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INTEGRATING FRENCH EDUCATION: THE FRENCH RESPONSE TO THE EUROPEAN UNION'S EDUCATION POLICIES

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The 1992 Treaty of Maastricht contained several European Union educational initiatives aimed at restructuring higher education in the participating countries as a means of increasing student mobility among nations and creating a more effective work force. Despite their adhesion to the treaty, the French are uneasy about initiatives that compromise national interests. European educational policies are no exception. The insertion of European policies into French higher education has generated a unique French response designed to limit scrutiny from Brussels and curtail the effects of EU intrusions on the French system, while still reaping the benefits of mobility and integration. This approach has been only partially successful. Despite developing an effective, centralized policymaking process to formulate and implement France's responses to policies from Brussels, the French education system is slowly, but fitfully, adapting to EU-wide education initiatives.

What's in a Name?

The role of the nation-state in European education is often said to have originated with Erasmus, the sixteenth-century Dutch humanist, who questioned the role of ecclesiastical universalism in shaping national systems of education. Refusing to enter into the religious disputes of the Reformation, Erasmus believed that education should contribute to a learned tolerance that would engender international peace and unity. To this end, he advocated state organization of educational systems, declaring, "It [education] is a task for the public authorities, just like, for example, the maintenance of an army."¹ Erasmus transformed the universalistic principles of education into international, secular constructs,² while arguing for state intervention to implement his cosmopolitan precepts—a practice not unlike the European Union's current goals for educational policy. However, Erasmus also believed that the state was the best manager of educational policy, rather than a supranational entity that would countermand national decisions.

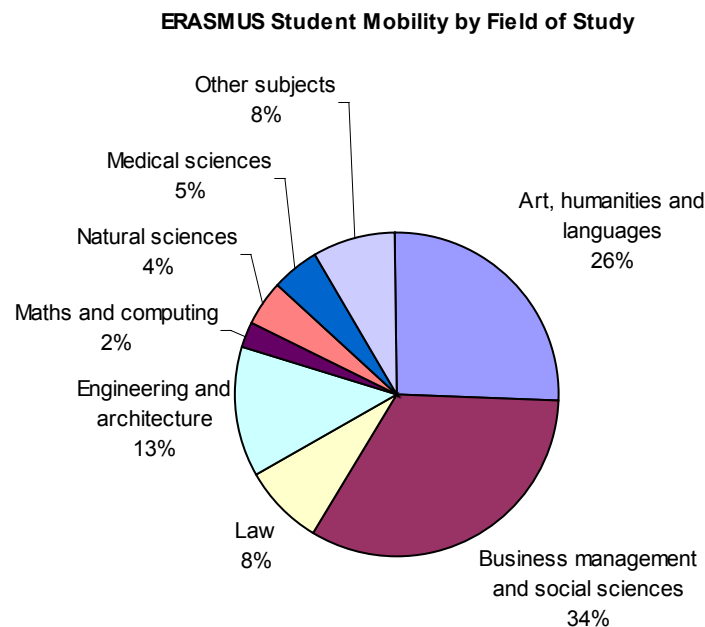
¹ Willy Wielemans, "Erasmus Assessing ERASMUS," *Comparative Education Review* 27, (no.2, 1991), p. 171.

² "International" in this context means the sixteenth-century intellectual community in the Netherlands, France, England, Germany, and Italy.

During the nineteenth century, French higher education became directly associated with the State and the civil service became the conduit for many of its graduates. It was during this period that Napoleon seized control of education from the Catholic Church and, as a result, solidified the national character of French education. By centralizing education through nationalistic principles, Napoleon duplicated practices the Church had used to maintain power for centuries and his educational legacy remains significant in France today.

