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► **To cite this version:**

Séverine Louvel. A Place for Humanities Graduates on the Labour Market in the so-called Knowledge Society: The French Case. *Higher Education in Europe*, 2007, 32 (4), pp.291-304. halshs-00348188

HAL Id: halshs-00348188

<https://shs.hal.science/halshs-00348188>

Submitted on 18 Dec 2008

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To cite this Article: Louvel, Séverine (2007) "A Place for Humanities Graduates on the Labour Market in the so-called Knowledge Society: The French Case", *Higher Education in Europe*, 32:4, pp. 291-304.

A Place for Humanities Graduates on the Labour Market in the so-called Knowledge Society: The French Case¹

SEVERINE LOUVEL

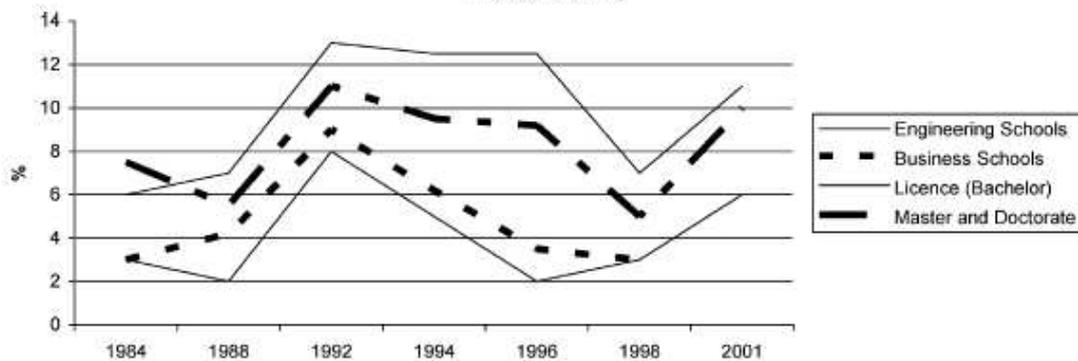
The emergence of the knowledge society and the development of knowledge-intensive employment functions do not seem to improve dramatically the situation of humanities graduates on national labour markets. This paper gives an overview of the employment situation of French humanities graduates and summarizes recent attempts to improve it. A description of how the employment for humanities graduates has developed in the course of the last decade is followed by an analysis of two complementary governmental initiatives: the development of Higher Vocational Education degrees and the professionalization of all curricula. The paper concludes with three propositions based on personal teaching experiences and a broader analysis of the French higher education system.

Introduction

Historically, European universities have been humanities-led. Higher education in the humanities has, in a certain way, been the ground for European cultures and civilizations. During the last century, the development of industrial economies has challenged the predominance of humanities within universities. Sciences, technology related and vocational subjects have become increasingly important in higher education systems. Graduates from these fields have also been considered as the leading graduates having the skills needed to create economic and social values for the common good. Even today's emergence of the knowledge society does not seem to improve dramatically the situation of humanities graduates on the national labour markets. "Humanists" broadly refer here not only to the traditional humanities, but also to the wider concept of social and human sciences that embrace literature, linguistics, philosophy, history, cultural studies, sociology, psychology, anthropology and ethnology. Competitiveness in the world of business obviously depends on innovation in marketing, communication and organization, which are functions in which humanities graduates can be experts. The business world and public administrations may also appreciate the humanities competencies when it comes to interpretative narrativity, imagery and reflection. However, and perhaps paradoxically, humanities graduates still face major difficulties to find employment on the labour market, and to convince potential employers that their knowledge is a business-relevant one. There are numerous international debates on these issues, which will be addressed in the following sections.

¹ This paper is based on a presentation made at an international conference on "Humanists on the Labour Market in the Knowledge Society", 28 February 2005 at the University of Copenhagen, organized by the Danish Cultural Institute.

FIGURE 1. UNEMPLOYMENT RATES THREE YEARS AFTER GRADUATING (PERCENTAGE VS. YEAR OF GRADUATION)



Source: CEREQ (2004).

Employment Prospects for French Humanities Graduates over the Last Decade

In France, the Study and Research Centre on Qualifications (CEREQ) collects data on graduate destinations two or three years after leaving the education system². Although CEREQ's studies provide rich statistical evidence on many aspects of graduate destinations, there is still the need for a general overview of the evolution of employment and unemployment for humanities graduates. Nevertheless, CEREQ's studies allow for interesting comparisons between the professional situation of humanities graduates and graduates of other programmes³.

