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Pedagogical support services and academic developers at French universities

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Abstract

Numerous programmes have been implemented to improve the quality of French higher education but the paucity of learning-focused objectives has resulted in contradictory initiatives. Expanding pedagogical development activities for professors, as emphasised by various reports, is a remedy worth exploring as only approximately 15 out of 150 higher education institutions currently have a teaching development centre. Professorial support for these initiatives is growing. A recent survey of professors found 91 per cent in favour of teaching development activities, with young instructors the most in favour and the most diverse in their teaching development requests (Demougeot-Lebel and Perret, 2011). In response, new teaching development units are emerging. The nascent pedagogical support structures raise issues of how to foster both the development of these centres and of their often inexperienced academic developers. Two promising initiatives are the national network of academic development centres¹ and an academic developers' community of practice in the Rhone-Alps region.²

Introduction

There is a general agreement that higher education in France is in need of significant change. The challenges listed often include the evolving demands of an expanding, increasingly diverse student population and ensuring that high standards are maintained to ensure that students are developing the high level skills and mental dexterity required to compete in the global market. The consensus breaks down as to strategies that should be employed to achieve these ends. The pedagogical development of professors has been identified repeatedly as a potential yet under developed tool. National reforms and local efforts to harness this potential are changing the context but the final effect will depend on achieving a consensus definition of coherent goals for student learning. This paper will review the current situation in France in view of highlighting some contradictory policies and some promising initiatives for improving coherency.

National context

Education represents 20 per cent of the French national budget and the Ministry of Education is largest employer in France. This investment reflects the importance held by education in France, so the poor performance of French higher education institutions in international university rankings (ie Shanghai ranking) has stimulated much debate.

At the national level, the shortcomings of French higher education are more often expressed as social, whereby measures to make university widely accessible have had little impact on increasing social mobility and decreasing economic disparity. The strong role of the

social status of one's family on university completion and employment has been thoroughly investigated (Duru-Bellat 2002) and there are numerous initiatives intended to reduce this bias. Many of these initiatives have been designed to boost high school completion rates (Cohen and Aghion, 2004) resulting in secondary schools consuming an equal share of funding (Lorenzi and Payan, 2003) compounded with a boom in university enrollment (Rege Colet and Romainville, 2006). The situation for universities is further exacerbated by extremely low tuition rates (~200 € per year) and the absence of entrance selection. The result is only 54 per cent of first year students continue directly into second year (Demuynck, 2011) and students from disadvantaged backgrounds are twice as likely to drop out (Cohen and Aghion, 2004). One out of every five students who begin higher education studies will not obtain any post-secondary certification (Demuynck, 2011) and the wages of graduates remain highly correlated to those of their fathers (OECD). A recent initiative designed to reduce university attrition and dropout rates (Plan réussite licence) has repeatedly been interpreted as setting specific goals for the number of students who must pass. The extension of universal accessibility of university from the lack of selection through to externally decreed pass rates is difficult to harmonise with the official discourse regarding a culture of excellence. The articulation of clear objectives with respect to student learning would facilitate the alignment of policies and ensure that the focus is well placed.

The role of legislation governing universities plays a crucial role in the development of pedagogical support at French universities as decision making in all areas is centralised in Paris and individual institutions have comparably little autonomy. For example university professors³ were employed directly by the Ministry of Higher Education until 2009. It has been postulated that this centralisation in a key aspect in the slow rate of cultural change in French higher education (Cohen and Aghion, 2004), as sweeping national reforms often obliterate local initiatives. In this context, two recent reforms will have wide ranging effects. The LRU Law⁴ (2007) gives universities more budgetary autonomy, more flexibility in appointing professors, and for the first time, the possibility to raise money through private foundations. The 2009–460 decree⁵ enacted important changes in the university professors' careers, through aspects of evaluation and recognition. The involvement of professors in more areas of university life will be better recognised, such as distance courses, international cooperation, tutoring, and coordinating internships. This latter law is part of a larger discussion regarding the relative importance of teaching and research activities at French universities (Musselin, 2008). The decree states that professors will be evaluated every four years on their collective teaching activities and contributions to the university (administrative service) and that this evaluation will be taken into account in all promotion decisions. Most institutions have interpreted the reporting of teaching activities as quantitative, involving the names of courses taught and the number of students enrolled. Others are exploring a more qualitative approach, based on a teaching portfolio model but norms regarding what should be assessed and how to present supporting material have not yet been established. This is clearly an area where to definition of clear objectives for student learning would be an asset, as the choice of indicators will orient how professors invest in their teaching. Objectives coherent with the learning-focused approach to teaching developed by Säljö, Entwistle, Ramsden, Prosser, and Trigwell (summarised in Prosser and Trigwell, 1998) could assist the penetration of these ideas into French university culture.