France and the ERASMUS Mobility Program

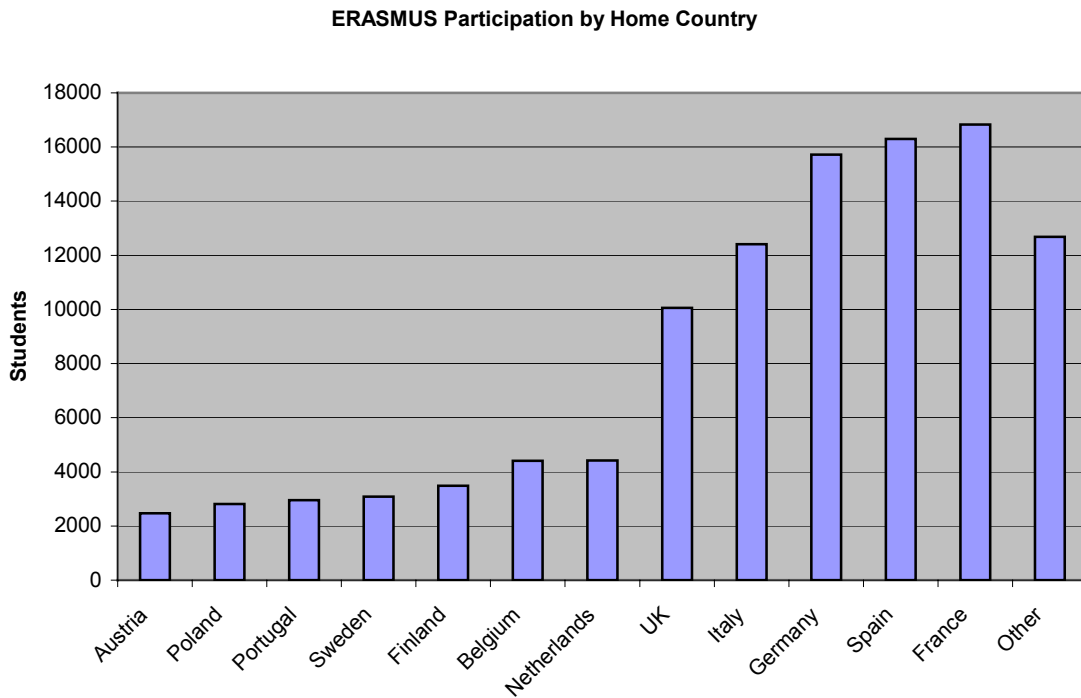
The most visible and important of the higher education mobility programs takes its name from Erasmus. “ERASMUS,” or the “European Community Action Scheme for the Mobility of University Students,” was launched in 1987 with a primary objective of ensuring that 10% of the current 6.5 million students in Europe’s 3,500 higher learning institutions spend at least one semester of their degree program in another European country (see chart).³



Source: Pierre Jallade, Jean Gordon and Noëlle Lebeau, *Student Mobility within the European Union: A Statistical Analysis*, European Institute of Education and Social Policy at <http://europa.eu.int/comm/education/erasmus/statisti/>

³ <http://europa.eu.int/en/comm/dg22/socrates/erasmus/statisti/sum.html>. The European Commission awards participants approximately EUR 429 for a five-month semester, or EUR 114 per month. The European Commission allocated EUR 254 million in 2001-2002 to the SOCRATES initiative—the umbrella program for ERASMUS. Approximately EUR 150 million is allocated to the ERASMUS program, 80% of which is for mobility grants. The total European Union budget for 2002 is EUR 98.6 billion. *Official Journal of the European Commission*, (L 29, 2002).

France sends the most students abroad via ERASMUS and is the second largest host country of ERASMUS participants (see chart), but the cost, from a French perspective, has been that European education policies are slowly changing the nature of the relationship within France between central administration, regional authorities and the French higher education system.⁴



Source: Pierre Jallade, Jean Gordon and Noëlle Lebeau, *Student Mobility within the European Union: A Statistical Analysis*, European Institute of Education and Social Policy at <http://europa.eu.int/comm/education/erasmus/statisti/>

To create and implement ERASMUS and other European policies, France has the most nationalized and centralized system for formulating its policy on European issues among the European member states. The French policymaking process ensures that contact with the European Commission is streamlined and centralized.⁵ The “General Secretariat of the Interministerial Committee for European Economic Questions” (*Secrétariat Général du Comité interministeriel pour les questions de coopération économique européenne*), or, “SGCI,” is the central force of French-European policymaking. The SCGI was formed in 1948 to coordinate policy for the former Organization for European Economic Cooperation and to administer Marshall Plan assistance. The Fifth Republic strategically decided that the SCGI would be attached to the presidency of the council of ministers, i.e., the French premier’s office. As a result, the SGCI became an intermediary between the European Commission and the various

⁴ The UK is the leading host country with 20,770 students (24%), followed by France’s 15,197 students (18%). French students have the highest rate of participation (17,000/year) followed by Spain (16,000/year). From a mobility standpoint, students and faculty consider ERASMUS a great success. At the close of the 2002/2003 academic year, ERASMUS will have hosted a million students.

⁵ Dominique Schnapper in Wallace and Wallace, *Policy Making in the European Union*, (London: Oxford University Press, 1996), p.21.

sectors of the French administration, thereby minimizing the contact of the wider French administration with Brussels.⁶ Generally speaking, the SGCI acts as an unbiased negotiator between French policymakers, making compromises to accommodate the interests of all the ministries regarding a particular policy area. A common position is reached by officials from the ministries in approximately 90% of the cases involving the SGCI.⁷ The remaining 10% of cases are referred to the prime minister, or, in some exceptional cases, to the French president for the final decision.

