SEMINAR ON THE TEACHING PROFESSION FOR HIGHER EDUCATION

LYON, 22-24 JUNE 2006

SYNOPSIS
In order to open a debate on the evolution of the teaching profession for higher education, we are obliged to refer to situations and regulatory frameworks which vary enormously from one country to another, even within the European Union. Within each and every country, practices, traditions, models also differ according to the fields of study: sciences, medicine, law, economy, literature and human and social sciences. Finally, the profession, if we can call it that, is still waver ing under the effects of far-reaching social, economic, and technological changes which have left their mark over the last 30 years.

The teacher is at the heart of change and he is the instigator of these changes. This analysis with regard to primary and secondary teachers was the topic of a first study carried out by the Education and Training Committee of the French National Commission for UNESCO. It has become equally pertinent for higher education, with however some particularities at the training level because the diffusion of knowledge, the sharing of competencies implies masterminding new knowledge through research. The teacher is also a researcher and this alone raises the question of his training for a twofold mission, that which relates to his role as a teacher and researcher within his career, throughout his career and in the successive evaluations which can mark each step of his career.

These reflections are, of course, by no means new, but they take on a particular importance at the beginning of the 21st century which has been called the “century of knowledge”. In the society of knowledge now in the making, and not only at the national but also at the international level where each country understands the necessity to train its highly gifted, offer to the highest number the highest qualifications possible in order to confront international competition, which is a consequence of globalisation, the responsibility of teachers/researchers in higher education is understandably burdensome. Can such teachers face up to such heavy responsibility alone or should we focus on specific teaching professions for higher education?

Just as the big international organisations – European Union, OECD, etc. – UNESCO, of course, has studied the question. By adopting a Recommendation as of 1966 on conditions for teaching staff, it provided Member States with an instrument to integrate the fundamental role of teachers in the implementation of all educational strategies. The 1974 Recommendation regarding scientific researchers, and in particular the Recommendation of 1997 regarding the conditions of teaching staff in higher education, stresses their decisive role in contributing to the development of societies and the importance of qualifications, skills, qualities of a human, pedagogical and professional nature, whilst at the same time underlining that “teaching in higher education is a profession”.

The 1997 Recommendation constitutes a reference, taking into account as it does both the objectives and policies of higher education; the obligations and responsibilities of establishments; the rights and liberties of teachers; their obligations and responsibilities; training for the profession; conditions of employment. It should be put into focus along with the preparatory work and results of the World Conference on Higher Education, which UNESCO brought together in 1998 by associating Member States, experts and national/international partners on the modernisation of higher education: widening access to it, its social pertinence and links to the labour market and world economy.
The 1998 Conference intervened at a moment when strong demands were being expressed at State and international levels for the generalisation of “education for all” by the year 2015. Higher Education, which is at the heart of the education system, appears more and more as a vital link in the indispensable chain towards “education for all”; it forms teachers for primary and secondary schools; it contributes to the strategic monitoring of the system; it contributes to the quality of education through its research.

Within the follow-up framework of the 1998 World Conference, the French National Commission for UNESCO has explored in depth the aforementioned issues for at least a decade now and placed higher education at the centre of the intense and rapid changes of the last years. The democratisation of our societies shows, among other things, the willingness to open up knowledge to an ever-increasing number of students undergoing initial training, but with the need to update knowledge and the desire for a better quality of life, lifelong education has become a reality, a new mission adopted by all higher education establishments.

On the other hand, economic development has modified the relationship of these establishments with the professional fields, multiplying chances of cooperation with diverse partnerships, including those of the financial world, without necessarily transforming them into public institutions. But disregarding these evolutions, the question of their autonomy is at stake and especially “quality norms” in their training offers.

Information and communications technologies have affected professional practices which until now were based on the authority of the erudite. The multiplication of information sources calls for a rethinking of the roles and functions attributed to the teacher and researcher.

Finally, the internationalisation of human activities, which is accelerating and creating tensions in society and between societies, affects a field where, without doubt, scientific and cultural cooperation, with their impact on economic and social programmes, plays an important part.

