

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 shows the impact of successive regulations (laws at national level) on the links between these three “worlds”. Its important to notice that the concept of lifelong learning is used now a common framework in these three contexts. The presentation uses a time line starting in the sixties and focuses on universities. It shows the progressive convergence of the questions raised in the society toward the finalities of the higher education system and the one raised in the “world of the active life”.

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

It takes the historical point of view, until today but it's impossible to say today what will append with the new French government elected in May 2017. Its program contains many important reforms of the whole system of education, including higher education, professional training and professional development.

Introduction

The question of the relationship between University and the labour market is a matter of debate, today. There are several reasons to this situation, but the main ones are the widening access to Higher Education and the fast changing of skills required to perform in the labour market. The first one increases the number of graduates looking for a job and the second one increases the skills mismatch and the need of re-skilling or up-skilling of more and more persons. Each country has its own educational system coming from its history and depending of the balances of power but also 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 prepare to specific qualifications required by the labour market (Professional oriented) or must they prepare to more general capacities (academic 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 events of 1968, we can identify several steps filling 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 by the 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 the professional insertion 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 programs 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 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 to guarantee creativity, innovation and ethic.

The representation carried by the words “academic” and professional

Academic, professional, which are the images that come in your head when you hear these words? It could be objects like hat, diplomas for “academic”, and tools like a wrench or a computer for “professional” even if it’s not clear today as this last tool is used in quite all life situations... It could be also persons in situation: a graduate for “academic” and builders for “professional”, but also business man or doctor... For “academic”, it could be also a teacher.

These are only images, but they match, in a certain way, with the usual understanding of what is an academic qualification and 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”. A professional qualification enables the learner to apply its knowledge in a practical manner, in a professional practice.

The acquisition of these qualifications and their recognitions, in most countries, are done by different institutions; on one hand, those dedicated to academic studies like colleges, lycées, faculties, 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 educational system organisation depends of historical issues like the balance of power between the different stakeholders that could be social partners, politicians, NGO, academics, etc.

Are the learners able to find a job or to create their own activity with these qualifications? What are the expectations of the society toward their educational system? These two questions find different answers depending of the national contexts. In some countries, these two notions are strictly separated but, in all cases, at the end learners have to earn money to live, so they have to work, independently of the type of qualification they have.

The two kinds of qualification are becoming more and more mixed, and at the end, even for very high-level theoreticians, the owners of these qualifications have a job (or would like to have one).

The next section gives some elements on the French context concerning higher education, professional training/skills development and employment/active life. Then, following the time line starting in the sixties, we extract the main elements of the successive regulations (national laws) concerning either higher education and professional training that have progressively build 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” than in other countries for the 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 the individuals have of chances to prepare a professional qualification. At these levels, the Professional studies include apprenticeship.

