THE FRENCH THEMATIC DIGITAL UNIVERSITIES – A 360° PERSPECTIVE ON OPEN AND DIGITAL LEARNING

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Abstract

This paper presents a 360° analysis of the role of the French Thematic Digital Universities, national consortia of Higher Education Institutions, from the perspectives of policy (macro), institutions (meso) and support for digital teaching and learning (micro). We trace the history of the development of these organisations since their creation in 2005, including insights from a recent report by the General Inspection of the Administration of National Education and Research, highlight the interactions between international, national and local initiatives and provide concrete examples of how the Thematic Digital Universities are contributing to the development of Open and Digital Learning. Key questions include how to reinforce the visibility and reputation of these consortia, including recognition of their transversal role in the French higher education landscape, how to develop engagement with Open Educational Resources and Practices on the part of both teachers and students and how to contribute to furthering interdisciplinary research in the field.

Introduction

The French "Universités Numériques Thématiques" or Thematic Digital Universities (TDUs) are national consortia of Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) dedicated to the production and dissemination of digital learning resources. They total eight in number, covering the major disciplines or disciplinary families.

As we shall see in this paper, the TDUs have a somewhat complex history, are structured in different legal forms and have faced periods of doubt and uncertainty, not least with the advent of MOOCs and the shifting priorities of public policy. This paper draws largely on a recent report by the IGAENR – General Inspectorate for the Administration of National Education and Research (Delpech de Saint Guilhem, Dubourg-Lavroff, & de Longueau, 2016). At this point, a few words should be said about the IGAENR, in order to understand the importance of this report to the Minister for National Education Higher Education and Research and to the Secretary of State for Higher Education (at the time of publication of the IGAENR report, a single Ministry covered all levels of education and research. Since June 2017, under the Philippe government, HE has been covered by the remit of a separate ministry, the Ministry for Higher Education, Research and Innovation). The IGAENR reports directly to the Ministers of National Education and Higher Education and Research. Divided into six territorial groups, it has jurisdiction over all administrative aspects of the education system, higher education and

research. It monitors the implementation of educational policies and their overall impact (MEN, 2018). The fact that such a high-level administrative structure was asked to produce such a report is a sign in itself of the political importance given to the future of the TDUs, and the report itself thus benefits from a high degree of legitimacy.

The paper also draws on other analyses by French academics of the context of French Higher Education in general (Musselin, 2017) and of the digital learning landscape in particular (Miladi, 2006; Thibault, 2007). It starts with an account of the historical development of the TDUs, placing this in the wider context of evolutions in the national HE landscape, before providing insights into the contribution of the French TDUs to the uptake of digital learning resources and practices since 2005, though the lenses of national policy, relationships with their membership, development of engagement with digital learning among teachers and students, and finally their contribution to research.

Historical development of the TDUs

As the IGAENR report indicates, the origins of the TDUs can be traced back to the 1990s, with the RUCA (University Network of Self-study Centres) initiative "Premier Cycle sur Mesure" (personalised undergraduate programmes), in which member universities pooled resources in a coherent, unified pedagogical approach. (Delpech de Saint Guilhem et al., 2016).

The early 2000s saw the development of the direct precursors to the TDUs, known as Campus Numériques (CN). While the direct translation of this denomination is Digital Campuses, the CNs are perhaps better understood as Virtual Campuses, with an offer of Open and Distance Learning (ODL) opportunities provided on a broad disciplinary basis by consortia of HEIs.

Thibault (2007) provides a semantic analysis of official texts relating to the CN initiative, noting that it took several years before a clear definition of the CNs was provided. Until then, indications of Ministry of Education expectations are to be gleaned from the successive national calls for proposals, for example in 2000: "develop an ODL offer and promote it at national and international levels"; in 2001: "promote a higher education ODL offer". In 2002, official texts finally provided the aforementioned definition as follows:

> *"A 'Campus Numérique' is defined as a learner-centred training system which proposes innovative services via digital technology. It enables the learner to access the course from close or distant locations according to times and rhythms chosen by the learner, and throughout his or her life".*

There is also reference to collaboration between HEIs, public/private partnerships, international partnerships, flexible modular design, personalised pathways consistent with ECTS, building bridges between Initial and Continuing Education, with, according to Thibault (2007), implicit reference to the European Union e-learning programme. Indeed, in 2002-2003, one of the CNs, CANEGE, is designated by the French Ministry of Education to participate in a case study carried out by the consultancy firm PLS Ramboll as part of the wider European Commission study on Virtual Models of European Universities.

