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“Gap year” in French Engineering Curricula Ethical Issues of a Trendy Educational Device

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This study is part of a wider ongoing research program on the values of French engineers, and the socialization of their values. We focus on their professional socialization process in French Engineering Schools. We study, from the perspective of the educational and then ethical issues, a “marginal” practice which is, however, becoming increasingly common. It is about the interruption of the curriculum for a period ranging between a few months and a whole year, generally called “gap period”. A more precise definition of this educational device would be: *an institutionalized extra-curricular period*.

This kind of device, at the moment lacking in any real institutional regulation at a national level, is not without raising some practical, but also fundamental questions.

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Borrowed from Business and Management French Schools, the “gap periods” are offered to Engineering students by an increasing number of Engineering Schools, and they meet a tremendous success among the students. But their pedagogical goals are rather unclear, and even divergent: some Schools insist on their educational goal, using words as emancipation, maturity, personal development, social and cultural openness, while other Schools will insist on the professional side: pre-professionalization, adaptation to the business world, broadening of the skills base, increased employability, etc.

First, we describe the general frame of our research: this will help the readers to give some depth of field to this study.

Then, we present this new raising phenomenon in a broad approach, trying to explain what it consists of, and the different ways of evaluating it, since its appreciation appears to be rather contrasted, and even quite critical.

The analysis of two exemplary cases will enable the reader to seize the great variety of practices grouped under the same heading, and to understand that the underlying pedagogical and even ethical choices, as well as the conceptions of an engineer’s role in our society, might be quite opposite.

We conclude with some paths for a further and deeper problematization, in a period where the necessity of a reflexive analysis on what kind of engineers our world is in need of appears to be of great urgency. ■