

## **Negotiating curriculum change in the French university: the case of ‘regionalising’ social scientific knowledge**

Sophia Stavrou\*

*Mediterranean Laboratory of Sociology, Université de Provence, Aix-en Provence, France*

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This paper focuses on the curricular change in French universities that has taken place over the last two decades and especially since the implementation of the *LMD Reform* in 2002. Curricula tend to become ‘regionalised-knowledge’ courses, by regrouping disciplinary knowledge and looking forward to economic and social needs. The article aims at analysing the process of producing this change. The first proposition is to show that change is not a linear process, but an ongoing process of negotiation undertaken by a wide range of institutions, social groups and agents, who operate in different institutional levels (European-level, State-level, university/local-level or pedagogic/local-level). The second proposition is that these negotiation procedures mask the differences in the social basis of each one of these discourses and, thus, mask conflict and struggle over social control in higher education reforms.

**Keywords:** curriculum change; French university; regionalised knowledge; pedagogic discourse

### **Introduction**

This paper addresses curricular transformations in European universities.<sup>1</sup> That is, in the process of construction of the European Higher Education Area, redefining the role of universities in society – now destined to contribute to the economic and social development of Europe. In other words, with the aim of reaching a ‘knowledge-based economy’. The research focuses on curricular change and how this change is produced. Curricular change, here, refers to formal or informal incitement by European, national or local institutions related to universities to ‘rejuvenate’ programs of study and to ‘adapt’ their courses. It refers to orientations in curriculum policy towards a closer connection between these courses and the economy, so as to improve ‘employability’ conditions for individuals and encourage the ‘sustainable economic growth’ of Europe (Conference of Ministers, 2001, 2003). Moreover, curricular change is also the indirect product of national higher education policies over the last two decades and the re-organisation of universities through mechanisms and technologies of ‘neo-liberal regulation’ by governments (Davies, Gottsche and Bansel 2006; Naidoo 2003).

Specifically, this paper concerns the process of change within French university curricula. It draws on previous observations of social sciences’ pedagogic texts

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\*Email: Stavrou\_sofia@yahoo.fr

(Stavrou 2008) as a starting point to examine the process of their elaboration (or ‘recontextualisation’) through continuous negotiation between and within agencies at all systemic levels, internal or external to the field of higher education.

The study focuses upon elaboration and realisation of an alternative pedagogic model, produced by bringing together two different principles in higher education policy: (1) ‘professionalisation’, tending to develop vocational training in taught or professional programs instead of scientific research programs; and (2) ‘pluridisciplinarity’, which refers to transforming mainstream disciplinary programs into programs based on labour market segmentation and outcomes. This is what I define as *professionalising courses by regionalising disciplinary knowledge*, as follows from Basil Bernstein’s concept of ‘regions of knowledge’ (Bernstein 1996). *Regionalisation of knowledge* is mobilised here to describe a specific form of transversality between disciplines embedded in a projected (to external political and economic fields) pedagogic discourse, which currently appears in university curricula. It can be understood as ‘one of the possibles’ of curriculum structuring – the one realised. The purpose is, then, to focus on the field(s) of ‘recontextualisation’ (Bernstein 1990, 1996) that came to produce this ‘possible’.

The analysis draws on 32 interviews with representatives of ministerial, university and pedagogic agencies. These comprised 15 policy interviewees, ranging from university’s agents contributing to local implementation of policy (‘Vice-Presidents’ and academics ‘in charge of operations’ [*Chargés de mission*]) to ministry’s agents responsible for the evaluation of universities and 17 academics teaching in four different programs of study. The interviews were centred on the participation of each agent in the reforming process of universities and on the specific tasks and responsibilities they have been given.<sup>2</sup> In addition, qualitative content analysis was conducted of official documents produced by these agencies and of reform acts. The case of the French university is an interesting one, as it enables us to observe a *change in progress*, one already having its effects on curricula, where non-stabilised tensions between groups for the ‘what’ and the ‘how’ of that change can be captured. I suggest that change is to be examined as the product of permanent negotiation between different and opposing fields of agents, participating directly or indirectly in the reform of higher education, at European as well as at national and local systemic levels.

