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France: the move towards distance education in the university sector

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Abstract

This study briefly outlines the current development of distance education in France's state universities and the government's recent initiatives in this field leading to the emergence of what is now termed 'Digital Campuses' (*Campus numériques*). A brief statistical overview initially situates French universities within the framework of the country's state education system (*Education Nationale*).

The beginnings of distance education in France in general is evoked, with the creation of the state-run CNED (*Centre national d'enseignement à distance*) in 1939. Analysis of the CNED's 2003 yearly report focuses on the programmes it offers and its vast international audience, while also shedding light on the current decline in its enrolments. Lifelong learning in France – albeit at a critically low level – is mentioned with a view to pinpointing the need for progress on this front, not least from the university sector.

Finally, the study describes the vigorous government initiatives that have, since 2001, generated tangible results, enabling the creation of distance learning programmes produced and run by consortia of existing universities within France, or in collaboration with other tertiary education institutions in France and abroad.

France: the move towards distance education in the university sector

Peter MORTIMER, M.A. University of London

'The next big "killer application" for the Internet is going to be education.'

John Chambers, CEO, Cisco Systems

INTRODUCTION

France: one of the most modern countries in the world today and a leading force in Europe (CIA, 2004). With a population of just over 60 million people (July 2004 estimate), statistics show the median age in France to be a low 38.6 years, thanks to strong government encouragement to have larger families. Life expectancy is a comfortable 79 due to a sophisticated health and welfare system, the cost of which nonetheless bites into the French taxpayers' pocket. The tax burden in France is one of the highest in Europe: 43.8% of the national GDP in 2003.

A highly literate and well-educated society, France's education statistics for 2003 show 12.1 million French children in primary and secondary education and 2.2 million students in tertiary education. Public expenditure on education is 5.8% of the national GDP (cf. United Kingdom: 4.4%). In the field of science and technology, expenditure on research and development is 2.2% of the GDP, compared with 1.9% in the UK (UNESCO, 2004).

How well then is higher education in France coping with the advent of distance education? To answer this question, we first need to present briefly the path leading to higher education.

Heading for university

Education in France is generally of a strong academic persuasion. Rote learning - even at university level - is still prevalent today; a long-standing tradition of memorisation

ardently and eloquently upheld by the philosopher and writer, George Steiner, brought up in Paris in the 1930s:

'We were in a system – the French *lycée* system [secondary education] – where memory was felt to be your greatest asset. [...] Most of present schooling is organised amnesia...' (BBC Radio 4, 1997)

The inclination in French education towards the straightforward transmission of knowledge and the inherent risk of a right/wrong attitude to learning, was highlighted in a recent study by the Education Department of the University of Bristol (Broadfoot *et al.*, 2000). The authors, reviewing the attitudes and achievements of 400 English and 400 French pupils aged between nine and eleven, reached these conclusions:

'In France, there is a "nationally-derived assumption that educational success is based on effort, rather than ability". [...] To French children, the main goal was to get the answer right - so they would tend not even to try questions about which they were unsure. English children were more likely to devise a strategy for solving an unfamiliar problem.'

(BBC Online News, 2000)

In secondary education, the summative examination at eighteen, the *baccalauréat* demands knowledge of a wide range of subjects, unlike the more limited 'A' level system in the UK. The *baccalauréat* - or the *bac* as it is commonly called – does nonetheless allow for some degree of specialisation.

It is important to note that passing the *bac* enables secondary school pupils automatic access to university education. This ease of transition, favourable as it might seem to promoting an academically gifted élite, is nonetheless a source of trouble.

Firstly, many pupils apply to university merely to escape unemployment. Statistics for June 2003 show an overall unemployment rate of 9.4% in France, whilst the number of under-25s unemployed stands at 19.9%, amongst the highest in Europe, and far beyond the 12.7% of under-25s that are jobless in the United Kingdom, for example

(Eurostat, 2003). Secondly, the academic emphasis of the *bac* does little to orient pupils professionally; many of them enter their first year at university as if it were an extension of school with no thought to a future career at the outcome. Furthermore, little or no help from an assigned tutor is on hand in French universities to aid first-year students in coming to terms with their new learning environment. These drawbacks in many cases quickly lead to students dropping out or having to change courses in mid-year. And for those who do 'stay the course', many are hampered by their lack of preparation for the academic discipline that university life supposes and the 'having to work on your own' approach to learning that university entails.

