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FRANCE

Implementation of the 'Sorbonne/Bologna' Process objectives (1998-2003)

Country report

Initial remarks :

The 'Sorbonne/Bologna' Process is an inter-government initiative which was launched in the Sorbonne university in Paris (in 1998), developed and carried on in Bologna (1999), then in Prague (2001). The Berlin Conference (2003) is the next stage to come.

Triggered off by 4 countries in 1998 (Germany, Great-Britain, Italy and France), this initiative ³⁰ ¹ European States are currently involved in is aiming at building up a European higher education area by 2010, which is attractive for the rest of the world : it is meant in particular to develop and democratize the students', teachers' and researchers' mobility, to make the recognition of degrees possible throughout Europe, and therefore, to make this area readable and attractive world-wide.

⇒ For this purpose, 9 objectives were agreed on :

- 1/ readable and comparable degrees ;
- 2/ a degree structure based on 2 main cycles ;
- 3/ the general use of transferable European 'credits' (ECTS) ;
- 4/ promotion of mobility ;
- 5/ promotion of the European cooperation in quality assurance ;
- 6/ promotion of the European dimension in higher education ;
- 7/ lifelong learning ;
- 8/ higher education institutions and students ;
- 9/ promoting the attractiveness of the European Higher Education Area.

While safeguarding each country's own culture, the process is aiming at adapting each national higher education system², at putting it into the European and world-wide context and at making its visibility and quality possible at the international level. This double, both international and national, dimension has been meeting for 5 years with a strong support from nearly the whole lot of European countries.

¹ But there are 32 signatories, since considering their federal structure, Germany and Belgium signed twice.

² Which represented in France at the start of last academic year 2002/2003 more than 2 million students (2,155,000) of which around 1,400,000 were in 85 universities.

1/ Readable and comparable degrees

A/ The 'Diploma Supplement'



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In 1999 October 4th, France ratified the Council of Europe/UNESCO Convention on the recognition of qualifications concerning higher education in the European region which was signed in Lisbon on April 11th 1997 - hence known as the 'Lisbon Convention' -, and where the notion of the 'Diploma Supplement' is standing out for the first time.

France explicitly refers to the 'Diploma Supplement' which is described as a 'diploma's descriptive annex', and to its widespread use for any student wishing to go abroad : so for international mobility purposes, this document will necessarily go along with the issued '*licence*' and master's diplomas « in order to ensure , within the framework of international mobility, the readability of acquired learning and skills" (article 2 (4°) < decree n°2002-482 of April 08th 2002).

This notion is mentioned as well in the texts on the validation of prior academic and professional learning, considering that the candidate's file must include :

- the diploma's descriptive annex and certificates testifying the credits acquired in case of studies undertaken abroad notably within the framework set by the European Union in order to promote mobility into another European country (article 4 < decree of April 16th 2002 on the validation of studies undertaken abroad) ;
- and, if need be, when dealing with the VAE³ given by the higher education institutions when awarding a national degree on the State's behalf, official papers corresponding to prior training and degrees (article 4 < 2002 April 24th decree).

In order to promote the widespread use of this 'diploma supplement', a group set up by the MJENR (ministry of youth, national education and research) is currently working on the definition of a document allowing the international, professional, university readability of degrees to increase ; although on the basis of legal texts, this document to be issued freely is compulsory for mobile students only, this working group suggests that any student might be given the 'diploma supplement', along with its translation into a foreign language.

B/ The validation of studies undertaken abroad

The reform of the prior learning validation (which occurred in 2002) mirrors the will to widespread the use of having, in higher education, the students' prior learning taken into account, whether studies (included those undertaken abroad), or acquired vocational skills (which may have been acquired either in France or abroad) are considered. The core idea is to have more coherent learning paths and to link initial and continuing education together because in relation to lifelong learning, such a dichotomy between each other is not meaningful anymore to-day.

The widened principle of the validation of prior academic learning, which is now written into the Code of education and which is what the decree of April 16th 2002 is made for, increases the right to have one's studies undertaken abroad validated by a higher education institution or organism which belongs to the public or private sector, whatever these studies' conditions and period were.

³ French acronym standing for the validation of prior academic and professional learning

2/ A degree structure based on 2 main cycles



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In France, the first measures to make the higher education system fit into the principles of the "Sorbonne/Bologna Process" started as soon as 1999 with the creation, on the one hand, of the 'maitre' 's degree"⁴ (which came to be added up to the 3 existing degrees : 'baccalauréat', 'licence' - bachelor's degree -, doctorate) and on the other hand, of the professionally-oriented 'licence' ('*licence professionnelle*') which came up to make the 3 postsecondary years' educational study programmes broader, while implementing the Europe-wide agreed on principle of a professionally-oriented 1st cycle.