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

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

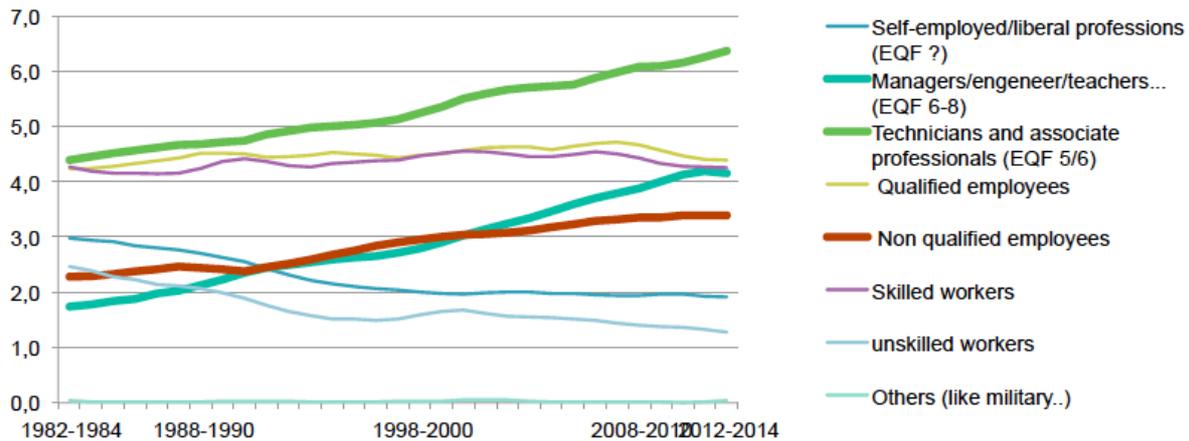


Figure 1: evolution of the number of active persons per category of job.

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

The number of persons working at a high level qualification, is increasing regularly since 35 years for job ranging in average at level 5/6 (in green: Technicians for example) and level 6/7 (in blue: managements, engineering...). The only other category that increases in the same intensity is the one of “non qualified employees” (in Brown). This survey shows the raising demand for higher qualified individuals. Figures 2 gives the evolution of the share of the population with a higher education degree since the beginning of the century.

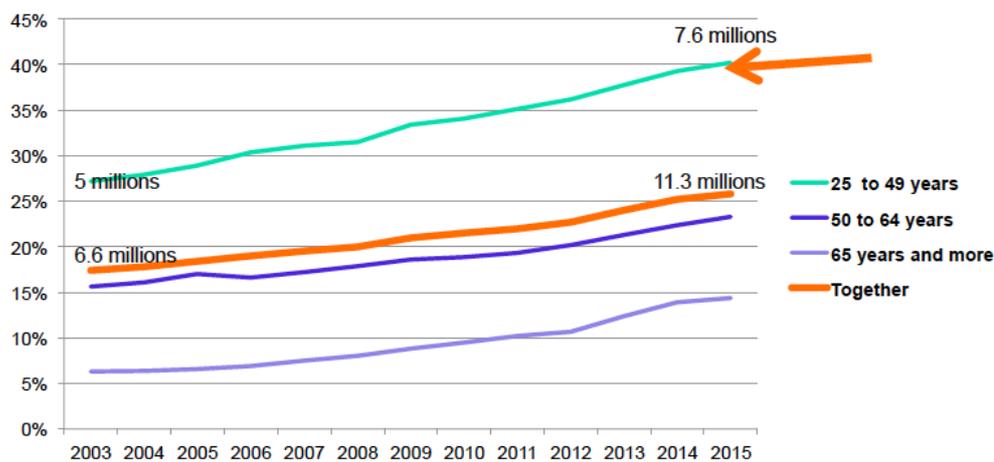


Figure 2: Evolution of the number of graduates (≥ EQF 5) in the population.

Source: DEPP, Ministry of higher education [2]

At the same time, the proportion of citizens with a HE diploma EQF 5 or more, has increased also regularly and in 2015, more than 40% of the people between 25 and 49 are graduated... Considering the total population over 25, 26% of this population have a degree, that is 11.3 Millions, increasing of more than 70% during the last ten years... Universities graduate a majority of them and most of them work, if we consider the annual surveys on professional insertion of the graduates, published by the universities and the ministry.

The Higher education system has to “graduate” enough person to fulfil to need of the country and of the economy (Figure 3). The choice made in France in the early sixties has been to increase dramatically the number of young people accessing to high education...

In 2016, 78,6 % of a generation (633 497) have obtained the *baccalauréat* : 40,4 % *baccalauréat général*, 15,7 % un *baccalauréat technologique* et 22,6 % un *baccalauréat professionnel*. Seventy five per cent (75%) of them continue to higher education, 55% directly at university, i.e. 400 000 new comers each year...!! Since 1960, the number of students registered each year has increased regularly and is now over 2.5 millions. The part of the universities is more than 62 %.

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 of the universities' graduates find a job and work...

