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## Quality Assurance Review for Higher Education

### Developing Romanian International Master's Level Education: Reflections on Change Management

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# Developing Romanian International Master's Level Education: Reflections on Change Management

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**Abstract:** *The question of managing change in the ASIGMA project has already been mentioned in both the Project Activities (A4, A7) and the first Consultancy reports: questions of national context, of adaptability, of rate of change, of time frame, of the need for explicit strategy. As external expert from a fellow Latin society, challenged by models of effective practice primarily from Northern Europe, I would like to stress the importance of cultural self-knowledge —and common recognition of same — in this endeavour. Parallels drawn between the French and Romanian contexts, with a critical analysis of successful (and less so) French experiences in this domain, will hopefully further awareness of possible pitfalls to avoid.*

**Keywords:** *ASIGMA project, cultural self-knowledge, language awareness*

## Introduction

The Inuit people have long built «inukshuks», or cairns, often in the likeness of a human being, to guide others along the right path. As a Canadian with nearly 40 years of experience in the context of French and international higher education, and in my role as external expert, I felt it appropriate to suggest the image of the inukshuk in discussing the challenges facing Romania in her quest for developing international Master's level education. Such an undertaking immediately raises questions of change management; guidelines offered from others – particularly of Latin origin – who have gone this route will hopefully prove helpful.

In the originally stated Project Activities and the first Consultancy reports, five questions were immediately raised pertaining to national context (i.e., Romanian specificity compared to other European countries), adaptability or transfer of European tools and models, the rate of change (at what speed?), the time frame (that of a three-year project), and the need for explicit strategy to bring about change in policy, skills development, etc.

Similarly, in the early days of the project when contacts were first established with Romanian higher education, a certain number of parallels became apparent to me linking the French and Romanian contexts in a Latin environment, as opposed to that of the Northern European countries. In the vast landscape of the European Higher Education Area, created within the Bologna process, it is clear that change management raises questions in *all* countries, but the possibilities available and the answers found differ across national cultures. Working on questions of language awareness and international education in a Latin context, my own experience in the face of Northern European models of effective practice has often been one of great frustration. Lessons learned by a Latin cousin, often the hard way, might thus offer insight for the Romanian project.

First, I must make a plea for cultural self-knowledge, and common recognition of same among all stakeholders. The common Latin nature of France and Romania should, logically, facilitate this awareness for ASIGMA members. Secondly, a case study of the French approach to international Master's level education will be presented in a spirit of critical analysis to see both what is effective, and less so. Finally, lessons to share will be discussed in terms of the *Common European Framework*

of Reference for Languages, again in an attempt to help guide Romania along the path chosen in the ASIGMA project.

## On the Question of Cultural Self-knowledge

As regards the notion of cultural self-knowledge, and common recognition of same among stakeholders, we must first look back to Socrates' teaching the virtue of self-knowledge. More immediately, within the ASIGMA framework, is Anne Räsänen's contribution to the Launch Conference, "Prerequisites for launching international Master's programmes – what does this internationalisation mean for the university?" Ms. Räsänen insists on the importance of "a good description of the local context", "clarified, specified and mutually accepted aims at both institutional and individual levels". From a research perspective, the *European Journal of Language Policy* offers further evidence of the essential role of cultural self knowledge in the context of foreign language education. In 2009, Lorenzo and Moore pointed out that "Language learning is a situated practice and the location of the activity... characterises and is characterised by underlying political, ideological, social goals" (p. 132). The following year, Rubio & Lirola (2010) carried out a preliminary analysis of the differences in English as a foreign language (EFL) proficiency levels among European states, based on the self-reports from the Eurobarometer surveys in 2005 and 2006. Table 1 (Rubio & Lirola 2010, p. 27) clearly distinguishes among the Germanic countries, Finland, Greece, France and the other Latin countries along with Romania, and the Czech Republic with Romania's neighbours Hungary and Bulgaria.

