
COOPERATION AND COMPETITION: NEW WAYS FOR THE FRENCH UNIVERSITIES TO FIGHT THE CRISIS

Gilbert Guillard

Honorary Master of Conferences
University Sorbonne Nouvelle / Paris 3

Over the past five years French universities have undergone important changes. The French government has launched a series of reforms to improve the efficiency of teaching and research, to turn out better graduates and to enhance the international visibility of these institutions.

The two main changes were, on the one hand, the new obligation of universities to increase their efforts to promote the professional integration of their students: diplomas and courses should be more professionally oriented and a large overhaul with this in mind is consequently now taking place. Each discipline must add to its initial list of diplomas a professional one at Masters Level. On the other hand, the governance of universities has been remodelled to improve the decision and response capacity to new situations arising from the current economic situation. The boards of administrators has been reduced in size and opened up to more external members, such as representatives of public institutions or private enterprises. This is also done with a mind to improving connections to the global economy.

Another action undertaken by the French government was to incite the universities to unite themselves either on local or regional levels in order to build the so called ‘Poles for Higher Research and Education’. Three or four universities can join up with one or two elite schools to build up such poles of excellence. For example, in some cities where there were three independent universities (Strasbourg I, II and III) there is now only one. In the Parisian area four such poles have been created, for example Paris 3, Paris 5, Paris 7, the Institute for Political Studies and the Higher School for Social Sciences are now cooperating inside a new structure called ‘Sorbonne Paris Cité’.

The goal is to achieve better research results through improved synergies on one side — in order to save money that can be better spent otherwise, to attract new partners, whether they are private enterprises willing to support universities via, for example, foundations, or foreign universities searching for international cooperation. Another goal of these new combinations of higher education establishments is to increase their international visibility and international ranking; the bigger the institution, the more noticeable. Size is of course not the only criterion, as proved by Harvard or, recently, the Ecole Normale Supérieure, with its list of Nobel prizes, but it is an important factor. Another step forward is now the creation of so called ‘clusters’, where on one geographical site, one finds university buildings, research centres, enterprises and factories, commercial centres and hotels, thus building the shortest way for interaction between a university and the economy. It is a fact that many of the jobs for the year 2025 just do not exist to-

day because the technology and the services with which they are linked simply have not yet been invented. Interactivity between universities and businesses are also a must in order to permit the latter to give hints about the direction of research and courses thereby induced by them, which could prove to be the most fruitful for the future. This does not mean the end of free fundamental research for universities; on the contrary, universities are the place where, through independent fundamental research, new discoveries are brought to light, new because industrial research has not been defined in this or that field. A win/win partnership can thus be established between enterprises and universities, with the latter still producing the core of scientific knowledge while the former enable them to quickly transform fundamental discoveries into everyday applications, which enables universities to increase their research and teaching potential. Whilst such a system already works in some countries; it has yet to be developed on a larger scale in France.

Through the building of these new conglomerates, cooperation as well as competition has been reinforced. The French government has spent five billion euros in the last five years in addition to the normal public subsidies to universities in order to bring them into line with international standards. Some of this money was granted to the new poles of excellence who presented the most innovative projects; thus stimulating competition between French universities, which were thereby urged to cooperate in order to better compete between each other. If a university wants to develop international cooperation, it has to present itself as more attractive than another in order to find a suitable partner who would be willing to enter such cooperation. Seen from this angle, competition is a basic driving force for successful cooperation.

Universities have discovered that their name can be considered as a trademark which is an asset for engaging in a fruitful partnership with enterprises that wish to enhance their own reputation by having the name of a world renowned university linked to them in return. It is also an asset to cooperate with foreign universities by opening subsidiary institutions abroad. For example, the Sorbonne University set up a full study course in Abu Dhabi, the three most important French Institutes for Technology opened jointly a Technological Institute in Shanghai and so forth.

Criticisms have been voiced about universities going in these new directions. Some even fear the complete disappearance of the Humanities from teaching courses and research, as they may not be as profitable as subjects such as economics, law or physics. It should therefore be remembered that the French university has a century's long tradition in this field, which will not be taken away, as it builds the nucleus of higher education in France, that is to say general knowledge. Unlike other countries, such as the United States, where the teaching system is primarily oriented towards praxis, through a pedagogy of discovery and the very early acquisition of autonomy for students, higher education in France is based on general culture and theoretical rigour first. Both systems could actually profit from introducing part of the other in their scheme of education. It seems thus that the possibility of French universities becoming obedient servants of industrial groups is highly unlikely, also considering that there are, among the French university members, many watchful minds ready to criticise and halt any development in such a direction.

Some simple facts should also be kept in mind when it comes to tracing the future development of educational institutions in the general frame of globalization.

1. International rankings are to be considered with caution. The Shanghai ranking is not the only one on the market; there are many others of a different kind, produced by different entities. There may be only three French universities among the first hundred listed by the Shanghai ranking, but, for example, the Financial Times ranking for Masters in Management set three French high schools among the first five on the list. The European Union plans to introduce its own ranking by spring 2013. This does not mean that one should not try to make progress in any ranking and this was also one of the goals of the reform in France.

2. Goodwill is to be found everywhere and is not limited by hypothetical bad will, cooperation is like parenthood: everybody is in favour of it. However, the partner's choice is most important, and success depends to a certain extent upon the result of competition between candidates for cooperation. One could call that constructive competition, which should be considered concerning universities as something quite different from enterprises competing ferociously to dominate a specific area of the market.

3. Cooperation only works when very practical problems are solved, such as funds. Raising them should never bring universities to deviate from the basic moral and ethical standards they represent. Accepting and using the methods which largely condition any international exchange is a necessity, but in doing so the respect of their fundamental values is both the key to successful international cooperation whilst contributing to exhorting these methods.