Another analysis of the CNs (Miladi, 2006) presents them in the form of systems articulating learning resources, services (individual and group tutoring using different techniques: phone, email, forums, videoconferences, periodic groupings …) and logistics (administration of the network and platforms, maintenance of necessary software, management of secure access, administrative management) to achieve the goal of building a flexible offer in initial training as well as in continuing education.

A major shift comes in 2003, with the announcement of the launch of the TDUs. Here the focus is no longer on offering training courses, but on producing resources. Again, no official text formalised their missions, their organisation or their legal status, although their main aims were described as contributing to student success, facilitating academics' digital production through providing access to reusable artefacts and a variety of tools, and offering a wide-reaching national and international visibility of French Higher Education and its "pedagogical heritage" (Delpech de Saint Guilhem et al., 2016; p.5).

From the integrated ODL training systems offered by the CNs (in addition to the long-established ODL programmes provided by individual HEIs), we thus see a move to the production of national catalogues of learning resources, again organised along the lines of the broad disciplinary families:

- AUNEGE: economics and business studies;
- IUT en ligne: technical studies, linked to the national network of Institutes of Technology;
- UNESS: health sciences (medicine, pharmacy) and sport;
- UNIT: engineering and technology studies;
- UNJF: law;
- UNISCIEL: science;
- UOH: humanities;
- UVED: transversal initiative covering Environment and Sustainable Development.

The TDUs take on different legal forms (association: AUNEGE; foundation: UNIT; foundation then Public Interest Grouping (GIP): UVED; GIP: UNJF, UNESS; Scientific Interest Grouping (GIS): UNISCIEL; Inter-university department: UOH) and in 2016 involved 110 universities, engineering schools and research institutes, many of whom are members of several TDUs.

2012 saw another major disruption with the creation of the France Université Numérique platform, part of a wider Digital Agenda for Higher Education but which quickly became overshadowed by the high-profile FUN-MOOC initiative. Furthermore, the development of local institutional strategies for digital education and the merging of HEIs into larger structures (Musselin, 2017) known as COMUE (Communities of Universities and Establishments) weakened both the national approach and the disciplinary groupings inherent to the TDUs. For several years, the TDUs were left in some doubt as to their continuing existence, in the face of dwindling financial support, fluctuating priorities set by the Ministry and the loss of an already fragile visibility both at national level and among their member institutions.

However, the 2016 IGAENR report, while pinpointing the weaknesses of the TDUs (perceived by HEIs as opaque and complex; a lack of notoriety; different expectations of students and teachers with respect to digital learning resources) concluded that the TDUs do in fact have an important role to play in the HE digital learning landscape. Over the years they have not only created a large base of over 34,000 resources, but have also demonstrated their capacity to develop large-scale collaborative projects at both national and European level, and to develop valuable tools to contribute to student success and to the promotion of French scientific and technical culture. The IGAENR report thus formulates a series of recommendations addressed at both the Ministry and the TDUs themselves.

Firstly, it is recommended that the Ministry clarify the missions of the TDUs, develop a multiannual framework setting out the thematic priorities, set up a working group to drive the move towards an integration of the TDUs with FUN-MOOC, reorganise and reinforce the Ministry department for Digital Pedagogy and coordinate the programming of the digital and pedagogical axes of the different national calls for proposals. Still addressed to the Ministry are recommendations to reinforce the communication around the TDUs' actions and resources and to conduct an annual or biannual satisfaction survey.

Recommendations addressed specifically at the TDUs are to join forces under a single legal structure to provide HEIs and COMUEs with a single administrative access point; to mutualise transversal support functions; to harmonise their calls for proposals and their membership subscription fees and processes. Transversal working groups should be set up on issues such as certification, standardised IPR contracts, conditions for opening up the source codes of the resources produced, evaluating and measuring usage of the resources, contributing to a national Learning Analytics model and coordinating relations with the AUF (national Agency for the promotion of French HE in the Francophone world). A final series of recommendations at the Ministry, TDU and institutional levels cover the need to support related initiatives, strengthen links with library services, set up reward mechanisms to recognise the contribution of academics to pedagogical development in their careers, develop Life Long Learning, evaluate the resources produced by the TDUs, integrate digital competency frameworks and initiatives for both teachers and students and initiate a legal study on the distinction between Open Educational Resources (OERs) and other forms of resources.

