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# When Training Is Not Enough: Preparing Students for Employment in England, France and Sweden<sup>☆</sup>

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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 employment<sup>1</sup> has tended to focus on the vocational education and training sector.<sup>2</sup> 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”<sup>3</sup> 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:<sup>4</sup> 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, DUT<sup>5</sup>); 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

<sup>1</sup> The substantification 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.

<sup>2</sup> 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).

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

<sup>4</sup> 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.

<sup>5</sup> *Diplôme universitaire de technologie* — a two-year technical degree.

status of different jobs within a classification [and] the recognition of a professional qualification [but also] the adaptation of young people to jobs by means of work placements” (Aguilhon, 2007, p. 14).<sup>6</sup> These two approaches are also perceived as opposed in the qualities that they value: in the skills-based approach, the focus is on vocational skills that are specific to a job or a professional field; in the knowledge-based approach, the focus is on more abstract knowledge, which can be used to acquire skills that are not specifically vocational but run across a variety of sectors and functions. The argument is that this new form of skills-based professionalisation is largely the result of a process of “marketisation” in higher education, characteristic of academic modernisation (Charle and Soulié, 2008), itself the consequence of “neoliberal canons” imported from the English-speaking world and increasingly influential in France (Laval et al., 2011). The claim is that this neoliberal canon predominates in access to work — under the guise of the demand for employability — in the model of public action in European structures (Lefresne, 1999). Rather than being explained by factors endogenous to the French situation, it is asserted that an external phenomenon is decisive in accounting for the rise of professionalisation in the form that currently prevails in France.

It is this apparently logical sequence that we propose to challenge here by highlighting the persistence of an idealised conception of “matching” that is specific to France and transcends transnational developments pertaining to skills and the marketisation of higher education. To do this, we will analyse the different methods of preparation for entry into the labour market employed by students in England and Sweden, with the common aim of acquiring work qualifications. For the French case, we will also examine how the systems of examination and work placement, so often treated as opposites, in fact share common characteristics that distinguish them from other countries’ methods of preparation for work. We will then go on to explore the socio-historical background to the relationship between education and employment, in order to understand the genesis of France’s specific social mechanisms and to grasp the respective impact of national and transnational dynamics in contemporary trends in the link between higher education and jobs. To this end, this article argues that the mechanisms of professionalisation and matching — and the skills- and knowledge-based approaches associated with them — constitute in reality simply two facets of a single normative universe — for which we use the term “matching”, which is profoundly embedded in the French system of relations between education and employment. In the examination of the conditions under which students are prepared for the labour market, therefore, it highlights the reasons why the long work placement, lasting up to a year and entailing the same responsibilities as those of an ordinary employee, is a typically French phenomenon. And it shows that France’s current form of vocational qualification is as much a reconfiguration of its own institutional and normative context as the consequence of a ubiquitous imported neoliberal canon.

The sequence of arguments proposed requires a comparative analysis (see *Inset 1*). Two countries have been chosen here, England and Sweden, because of their different social traditions as identified by researchers whose focus was generally on the distinctions between social models and forms of capitalism and, more specifically, on education and career guidance (Verdier, 2010).

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<sup>6</sup> Today, the notion of professionalisation is therefore associated more with a skills-based approach, which itself reflects a government’s objective of adapting education to the needs of employers. Other notions (matching, correspondence), less commonly used since the 1980s, do more to express the other facet of the connection between education and jobs, which is the institutionalised guarantee of a job based on the university qualification achieved.

We examine the processes whereby students obtain professional qualifications in these countries, in order to cast a better and contrasting light on the French situation. In order to identify the national specificities of each system, we will begin by examining the mechanisms whereby students make the transition from education to employment in England and Sweden. To this end, an analysis of the majority forms of student experience in the country will be cross-referenced with an analysis of the way education is organised. In the next step, we will similarly describe how French students obtain professional qualifications. This distinct part will reveal both the variety and the commonalities in the types of education and methods of access to the labour market. In the third step, the aim will be to explain the singularity of the French situation. To this end, we will elucidate the sources of France's idealised conception of matching and clarify the confusions that lead to the neoliberal canon being blamed for the emergence of a system of relations between higher education and jobs which is, in fact, no more than the contemporary application of a long-standing social practice of matching.

### **Inset 1: methodology and field of investigation**

In the wake of a pioneering study on France and Germany (Maurice et al., 1982), numerous studies have analysed societal patterns in the transition from education to employment. Our analysis follows directly from this quest for a societal pattern through the study of the interactions between educational systems and labour market regulation. Nonetheless, it differs in ascribing an important role to the systems of actors, in this case to the experiences of students, and in undertaking a discussion of the relevant scale of analysis between the national and international contexts, following the example of numerous more recent comparative studies (Demazière et al., 2013). This research pursues a more in-depth exploration of this question in the sphere of higher education by comparing three countries — England, Sweden and France — with large-scale higher education systems, but different university histories and structures. Based on consultation of documents, a secondary analysis of quantitative surveys (in particular the Eurostudent III<sup>7</sup> and Reflex<sup>8</sup> surveys) and interviews with students, the aim of the research, in keeping with the work done by Cécile Van de Velde (2008) on young people, is to show the difference between the national higher education systems in terms of the forms of student experience and the modes of organisation of higher education.

With regard to student experience, some sixty semi-directive interviews were conducted with students within two sectors that in principle differ greatly in each of the three countries — the first a prestigious economics and management school, the second a history course within a “massification”

<sup>7</sup> The Eurostudent III study was carried out in 2005 with students of twenty-three European countries. It covers many dimensions of student experience, in particular the funding of their education.