DISTANCE EDUCATION IN FRANCE

The generally accepted starting date for distance education in France is 1939. With the outbreak of World War 2 and the German invasion of northern France, children were relocated to the south of France, triggering the need for a massive solution for their education. This provoked the creation of the state-run *Service d'enseignement par correspondance et radio*: the Correspondance- and Radio-supported Teaching Service. In its first year, the service provided instruction for 7 500 learners, with a total staff of 100 teachers, 52 markers, four typists and three clerks, and alongside printed material, two hours of instructional programmes were also broadcast every day. Since then, the service - now called the CNED (*Centre national d'enseignement à distance*: the National Centre for Distance Education) - has evolved enormously. It remains a government body and is manned largely by teachers trained and employed by the state. With a 2003 total of some 323 000 enrolled learners, the CNED ranks as Europe's number one provider of distance education. One third of the learners are involved in primary or secondary education courses, one fifth in teacher training and a further fifth in adult training courses of various types. A good third of all learners (35%) are resident in Africa, due to the widespread use of French as a second language in West and North Africa. A further 30% are in Europe, 13% in the USA and 13% in Asia (CNED yearly report, 2003, Annex A-V & A-VIII).

The CNED: On a slippery slope

Despite its far-reaching popularity, the CNED has seen its enrolments plummet recently, with a loss of some 72 000 enrolments since 1999. Figures in its yearly report for 2003 show a catastrophic fall of 8% on the previous year, and statistics also indicate that a staggering two thirds of learners drop out in their first year. Two major drawbacks may explain these figures. Firstly, a turn-around time for getting assignments back to learners of up to six weeks; a fact often cited as one of the major reasons for demotivation. Secondly, the glaring failure of the organisation in the 90s to initiate web-based and electronic media for course delivery and student support; 95% of all materials are still print-based and delivered by the postal service. It is significant however to note that enrolments abroad nonetheless continue to progress, no doubt influenced by the fact that the postal service - in the poorer African countries, for example – often remains the only means of delivery available.

One may hypothesize that the CNED's poor strategic planning is due to its institutional structure, belonging as it does to the French state education system. Equally, its mandatory workforce - a long-standing heritage from its creation in 1939 – of teachers with civil service status has perhaps afforded the institution little scope for change. Moreover, the introduction and implementation of information technology (IT) throughout the entire French education system, not just the CNED, has over the past ten years been painfully slow. State-employed teachers, ill-informed of the advent of IT and offered scant opportunities to acquire new skills in that field, have dragged their feet in the uptake of new technology; and surprising as it may seem, nowhere more so than at university level.

DISTANCE EDUCATION IN FRENCH UNIVERSITIES

The concept of education as a market commodity - long since prevalent in the world of distance education – is ill-received in university circles in France. Downes and Janes

strenuously uphold the concept and remind us that it is the learners themselves who – justifiably! – 'call the shots':

'New Zealand's tertiary education sector has experienced significant changes over the past few years. As a result, tertiary education is now viewed as a commodity by students and by the wider community – and tertiary institutions must respond appropriately.' (2003: p.1)

French universities: Biting the bullet

This innate reluctance throughout French universities to adopt the concept of education as a market commodity - with its intrinsic value - has put a brake on any significant progress in getting substantial distance programmes online.

In 1998, Jacques Vauthier, at the time secretary general of the FIED, *Fédération interuniversitaire d'enseignement à distance* (Interuniversity Distance Education Federation) and vice-president of the EADTU (European Association of Distant Teaching Universities) was already sounding the alarm:

'The sum of money that Europe is going to spend on "lifelong learning" is a windfall that French universities would do well to preoccupy themselves with, and in doing so produce, as an end-product, courses of "industrial" quality with a learning environment which is inevitably not the one at present found in our institutes of higher education.' (1998: p.39)

In some universities, hastily prepared distance education programmes have nonetheless been announced, but bear little relationship to the true concept of distance education:

'Setting up a digital campus and distance training often comes down to just "putting online" the content of face-to-face lectures '.