Despite the work of Rege Colet and Romainville in French, university teaching in France remains focused on transmission and students on assimilative, memorisation-based learning strategies (Gustin and Isaac, 2010). This may be in part due to the fact that the majority of university professors in France start their careers without any formal pedagogical training (Coulon and Paivandi, 2008). For example, a 2010 survey of 25 newly recruited assistant professors at Lyon 1⁶ found 16 had no pedagogical training, 3 had previously participated in short activities at Lyon 1 and 4 in activities as doctoral students. The average reported teaching experience was 3.5 years, with values ranging between 0 and 10 years.

Formal opportunities for development during academic careers are rare (Demougeot-Lebel and Perret, 2011) and numerous reports have called for better resources (Dejean, 2002; Espéret, 2001; Faure, Soulié and Millet, 2005; Fréville, 2002; Petit, 2002; Romainville, 2004). A survey in Dijon found 91 per cent of professors in favour of pedagogical development activities, with interactive teaching methods the most popular theme (Demougeot-Lebel and Perret, 2011). On average, professors declared themselves willing to commit two days per year to pedagogical development.

The preparation of doctoral students for academic careers was undertaken by 14 regional centres of initiation to higher education (CIES⁷) for the period between 1989 and 2009. Selected teaching assistants (*moniteurs*) completed a service of 64h/year of teaching activities and 10 days of professional development for a career in higher education over a 3 year period. The programmes of these centres varied considerably by region, some including a strong pedagogical aspect and others entirely focused on technology or research methods. Schemes for mentoring by experienced instructors were also put in place but this aspect was generally judged to be ineffective (Paivandi, 2010). Since 2009, some regions have continued with a CIES-like inter-institutional organisation and others have developed panoply of institutional programmes.

The French university context further reinforces a transmissive model of teaching through the algorithm for calculating professors' yearly teaching service requirement in terms of in-class hours and class format (lecture, tutorial, lab). An hour of lecturing is worth 90 minutes of teaching a tutorial session. It thus appears that small group teaching designed to involve learners is less valuable or requires less work to prepare. Investment in teaching is often perceived as detrimental to career advancement as it infringes on research activities and has not been taken into consideration in promotion decisions. One outcome of this arrangement is that many senior professors fulfil their service exclusively in lectures and newly hired professors may find themselves completing twice as many hours in laboratory supervision.

Institutional initiatives

The objectives of teaching improvement initiatives in France generally explicitly target technology use. Most universities and higher education establishments have a formal mission devoted to supporting and encouraging the use of teaching technologies (Adangnikou and Paul, 2008). There is a mission devoted to using technology in teaching in higher education⁸ within the Ministry of Higher Education and Research, and communications involving teaching technology dominate the French pedagogical literature, with up to 50 per cent of the

papers presented at conferences focusing on technology use (de Ketele, 2010). In contrast, few (if any) universities have a policy for promoting excellence in teaching discrete from technology use.

The first university teaching support services⁹ emerged around 2000 (Demougeot-Lebel and Perret, 2011); such services are now present in about 20 per cent of universities, particularly in those teaching science (Adangnikou and Paul, 2008). The mandates of such structures vary, but essentially all have a teaching technology mission and a lower percentage offer pedagogical workshops, individual counseling, or teaching evaluations (Adangnikou and Paul, 2008).

In the centralised, French context, the creation of the *réseau des SUP*, a national network of university academic development centres¹⁰ is essential, as initiatives without formal recognition from the Ministry of Higher Education risk being obliterated in the next set of reforms. The *réseau* is thus a political entity, currently made up of 9 pedagogical support centres, with the goal of ‘describing the roles of a pedagogical support service, with the objective of making them better known and to aide in the emergence of such services in other universities’. The distinction between the objectives of a pedagogical support service and one that specifically focuses on technology use is not clear in all quarters, resulting in some dynamic technology support services feeling undervalued or excluded. Outside the *réseau* there are also several vibrant pedagogical support centres at engineering schools or *Grandes Ecoles*. These schools are distinguished by rigorous selection processes and are set apart from the universities; the *réseau des SUP* represents universities exclusively.

