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**Inter-University Consortium for Agriculture and Related Sciences (ICA)
The Royal Veterinary and Agricultural University – KVL - Copenhagen**

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“Rethinking Higher Education in the Food Chain and Environment”

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**Improving the first destination of graduates:
an institutional challenge**

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Abstract

Finding a first destination is a challenge for graduates, higher education institutions and employers alike. Graduates look to minimise the risks of an unsuitable first destination and its consequences for their future career and professional development. Institutions seek to optimise society's substantial investment in education by getting their graduates off to a successful career start. Employers try to minimise recruitment costs and to avoid the consequences of mis-recruitment (delays, disruption of existing teams, etc.).

Therefore finding a successful first destination is not only the responsibility of individual students but, through careers guidance, is also part of the educational process for which the institutions are responsible.

This type of action requires a set-up that gets students themselves to take matters in hand. The challenge is therefore to get students to see the need to make informed decisions. They need help in being made aware of their abilities, their wishes, their strengths and their weaknesses and they need to be prompted to take the necessary steps and to be pro-active about their education, to give meaning to the skills they acquire and to control the circumstances of their first recruitment.

On the basis of the recent experience of *Agrocampus Rennes* (France), this paper aims to analyse how a higher education institution may address this issue and may try to respond to the need for a tutorial/training process for the career start of students/young graduates.

For several years now *Agrocampus Rennes* has conducted an active policy of individual support for its graduates in finding their first destinations. Apart from other existing conventional activities, the paper focusses on two different recent initiatives: the career planning process and the occupation profiles project.

The paper also provides some figures about the first destination of French agricultural students and recalls about the general organisation of the French agricultural higher education system.

Key words: career start, career planning process, occupation profiles, job market, agricultural graduates

1 - An overview of the issues

With the state of the job market being as it is, graduates can no longer rely solely on a degree, however prestigious it may be, to find employment after completing their studies. The sheer variety of degrees and courses, the ever wider spectrum covered by agricultural higher education, the growing importance of specialisation in students' education and training, the competition from other types of courses, the changes in employment sectors and in the positions for which new graduates are recruited make it more difficult than before to get into the job market.

Paradoxically, graduates from our institutions get a good education but, because of their academic career, are not as much in touch with the world of work as young people having been through more vocationally-oriented educational courses (with vocational diplomas or first degrees).

Finding a first destination is a challenge for graduates, higher education institutions and employers alike. Graduates look to minimise the risks of an unsuitable first destination and its consequences for their future career and professional development. Institutions seek to optimise society's substantial investment in education by getting their graduates off to a successful career start. Employers try to minimise recruitment costs and to avoid the consequences of mis-recruitment (delays, disruption of existing teams, etc.).

Therefore finding a successful first destination is not only the responsibility of individual students but, through careers guidance, is also part of the educational process for which the institutions are responsible (CEFI, 2004).

Our universities are responsible for avoiding excessive trial-and-error or worse still failure because of a poor choice of first destination with the disastrous effects it may have on graduates' self-esteem or on their future career paths.

For all these reasons higher education institutions are fully justified in actively supporting graduates in finding their first destinations and this is arguably as much their responsibility as is their duty to provide a high standard of education.

This type of action requires a set-up that gets students themselves to take matters in hand (Stephan, 2004). Not only should students be provided with information but they must be made aware that they need this information to make the right decisions. The challenge is therefore to get students to see the need to make informed decisions. They need help in being made aware of their abilities, their wishes, their strengths and their weaknesses and they need to be prompted to take the necessary steps and to be pro-active about their education, to give meaning to the skills they acquire and to control the circumstances of their first recruitment.

On the basis of the recent experience of *Agrocampus Rennes* (France), this paper aims to analyse how a higher education institution may address this issue and may try to respond to the need for a tutorial/training process for the career start of students/young graduates.

We first set out the general framework of agricultural higher education in France and describe the state of the market for graduate recruitment on the basis of recent survey results. Then we analyse arrangements recently put in place in Rennes emphasising the role of two pilot schemes.

2 - The French agricultural higher education system

The French agricultural higher education system is original in that it is part of the *école d'ingénieurs* system and has a long history of control by the Ministry of Agriculture.

Post-graduate engineers⁵ enjoy a very specific socio-economic position in France. 'In none of the major developed countries, including those which, like the United States and Germany, were the first to promote higher education to train their technical elites, is the distinction between engineer and technician so contrasted, nor the social prestige attached to an engineer's title so high' (Bouffartigue and Gadéa, 1997).