(Demaizière, 2003a: website)

Furthermore, central government has for too long contented itself with offering universities extensive IT hardware - throughout the 90s, and still persists in doing so -

while the genuine need at the grass roots level is for training and in-house communication to aid staff and technicians in adopting new technology. The emphasis clearly needs to be the creation of a 'service' ethos within universities:

'Working towards the concept of a service is required rather than concentrating on facilities.' (Demaizière, 2003b: website)

Other reasons for the lack of interest in IT and in distance education have stemmed from workloads that afforded little room for staff to update their skills:

'...the staff concerned feeling relatively uninvolved, due in particular to the absence of any statutory recognition of the significant amount of time required of teacher-researchers when they participate in multimedia productions (or else the lack of interest many of them show for the introduction of technology into their teaching) and a lack of training for many university engineers and technicians.' (Glikman, 2002: p.94)

On another level, the drive towards open learning with unconstrained access to university education, along the lines of that offered by the Open University in the United Kingdom, has been equally slow and meagre. The VAE system, *Validation des acquis de l'expérience*, (Validation of work experience), destined to provide people with justifiable fast-track access to higher education diplomas, remains greatly discouraging for many people:

'The idea is gaining ground that experience in a trade is as valid as qualifications obtained at school or in higher education. But the procedures for validating vocational achievements, brought in by the 1985 and 1993 Acts, still come up against serious obstacles. In 1998, only 12,000 people managed to validate the achievements of their experience.'

(French Embassy, UK, 2002: website)

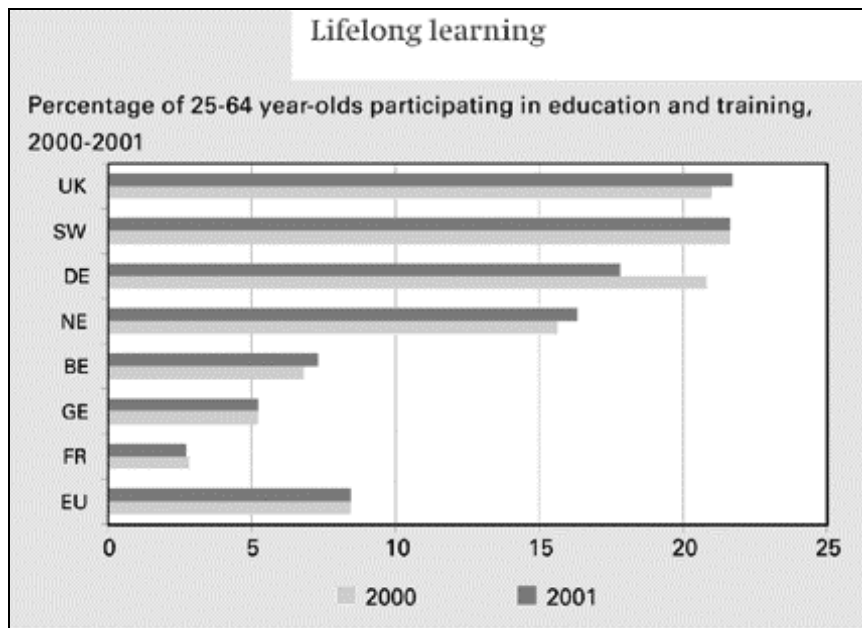
Facing the music?

Summing up, it would appear then that it is the overriding market concept of higher education that manifestly awakens panic in many French university spheres:

'Commercial logic demands [...] that one bows *de facto* to the existing standard, that is to say the Anglo-Saxon model for the organisation of teaching and diplomas, which currently leads the way in the international trade in education... [...] Pure economic interests thus become a fundamental element in the reworking of our educational system.'

(Del Buono, L. *et al.*, 2003: p.21)

Yet can one ignore the figures? Statistics for 2000-2001, in this graph taken from a survey published by the Dutch Ministry of Education, Culture and Science, show a humbling record for France in the field of lifelong learning, for example: scarcely 3% of the population, a figure even lower than the overall European average of 8%.



(© Dutch Ministry of Education, Culture and Science)

TOWARDS A BRIGHTER FUTURE?

