

French Beyond the Classroom: The Strategic Value of French Language Learning for Higher Education and Global Employability

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Abstract

Higher education is becoming globally connected and employers are looking for graduates who can do more than demonstrate subject knowledge. Communication skills, cultural awareness, adaptability, and the ability to work across linguistic and cultural boundaries are becoming more crucial. Learning a foreign language can contribute to these abilities by giving students opportunities to communicate with people from different backgrounds and to engage with academic and professional environments beyond their own country.

French is particularly relevant in this context because of its international institutional status, educational importance, and geographical reach. The Organisation internationale de la Francophonie (OIF) reported approximately 321 million French speakers worldwide and 93 million pupils and students using French as a language of education in 2022 (OIF, 2022). French is also one of the six official languages of the United Nations (United Nations, n.d.). This conceptual review considers the role that French-language learning can play in higher education, focusing on academic mobility, access to knowledge, employability, intercultural competence, and international engagement.

The review argues that French should not be viewed as a qualification that guarantees employment on its own. Its value is greater when it is combined with disciplinary knowledge, professional skills, digital competence, work experience, and international exposure. Universities can strengthen this value by connecting French-language education with student mobility, discipline-specific language courses, internships, international partnerships, and career development. In this sense, learning French can be understood as an additional form of linguistic and intercultural capital that may broaden students' academic and professional opportunities.

Keywords: French language, higher education, employability, multilingualism, intercultural competence, internationalization, language education

1. Introduction

Higher education has changed considerably as a result of globalization, international mobility, technological development, and changes in the labour market. A university degree remains important for developing disciplinary knowledge, but employers increasingly expect graduates to possess a wider range of abilities. Communication, adaptability, teamwork, problem-solving, and the ability to work with people from different cultural backgrounds are now relevant to many professional settings.

Foreign-language learning can contribute to this broader set of skills. Learning another language is not simply a matter of memorizing vocabulary and grammar. It also requires students to understand different ways of expressing ideas, interacting with others, and interpreting cultural contexts. For students who intend to study, work, or communicate internationally, these experiences can be valuable.

The importance of multilingualism has also received greater attention in international education policy. UNESCO's *Languages Matter: Global Guidance on Multilingual Education* recognizes multilingualism as an important feature of societies and emphasizes the educational value of using and developing more than one language (UNESCO, 2025). This provides a wider context for considering the place of foreign languages within higher education.

French has a particular position within this discussion. It is one of the six official languages of the United Nations and continues to be used in international diplomacy, education, cultural exchange, and institutional cooperation (United Nations, n.d.). The OIF reported approximately 321 million French speakers worldwide, along with 93 million pupils and students for whom French is a language of education (OIF, 2022). French is therefore not limited to France or to a European context. It is used across a broad network of countries and communities, particularly in Africa, Europe, North America, and parts of the Caribbean and Asia.

The relevance of French to university students, however, should not be overstated. Not every graduate needs French to obtain employment, and language ability alone does not guarantee career success. The more useful question is whether French can provide an additional advantage when it is combined with a student's academic specialization and other professional competencies.

This article examines that question by considering French as a form of complementary linguistic and intercultural capital. It focuses on its potential contribution to higher education, academic mobility, access to knowledge, employability, intercultural competence, and international engagement.

2. Research Gap and Objectives

Graduate employability is influenced by several factors, including disciplinary knowledge, communication skills, professional experience, adaptability, and the ability to respond to changing workplace demands. Foreign-language skills can form part of this wider employability profile. Grasmane and Grasmane (2011), for example, examined students' perceptions of foreign-language competence in relation to employability and labour-market mobility and found that language skills were considered relevant to participation in the European labour market.

Despite this recognition, discussions of language and employability often focus primarily on English because of its dominant position in international business, science, technology, and higher education. This can sometimes lead to other international languages receiving less attention. French deserves consideration because of its institutional role, educational presence, and use across a wide range of countries.

The purpose of this conceptual review is:

1. To examine the international position of French
2. To explore the relevance of French to higher education and academic mobility
3. To consider the possible contribution of French to graduate employability
4. To suggest ways in which universities can connect French-language learning with internationalization and career development.