Their education is provided within a specific system known in France and abroad as *Grandes Écoles* or *Écoles d'ingénieurs*, which developed historically alongside the conventional university system. The *Grandes Écoles d'ingénieurs* were first set up as part of the late 18th century Enlightenment and developed with the positivist movement. With the impetus of a centralised, interventionist state they expanded in the 19th century to cater for most sectors of the economy (agriculture included) turning out highly qualified managerial personnel capable of ensuring the modernisation and economic development of a newly industrialising country. This form of education gradually took precedence both in economic spheres and in public administration. Thus engineers have achieved a very high socio-economic standing within French society and in business circles, higher than that of most conventional university graduates. However, they make up less than five per cent of the overall output from the French higher education system.

French agricultural higher education is strongly anchored in this tradition of engineers' education. Unlike in other European countries, there are broadly-based, multidisciplinary curricula with an emphasis on management. This is why economics and management courses are so significant and case studies or work placements feature very prominently, as does foreign language teaching, which is generally mandatory and has gained importance over the last decade.

Education has been dramatically transformed over the last 20 years to take on board changes in agriculture, the rural world and the food chain. The professional outlook of graduates has become much broader, reaching far beyond the bounds of agriculture alone. As in other countries, there is an ongoing debate in the academic community as to whether certain changes are warranted, be it new degree profiles to be developed or the respective standing of fundamental and applied science (Ruffio, 1995).

These factors explain why engineers, whatever their specialist area, fare better than university graduates statistically when it comes to finding employment; they enjoy lower unemployment, faster first recruitment, higher incomes and more dynamic career paths (e.g. Koubi and Mazars, 2003).

⁵ A master's type degree: five-year course (300 ECTS credits).

3 - Characteristics of the first destinations of French agricultural graduates

A recent survey conducted by Toulouse Social Sciences University's Student Observatory for the Ministry of Agriculture reported on the first destinations of engineers graduating from the Ministry's institutions in 1998 (analysis of their initial employment and their occupation in 2002, that is four years after graduating) (Boudier, 2003).

Table 1 shows the survey's main findings, separating the three main categories of agricultural educational institutions:

- public institutions belonging to the group of *écoles nationales supérieures d'agronomie* (Paris, Montpellier, Rennes, Toulouse, Nancy, Dijon–Food Sciences) (I)
- other public institutions (Bordeaux, Clermont-Ferrand, Nantes, Dijon–Agricultural Sciences, Angers–Horticulture, etc.) (II)
- *écoles supérieures d'agriculture*, private institutions under contract to the state (Angers, Purpan, Beauvais, Lille, Lyon, Val de Reuil) (III)

The survey shows French agricultural science graduates get a good start on the career path. First recruitment is rapid and to good positions insofar as most graduates take up managerial positions. Respondents report this is because of the wide scope of their education, their experience abroad (especially work placements), their foreign language skills, and the career development and employment services of their educational institution. The placement when preparing their master's dissertation is also important in this respect.

The survey does reveal, however, differences by sex and type of institution from which respondents graduated.

Women continue their studies more often than men, who move into working life more quickly. Women are recruited more often on provisional contracts and remain (four years later) less well positioned on the labour market.

The recruitment patterns⁶ and social backgrounds of students at the three types of educational institutions investigated are somewhat different. Likewise, graduate access to the job market is variable. Graduates from category I institutions tend to go on with their studies and many go into employment unrelated to the food chain, in which they work in managerial positions. Most graduates from category III institutions go into food chain-related sectors while those from category II favour the public sector at intermediate levels of responsibility.

However, to maintain their lead and to cope with recent difficulties on the job market and with growing competition from other educational courses (e.g. business and management), some institutions have opted to become more actively involved in the career development of their graduates.

⁶ Schematically at the end of secondary education (type III) or at bachelor level (type I and II).