While France has had a centralized process for formulating European policy for thirty years, it was not until the late 1980s that it created a process to streamline European policy implementation. Here again the SGCI plays a crucial role and is responsible for the domestic implementation of Community directives such as ERASMUS after their formal adoption at the European level.⁸ Education ministries are required, even at the negotiating stage, to provide the SGCI with a list of legislative texts, which require elaboration or modification of the proposed measure.

The reform of the implementation process of European Community programs is due to the French Council of State, an institution concerned with preserving national models of administration and administrative law.⁹ Through the use of early intervention, whereby potential implementation problems are raised at the negotiation phase, the French government can opt to secure only those European norms that are less disruptive to existing national legislation and practice. As a result, European agendas put forth by the French Council of State create buffers between the national and supranational politico-administrative systems.

Changes to French Administration as a Result of ERASMUS

Despite intermediaries, European education policies are changing the nature of the relationship within the nation-state between central administration, regional authorities and the French higher education system. There is now increased supervision of institutions by both French public authorities and the European Commission throughout the process of implementing ERASMUS.¹⁰ Participation in ERASMUS has meant that universities, unable to control their allocation of resources, are obliged to meet several conditions concerning cost and performance targets, thereby introducing market forces into French higher education. French institutions must also respond to several constraints including increased competition for funds among member states,

⁶ Robert Harmsen, "The Europeanization of National Administrations: A Comparative Study of France and the Netherlands," *Governance* 12 (no. 1, 1999), p. 88.

⁷ Christian Lequesne, "Comment se fait la politique européenne de la France," *Presses de la Fondation nationale des Sciences Politiques*, (Paris : 1993), pp. 114-115.

⁸ Jean-Luc Sauron, "L'application du Droit de l'Union Européenne en France," *La Documentation*, (1995), p. 56-60.

⁹ Robert Harmsen, "The Europeanization of National Administrations: A Comparative Study of France and the Netherlands," *Governance* 12 (no. 1, 1999), p. 99-100.

¹⁰ Guy Neave in Peter Darvis, *Higher Education in Europe*, (London: Garland Publishing, 1997), p. 382.

as well as competition for resources from the European Commission for research faculty and staff.¹¹

Still, the effect of European education policies on France is less than it might have been. For example, European education initiatives also include the introduction of cross national and international studies. In 1990, French universities had the option to comply with the *L'Action Universitaire de Jean Monnet*. The Monnet plan was financed by Brussels and sought to create European courses that followed curriculum modules to be used throughout member states resulting in the award of a “*diplôme d'études européennes*.” Courses include International Relations, European Integration, European Culture, and European Identity. However, diplomas are not yet recognized by the French ministry of education and are not accredited, nor are they a means of pursuing advanced degrees.¹²

Conclusion

While the ERASMUS program continues to receive praise and endorsement in France from both students and professors for its mobility experience, the shared curriculum initiatives have been less successful. This is largely due to the French Council of State's jurisdiction over EU policy implementation and its efforts to preserve, to the largest extent possible, the specific characteristics of the French administrative and legal systems. Concern with the integrity of domestic institutions, including the French higher education system, is linked to a broader concern to preserve national sovereignty. In both policy implementation and policymaking, “a desire to maintain national control over the integration process remains a defining characteristic of French positions.”¹³

As a result, France is an active participant in ERASMUS, while simultaneously maintaining control over both the policymaking process and the curriculum. With the highest rates of participation in management and language courses, both necessary components of increased mobility, French students are utilizing the ERASMUS policy to advance their interest in becoming employable throughout Europe. To maintain a labor force capable of competing on world markets, France must continuously increase the relationships and links of her educational system with other nations—either through ERASMUS or other European initiatives—a practice that to greater or lesser degrees undermines the insularity of French education. The problem of reconciling the competing agendas of preserving the nation-state while engaging in increased economic and social interdependence is a dilemma faced by each member state, but one felt more intensely in France. Straddling these differing objectives is nonetheless essential to preserving “a certain idea of France.”

¹¹ Eliason, Fagerlind, Merrit, and Weiler in Dierkes et al., *Comparative Policy Research* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1996), p. 259.

¹² Elise Langan, *The European Union: ERASMUS in Paris*, (New York: Nova Science Publishers, 2002) pp. 108-110.

¹³ Robert Harmsen, “The Europeanization of National Administrations: A Comparative Study of France and the Netherlands,” *Governance* 12 (no. 1, 1999) p. 101.