The Higher the Academic Degree, the Better the Employment Conditions

Higher education degrees protect graduates from precariousness on the labour market. During the last two decades, this general conclusion has applied to all curricula: since 1988, the unemployment rate of 'licence' graduates has constantly remained above the unemployment rate of Master's and PhD graduates (Figure 1).

Three years after leaving the higher education system, unemployment rates are decreasing and employment conditions (for example, median monthly wages) are improving (Tables 1 and 2).

Structurally, this negative relation between unemployment and higher education degrees can be explained as follows: All employment sectors have shown an increasing need for managers (French "cadres") and for intermediate professions. Employment in upper positions increased substantially by forty-six percent between 1987 and 1999, whereas total employment was only up by seven percent. Increases in upper positions varied widely by profession for the under-thirty age group. They were considerable for engineers (> ninety-seven percent), teachers and researchers (> sixty percent), and commercial and management upper positions (> forty-nine percent) (Martinelli and Vergnies, 1999). The evolution of the employment structure has thus become favourable to Master's graduates over recent decades. As a consequence, the simultaneous increase of higher education graduates has not led to corresponding unemployment rates.

² The surveys called "Generation 1998" and "Generation 2001" were respectively carried out in 2001 and 2004. They analyse the professional situation of students who respectively left the education system in 1998 and 2001 (CEREQ, 2001, 2004).

³ Interested readers will find detailed data on specific topics in CEREQ's publications and databases at www.cereq.fr.

TABLE 1. PROFESSIONAL SITUATION IN 1999 OF GRADUATES (YEAR OF GRADUATION: 1996)

	Unemployment rate	Part-time jobs	Median monthly wage of those with real jobs (€)
PhD			
Law and Economics	5%	9%	2,130
Humanities	6%	14%	1,830
Exact Sciences	5%	18%	1,900
Life Sciences	10%	34%	1,830
All Disciplines	7%	22%	1,875
Master's			
Law and Economics	8%	21%	1,525
Management	8%	10%	1,830
Humanities	10%	27%	1,525
All Disciplines	8%	18%	1,630
Licence			
Law and Economics	13%	23%	1,200
Management	8%	13%	1,525
Humanities	14%	37%	1,310
All Disciplines	13%	30%	1,310

Source: Martinelli and Vergnies (1999).

Sharpened Difficulties for Humanities Graduates

Even if the economy and the nature of work have changed to accommodate the increasing number of graduates, humanities graduates experience worse employment conditions than graduates from other disciplines, and fare particularly poorly in terms of job stability and median wages in comparison with other graduates (1,300 euros versus 1,600 euros) (Table 3).

When looked at in further detail, the employment conditions are worse among humanities graduates than among other university graduates, for licence and Master's degrees (see Tables 1 and 2). It is noteworthy that the employment conditions of law and economics graduates are comparable to those of graduates from the exact sciences.

Finally, a diploma is not necessarily the best asset for humanists to avoid unemployment. For humanists who left the higher education system in 1999, a high level diploma (Master's and PhD) had a good protective effect on the risk of unemployment (Table 1). But the recent situation is reversed, so that Master's or PhD holders face higher unemployment rates than licence or *maîtrise* graduates (11 percent versus 8 percent, Table 2). Furthermore, the unemployment rate of PhD holders is slightly above the unemployment rate of other university graduates in the humanities (17 percent versus 16 percent, Table 3). However, Master's and PhD holders have better employment conditions than licence graduates for items such as job security and wages.

TABLE 2. PROFESSIONAL SITUATION IN 2001 OF LICENCE, MASTER'S AND PhD HOLDERS (YEAR OF GRADUATION: 1998)

	Unemployment rate	Part-time jobs	Median monthly wage of those with real jobs (€)
Master's or PhD			
Exact and Life Sciences	5 %	16%	1,899
Law and Economics	7 %	25%	1,707
Humanities	11%	35%	1,326
Licence or <i>Maîtrise</i>			
Exact and Life Sciences	6%	27%	1,411
Law and Economics	7%	27%	1,267
Humanities	8%	40%	1,156

Source: CEREQ (2001).