Table 1: First destination of 1998 graduates and their employment situation in 2002

	Type of institution			
	(I)	(II)	(III)	Total
Number of graduates surveyed	358	348	361	1067
Sex				
Male (%)	38.5	49.4	53.2	47.0
Female (%)	61.5	50.6	46.8	53.0
Family background				
- Farming (%)	7.5	17.0	33.2	19.4
- Managerial, liberal professions (%)	58.6	44.6	40.6	47.9
- Others (%)	33.9	38.4	26.2	32.7
Further education (after graduation in 1998) (%)*	27.4	23.9	19.1	23.4
Average time to find first employment (months and days)	2 m 12 d	2 m 25 d	2 m 1 d	2 m 25 d
- male				1 m 28 d
- female				2 m 25 d
% of graduates in employment after 3-months' job-seeking	61.5	64.9	68.5	65.0
- male				72.4
- female				58.6
Type of employment contract (first job)				
- provisional	65.6	60.8	69.4	65.4
- permanent	34.4	39.2	30.6	34.6
Main areas of employment in 2002 (4 years after graduation)				
- food processing industry	18.5	15.1	21.3	18.4
- farming and related areas	11.4	12.7	18.8	14.3
- business services (related to agriculture)	10.1	11.0	15.6	12.3
- business services (unrelated to agriculture)	18.2	7.2	4.1	9.8
- education and research	8.1	11.4	8.9	9.4
- marketing food and agricultural products	3.9	5.1	8.9	6.0
- public administration related to agriculture	5.5	8.6	4.1	6.0
- other public administration	6.2	7.9	2.9	5.6
% related to farming, food and environment	58.7	74.1	84.3	72.5
% managerial staff	80.2	64.9	69.0	71.6
% in multinational firms	39.3	24.2	26.2	30.0
% in public sector	15.1	28.0	7.2	16.6
Unemployment level in 2002	4.5	2.6	4.2	3.8
- male				2.6
- female				4.7

* graduates having started new courses after completing their agricultural degree course (obtained in 1998)
Source: Boudier (2003)

4 - A structure to promote graduate career starts: the case of *Agrocampus Rennes*

For several years now *Agrocampus Rennes*⁷ has conducted an active policy of individual support for its graduates in finding their first destinations:

- by formalising an individual career-planning process for each student⁸
- by providing students with a set of tools and resources as part of a specialised career development service.

Thus in addition to the conventional activities included in the students' basic education (work placement, conferences with visiting professionals, compulsory teaching modules for human resource management, etc.), various services are available to students based on their own personal initiatives.

The primary mechanism is to encourage students to think in terms of developing their own career paths and to ensure they are doing so, to facilitate its formulation and then possibly to help them with the process.

This mostly involves:

- group training sessions on recruitment techniques, interviewing and writing a curriculum vitae.
- organising an annual one-day recruitment fair attended by some thirty firms or organisations. Students attend presentations by these firms, make direct contacts with them or participate in round-table discussions on the various careers in their specialist areas.
- provision of a database of entrance-level vacancies, which is updated weekly and can be consulted on the internet.
- access to a specialist library on employment, careers, firms and supervised access to a set of multimedia resources (telephone, fax, computers).
- customised individual support with career planning.
- development of a set of occupation profiles which graduates in our sectors may take up.

The last two initiatives were introduced recently and have been the subject of special focus in recent years. They are worth a closer look.

⁷ This is a new organisation formed by the merger in 2004 of *l'École nationale Supérieure Agronomique de Rennes* (ENSAR) and *l'Institut National Supérieur de Formation Agro-alimentaire de Rennes* (INSFA). It turns out some 200 graduates a year at master's level.

⁸ There is also a formalised process for supporting and advising students on their individual education and training (system of personal tutors among teaching staff and formal trial presentation of an educational project to a panel of tutors).

4.1 - The career-planning process

Definition

A service has been in place since 1997 to provide individual support to each final-year student. The service is based on entitlement to an individual interview with a specialist in this area.

Students are free to take advantage of this opportunity if they so wish. They are told of it during their course and actively reminded of it at the beginning of their final year.

The institution secures the assistance of a team of paid advisors (human resource managers, recruitment officers or career guidance officers, recruitment consultants) who all share the same concerns and apply the same method (preparation and interview form).

Each student wishing to participate is assigned to an advisor with whom the student goes through one or more interviews. The two-hour per student interview credit is generally spread over two or three interviews, depending on how far advanced the student's career-planning process is.

The objective is to move gradually (using the other tools available) from a somewhat hazy idea about a possible future occupation to a specific project and a coherent action plan designed to open the gateway to the desired position. In other words, students move to a position where they are aware of their strengths and of where they stand relative to the environment and are themselves convinced and can convince others that their objectives and ambitions are achievable.

Process

The approach used is similar to the funnel process and involves personal reflection on external factors (the economic situation, the state the sectors of activity are in, changes in careers available, the labour market), internal factors (review of hopes and aspirations, evaluation of own potential, definition of objectives, review of skills, etc.) and ends by focusing on an action plan including the sector of activity, type of occupation and specific job, combined with a strategy to achieve it. This strategy includes a time-frame and concrete resources.

