

PROFESSIONAL AND ACADEMIC, OPPOSITE CONCEPTS? THE FRENCH APPROACH FOR FILLING THE HYPOTHETIC GAP

Dr FILLOQUE Jean-Marie

Former Vice-Rector for LLL and academic affairs of the University of Brest

Former President of the French National Network of UCE departments (CDSUFC)

Member of the CNEE-National Council Education-Economy

ABSTRACT

Based on the French context of Higher Education, professional training / skills development and employment / active life, this keynote paper shows the impact of successive regulations (laws at national level) on the links between these three “worlds”. It is important to note that the concept of lifelong learning is used now as a common framework in these three contexts. This presentation uses a time line starting in the sixties and focuses on universities. It shows the progressive convergence of the higher education system and the “world of work” over this period.

The paper takes into account only the question of education and training, but it’s clear that the questions of research and its valorisation are also of great interest for universities, and can raise more or less the same questions about their objectives, ranging from completely theoretical to market oriented.

This paper takes the historical point of view up until the current day, but it’s impossible to say today what will happen next with the new French government elected in May 2017. Its programme proposes many important reforms of the whole system of education, including higher education, professional training and professional development.

INTRODUCTION

The question of the relationship between the University and the labour market is a matter of debate today. There are several reasons for this, but the main ones are widening access to Higher Education and the rapid changing of the skills required to perform in the labour market. This first factor increases the number of graduates looking for a job, while the second factor increases the skills mismatch and thus the need for re-skilling or up-skilling of more individuals. Each country has its own educational system based in its own history and depending on the balances of power, but also on the convergences, between the different

stakeholders like social partners, politicians, NGOs, academics, etc.



In France, like in many other countries, the traditional debate concerning Universities and Higher Education in general is concentrated on the roles and missions of the institutions: must they offer students specific qualifications required by the labour market (professionally oriented) or must they prepare students with more general capacities (academically oriented)?

Observing the French Higher Education system, we propose an analysis based on the national regulations and their implementation. Starting from the law issued after the student strikes and general unrest of 1968, we can identify several steps bridging the gap between the two “worlds”, the professional one and the academic one. However, the situation is not yet clear. This law has introduced the words “professional” and “economic needs” in the regulations, both for initial studies and for “adults” returning to university, and generalized the creation of technological institutes inside the universities. The following steps have formalized the management of university continuing education in the context of labour laws (1972, 1984). In 2002, the introduction of the “VAE” process together with the description of diplomas using learning outcomes and skills competencies at all levels have produced a kind of “shock therapy” to the academic community and started a slow but real evolution of the institutions.

The last steps in 2007 (introduction of mandatory publication of “professional insertion” or graduate employment indicators) and in 2013 (introduction of the words “Lifelong learning” in the missions of universities) have strengthened the links between universities and the socio-economic environment. Considering the objectives of the new programmes which are more “skill oriented”, considering the “professional insertion of graduates” used as performance indicators, considering the market share of continuing education and the development of work-based learning for bachelor and master degrees, etc., the question today could well be: “are universities VET providers?”.

We will discuss the answer weighing these socio-economic objectives and constraints against the claimed (and legally based) independence and autonomy of university teachers/researchers, which is intended to guarantee creativity, innovation and ethics.

WHAT IS REPRESENTED BY THE WORDS “ACADEMIC” AND “PROFESSIONAL”?

Academic, professional ... what are the images that come to your mind when you hear these words? It could be objects like mortarboards or diploma parchments for “academic”, and tools like a wrench or a computer for “professional”, although today this later tool is used in almost all life situations. It could also be persons in certain situations: a graduate for “academic” and perhaps builders for “professional”, but also a businessman or doctor ... for “academic”, it could also be a teacher.

These are only images, but they match, in a certain way, with the usual understanding of what is an academic qualification and what is a professional qualification. Academic is connected with knowledge, studies. Etymologically, it comes from the Greek “*akademos*” connected with the cultural accumulation of knowledge, its development and transmission across generations and its practitioners and transmitters. Professional is connected with the world of work, jobs, and employment. A classical (or a common) definition for these qualifications could be: an academic qualification involves the study of a subject with an academic discipline and (hopefully) research focus, while a professional qualification enables the learner to apply the knowledge acquired in a practical manner, in professional practice.