**Table 1.** Sample of speakers of English as a foreign language in the EU, with language origin

		Users of English as a Foreign Language	
Language origin	Countries	2005	2006
Germanic	The Netherlands	87%	87%
	Denmark	83%	86%
	Sweden	85%	89%
	Germany	51%	56%
Latin	<b>France</b>	<b>34%</b>	<b>36%</b>
	Italy	29%	29%
	Portugal	26%	32%
	Spain	20%	27%
Other	Greece	44%	48%
	Finland	60%	63%
	<b>Romania<sup>1</sup></b>	<b>26%</b>	<b>29%</b>

<sup>1</sup> For reasons not explained, Romania is not listed as a country of Latin language origin in this study.

	Czech Republic	24%	24%
	Hungary	16%	23%
	Bulgaria	15%	23%

The authors propose “a taxonomy to explain national differences as regards EFL including individual variables (personality, aptitude and intelligence, affect, cognition, sex, age), the linguistic category in relation to English (phonology, syntax, lexis and morphology, semantics), the educational context (teaching practices, curricula, instruction time, oral/written emphasis, pre-service and in-service teacher training), and societal or cultural factors (history, economy, demographics in terms of mono-, bi- or multilingualism, beliefs, attitudes toward otherness, motivation, subtitling and/or dubbing in film and radio broadcasting).

Ignoring the key role of context in the question of foreign language-mediated education is a danger which is underscored by the French sociolinguist Claude Truchot (2010): The manner of treating language questions [in the emergence and spread of teaching through English in Europe] is done without previous studies, without debates, without assessment by institutions or competent public authorities, without looking at other solutions”. He stresses that “a critical approach is necessary” and concludes by saying that “the acknowledgement of the gap in the level of English between Northern Europe and other parts of the continent... makes English a political priority.” In the specific French context, he cites a report prepared for the government (*Rapport Attali*, 2008), which states that “every [French] pupil master French, reading, math, group work, English, computers and economics by age 12” and raises the obvious, unaddressed, question of providing the means to do so.

Having raised these general considerations facing countries engaging in developing international Master's level education, and having evoked a certain Latin commonality shared by France and Romania, it is necessary at this point to further explore this parallel. The seminal work of the Dutch intercultural researcher Geert Hofstede (1991) enables us to do so, thanks to his widely recognised paradigm ranking national (Western) cultures on four “value” dimensions<sup>2</sup> and then later grouping them into characteristic “clusters”. A brief definition of each dimension follows (cf. Hofstede's web site, listed in the References).

*Power Distance Index* (PDI) is the extent to which the less powerful members of organizations and institutions accept and expect that power is distributed unequally: all societies are unequal, but some are more unequal than others. The notion of hierarchy plays an important role in the concept of power distance.

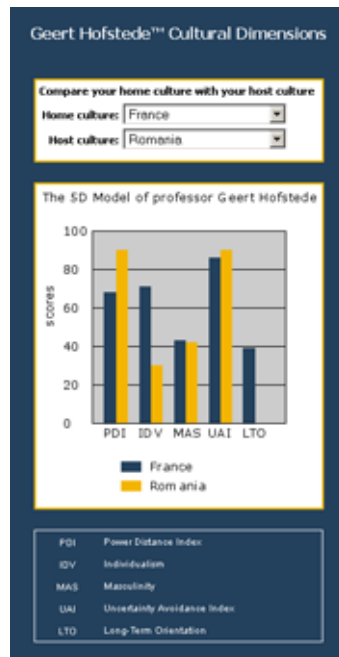
*Individualism* (IDV) on the one side vs. collectivism, in a non political sense, on the other. This is the degree to which individuals are integrated into groups, looking rather after themselves and their immediate family vs. strong and loyal groups (often extended family).

*Masculinity* (MAS) vs. femininity refers to the distribution of roles between the genders, from the more “masculine” assertiveness, competitiveness and materialism to the more “feminine” values of modesty, caring, nurturing and being concerned with quality of life.

*Uncertainty Avoidance* (UAI) deals with a society's tolerance for uncertainty and ambiguity. It indicates to what extent a culture programs its members to feel either uncomfortable or comfortable in unstructured situations. A concrete example of uncertainty avoidance contrasts, for example, countries on the high end of the scale with a tradition of civil law based on explicit, codified Roman law, to those on the low end of the scale with a more “flexible” tradition of common law.