<sup>8</sup> The Reflex survey, carried out in 2005 in fifteen countries, covers entry into employment and the acquisition of skills amongst graduates.

institution, so called because of its openness to students from working-class and more generally “non-traditional” backgrounds (ethnic minorities, people with disabilities, adults, etc.). The combination of national and infra-national scales (with a choice of contrasting courses) enables us to bring out the homogeneity within each country. The students were interviewed during the last two years of their course in order to cover the multiplicity of the systems they encounter during higher education and the gradual process of preparation for entry to the labour market. Within the six case studies — two per country — the challenge was to choose a sample with variety in sex, social background, and also “student experience” (Dubet, 1994), i.e. a student’s subjective perception of their studies. In terms of the organisation of higher education, as well as making a historical analysis of conceptions of universities and of forms of preparation for employment in the different countries, we also examine here the systems of access to employment within the framework of higher education, both at national level and within the case studies.

## **1. The conception of professional qualification under the English and Swedish systems of relations between education and employment**

Preparation for the labour market is analysed here through the institutional arrangements in higher education and the way those arrangements are appropriated by students in the course of their studies. Large-scale higher education systems are generally divided into different sectors, and there are inevitably various forms of professional qualification. Here, we look for the “hard core” of elements that characterises a country’s methods of preparing people for work. In this respect, this analysis links up with work on the models of public action in academic and career guidance (Verdier, 2010), models that can be fully understood through an analysis of the pathways followed by students until they join the labour force.

### *1.1. In England, higher education to develop student employability*

English students seek to acquire skills by drawing on sources well outside formal academic learning. All extracurricular experience helps them to develop their employability, i.e. to acquire a set of skills, knowledge and personal qualities that recruiters in England associate with higher education (Yorke, 2005) as a source of global individual transformation. For example, Brennan et al. (2009, p. 7) note that “the notion of ‘holistic development’ is part of an Anglo-Saxon conception of student experience which contrasts, for example, with the more professional or vocational traditions of other European countries”. In this respect, the concept of employability does not consist in developing skills specific to a career or a professional field, but rather in building up a set of crosscutting competences that make someone employable in most careers that entail management and expertise. Along the same lines, Jary et al. (2010, p. 87) highlight the fact that, whatever the institution or the speciality (with the exception perhaps of medicine and engineering), “for most university students, their involvement in their discipline does not consist in a process of ‘conversion’ into a sociologist, a historian or a mathematician. At the very least, it does not consist in acquiring a professional identity”. Studying a subject does not make one a professional in that discipline. To the contrary, university is a gateway to a variety of careers, in

which the graduate can with practice become a professional, sometimes in a field very different from their original subject (see [Inset 3](#)).

This quest for employability is consistent with the mode of transition to the labour market, in which the acquisition of specific professional skills through education has little utility in the eyes of either students or employers. In the Reflex survey, British students were among the fewest to have a work placement (31.7% compared with almost 83.9% in France)<sup>9</sup> and report one of the lowest total durations of degree-related work experience ([Allen and van der Velden, 2007](#)).<sup>10</sup> In England, work placements often last only a few weeks and their purpose is to make contact with a given professional milieu, with no goal of acquiring professional skills, as illustrated by the cases of the economics and management students interviewed (see [Inset 2](#)). Young people move directly from student status to worker status. The restricted role ascribed to university in the process of accessing employment is balanced by the importance of acquiring competences, in particular through formal and informal lifelong learning in employment ([Little and Arthur, 2010](#)). There is thus a transition between, on the one hand, the acquisition of knowledge and crosscutting skills during university education and, on the other hand, the acquisition of more specific skills in the world of work.

This principle of employability is embedded in the model of a liberal education that runs through the English university system ([Drèze and Debelle, 1968](#)). It promotes the disinterested pursuit of knowledge and is therefore in contradiction with the idea of professionalisation as now understood in France. The aim of university courses is to develop students' thinking skills and general knowledge, so that they will be able to respond effectively and innovatively to a variety of situations. From this perspective, strictly utilitarian knowledge has no place in the university. This is how things have long stood in England: to develop long-term student employability, it is important to impart knowledge, but also gradually to open up the student experience to other social activities. Preparation for a career is only meaningful within the context of a job.

### **Inset 2: Preparing for employment. The case of prestigious economics and management courses**

Business banking and management consultancy are the most common careers amongst the economics and management students interviewed, but the pathways that lead to them and the student experiences vary in the three case studies.

In the prestigious English university, most of the students want to develop their CVs to meet the presumed expectations of employers. To do this, they highlight their extracurricular activities (in particular student jobs and voluntary experience) in order to "bulk up their CV", as some respondents expressed it. In most cases moving into work after their first degree, the students have little experience of work placements during their courses: at best, a summer placement lasting eight to twelve weeks and, more commonly, a work

<sup>9</sup> Data not available for Sweden.

<sup>10</sup> Employment connected or unconnected with studies, work placement, volunteer work, experience abroad...

experience and observation placement, lasting one or two weeks, during the winter or spring vacation. For companies, this placement is an opportunity to identify promising students for recruitment and, for the student, to have some time to think about their career plans.

In the prestigious business school studied in Sweden, preparation for employment entails a connection between academic activities and professional activities. For example, one of the students interviewed had experienced every kind of overlap between study and work available in Sweden: one semester teaching mathematics and marketing (part-time unqualified work), one semester working in human resources consultancy (part-time qualified work), business creation for a year (part-time qualified work), a four-month work placement in marketing (full-time qualified work), two years managing a share portfolio for individuals (part-time qualified work), a summer work placement in a management consultancy firm (full-time qualified work). Few students had quite such a varied CV, but this particular case illustrates the diversity of the forms of connection between education and employment in Sweden, in particularly the preponderance of part-time qualified jobs, to develop professionalism gradually through practice.

