

Students' perception of professional achievements and their effects on professional integration

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Abstract

Several authors have shown that little research has been done on the assessment of the professional achievements of young graduates in the pedagogical literature devoted to university education (Romainville, [1], [2], [3], [4] ; De Ketele, [5], [6], [7], [8], [9], [10], [11], Opinion of The High Council of Evaluation, [12] ; Boussada & De Ketele, [13], [14], [15]). The few studies that deal with student's learning revolve around four themes: the skills of students at the beginning of their studies (as in the Belgian interuniversity study «Mohican» coordinated by Leclercq, [16]), students' perception of the outcome skills (as in Heywood, [17]), their methodological skills (as in De Ketele, Draime and Voglaire, [18]; Lemenu & Heinen, [19]) and the general effects of higher education (as in Paul and Sulleman, [20]). However, few studies provide accurate indicators of measured professional skills and labour market requirements ((Fernex et Lima [21] ; Beduwe, [22] [23] ; Dubois, et Vourc'h, [24] ; Kouakou et Vianney Yapo [25])). This study is a retrospective evaluation of the quality of university education provided by graduates with work experience. The results of a questionnaire conducted with a sample of 158 students show the difficulty of the university in implementing relevant and valid assessments that promote the development of the required skills in professional life.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Several authors have shown that little research has been done on the assessment of the professional achievements of young graduates in the pedagogical literature devoted to university education (Romainville, [1], [2], [3], [4] ; De Ketele, [5], [6], [7], [8], [9], [10], [11]; Opinion of the High Council of Evaluation, [12]; Boussaada & De Ketele, [13], [14], [15]). The few studies that deal with the issue of student learning revolve around four themes: the skills of students at the beginning of their studies “Mohican”, coordinated by Leclercq, [16]), students' perception of the outcome skills (as in Heywood, [17]), their methodological skills (as in De Ketele, Draime and Voglaire, [18]; Lemenu & Heinen, [19]) and the general effects of higher education (as in Paul and Sulleman, [20]).

In the assessment of the essential skills required in the students' professional development, we have some studies on employers' perceptions of the skills that they believe students have acquired or should acquire upon completion of their university training. (Larquier and Marchal [26], Eymard-Duvernay et Marchal, [27]; Duru-Bellat, [28]) Béduwé, [22], [23]. However, there is lack of accurate knowledge on the perceptions of Tunisian students of their professional achievements and on their opinion about the relevance of the university professional development assessment system.

This study is a contribution to address this shortage. It should be regarded as a

retrospective assessment of the quality of university education by graduates with work experience. It focuses on two types of questions :

- To what extent does university training develop high-level skills which can be applicable and used in professional field?
- To what extent is the evaluation system relevant and valid, and capable of developing the vocational skills required in the labour market ?

These questions are particularly important to us. Indeed, the work in the field of university pedagogy and in the field of education in general, attempts to show (i) the effectiveness of new approaches to learning and skills assessment to the detriment of schemes exclusively focused on a set of specific objectives, (ii) the importance of calling upon prior skills in situations where problem solving is needed to allow better integration and reinvestment of prior learning, (iii) the need to prompt response to the demands of the labour market and employability.

This is why our study, conducted in what could be described as a “classic” university, focuses on three levels of analysis:

- Graduates' perception of the quality of the content of the provided training (theoretical knowledge, practical knowledge and developed skills) and the requirements of professional life in terms of skills (solving a problem, conducting a project, teamwork, etc.)
- Students' perception of the correlation between the skills assessed and the

skills deemed important for occupational integration.

- Graduates' perception of the quality of the evaluation system with respect to the subject, objectivity and fairness.

2. METHODOLOGY

2.1. Sample selection

This research sample is made up of **158** students (**60.8%** men and **39.2%** women) with specialized master's degree of the ISEFC having attended an initial disciplinary training in one of the following Tunisian universities: Faculty of Letters, Arts and Humanities of Manouba (**7.6%**), Faculty of Arts and Human Sciences 9 Avril (**14.6%**), Faculty of Sciences, Tunis (**13.9%**), University of Sciences, Bizerte (**14.6%**), Institute of Education and Continuing Education (**20.3%**), Faculty of Technical Sciences, Sfax (**7%**), Faculty of Sciences, Monastir (**8.9%**), Faculty of Arts, Jendouba (**3.2%**), Faculty of Arts, Sfax (**5.1%**), INSET (**5.1%**). Graduates come from cohorts ranging from 1980 to 2005: 27 (**17%**) between 1980 and 1988; 45 (**28.5%**) between 1991 and 1999; 86 (**54.5%**) between 2000 and 2005. We believe that this sample will provide specific information on students' satisfaction or dissatisfaction with the impact of university education on their professional development and their perception of the relevance and the validity of the evaluation system concerning the development of essential skills for the profession.