However, what is central to this plural space is more than the negotiation between agents themselves. One can consider curricular change as in a negotiated order theory (or as in symbolic interactionism), where reform is emerging from an ongoing process of interaction between individuals, implicating constant renegotiation in orientations. It means that these orientations are not based on rigid definitions. This is certainly what is observed through investigation. For example, the terms figuring in the *Communiqués* of the European Ministers conferences of the Bologna process are never clearly defined. Institutional keywords as ‘multidisciplinarity’, ‘quality’, ‘employability’ or ‘flexibility’ appear in different European texts with different meanings. This is also true for terms figuring in French national texts. Definition of policy objectives and ways of realising them are permanently negotiated.

I argue, however, that what is more fundamental is analysing this plural space as a conflict space. Why are objects of study redefined, what are the criteria underlying the selection and organisation of knowledge, what is the learning process aimed at? These are questions that can be answered by referring to the different agents’ discourses (principles) involved in the institutional arena. This is to say that there is conflict over the control of meanings, based on antagonistic interests: a struggle to

define terms, a struggle for institutionalising practices. That means, beyond the negotiation aspect, it is important to observe what is being negotiated by each discourse and how each discourse is generated by the inner logic and social basis of the groups who carry it, where negotiation of meanings is embedded in cultural stakes. I suggest that the crucial point is that of the specific internal activity and of the specific structuring of relations between these groups and their discourses.

In this article, I begin by illustrating the evolution of theoretical approaches in sociology of education for studying curriculum change, especially the importance of the connection between Bourdieu and Bernstein's frameworks. Secondly, I discuss contemporary trends of change within French universities towards 'regionalisation': at curricula's landscape-level and then within courses of study in terms of recontextualising social scientific knowledge. Finally the paper considers the process of production of this change, through the discourse and activity of recontextualisers at different levels (European, national, local).

### **A sociology of curriculum change**

In this section I shall set out the theoretical framework for this study. The paper builds upon theoretical frameworks in the sociology of curriculum and its developments towards sociology of knowledge, especially those carried out by Basil Bernstein in his later work.

After Marx and Engels' (1845/1968) *German ideology*, pointing out the materialistic basis of philosophical idealism contributing to social domination, Durkheim was the founding thinker in sociology directly interested in the social basis of the content of education. He gave education the form of a sociological object (1938) and studied it from a socio-historical perspective, making connections between each period's social system and educational change, from the Middle Ages to the beginning of the twentieth century. He was the first theorist to highlight the issue of knowledge selection and to set out, implicitly, the conformity of educational culture to a 'pedagogic ideal' generated by social structure.

These ideas resurfaced in the UK during the 1960s, in debates establishing a 'common curriculum' in a mass-society, which generated a sociological movement named the 'New Sociology of Education' (NSOE). The NSOE's theoretical starting point (Young 1971) is that of considering knowledge as a social construction, as something that has not an intrinsic value, but rather is produced in an institutional arena on the basis of interactions between groups. However, the problem with NSOE was its epistemological relativism. The concept of social construction of knowledge, rejecting the idea of an inner value for knowledge, was also a means of compromising all types of knowledge, including NSOE's knowledge of knowledge (Vitale 2006).

Pierre Bourdieu and Basil Bernstein's contributions and developments, from the 1970s to 2000, have been of a great significance for curriculum studies, especially from a sociological perspective. Initially, Bourdieu highlighted the arbitrary character of subject selection in educational programs, focusing essentially on the 'reproductive' function of school, transforming social differences into inequalities to learning, by transmission of dominant culture (Bourdieu and Passeron 1964, 1970; Bourdieu 1971), whilst Bernstein advanced a theory of 'codes' of educational knowledge, correlating morphological characteristics of curriculum, pedagogy and evaluation forms with distribution of power and social control in society (Bernstein, 1967, 1971, 1975). The two researchers have as a meeting point a theory of 'cultural reproduction': the

embodiment of social order through knowledge transmission and acquisition systems, both centered on the establishment of power relations and classification between social groups, though without questioning what is producing that classification within educational transmission.

In subsequent elaborations of their theories, Bourdieu continued to develop his social conflict space model, based on the analogy to social division of labour, structuring practices within the field of higher education (Bourdieu 1984). Bernstein (1990, 1996) developed the concept of ‘pedagogic discourse’ and that of the ‘pedagogic device’ producing this. In doing so, Bernstein displaced the centre of analysis from reproduction of external relations to production of internal relations, where internal relations refers to relations within pedagogic discourse, to its inner structure and logic and to the principles by which it is generated. As Bernstein (1995) argues, one can make a distinction between ‘relations to’ and ‘relations within’ pedagogic texts. What is highlighted now is the activity of production of a ‘legitimate’ curriculum, by recontextualising knowledge through changing principles of legitimation. The heuristic contribution of a Bernsteinian approach, suggested by Ramognino (2008), lies in this focus on the internal activity of social practice and its integration in the theory of cultural reproduction.