The article does not argue that learning French directly results in employment. Instead, it considers how French may strengthen a graduate's overall academic and professional profile when it is combined with appropriate qualifications and experience.

3. Review Approach

This article uses a conceptual narrative review approach. Relevant scholarly literature and publications from international organizations were considered in relation to five broad themes: French-language education, multilingualism, higher education, employability, and intercultural competence.

The sources used in the discussion fall broadly into three groups. The first consists of academic studies concerning foreign-language learning, bilingualism, and employability. The second includes publications from international

organizations that provide information about multilingual education and the international position of French. The third includes research that helps explain the relationship between language learning and wider educational or cognitive development.

The purpose of the review is not to provide a systematic statistical analysis or to establish an effect size for French-language proficiency. Instead, it brings together existing perspectives to examine why French may have value for university students and graduates and under what circumstances that value is most likely to be realized.

4. French as an International Language

One of the strongest arguments for learning French is its international reach. The language has an established role in international organizations, education, diplomacy, culture, and communication. French is one of the six official languages of the United Nations, which reflects its continuing importance in international affairs and multilateral communication (United Nations, n.d.). Its use, however, extends well beyond international institutions.

According to the OIF, approximately 321 million people speak French worldwide, while 93 million pupils and students use French as a language of education (OIF, 2022). The report also identifies a large population of people learning French as an additional language. These figures indicate that French functions as both a first language and a second or foreign language across a diverse geographical area.

The Francophone world is particularly important in Africa. French is used in many African countries in education, administration, diplomacy, international cooperation, media, and professional life. This growing geographical importance means that French can provide students with access to communities and professional environments that might otherwise remain less accessible to them.

For university students, the international presence of French creates opportunities for engagement that go beyond traditional language and literature studies. Depending on a student's field, French can be relevant to international relations, business, tourism, education, development studies, research, media, and cultural industries.

5. French and Higher Education

5.1 Academic Mobility

International mobility has become an important part of higher education. Students increasingly participate in exchange programmes, study-abroad opportunities, international conferences, research projects, internships, and collaborative programmes involving institutions in different countries.

French proficiency can be useful for students who choose to study or undertake professional training in Francophone environments. A student who can communicate in French may find it easier to participate in classroom discussions, interact with local students, communicate with academic staff, and deal with everyday situations outside the university.

The benefits are not limited to formal academic activities. Language ability can influence the extent to which students feel comfortable participating in the social and cultural life of the host country. Students who can communicate with people in their own language may have more opportunities to build relationships and understand the local context.

For this reason, French can support a more meaningful experience of academic mobility rather than simply helping students meet a language requirement.

5.2 Access to Knowledge

English has become the dominant language of much international academic communication. Nevertheless, substantial bodies of scholarship, literature, historical material, cultural production, and research continue to exist in French.

French proficiency can allow students to consult original sources rather than depending entirely on translated material. This can be especially useful in fields such as literature, philosophy, history, political science, international relations, cultural studies, and the social sciences. Reading a source in its original language can also help students appreciate meanings and arguments that may be difficult to reproduce fully through translation. For researchers, the ability to work with French-language sources can broaden the range of material available for comparative and international research.

Therefore, learning French can be understood not only as acquiring a communication skill but also as gaining access to another body of knowledge and scholarship.

5.3 Multilingual Education

The growing emphasis on multilingual education provides another reason to consider the place of French within universities. UNESCO's recent guidance encourages education systems to recognize linguistic diversity as an educational resource and to support multilingual approaches to learning (UNESCO, 2025).

Although UNESCO's guidance is not specifically about French, its broader argument is relevant to foreign-language education in higher education. Universities that promote multilingualism can provide students with opportunities to develop communication skills while also engaging with different cultural and intellectual traditions.

French can therefore be one part of a wider institutional approach to multilingual and international education.

6. French and Graduate Employability

Employability is broader than the possession of a university degree. It includes the knowledge, skills, attitudes, experience, and adaptability that help graduates enter and progress within the labour market.