In 2002, an overall reform of the French higher education system occurred in the perspective of the European higher education area Ministers in charge of Education committed themselves to building up by 2010. One of the most significant legal texts published in April 2002 is the decree (n°2002-482) of April 8th 2002 which provides for implementing into the French higher education system the shaping of the European higher education area and therefore defines the core principles underlying the way the whole system is to be set up :

- degree structure in higher education based on 4 degrees <ie : French "*grades*"> (instead of 3) : the 'baccalauréat'⁵, the 'licence', the new *master's* degree and the doctorate (hence the common name of the general reform thus introduced and called 'L.M.D.' - LMD standing for '*licence*', *master*, and *doctorate* -) ;
- programme structure divided into semesters and modules ;
- general use of the ECTS credit system ;
- 'Diploma supplement' or diploma's descriptive annex issued to any student wishing to do an international mobility.

Therefore in order to link the national system with the degree structure pattern agreed on Europe-wide and essentially based on two main cycles, a second decree (n°2002-481) of April 8th 2002 legally *creates a new diploma, the Master's diploma*, whose organization of studies is defined by the ministry act of April 25th 2002.

Besides, the name of the existing 'maitre' 's *degree*⁶ is modified (cf. decree n°2002-604 of April 25th 2002) and substituted by the '*master*' 's name in order to guarantee its readability right away at the international level : this degree, awarded on the State's behalf and conferred as a full right, as soon as 1999, to the *DEA* or *DESS* holders and to the graduates holding an *engineer's diploma* awarded by an 'accredited'⁷ institution is also given, from now on, to the holders of a master's diploma and of other diplomas awarded on the State's behalf at a similar level of postsecondary education and mentioned on a legal list.

⁴ 'Degré' is indeed used here in the sense of the Lisbon Convention, and therefore is referring to the French notion of '*grade*' (see footnote n°6 below) ; whereas 'diploma' was the legal translation used in the Lisbon Convention for what is called a '*diplôme*' in French.

⁵ The fact that the 'baccalauréat', as a right to access to 1st-year university courses, is the 1st university degree is indeed one of the particularities of the French higher education system, whose other fundamental characteristic is the 'Universities/ *Grandes Ecoles*' duality.

⁶ The legal notion of a degree, used here in the sense of the Lisbon Convention as the French notion of '*grade*', corresponds in France to a level of studies which is certified as such and is not linked to any discipline or specialization ; a '*grade*' is given by a diploma you acquired in a given discipline.

⁷ That is to say, legally entitled to do so by the State - 'accredited institution' used here in the sense of the French notion of '*établissement habilité*'.



The *Master's degree*, whatever profile it's got (*professionally-oriented Master* or *research-oriented Master*'s degrees), requires 120 credits after the *licence*'s degree, that is to say, 300 credits altogether from the *baccalauréat*'s degree, which corresponds to 5 postsecondary years ; it can also be awarded by the *Grandes Ecoles*.

Therefore, French higher education institutions are invited to work on a genuine in-depth reconstruction of their educational offers in order to provide, for each cycle, a set of coherent flexible learning paths in fields of study to be set in relation to each institution's own strategy.

Because of the national timeschedule set for the next "waves" of 4-year contracts to be negotiated between the State and institutions under the supervision of the minister in higher education, this reform should be made real all around the country in 2005/2006. And if legal texts make it possible for an institution to adopt a progressive schedule for it over a period of several years, it is nevertheless recommended, for the sake of easiness and efficiency, to make a single switch at once for all courses of a similar field.

3/ The general use of transferable European 'credits' (ECTS)

The use of the European transfer credit system (ECTS) - credits referring to capitalizable and credit giving modules on the basis of a Europe-wide agreed on scale of values (that is : 60 credits = 1 year ; 180 credits = a *licence*'s degree ; 300 credits = a master's degree) -is the golden rule now in France. This legal principle (cf. april 8th 2002 decree mentioned before) from now on is stated in ministerial notes sent to institutions involved by the 4-year contract process.