Within this process, the confrontation between oneself and the real world is essential. A thorough knowledge and evaluation of both is required. Information about external factors can be investigated by anyone at their own level provided they have the resources to direct their research and to be in a state of personal preparedness that allows it. The interviews are therefore aimed at reinforcing the students' realism and developing their ability to seek out relevant information and then to move in the direction they want to go.

The interview therefore runs through the following stages:

- becoming aware of aspirations and objectives,
- objectivising strengths and weaknesses,
- formalising a project including the chosen sector and career,
- defining and planning what steps to take.

Each student receives a personal dossier covering the different stages and presupposing a personal preparatory phase for each stage. The final formulation of the project involves a full write-up validated by the advisor.

As the process is a voluntary one, the students give an undertaking to see it through to the end. Completion is formalised by a final written document signed by both student and advisor.

Appraisal

This action is now well tried-and-tested and is widely taken up by students. Some 70 per cent take avail of the system. A network of some 40 professionals regularly participate and meet twice yearly to evaluate the action in qualitative and quantitative terms and to take it forward.

4.2 - The occupation profiles

Definition

Agrocampus Rennes undertook early in 2001 to draw up a list of occupation profiles⁹ that graduates might take up in the farming, agrifood and environment sectors. Since 2003 this action has been extended nationwide and *Agrocampus Rennes* co-ordinates a working party with participants from most French institutions.

This action is designed to meet three requirements:

- increasing demand from **students** for greater visibility of the contents of the occupations in question. They need clear and precise information to develop their career plans, to choose their specialist subject for their master's degree and to prepare for job seeking or for recruitment interviews.
- the need of **teaching staff** to update course content and curricula and match them to employers' needs and expectations. This information also provides fuel for dialogue with students.
- the need for our institution to have a reference and **evaluation tool** to validate the work experience of professionals (mature students) when awarding qualifications.

This is a tool for internal use. It is not intended as a communication tool to explain occupations to secondary school pupils during careers guidance or to inform potential employers about the courses provided.

Each occupation profile provides four categories of information:

- mission: general objectives of the occupation within a firm's organisation of work.
- activities: list of the main activities characterising the occupation; actions or groups of actions to be performed in this occupation, which may be ranked in hierarchical or chronological order.
- competencies: these are the skills needed to successfully carry out the occupation.

⁹ An occupation (*métier* in French) profile is a generic term for a collection of professional activities describing the common features (usually 60–80 per cent) of a set of positions whose main activities are of a similar kind and where the competencies and know-how involved are relatively uniform, while escaping the constraints of the diversity of structures and employment situations.

- Knowledge: acquired in the course of initial or vocational education and training; areas of knowledge required to perform the occupation together with their level based on a rank order (basic, competent, skilled, expert).
- Know-how: true potential to do the work that may be nurtured through vocational experience or in-service training.
- Predisposition: personal qualities, behaviour, affinities, temperament.

The competencies indicated are those which are both specific and relevant to the occupation.

- Occupational environment: localisation and working conditions (co-workers/travelling).

To date some 30 occupation profiles have been drawn up covering sectors as varied as animal and plant production, agrifood industry, the environment, and occupations ranging from commercial activity to consultancy via management. A sample occupation profile is appended.

Drawing up the occupation profiles

The occupation profiles are developed by a high-resolution analysis in several stages:

- preliminary documentary analysis: company job descriptions, job vacancies, etc.
- semi-directed individual interviews with 3–5 professionals currently working in the occupation under analysis and having a degree of control over their employment situation.
- validation by a panel of serving professionals and teaching staff to reach final consensus on the contents of each occupation profile.

The professionals chosen are a non-representative sample but do provide a grasp of the diversity of situations. The panel discussions are designed to identify the core features of the occupation.

Appraisal

This iterative process (collection of information, synthesis, validation) is time-consuming, demanding and expensive. It entails mobilising specific human resources which are now pooled at national level. Moreover, the process requires regular revision (planned for every 3–5 years) of the profile contents and of the occupations list (mapping) which had to be drawn up beforehand.

In terms of their use, these profiles must provide objective benchmarks against which students can align their ideas about the realities of work. However, there is nothing hard and fast about them as professions are never static. Nor does each professional necessarily exercise all the functions at one and the same time. This is why students using the profiles are advised to discuss them with other students and teaching staff who know these occupations or with their advisor (see above).