In the elite business school studied in France, the work placement constitutes the primary interface connecting students to the world of work. There are at least three work placements during the course, generally lasting three to six months, enabling students to acquire the social skills and know-how specific to a profession, given the responsibilities involved in these hands-on roles. In the chosen case study, the dominant feature is the “gap year” in a company between the second and third years of university (between the Bachelors and Masters degrees). The following student’s situation is a good example of how this transition to employment is organised, with its sprinkling of work placements:

“I have done four work placements. Over fourteen months, I took only two weeks’ holiday. I began by going back to S., where I had already done a work placement the previous summer, a market survey on medical residences for people with disabilities and the elderly, a job that I found meaningful. [...] Then, for five and a half months, I did financial auditing at M., because I was told that it was an excellent postgraduate position, a new course, a new school. Because it teaches you rigour, if you don’t have it, and you learn to “suck it up” in terms of hours, because you are ready and willing to be exploited and, after all, recruiters generally like that. [...] Then I went to E. for four months to work on the relaunch of their network of stores, with the introduction of a new concept. I finished with two months in Houston at A., because I was selected to do management control, so though the job wasn’t fantastic, the travel was fun.”

Preparing for work here is about accumulating evidence of one’s expertise in a profession, but also evidence of readiness to accept the strictest organisational rules, especially in terms of working hours and conditions.

## 1.2. In Sweden, the interweaving of education and jobs, the keystone of bildning

The transition from higher education to employment in Sweden is a process of gradual individual construction. During their education, students acquire professional experience that can take two main forms: alternation between periods of study and periods of employment, and part-time work alongside study.<sup>11</sup> Programmes are organised semester by semester to allow students to shift back and forth between education and work. During their studies and particularly towards the end, students take up jobs that are increasingly qualified and related to their field of study. Moreover, at the end of their programmes, Swedish students frequently — much more so than in the other countries — continue to do the job they did, often part-time, while in education (Pettersson, 2007). This interweaving of study and employment gives students the chance to think about their future careers and to acquire professional experience during their education, as exemplified by the economics and management programme we investigated in Sweden (see Inset 2).

With such an approach, it would be hard to imagine that the significance of professional qualification would be restricted to skills alone. On the contrary, in Sweden it is embedded in the knowledge paradigm. Education qualifies people for work, not because it entails preparation for a job, but because the theoretical knowledge it provides enables them to be more effective on the labour market. As in the English case, it is more important to give students broad-based skills, because only they can guarantee long-term professional qualification. However, the mechanism for converting knowledge into skills is not the same as in England. Rather than the acquisition of thinking abilities or general knowledge, it is the application of academic knowledge to vocational practice that develops crosscutting skills. While the skills sought are not strictly professional, they primarily become valuable through their implementation in a working context. The very extensive interweaving of educational and professional activities is thus a way to combine the acquisition of knowledge with its practical application.

In fact, the Swedish higher education and research system was strongly influenced by the model of the Humboldtian university, in which the acquisition of knowledge through research lies at the heart of the ideal of professionalisation. In other words, “learning teaches”: not only does it provide a higher level of knowledge and broad-based skills, but it is also direct preparation for a job, since it is the acquisition of knowledge that enables people to be innovative in their professional fields (Drèze and DeBelle, 1968). The dominant Swedish ideal of *bildning* (Liedman, 1993) thus encompasses a global conception of education, which includes — but at the same time goes beyond — preparation for a specialist field. Through the acquisition of a unified and multidisciplinary corpus of knowledge, education provides training for a career, not by converting individuals into professionals, but by giving them the keys to improve their professional practice throughout their lives. This principle, which historically originates in the Humboldtian university model (Lane et al., 1981), is manifested in the last big reform of Swedish higher education in 1977, which favoured the acquisition of professional skills, “but not narrowly vocational in the sense that each course would be associated with a corresponding job. Instead, most of them should be aimed at a broad sector of the labour market” (Premfors and Ostergren, 1978, p. 58, our translation). So history programmes, in particular because they provide strong analytical skills, can lead to a variety of social positions (see Inset 3). It could be said that the Swedish educational model seeks to reconcile the quest for vocation and for professionalisation which, in the noble sense of the term, is perfectly in accord with the conception of work as an end in itself. This model

<sup>11</sup> End-of-course work placements also exist, but they are much less widespread than part-time jobs.



has probably never existed in its pure form, because of the demand for professionalisation that was already prevalent in the nineteenth century (Torstendahl, 1993). Nonetheless, Sweden still retains a system of professional qualifications that prioritises the acquisition of general knowledge, without excluding the pursuit of other, more specific skills.

### **Inset 3: Preparing for employment. The case of “massification” degree programmes in history**

The methods of transition from education to a job vary markedly for students studying history on so-called massification programmes.

In England, most of the respondents in the institution studied juggled education, often part-time, with personal commitments — in particular for older students — but also voluntary and professional commitments. The conception of learning was broad and the students we met were considering a variety of options: teaching, but also journalism, public administration, or work in insurance and banking. While work placement was not a very common practice, the university institution sought to include its students in the university community, notably in order to prepare them for employment. A skills development department called a Skills Zone offered foreign language learning, training in working methods or an introduction to professional fields. The Employability Team, a section dedicated to transition into work, also offered numerous services: help with finding work experience placements in companies (mentoring) and in the voluntary sector (volunteering), writing a CV, advice on starting a business, etc.<sup>12</sup> It is in this case study that the interviewees most often cited the decisive role of their institution in their transition to employment.

In Sweden, the history students interviewed, like the management students (Inset 2), combined education and work, either simultaneously or alternately, and were aiming for a variety of careers. One interviewee, after holding a variety of jobs up to the age of twenty-eight, was on a three-year nursing course. Realising that she did not want to continue down this path, she had joined a part-time course on “gender and history”, while still working as a part-time nurse. Another student began her studies at the age of 22, doing three semesters in history, before working for a year as a classroom assistant in a primary school. She then undertook a university programme on “cultures and society”. Another interviewee was a full-time student for five years, and then trained as a teacher on a day release course. There were no competitive examinations — in fact there is no national certificate to become a teacher in Sweden<sup>13</sup> — and work placements are relatively unusual on these programmes; students gradually build their careers by accumulating experience before and during higher education, because most of them ultimately

<sup>12</sup> This institutional support is even more systemic, going so far as to include aspects such as student well-being and managing personal finances.