2.2. Method of data collection

The data was collected using a questionnaire based on four groups of variables: (1) general

information on the individual characteristics of the participants; (2) the professional universe of new graduates (to what extent are the acquired competences important for occupational integration and to what extent do the acquired competences actually prepare them for current profession?); (3) their perceptions of the relevance of the skills developed at graduation (what theoretical and practical knowledge have they acquired at university? What is its usefulness with regards to the demands of the labour market? What are the weaknesses and strengths of the training received at the university? How much of the acquired knowledge is really used in their professional activities? How do graduates assess their level of mastery of the skills acquired at the end of their university studies? How do they perceive the role of the university in the learning process and in the development of skills required for the labour market?); (4) the quality of the student assessment system (which skills are assessed? Which function(s) does university evaluation focus on? How is the grading system perceived?).

Most of the questions require an answer on Likert's 4-degree scale that invites participants to choose their point of view clearly (either positively or negatively) while allowing them to change it slightly.

3. PRESENTATION AND ANALYSIS OF GRADUATES' RESPONSES

3.1. University training and vocational integration

Our analyses reveal the following results:

- Dissatisfaction dominates both for training in general (**69.6%**) and for

skills acquired for vocational integration (**80.3%**).

- However, dissatisfaction with university training related to vocational integration does not mean that graduates completely reject it. Indeed, a number of participants consider university training useful (fairly well, if not entirely useful) for professional integration (**32.9%**) and for general knowledge (**39.2%**).
- The evaluation of graduates themselves is more nuanced concerning the relatively compulsory nature of the content taught for professional integration: 53.2% of graduates consider it to be relatively essential (**45.6%**) or quite essential (**7.6%**). They are much more disapprove of the skills developed at university for professional integration: only (**27.9%**) consider them relatively essential (**20.3%**) or quite essential (**7.6%**).

These results show that, through the eyes of students, university training is more content-oriented rather than skills-oriented, while employability involves acquiring skills.

3.2. University training and mastery of skills

The questionnaire presented to students a set of **33** “Competencies” that can be developed through university training. Participants were asked to evaluate their level of mastery of these upon graduation.

To clearly make the difference between well-mastered skills and less mastered ones according to graduates, we calculated an index *d* by making the

percentage difference between “strong mastery” and “no control”. We can therefore distinguish three skill groups according to whether the index is above **+20%**, between **+20%** and **-20%**, or below **-20%**.

- In the first group: four competencies stand out with an index of more than 20%:

Tableau 1. Competencies stand out with index of more 20%

Competencies	Index of more than 20%
Knowledge related to a specific sector	+34.2% ^a
Knowledge of methods related to a specific sector	+29.1%
Written communication	+25.9%
Ability to implement methods or regulations	+18.3%

^a. That is to say for example 40.4% - 6.3%)

- In the second sub-group, we find skills with mixed results in the sense that strong masteries are counterbalanced by uncontrolled mastery or vice versa. Thus, the memorisation is estimated to be highly controlled by **22.4%** of graduates, but **6.3%** believe they have no control over it (index = **16.1%**). The ability to learn has a lower index (**7%**), because while **22.2%** believe they have a strong mastery, **15.2%** believe they have no mastery. The survey of this set of skills confirms the argument that graduates very often give of the deeply academic character of high education. This will be confirmed by the survey of competences for which they consider

to have a particularly weak mastery with indexes d less than **-20%**.

- The third set comprises the following skills:

Tableau 2. the compétences that can be developed through university training

Competencies	The indexe
ability to work under pressure	-63.3%
leadership	-44.3%
teamwork	-40.5%
manual dexterity	-39.9%
adaptability	-38%
initiative	-34.8%
computer skills	-32.9%
ability to carry out a project	-32.3%
personal involvement	-31%
problem-solving skills	-30.3%
creativity	-26%
negotiation	-25.3%
responsibility and decision-making	-22.8%
time management	-22.1%

This survey (much longer than the first one) indicates that, with the possible exception of manual skills, these are skills which are highly valued by the current professional world and which will be increasingly valued in the knowledge-based society (Paul & Sulleman, [20] ; OCDE, [29]).