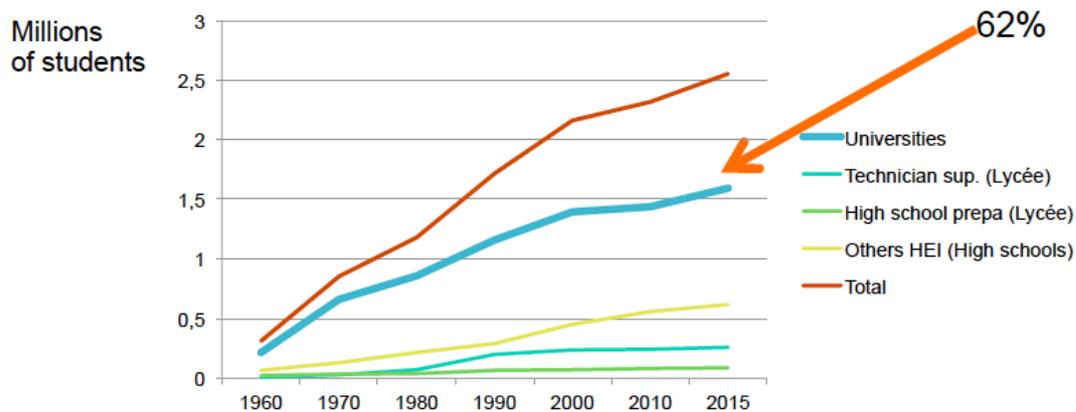


Figure 3: widening access to higher education: evolution of the number of students/year
Source: DEPP, Ministry of higher education [2]

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

We will try to answer the first question in the next section. For the second one, it's absolutely sure that it is not a voluntary strategy, but it has enabled the possibility to develop a real culture of "adult education" in the universities, 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 [3].

The timeline of a 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 and some others are not so important for the demonstration.

In the past, and may be still now for some persons or organisations, higher education and mainly universities, have not, (or must 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.

Since some years, one of main public performance indicator of the Universities, together with research ones, is the job insertion of its graduates. Their capacity to build agreements with companies, NGOs, sectorial organisations for research contracts, but also for developing new programs (adapted to the needs...) is also pointed out and raised across their communication.

Before the first step of our timeline, one can find specific older forerunners. We have to cite the CNAM (National Conservatory of Arts And Crafts), which was opened for adults in 1794 (18th century, French revolution). 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 clairvoyant and innovative professors. They create, close to universities, some IPST (Institutes for higher social promotion of work) in Grenoble, Nancy, Lille, Toulouse, etc. Most of them are now closed, and included in the UCE departments but they have prefigured the actual university centres for continuing education.

The figure 4 gives together the main dates that we have retained for the timeline and the two groups of main stakeholders involved in the national strategies of the two "worlds".

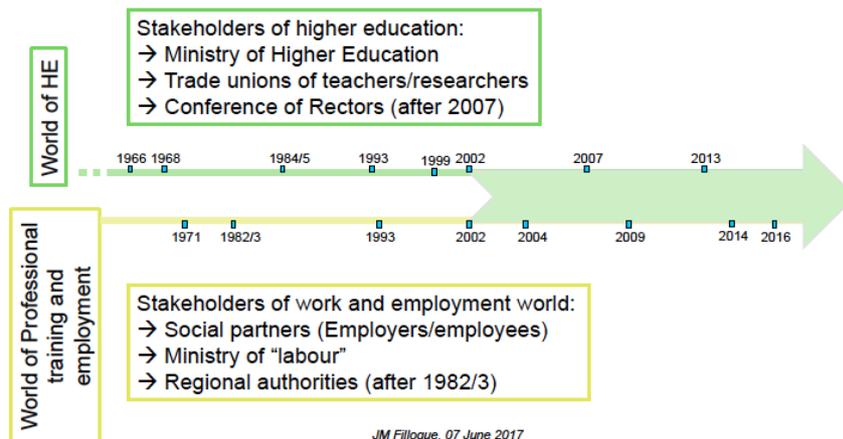


Figure 4: Timeline for a convergence.