The bilateral comparison of France and Romania on each of these dimensions clearly reveals the perceived cultural similarity of these two cultures of Latin tradition (Table 2).

<sup>2</sup> Hofstede's current activity, including projected data concerning Romania, which was not involved in the original research carried out in the late 1960s, is available on the web site noted in the References. Neculaesei & Tatarusanu (2008, cf. References) apply Hofstede's dimensions to the question of regional identity within Romania.

**Table 2.** A comparison of France and Romania on Hofstede's four key dimensions<sup>3</sup>

It is immediately apparent that on the Uncertainty avoidance and Masculinity indexes both countries share very close rankings, respectively 86 and 90 on a scale of 8 to 112, and 43 and 42 on a scale of 5 to 110. In other words, both national cultures have little tolerance for uncertainty and ambiguity (characteristic of the civil law tradition) and share a relatively modest and caring approach compared to the Anglo-Saxon cluster (USA, Australia, Great Britain, New Zealand, Canada), but a more assertive, masculine approach compared to the Northern European countries (Sweden, Norway, Denmark, the Netherlands). On the Power distance index, France and Romania are relatively close, with fairly high rankings of 68 and 90 on a scale spreading from 11 to 104. Compared to the Anglo-Saxon and Northern European countries, these Latin cousins are thus rather more inherently “unequal” societies, where social rank and status play key roles. The most notable difference between France and Romania is seen on the Individualism index, respectively 71 and 30 on a scale of 6 to 91. When compared to the strongly individualistic Anglo-Saxon and Northern European countries, France tallies up fairly closely, whereas Romania traditionally places greater importance on group cohesion, often on a familial level.

Looking at the overall picture of all four dimensions taken together, France and Romania may thus be seen to share more similarities than be distinguished by differences, particularly when compared to the cluster of Anglo-Saxon and Nordic countries on the key management dimensions of Power distance and Uncertainty avoidance. These two countries, with their Latin linguistic and legal heritage, tend, in Hofstede's terms, to be traditionally bureaucratic “pyramids of people.”

Given this common cultural base, then, one might expect similar responses to those challenges facing all countries engaged in developing international Master's level education. A critical approach to the road thus far taken in French higher education, as Truchot (2010) suggests above, may well add a stone to the inukshuk, hopefully enabling Romanian decision makers to benefit from a “cousin's” prior experience.

<sup>3</sup> Table 2, taken from the web site indicated in the References, includes a fifth dimension – Long term orientation vs. short term – which pertains particularly, but not exclusively, to countries of Confucian heritage. This dimension was not studied in the Romanian context.

## A French Case Study: the Question of Language Awareness?

To our knowledge, the first formal discussion in France of foreign language-mediated programmes (often referred to as CLIL, Content and Language Integrated Learning) took place at the annual colloquium of the French association for English for Specific Purposes (*Groupe d'Etude et de Recherche en Anglais de Spécialité*) in Le Havre in 2003. A keynote address delivered by Dieter Wolff on “Integrating Language and Content in the Language Classroom: Are Transfer of Knowledge and of Language Ensured?”<sup>4</sup> encouraged me to further explore the question. That same year, I carried out a small-scale case study at the University of Toulouse of early implementation of CLIL in an international Master's programme (Taillefer, 2004). A research seminar then followed in Toulouse in 2007, giving rise to an update on the question in France (Taillefer 2009a) and insights into CLIL in other national contexts (Taillefer 2009b). During the same period, the University of Toulouse was also a partner in the SOCRATES Language Network for Quality Assurance (LANQUA) project, 2007–2010.

The web site of the LANQUA project (cf. References) proposes a CLIL continuum describing contexts from less exemplary to more so (Frame of Reference, p. 11–12), taking into consideration a large number of variables pertaining to institutions, content teachers, language teachers and student body. Within the LANQUA framework, case studies then exemplify variations on the theme of CLIL. The French case study (“The challenge of CLIL in a French School of Economics”) presents a context of world-class excellence on the content level coupled with a general lack of language awareness. The overall result, in quality terms, speaks for itself as an example of less effective practice in CLIL.

