as social integration, result from a combination of characteristics and not only and automatically from the average level of education. However, although no clear relationship emerges when comparing countries above a certain level of economic development and where the mean level of education is high, we cannot exclude the possibility that some increase of the mean level of

education may be associated to some betterment of social cohesion in poorer countries, when they achieve universal literacy, for instance.

Moreover, recent studies show that the distribution of education may be more important than the mean level. In other words, educational inequality (assessed by the ratio between the mean literacy score of adults with tertiary education and those with lower secondary education) does have some specific detrimental effects upon social cohesion. As Green and others suggest, educational inequality impacts through the way it distributes skills and hence income; moreover and may be more important, it increases the cultural distance between individuals, making communication and trust more difficult. The growing credentialism that characterizes educated societies (stronger relationships between diploma and jobs) fosters status anxiety, individualism and competition stress, and may have an overall negative impact for social cohesion.

So, sociologists not only question the positive effects of more education, but they often go further; some of them clearly maintain that *qualification inflation has negative consequences*. About these negative aspects, French sociologists as different as Boudon and Bourdieu share similar conclusions: educational expansion does not hinder social reproduction, rather, it make its easier to be maintained. Boudon focused on the relative importance of numbers – number of jobs, number of degrees- on the concrete operating of social reproduction; Bourdieu insisted more, but it amounts to the same, on the size of the pie to be shared and on the fact that social reproduction required a credential inflation to be achieved smoothly.

Bourdieu (1978) explains: ‘The entering into the race and competition for degrees of young people belonging to groups who were till now using school in a very moderate way has pushed those groups whose reproduction was mainly achieved by school to intensify their investment to maintain the relative scarcity of their degrees and so doing their position in the social structure, so that the degree and the system delivering it become the main stake in a competition which generates a broad and continuous growth of the demand for education and an inflation of degrees’.

At the same period (1979), another sociologist, Collins presented credentialism as a way of social closure and the credential inflation as the strategy (the ‘exclusionary tactics’) of the elite to preserve its advantages regarding its access to the best occupational careers on the basis of higher and higher degrees. In that case, following Collins’ thesis, the expansion of education is a response to consumer demand rather than a functional necessity (notably an economic one). This theory is broadly in conformity with French observations concerning increasing competition. Moreover, it makes understandable the necessity for the dominant group to encourage expansion of schooling as a means to keep its children ahead. “Additional schooling becomes a form of self-defense”, as two American sociologists write (Grubb and Lazerson, 2004).

All these analyses underline the impact of both the structural frame and the actors’ strategies on the operation of social reproduction; in this respect, the size of the pie is as important as the way the pie is divided among groups. They also hold that to understand how inequalities change, it is very important to take into account the dynamics of growth, with the prediction that in a context of growth, it is easier for elites to find ways to keep ahead. Actually, growth is a facilitating condition for what Raftery and Hout (1993) calls ‘maximally maintained inequality’, that is actors’ strategies striving to preserve their advantage with the complicity of politicians, since the educational system is financed by public resources, and also because this

may be the most easily acceptable policy. In a context of expansion, growth operates here both as a safety-valve, and as a counter-reform, allowing things not to change. So the word inflation is relevant, and it is bound to perpetuate itself... and all across the board, it is the conveyor-belt of maximally-maintained inequality.

Let's add that the development of the educational system is generating a social dynamic which may have unexpected effects. The devaluation of degrees, evoked earlier, is one of these unexpected effects, resulting from their diffusion which weakens the information they bring to employers and give a new leeway for other personal characteristics. As Passeron (1986) suggests, the importance of degrees in the social reproduction process may be an historical model: it would be doomed to fade out due to its success. Even if education has of course a major importance for society and for individuals, one must question more precisely what it is about when expansion goes on above a certain threshold.

To end with the sociological approach, I would underline that sociologists do insist on the costs of expanding education at both aggregate and individual level. Here, we must remember some old hints of Bourdieu (with Boltanski, 1975), and dare quoting him: 'since it does not assure only the function of reproducing the qualified labour force (function of technical reproduction) but also the function of reproducing the position of individuals and groups within the social structure (function of social reproduction), knowing that this position is in some ways independent from the strictly technical competency, the educational system relies less directly upon the requirements of the production system than upon the requirements of the reproduction of social groups'. In that case, educational expansion meets mostly the private interests of those who want to stay ahead, without helping those who stay behind.

So a first and major problem of credentialism, put forward by sociologists, is that it is both inefficient and unfair. While the public benefits expected from educational expansion are not always met, the primary beneficiaries are actually private individuals. From this perspective, "education becomes little but a vast public subsidy for private ambition" (Brown, 1995).

This perspective should meet *the economic one*, investigating costs and consequences of this educational expansion, as long as it goes along with strong social inequalities... For the economist, the private return of education is one thing, widely studied, but the issue of social or economic return, at the macro level is as important. Each time a person is overqualified, and as long as education is funded by public resources, this is a waste; and this waste is all the more a problem when education is unequally distributed. And that is of course very clear in the poorest countries...

But the opening of the system has *not only monetary costs*; it also has ill-assessed and even taboo social and psychological ones. Since Young's essay -The Rise of Meritocracy- (1958), we suspect that a society where places would be allocated on the basis of 'merit' would not be a perfect one. Similarly, many studies have shown that the fact that degrees have become more and more necessary for individual advancement not only does not lead to a fairer society but progressively spoils the content of education itself: it becomes a necessary evil. In 1976, Ronald Dore described what he called the 'diploma disease', in several developing countries. Starting with the observation of an inflation of degrees and a growth in their value as positional goods for employers, he notes that this situation leads to examination-oriented schooling, with detrimental effects on the quality of learning as well as on subsequent attitudes towards learning, such as ritualism, and mostly no intrinsic interest in knowledge.