TABLE 3. PROFESSIONAL SITUATION IN 2004 OF GRADUATES (YEAR OF GRADUATION: 2001)

	Unemployment rate	Part-time jobs	Median monthly wage of those with real jobs (€)
All university graduates (except PhD holders)			
Law and Economics	11 %	25 %	1,600
Humanities	16 %	41 %	1,300
Exact and Life Sciences	13 %	25 %	1,620
PhD holders			
Law and Economics	11%	24%	
Humanities	17%	22%	
Engineering Sciences	6%	13%	

Source: Giret, Molinari-Perrier and Moullet (2006).

An Increasing Need to Diversify Employment Sectors?

In France, public employment has been a preferential destination for humanities graduates during the last two decades (Table 4).

The predominance of public employment (including teaching positions) explains why the median wages remain lower for humanities curricula. At present, the majority of humanities graduates still find employment in the public sector (Tables 5 and 6), often as teachers (Table 6).

TABLE 4. PUBLIC EMPLOYMENT IN 1983 AMONG HUMANITIES GRADUATES WHO OBTAINED THEIR "LICENCE" AND "MAÎTRISE" DEGREE IN 1978

	Public employment
Literature	83 %
Languages	75 %
Applied Languages	44 %
History	81 %
Geography	67 %
Philosophy	64 %
Sociology	73 %
Psychology	55 %

Source: Charlot (1987).

TABLE 5. PUBLIC EMPLOYMENT IN 1997 AMONG GRADUATES (YEAR OF GRADUATION: 1994)

	Public employment
PhD	
Humanities	77%
All Disciplines	65%
Master's	
Sciences	30%
Law and Economics	26%
Humanities	63%
Licence	
Sciences	38%
Law and Economics	32%
Humanities	63%

Source: Martinelli, Sigot and Vergnies (1997).

TABLE 6. PUBLIC EMPLOYMENT AND EMPLOYMENT SECTORS IN 2001 AMONG GRADUATES (YEAR OF GRADUATION: 1998)

	Public employment	Education (mostly public employment)	Public administration
Master's and PhD			
Exact and Life Sciences	23%	15 %	3 %
Law and Economics	28%	9 %	22 %
Humanities	50%	35 %	11 %
Licence or <i>Maîtrise</i>			
Exact and Life Sciences	27%	18 %	9 %
Law and Economics	30%	14 %	19 %
Humanities	51%	46 %	10 %

Source: CEREQ (2001).

However, humanists have gradually diversified their employment destinations since the mid-nineties. Their public employment rate decreased by more than 10 percent from 63 percent in 1997 (licence and Master's graduates who graduated in 1994; Table 5) to 50 percent (licence or *maîtrise* graduates, Master's or PhD graduates who graduated in 1998, Table 6; and all university graduates except PhD holders who graduated in 2001, Table 7). The public employment rate among PhD holders did not fall significantly between 1997 (77 percent, Table 5) and 2004 (74 percent, Table 7). In the coming decade, the number of positions in the public sector should increase rather slowly (Martinelli and Vergnies, 1999). Humanities graduates, more than graduates from other disciplines, will thus need to diversify their employment sectors in order to gain better employment conditions (or to preserve at least their current employment conditions).

TABLE 7. PUBLIC EMPLOYMENT IN 2004 AMONG UNIVERSITY GRADUATES (YEAR OF GRADUATION: 2001)

	Public employment
All university graduates (except PhD holders)	
Law and Economics	25%
Humanities	51%
Exact and Life Sciences	26%
PhD holders	
Law and Economics	69%
Humanities	74%
Engineering Sciences	49%

Source: Giret *et al.* (2006).

TABLE 8. PERCENTAGE OF TEACHERS (IN PERMANENT AND TEMPORARY POSITIONS) IN 1981 AMONG HUMANITIES GRADUATES WHO OBTAINED THEIR "LICENCE" AND "MAÎTRISE" DEGREE IN 1978

	Teaching positions
Maîtrise	
Literature	70 %
Languages	53 %
History and Geography	54 %
Psychology	17 %
Licence	
Literature	50 %
Languages	61 %
History and Geography	30 %
Psychology	20 %

Source: Charlot (1987).

The curricula traditionally have a major impact on the professional orientation of humanities graduates (Table 8) and on the opportunities for diversification of their employment destinations.