Bernstein and Bourdieu offer two complementary frameworks: they reveal the necessity for both micro and macro levels to be examined in curriculum change. We need Bourdieu’s framework to analyse the conflict space in which the reform of higher education is elaborated, addressing power relations between agents, groups and institutions based on their social position and their different forms of capital. We also need Bernstein’s approach to consider these ‘fields’ as ‘agencies’ with a specific normativity of action (Ramognino 2008) and to show how the relations between them structure the reform process and, thus, between knowledge and between practices within curricula. As Maton (2000) suggests: ‘between them, their approaches conceive educational knowledge as a structured and structuring structure’ (149). Bringing together these two approaches offers the possibility of ‘a relational sociology of higher education’, a *relationalism* that other existing studies on higher education do not enable (Maton, 2005). The common frame rests both upon ‘external’ and ‘internal’ analytical focus, and upon ‘objectivist’ and ‘subjectivist’ theories.

A curriculum is an educational path implying choices within a specific educational system and within a specific socio-historical context. Therefore, studying curriculum choices is a question of examining more broadly social change. In other words, curriculum change reflects changes in wider models and principles of social action. This is why, I suggest, that when changes occur to university curricula they need to be examined as the result of a large process of reconfiguration happening beyond educational context, going into curricula.

Elaborating or transforming curricula, refers to an activity of recontextualising knowledge (Bernstein 1990): an activity of selection of knowledge, abstracted from its original context and organised within a new pedagogic text destined to be transmitted to students. The activity is oriented by principles carried by an array of groups and agents, participating directly or indirectly, or generated by the confrontation between them in this process. As Bernstein (1996) describes:

The recontextualising principle creates recontextualising fields, it creates agents with recontextualising functions. The recontextualising functions then become the means

whereby a specific pedagogic discourse is created. Formally, we move from a recontextualising principle to a recontextualising field with agents with practising ideologies. (33)

Furthermore, the product of this activity can become an autonomous category, resting upon cognitive models structuring knowledge and practices, through classification and framing of contents. It implies structuring 'pedagogic identities' (Bernstein 1996) for individuals operating in the social world. In this respect, understanding a curriculum sociologically means exploring how the text has been elaborated, by whom and, finally, exploring how this text contributes to objectivise some practices as *the possible to be realised*.

### **What is changing for French curricula?**

After restructuring public higher education institutions to address students' issues raised as part to the movement of *May 1968*, the French State involved universities in a long process of redefining their role within French society. This was the official field's work, but, at the same time, influenced by a whole society in transition: a period of slow inflation, of decline of the Welfare State, mass society, the democratisation of higher education and of growing unemployment. During the 1980s two important reform acts contributed to this change. First, *loi Savary* in 1984 assigned new responsibilities to universities, encouraging the connection between higher education and the field of production, emphasising the immediate needs of French society. Second, *loi Jospin* in 1989 was more explicit on the need for renewing courses in universities: 'courses, which in their contents and methods are adapted to the economic, technological, social and cultural evolutions of the country, as of its European and international environment' (Act no. 84-52).

These changes were the start of a process of change in France and more widely in Western countries (especially in the Anglophone world). Universities were becoming more than academic structures and closed scientific communities working solely for intellectual gain. They were progressively turning into something that should have an important role to play within a context, providing advantages to national level, and even to each regional local level, where their economic and social relevance became more pronounced than the intellectual one. This is to provide advantages such as highly placed national institutions in international ranks, attractiveness for foreign students, knowledge-based economy, managing unemployment issues and local development around universities. In other words: competitiveness, an 'input-output' perspective of conceiving the State's investment in higher education.