On one hand, higher education institutions organisation and strategy at national level are shared between 3 stakeholders: Ministry of Higher Education, trade unions of teachers/researchers and the Conference of Rectors (after 2007). Nevertheless, Universities, as public institutions are financed by state, and so, have to follow national regulations. They have a complete “pedagogical” autonomy since long time (independence of professors...) but their administration and management is under control. During 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 (more for adults than for youth in initial education) has its own organisation, mainly defined (until now) by negotiations and agreements between social partners and Ministry of labour. Since 1982, and the decentralisation laws, regional authorities have taken more and more place in the discussions.

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

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 notice that in this time (before 1968), Universities have no real power. Only faculties, all autonomous, have the possibility to organise studies and research and each Dean had a lot of power, discussing directly with the Ministry. It was the end the “*thirty glorious years*” (the years of reconstruction following the Second World War), and France have faced then a great lack of technicians and intermediate managers for the industry and services. This is why the French government has decided to create new faculties, dedicated, for the first time, to technology and professional needs, but linked with theoretical studies. In many towns, historical faculties and professors have tried to refuse these creations, with the argument that it’s not the role of university to trained technicians, but they have lost and many institutes have been created on the model of US “junior colleges” and “community colleges”¹. It’s the first example of higher education institution mixing professional issues and theoretical studies: Internship, professional as teachers, practical activities².

After 1968 events, a huge reform of the universities has started. One of the main decisions was the creation of new universities including former faculties that then have lost their autonomy. Universities are now defined by law as “Scientific and cultural public institutions” with specific new missions, together with education, research and creation of knowledge. For example, they have now to:

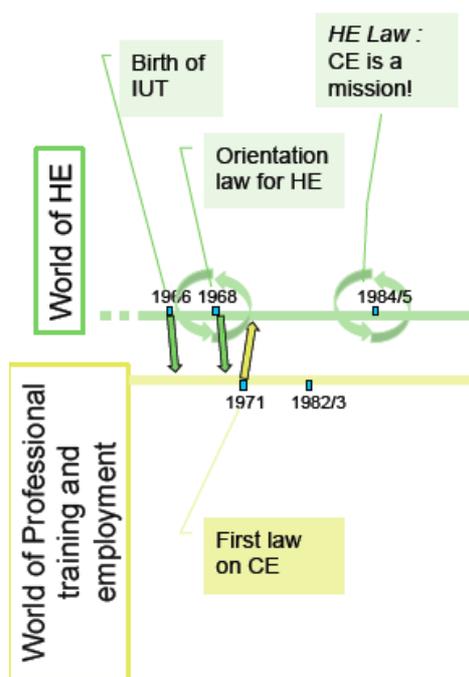
- “Provide” managers and high level personals in all sectors,
- Participate to social and economic development,
- Participate to adult education,
- Open access to higher education

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

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), deliver a diploma at EQF level 5. The access in first year is by selection.

In the timeline of professional education and training, the certainly most important law (so called “law Delors”) has been voted in 1971 under the umbrella of “Ministry of labour” after several round of negotiations and an agreement between social partners. It has built the structure of the Continuing education in France, organising the financing schemes, the governance, the stakeholders, the training possibilities and opening training activities to the market. At this moment, the ministry of HE has decided to be an actor (a kind of provider) for this new opened market but universities was free to be active or not. The first UCE departments have been created in 1972 in some forerunner universities and the ministry has given special funds to develop **experimentations**. The law authorizes the public service of HE to be present on this specific “private market” but this has 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 will reform HE, but in the continuity of the 1968 law.... The main evolutions linked with our subject have been:

- 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 becomes “**Professional, Cultural and scientific public institutions (EPCSCP)**”
- “Initial and **continuing** education” becomes the first mission of higher education over 4.

