



Description of practical placements in France

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Practical placement (PP) in France encompasses several realities according to the national dispositions. It concerns institutional system, pedagogical organisation, modalities to get a qualification. The general definition is a period of time spent by students in a company in order to be initiated to work organisation, to get work experience and to be assessed for skills, competences and qualification acquired.

In a more specific way, in the French higher education system, we have to distinguish practical placement in the University on one side, in the Engineering and Business School (5 years program) on the other side. As Engineering and Business Schools are professionally oriented, they are, since a long time, familiar with placement of students. However, there is no general rules, and each school may decide about the duration, the schedule and the extent of PP. The practical placement is more often in a company, and his submitted to general laws on national level. The placement is generally requested at the end of the studies (4th or 5th years) and its duration is around 6 monthes

As the role of the University was until recently limited to produce and transmit knowledge, the need to include PP in its curriculum was not a priority. But recently, the connection between the academic world and work experience was developed as a solution to adapt curricula to the evolution of society and of work organization. The practical placement with work experience was presented as the innovative answer to graduates' difficulties to integrate the job market. Nowadays, although there is no requirements, Universities of applied sciences include often in their curriculum practical activities either in a company or in a laboratory. The so-called *stage* as been recently extended to many curricula of the university, but without strict rules about duration, connections between academic and company tutors and final evaluation. More recently, with the Bachelor-Master-Phd system, new curricula with vocational objectives, *the Professional Bachelor* and the *Professional Master*, include a compulsory PP.

Good examples of PP of students in higher education are found in technical and short curricula (2 years duration after High School). The BTS (Brevet de Technicien Supérieur) in the Technical College) and the DUT (Diplôme Universitaire de Technologie) in the University, include in their curricula a compulsory and strictly organized placement. In the BTS, there is two training periods in company, of approximately one month duration each, one each year. In the DUT, this period is 10-15 weeks, generally at the end of the second year, and hence may be considered, in some cases, as a test period in the view to be hired. In both cases, an agreement has to be signed by the Chairman of the university or the head of the department, the tutor of the enterprise, the academic tutor and the student. The company's tutor is supposed to receive a compensation from is employer to support his effort by training the student. The academic tutor has to meet the enterprise tutor and the student in the enterprise, at least one time. At the end of the internship, the student must present an individual written report and an oral power-point presentation in front

of an examination board where are represented at least both the academic and the enterprise tutors.

At the beginning of the school year, the enterprise supervisor, who has selected the main activity given to the apprentice according to the academic programme, writes the objectives of the student's activities during his placement, the results expected and the means at his disposal to reach his objectives. : At half of the year the enterprise supervisor realises an intermediate evaluation of the student work. At the end of the academic year he has to assess with the same grids presented above the quality of the work carry out by the apprentice.

The student has theoretically to search for a placement by himself. But the quality of the placement has to be evaluated by the academic tutor. There is often an office (or a person) which provides help in searching for placement opportunities. A directory of former placements is generally available. The students are trained by the academic team for interviews, written cv and cover letters. Placement in a foreign country is strongly encouraged.

The financial support from the company may vary from one company to the other from nothing to few hundreds of euros per month. Under 330 euros, the company has not to support social insurances and welfare. Above this amount, the student is considered as a regular employer and the company must pay all the employer's social security contributions. There is a recent obligation for the employer to give a minimum salary to the student for placements longer than three months. But, there is a government bill to reduce this duration to two months.

To improve the internship system, the French education organization has made big efforts to encourage the development of the so-called *alternance* in higher education. Confronted inside with a rising rate of examination failures and outside with an increasing unemployment rate, the French university had to adapt to new situations made by the student's demand and the work environment. The aim of the alternate university/enterprise curriculum is to promote (in addition to the general knowledge given traditionally by the university) professional skills, or more explicitly :

- ⇒ knowledges adapted to up-to-date need of the company
- ⇒ practical and technical competences
- ⇒ professional behaviour

The student, called « *apprenti* » spends during the school year « short » period (which can be few days, few weeks, or in some cases, few months) alternately at university and in the company. Students and companies receive material benefits from this apprenticeship. The student, on his side, has a real contract of employment with a salary which may vary between 41% and 78% of the SMIC (SMIC : *Salair Minimum Interprofessionnel de Croissance* . minimum salary for 35 hours per week. In July 2008 the SMIC was 1321€gross per month or 1000 €net, both before income taxes. The company, on the other side, is exonerated from employer's social security contributions and receive a basic allowance of 1000 €per apprentice-student.

The main difficulties arise from the control of the quality of placement, the required involvement of the academic staff, and the time consuming visit in the enterprise.