In the Spring of 2018, two years after the publication of the IGAENR report, progress has been made, in particular in the relationship between the TDUs and the Ministry. They now have a 3-year contract with the Ministry, setting out their objectives and resources for the period, their operating costs are partly covered by annual grants and they are in a stronger position when replying to national calls for proposals. Two of the TDUs (UNIT and AUNEGE) have joined forces under a single legal umbrella structure, while still maintaining their disciplinary identities, and events such as FAN, the Autumn Digital Festival are organised jointly by several TDUs.

After this historical account, we now turn to a thematic approach, looking at the relationship between the TDUs and current national policy, their relationship with their members, how they

are developing teacher and student engagement and finally their contribution to research. The initiatives described are not intended to be exhaustive, but simply to illustrate through concrete examples. There are necessarily many more TDU projects than there is space to describe in this article, and the reader is therefore encouraged to explore further via the individual web portals of each TDU, accessible from the website (http://univ-numerique.fr) set up by the TDUs themselves due to a loss of visibility on the current national digital portal for HE (http://www.sup-numerique.gouv.fr).

The TDUs and national policy

As with the "Campus Numériques", the relationship of the TDUs with the Ministry of (Higher) Education has been largely defined by national policy priorities. In fact, as we have seen, the Ministry did not define from the start what it expected of the TDUs. The authors of the IGAENR report conclude that the TDUs have a major role to play, are in line with international conclusions on the need for pooling resources in areas where single HEIs are not necessarily equipped to do so, and recommend focussing on 5 priority areas:

- Producing resources to support the transition from secondary to higher education.
- Producing core resources for bachelor level courses.
- Tools to support bachelor students.
- Technology watch.
- Actions to support inclusion of disadvantaged populations and for the development of the Francophone digital space.

As we can see, support at bachelor level is a clear priority. In the French HE system, any student with the baccalauréat, the secondary school qualification obtained by 87,9% of school leavers in 2017 (MEN, 2017), has the right to a place at university. With the massification of higher education and the diversification of the student population, French HE faces a significant challenge in terms of completion rates at bachelor level.

Prior to the 2018 ORE law (Orientation et Réussite Etudiante, for Orientation and Student Success), the French Minister for Higher Education Research and Innovation Frédérique Vidal addressed the TDU community with a video message at the opening of the 2017 FAN event. This message focussed on Ministry expectations for the TDUs to contribute to student success, with resources and initiatives covering pre-requisites for higher education studies and to support remediation. At this point it should be mentioned that the notion of pre-requisites has faced a certain degree of resistance from staff and students opposed to the idea of introducing a form of selection for entry to French universities, and also that resources alone are insufficient to meet the learning needs of already fragile populations. However, a certain number of existing or new TDU initiatives can be seen to address this issue, for example:

- UNISCIEL – resources covering the core science curriculum and a bank of multiple-choice questions which can be embedded in a university Moodle;
- IUT en ligne – resources to support the transition from secondary to higher education;

- UVED – partnership with an *académie* (regional education body of the national Ministry of Education)
- UOH – ECRI+ – an application for the evaluation, training and certification of written skills in French (both in comprehension and expression) through the co-construction of a shared online service and the generalisation of dedicated training courses in each institution.

The TDUs and their relationship with member institutions

As membership associations, whatever their specific legal form, the TDUs are necessarily turned towards providing services to their members, although one of the criticisms formulated by the IGAENR report was that the reach was somewhat limited, with the majority of teachers using the TDU resources being those who had actually produced them, highlighting the need to address the issue of OER uptake.

While HEIs are officially represented by their governance (Presidents, Vice-Presidents) on the executive boards of the TDUs, participation is frequently delegated to operational staff, with the risk of diluting the strategic advantages to be drawn from membership. UNISCIEL reports making inroads by forging relationships with Deans, consistent with the disciplinary TDU approach and supporting dissemination at Faculty level. Another concrete example is that of a bottom-up initiative, where a teaching team learnt about a particular TDU through their pilot project supported by a local call for proposals and pushed the institution to become a member in order to benefit from the resources and services offered.

A further initiative which is raising the profile of the TDUs within HEIs and particularly at a more strategic level is the ePericles project, which involves both AUNEGE and UOH alongside other HE and private sector partners to develop a quality assessment tool and approach (inspired by the EU Lifelong Learning Programme project SEVAQ+), combined with a second tool for the recommendation of resources based on prior and community consultations, in much the same way as Amazon recommendations.

Finally, the IGAENR report goes as far as recommending that the remit of the TDUs should include supporting merged HEIs and COMUEs in the pedagogy of designing and using digital resources. For this to become reality, not only will the TDUs need to develop a coordinated response, but also to be in a position to recruit and mobilise the human resources necessary for such activities.

