

# THE BOLOGNA PROCESS AND DOCTORAL STUDIES IN FRANCE

**Jean-Marc MONTEIL**

Directeur de l'Enseignement Supérieur  
Ministère de l'Éducation Nationale  
de l'Enseignement Supérieur  
& de la Recherche

Ladies and Gentlemen : Dear Colleagues,

I would like to briefly express the philosophy and the practical aspects of the French policy for doctoral studies in the context of the Sorbonne-Bologna Process.

For France the first virtue of the Sorbonne-Bologna Process is that it has allowed a real reorganization of our academic system.

This system was historically constrained and had many specific features inappropriate to comparisons with international standards and incompatible with them. Notably in terms of training : French programs and diplomas were at the same time numerous and intricate at first glance.

The Bologna process gave us a great incentive to change our system. It made its internal reorganization possible in the name of a European ideal shared by all. This reorganization would have been impossible to obtain if debates had been left to a purely national approach. It is, in my opinion, one of the main virtue of the Bologna process to help States re-think and implement policies which they could not have carried out without the general belief in the necessity of a European vision

On this basis, France has built up a new structure called L-M-D, Bachelor (which we call Licence) – Master – Doctorate, intended to be more flexible, more comparable and more compatible with other international standards.

The most important characteristic of this plan is that it allows students to be exposed to research at each and every level of their development.

This presence of the scientific stratum is modulated pending the needs and aims of each level.

## **The bachelor**

The bachelor, which we call “licence” is the first level. It aims— according to the goal re-defined this year by the Minister of Education — at making possible for 50% of an age group to receive a higher education diploma. In addition to its evident social dimension, this policy is a logical consequence of the Lisbon strategy for building a knowledge society.

The French bachelor level can be described in this respect as follows :

- it is based on pluridisciplinarity,
- it aims at giving students a disciplinary and professional proficiency;
- it is intended to equip students with a scientific and technical culture in the broadest sense of the words.

The French system is open to all at the bachelor level. Its ambition is to allow each

student to succeed according to his or her own ability by giving them a scientific background and the option to work toward the master level or prepare for a professional diploma.

### **The master**

Whether professionally or research oriented, the master level shows the first indication of a close link between higher education and research.

During the master studies the students are introduced to contemporary scientific research, its methods, its contents, as well as its terms and conditions of production.

This means that we need to develop at the master level an elaborate and in-depth scientific culture of which the students are able to gain the largest benefit, either for entering active life and getting a job, or keeping on with their studies at the upper level of the Doctorate.

This necessity and the nature of the scientific culture implemented at the master level aims at enlightening the consciousness of students who are invited to get acquainted with a process of education and training **to** and **by** research activities.

For the first time in France, a diploma, the master, has been made common to both Universities and *grandes écoles* (schools at the higher education level) which brought them together as never before. This evolution was made possible by the implementation of the scientific assessment of programs at the master level. And it is, of course, a major direct result of the Bologna process.

### **The Doctorate**

At the doctorate level, students are expected to be deeply involved in research activities and to fulfill the goals set by the Dublin descriptors in 2004.

This means that they must be totally up-to-date with the modern scientific methods of research whatever may be the disciplinary field in which they are working : fundamental sciences, applied sciences, exact sciences as well as humanities and social sciences.

The achievements requested of doctoral students required in our opinion the setting of some course work in addition to the special relationship developed with a supervisor. Nevertheless France does not intend to give academic credits - for example ECTS – for these courses. At this level, the student is a young researcher who begins his or her contribution to science. As such the status is very different. It can not be compared with that of students at the bachelor or master level and has to be assessed in an entirely specific manner.

What I have just described bears a direct influence on the policy we want for our doctoral schools which I will describe later on.

But first let me come back to my point.

In the lifelong learning perspective, the doctoral studies do not end the educational cycle since one must also stress the importance of continuing education in the knowledge society as it is described in the Lisbonne process.

Any professional qualification, for example, must be under the control of a permanent scientific concern so that the technological aspects derived from science should never be obsolete. Such a prospect facilitates the dialogue between our systems and our institutions within Europe since science is a common element to all higher education and research.

If this concern is effective, this leads to adoption of a constantly adaptable model for producing technical objects and scientific results, which enhances the meaning of the word *progress* for society.

In our modern occidental societies, universities also have the responsibility to answer the social need for scientific information. Such a responsibility cannot be solely left to the media if, tomorrow, we want public opinions to have an intelligent vision of science.

These representations and values shape the identity and the activities of the social actors of our world.

There is in this matter a real responsibility of our universities in Europe as well as in the world to train and prepare students who will play an essential part in our future societies. This responsibility is even greater at the doctorate level.

### **Doctoral studies and doctoral schools**

In keeping with this general philosophy of higher education, France has implemented some practical ideas at the level of doctoral studies.