<sup>13</sup> Moreover, work experience placements are not compulsory in all teacher training courses, although the interviewees who planned to become teachers had all, at one time or another, been in a job associated with education.

believe, as one or two commented, that their educational and professional choices should “come from deep inside”.<sup>14</sup>

In France, preparing history students for employment entails — at least until the first year of a Masters course — training them to pass the exam to enter the teaching profession,<sup>15</sup> so that they can join the corresponding academic course.<sup>16</sup> None of the students we met had undertaken a work placement. Instead, it was the examination — and the academic teacher training course that followed — which marked the entry into employment for these history students. Most of them would become teachers, sometimes by default, given the relative irreversibility expressed by one interviewee: “As soon as I say that I am in history-geography, people say ‘You want to become a history teacher?’ ” Most of the students we spoke to were fully aware of the mismatch between the number of teaching positions and the number of history students. However, there is no getting away from the matching principle orchestrated by the university institution, which — notably through the way programmes are organised — sees its primary role as preparing its students for the examination to enter the teaching profession. One female student, who had spent some time studying educational science before returning to a one-year Masters in history, took a jaundiced view of this exclusive focus on the examination: “I enjoyed educational science, because [...] it opened more doors, while in history, all the teachers say is: ‘Right, you need to prepare for the exam, the *Capès!*’ ”

## 2. In France, from the imperative of transition-to-work to the principle of pre-professionalisation

The systems of professional qualification described above are well illustrated by the terminology employed in England and Sweden for the process of access to employment. The English *transition* and the Swedish *etableringen* encompass different meanings. The term ‘transition’ suggests the idea of a relatively active attitude on the part of the student and of a moment, rather than a period of time, in which the shift from student to worker status takes place. In the Swedish case, *establishing* oneself on the labour market expresses more the idea of a long-term process of transition from education to employment. In France, the term employed is *insertion professionnelle* — transition-to-work. This expression suggests the idea of a transitory stage, an in-between state of uncertainty and sometimes ambiguous instability, before integration into the standard stable state of employment. However, it also suggests a certain passivity on the part of students, as if the process of integration fundamentally emanated from some outside force.

<sup>14</sup> Approximate translation of the Swedish expression “*Det maste födas inuti*”.

<sup>15</sup> CAPES (*certificat d’aptitude au professorat de l’enseignement du second degré*: certificate of aptitude for secondary school teaching), CAPLP (*certificat d’aptitude au professorat de lycée professionnel*: certificate of aptitude for vocational secondary teaching), *Agrégation* (university teaching diploma).

<sup>16</sup> IUFM (*instituts universitaires de formation des maîtres*: university institutes for teacher training) until 2013; now ESPE (*écoles supérieures du professorat et de l’éducation*: higher teaching and education schools).

## 2.1. “Professionalising” programmes as systems of transition-to-work

The singularity of the French case resides in the existence of a temporary period, between formal education and entry into work, which relates simultaneously to education and work: this is the period of transition-to-work. It is often considered that integration begins on exit from the educational system. However, in order to promote access to employment, “professionalising” programmes have been developed — preceding the degree — which prepare students for their entry into the labour market and mitigate the hazards of the process. In other words, transition-to-work has gradually extended to the educational system, becoming part of the actual framework of degree programmes and the award of a degree. In this way, French students have two main methods of preparing for employment, underpinned by two types of educational approach: vocational training programmes and the work placements associated with them;<sup>17</sup> civil service examinations and the academic professional programmes that follow them within the different civil service schools. Moreover, while the latter programmes are often considered to be outside the educational system, a cluster of factors suggest that the programmes taught to students who have successfully passed the civil service examinations, in particular in teaching,<sup>18</sup> are now increasingly similar to higher education. We are thinking, for example, of their recent *rapprochement* with the universities or the fact that, although these institutions are akin to lifelong learning, the students who pass the civil service exams are in fact almost always studying for a first degree.<sup>19</sup>

On the one hand, work placements are very widespread in France: almost 74% of students leaving higher education have undertaken a work placement in the course of their studies (Calmand et al., 2009). Work placements are far more widespread in France than in England and Sweden.<sup>20</sup> Above all, they are much longer and do not fulfil the same social function. In France, these work placements, most of which entail real responsibility (Pospel, 1989), can last up to a year, during which time the student is expected to do a job, sometimes with the same level of responsibility as an ordinary employee. Almost 43% of students have undertaken a work placement lasting more than three months. Finally, this system is generally institutionalised within the first degree curriculum, since in 2004 the work placement was compulsory for 71% of interns (Calmand et al., 2009). This phenomenon reaches its apogee in Masters level business schools, where 90% of graduates have undertaken a work placement in the course of their studies (Inset 2).<sup>21</sup>

<sup>17</sup> We do not discuss here the alternating study and workplace programmes that are rapidly developing in higher education, but their expansion only supports our case.

<sup>18</sup> Teachers, at all school levels, have to pass a national exam in order to teach. Once they have passed these exams, teachers in the state sector, who are the majority, acquire civil servant status.

<sup>19</sup> Given the youth of French students relative to the other European countries (Charles, 2012), courses in civil service schools for successful exam candidates are almost entirely restricted to first degree level. Moreover, now that the University has returned to the heart of the French higher education system, civil service schools increasingly cooperate with universities, the clearest illustration being the conversion of the IUFM into ESPE which, as integral components of the universities, now award Masters degrees. In addition, even the content of the programmes is becoming partially university-like, to the point that certain programmes, such as the Masters in the “teaching, education and training professions” at the ESPE, which combine teaching and professional practice, can hardly be differentiated from vocational university programmes. Finally, other practices further equate these civil service schools to higher education: most of the “civil servant-trainees” also have student status, and students at the ESPE and administrative schools are included in the ministerial statistics on student numbers.