At the same time a decree will organize and structure university continuing education activities in the framework of the law on CE and another one will create (initiated by J. Delors) one of the first RPL process for exemption of exams (VAPP) in higher education.

This law and its decree are mainly internal but then CE will become more “official” and will lead universities to new relations and partnerships with economic actors: enterprises, organisations, “clients”...

The next step will be in 1993, when a decree authorises apprenticeship (and so WBL) for HE, opening the doors for narrower relations with companies. This event have

had a small effect on universities at the beginning but the increasing number of students in apprenticeship and the number of programs opened in WBL is now very important and that shows that it’s a real opportunity for students but also for companies.... The figure 5 show the evolution of the apprenticeship contacts, and then students, signed each year by level of qualification prepared. Its very interesting to see that the level EQF7 has grown so quickly both for Master degrees and Engineer degrees.

Since 2000, we have to add the other way to organise WBL called “Professional Contract” opened also to HE. In 2014-15, they have concerned 29,500 students, most of them at level 6. This has a great impact on professionalization of universities and University/business bridges!

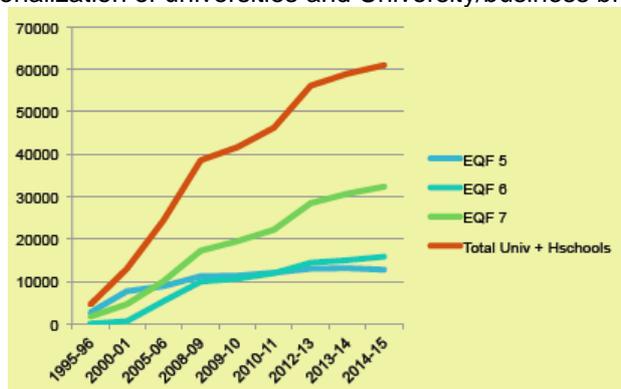


Figure 5: The evolution of the number of students in apprenticeship in universities.

Source: DEPP, Ministry of higher education [2]

In 1993, the first law dedicated to RPL has been adopted and a decree for the diplomas of our Ministry

published (but also for agriculture and sport degrees). This law allows the validation of professional experience to obtain components of a qualification or a “professional” diploma. The procedure based on a portfolio and professionals can be members of the juries. Universities have started to organise new offices, 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 a direct access to employment has been created in 1999. It is a one-year program proposed by universities. It has been a success story at the beginning and in 2015-16, we have registered until 52 000 students, mainly in apprenticeship or “Professional Contract”. This number is now more or less the same since 5 years and now some sectors says that they would prefer specific professional licence organise directly in 3 years and called “Bachelor”. This situation starts new discussion among stakeholders about the process of professionalization.

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

At the same time, a law called “of social modernisation” supported by all the ministries creates two important provisions: a national repository of professional certifications (RNCP for Répertoire National des Certifications Professionnelles) and a new full validation process called VAE (Validation des Acquis de l’Expérience). The national repository of professional certifications is under the control of a national commission, composed of representatives of social partners and State... Its role is, not less, to accept or not new certifications from all the sectors in the repository. A great point for Universities is that all the national diplomas delivered are registered as professional certification “automatically”. The validation of experience can be used to deliver a 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 repository.