Tradition and negative past experience may well explain the overall gloomy picture of distance education in French universities that so far emerges:

'Unlike the UK, in Germany and France there has been no strong tradition of distance learning, nor positive experiences of computer-based learning (Massy, 2001). Moreover, the data on dissatisfaction with current eLearning

provision in Germany and France may reflect a cultural antipathy to such forms of learning that makes future adoption less likely.'

(Martin & Jennings, 2002: p. 41)

There is nonetheless light at the end of the tunnel, it seems.

The 'Digital Campuses' project

In much the same way as in 1968 the Labour government's vigorous initiative in Britain produced the Open University, so France's socialist government in 2001 gave a vital, top-down and long-awaited impetus to university-based distance education with the implementation of the 'Digital Campuses' project (*Campus numériques*).

The vocation of these campuses was made clear in the words of Jack Lang, the minister for education at the time:

'To ensure the modernisation of the higher education public service by maintaining its level of excellence and by developing partnerships between universities and partnerships at an international level.'

(Lang, 2001: French National Education website)

The scope of the project is wide and pragmatic:

'...to successfully construct a range of flexible training programmes, including both initial training and continuing education [...] available in versions ranging from traditional classroom situations enriched by the use of ICT, to programmes that rely entirely on distance learning techniques, depending on the course of study and the needs and objectives of students.'

(Educnet, nd: website)

Unlike the Open University, however, the 'Digital Campuses' project does not involve the creation of new institutions, but aims to bring together existing institutions:

'... a cooperative effort comprised of French higher educational institutions (nearly 200 are involved in this programme), foreign higher educational institutions (with 38 partnerships) and above all, the private sector (including 178 partnerships with associations or businesses).'

(Educnet, nd: website)

By opening up institutions in this way - chipping away at their isolation, both geographically and ideologically - the project seems to be working. Forty-five of these consortia were already in the starting-block in 2001, with ten major distance programmes accessible for the 2001-2002 academic year (French National Education report on Digital Campuses, 2001).

And now, another inspired move: the gradual erosion of France's historic tendency to centralise everything, not least, education, with the creation of nine 'Regional Digital Universities' (*Universités numériques en région*).

France's Regional Digital Universities

ACO: Aquitaine Campus Ouvert	Centred on Bordeaux, in the south-western region of France
ANCOLY: Animation du Campus Ouvert de Lyon	Centred on Lyon and Saint-Etienne, in the south-east
CNB: Campus Numérique de Bretagne	Brittany region, in the north-west of France
GRECO: Grenoble Campus Ouvert	South-east of France, at the foot of the Alps
LUNO: Lorraine Université Ouverte	Eastern France, bordering on Germany
TOCO: Toulouse Campus Ouvert	Situated in south-western France, bordering on the Pyrenees
UNS: Université Numérique de Strasbourg	North-eastern region of France
UO-MLR: Université Ouverte Montpellier Languedoc Roussillon	Central southern France
UVPL: Université Virtuelle des Pays de la Loire	Western region of France, stretching out towards the Atlantic

The aim of the project is to prompt the creation of a consortium of institutions at a regional level wherever this is possible:

'...to encourage establishments to pool their efforts in order to offer online services to the entire body of students and personnel.' (Educnet, 2003)

The Regional Digital Universities initiative is – as we write - forging inter-university relationships at a regional level and cementing projects between two, or three, or sometimes four local institutions, who would not, under previous circumstances, have collaborated.

If, however, the above list shows the strength of initiative in many regions, one is compelled to note the absence of projects in the north of France, in the south-east and, more spectacularly, in the Parisian region. Paris's prestigious universities have of late been conspicuous by their absence in many recent developments of this nature.

A guarded optimism is perhaps appropriate with regard to the existing projects. It is too early as yet to measure the long-term success of these ventures; some of them having only come into being over the past two or three years. Demaizière, following the 2003 Montpellier symposium on distance education in French universities cautiously comments:

'...one cannot but notice the fragile or embryonic nature of certain projects, i.e. few permanent staff; a great deal of voluntary work; projects relying on retired workers offering their services for free; the risk - as previously mentioned - of distance training restricted to an audience of adults involved in lifelong learning. The fully mature stage has yet to be reached at which university practices and structures wholeheartedly embrace [distance education]. Here, as before, only time will tell what will result from these projects.'

