

The integrity of integration: the ethics of exchange student welfare in undergraduate programmes at a French higher education institution

Paul Amis

Abstract Experiences of an Australian exchange student at Sciences Po, a French elite educational institution, are used to illustrate some of the problems that can arise when features of the local institutional culture are not effectively communicated to visiting students.

Key Ideas

- Exchange students often are ill-equipped to negotiate unfamiliar administrative systems.
- Expectations about educational integrity can vary considerably between different cultures.
- “Pedagogical liberty” at Sciences Po may allow what students feel are abuses to occur without an official avenue for bringing about change.

Discussion Question 1 Is it always best practice to provide students with full information about syllabus, assessments and the like, or does pedagogical liberty to do things differently have a place?

Discussion Question 2 What can be done to support exchange students who seem to be victims of both inadequate cultural knowledge and abusive treatment?

Transparency is a critical element of accountability. By extension, academic integrity in higher education institutions depends on the effective communication of policy and procedure. It also depends on the internalisation of a shared set of ethical values and practices by students and staff. In this paper, I argue that exchange students often lack the institutional knowledge to fluently navigate bureaucracy and administration in their host institutions. While students are often prepared explicitly for differences of language and teaching styles, they are little prepared for the differences across cultures in notions of educational integrity that govern higher education institutions. A failure to effectively communicate these differences leads to a resulting gap between students’ expectations of host institutions, and host institutions’ understandings of their own obligations. Exchange students’ welfare is placed at risk, due not so much to a lack of policy as to an inability to navigate foreign systems of accountability and transparency. A failure to properly transmit institutional values to teaching staff only compounds this vulnerability.

Background

I was a student at Sciences Po for the 2007-08 European academic year under the auspices of an undergraduate program at the University of New South Wales. All undergraduate students at Sciences Po are enrolled in a single three-year program. The third year is spent abroad, either on exchange or gaining work experience. As a result, there is no third-year teaching and all undergraduate exchange students are placed into second year. During this time, I noted a number of problems with the exchange program and undertook a series of surveys and interviews with exchange students to canvas the extent and nature of those problems. I compiled the results into a report and was then invited to attend a meeting with two representatives of the Sciences Po administration to discuss my research.

Sciences Po is not a university. The school was created in 1972 to improve the training available for public servants and politicians following a series of political catastrophes. It has since become part of the *grande école* system. These schools are distinct from universities in that they aim to train students in a vocation, rather than provide an intellectual education.¹ The school has developed into a hub for the French elite; in French society, it has accumulated an enormous amount of prestige.

The international tertiary education system is largely dominated by Anglo-American values and practices. Sciences Po has gone to great lengths to market itself as prestigious and high-quality institution within this sector. Nevertheless, many of its educational values remain staunchly French. It has been argued that understandings of issues like plagiarism are embedded in Australian academic culture.² In this paper, I take a comparable approach to French educational values. The successful navigation of this system depends upon how well those values are communicated. Some are transmitted quite effectively; others, however, are not.

Pedagogical liberty

Sciences Po places great store by what it calls “pedagogical liberty”, whereby teachers are given free rein to design their own curricula. At the same time, teachers are not drawn from a pool of academic research staff, as is the practice in Australian universities. While some teachers do work in one of Sciences Po’s research centres, the majority are practitioners or graduates. The practice is for the former to teach large lecture-style courses (*cours magistraux*) with several attached tutorial classes (*conférences de méthode*), and for the latter to teach seminar-style classes (*conférences de méthode*). The exchange student

¹ Albouy, V. and Wanecq, T., ‘Les inégalités sociales d’accès aux grandes écoles’, *Economic et Statistique* 361 : 2003, pp. 27-52

² East, J., ‘Plagiarism and academic culture: voices from international students and researchers of university learning and teaching’, paper presented at 2nd Asia-Pacific Educational Integrity Conference, 2-3 Dec. 2005.

testimony I collected suggests that the policy of pedagogical liberty has resulted in a failure to transmit institutional memory to staff and exchange students.

One student recounted an incident where she was castigated by the teacher for trying to leave the classroom to go to the bathroom without asking. The staff member in question then continued to abuse the class and demanded that a student obtain for him a copy of Sciences Po's bathroom policy. The other student was asked to solve a problem in front of the class that was not related to the course curriculum, and for which she was consequently unprepared. The teacher, in this case, publicly insulted the student when she was unable to complete the problem and humiliated her to the point of triggering a panic attack. I brought these two cases for consideration by the management and was told in no uncertain terms that, while these incidents were unfortunate, pedagogical liberty was not negotiable.