The acquisition of these qualifications and their recognition, in most countries, are done by different institutions; on the one hand, those dedicated to academic studies like colleges, lycées, faculties and universities, and on the other hand, those dedicated to vocational and professional studies like training centres, polytechnics, professional schools ... Hautes écoles, Fachhochschule, etc. In each country, the organisation of the educational system depends on historical issues like the balance of power between the different stakeholders (who could be the social partners, politicians, NGOs, academics, etc.).

Are the learners able to find a job, or generate their own economic activity or employment, with these qualifications? What are the expectations of society toward their educational system? These two questions find different answers depending on the national contexts. In some countries, these two notions are strictly separated but, in all cases, at the end of the day learners have to earn money to live, so they have to work, regardless of the type of qualification they have. The two kinds of qualification are becoming more and more mixed, and in the end, even for very high-level theoreticians, the holders of these qualifications have a job (or would like to have one).

The next section gives some background on the French context around higher education, professional training/skills development and employment/active life. Then, starting in the sixties and following the time line, we extract the main elements of the successive regulations (national laws) concerning either higher education or professional training that have progressively built links (bridges) between the “academic” world of universities and the world of work.

THE FRENCH CONTEXT

In France, there is more or less the same separation between “general education” and “professional and technical studies” as there is in other countries for those qualifications lower than Level 5 (EQF), but with some bridges between the two. It’s not the subject of this presentation, but it is at these levels that the impact of the socio-economic situation of the families has the greatest importance: the lower it is, the more chances the individuals have to undertake a professional qualification. At these levels, professional studies include apprenticeships.

From level 5 to 8, the situation is more complex and this is the subject of this paper. The question of qualifications is shared between institutions in different ways depending on the professional sector, the level of qualification and the stakeholders.

Figure 1 gives the evolution of the number of active persons (in millions) according to their level of qualification between 1980 and 2014.

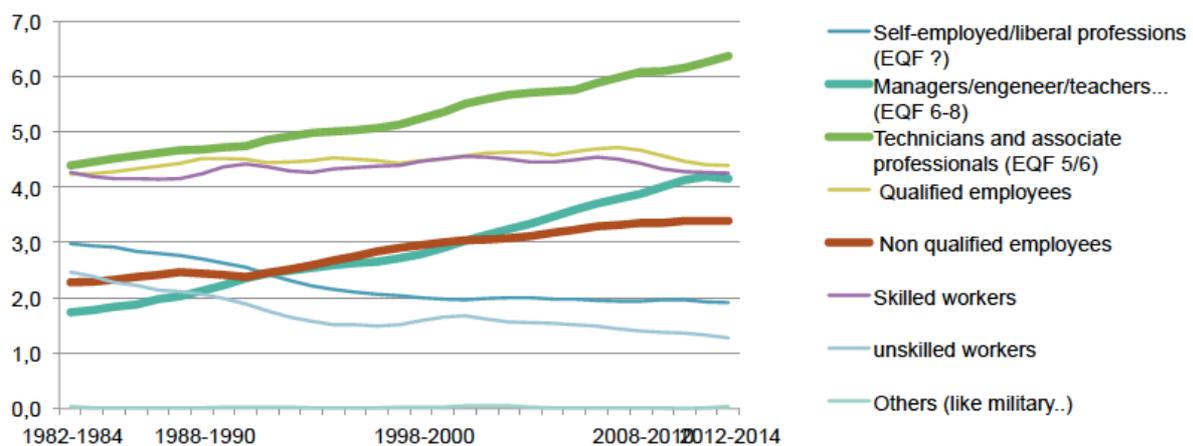


Figure 1: evolution of the number of active persons per category of job

Source: DARES, Ministry of labour, 2017[1]

The number of persons working towards a higher-level qualification has increased constantly over the last 35 years for jobs at Level 5/6 (in green: technicians, for example) and at Level 6/7 (in blue: management, engineering, etc.). The only other category that increases at the same intensity is “non-qualified employees” (in brown). This survey shows the rising demand

for higher qualified individuals.

Figure 2 gives the evolution of the share of the population with a higher education degree since the beginning of the century.