Graduates are highly aware of this, as shown in the results in Appendix (1), where they were asked to estimate the degree of importance of the same **33** skills for professional integration. We can really see that all the low-mastered skills, which we have just listed, have high importance for professional integration. However, written communication is the only skill considered to

be mastered at graduation and which is valuable for work life. These findings lead us to question the quality of students' assessment system and its impact on the "professionalization" of our new graduates.

3.3. Evaluation system

The first thing we wanted to do was to find out what were the actual skills being assessed at the university according to graduates. To do so, we presented them with a list of the **33** competencies that could be developed by university training and asked them to what extent they were "not at all evaluated", "little evaluated", "assessed fairly often", and "regularly assessed". To identify the most frequently assessed competencies, we calculated the percentage difference between "assessed very regularly" and "not assessed at all".

The following skills have obtained an index higher than **20%**:

Tableau 3. The most frequently assessed compétences

The most frequently assessed competencies	index higher than 20%
ability to learn	60.2%
ability to memorize	39.3%
ability to reconstruct a course	33.6%
ability to analyse	26.5%
field-specific knowledge	24.7%

These represent very classic academic skills.

To identify the least frequently assessed competencies, we calculated the percentage difference between "not assessed at all" and "assessed very regularly". The least evaluated skills have an index of more than **20%** and they are:

Tableau 4. The least frequently assessed compétences

Competencies frequently assessed	Index of more than 20%
Leadership	72.8%
Ability to auto-evaluate one's performance	68.4%
Ability to resolve projects	67.7%
Negotiation	57%
Creativity	56.3%
Taking responsibility and decision-making	53.2%
Personal involvement	51.9%
Time management	48.8%
Manual skills	48.7%
Teamwork	48.1%
Computer skills	47.5%
Interdisciplinary knowledge	46.2%
Oral communication	44.3%
Ability to plan, to coordinate and organize	43.7%
Ability to work under pressure	41.1%
Ability to solve problems	39.8%
Taking initiative	36.7%
General knowledge	36.7%
Written communication	34.1%
Ability to concentrate	31%
Adaptability	30.4%
Autonomy at work	22.8%

Here again, we find skills which, for the most part, are considered important in the professional world and by graduates themselves, if not very important, for professional integration. It is interesting to note that among the 22 less frequently assessed skills, 14 are also reported to be poorly mastered. There are 6 skills which are estimated to be poorly evaluated but are not

among the least mastered skills. We can explain this by the fact that, indirectly, the work provided by the student at the university explains the progressive development of self-criticism ability, the concentration ability, the ability to plan, coordinate and organize, autonomy at work, oral communication (this is perhaps less obvious) and interdisciplinary knowledge (during the study, the student feels that s/he is building bridges between disciplines). Alongside the classical academic « *formal curriculum* » there is a « *hidden curriculum* » which is not insignificant. No doubt these results explain the severe judgment that graduates have on the functions performed by the university evaluation system, by the implemented system of grading and on the criteria of the allotted marks.

While 67.7% of graduates strongly agree that an effective assessment system allows (implies “must allow”) to improve the quality of student learning, they strongly disagree that (i) the evaluation system they experienced at the university had a formative value (69.6% “strongly disagree” versus 0% “strongly agree”), (ii) the test scoring system was clearly explained (86.7% “strongly disagree” versus 0% “strongly agree”), (iii) objective (41.8% “strongly disagree” versus 0% “strongly agree”) and (iv) ensures equal opportunities for all students (57% “strongly disagree” versus 0.6% “strongly agree”). Concerning the mark, it seems to depend, above all, on the ability to memorize (48.7% «strongly agree» and 31% «agree»), and to a lesser extent on the art of well presenting one's answer (49.4% «agree» and 3.2 «strongly agree»); however, it seems to depend less on the effort made (only 19.6% «agree» and 3.8% «completely agree»).

4. SYNTHESIS AND DISCUSSION

Our initial hypotheses were formulated on the basis of observed signs that led us to say that Tunisian high education was too exclusively academic (« *too much is the enemy of the good* ») and was lagging behind the requirements of the development of the so-called knowledge society.

The first hypothesis was that graduates believe that the content of high education (both theoretical and practical knowledge) is insufficient and unsatisfactory to promote the development of skills required by the labour market. The results obtained lead to this idea and we just need to look at the indicators in *Table 5*. Theoretical and mainly practical knowledge is insufficient and useless. Among the graduates, **67.4%** report that they never use or make little use of the knowledge acquired at university in their professional lives.