Curricula such as literature and languages are mainly leading to teaching positions in the public sector; other programmes lead to diversified positions in the public sector (history) or in the public and the private sectors (philosophy, geography, sociology, psychology). Whatever their specific subjects, humanities graduates currently encounter two major difficulties in diversifying their employers. First, humanities graduates with intermediate degrees (licence and maîtrise⁴ degrees) are, more than other graduates, often overqualified for their jobs (for example, secretarial occupations, health and education related occupations, administrative and commercial occupations) (Giret, Moullet and Thomas, 2002). Second, when applying to upper positions in the private sector (for example, in the areas of administration, communication, law, human resources), humanities graduates with intermediate and upper degrees (maîtrise, Master's and PhD) have to compete with graduates from other disciplines (management, law and economics) and business schools, who may be better prepared for these jobs.

Universities are only one part of the French higher education system⁵ and non-university structures grant prestigious degrees, which are highly valuable on the private labour market.

There are two major structures standing alongside universities: public or private graduate schools, granting engineering or business and management degrees; and Grandes Ecoles (mainly for science, but also for art and business students), which can be compared to the very best foreign universities.

Two ongoing transformations aim at helping all graduates to improve their professional opportunities on the private labour market. They may have a significant impact on humanists' early careers. The

⁴ The maîtrise degree is a former degree that was delivered four years after entering the higher education system. It was abolished with the implementation of the Bologna Process in 2002.

⁵ University students only make up three quarters of the total number of higher education students. This bipartition makes it difficult to integrate the French system of higher education into international comparisons.

most institutionalized one deals with the development of professional curricula. The second one may be less visible, but is as crucial. It is related to the professionalization of all curricula.

Setting Up Professional Channels for Humanities Graduates?

Higher Vocational Education Degrees in France: Increasing the Employment Opportunities for Humanists

Today, there are more higher vocational education degrees in France than in many other countries (Table 9).

For Dubois (2003), this French peculiarity is the fruit of forty years in which the French governments set up new degrees without abolishing the existing ones. New educational programs bridging the gap between licence or Master's graduates and the private sector have mainly been created at two levels. In 2002, the implementation of the Bologna Reform in France (the so-called "LMD reform" or Licence/Master's/Doctorat) has slightly modified this organization. It has mainly abolished all *maitrise* degrees (becoming the first year of Master's degrees).

After graduating from the licence degree, students have the choice between a professional track (professional Master's) and a research track (research Master's).

Since 1999, they have been able to graduate from a professionally-oriented licence diploma ("Licence professionnelle").

Doctoral programs aiming at promoting the recruitment of PhD holders in the private sector were created in the eighties. In 1981, the French Government created a contract called CIFRE ("convention industrielle de formation par la recherche" or Industrial Agreement for Training through Research), by which a company hires a PhD Student for three years and receives some funds from the French government.

Over the past fifteen years, doctoral students in the humanities have benefited from CIFRE agreements, from which they were previously excluded.

Dubois (2003) characterizes the vocational degrees (with the exception of doctoral programs) in four major features (Dubois, 2003) differentiating them from the general degrees in French higher education⁶. This specific design may improve the employability of humanities graduates.

TABLE 9. HIGHER VOCATIONAL EDUCATION DEGREES IN FRANCE

First cycle	DUT (University Technological Diploma) DEUST (Diploma in Technological University Studies)
Secondary cycle	licence professionnelle (professional licence) licence IUP (professional university institutes) <i>maitrise</i> IUP (becoming the first year of Master after the LMD reform).
Third cycle	Professional Master, DRT (Diploma in Higher Specialized Studies)
Doctoral studies	CIFRE (Industrial Agreement of Training Through Research)

Source: adapted from Dubois (2003).

Curricula Designed in Relation to Labour Market Issues

The vocational degree contents are devised in relation to the labour market evolution and to the upper skills asked by firms. As a consequence, there is a *numerus clausus* to enter the vocational degrees. The access to job-oriented curricula is restricted in respect to the employment perspectives in a particular economic sector. Potential students must generally complete dossiers to be admitted. There

⁶ General and vocational degrees have a common point: the central state plays a central role in their elaboration. The Ministry of Higher Education defines the global framework of studies (their rhythm, the structure of their contents), and university degrees; universities then fulfill this pre-defined framework by proposing courses, assessment procedures, orientation conditions at the end of each semester. Finally, the Ministry validates these propositions with or without modifications. As a consequence, the contents of each discipline and the organization of courses may greatly differ from one university to another, even in the same geographical area (Thélot, 1998).

are no selection procedures for general curricula, i.e. any student holding the French baccalauréat can register at any university in the subject of their choice. The absence of selection has secured the massification and democratization of higher education for the last forty years, but it raises acute problems. In fact, the number of drop-outs after the first year of university studies is high, as many students choose a curriculum their baccalauréat has not prepared them for. A high number of students from general curricula also leave the higher education system without graduating. Giving these students “a second chance” has thus become a major issue for universities. As humanists are overrepresented among these students⁷, they are particularly concerned with the new orientation opportunities vocational degrees offer.