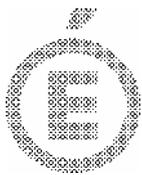
The core idea behind it is to increase the readability of studies and degrees in respect to the 'Sorbonne/Bologna logic', and to use the ECTS tool as well (together with a modular curricular structure and prior learning validation) in order to build up *flexible learning paths*'. On condition that the educational coherence is guaranteed by teaching teams, this greater flexibility in the educational offer and in diversified learning paths to be provided to students⁸ makes it easier to have disciplines unusually combined with each other without actually meaning to create new degrees systematically ; it enables students to be more easily oriented and put into new streams with bridges (for instance, between a research-oriented Master and a professionally-oriented Master's degree), and suits better the educational needs met by different sorts of publics at university. Although the reform this way is steering a logic of flexible learning paths, ***the national feature of each national degree*** is guaranteed by the *habilitation*' ('accreditation') and the recognition of such a degree by the State which sees to the national coherence of degrees and educational offers and to the complementarity of courses provided on a same location.

With the ECTS approach an important change is being adopted in France where the unusual notion of a student's workload must be substituted to the principle of 'hours attended by teachers and students'. Matters are getting off to a good start now and are improving by the new 4-year contracts to be negotiated.

⁸ For example, at the Artois University (in the north of France), the professionally-oriented Master is translated into 7 paths whereas the research-oriented Master only includes 2 learning paths.

4/ Promoting mobility

A strong commitment to mobility was developed under the French presidency of the European Union, which resulted in the adoption, at the European Council in Nice in december 2000, of an Action Plan for mobility.



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Beyond the revision of the degree structure and the general use of the credit system triggered off by the 'Sorbonne/Bologna logic', two boosts for action are contributing to strengthen the national policy for mobility's sake : the will to make the access to university easier to anyone is reflected into the ongoing Student Social Plan on the one hand, notably with mobility grants rising (ie : see below), and on the other hand, the broadened principle of prior learning validation, both for prior academic learning acquired when studying abroad and prior professional learning to anyone (ie : point 7 before).

Generally speaking, the MJENR is promoting an ambitious policy in higher education for the rise in mobility figures, notably through the policy of contracts with institutions which are automatically asked to develop such an action line.

So, with Erasmus notably, France is still having the leading position in 2003 as compared to its European partners, as far as figures of outgoing students (more than 18,000) and institutions involved in that kind of exchanges (more than 300) are concerned. Besides, mobility is now increasingly financed, whether individual or institutional grants are concerned.

A/ Individual grants

In France there are all sorts of incentive systems for mobility (students' mobility mainly, and mobility of teachers and researchers as well, or even mobility of academic staffs). These systems which lead to various individual grants and supports are financed by public funds, whatever grants, either grants financed by different ministries or grants attributed by local authorities (in particular by the regional authorities). These support schemes do play an unquestionable part in the steady increase going on in France concerning students' figures, irrespective of the Erasmus⁹ or Leonardo da Vinci¹⁰ schemes.

The State financial contribution is still greatly prevailing whereas the local authorities' one is although limited fastly growing. Recent measures (ie : see below) were taken in that field in order to consolidate the grants' system, for students in particular.

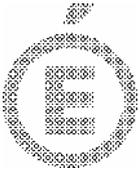
Such a logic of grants to be paid concurrently which is underlying the whole grants' scheme is a way to promote the access to mobility for young people with low income, and therefore, that makes mobility more democratic, as recommended by the Action Plan for mobility.

Since 2000, the national support scheme for students in higher education was indeed strengthened by :

- Ü *the tripled financial 'Erasmus top-up' envelope* : in order to promote the students' mobility better, the specific financing which the ministry in charge of education created in 1989 and called 'Erasmus top-up' - because such a support is meant to be a top-up added to the European community Erasmus grants attributed to French students who are selected for this kind of exchange - was multiplied by three since 2000 and represents 4,5 Meuros <4,573,470 euros exactly > in 2003 ;

⁹ cf. 15,263 in 1997/98 - 16,351 in 1998/99 - 17,093 in 1999/2000 and 18,149 in 2000/01

¹⁰ cf. 1,490 in 2000 - 1,569 out of a total amount of 4,067 French mobile persons in 2000/01 - 1,654 out of a total amount of 4,671 French mobile trainees in 2001/02



- ü *the creation of 'mobility grants'* : this new socially-oriented kind of grant which was created in 2001 is meant to give students who are taking advantage of higher education grants attributed on social criteria, opportunities to go and study abroad, notably in Europe for their training. Whereas 36,000 grants (corresponding to monthly grants of a 384 euros amount) were financed in 2002, 45,000 monthly grants (for an amount of 389 euros per month) are planned to be financed in 2003, that is to say an increase by 25% ;
- ü *the gradually broadened right to higher education socially-oriented grants* - which are still paid when studying in Europe (ie : see next § below) - given to 5th-year students since last academic year 2002/2003.