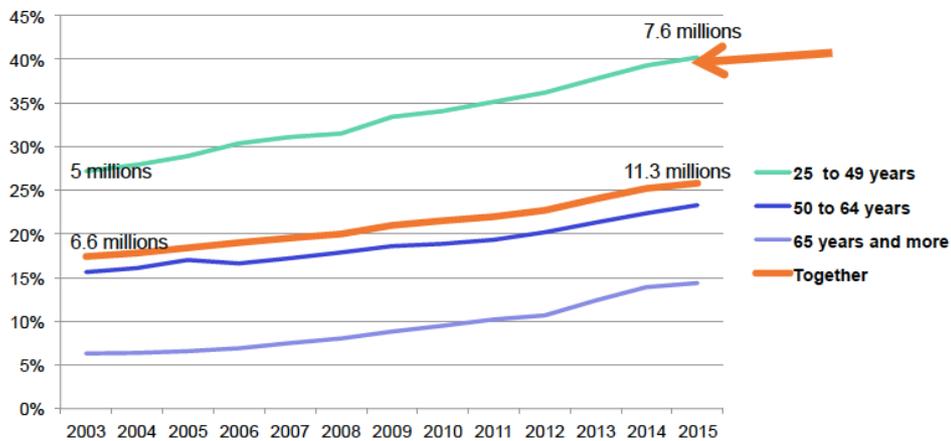


Figure 2: Evolution of the number of graduates (≥ EQF 5) in the population

Source: DEPP, Ministry of higher education [2]

At the same time, the proportion of citizens with a HE diploma (EQF Level 5 or higher) has also increased regularly, and in 2015, more than 40% of those between the ages of 25 and 49 were graduates. Considering the total population over 25, 11.3 million or 26% of this population had a degree, an increase of more than 70% over the previous ten years. Universities graduate a majority of these, and most of them are working, if we consider the annual surveys of graduate employment published by the universities and the ministry.

The Higher Education system has to generate enough graduates to fulfil the needs of the country and of the economy (Figure 3). The choice made in France in the early sixties was to increase dramatically the number of young people accessing higher education.

In 2016, 78.6% of a generation (633,497) have obtained the *baccalauréat*: 40.4% the *baccalauréat général*, 15.7% the *baccalauréat technologique* and 22.6% the *baccalauréat professionnel*. Seventy-five per cent (75%) of them continue to higher education, 55% directly to university, i.e. 400,000 new entrants each year! Since 1960, the number of students registered each year has increased regularly and is now over 2.5 million, with over 62% of these attending the universities.

At this point, the main findings are:

- A majority of each French generation study at university
- A majority of HE diplomas are delivered by universities
- Most university graduates find a job / work

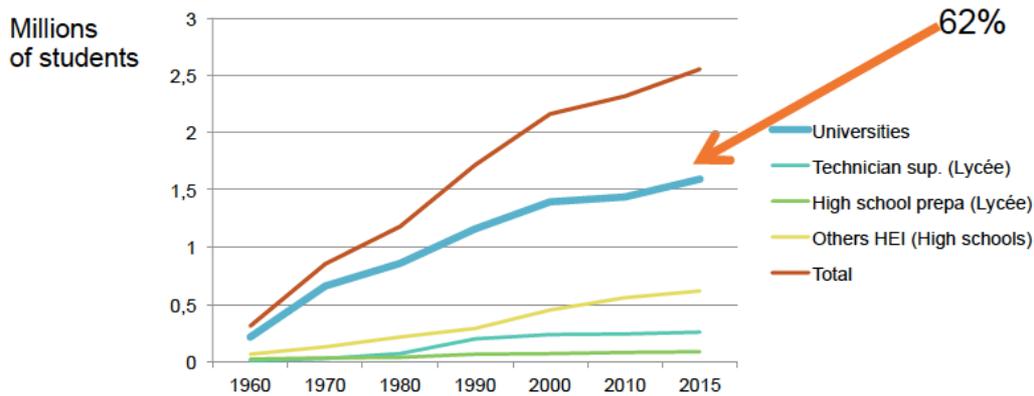


Figure 3: widening access to higher education: evolution of the number of students/year
Source: DEPP, Ministry of higher education [2]

It's important to add that today 8 - 10 % of registered students are adults returning to study and using all the provisions offered by the French adult education system. So, the questions are: how have academic and professional qualifications progressively been mixed to produce (or to try to produce) "skilled graduates"? And, given that French universities are open to adult students, is it a strategy for promoting lifelong learning?

We will try to answer the first question in the next section. As to the second one, it's absolutely certain that it is not a deliberate strategy, but it has enabled the possibility to develop a real culture of "adult education" in the universities, though still far from a real lifelong learning strategy. Recent initiatives and developments supported by the Ministry can be considered as a logical consequence of this evolution (Filloque et al., 2016).