<sup>20</sup> See above for England (Reflex Survey). No accurate and reliable data on work placements could be found for Sweden.

<sup>21</sup> In 73% of cases, graduates of business schools undertake at least one work placement lasting more than three months and, for 87% of them, this practice is compulsory.

On the other hand, the civil service examinations have historically constituted one of the primary outlets for higher education graduates in France (Audier, 1997). Symbolically, this system also occupies a central place on the labour market, since it provides access to civil servant status (Inset 3). The number of external recruitments into the state civil service fell from 58,733 in 2000 (all by examination) to 30,317 in 2009 (5.3% without examination).<sup>22</sup> Of these recruitments in 2009, 20,213 (i.e. two-thirds) were for Category A jobs, including more than 15,000 teaching jobs (half). This issue is particularly relevant for future teachers and those who have had a general university education. For example, graduates with a Bachelors (38%) and Masters (23%) degree are often to be found in civil service jobs three years after the end of their studies, as compared with only 5% of graduates of business and engineering schools (Ministère de la fonction publique, 2011).

Rather than a global expansion in these two systems of transition-to-work, what we see is a system of communicating vessels. As we have seen, entry by examination to the civil service has been steadily shrinking since the 2000s. Work placements and apprenticeships have been growing steadily over the same period. There are no comprehensive official data on the development of work placements, but the Economic, Social and Environmental Council recently estimated that the number had risen from around 600,000 in 2006 to 1.6 million in 2012.<sup>23</sup> For its part, the number of apprentices in higher education more than doubled between 2003 and 2011, reaching around 123,000 students in 2011, according to Ministry data.

## 2.2. Pre-professionalisation *incorporated into initial higher education and focused on professional skills*

As the number of places in the civil service examination diminishes, work placements and the private sector are growing in importance. The claim is that one system is gradually replacing the other, that there is a shift from a system that is “knowledge-based” to one that is “skills-based”. Yet these two approaches largely reflect a single conception of the transition from education to employment, a three-step sequence: unpaid study, period of transition-to-work, then access to employment (Van de Velde, 2008). Young people in France must now go through a process of integration, based in particular on work placements in conditions of full responsibility and on civil service examinations. The diversity of transition-to-work systems should not mask the relative unity of the French system of professional qualification, compared with the English and Swedish models. The work placement with full responsibility — and the vocational training of which it forms part — and the civil service examination — together with the academic vocational training to which it leads — share two characteristics that distinguish it from Sweden and England. 1) these systems operate right at the heart of the initial higher education programme (in particular via degree validation) though outside the university walls and 2) they aim to prepare the student for a specific job or a professional field, through the acquisition of specific know-how.

On one side, most higher education programmes make the work placement a compulsory part of the degree or, at least, structure academic timetables to make it possible to attend an optional work placement. Moreover, work placements — under the guise of fostering the acquisition of broad-based skills — mainly serve to develop professional skills in a specific job or, sometimes, in a wider professional field. The strong development — both recent and government

<sup>22</sup> External recruitment, by contrast with internal recruitment which takes place amongst employees who already have civil servant status, relates to the examinations (external and “third way”) which provide access to the civil service.

<sup>23</sup> Position paper by Jean-Baptiste Prévost on youth employment, available online: [http://www.lecese.fr/sites/default/files/pdf/Avis/2012/2012\\_16\\_emploi\\_jeunes.pdf](http://www.lecese.fr/sites/default/files/pdf/Avis/2012/2012_16_emploi_jeunes.pdf).

planned — of sandwich programmes, a system encountered little in the case studies, is probably one of the most powerful symbols, along with the expansion of work placements, of this renewed form of professionalisation.<sup>24</sup> The proliferation of references to vocational Bachelors and Masters degrees, though checked in 2013 by the Ministry of Higher Education, is also symptomatic of increased specialisation.

On the other side, vocational academic courses often follow on from a general university degree combined with success in a civil service examination. Although examinations, as recruitment procedures, seek to measure essentially academic qualities, many of them lead to vocational training combined with work placements, a combination that undoubtedly constitutes an academic system heavily infused with the pursuit of vocational skills. Higher education graduates seeking positions of responsibility (“Category A”) in the civil service almost always attend a civil service school, which prepares the student for a specific professional field. In this sense, the examination is not only a recruitment tool, but also a gateway to a period of professionalisation for future civil servants within the initial higher education system. It opens the way to higher education that includes work placements, intended to impart the professional skills needed for a specific career or, perhaps, for a wider professional field. Finally, the examinations are part of a continuum that begins with a programme that helps to prepare for them, and another programme, in a civil service school, which prepares the successful candidates professionally for their future careers.

Ultimately, the transition from a knowledge-based to a skills-based system is not so clear, since the French model of relations between education and employment has long been marked by the acquisition of skills, particularly vocational skills, even if that is not what they were called. For example, is it not the case that the vocational programmes that follow on from the civil service examinations consist simply in matching positions to academic qualifications through a national framework that guarantees access to a social position? Moreover, vocational programmes (along with their associated work placements) are not simply about a principle of employability, aiming to impart broad-based competences and to forge social skills. The large majority of higher education courses in France offer *pre-professionalisation*, in other words a process of vocational qualification that is institutionalised in initial higher education and focused primarily on professional skills. *Professionalisation*, in the current understanding of the term (Aguilhon, 2007), can be defined generically as the preparation for the performance of a job by the acquisition of specific know-how and social skills. As for the prefix *pre*, it refers to the presence of this form of vocational qualification within the French academic system itself,<sup>25</sup> not that vocational skills are necessarily acquired in the place of education (work placements are undertaken with the employer: company, civil service department or voluntary sector organisation), but because the *professionalisation* systems form part of the curriculum and are usually a condition for the award of a degree. By contrast with France, neither in Sweden nor in England do higher education programmes prepare their students so concretely to do the jobs that they should, in a normative approach to matching, in principle go on to occupy.