Another recommendation of my report was that marking and assessment standards be created. This was a response to a perception among exchange students that the amount of assessment set, and the marking standards used, were so disparate from teacher to teacher as to make the marking system meaningless. The subjectivity of grading standards raises concerns about the fairness of academic standing, especially where students are required to repeat a year of study.

The Times Higher Education Supplement's World University Rankings have not included Sciences Po in the top 200 since 2006.³ By contrast, the French Ecole des Mines' 2009 rankings of the top 377 higher education institutions, which rank institutions according to how many of their alumni lead Fortune 500 companies, places Sciences Po at number 15 globally.⁴ This anecdote points to the importance of networking at Sciences Po. Sciences Po's tendency to reproduce social inequalities in France by acting as an elite prestige marker, and its attempts to remedy the situation, have been discussed elsewhere and the issue mostly lies outside the scope of this paper.⁵ It is, however, relevant to the extent that hiring practices at Sciences Po affect student welfare. The appointment of teaching staff is premised as much on nepotism and networking as on merit. These staff, rather than being drawn from the full-time academic staff, are usually graduates of Sciences Po and successful practitioners in their field. They are hired to teach single seminars on an ad-hoc basis, spending as little as three or four hours per week at Sciences Po. This practice only serves to highlight the importance of having clear student welfare and grading standards: teaching staff have little opportunity to familiarise themselves with institutional practices.

Sciences Po insists that absolute freedom in teaching is necessary for students to properly benefit from professor expertise. In this case, however, the end does not seem to justify the means. The emphasis on the pedagogical benefits of the

³ Times Higher Education-QS, World University Rankings, <http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/>, accessed 1/08/09

⁴ Mines ParisTech, 'International Professional Ranking of Higher Educational Institutions', <http://www.ensmp.fr/Actualites/PR/EMP-ranking.html#7>, accessed 1/08/09

⁵ See Sabbagh, D., 'Affirmative Action at Sciences Po', *French Politics, Culture and Society*, 20: 3, 2002 (Fall), pp. 52-151

policy has drawn attention away from the need for teaching staff to be aware of their welfare responsibilities towards students. Bullying is not an acceptable form of behaviour on the part of teaching staff and, at the time I attended the institution, exchange students were not made aware of avenues of redress and complaint. Such guidelines are even more important in light of Sciences Po's hiring practices. Without such guidelines, teachers are also unaware of their responsibilities. Both exchange student and teacher thus come to the classroom with little common understanding of how the teacher-student relationship is practiced in that particular institutional context. Without knowledge of institutional procedures or of how to obtain such information, there is a tendency for procedures to be decided on an ad hoc basis by teaching staff. Students are thus exposed to inconsistent and inequitable practice.

Communicating values

Implicit in many of the formal interviews and informal conversations I had with exchange students was a sense of frustration with Sciences Po's bureaucracy. It was not the existence of rules and procedures, but their ineffective communication that was primarily responsible.

There was no standard system of running courses... [In Australia] there are systems in place for if you're sick; each teacher is expected to hand out a course plan at the start of semester that gives a detailed outline of the rules about what happens if you hand work in late, plagiarism, all the things that help you understand what you're expected to do in the course and how you're going to plan out your time.⁶

This quotation, from one of the exchange students I consulted, highlights the central breakdown in the transmission of educational values to exchange students. For example, policies at UNSW on attendance, submission of assignments and extensions, special consideration, student academic misconduct, grievance procedures, and review of results are included in every course guide and also communicated to students via email. If such policies exist at Sciences Po, they are not communicated to exchange students in a transparent and systematic manner. French students tend to be aware not only of their rights, the relevant points of contact and procedures, but of how to obtain this information. Exchange students lack the knowledge of their host institution to be familiar with such practices. The transparency of policy is thus just as critical as its existence to assure that the treatment of exchange students is equitable.

Conclusion

It is precisely to experience cultural difference that many students decide to undertake an exchange. Generally speaking, higher education institutions work more closely together across borders than ever before. Culture can no longer be realistically used as an excuse for a failure to maintain standards in certain areas, including student welfare. The number of students who undertake exchanges

⁶ Sciences Po exchange student, interview conducted by author, Paris, February 18 2008.

overseas only raises the importance of establishing shared ethical standards. This paper has provided a brief discussion of the ways in which exchange students are made vulnerable. Educational integrity is highly contextual, and its specificity underscores the importance of “institutionalising” exchange students, for institutional know-how is central to protecting student welfare.

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