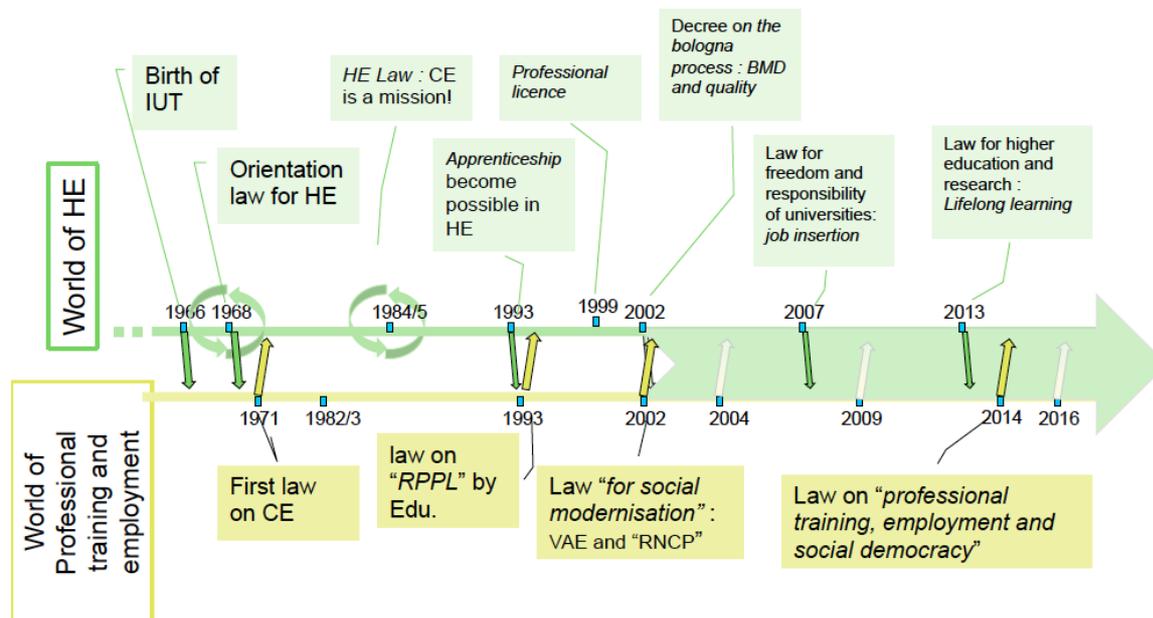
By this law, diplomas delivered by universities were officially recognised as professional certifications but to complete this recognition, they have to describe these certifications in terms of outcomes, skills and competencies. This work has been far easier for those, which had already invested on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

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

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

After the national elections in 2012, two new laws, one for each domain has been voted in 2013. The first one concerns higher education and transforms the first mission into: « Lifelong Initial and continuing education”. A difficult discussion has taken place but it was impossible to obtain the simple expression like “Lifelong learning”. Many other improvements of the connection with economy has been introduced in the regulations:

- The obligation of organise “Improvement councils” for each diploma (with professional to discuss of the program, outcomes, needs of the sectors....)
- A focus on Skills and competences for all programs (publication)
- The promotion of entrepreneurship
- The development of apprenticeship
- The improvement of the visibility for the public: reducing the number of titles for each level (Licences, Lpro and Masters)
- Etc.



The second law has been called “*professional training, employment and social democracy*” and has been voted 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 repository of all the professional certifications that can be chosen in the framework of the CPF and financed³.

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

Conclusions

We have flown over fifty years of evolution... What a long and hard work for those who think that the convergence between Higher Education and the “world of work” is important. The main reason pushing this evolution can be that Universities welcome a large part of the population during its life and that they have to be prepared to work, obviously. But we have also to take into account the quality and level of its personals (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. Economy and specifically companies have many to gain from this situation [4].

University Continuing Education has had a great contribution to this convergence, mainly because it has always put on the top the social responsibility of HEI and not only the business and resources generated by the French training market (9 billions each years) even if they have enabled centres to be self financed.

Considering the objectives of the new programs, developed under the logic of the new regulations which are more “skill oriented”, considering the “professional insertion of graduates” used as performance indicators for all HEI, 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 to say that universities are able to train “skilled graduates” for the world of work but also for the 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 creativity, innovation and ethic, but it’s sure that are HVET providers since 1966 and the emergence of the IUT.

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- [2] French HE Ministry publication.enseignementsup-recherche.gouv.fr/eesr/10/source-MENESR_SIES.php

³ Repository for the CPF is composed of long lists of diplomas. All diplomas must be registered in the national repository of professional certification, ... But it’s not enough...

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