Overall, this project is currently at the development stage, and its promoters have been surprised at the interest shown by the firms and organisations contacted. Some professional

partners even envisage using this tool to clarify and define the occupations relevant to them, particularly with a view to certification of quality assurance systems in their business.

Conclusion

The experience acquired in Rennes in terms of first destinations of graduates shows that a successful process depends on a number of factors which cannot always readily be brought together:

- a firm commitment from the institution's governing bodies,
- acceptance of the operating costs of such a set-up,
- mobilisation of specific competencies to co-ordinate and operate the system,
- enhanced awareness of teaching staff,
- an information system.

The approach must also be open to the outside world and conducted in a network with the world of work (firms and potential employers, alumni associations or specialist employment centres¹⁰).

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¹⁰ For instance in France: APEC: *association pour l'emploi des cadres* (association for the employment of managerial staff) or APECITA: *association pour l'emploi des cadres, ingénieurs et techniciens de l'agriculture et de l'agroalimentaire* (association for the employment of executives, engineers and technicians in agriculture and the food industry).

Appendix:

A sample occupation profile (in French)

Secteur d'activités : **PRODUCTIONS VEGETALES**
sous-secteur : *Appui technique à la filière*

réf. fiche : PV- S4F3n°4

Ingénieur CONSEIL(LERE) SPECIALISE(E) (en agronomie, en productions végétales, en productions légumières...)

Mission

Apporter méthodes, appui et conseils à l'agriculteur, par des interventions collectives et individuelles, pour l'aider à atteindre ses objectifs de production de qualité, en fonction des contraintes techniques, économiques et environnementales

Activités

Accompagnement collectif

- Proposer ou faciliter l'émergence de thèmes de travail collectif (formations, démonstrations, campagnes de mesures...) pour les agriculteurs
- Développer et mettre en œuvre des méthodes et des moyens permettant de diffuser des informations et d'accompagner le transfert d'innovations (réunions, visites de terrain, portes ouvertes, voyages d'étude...)
- Concevoir et assurer des interventions dans des formations au profit des acteurs du monde agricole (groupe d'agriculteurs, techniciens, étudiants...)
- Rédiger des articles pour les agriculteurs et autres personnes concernées (résultats d'essais, sensibilisation, conseils de saison...)
- Conseiller les agriculteurs et leurs organisations face aux procédures administratives et réglementaires

Accompagnement individuel

- Analyser les besoins des agriculteurs et leur proposer des services et prestations adaptés aux contraintes techniques, économiques et environnementales de l'exploitation (diagnostic des cultures, conseil de fertilisation, assolement...)
- Mettre en œuvre la prestation chez l'agriculteur (analyser la situation, proposer des conseils, suivre les mises en pratique)
- Proposer des solutions en réponse aux demandes ponctuelles

Veille et recherche de références

- Assurer une veille technique, scientifique et réglementaire
- Maintenir et apporter son expertise technique
- Proposer des expérimentations en station expérimentale ou chez l'agriculteur, les mettre en place, les suivre, interpréter les résultats, les synthétiser et les communiquer
- Monter et réaliser des projets individuels ou en collaboration : réponse aux appels d'offres, recherche de moyens et de partenaires, présentation devant les instances concernées...

Compétences

<u>Savoirs</u>	<u>Savoir-Faire</u>	<u>Savoir-Etre</u>
<ul style="list-style-type: none">➤ Connaissances approfondies en agronomie et en productions végétales➤ Connaissance du milieu agricole➤ Notions en sciences de l'environnement (hydrologie, science du sol) et en productions animales➤ Notions d'économie agricole et de gestion	<p><i>Capacités :</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">➤ à animer et à communiquer en public➤ à travailler d'une façon autonome mais aussi en équipe➤ à s'organiser pour gérer de front des activités multiples et variées➤ à concilier des points de vue différents	<ul style="list-style-type: none">➤ aisance relationnelle➤ écoute➤ adaptabilité➤ ténacité

Environnement du métier

▪ **Localisation :**

Chambres d'Agriculture, groupements de producteurs, coopératives et négoce, instituts et centres techniques agricoles, cabinets d'études...

▪ **Spécificités du métier :**

- Métier avant tout sur le terrain, avec de nombreux déplacements
- Pluridisciplinarité et disponibilité sont nécessaires pour faire face à de multiples et diverses sollicitations qu'il faut évaluer
- Travail en équipe (confrontation des expériences, harmonisation des méthodes, apport d'informations...)

Dans les structures à but lucratif, se rajoutent des activités à dimension commerciale.

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