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# Anglo-American lessons for Luxembourg and Europe in education?

A few reflections borne out of personal experience and exposure

Luxembourg and other European countries could and should learn from more open-ended systems without copying their negative traits, otherwise they risk losing out to international competition.

It is of course a truism to say that education and the way in which it relates to the world of work varies significantly, depending on the country. One of the most salient differences between the Anglo-American system and its European-continental counterparts is precisely a more flexible approach to education that allows for less rigid career paths. Luxembourg could perhaps learn significantly from other countries in structuring how people are educated, how they are best prepared for the 'real world' and the extent to which flexibility within it should be allowed for. The labour market in Luxembourg arguably still suffers from a considerable amount of protectionism and this is of course reflected in the academic and non-academic paths people pursue.

## Examples of flexibility

A good example: in the UK it can be quite normal for someone to have studied humanities, such as Classics, and to end up in a career in the realm of consulting or finance. Some humanities and STEM degrees are considered among the most competitive and toughest, and quite a few employers in the City of London would rather simply employ someone who can dedicate him- or herself to a difficult topic over a set period of time. In Luxembourg people are usually expected to study for

the career they have in mind, and the demands of employers usually reflect this.

A further example: already at the undergraduate level in the US, people in their first year study from a wide range of subjects across different fields and only then make up their mind what more precisely defined field they would like to pursue in the humanities or the sciences. This has the double advantage of letting them experiment with different subjects, and equally giving them a broader background and,

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to use two fashionable terms, 'transferable' and 'transversal' skills. This allows people to already 'explore' different avenues of research at the undergraduate level.

In the UK, one of the ways in which people can switch from one topic at university to a different profession are the so-called graduate schemes which last between one and three years and allow prospective or recent graduates a full and paid immersion in the labour market. The idea is that 'you

learn on the job' and that one can progress from there and even build a career in a field that might not be what one had originally imagined. It is for instance possible for a linguist to embark on a graduate scheme in IT and thus become a proficient coder through immersion in a graduate scheme. This is all the more relevant in a work environment where jobs are changing constantly, as for instance caused by rapid economic transformation through robotisation and AI. Luckily, there are signs that this is changing: the Luxembourg Central Bank has been offering graduate schemes where people with a variety of backgrounds can explore different lines of work and then perhaps later forge a career which reflects preferences that have been explored in this initial professional environment.

Another major difference in the Anglo-American system is that it is often possible to pursue a postgraduate degree in a subject that has only tangentially been touched upon in previous studies – or sometimes not at all. In the US, for instance, law is only ever really studied at the postgraduate level, after at least a B.A. Barack Obama, before undertaking his J.D. in Law at Harvard, studied Politics

and International Relations at Columbia. Quite often, adolescents do not yet know what they want to become later in life, and this more open-ended system allows them to study something they feel passionate about but might not want to work in later. Or it allows them to change their mind. Regularly, students at university discover other passions, interests and skills through interaction with their peers and participation in non-curricular activities such as volunteering, student societies and the like.

Another feature of postgraduate degrees in the UK is that a sizeable number of postgraduate degrees only last one year, which allows people to quickly acquire new skills without wasting too much time that could have otherwise been spent on the labour market. Most postgraduate degrees at the University of Luxembourg last two years. It would be advisable if at least some of those degrees could be finished in nine months or a year. It would enable people to more quickly change their career paths and dip in and out of jobs.

There are instances where Europe has made use of this flexible approach. The *Europa-Institut* at the University of Saarbrücken and the Netherlands in general have also mimicked the US and the UK systems to some degree, and one can undertake so-called conversion postgraduate study, which allows one to, for instance, study EU law without having studied it at a prior level. Needless to say, some academic qualifications, and the ability to do in-depth research and demonstrate study skills are required. However, it is not so much the *topic* that counts as opposed to the more *generic skills* and *dedication* applied to a field over several years.

### Work as a learning experience

In the US it is also recommended to have done at least one year of professional work before embarking on postgraduate studies as it tends to require hard work and a certain discipline that many can only properly acquire in a full-time position where they are required to handle various tasks and deadlines on a daily basis. In general, working does help one to become a more rounded human being and be better prepared for an often challenging academic

environment. It furthermore also prepares people for the possible outcome where an academic future after a PhD does not seem viable enough anymore and a return to the professional world is preferred.

The protectionist nature of work in Luxembourg tends to value tokenised and totemised degrees over the real interests and skills of the person. This is of course not to say that some professions, such as engineering or medicine, should lose academic and professional qualifications in those specific fields – that would be highly dangerous. It however means that a talented applicant with a non-typical background is often overlooked in favour of someone who tends to exactly meet the precise and quantifiable rather than the qualitative job criteria.

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The narrative around working needs to change as well. Work should also be seen as a learning experience, a continuation of the academic exploration of various ideas and putting them into practice, with the possibility of failure. This should also change our understanding of 'failure'.

For all its faults, and there are indeed many, one of the advantages of the US labour market is that failure is not considered as strictly career-limiting as in Europe – and it is one of the reasons why US start-ups can attract more venture capital and people are ready to take higher risks. It also means that if one career path doesn't work out for you, there is no reason to despair immediately: you can weigh your options and indeed try something different. Luckily, these attitudes are now changing, with the so-called phenomenon of job-hopping also on the rise. A while back, changing jobs rapidly was decried as people were supposed to display endurance and loyalty to a company. However, as companies often show that they don't really display those character traits to their

employees either, it is becoming more and more acceptable to withdraw one's labour and enhance one's value by changing employer or even career path at a more rapid pace.

### Learning from the pros, not the cons

That does not mean that this system should be copied completely. There are many issues around wealth and income inequality, expensive private education that entrenches these differences further, elitism within universities<sup>1</sup>, and a predilection for status and privilege over factual arguments.<sup>2</sup> There is also, in the US at least, a certain irrational devotion to the notion of work, perhaps derived from a Protestant ethic, that leads to harmful abuses, with many people barely able to claim holidays and working an extreme set of hours. Often, this is marked by a lack of actual productivity.

Another potential negative is that academic degrees might be valorised over other degrees. In parts of the US, factory workers are expected to have at least undergraduate degrees given the complexities of some of the tasks involved, not least because of digitisation. Nonetheless, an emphasis on the possibility of learning 'on the job' could also help create higher value for career paths that do not follow academic pathways.

It should be possible to find a middle way between the Anglo-American open-ended education system and the more tightly regulated continental European systems. It would certainly benefit the economy if there were more flexibility, and first and foremost it would benefit our young people if they could carve more open career paths in an ever-changing and internationally competitive labour market. Otherwise there is a risk that they may be frozen out of it by people that have benefitted from more flexible systems. ♦

1 The ongoing College Admissions Scandal, in which wealthy US families essentially bought their children's admission to top Ivy League Schools, shows this very clearly.

2 One might mention the intellectual self-indulgence of the Oxford Union (an entity distinct from the University, but reflective of a lot of students' intellectual culture).