An echo of this unawareness of language is ironically seen in a recent article published in the weekly magazine of the internationally known newspaper *Le Monde* (November 13, 2010). In “*Dans les faits, va-t-on passer au tout anglais?* [Are universities moving toward all English environments?], it is explained how the national Ministry of Education is caught between the difficult task of preserving national identity (“*le français est la langue de l'enseignement*” [French is the language of teaching]) and the desire to make the most of globalisation. The Rector of one of France's largest universities clearly dismisses the questions of language policy and quality CLIL in claiming that “English is only a vehicle, a world language, that's all... This is not an ideological question.”

Yet a further example of somewhat less than exemplary language awareness is that of Campusfrance (cf. References), a structure managed jointly by the Ministry of Foreign affairs and the Ministry of Education. The latest version of the on-line brochure *Programmes taught in English* lists more than 600 programmes, 80% of which are on the Master's level, especially in the fields of Commerce and Management. Two key language issues cloud the quality picture: nearly 50% of the programmes merely stipulate “fluent in” or “mastery of” English, in some cases making reference to standardised tests such as TOEFL, TOEIC or IELTS, but with no specification of any minimal required score. And for these hundreds of programmes taught in English, 79% of them either make no mention of a required minimal level of French competency or go so far as to specifically state that French is simply “not required.” Given the traditional defence of *la francophonie*, the official position stating that “*Il n'est plus nécessaire de pratiquer couramment le français pour étudier en France* [It is no longer necessary to speak fluent French to study in France]” seems, at best, paradoxical.

If cultural self-knowledge, including that of policy regarding foreign and native languages, plays the important role that we have seen in developing international Master's programmes, then what indeed underlies the apparent low level of language awareness in France? More importantly, in the framework of the ASIGMA project, given the level of cultural similarity between France and Romania, are there potential pitfalls that may, by being aware of their existence, be averted? A discussion of the French national context as it pertains to higher education and languages will hopefully

<sup>4</sup> Published in 2003 in ASp 41–42, 35–46.

inform the Romanian reader; drawing parallels as to what not to do in the Romanian CLIL endeavour demands interpretation that only these readers can carry out.

Four key notions must be pinpointed as background to the French CLIL context. First, as analysed by the French sociologist Philippe d'Iribarne (1989, 2006), France is an "aristocratic republic", where a two-tier system of higher education is split between ideals of republican elitism and republican egalitarianism. The result is a highly selective network of "*grandes écoles*" (a French equivalent to the American Ivy League or to the English "Oxbridge") and "catch-all" universities with no selection of students on entrance. Whereas the former are a guarantee of excellent job prospects for their graduates, with correspondingly high social status, the latter suffer from a high drop-out rate and a comparatively low percentage of graduates (*Le Monde*, 2004, 2010; OCDE 2006). Secondly, Hofstede (1991), as we have already seen, characterises France as a country with high power distance, strong individualism and high uncertainty avoidance, resulting in a strongly centralised state with a very hierarchical Ministry of National Education. True university autonomy is embryonic, and there is little precedent for management training or support for Rectors. In such an environment, the tradition of assessment – be it professional, peer, or on the part of students – is weak, as is the notion of accountability. Consequently, a certain paradox exists between proclaimed standards of international quality and the reality as observed in the field. For the French, the transition from an historical means-based economy to an internationally comparable results-based model is proving difficult. Finally, there is a strong heritage of public funding for higher education, coupled with a traditional (Latin) taboo as regards money (student fees, fundraising). Surveys over the past several years (*Le Monde*, 2004, 2010; OCDE 2006) have shown the per capita spend to be significantly below the OECD average.