<sup>24</sup> Sandwich programmes in higher education, almost non-existent before the 1990s, now account for some 110,000 apprenticeship students and 50,000 students on professionalisation contracts, i.e. 7% of students registered in the different sectors of higher education. On several occasions in 2013, Geneviève Fioraso, Minister of Higher Education and Research, publicly stated the target of doubling the number of students in higher education sandwich programmes by 2020. For this purpose, Article 22 of the Act of 22 July 2013 states that any programme can be organised on an alternating study/work principle.

<sup>25</sup> In all three countries, the quest for vocational skills often prevails in lifelong learning courses, once the individual has entered the labour market.

### 3. The persistence and dissemination of an idealised conception of “matching”

The period of transition-to-work specific to France is largely internalised within higher education, since the curriculum includes a period of work experience or explicitly culminates in civil service examinations that themselves lead to vocational training combined with a sprinkling of work placements. Work placements in the private sector and professionalisation are often presented as a consequence of international influence. European governments have set themselves the goal of developing student employability, in the sense of qualifications that provide better preparation for the labour market, though it is up to individual countries to decide how to achieve this goal. On this basis, certain authors (e.g. [Laval et al., 2011](#)) see the underlying neoliberal canon and the marked emphasis on skills as an explanation for the trend towards more work placements and for the rhetorical shift around the notion of professionalisation highlighted by [Agulhon \(2007\)](#). However, the quest for better matching between higher education and jobs, justifying the acquisition of specific professional skills during the first degree, hardly features in European documents and is even seen as an iconoclastic idea in the English-speaking countries. Should not this French penchant for pre-professionalisation be seen more as reflecting the continuity of a French normative universe in which an idealised concept of matching is pre-eminent?

#### 3.1. How can a perfect match between education and jobs be achieved? The sources of the “adequationist” approach<sup>26</sup>

During the so-called *Trente Glorieuses*, the three post-war decades of economic growth, a social process led the quest, in France, for a more direct connection between education and the economy and, more specifically, the pursuit of a match between educational flows and the skills required in the labour market. It was in and through the planning conducted by the Economic Advisory Committee in the 1960s and 1970s that this attempt to match education with employment took place and the notion of training became the foundation of professional qualification:

“Indeed, this was the framework within which the classifications of educational level were formed, establishing a correspondence between two hierarchical distributions, education on the one hand, and employment on the other. The reasoning that governed this equation was founded on the goal of establishing a norm rather than projecting the existing order. In fact, the categories so formed were not the result of observation, the distribution of the working population across professions according to its qualifications at a given moment, but of the desire to establish relations between education, training and the economy. More specifically, this classification was founded on the idea of the “professional capacities” that education should impart and not on notions relating to educational curriculum and content” ([Tanguy, 2002](#), p. 705).

The relational correspondences between education and employment gradually came to dominate public policies and individual behaviours. In a way, matching degrees to jobs shifted from being a national target to being an ideal sought by each individual, increasingly justified by an ever-growing risk of unemployment. This is how educational qualifications came to be “endowed with a universal and relatively timeless value” ([Bourdieu and Boltanski, 1975](#), p. 98). Thus,

<sup>26</sup> Imported from the French, the word “adequationist” does not mean “adequate” in the sense of “good enough” but something that is a perfect fit, here between a study programme (level and field) and a given job.

the relation between two quantitative entities — degree courses on the one hand, jobs on the other — which justifies the professionalisation of students, came to be retranslated into a vision of individual matching (Vincens, 2005) through the quest for a strict correspondence between “qualifications” and “positions”.

Ultimately, the pursuit of student professionalisation, in particular by governments, and the quest for qualitative matching, simply represent two facets of this “adequationist” approach: at the level of the Nation, establishing equivalence between higher education programmes and jobs, i.e. matching education to employment needs; at the level of individuals, guaranteeing equivalence between qualifications and jobs, i.e. matching positions to the qualifications awarded. These two approaches, quantitative and qualitative, in reality combine within a single “adequationist” conception of the relation between education and employment. On the one hand, the expansion of professional work placements and courses reflects the maintenance of the national goal of matching training to employment. On the other hand, examinations provide access to a social position for individuals who possess the relevant academic qualification. Examinations (and the academic vocational courses that follow them) and work placements with responsibility (within vocational education programmes) thus reflect the quest to establish an equivalence between training and jobs that continues to be characteristic of France.

This matching-centred approach is therefore the outcome of long-term social construction. As Guy Brucy has pointed out, the relations between the world of education and the world of production have fluctuated, with a period from 1880 to 1920 during which “though there was no talk of matching, there was nevertheless a real political will to build a decentralised educational system closely aligned with the needs of employers” (Brucy, 2005, p. 27), followed by a period of “backlash” against this quest for correspondence. This “adequationist” approach, fluctuating but persistent in recent history, in fact has its origin in the traditional model of French higher education. Practical training and the quest for social utility take precedence over the pursuit of truth and learning for its own sake. In France, this model has developed through specialist elite higher education institutions, the *grandes écoles*, to the detriment of the universities. According to Jacques Drèze and Jean Debelle, the strong sociopolitical bent of the university and of education in general in France dates back to Napoleon: “A state public service, the imperial university was ideologically subjugated to those in power and was assigned a general function of ‘preserving social order’ by disseminating a common doctrine [...] through an organised corps of teachers [...] who provided an education that was primarily vocational” (Drèze and Debelle, 1968, pp. 87-88).