Pedagogical Innovations

The organization of vocational studies greatly differs from that of general curricula. A common feature to job-oriented curricula is their pluridisciplinarity, each of them associating several disciplines to produce the abilities necessary to perform a particular job. The gap between general and vocational curricula is particularly high in the humanities. The pedagogy is often diversified and based on learning by doing methods. Case studies, company games, problem solving, simulation software, as well as collective projects help the students learn social relations at work. Finally, each student has to complete an internship, the minimum duration depending on the degree.

Moreover, some job-oriented curricula are organized according to the apprenticeship system, in which students have a job contract with a firm. Furthermore, the state allocation by student is higher in professional curricula and firms can bring additional resources. Job-oriented curricula thus benefit from comfortable human and financial resources to implement their pedagogical innovations.

Partnership between the Academia and the Business World

Economic partners participate in discussions taking place at the national level when a new degree is set up. Above all, they play a crucial role at the local level. They are associated with all the jury (for admission, for examinations, for evaluation) and all forms of teaching. The law states, for example, the percentage of teaching hours to be given by professionals.

The partnership between teachers and potential employers has sometimes failed to fulfil expectations. This conclusion particularly emerges from the detailed studies that have been carried out on the professional licences (Maillard and Véneau, 2003). These authors show that the creation of the professional licences⁸ was often initiated by teachers who already had contacts with firms and who had analysed the employment context. Economic partners were associated at the second stage of the process, when the teaching department had already established the general frame for the new degree. The authors also demonstrate the wide variety of economic partners who took part in the projects. Employment agencies and professional organizations were sometimes far more involved than potential employers.

However, the authors' conclusion is that professional licences have introduced significant changes in the way teaching departments design curricula and define the articulation between degrees and labour market issues. These changes have represented a pedagogical and institutional turn in humanities departments that introduced professional licences (in history, geography, psychology, sociology, arts). They had to rethink their curriculum in terms of qualifications and skills instead of disciplinary knowledge.

⁷ In 2001, six out of ten students leaving the higher education system without graduating came from the first of the second year of study of a general curriculum. Among them, 19 percent were studying exact sciences, 27 percent languages and literature, 24 percent other social and human sciences, 30 percent law, economics and management (Giret, Molinari-Perrier and Moullet, 2006).

⁸ Three out of four professional licences were initiated through this process.

TABLE 10. PROFESSIONAL SITUATION IN 2001 OF GRADUATES (YEAR OF GRADUATION: 1998)

	Unemployment rate	Part-time jobs	Median monthly wage of those with real jobs (€)
Professional Master's			
Exact and Life Sciences	6,1%	11%	1,830
Human and Social Sciences	6,2%	23%	1,680
Research Master's			
Exact and Life Sciences	7,2%	22%	1,770
Human and Social Sciences	6,5%	36%	1,560
Maîtrise IUP			
Industrial Sector	4,9%	10%	1,680
Services	3%	24%	1,520
Maîtrise			
Exact and Life Sciences	5,6%	38%	1,370
Human and Social Sciences	10%	31%	1,300

Source: CEREQ (2001).

Encouraging Results

Even if there are many ways to improve the organization of professional degrees, these curricula have helped develop graduates' employability. The professional situation of vocational graduates is better than that of general graduates with the same education levels (Table 10; Giret, Moullet and Thomas, 2003). This general conclusion also applies to humanities graduates, at the Master's level (Table 10) as well as the licence level (Table 11).

TABLE 11. PROFESSIONAL SITUATION IN 2004 OF LICENCE GRADUATES (YEAR OF GRADUATION: 2001)

	Unemployment rate	Part-time jobs	Median monthly wage of those with real jobs (€)
Professional licences			
Services	12%	26%	1,370
All sectors	9%	22%	1,380
General Licences			
Human and Social Sciences	14%	30%	1,250
All disciplines	12%	33%	1,300

Source: Giret *et al.* (2006).