Foreign-language competence can contribute to this profile, particularly in occupations that involve international communication. Grasmane and Grasmane (2011) found that university students considered foreign-language skills relevant to employability and international labour-market mobility. This suggests that language learning can have professional relevance, although its importance will differ according to the occupation and context.

French may be useful in a range of areas, including:

- International business and trade;
- Diplomacy and international relations;
- Tourism and hospitality;
- Education and research;
- International development;
- Journalism and media;
- Translation and interpreting; and
- Multinational organizations and international services.

The value of French is likely to be strongest when the language is connected to a student's professional field. For example, a graduate in business who also speaks French may be better positioned to communicate with Francophone clients or business partners. A tourism professional may be able to provide more effective services to French-speaking visitors. Similarly, a student of international relations may benefit from being able to communicate directly with Francophone institutions and communities.

French can also be useful in research and education, where the ability to communicate with international colleagues and consult French-language material can expand professional networks.

At the same time, it is important not to present French proficiency as a guaranteed route to employment. The benefit depends on several factors, including the level of proficiency, the graduate's area of specialization, the country or region in which they seek employment, and whether their workplace actually requires or values French.

The stronger argument, therefore, is that French adds another dimension to a graduate's existing qualifications. It is most useful when it complements professional expertise rather than being treated as a substitute for it.

7. French and Intercultural Competence

The value of language learning extends beyond the ability to communicate in another language. Learning a language also involves encountering different cultural references, communication styles, social expectations, and ways of understanding the world.

This is relevant to intercultural competence, which has become increasingly important in workplaces where employees interact with people from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds. French-language learning can give students opportunities to develop greater awareness of cultural differences and to become more comfortable communicating across those differences.

Some of the abilities that may be developed through language learning include:

- Cultural awareness;
- Flexibility in communication;
- Perspective-taking;
- Sensitivity to different cultural practices;
- Active listening; and
- Confidence in multicultural environments.

These abilities can be particularly valuable for graduates who expect to work in international teams or interact with overseas clients, institutions, and communities.

However, claims about the cognitive advantages of bilingualism should be approached with caution. Valian (2015) points out that research on bilingualism and cognition is complex and that outcomes can vary according to factors such as proficiency, age of acquisition, patterns of language use, and sociolinguistic circumstances.

The educational value of French therefore does not need to depend on the claim that learning another language automatically makes a person more intelligent. A more defensible argument is that language learning can encourage linguistic awareness, communication flexibility, cultural understanding, and engagement with people and ideas beyond one's immediate environment.

8. French for Specific Purposes

One way to make French more useful to university students is to connect language learning more closely with their academic disciplines and future careers. This can be achieved through French for Specific Purposes (FOS).

Traditional French courses often focus on general grammar, vocabulary, reading, writing, and conversation. These foundations remain important, but students preparing for particular professions may also need language skills that reflect the situations they are likely to encounter in the workplace.

Universities could therefore consider courses such as:

- French for Business;
- French for Tourism and Hospitality;
- French for International Relations;
- French for Academic Research;
- French for Healthcare; and
- French for Professional Communication.

Such courses could include workplace vocabulary, professional correspondence, presentations, interviews, report writing, negotiation, meetings, and discipline-specific communication.

This approach can also help students understand the practical purpose of language learning. When students can see a clear connection between French and their degree or future profession, they may be more motivated to continue learning and to develop higher levels of proficiency.

9. The Role of Universities

Universities can play an important role in ensuring that language learning leads to meaningful academic and professional experiences.

One approach is to make French available as a credit-bearing elective for students across different disciplines. French should not necessarily be limited to students enrolled in language or humanities programmes. Students in business, tourism, international relations, social sciences, education, and other fields may also benefit from access to language learning.

Universities can also strengthen partnerships with Francophone institutions. Exchange programmes, joint research projects, internships, guest lectures, and collaborative academic activities can give students opportunities to use French in authentic situations.

Informal opportunities are also important. French-language clubs, cultural events, film screenings, debates, seminars, and conversation groups can provide students with opportunities to practise the language outside the classroom.