Tableau 5. Main indicators related to hypothesis 1

	<i>Insufficient^a</i>	<i>Useless^b</i>
Theoretical knowledge	79.8%	77.2%
Practical knowledge	93.7%	91.2%

^b. Totally insufficient + insufficient

^c. Totally useless + a bit useful

The second hypothesis was that graduates believe that the skills assessed are not those required in the professional life. Our results showed that the skills most frequently assessed are the ability to learn (calculated index = **60.2%**), the ability to memorize (**39.3%**), the ability to reconstruct a course (**33.6%**), the ability to analyze (**26.5%**) and field-specific knowledge (**24.7%**). While the first two are considered relatively important (but not the most important), the latter have

very low scores of importance. However, graduates identify **22** skills that are hardly evaluated and yet they consider them important, even very important. *Table 6* shows them together with the calculated indexes, the first one indicates the scarcity of the competence assessment and the second the importance for professional life.

Tableau 6. Evaluation scarcity and importance of skills

	Evaluation scarcity	Its importance in professional life
Leadership	72.8%	34.1%
Self-criticism	68.4%	52.5%
Project resolution	67.7%	44.9%
Negotiation	57.6%	56.3%
Creativity	56.3%	60.1%
Taking responsibility	53.2%	57%
Personal involvement	51.9%	49.4%
Time management	48.8%	67.1%
Manual dexterity	48.7%	50.8%
Team work	48.1%	44.9%
Computer sciences	47.5%	46.9%
Interdisciplinary knowledge	46.2%	53.8%
Oral Communication	44.3%	51.3%
Planning, coordinating, organising	43.7%	36.1%
Work under pressure	41.1%	15.8%
Problem solving	39.8%	69.6%
Initiative	36.7%	15.2%
General knowledge	36.7%	56.3%
Written Communication	35.1%	62%
Concentration	31%	36.1%
Adaptability	30.4%	58.2%
Work Autonomy	22.8%	15.8%

Among these **22** skills which are too rarely assessed in high education, **19** are considered important and even very important by participants. But three of them challenge us, because they are considered much less important by our graduates, while they are of

high importance for professionals: (i) working under pressure; (ii) taking initiatives; (iii) autonomy at work. Once again, we wonder if the public service “syndrome” has not already impacted our graduates working in the education sector. It should be noted that these 22 skills are among the most used to defend current pedagogical approaches, namely problem-based and project-based approaches.

The third hypothesis states that graduates of the University of Tunis believe that the assessment system is not relevant since it is not objective and does not provide equal chances of success. This hypothesis is fully supported. Indeed, not a single student has fully agreed that the evaluation system is objective and only one student out of 158 has fully agreed that the evaluation system ensures equal opportunities for all students. The university assessment system is more problematic for our graduates than clearly explained.

As a conclusion, if one of the important criteria for the quality of high education is good preparation for vocational integration, what seems to be increasingly considered by university evaluation or accreditation institutions (GUNI, [30]), and whether university graduates are among the best to assess this criterion, we have to admit that the training provided in the universities from which our students graduated must be improved. There is undoubtedly an important effort to be done in several areas: (i) to improve the teaching-staff vision concerning the university training mission; (ii) to train them, and especially the next generation, with pedagogical approaches that better prepare for professional integration; (iii) review the evaluation system, both in its

priority objective and in its technical aspects, following the saying “*tell me what you assess and I'll tell you what students will seek to learn*”.

5. CONCLUSION

As we have shown throughout our research, students' perception of the skills they think they have mastered during their high education and of the evaluation system for the professional future seems to us an important and even essential source for assessing the quality of teaching in Tunisian universities. The challenge of this research lies largely in the perspectives it offers. We believe that the results obtained offer a good basis and an opportunity to raise the awareness of academic leaders and stakeholders in higher education about the problem of the impact of university training on graduates' professional future and on building Tunisian society. We are convinced that this vast project to ensure quality education in the institutions can certainly encompass not only the opinion of students but also the involvement of various stakeholders. Its promotion, as Ricci [31] points out, « *can only be the fruit of the commitment of multiple stake holders in multiple actions* » (p. 55).

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(i) It was necessary to contact graduates with work experience who are following a shift schedule in a master's degree specialized in didactics of disciplines. This training takes place in the context of the professionalization of education practitioners to prepare them for teaching and research.

(ii) Higher Institute of Education and Continuing Education.

(iii) A literature review was required to list the skills offered to students (Drew [32], Romainville [3], Paul et Suleman [20]). By examining the definition of competence, we were able to identify several reflections. Some refer to transversal skills and others of generic skills, but there are few reflections on the contextualized skills needed for professional integration.