THE TIMELINE OF CONVERGENCE

The timeline starts in 1966. It is schematic as it doesn't include all the events concerning our subject, but only the main ones as some others are not so important for our purpose here.

In the past, and maybe still for some individuals or organisations, higher education and, mainly, universities, did not have many connections with the world of work. But today, even with more autonomous Universities, things are changing, mainly because of the context described previously.

For some years now, one of the main public performance indicators of the universities, together with research indicators, is graduate placement / employment. The capacity of the universities to build agreements with companies, NGOs, sectoral organisations for research contracts, but also for developing new programmes (adapted to the needs of the job market) is also highlighted across their communication.

Even before our timeline begins, one can find specific older forerunners. We can cite, for example, the CNAM (National Conservatory of Arts and Crafts), which was opened for adults in 1794 (18th century, during the French revolutionary period). It is still active as a public national HE Institution and is one of the most important higher education organisations for professional and adult education. Another initiative was taken in the early fifties (1951) by some far-sighted and innovative professors. They created, close to universities, some IPST (institutes for higher social promotion of work) in Grenoble, Nancy, Lille, Toulouse, etc. Most of these are now closed, and included in the UCE departments, but they prefigured the actual university centres for continuing education.

Figure 4 brings together the main dates that are significant for the timeline and for the two main groups of stakeholders involved in the national strategies of the two “worlds”.

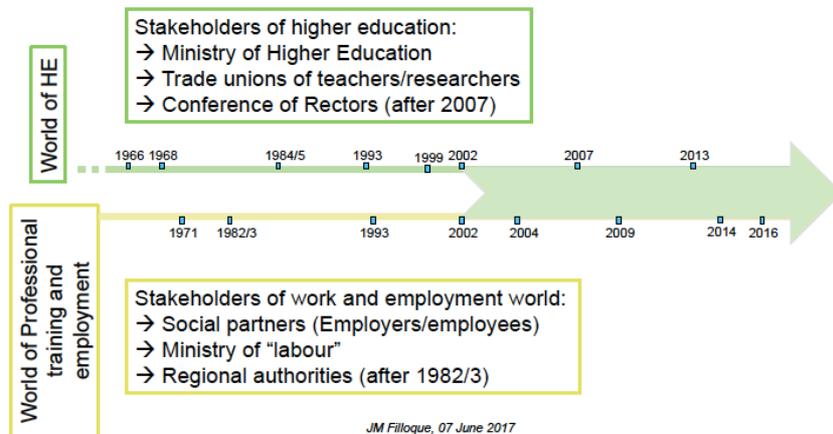


Figure 4: Timeline for a convergence

On the one hand, HEI organisation and strategy at national level is shared between three stakeholders: the Ministry of Higher Education; the trade unions of teachers/researchers; and the Conference of Rectors (after 2007). Nevertheless, universities, as public institutions, are financed by the state, and so have to follow national regulations. They have complete “pedagogical” autonomy for a long time (independence of professors) but their administration and management are under control. Over the last 50 years, they have acquired more and more autonomy to build their own strategy, but it’s a slow process.

On the other hand, vocational/professional training (intended more for adults than for youth in initial education) has its own organisation, mainly defined (until now) by negotiations and agreements between the social partners and the Ministry of Labour. Since 1982, and the decentralisation laws, regional authorities have taken a more and more prominent place in the discussions.

We will now follow the history of these two groups of actors, the actions they have put into practice, and the laws and regulations they have initiated and implemented.

The first important event in this short history is the creation of the IUT (Technological Institutes) by a decree in 1966. It’s important to note that in this time (before 1968), universities had no real power. Only faculties, all autonomous, could organise studies and research and each Dean had a lot of power, engaging in direct discussions with the Ministry. It was the end of the “*thirty glorious years*” (the years of reconstruction following the Second World War), and France was then facing a major shortage of technicians and intermediate managers for industry and services. This is why the French government decided to create new faculties, dedicated, for the first time, to technology and professional needs, but linked with theoretical studies. In many towns, traditional faculties and professors tried to refuse these creations, with the argument that it was not the role of university to train technicians, but they lost the argument and many institutes were created on the model of US “junior colleges” and “community colleges”¹. It is the first example of higher education institutions mixing professional issues and theoretical studies: internships, professional training for teachers, practical activities².