Career services can contribute as well. Collaboration between language departments and career offices could help students identify industries, organizations, internships, and professional roles in which French may be useful. This would make the connection between language education and employability more visible.

Where appropriate, universities could also encourage students to obtain recognized evidence of their language proficiency. Certification can help students communicate their level of competence to employers or academic institutions, particularly when language ability is relevant to a specific position or programme.

Taken together, these measures can move French beyond the status of an isolated subject and make it part of a wider approach to graduate development.

10. Discussion

The literature and institutional evidence reviewed in this article point to three broad areas in which French may contribute to higher education and graduate development: academic opportunities, professional communication, and intercultural competence.

First, French can give students greater access to Francophone academic and cultural environments. Students who have the ability to communicate in French may be better prepared to participate in exchange programmes, international projects, research networks, and educational experiences in Francophone settings.

Second, French can complement professional expertise. Its usefulness is particularly clear in occupations that involve international clients, institutions, visitors, researchers, or colleagues. However, the relevance of the language will depend on the specific profession and the context in which a graduate works.

Third, learning French can contribute to students' understanding of linguistic and cultural diversity. This is increasingly relevant as professional environments become more internationally connected.

At the same time, the benefits should be viewed realistically. There is a significant difference between having basic knowledge of French and being able to use the language confidently in academic or professional situations. Employers may value advanced proficiency more than elementary knowledge, particularly when communication is a central part of the job.

The professional value of French is therefore better understood as complementary rather than independent. A graduate with strong disciplinary knowledge, professional experience, digital skills, and international awareness may gain an additional advantage from being able to communicate effectively in French.

The relationship can be represented conceptually as follows:

Disciplinary Expertise + French Proficiency + Intercultural Competence + Professional Skills → Greater Capacity for International Academic and Professional Participation

This model should not be interpreted as a causal equation. Rather, it illustrates the central argument of the review: French works as one part of a broader combination of competencies that can support participation in international environments.

11. Limitations and Future Research

This article is a conceptual review and does not present original empirical data. It therefore cannot establish a causal relationship between French proficiency and employment outcomes.

The value of French may also differ substantially according to country, industry, occupation, and level of proficiency. A language that is highly useful in one professional environment may be less relevant in another. Similarly, the benefits of French for a student planning a career in international development may differ from those for a student entering a locally focused occupation.

Future research could examine these differences more closely. Employer surveys could investigate which levels and types of French proficiency are valued in different industries. Studies of university students could explore their motivations for learning French and their perceptions of its professional relevance. Longitudinal research could examine whether students who develop French proficiency experience different patterns of international mobility or employment after graduation.

Research could also evaluate French for Specific Purposes programmes and compare French with other foreign languages in different employment contexts. Such studies would provide stronger empirical evidence about when, where, and how French contributes to graduate employability.

12. Conclusion

French-language learning has a place in contemporary higher education because of the language's international reach, institutional importance, educational presence, and continuing use in international communication.

This review suggests that French can contribute to several aspects of university education and graduate development. It can support academic mobility, provide access to French-language knowledge and resources, facilitate professional communication, and contribute to students' understanding of cultural and linguistic diversity.

At the same time, French should not be presented as a qualification that guarantees employment. Its value depends on how well it is developed and how effectively it is combined with other competencies. A student who combines French proficiency with disciplinary expertise, professional experience, digital skills, and international exposure is likely to have a stronger basis for using the language in meaningful academic or professional contexts.

Universities can play an important role in making this possible. French-language education can be connected with international partnerships, student exchanges, internships, discipline-specific courses, cultural activities, and career services. French for Specific Purposes can also help students see a direct connection between language learning and their future professions.

The central argument of this review is therefore that French represents a form of **complementary linguistic and intercultural capital**. Its importance does not lie in replacing professional qualifications but in extending what graduates are able to do with those qualifications.

Learning French during higher education can consequently provide students with more than another language. It can give them additional opportunities to engage with people, knowledge, institutions, and professional environments beyond their immediate linguistic and cultural surroundings. In an increasingly interconnected and multilingual world, that broader capacity for engagement is a meaningful part of graduate development.

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