Developing engagement with Digital and Open Education among teachers

Over and above the production of learning resources aimed at students, the TDUs also contribute to developing engagement with digital and open education among teachers. UOH has supported the production of an interactive resource for teacher Continuing Professional Development (CPD) as well as a MOOC on mobilising social media for teaching and learning. The annual FAN event provides opportunities for exchange of practice among teachers, and the

TDUs participate in disciplinary, national and international events, although again much more could be done in particular at local level with a focus on usage of the resources in addition to the support for production.

The TDUs and their contribution to research

Although research per se is not within the strict remit of the TDUs, they contribute to research in two main ways. The first is that the learning resources are produced by academics who are both teachers and researchers. To highlight just two examples: a webdocumentary co-produced by UOH not only made available a corpus of historical documents but also included a methodological angle to support students in developing a scientific approach; and as part of the major uTOP project coordinated by UNIT, a research lab is creating a demonstrator for the valorisation of research through digital resources and training courses. The second approach is more directly targeted at furthering research in the field of digital learning: in 2016, AUNEGE integrated a research theme into its strategic development axes, with the aim of becoming the French reference for research into digital pedagogy in the field of business studies and economics, and in 2017 held the first meeting of its research group, with the challenges of interdisciplinary research high on the agenda.

Discussion

Two years prior to the publication of the IGAENR report, the EU project POERUP (Policies for the Uptake of OERs) produced a series of policy briefs, at both sectoral and national levels. While the IGAENR report does not explicitly reference the France Policy brief (POERUP, 2014) we propose to examine the IGAENR recommendations in the light of those produced for the POERUP project by Université de Lorraine.

Table 1:   Comparison of POERUP and IGAENR recommendations

POERUP recommendations (2014)	IGAENR recommendations (2016)
	Clarify the missions of the TDUs via thematic priorities:
Contribute to student success at bachelor level	Producing resources to support the SE-HE transition
	Producing core resources for bachelor level courses
	Tools to support bachelor students
	Technology watch
Provide better support to disabled students	Actions to support inclusion of disadvantaged populations and for the development of the
Support international mobility	Francophone digital space.
	Set up a working group to drive the move towards an integration of the TDUs with FUN-MOOC
	Reorganise and reinforce the Ministry department for Digital Pedagogy.
	Reinforce communication around TDUs
	Conduct an annual or biannual satisfaction survey
Simplify and coordinate the way TDUs function	Create a single legal structure
Simplify and coordinate the way TDUs function	Mutualise transversal support functions

Simplify and coordinate the way TDUs function	Harmonise TDU calls for proposals, membership fees and processes.
Position the TDUs as support to HEIs	Provide support to HEIs and COMUEs in the pedagogy of designing and using digital resources
Train teachers, manage disciplinary communities and support pedagogical innovation	
	Set up transversal working groups
	Strengthen links with library services
Contribute to the recognition of teacher engagement	Set up reward mechanisms
Contribute to developing Life Long Learning in HE	Develop Life Long Learning
Meet the needs of working students	
	Evaluate the resources produced by the TDUs
Valorise transversal competences	Integrate digital competency frameworks and initiatives
	Initiate a legal study on the distinction between OERs and other forms of resources.

As we can see from Table 1 above, the majority of the IAGENR recommendations had already been formulated by the POERUP project, although it is unknown whether the IAGENR authors actually had knowledge of the prior work. If indeed this was unknown to them, the convergence is in itself a sign that both initiatives recognised similar weaknesses and areas for improvement with respect to the TDUs form and activity, support from the Ministry and structural challenges such as teacher training and recognition. The main POERUP recommendation not reflected in the IGAENR report is that of preserving knowledge and competences in rare disciplines, perhaps a preoccupation specific to the academic TDU stakeholders. Finally, the question of OER uptake, or rather the lack of it, is not specific to the French context, as discussed for example by Conole and Weller (2008) and Ehlers (2011).

Conclusion

This presentation and analysis of the French TDUs is voluntarily restricted to the French national context. It is intended to provide the reader with insights as to how these structures developed and an understanding of their contribution to the national digital learning landscape, the challenges they face and how they might overcome them. Further analysis of the TDUs in terms of comparison with initiatives in other countries would be welcome, to build on the considerable work already done by the POERUP Lifelong Learning Programme project.

Finally, both the TDUs and the Ministry of Higher Education, Research and Innovation should continue to stay up to date with European and international developments in the field. While the TDUs in their current form will continue to be largely dependent on national policy, they are still in a position to develop a clear identify for themselves, taking a stance on Open Education and exploring different business models to contribute to their sustainability.

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