The positioning of a pedagogical development service is a fine balance of needing to be a central service and simultaneously adopt a more academic approach with respect to the dissemination and contribution to research (Frenay et al., 2010). This equilibrium is a considerable challenge in the highly structured French university culture but ultimately essential for building constructive and influential partnerships within the university. The emergence of new teaching support services is also creating tensions with existing educational technology services, at both the local and national level. While competition for funding and recognition are always a challenge, the cultural differences between applied technology-focused services and a more academic approach adopted by many pedagogical support services further aggravate communication and collaboration between these groups. Synergy has been shown to be possible, with successful fusions between the 2 types of services at some universities¹¹ and productive collaborations between distinct services at others.¹²

The title *academic developer* does not currently exist in the official human resources lexicon of French universities, nor the competencies and services offered by a pedagogical support service in the official database of responsibilities. Academic developers in France generally hold administrative posts, and some are professors with a reduction in teaching responsibilities in order to allow them to coordinate faculty development activities. A view commonly, if infrequently, expressed is that only professors are competent to discuss pedagogy and the administrative staff should assist only with technology-related training. This symptom of the hierarchical French university culture tends to be more prevalent in older professors.

Pedagogical research in France has been the domain of the IFE¹³ and the IUFM¹⁴, who train primary and secondary teachers. The research programmes of these institutions have consequently focused on the primary and secondary levels. Adangnikou states that research in university teaching and pedagogy in France was first addressed in 2008 (Adangnikou, 2008) and publications on university pedagogy in French language remain representatively lower than in English (de Ketele, 2010). This has led to a paucity of relevant resources for French universities to draw on, exacerbated by the belief that research from abroad cannot be directly applied. In 2008, each IUFM was directly associated to a (usually scientific) university, leading to significant ongoing structural changes. The rapprochement will likely increase research in university pedagogy, generating relevant literature to nourish debate in the public sphere and to nuance questions of whether foreign research in pedagogy is indeed relevant.

Student evaluation of courses were initiated in 1992 by national directives stating that the council of each university may hold a teaching evaluation process but that this process would not affect the careers of professors. In 1997 a second decree was published requiring that each course and each programme of study must be evaluated. The objective of this evaluation was stated as providing professors with information on their teaching, and hence not to manage the career of the professor. To reinforce the desired application, it is stated that the results of the evaluation must be directly addressed to the professor concerned and not to the institution. It is further elaborated that the objective is the formative use of course evaluations and not simply an administrative requirement.

A further modification published in 2002 explicitly includes students in the procedures for evaluating courses and programs. To ensure the implementation of this cultural change, an independent body was created in 2007 (AERES, the reporting agency for research and higher education) to coordinate audits. The lack of a course evaluation procedure or the improper use of the results can lead the agency to judge a programme as unsatisfactory and to impose significant reforms or even to revoke the certification of the programme, resulting in its closure.

It is a hope of certain academic developers in France that course evaluations may be leveraged to increase reflective practice among professors and stimulate changes in pedagogical practices. The effect of the 2009–460 decree will likely be the decisive element in whether course evaluations are seen as a tool of the administration and thus summative. The ambiguous term ‘evaluated on their collective activities’ and the possibility of future decrees keeps the current debate lively, both within each university and on the national level. Overall, there is an evolution of the perception of course evaluations from a tool of administrative control in favour of a more formative process.

Academic developer initiatives

The number of academic developers in higher education in France is increasing significantly; most are new to the profession, offering a novel service within their institution and/or associated with a nascent teaching support unit. An anecdotal example is the significant increase in the number of academic developers attending the BSQF¹⁵ rose from 8 individuals in 2008 to 23 in 2009 and again to 24 in 2010. However opportunities for professional development for these *conseillers pédagogiques* remain scarce (Frenay et al., 2010). A survey

of 50 academic developers working in Quebec or in francophone European universities (Germain-Rutherford and Grandtner, 2006) found most held a Masters degree in psychology or education, while a third came from completely different disciplinary fields. As Frenay et al. note, *'expertise in this field is typically acquired through experience'* (2010).