¹ <http://fresques.ina.fr/jalons/fiche-media/InaEdu01803/la-creation-des-instituts-universitaires-de-technologie-iut.html>

² In 2016, IUTs have 116,000 students (i.e. 7.3% of the students). IUTs deliver a diploma at EQF level 5, and access in first year is by selection.

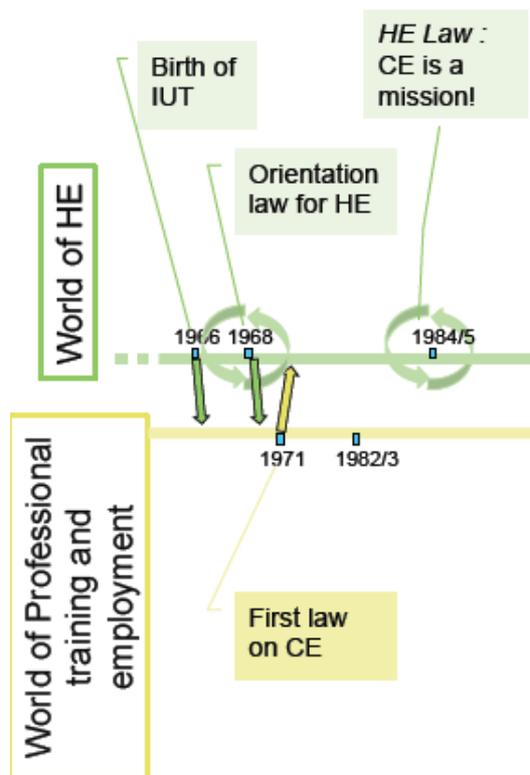
After the events of 1968, a huge reform of the universities was started. One of the main decisions was the creation of new universities, subsuming former faculties which thus lost their autonomy. Universities were now defined by law as “scientific and cultural public institutions” with specific new missions as well as education, research and the creation of knowledge. For example, they now had to:

- “Provide” managers and high-level personnel in all sectors;
- Participate in social and economic development;
- Participate in adult education; and
- Open access to higher education.

This law had an important internal impact (in universities) but it was also to have an impact on the country and the economy, opening the doors of higher education to an increasing number of people, young and less young.

In the timeline of professional education and training, the most important law (the so called “Delors law”) was passed in 1971 under the umbrella of the Ministry of Labour after several rounds of negotiations and an agreement between the social partners. It built the structure of Continuing Education in France, organising the financing schemes, the governance, the stakeholders and the training possibilities, and opening training activities to the market. At this time, the Ministry of Higher Education decided to be an actor (a kind of provider) in this newly opened market, but universities were free to be active or not. The first UCE departments were created in 1972 in some forerunner universities, and the ministry gave special funds to develop experimentation and pilot programmes. The law authorized the

public service of HE to be involved in this specific “private market”, but this implied some problems of competition with other private operators but without really modifying the rules.



In 1984, at the beginning of the first socialist government, a new law was to reform HE, but in the continuity of the 1968 law. The main developments linked with our subject were:

- Higher Education becomes a “public service of HE” and includes Universities, high schools;
- The word “professional” is added to the status created in 1968 which now becomes “professional, cultural and scientific public institutions (EPCSCP)
- “Initial and continuing education” becomes the first mission of higher education.

At the same time a decree organised and structured university continuing education activities in the framework of the law on CE, and another one (initiated by J. Delors) created one of the first RPL processes for exemption of exams (VAPP) in higher education.

The impact of this law and its decree was mainly internal at first, but then CE becomes more “official” and will lead universities to new relationships and partnerships with economic actors: enterprises, organisations, “clients”,

The next step will be in 1993, when a decree authorises apprenticeship (and so Work-Based Learning) for HE, opening the doors for closer relations with companies. This event had little effect on universities at the beginning, but the increasing number of students in apprenticeships and the number of programmes opened in WBL is now very important, and shows that it is a real opportunity for students but also for companies. Figure 5 shows the evolution of the apprenticeship contacts through the numbers of students signed up each year by level of qualification. It's very interesting to see that the EQF Level 7 numbers have grown so quickly both for Masters degrees and Engineering degrees.