Concerning the Master's degree, the professional Master's significantly improves long-term employment among humanities graduates. Those who graduated from the former professional maîtrise degree ("maîtrise IUP") had a considerably lower unemployment rate than humanities graduates from the general maîtrise degree. Concerning the 'licence' degree, humanities graduates from the professional 'licence' benefit from higher wages, more qualified jobs, and better access to intermediate and upper positions (Maillard and Véneau, 2003).

However, one should notice that the professional curricula do not reduce the disciplinary gap between humanities and other disciplines that we pointed out for the general curricula.

Finally, doctoral students from the humanities who are financed through a CIFRE agreement benefit, like other disciplines, from the substantially better employment the CIFRE agreement offers. Six months after defending their doctoral thesis, forty-four percent of the CIFRE PhD holders have a position in the company where they worked during their PhD. Thirty-three percent of them have a position in other company. The unemployment rate decreases from fourteen percent just after the PhD defense to three percent six months after it. One problem is that humanists still have limited access to

CIFRE agreements. At present, fifteen percent of the PhD students financed through the CIFRE system are working in the social and human sciences (representing between 100 and 150 agreements per year). But a more detailed analysis reveals that 35 percent are working in economics and finance, nineteen percent in law, twenty-one percent in technological fields, making humanists a minority in the CIFRE agreements⁹.

There are more and more types of professional-oriented diploma in France and more and more humanities students following these vocational courses. However, improving the employment opportunities of the majority requires the professionalization of all humanities curricula. The idea of professionalizing all higher education studies is not a new one, but it has known several recent developments.

...Or Professionalizing All Curricula?

On-going Reforms

In April 1997, the French government reformed the curricula, introducing the Master's degree. Studies were organized in teaching units that could be "capitalized", i.e. kept for a certain length of time. Each teaching unit corresponded to a "coherent group of teaching contents and activities" spreading over a set period of six months, or one semester (Thélot, 1998). However, the central dimensions of the curricula remained organized on an annual basis (exams, reorientation procedures, etc.). As a consequence, students did not take the semestralization as a chance to diversify and to professionalize their studies.

The "LMD reform" could have an impact on humanities students' professionalization by reshaping study courses. For example, a recent report delivered to the French government (French National Commission on University–Employment Relationships, 2006) has suggested the development of the apprenticeship system for law and humanities students, at the licence and the Master's degree level. However, it is too early to assess how this reform will impact employment opportunities.

Recent reforms also aim at professionalizing doctoral studies in all disciplines and this may have a positive impact on humanities doctoral students. Again, it is still too early to notice significant changes. These reforms are listed in brief below:

- Since 2000, each doctoral student has to be affiliated to a Doctoral school which offers several trainings. These trainings are either related to the doctoral research or to the professional project of doctoral students;

- Since 1998, a "doctoral charter" (la charte des thèses) is binding for the doctoral student, the supervisor, the laboratory director and the Doctoral school director.

The establishment of the doctoral charter is obligatory but there are no legal obligations to respect it and no legal sanctions for not doing so. As a consequence, the "doctoral charter" cannot be considered as a contract that enforces the responsibility, duties and rights of each actor of the doctoral training;

- Since 1994, doctoral students can attend a one-week seminar called "Doctoriales". Sponsored by the French Ministry of Education and Research, this seminar is dedicated to the preparation of their professional project;

- Finally, associations¹⁰ promote doctoral employment while publishing job vacancies and candidates' profiles.

A Business World on Guard

There is much statistical evidence showing that the business world is still reluctant to employ humanities graduates. On the contrary, few empirical studies explore why employers do not consider humanities diplomas as "passports to employment".

On the demand of the French Government, a qualitative study was carried out in 2001 (High Committee of Education, Economy and Employment, 2001) in order to enhance the knowledge of recruitment practices in the private sector. Many employers were asked to define the main criteria used when hiring young Master's graduates. The study shows that employers prefer hiring students from graduate schools to those from universities. The reputation of the school gives them a signal for

⁹ Source: Doctoral School of Law, Poitiers University. Overview of the CIFRE agreements.

¹⁰ The main association is the Association Bernard Gregory: <http://www.abg.asso.fr>

the competencies of the young graduates. This preference disadvantages humanities graduates in comparison with graduates from business and management schools.