(2003c: website)

Up and running

A year on from Demaizière's remarks – in September 2004 – and a visit to each Regional Digital University's website reveals pleasant surprises. There is, in several cases, good, intuitive, user-friendly access to online catalogues of distance courses.

One quickly finds one's way around the courses on offer. The *Université Virtuelle des Pays de la Loire*, the *Lorraine Université Ouverte*, the *Université Numérique de Strasbourg* are particularly impressive. Furthermore, with an aim to enabling prospective learners to visualise the environment they will be using, some - The *Lorraine Université Ouverte* site, for example - offer extensive demonstrations of how courses work and what is expected of learners (See link to *Lorraine Université Ouverte* demo pages in References below).

Perusing the various universities' web pages, one cannot but feel that we are – at last! – on the brink of a profound and lasting transformation in the delivery and support of university-level education in France. So why has it taken so long?

Distance education in French universities should – one cannot help thinking – have been embraced long ago. By its very nature, distance education should appeal to the highly transmissive concept of education that abounds in France (cf. the popularity of the CNED). Distance education notoriously allows – in its simplest forms – the processing and 'packaging' of knowledge, enabling the learner access to self-manageable chunks of knowledge. So why – one wonders – has there been such a history of suspicion, of reticence and of delay in its implementation in French university circles?

To answer this last question, can one evoke the true geographical isolation that many universities have suffered from in this vast country? To some extent, yes. But it has been – and maybe still is in some cases – the halting interaction with society at large, and notably with industry and commerce, that has immured university institutions for so long.

Change appears to be on the way with the arrival of a new generation of university staff in their 30s and 40s, familiar with computer technology and online learning. The older staff, in the 50 to 65 age-range, hierarchically superior and in many cases the chief decision-makers, are gradually reaching retirement. One may suppose that it was this population that had to bear the brunt in the late 80s and 90s of the IT revolution and the

sea-change in communication that the Internet and e-mail represented at that time. And who – apparently – in many cases resisted or ignored it.

To conclude, our fingers itch to turn the page and assess the present and future situation in positive terms. Progress – it has to be admitted though – will probably be slow. But France will, we hope, astound us with its universities as it has done in other fields, when suddenly it realises it has fallen behind, then reacts and forges ahead. Examples abound: its telephone system, its motorways, its architecture, its world-famous TGV hi-speed train. And now, its digital universities?

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a) Original quote in French: 'Monter un campus numérique, faire de la formation à distance semble souvent revenir à "mettre en ligne" un cours magistral.'

b) Original quote in French: 'Il convient de créer une dynamique de service plutôt que de se focaliser sur les équipements.'

c) Original quote in French: '...on ne peut que remarquer le caractère embryonnaire ou fragile de certains projets : peu de personnels titulaires, beaucoup de bénévolat, des projets appuyés sur des retraités bénévoles, risque mentionné de cantonner la FAD au

public de formation continue. On n'a pas encore atteint le stade de la maturité et de la pleine intégration dans les pratiques et les structures universitaires. Ici encore seul l'avenir dira ce qui sortira de ces projets.'

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REGIONAL DIGITAL UNIVERSITIES IN FRANCE

ACO: Aquitaine Campus Ouvert

<http://www.aquitaine-campus.net> (temporarily unavailable)

ANCOLY: Animation du Campus Ouvert de Lyon

<http://www.ancoly.net/>

CNB: Campus Numérique de Bretagne

<http://nte.univ-rennes1.fr/cnb/>

GRECO: Campus ouvert de l'académie de Grenoble

<http://askonce.grenet.fr/webgreco/>

LUNO: Lorraine Université Ouverte

<http://www.luno-edu.net/>

TOCO: Toulouse

no website at present available

UNS: Université Numérique de Strasbourg

<http://uns.u-strasbg.fr/>

UO-MLR: Université Ouverte Montpellier Languedoc Roussillon

<http://www.uomlr.agropolis.fr/>

UVPL: Université Virtuelle des Pays de la Loire

<http://www.uvpl.org/>

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