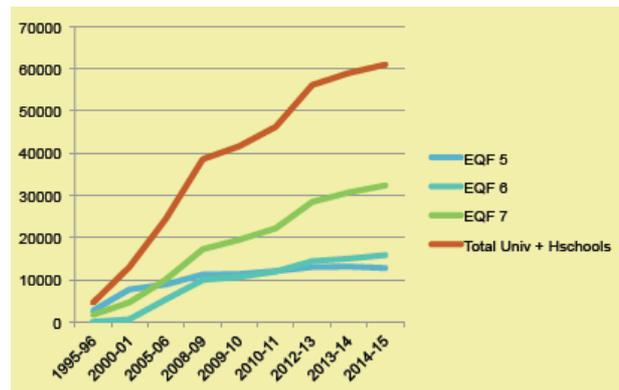


Figure 5: The evolution of the number of students in apprenticeship in universities

Source: DEPP, Ministry of higher education [2]

Since 2000, we have to add another way to organise Work-Based Learning called “Professional Contracts” which was also opened to HE. In 2014-15, this concerned 29,500 students, most of them at Level 6. This has had a great impact on the professionalization of universities and the building of bridges between universities and the business world.

In 1993, the first law dedicated to RPL was adopted, and a decree covering the diplomas of our Ministry published (which also covered degrees in the areas of agriculture and sport). This law allows the validation of professional experience to obtain credit for components of a qualification or a “professional” diploma. The procedure is based on a portfolio, and professionals can be members of the juries. Universities have started to organise new offices and to recruit staff dedicated to validation of prior learning. Combined with the previous decree (1985), the law on RPL has contributed to the development of an important work on skills and competencies.

In line with the process of professionalization of higher education, a new professional diploma at Level 6 (EQF) called “Licence professionnelle” dedicated to direct access to employment was created in 1999. It is a one-year program proposed by the universities. It was a success story at the beginning, and in 2015-16 there were 52,000 students, mainly in apprenticeships or “Professional Contracts”. This number is more or less the same for the last 5 years, and now some sectors say that they would prefer specific professional licences organised directly in three years and called “Bachelors”. This starts a new discussion among stakeholders about the process of professionalization.

The year 2002 was very rich in important events for both of the worlds which we discuss, and really started a new step in the convergence. It could be considered a key milestone in the timeline. A decree implements the Bologna process in French universities, organising studies in cycles L, M and D, and adopting credits, diploma supplements, quality assurance, etc.

At the same time, a law called “Of Social Modernisation”, supported by all the ministries, created two important provisions: a national registry of professional certification (RNCP for Répertoire National des Certifications Professionnelles) and a new full validation process for RPL called VAE (Validation des Acquis de l’Expérience). The national registry of professional certification is under the control of a national commission, composed of representatives of social partners and the state. Its role is to accept or register new certification options from all the different sectors. A great point for universities is that all the national diplomas delivered are registered as professional certification “automatically”. Validation of experience can be used for exemption from the whole or components of a qualification (certification) based on the knowledge and skills acquired through prior experience and learning in a variety of contexts. VAE can be organised for any qualification officially recognised by the State and the social partners and listed in the national registry.

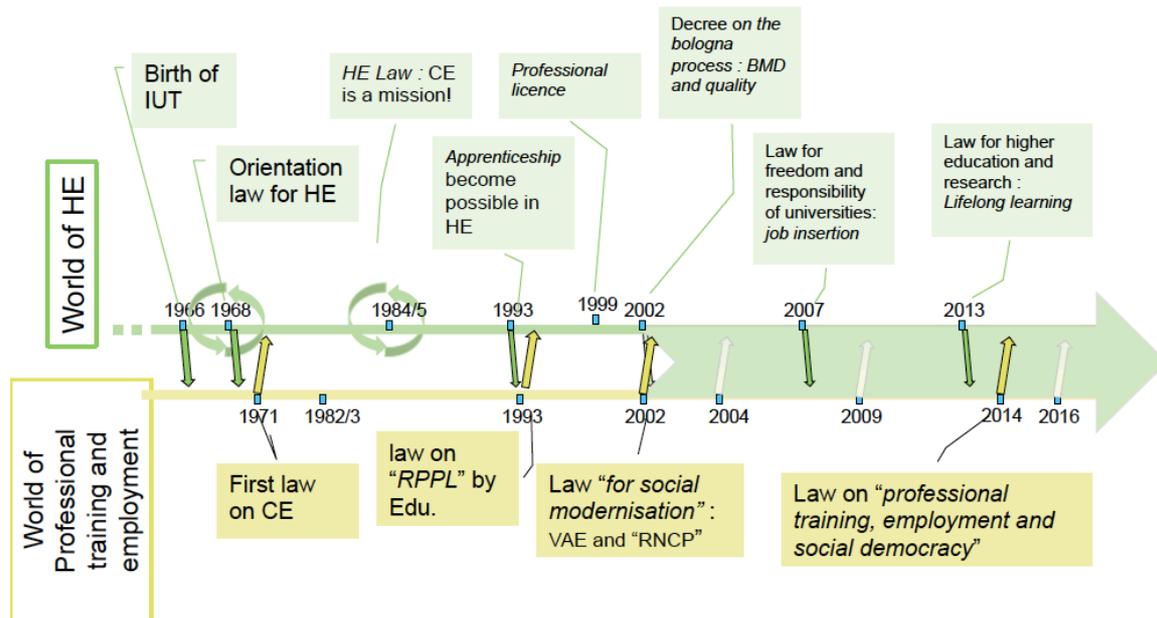
By this law, diplomas delivered by universities were officially recognised as professional certification, but to complete this recognition, they have to describe each of these qualifications in terms of outcomes, skills and competencies. This work has been far easier for those who had already invested in RPL.

