

## **REVIEW OF STUDENTS' INTEGRATION BY AGROSUP DIJON'S STUDENT OFFICE (BDE)**

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Each academic year in early September, two weeks of say "integration" are organized by the Student Office (BDE) of AgroSup Dijon (ASD) in order for the new students to discover how the school works, what is the global role of the BDE is, and what "the identity of the school" is. The set-up of these two weeks of integration is the exclusive responsibility of the BDE, closely correlated with the idea that the role of the BDE is not only entertaining, but also strategic and educational.

It is the most important action of the BDE during its year in office. It requires a huge investment of time and energy. The design and organization of these two weeks of integration represents a major challenge for student life because it largely determines how the freshmen will be involved in the engineering school. The content of activities during those two weeks is kept secret for newcomers which raises anxiety for some new students, given the media coverage of some problems encountered during the integration "activities" in some French "Grandes Ecoles". It is also a major challenge for the credibility of the BDE and more broadly for the students of the 2nd year who regulate these activities continuously, and which requires a big anticipation effort and mobilization to ensure the success of the two weeks.

### **Project design to improve the two weeks of integration**

The start of the project:

- The idea arose during the "student" part of the European TEMPUS project "La Manche" to improve the management of Higher Education Institutions.
- A review of the integration weeks was made by the BDE in April-May 2014 through a survey to the ASD students and a consultation of the so-called "Wall whispers," as presented at the conferences Yerevan and Tbilisi in June.
- It shows that the integration of students was not homogeneous within AgroSup in 2014-2015. Some students of 1st year felt a little neglected and took little part in the activities proposed by the BDE, including those Erasmus students who come to Dijon alone. The survey also revealed that students outside the 13 members of the BDE are insufficiently involved in the design of the integration weeks which falls "traditionally" under the BDE's responsibility. A significant number of first year students didn't appreciate the experience of the "false knowledge test" given out in the early weeks of integration because it reminded them of the stress of the tests they were given in their preparation classes prior to entering AgroSup.
- The conditions in which the annual attribution of responsibilities between the old and the new BDE in February 2015 took place showed real organizational deficiencies. Certainly, there is a USB key for 2 years, bringing together a large number of relevant documents, but they do not replace a single document of reference on the conduct of the BDE activities such as a "good practice guide". A retro planning schedule to prepare and develop a detailed action plan and coordinate major operations such as the integration weeks is missing. This would enable to keep traces of the management style of these

activities by the BDE, and evaluate them on the basis of specific indicators to convey the experience to the newly elected office members to be elected in February 2016.

The main change ideas discussed within the BDE in spring 2015:

- To improve the organization of the integration weeks, and in particular anticipate work to be carried out before the summer holidays.
- To establish objectives for the main groups of activities, including an "ad hoc" group of animation to organize the integration weekend, trips abroad etc.
- To develop the cultural dimension of a "rally in town" to discover Dijon by raising a number of challenges as a team to "soak up the school spirit"
- To organize a meeting with cultural actors along with ASD library to open up the ASD students to local cultural life outside the school.
- To review the organization of the "false knowledge test" on the first day preceding the presentation of the students of 2nd year. This includes explaining to new students that the activities of weeks of integration will pose no risk whatsoever for them.

The development of the action plan:

A first reflection has been engaged in the BDE using a concerted and progressive development grid around the ideas of "I need ... and also ... with ... to ..." (source. Project Comenius EPIDORGE, 2004). The action plan was ultimately not formalized and written to define the overall progress of the integration weeks. The only formalization of activities has been designed as an information sheet which must be submitted to the prevention and security department of ASD for each activity.

The place of governing bodies and the personnel of ASD:

- The Student affairs department and the ASD Student Council (CEVE) were kept informed of the project progress.
- The General Assembly of the Student Office was held to discuss the issues raised by the "Wall whispers" survey and proposals to improve the action of the BDE.

Evaluation of the implementation of the integration weeks

Preparation time:

- The aim to plan the two integration weeks in detail was quickly abandoned to make way for more initiatives coming from the members of the BDE.
- The BDE has used the expertise of some students outside the BDE to organize certain activities.
- The preparation time has not been managed optimally. The students of 2nd year only return a week before the students of 1st year and then they have classes. The BDE does not have sufficient time before the holidays or just before the events to further define what they should do, how and why, in order to build a consensus on the guidelines for those weeks of integration.

- More work should be done in advance to agree, define, and redefine "the spirit of school" that the BDE and second- and third-year students want to show to newcomers.

The two weeks of integration 2015:

-Two of the activities did not place. The downtown rally because of the weather and the cultural evening at Mediadoc library due to lack of sufficient anticipation to organize and invite stakeholders.

-The explanations on the first day managed to reduce some anxiety due to the the friendly and playful side of these activities.