Students who are holding social grants can still have their grants paid if they go and keep studying abroad in a member State of the Council of Europe, as long as these studies are leading to a national higher education degree. This principle echoes the Council of Europe European agreement of december 12th 1969, which was signed and ratified by France on september 11th 1970 concerning the maintain of the grants payment to students going abroad to keep on studying.

B/ Grants to institutions

α/ Policy of contracts with universities

International opening up is a must for the attractiveness of higher education and research ; recent legal evolutions triggered off by the 'Sorbonne/Bologna Process' dynamics must create the conditions allowing higher education institutions to commit themselves to the shaping of the European higher education area.

In such a context, and in order to encourage the higher education institutions involved in the contract policy to develop a genuine international strategy as a part of their own institutional projects for the next 4 years to come, the MJENR modified the procedure: since 2002 indeed the institutional project must put the international dimension forward within its strategy for action, which is made real by 'an international policy statement' and an 'international section' as such ; and if the 'European policy' dimension has to be the main one of course in the 'International' section, such a dimension from now on is also a core one in the contract process in relation to the whole educational offer to be restructured, with the 'LMD reform' developed in France within the 'Sorbonne/Bologna Process'.

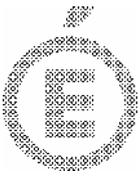
β/ Taking into account specific educational costs fostered by international cooperation

In order to promote international initiatives from higher education institutions and notably the building of a new MA offer into competitive attractive Masters which are adapted to the particular needs foreign students with a Bachelor degree are facing, it was an important matter to give opportunities to higher education institutions for increasing provisions of new educational services and get new financial resources.

The decree of april 30th 2002¹¹ gives to institutions the opportunity to state in an annex to their financial budgets the costs fostered by the specific educational services which are provided within the framework of international cooperation ; these courses must be provided to foreign students who are welcome in France, or who are staying abroad and are taking advantage of such courses with on-site or distance services, and can lead to the award of diplomas or certificates. Eligible costs concern specific tailored courses, specific welcome services, tutoring and training backup, and providing persons in training schemes with continuous educational support, engineering services for training and general outcoming costs as well.

¹¹ Decree n°2002-654 of april 30th 2002 concerning the payment of educational services provided by higher education institutions within the framework of their missions of international cooperation

5/ Promoting the European cooperation in quality assurance



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In quality assurance, the national system was consolidated with the legal principle of a *regular* national evaluation of higher education institutions, educational offers and certification systems ; the results from these assessments will be taken into account before the decision for the '*habilitation*' ('accreditation') will be made by the State for a limited period of time. In this context, the 4-year contract legitimacy and efficiency, which was launched in the early '1990s and which binds a university, or another institution concerned by the contract policy, to the State once objectives for action are negotiated, are based notably on a permanent external assessment of all the institution's activities whether these concern management, educational offer and methods, social activities or research. For engineering colleges, a regular assessment, every 6 year maximum, which corresponds to the maximum period of the '*habilitation*' ('accreditation') that can be awarded for the right to 'make' graduate engineers, must be carried out by the Commission for Graduate Engineers (*CTI* < French acronym), created since 1934. Concerning the assessment of business and management colleges a new commission was created for in 2001, the Commission for the evaluation of management courses and degrees - '*Commission d'évaluation des formations et des diplômes de gestion*', the same principle stands as the rule, that is to say an assessment carried out every 6 years maximum, because such is the maximum length that can be given for the right to award degrees signed on the State's behalf. Besides, the national evaluation Committee - "*Comité national d'évaluation*" (*CNE*) -, member of the European Network for Quality Assurance (ENQA), regularly examines and assesses activities of public institutions with scientific, cultural and vocational purposes in the fields related to the missions of the higher education "public service"¹².

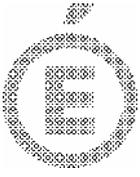
While sticking to the principle of an 'ex ante' authorization and the traditional analysis of teaching contents, greater room is to be given from now on, whatever the degree under consideration may be, to the efficiency criteria based on the teaching teams quality and on the analysis of the eventual results, in order to give a label to these studies courses. If international opening is a key element for the assessment of the overall educational offer of a higher education institution, a particular attention, while evaluating Masters and Doctorates, will be paid to the international dimension, notably to the quality of transnational partnerships and to the suggested innovations in teaching methods. Bodies in charge of assessment can call on foreign experts in order to perform their missions well.

The care to develop an inner culture for quality assurance in universities led to agree on the principle of having study programmes and teaching methods evaluated while students are associated, and procedures must be set for the evaluation process¹³.