The new government elected in 2007 passed a law in that year creating the obligation for the universities to guide students (including adults) in their study pathway. It is not really a new job for universities, but the services dedicated to this activity have been obliged to develop new kinds of networks at local, regional and national level with all stakeholders to improve their own competencies.

The question of graduate placement and employability is more technical, but matches with the “professional” character of the French universities since 1984. Since this law came into effect, the universities have to publish (via any media) the situation of the alumni 16 months and 30 months after graduation: job situation, sector, average salary, etc. Guidance and graduate placement is now the third mission of Higher Education.

After the national elections in 2012, two new laws, one for each domain, were passed in 2013. The first one concerns higher education and transforms the first mission of HE into: “Lifelong initial and continuing education”. A difficult discussion took place but it was impossible to agree on a simple expression like “Lifelong learning”! Many other improvements of the connections between HE and the economy have been introduced in the regulations:

- The obligation to organise “Improvement councils” for each diploma (with professionals from the relevant field involved) to discuss programme content, outcomes, needs of the sector, etc.
- A focus on skills and competences for all programmes (publication)
- The promotion of entrepreneurship
- The development of apprenticeship
- The improvement of public visibility and recognition: reducing the number of titles for each level (Licences, Professional Licences and Masters)
- Etc



The second law was called “Professional Training, Employment and Social Democracy” and was passed in March 2014. It contains several points concerning HE:

- Higher Education is a new stakeholder invited to National and Regional Councils for Professional Training (CNEFOP and CREFOP)
- Creation of a new “Personal Training Account” for all citizens (CPF)
- Creation of a registry of all the professional certification that can be chosen in the CPF framework and financed through it.

It’s the beginning of a new area and it could be developed in a possible updated version of this paper.

CONCLUSIONS

We have passed quickly over fifty years of evolution ... what a long and arduous process for those who think that the convergence between Higher Education and the “world of work” is important. The main reason pushing this evolution is that universities welcome a large part of the population during their life, and they have to be prepared for employment, obviously. But we have also to take into account the quality and level of HE personnel (professors, lecturers, etc.) and their links with up to date research (inherent to HE) so that they can bring a real added value to their courses. The economy and specifically companies have much to gain from this situation (Filloque, 2010).

University Continuing Education has made a major contribution to this convergence, mainly because it has always emphasised the social responsibility of HEIs and not just the business, resources and potential income generated by the French training market (€9 billion each year), even if this has enabled centres to be self-financing.

Considering the objectives of new programmes developed under the logic of the new regulations which are more “skill oriented”; considering the “professional insertion of graduates” (graduate placement in employment) used as a performance indicator for all HEIs; considering the market share of continuing education and the development of work based learning for licence and master degrees, etc., it is justifiable to assert that universities are able to train “skilled graduates” for the world of work but also for society.

The other question today could be: “are universities VET providers?”. We can discuss the answer weighing our socio-economic objectives and constraints against the necessity of maintaining academic freedom and independence and thus fostering creativity, innovation and ethics, but it’s clear that HEIs in France have been HVET providers since 1966 and the emergence of the IUTs.

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