### *3.2. The private sector, today the main beneficiary of pre-professionalisation, offers no institutionalised guarantee of social positions*

Why then, since pre-professionalisation is a result of the persistence of the adequationist approach, is professionalisation through work placements sometimes seen as the consequence of a “neoliberal shift”? After all, we have established that examinations and work placements reflect exactly the same principle of transition-to-work, i.e. pre-professionalisation in the sense of the acquisition during education of know-how and social skills specific to a particular job, or possibly a broader professional field. In France, therefore, the aim is not really to facilitate employability through a student experience that extends well beyond formal education (as in England). Nor is the objective to impart knowledge, as a source of transition-to-work, while allowing two-way traffic between education and employment (as in Sweden). The aim of higher education in France is much more to impart to students, as part of their degree programme, skills that are essentially vocational. This system of pre-professionalisation, which exploits education in the interests of

employers, is not new in France. It even represents one of the most persistent and stable factors in the relation between education and employment in France (see above).

Indeed, the most profound change is not so much to be found in the exploitation of higher education in the interests of employment, as in the labour market (public or private) to which higher education is subordinate. Formerly highly dependent on the needs of the state, the university responded to outside requirements while imposing its own criteria for the selection of future civil servants, especially in secondary education. Nowadays, graduates mostly go to work in the private sector (Calmand et al., 2009). The needs that higher education has to meet are no longer primarily those of the state, whereby graduates provide a pool from which the Nation's managers are drawn, but those of employers in general, with private employers foremost among them. The reason why this "subordination" of higher education to the labour market is under fire today is because the beneficiary has changed, especially as the private sector uses this process of pre-professionalisation to extend the period during which employees can be hired on terms that give them no long-term job security.

The current exploitation of higher education in the interests of private employers is thus partially a survival of the past, when the state was the main recruiter of educational elites. Nevertheless, the change of beneficiary from the public to the private sector has had an impact on the higher education system. Universities have been deprived of the prerogative of setting their own requirements with regard to the match between education and employment. To a certain degree, this change has helped "to transform the pedagogical relationship itself, in other words the content of the instruction and the methods that should govern its transmission" (Laval et al., 2011, p. 217). Finally, graduates lose one advantage of the matching of qualifications and jobs when recruitment and the recognition of qualifications are negotiated on a competitive labour market. By means of examinations and vocational academic courses, the state could offer "an institutionalised guarantee of a place in the technical and social division of labour" (Laval et al., 2011, p. 94). This protective dimension of academic qualifications is no longer applicable in the private sector, although students sometimes find their first job in the company where they did their work placement.

### 3.3. *The French misunderstanding of the goal of the imported term "employability"*

Apart from the change in the beneficiary of professionalisation/matching processes, there is a second reason for the mistake regarding the supposed influence of marketisation: the ambiguity of the imported term "employability" as understood in France (Lefresne, 1999). It is a source of confusion that can be removed by looking at the situation of England. In France, there is a readiness to ascribe to the English-speaking countries a wish to subordinate higher education to the labour market. After all, don't they make students pay for their studies, thereby turning education into a commodity? So it is often said that France is now committed to a principle of *employabilité*, defined not generically but in the sense of the English employability (see *inter alia* Laval et al., 2011) which, it should be recalled, refers to the acquisition of skills that are relevant to most professional fields (Yorke, 2005). However, the invariable tendency in France is to develop professional skills that target a limited professional sphere, as indeed is suggested by Christian Laval and his co-authors when they condemn the pursuit of employability in vocational degrees:

"What should we think of a 'professional business degree with a major in retail and minor in department management', or else a 'degree in customer advice on bank insurance'? It is



as if specific and meticulous job descriptions were now supposed to govern the organisation of higher education on the grounds of ‘employability’ ” (Laval et al., 2011, p. 98).

The French system places little value on the traditional conception of employability. In fact, vocational higher education programmes are increasingly characterised by a proliferation of ever more targeted modules in Bachelors and Masters degree curricula and by the adaptation of education to a specific job or a limited professional field.

It should be recalled that England, by contrast, has traditionally adopted a genuine principle of employability, by fostering an approach that combines the acquisition of knowledge in formal education with broader student experience (voluntary activities, student jobs, etc.). True, higher education programmes in England seek to develop student skills, but the curriculum takes very little account of the immediate professional needs of employers, partly to maintain the distinction from the vocational training system (Moncel, 2012). Conversely, in France, higher education programmes increasingly reflect the specific requirements of employers. Hence the apparent paradox of an English model that prioritises general education and a French model that increasingly pursues specialisation. In reality it is not because students contribute to the cost of their education that there is a tendency for education to be geared to the labour market. The fact that higher education operates as a market in England (Brown and Carasso, 2013) has nothing to do with any hypothetical “subordination” to the market economy, and implies no close link between higher education and the labour market. English students do not look for higher education programmes that prepare them for a job, and conversely higher education institutions do not particularly seek to develop such programmes. In reality, it is the French situation that perfectly illustrates the matching of higher education to the specific needs of employers.

France’s “adequationist” system only works if it is mediated by a mechanism of student pre-professionalisation. This phenomenon, specific to the French situation, is often condemned as a consequence of the imposition of a neoliberal canon and a skills-based system. If it is true that the experience of French youth is marked by a process of transition-to-work, mediated by systems of professionalisation that seek to impart skills that can be immediately applied in a working context, is this phenomenon primarily a consequence of neoliberal influence? It would appear that professionalisation programmes did not wait for the recent shift towards liberalism, as evidenced by France’s civil service school tradition. Moreover, if this neoliberal canon were the main explanation for the development of the skills-based approach, the French system would explicitly and genuinely encourage the acquisition of broad-based skills, which is hardly the case — except in lipservice — in the implementation of professional work placements and courses. It would seem more reasonable to conclude that the logic of pre-professionalisation is, in fact, simply a contemporary variant on France’s matching-centred model, though channelled through the prism of a new social context marked by the growing difficulty that a proportion of graduates experience in finding a job that corresponds to their degree.