With varying degrees of intensity according to the country concerned, the increase in demand for higher education is without doubt one of the major challenges which prompts us to reconsider the profession of teachers in higher education as to their mission, the teacher’s role in society, his training and competencies, and finally his evaluation resulting from the two previous points.

1. The teachers’ role in society and the profession’s image

The reactions of higher education to the challenges with which it is faced inevitably have a bearing on society’s image of teaching in the higher education profession. UNESCO’s Recommendation, mentioned earlier, stipulates in Point N° 6 that “Teaching in higher education is a profession for which its members ensure a public service: this profession demands [...] not only that teachers acquire extensive knowledge and special competencies which must be sustained through continuous study and rigorous research but also that they acquire a sense of personal and collective responsibility which they should assume for the sake of education and for that of the students’ wellbeing, and their community as a whole, as well as respect for rigorous professional conduct in teaching and research studies.
This leads us to ask a certain number of pertinent questions concerning:

- Liaison between research and teaching and, at the research level, between basic research and applied research;
- Capacity to develop partnerships with the economic sector and civil society: training courses, lifelong education, exchanges, sharing of competencies;
- The means put at our disposal to ensure democratisation of higher education: access, assistance to achieve success;
- Aptitude to manage projects and to take part in the running of the institution;
- Awareness and active participation in international cooperation: sharing of knowledge, mobility for researchers and students;
- Use of information and communications technologies for training and research.

Is the teacher destined for higher education sufficiently trained, prepared to meet the challenges?

2. Training and careers

In Europe, we can affirm that there is much heterogeneity in training for the profession. However, even if the preparation of a thesis is widespread – without being the norm everywhere – we can nevertheless ask ourselves if the future teacher is thus well trained for his future profession: through research perhaps, with all the knowledge developed in studying for a doctorate but beyond that? What does he know of the pedagogical aspects of his calling? Many a brilliant young researcher finds himself disarmed before a heterogeneous public whose pursuits and expectations are very diverse! And on what criteria do we base the recruitment of a teacher for higher education, and his future career? What are the competencies necessary to access a position and then to progress in the chosen field?

Can he alone shoulder all the tasks which will be expected of him: research, teaching and administrative responsibilities?

This prompts us to ask a certain number of questions:

- Should we speak of one or several teaching professions?
- Should we reconsider the initial training for teachers in higher education and take into account the many tasks he will be forced to take on?
- Should the training period enter into a real policy of permanent training?
- As to the teacher’s career, what respective parts should be devoted to teaching, research and administration and how should these parts evolve over the years?
- The teacher’s status, which will vary henceforth and according to the country concerned for a state functionary or someone recruited on a contractual basis for a project, should it be taken into account during training, then during recruitment and finally for the rest of his career?

It is of course evident that the inference of such questions brings us to that of assessment or evaluation?
3. Evaluation

Here, it is necessary to be clear. The teacher’s performance is one thing and the evaluation of the subjects taught is another. The various aspects cannot be mixed up. The quality requirement, within the current context of globalisation and international competition, can be tackled in several ways by determining: Who evaluates? What should we evaluate? What modalities should we adopt to evaluate?

As in training, diversity in its broadest sense dominates evaluation: a confrontation of experiences, be they positive or negative, would appear very desirable. The seminar will enable us to draw up a sort of anthology of practices in current use, notably in the European Region.

Here again, many questions need to be asked and the participants in the Workshops will be asked to give their opinions on, for instance:

- An evaluation should be conducted according to the objectives aimed at: how should we define these objectives?
- Who are the actors and partners involved in such an evaluation? What part should be attributed to external evaluations, to internal results?
- How shall we assess the autonomy of the institutions, the liberty of the researcher and respect the academic principle of “judgement by peers”?
- How do we define the instruments of quality? Should they be applied in a systematic manner with each successive step in the teacher’s career?
- How do we take into account, in a just manner, the activities of a teacher/researcher in order to maintain the excellence of research, of teaching, not forgetting the administrative tasks which he will, in addition, be called upon to assume?
- Finally, at a time of international mobility, and the implementation of the European Space for Higher Education and Research (Bologna Process), should we not strive for better collaboration as to the evaluation criteria to be adopted?