The response in the Rhone-Alps region was to create a auto-facilitated community of practice. PENSERA¹⁶ was established in 2009 between 3 higher education institutions to respond to a small but growing number of academic developers in need of community, critical friends and resources to continue their professional development. There are currently 4 official institutional members (2 science/medicine focused universities, an engineering school, and an architectural college) and 3 permanent visitors (a multidisciplinary university and two engineering schools) with a combined 14 academic developers.

Having met many of the original challenges of a new community of practice (Isaac et al., 2010), PENSERA has now entered a new phase where it is frequently solicited to accompany new academic developers and emergent teaching support structures. Repeated experience has lead to the definition of a posture designed to assist the emerging structure while avoiding acting as a service provider for their institution.

An initial inquiry often involves launching a teaching development workshop series and experience has shown such request can become permanent with no accompanying structural or cultural changes in the host institution. An approach involving hosting an emerging academic developer for the first experience of the workshop, followed by the co-facilitation of the workshop in the new institution allows for scaffolding of the nascent academic developer in both practical and theoretical areas. It also enables the new academic developer to gain recognition in their own institution. PENSERA thus requires an institution to identify 1–3 people interested in taking on academic developer roles before engaging in support roles. A motivated individual should likewise be mandated by their home institution for initiating academic development activities.

Conclusion

While there remain a number of major obstacles to the alignment of teaching and learning goals in France, the proliferation of pedagogical support services should improve the level of discussion. Additionally, research in university pedagogy seems likely to rise, providing relevant literature and research collaborations to enable professors gain recognition for investment in teaching excellence through publications.

The lack of formal recognition of pedagogical support units and academic developers remains a weakness, particularly in terms of the ability of such services to accompany and counsel the decisional bodies at the university. A clear legislative framework would give greater credibility to existing structures and support the emergence of new structures.

Possible threats, but also opportunities, may come from human resources departments and quality units. Human resources departments have recently been awarded the responsibility for on-the-job training of professors (whereas they were previously concerned only with

administrative staff) and this will likely expand the offer of short workshops in pedagogy for professors. The importance of a range of pedagogical activities, including action-research and long-term accompaniment roles of academic developers, needs to be valued and clarified. In the quality side, institutions are giving more thought to how to measure excellence. Depending on the type of indicators selected for the evaluation of professors and the evaluation of courses, value of academic developers in improving student learning may become more apparent. A context of formative, rather than summative, use of the results is essential.

The coming decade is shaping up to be a period of accelerated evolution for the culture of teaching and learning at French universities.

¹ Le réseau des SUP <http://sup.ups-tlse.fr/reseaudessup/>

² PENSERA <http://pensera.fr>

³ The statutes of academic staff at French universities are numerous and complex. For simplicity, this article will use the term ‘professor’ to denote all levels of academic teaching staff.

⁴ LOI n° 2007–1199 du 10 août 2007 relative aux libertés et responsabilités des universités, JO no. 185 du 11 août 2007.

⁵ Article 7–1. Décret No. 2009–460 du 23 avril 2009 modifiant le décret n° 84–431 du 6 juin 1984.

⁶ Internal document, ICAP, Lyon 1.

⁷ Centre d’Initiation à l’Enseignement Supérieur.

⁸ Mission numérique pour l’enseignement supérieur.

⁹ Services Universitaires de Pédagogie.

¹⁰ Le réseau des SUP <http://sup.ups-tlse.fr/reseaudessup/>

¹¹ ICAP <http://icap.univ-lyon1.fr/>, SIAME www.univ-brest.fr/siame and SUP Toulouse 3 <http://sup.ups-tlse.fr/>

¹² SUP Grenoble <http://sup.ujf-grenoble.fr/>

¹³ Institut français de l’éducation, formerly called the Institut nationale de recherche en pédagogie.

¹⁴ Institut Universitaire de la Formation des Maîtres.

¹⁵ The francophone academic development conference was created in 2001 by academic developers from Belgium, Switzerland and Québec, taking the name BSQ. French academic developers participated as they emerged and in 2008 the biannual conference was held in France for the first time, leading to a renamed BSQF.

¹⁶ Pédagogie de l'ENseignement Supérieur en Rhône-Alpes, <http://pensera.fr>.

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