The intensification in the evaluation of higher education courses in France is the consequence of the greater freedom given to institutions - because an 'ex ante' definition of the degree's content is given up -, entitled to design their own educational offers as long as the general 'LMD' framework is respected.

¹² cf. important French legal notion of the '*missions du service public de l'enseignement supérieur*'.

¹³ cf. articles 20 et 21 of the ministry act du 23/04/02 concerning the '*licence*' 's degree.



6/ Promoting the European dimension in higher education :

Within the framework of the contract policy, the MJENR is backing up initiatives which are aiming at introducing the European dimension in courses, particularly the internationally-oriented ones and from now on an increasing attention is being paid to the development of "double degrees". There exists a broad range of partnerships with European universities as well, for instance in Law, with a double legal orientation. The new texts published in April 2002 must promote such initiatives better and what matters notably is to make important efforts for the teaching of foreign languages so as any graduate student with a Master's degree can speak - as a compulsory skill - one or two foreign languages fluently.

As far as ongoing European pilot projects are concerned, 8 French higher education institutions (7 universities and 1 '*Grande Ecole*') are participating to 10 of the 11 Joint Master Degrees programs selected for the EUA (European University Association) pilot project ; and again 8 French institutions (6 universities and 2 higher education colleges) are involved in the 5 major disciplines which were concerned during the Tuning project's first phase.

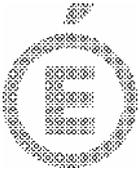
7/ Lifelong learning :

The current policy promoted in France for an education system of quality is characterized by the will to open it all up, in particular thanks to increased opportunities for the individuals' mobility ; beyond the students' mobility from one country to another, which is made easier by the validation of higher studies (cf. point 1B mentioned before), an important reform on the validation of prior professional learning was made in 2002 in order to develop the mobility between student life and professional life and vice-versa, for the sake of a genuine lifelong learning.

The law on social modernization of January 17th 2002 broadened the opportunities to have one's prior professional learning validated in order to get a higher education degree : from now on, the new system of validation of prior professional skills and experiences (VAE) allows you to have not just your professional skills validated for the award of a degree, but the skills you acquired through socially-oriented or volunteer activities validated just as well ; and it's the whole part of a degree you're looking for, and not the only part of some exams required for it anymore, which you can have through VAE.

In no way, that doesn't mean the recognition of an automatic right to a degree, but the recognition of a right given to anyone to have one's experiences validated for the award of a degree. Besides, it must be noted that actually VAE will give access to all degrees but gradually though.

While combining this principle of validation of prior learning and the one of the modular structure of study programmes into units, what is meant is to make the notion of 'flexible learning paths' real and, thanks to a broadened recognition of prior academic and professional, formal and informal learning, to promote all sorts of mobilities (mobility between professional life and training life, mobility in order to go and study abroad) that will be more and more applying to everyone.



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8/ Higher education institutions and students :

The dialogue between higher education institutions and the MJENR is a constant one, notably through representative associations and various commissions these institutions' representatives participate in, but first and foremost, with universities and other institutions concerned by the 1984 law on higher education and the contract policy.

Students are also represented by their own unions and sit in national advisory commissions (notably the CNESER¹⁴) and boards within institutions. Considering the important public funding attributed to higher education in France, they can take advantage from low tuition fees generally speaking, as compared to the quality of courses provided and other situations that can be usually seen abroad, as well as an important scheme of various grants and supports which was strengthened with the Student Social Plan.

9/ Promoting the attractiveness of the European Higher Education Area :

A wide range of grants is meant for foreign students who came to France to study ; according to estimated figures, the financial envelope awarded by the ministry of Foreign affairs to about 23,000 holders a year equals to nearly 91,5 millions euros a year, besides low tuition fees required in French universities.

In order to offer a better welcome to these foreign students, a 'national Council for the development of the students' international mobility' is being created in order to analyze what is existing and to make any suggestion for improvement. The State is already promoting the development of single information points in order to avoid foreign students from having many administrative steps, the improved welcome of these students at university with ongoing or planned innovative actions financially backed in 4-year contracts ; and the conditions of entry and residence of students and persons on training coming from non-member States of the European community were recently softened.

The ongoing strategy is also based on a genuine information policy to be set up about the educational offer, at the national level, with the Edufrance agency that has just made a catalogue on the French educational offer, which is called "e-France" and can be available through the Internet¹⁵ ; and on the development within institutions of a specific educational offer to be provided to foreign students.

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¹⁴ ie : *Conseil national de l'enseignement supérieur et de la recherche* / national Council for higher education and research

¹⁵ www.edufrance.fr