One of the most important of these ideas is the redefining of the meaning and goals of what we call « doctoral schools », in the full sense of the word « school ».

Until the nineties, students were generally restricted to having discussions solely with their supervisor.

Today, doctoral schools organize close relationships between laboratories and research centers and are submitted to an evaluation every four years. Increasingly, the labs which constitute the basis for the doctoral schools belong jointly to both universities and research organizations. Thus they give a larger scientific basis for the doctoral schools while at the same time they bring universities and research organisations closer together. Their main purpose is to:

- bring together different disciplines in an identified scientific field, whatever it may be, exact sciences, social or human sciences,
- promote a multi-disciplinary approach to scientific questions, and to provide students with a scientific culture enabling them to restate the facts in their proper epistemological environment,
- offer the students a place to share their experiences and their knowledge,
- prepare doctoral students to enter the market place which includes developing contacts and partnerships with socioeconomic actors, as well as making the doctors and their research better known and thus more attractive to the labour market. In that context, course work seems essential, and as I mentioned before, can not be assessed with credits,
- follow up on the professional integration of each student,
- partake in international partnerships,
- foster international mobility during and after the completion of the doctorate,

In this matter, France has wished to demonstrate its goodwill to Europe and the creation of the European Higher Education Area, by choosing the doctorate level to be an example of how Europe can enrich national academic traditions.

Our first step in this matter, has been to change this year the legal rules guiding the process of the « co-tutelles de thèses » (*joint supervision of doctoral thesis*). This process has been given the more precise denomination of « co-tutelles internationales de thèses » (*international joint supervision of doctoral thesis*).

Behind the change of the name, the whole philosophy has been modified. Although universities are still linked to the ministry by a four year contract and the fact that diplomas are nationally guaranteed, French universities are now allowed to conclude an agreement with a foreign university to supervise a doctoral student.

This new text comprises two major innovations :

- French universities can depart from the French ordinary legislation when the legal norms in both or more countries are incompatible thus showing that France fully trusts other European doctoral systems. For example, the French legislation provides that the thesis supervisor is part of the jury of defense which is not legal in several other countries. The new dispositions make it possible for a French university to give up its specific rules in order to comply with those of its conventional partners.
- It authorizes the possibility of delivering a joint diploma at the doctoral level, which implies the responsibility for the involved universities to choose between either a joint diploma in the strictest sense or a double diploma.
- With 11 000 doctorates per year, in 315 doctoral schools, France is able to share the quality of its doctoral studies with the major part of the world, on the grounds of mutual trust born from serious and internationally recognized evaluation procedures.

Speaking of doctoral studies brings naturally to mind the question of quality assurance. I'll use this word since it is the one usually used by all. But what is quality assurance ? Some use the terms to describe the evaluation of programs, others of institutions, some of the process. France is quite attached to a three level evaluation : that of institutions, programs and people which can not be reduced to the mere evaluation of processes. This type of evaluation gives at the same time more responsibilities to each university but requires more flexible forms.

EUA has largely contributed to this debate, and there is still room for debate among ourselves. As such France could not support the recommendation on quality assurance recently proposed by the European Commission. We first need to agree on which standards are to be implemented nationally and which should be discussed at the European level. In France, for example, we assess the quality of masters based on their links with research. I am not sure this view is shared by all in this room.

This subject is at the core of our French debate presiding over the making of the future law on research. As for us, we think that it is impossible to separate research from higher education, at least at the upper level. There are numerous discussions on this matter right now in France. In particular we are thinking of coordinating all our evaluation institutions within one body.

**To conclude**, I would like to bring further the French vision of the links between education and research.

In our opinion, there is a **real continuum** between these two components of a higher education system. One can not oppose research on one side and training on the other without running the risk of destroying the essence of the university concept.

The **social and economic actors** of our world need to have the most lucid knowledge of the contemporary results of research and science in order to express clear-sighted judgements upon the major questions that upset our world, from the tsunami to the genome through the religious conflicts of our time to the economic constraints of globalization...

The cooperation that France has wanted to develop between its three major components : universities, higher schools and national research organizations is not conceived as a check to reduce their autonomy but on the contrary to give them more responsibilities in achieving nationwide, even Europe wide, goals.

This leads to two additional ideas. First, autonomy does not mean that we have to keep our present institutional organization. France historically inherited too many institutions. It is time to reunite them, if we want to attain European and worldwide visibility. My second thought is that greater autonomy implies stronger evaluation with real consequences in order to progressively improve the entire system. These ideas, which have become widely shared in France, are direct consequences of the Bologna process and of our mutual work.

All these elements brings France to wish the following **recommendation** to be included in the Bergen Communiqué : the creation of a single united space of higher education and research is the essential component of a knowledge society called for by the Lisbon declaration. In this perspective, doctoral studies and dynamic European post-doctoral models must be central to our strategy for the future.

Thank you very much for your attention