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Internationalization trends in French higher education: a historical overview

Guillaume Tronchet

For many policy makers in France, internationalization of higher education is a new subject. “Internationalization: it’s time to invest”, concludes a recent report presented in January 2015 by the French government. “It’s a new challenge for France”, said the organizers of the Congress of the French *Grandes Ecoles* already in 2010.

People have short memories. They have forgotten – or simply do not know – that French universities were pioneers and leaders in internationalization between the end of the 19th and the middle of the 20th century, before being outshone by the United States and some other European countries. How can this be explained? And how can history help in understanding some of the current trends in French higher education policy?

From local to global

During the 19th century, the global academic community was fascinated by the German university model. To counteract this influence, especially after the Franco-Prussian War, French elites of the new Third Republic decided to invest in higher education, in order to divert international students and scholars from Germany. By grouping together the existing faculties of arts, sciences, medicine and law, fifteen public universities were created in 1896, with a large autonomy of action in international academic affairs.

Local initiatives were then crucial. In order to increase the number of their students, and with the help of local actors such as mayors, regional chambers of commerce etc. who wanted to develop tourism and other economic opportunities for their cities, French universities launched what I call in my doctoral thesis “academic diplomacy”. This entailed (inter alia): marketing actions to promote French universities (handbooks, posters, advertisements in the

international press); French language and culture courses for international students; international summer schools (the most famous was organized by the University of Grenoble in 1899); special degrees for international students; scholarships to study abroad; new branch campuses abroad (in this matter the University of Lyon was very active in the Middle East with the foundation of a Law School in Beirut, while Paris turned to South America, Grenoble to Italy, Bordeaux and Toulouse to Spain). French cultural and scientific institutes were subsequently founded in Florence, Madrid, London and Saint Petersburg in the early 20th century.

The defeat of university autonomy

After the First World War, as Philip Altbach and Hans de Wit stated in a recent issue of *IHE*, the development of international academic relations benefited from the rise of Geneva internationalism. France quickly took the leading position in the international student market: 17,000 students came to France in 1931, i.e. about 20 to 25 percent of the total number of internationally mobile students at this time, while only 9,000 international students went to the United States, about 7,000 to Germany and 5,000 to UK. The percentage of international students in French universities was up to 25 percent of the total number of students. In some universities this rate even reached 80 percent, e.g. Rouen University in 1930.

At the same time, government administration became more present in the process. The Ministry of Education was first involved from the 1910s and gradually nationalized academic diplomacy. After 1920, the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs also came into play, developing its own ‘cultural diplomacy’ to compete with other nations, especially the fascist countries. As I noted in my doctoral thesis, there were frequent conflicts between actors of academic diplomacy on the one hand, and of cultural diplomacy on the other. Universities

tried to preserve their autonomy without success: the international academic policy of France gradually came under the control of governmental cultural diplomacy.

The burden of history

The second part of the 20th century did not change this legacy. There were constant conflicts inside French administrations between actors related either to Higher Education offices or to Foreign Affairs offices. The situation was complicated in the 1960s first by the creation of a Ministry of Culture, which wanted to get involved in cultural diplomacy, and then after decolonization by the creation of a Ministry of Cooperation which was in charge of relations with scholarship students from the former French colonial empire. Many reforms were then enacted before creating finally, in 2010, a unique national agency, Campus France, in charge of international student mobility and of the promotion of French higher education abroad. This could be translated into a new start for academic diplomacy.

The fact that the French government and higher education are both intrinsically linked to the Civil Service system is also significant. What kind of international autonomy can universities enjoy in this context? It is the government that sets down the rules for all public universities regarding scholar recruitments and student enrollments, and they do not always favor internationalization. For instance, as regards scholar recruitments, no foreign scholar could be appointed to an ordinary teaching position in France until the Edgar Faure Law in 1968; this is one of the reasons why French universities could not keep German scholars who fled Nazism in the 1930s. Even though the recruitment of foreign scholars in France recently increased to an average rate of 18 percent of the total number of new recruitments each year, this is still not common: in 2004, according to OECD figures, the percentage of foreign scholars in French higher education was 7.5, a long way from the United States (30 to 40

percent), Switzerland (35 percent), the United Kingdom (20 percent) and Norway (10,5 percent).

As for international student enrollments, although the ‘republican consensus’ — based on the principle of non-discrimination between French and foreign students — has maintained equal tuition fees for French and international students since 1914, a fact which contributes to the international attractiveness of French higher education, universities have nonetheless been deeply impacted by government immigration policy which has at times closed the doors to foreign students, especially between the 1970s and the 1990s and again in 2011-2012. The effect has been such that a French political scientist talked about “the end of foreign students”.

A centralized national government, numerous conflicts between elements of this government and, on occasions, enactment of restrictive immigration laws have led to stifling international innovation in French universities. The changing world order since the 1970s has also contributed to live down this historical tradition: the shift from internationalization to globalization has drawn public attention to private schools – especially business schools – which are more comfortable in globalization and are active in funding branch campuses abroad (according to the Cross-Border Education Research Team about 90 percent of French branch campuses abroad are private school extensions). Instead of internationalization, which is clearly not a ‘new challenge’, it is globalization that locates French higher education today at the crossroads. Reclaiming its own history could be part of the solution.

ABSTRACT

For many policy makers in France, internationalization of higher education is a new subject. But people have short memories. They have forgotten – or simply do not know – that French universities were pioneers and leaders in internationalization between the end of the 19th and the middle of the 20th century, before being outshone by the United States and some countries in Europe. Faced with today’s challenges of globalization, it is may be time for French universities to reclaim their own history.

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KEYWORDS

Internationalization – French Higher Education – Academic Diplomacy – History