However, employers acknowledge many qualities in humanities graduates, such as autonomy, creativity and open-mindedness, but consider them poorly prepared for the working realities of the private sector. There are doubts whether these graduates have acquired professional skills, whereas there is more confidence in the employability of graduates from professional Master's courses. This scepticism is evidence for the need to develop professionalized curricula and to enhance the professionalization of general degrees.

Concerning PhD holders, even though no systematic study on the topic exists, several analyses and personal experiences converge to show that potential employers tend to see the PhD as an academic diploma. The bipartition of the French training system between universities and graduate schools is again responsible for the difficulties of PhD holders to enter private companies. The perception is that universities are supposed to provide academic training, whereas business and engineering schools are to train future managers.

In conclusion, we would like to present three propositions on the topic of professionalization of all humanities curricula. Although these propositions reflect our personal analysis and opinion, they could inform the broader debates among the stakeholders of higher education institutions.

Three Propositions as a Conclusion

LMD System, Flexibility and Professionalization

The implementation of the LMD system introduced the semestrialization of the French organization of studies. It is meant to allow humanities students to discover complementary disciplines and eventually facilitate switching to other curricula. The flexibility of this system should increase students' polyvalence, in terms of disciplines but also of working methods. This flexibility, and the possibility for students to follow courses at different universities or teaching departments, could be an opportunity to compensate for the lack of resources from which many humanities departments suffer.

For example, students could complete their training in foreign languages or in computer training in another department. But such flexibility raises several questions: Will teaching departments have sufficient means, appropriate orientation tools and advice structures in place to help students find their way? How will they deal with the unequal possibilities and abilities students will develop (in relation to their social and educational background) to orient themselves?

Recognizing the Existing Competencies as Professional

Acquiring professional competencies does not always mean acquiring additional competencies. What can teaching departments and teachers do to enhance the professional value of each humanities curriculum?

Universities have career advisory services that distribute information products on paper and on the Web about occupational profiles (for example, descriptions of various occupations); descriptions of graduates destinations (what can one do with a degree in history?); guides to writing CVs/resumés, and interview techniques. These services may help humanities graduates recognize the professional competencies they have already acquired and find suitable employment destinations.

Teaching departments and teachers can also introduce courses dedicated to professionalization. A few remarks can be drawn from our teaching experiences at a humanities department of a French university (covering disciplines such as psychology, sociology, arts, law and history): teachers noticed that their students often had the feeling of being isolated from the labour market and lacking the competencies needed in the private sector, so they set up a new course leading to the licences degree, entitled "discovering the professional world". The course aims at developing skills for searching for employment and for working life (basic skills in word processing, communication skills), but also at helping students discover employment sectors in which they would like to work. For that purpose, students are spending a few weeks with two different groups of professionals. These periods are designed as observation periods rather than as internships: students do not practice but interview the professionals and follow them in their activities. This experience allows some of them to discover their professional vocation, but it helps all students to explore professional orientations and to adjust their perceptions and opinions to professional realities.

Finally, one of the major difficulties teachers encounter during this course is to convince students that their curriculum contains valuable skills for a wide range of jobs. Another purpose is to develop students' self-confidence, by encouraging them to take any occasion (training periods, associative/volunteer commitments, summer jobs) to test, evaluate and enhance these competencies.

This personal experience shows that French teachers and teaching departments have room to implement pedagogical innovations in the humanities curricula. However, initiatives such as the one described above often remain individual or isolated. Teachers sometimes lack clear and constant support from their teaching department. In other cases, universities do not give teaching departments precise professionalization goals and suitable means (in terms of staff and equipment) to achieve these goals.

Such initiatives should be generalized, but also institutionalized and relieved by formal structures so as to assist humanities students with the development of their generic employability skills. One could, for example, include courses on career management skills in all humanities curricula, and introduce career advisors to help humanities students to recognize what their valuable work experiences are.

Developing Mutual Understanding and Knowledge between Humanities Departments and Potential Employers

First, internship periods could be introduced in most disciplines. Second, potential employers could contribute to some teaching courses in general curricula whereas they rarely belong to the teaching staff. Teaching departments could also promote the benefits of humanities graduates to business, by organizing conferences, writing articles in professional journals, producing and distributing materials. Developing these exchanges and partnerships between humanities departments and the business world would bring potential employers to a better appreciation of the skills developed by humanists. It would also help teachers articulate educational qualifications and professional skills.

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