Recent research in France shows, from the higher secondary school to some university tracks, an increasing ritualism among pupils who look mostly interested in the marks they may get, the exams they may pass and what returns they may achieve with it, rather than by the content of the studies themselves. When these utilitarian students enter the labour market, disillusion is often great. All across the board, it is the second major problem raised by credentialism: it undercuts learning; students will do whatever it takes to acquire a diploma.. Under these conditions, it is rational –but educationally destructive- for students to seek to get their diplomas at the minimum academic cost...

Openness and the competition it fosters are also cruel in a second sense: as education is becoming mostly a positional good, it requires that a lot of pupils fail to master it, since the winners must not be too numerous if they are to win something. So failure remains a necessary part of the machinery of a selection whose necessity is admitted by students as well as by politicians, if a given value associated with the degree is to be preserved.

At the macro level, the fact that competition is tougher and tougher and the growing sense of economic insecurity certainly have also broader undesirable effects, not yet well identified. However, despite this wasteful competition, one may consider all across the board that some symbolic efficiency is achieved, if the conviction that you deserve the rank you obtain in a continuous competition proves ingrained and if so, as Bourdieu would say, inequalities are legitimised. But one may make the hypothesis that the growing gap between degrees and jobs obtained may throw some doubt on the meritocratic way in which the whole system operates.

3. What about the ideological effect of educational expansion: is it reinforcing or weakening meritocracy...

Opening school, developing access to education, is supposed to convey more meritocracy and consequently more social justice. Research shows that it is a fiction (albeit a necessary one). As long as degrees have some value on the labour market, consequently as long as education has mainly positional effects, one cannot hope to reduce social inequalities by opening the system; this is because by so doing (and as long as inequalities exist within society), unequal families will strive for unequal positions with unequal assets, and inequalities will only occur further on; this somewhat pessimistic view is shared by both Bourdieu and Boudon.

So meritocracy –if one means a strong tie between degree and position, without any inequality in schooling- can't be achieved as long as both families and positions aimed at remain unequal. In other words, it can't be achieved without an evolution towards equality of positions... But this is not the observed trend today, and it is not even sure it would be a consensual objective! That's why the notion of equality of opportunity is growing more and more popular: it promises equity in the race for success, not equality in results and certainly not in economic life.

But if meritocracy appears both as impossible to achieve and debatable in itself, however, it is impossible to scrap the model of fairness based on merit, for fundamental reasons. In a democratic society, that is one that postulates that all individuals are in principle equal but in which real social positions are not equal, personal merit appears as the only way to construct fair inequalities, legitimate ones, since inequalities linked to birth are unacceptable because they contradict the equality postulate. So, the only choice we have is to perfect the meritocratic model, turning ourselves to other fairness or justice principles (Duru-Bellat, 2009). Concerning education, this requires that we take into account some distributive justice

implying positive discrimination and securing a minimum of resources and protection to the weakest pupils.

We should also question the social effects of academic inequalities (of unequal degrees). In France, one thinks spontaneously that social inequalities pervert educational equality, while inequalities resulting from unequal degrees are perceived as fair. However, degree is the factor that most strongly determines the job and salary one may get, especially in France, where credentialism is high. And at that point, one can underline that a credential-driven system of education can provide meritocratic cover for social reproduction (the British sociologist J. Goldthorpe uses the expression “a moral gloss”...).

But that is true only if people believe in it! Recent studies show that more and more French people, especially overqualified students, dare ask the question: is it fair that educational degrees should have such a strong, lasting hold in other spheres of activity? This question has an iconoclastic power in a country where people readily assume that educational success is the sole legitimate means of achieving social mobility and that strengthening the power of schooling therefore brings about a more just society. Once we accept the idea that educational performances and degrees reflect much more than merit, and therefore that educational inequalities are not so fair, then we have to ask whether it is not actually unfair to grant educational degrees so much importance. Is the fit between degrees and jobs such a good thing to be aimed at?

Another motive for loosening the fit between education and jobs is that it turns the system into a self-perpetuating one: if degrees have a strong impact on children's occupational prospects, one understands easily that well-informed parents conceive of schooling instrumentally, rather than with specifically educational aims in mind. Moreover, at the society level, this instrumental and individualistic perspective on education probably runs counter to social cohesion.

Anyway, to strengthen the fit between degrees and jobs is more uncertain as often thought, as far as social justice is concerned! It runs counter to our current view, and may be it is especially true even among researchers working on that field (and may be still more strongly among economists of education, especially inclined to consider as a good thing strong relations between degrees and jobs)... So, even for academics, the question of overeducation is a value-laden issue. It is often a rather taboo issue, because it may hint that we have educated too much –and one can never be too educated–, or have at least spent too much money in giving tertiary education to young people who will get a low-qualified job.

Another joined value-laden consideration is that weakening relationships between degrees and jobs may be the counter part of some democratization of access to culture: we may imagine a society in which every body would share more or less equal amount of education, or make different educational choices, but in that case without any consequences on the job obtained. But one may be sceptical whether it would boost a more fair society (as far as alternative criteria must be found to have access to unequal jobs)... So we are led to conclude that all these issues are bound to remain open to debates, whatever the quality of our research may be.

References: most of the references quoted will be found in two of my recent books: “L'inflation scolaire”, Seuil, 2006; “Le mérite contre la justice”, Presses de Sciences Po, 2009.