#### *3.4. Is France the precursor of a trend that is spreading across Europe?*

If the phenomenon of pre-professionalisation was not imported from the English-speaking world, perhaps it is France that is a pioneer in the use of work placements to teach professional skills, a trend now becoming increasingly prevalent in England. As in France, there are as yet no reliable statistics in England on ‘work placements’. Nevertheless, notably following the rapid massification of higher education in the first two decades of this century (Universities UK, 2013, p. 7), which brought student numbers up to the levels of France and Sweden, graduates in England

have increasingly experienced problems in transition-to-work. As a result, in recent years, the historical model of employability, which remains strong in England, has been evolving towards greater professionalisation in higher education (Mayhew et al., 2004), a change that would seem to be gathering pace today (Allen et al., 2013). As Ken Roberts comments (2007, p. 195): “the expansion in higher education is not offering more young English people an experience worthy of Oxbridge”, given the large-scale influx of non-traditional students.<sup>27</sup>

As a result, the way in which students understand this principle of employability in England has varied considerably between universities since the 1990s (Ainley, 1994), and even more so today. Patrick Ainley showed that, equally in an institution serving a local area and in a high-level research university, students shared the experience of developing their cognitive and social faculties more than their specifically vocational skills. However, he also suggested that the research university students learned more from their academic experience, their social background having endowed them with useful capital to make more of their education. A comparative analysis of our case studies only confirms the effect of a diversity of educational experiences in improving employability. In the so-called massification institution, the age of the students interviewed was a decisive factor in the variety of learning styles. The older students, because of their working experience, already had strong crosscutting skills, and because of that became more employable through formal education. Conversely, the younger students were looking for generic skills through a multiform academic experience, consisting of formal education but also an informal curriculum and extracurricular activities. Nevertheless, by contrast with the economics and management students interviewed in the prestigious institution, who were beneficiaries of an environment entirely allotted to offering an enhanced student experience, the heterogeneous membership of the so-called “massification” institution enjoyed a very wide range of activities, but with less of a focus on this informal learning. In addition to — or rather superimposed on — these inequalities between institutions, there are social, gender and ethnocultural inequalities (Allen et al., 2013).

Like most Scandinavian countries, which suffer fewer problems of transition-to-work and downward social mobility (Barone and Ortiz, 2011), Sweden seems only marginally affected by this phenomenon, since university expansion has been accompanied by the creation of large numbers of high-level jobs and the university system remains broadly uniform (Kim, 2004). However, future European comparative surveys will need to investigate the recent expansion of this component of the transition-to-work process, the long work placement, where France leads the field and which could spread within Europe.

#### 4. Conclusion

The comparative analysis cast light on the conceptions of professional qualification at work in higher education in England (employability), in Sweden (*bildning*) and in France (*pré-professionnalisation*). In England, employability depends above all on crosscutting skills, since on the labour market students are expected to demonstrate their ability to construct their own qualifications. In Sweden, higher education entails individualised pathways that combine learning with multiple professional experiences, and connects general education to the acquisition of professional skills that provide openings to a wide range of jobs. In France, transition-to-work is part of a process of acquiring professional skills that is embedded within initial higher education programmes themselves. The ideal types have multiple variants in each of the countries and, as

<sup>27</sup> “Oxbridge” is a fusion of the names of Britain’s two most prestigious universities, Oxford and Cambridge.

with any nationwide generalisation, this one needs to be fine-tuned through further work. Nevertheless, these conclusions have cast light on the existence of a method of preparation for entry to the labour market in France which, far from being attributable to the influence of the neoliberal canon, has its origins in a legacy of “adequationist” thinking which, from Napoleon to modern planning, highlights the French conception of the “State as engineer” (Desrosières, 2003). Just as the recent increase in tuition fees in certain public *grandes écoles* does not challenge a French student funding model characterised by differential education costs based on parental income (Charles, 2014), the proliferation of work placements in the last ten years represents no more than the reproduction of a well-established French relationship between education and employment.

The findings of this research also show the utility of a multilevel comparative analysis, from the infra- to the trans-national scale. International trends cannot be the only factors that explain the evolution of the French model. They merely represent a backdrop against which social mechanisms play out, including mechanisms of reproduction specific to France. While the national framework is gradually yielding centrality, in particular to international frameworks, the examination of transnational phenomena perhaps poses the risk — if confined to an analysis of the French case alone — of being too ready to assume that the consequences identified are of the same nature from one country to another. One partial solution, therefore, would probably be to conduct comparative exercises in which several scales are interlinked (Demazière et al., 2013).

In view of this comparative analysis, the standard critical approach to professionalisation is worth qualifying. If we return to the two facets of the “adequationist” approach — on the one hand, quantitative matching, which justifies professionalisation and is desired by governments, and on the other hand, qualitative, protective matching, as advocated by workers — the advocates of the two approaches are divided between those who support professionalisation in order to adapt education to jobs, and those who want jobs to match the qualifications awarded by the academic institutions. However, promoting one of the two dimensions means reinforcing the other, and these two mechanisms help to maintain the “adequationist” norm: for education to meet employment needs, it must provide specific professional skills; and if one takes the view that a qualification should lead to a job, then the qualification must guarantee the individual’s capacity to do the job in question, in particular through the acquisition of professional skills. The two approaches thus form part of a single “dream” (Gensbittel, 1996), a single normative universe that constitutes the particularity of the French model. Arguing that jobs should match the qualifications actually awarded reinforces France’s “adequationist” principle, while forcing the recognition that individuals receive less protection as the private sector recruits a growing proportion of higher education graduates. It is then easy to scapegoat professionalisation, and its supposed cause, neoliberalism, when it is the adequationist approach as a whole that should be at the heart of the debates. This is the source of the paradox of a connection between education and employment in France that fuels dreams of protection and equality, when the defence of that protective equality indirectly promotes the development of professionalisation and therefore simply repeats the mechanisms that generate social inequalities in access to employment.

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