This cultural "cocktail" translates into what may be described as a traditional model of teaching and learning. "*Une tête bien pleine* [a head full of knowledge]" predominates over the ideal of a "*tête bien faite* [a head filled with both knowledge and know-how]; the product of learning takes precedence over the process of learning; theory and perfection are more highly valued than practice. A mistake, for example, is more often a "*faute*", implying moral judgement, than an "*erreur*", or simple mistake. As a final example, the term "learning outcomes" has no standard translation<sup>5</sup>, and is generally confused with "objectives." Along similar lines, the term "lifelong learning" is generally translated as "*formation*" [training] *tout au long de la vie* and not as "*apprentissage*" [learning]. Unsurprisingly, in a high power distance society with high uncertainty avoidance, education is mainly teacher-centred, with little place for learner autonomy or risk taking. French assessment practices are also known, across disciplines, for their *negative* reinforcement (Antibi 2003) – "can't do", rather than "can do", in the words of the *Common European Framework of References for Languages*. Antibi, a professor of mathematics in higher education, has made the revolutionary case for a "contract of confidence". The impact of this non constructive approach has been easily observable in my own experience of nearly 40 years in the French university context. The standard refrain of language learners, be they students or adults, has always been "*Les Français sont mauvais en langue* [the French are bad at languages]". The veracity of this perception is somewhat mitigated by the Eurobarometer results, where the French hold a median position, but the negative self-image of learners leaves no doubt. Official discourse only adds to such a counter productive paradox, since it proclaims secondary school leaving language proficiency levels as being B2 on the European Language Framework (independent user, able to adequately respond to situations normally encountered), when two months later upon University entrance, 60% of incoming students (University of Toulouse figures) see that their level has in fact "dropped" down two levels to A2 (basic users) and 25% down one level to B1 (independent users at a threshold level).

On a similar official level, the French response to the Bologna process, consisting of ministerial decrees dating from April 2002, also manifests a lack of true language awareness. On the Bachelor's

<sup>5</sup> One hears "*acquis des formations*", "*resultants d'apprentissage*" or "*compétences attendues*."

level, the text specifies “After assessing the level of incoming students, programmes offer appropriate foreign language training.” What is meant by “appropriate”, and who determines this? On the Master’s level: “...the degree can only be awarded once the aptitude to master a foreign language has been validated. Programmes must include teaching which enables students to acquire this aptitude.” Again one must ask how it is possible to acquire an aptitude? What is “mastery”? What about language certification? Few universities have, over time, actually developed some form of institutional language policy to answer these questions; notable examples are the Universities of Strasbourg and Lille Charles-de-Gaulle.

On the part of university language teachers, however, there are more encouraging signs. Professional bodies exist and operate on both national and international levels. These include learned societies in the areas of Language for Specific Purposes (as early as 1972 in English, more recently in Spanish), Language Centres, and didactics. But their status and impact remain politically minor on a national level compared to the weight of literature and civilisation specialists. There is little professional pre-service training in teaching or research, and no in-service training in higher education. Consequently it is proving difficult to promote *effective* implementation of the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* and its companion, the European Language Portfolio.

### Lessons to Share: “Je peux”

Nevertheless, despite what may appear to be rather a bleak, albeit traditional, vision of the language teaching/learning context in French higher education—whose resemblance to the Romanian context can only be truly identified by Romanian colleagues—the picture is not without hope. “A prophet is not without honour, save in his own country,” and in my long career in the university context, it has been possible to engage in “insider dealing”, encouraging bottom-up advocacy for change within the overall favourable context of the Bologna process and the emergence of international rankings. Competition in the knowledge society is indeed bearing some form of fruit. I can attest to a certain level of success in raising local language awareness, as witnessed by the creation of a Language Resource Centre, the introduction of blended learning (classroom teaching integrated with guided autonomy), language teacher training seminars, and collaboration between language teachers and some faculties, gradually favouring better quality CLIL.

It is our hope that within the Romanian context, the ASIGMA project will make it possible to avoid potential pitfalls which culturally, as in France, seem to “load the dice” in comparison with educational contexts in Anglo-Saxon or Northern European environments. The spirit of open questioning, as observed in the first two project meetings—what works, how it works, why it works, how to make it work, etc.—is the necessary prerequisite for continuing willing collaboration among the national quality assurance agency, institutional coordinators and managers, content teachers, language teachers and, of course, students. The challenge for Romania is to work out the appropriate strategy necessary to find the optimal *Romanian* answer to the questions facing every country in developing international Master’s programmes. May the Latin cousin’s experiences be of good counsel.

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