- All the 2<sup>nd</sup> year students' year helped out. The participation of these students (about 100 outside of the BDE to animate certain activities (eg. the integration weekend, the rally ...) went well but the mobilization weakened at the end of the 2nd week when facilitators were missing to animate the 2nd weekend.

- The dropping out of some 2<sup>nd</sup> year students questions their non-involvement in the design of weeks of integration and the lack of detailed planning in advance by the group in charge of this activity and the BDE. The passivity of the students who are there as "participant observers" without wanting to assume the animation of the welcome of newcomers is also to be related to their participation in the activities of student life throughout the year. 25% of them are involved in associations, 25% in clubs; the others do nothing at all.

- The BDE had to improvise a replacement activity for the planned rally in the city at the last minute. The five hours of intense preparation were experienced by all players in this activity as a highlight and a great experience. This would not have been possible without the impressive mobilization of part of the students and 2nd year and without technical input from some students who have a proven experience in animation, or have a coaching training in Scouting.

- Various staff members accompanied the implementation and provided regular advice and support to the BDE to organize major activities.

The effects of this experience on student life:

-Since the end of the integration weeks, new students are now more involved in the management of student events than in 2014.

-The activities organized during the evenings were more diversified, with, another innovation, the participation of a teacher for one of them via the bridge club, during an evening card games and video games.

- The integration of foreign students was also facilitated. Students from the same country (eg. the Brazilians this year) tend to keep to themselves when they do not speak fluent French.

-The third year students are very satisfied with the innovations in the organization of two weeks

-The implication of non-member students in the organizational decisions BDE raised problems on their legitimacy to participate in decisions. There was never any discussion earlier about the possibility for the BDE to identify and mobilize external resources host some activities, although this is not part of "tradition".

-In the continuation of the integration days, we must unfortunately deplore some material damage, one of which had a significant impact because it concerned the central lawn of the institution. The people responsible for this damage did not report and it undermined the credibility of all students, especially those who take responsibility and get involved to live the student life.

Development prospects for 2015-16:

-The report of this experiment will conclude the contribution of the students to the final report of the TEMPUS "La Manche" project on improvements to the management of the institution. It will also feed into the drafting process of a kind of "practical guide" incurred by the BDE to their successor in February 2015.

- A major breakthrough took place for a better understanding of the role of BDE in the School when the vice president of the BDE presented its activities during the fall meeting of teachers.

- Other notable advances for students included several meetings between the heads of associations and management in September helped to evoke various organizational issues, which facilitated the allocation of new space for associations.

How to improve the effectiveness of the BDE:

- A thorough review of the operations of the BDE since March 2015 is needed to improve the management of activities. A series of indicators need to be implemented in order to regulate the actions of the BDE and to measure the improvements of its operation since March 2015. Indeed, in the absence of indicators and a validated plan of action, it is not possible to assess progress. It is not enough to establish an administrative form of activity. This must be part of an action plan completed with a provisional calendar of events, a nominal allocation of responsibility, a brief description of the proposed development, etc . to facilitate communication around the actions of the BDE and to acquire coherence and efficiency.

- Allowing members of the BDE, and students associated with them to lead activities, learn from experience, would require the BDE to keep written records (action plans, reports ...) for its decisions and of its activities.

- In order to clarify what the BDE wants to convey about the "spirit of the School" to new students, it could organise a joint debate on the claimed values, for example by using the technique of heraldry at the time of its campaign. It is the responsibility of the BDE and this should be a major issue during the campaign preceding the election of new officers. Questioning the founding values of the "spirit of the School" is also an opportunity to reflect on the content and purpose of student life activities proposed by the BDE, which are not only to "have fun or use their peers as "recreational consumers"; it also has the role of facilitating time for discussions, cultural exchanges and managing and negotiating the daily organization and the so-called "school spirit".

-It should also review the process of the integration of foreign students in September 2016 so that their welcome is more personalized.

Other projects around the organization of student life could be set up in the wake of the student action in the TEMPUS project:

- A first reflection could be initiated along with the CEVE to give more coherence to the actions of the BDE in connection with the educational and preventive actions by the personnel. For example, it would be good if the procedure for the validation of all kinds activities by the Management is the subject of a summary document, known to all stakeholders which is globally managed and negotiated. As another example, it would be good if the BDE had a comprehensive, multi-year review of previous BDE expenses in addition to the estimated budget allocated to it to get a better understanding of the budget framework for the action belonging to the BDE.

Sanctions, such as significant material damage would require not only the start of a global reflection on the sanctions regime in the school, but also a wider reflection on empowerment of students in all the activities of the School.

Finally, the improvements made by other project partners in the TEMPUS "La Manche" project, particularly in the area of the involvement and empowerment of students (see online conferences on the project website) deserve to be known and also discussed in AgroSup Dijon.