French university's curricula have been heading towards a change in the last few years. The need for change was explicitly implemented in 2002, through the 'LMD Reform', legally applying the construction of 'European higher education area' to the French higher education system (Decree no. 2002-482). It installed the 'Licence-Master-Doctorat' or '3-5-8' system, the 'ECTS' european credits system and the organisation of teaching and evaluation in semesters (instead of annual organisation). It also promoted principles orienting curricular restructuring of universities: 'conceiving specialised courses within disciplines', 'the need of introducing pluridisciplinarity' and of 'introducing transversal competences', 'development of professionalisation of studies' and 'reinforcement of new information and communication

technologies'. However, beyond this explicit prescription, incitement to change for university programs of study also appears implicitly in national reports, in universities' local policy texts and in their evaluation by the ministry's agencies.

All French higher education is experiencing this phenomenon, although some faculties and departments are more affected by change than others. More affected are universities' discipline-centered curricula within traditional faculties of science, humanities and social sciences. Selective institutions, as more recent market-centered or competence-centered courses and elite schools (i.e. Faculties of Medicine, Schools of Commerce), are less subject to change, at least to curricular change. It is worth highlighting here the French specificity of coexistence of 'universities' and 'grandes écoles' within public higher education, where the former recruit the mass of students whilst the latter have a socially and scholarly selected student body (Bourdieu 1989; Euriat and Thélot 1995). The two structures are unequally addressed within the reform process (Vinokur 2008); the *Report Attali* (Attali et al. 1998) explicitly stressed that the 'grandes écoles' did not need great change, but, rather, 'marginal adjustments' in regard to research development. It appears that selective institutions are already considered as competitive in the international arena and so can still be legitimated by their attachment to tradition, whereas mass universities 'must prove' their value.

### ***Changing the division principle of academic structures***

At present, the curricular landscape of universities is in a process of change. Since the LMD Reform act of 2002, Master's degrees have been separated into *Master professionnel* (professional as vocational training) and *Master recherche* (research courses). 'Professional' degrees are now nearly twice the number of 'research' degrees (Ministère de l'Éducation Nationale [MEN] 2007). Furthermore, since 2006 the Ministry of Education has introduced into its registering categories that of *Pluri-Lettres, Langues et Sciences Humaines* – institutionally recognised pluridisciplinary courses. This is the only category within the faculties of humanities and social sciences (HSS) that has a positive variation in 2007 in terms of number of degrees created (+ 12.7%). More detailed statistics show that, in regard to their number, only pluridisciplinary courses are in expansion within HSS, e.g. communication, education and urbanism courses. In contrast, numbers for disciplinary courses such as history, psychology, sociology and geography are decreasing (MEN 2007). At the same time, the evolution of academic staff recruited by the State is also increasing according to the pluridisciplinary and professionalising character of courses (Le Gall and Soulié 2007). Social sciences degrees are particularly affected by this change: they tend to a greater 'professionalisation' and 'pluridisciplinarity'. In Bernstein's words, these courses tend to 'regionalisation'.

'Regionalisation' comprises two directions (Ramognino 2008): one of spatial regionalisation of courses of study and research to local political and economic markets and a second one of regionalisation of departments, disciplines and knowledge. The hypothesis here is that what is changing is the legitimation criteria for defining institutional spaces within universities. The division of academic labour by scientific or disciplinary criteria is no longer the legitimate model or is at least a model currently tending to weaken, whilst the legitimate one tends towards a division resting upon potential outcome criteria. This is what I examine in the next section, through the case of recontextualisation of social scientific knowledge.

### *Recontextualising knowledge within social scientific courses*

Social sciences, and in particular sociology, have been characterised by plurality since their emergence. As Vitale (2001, 2006) showed in his comparative study on European sociology curricula, there is ‘plurality’ within the discipline with regard to its epistemological and ontological bases, which is reflected in the teaching of sociology, in its curricula and contents. However, sociology in France has been institutionalised and seen until recently as a relatively autonomous discipline. This is related to its naissance as a science and the struggle of founding father, Emile Durkheim, to establish a school of sociology as an autonomous scientific method and knowledge, detached from the psychological and historical sciences (Durkheim 1895). In this respect, after sociology was recognised in the 1950s it began to be taught in independent sociology departments within universities. The number of sociology courses in Bachelor or Master’s degrees expanded, especially between 1980 and 2000. Moreover, these courses opened their doors to the students of ‘mass democratisation’ of French higher education, including socially differentiated groups. Currently, however, as discussed above, social scientific disciplinary courses are decreasing, whilst ‘regionalised’ courses are increasing.

Though regionalisation of social scientific knowledge is realised in different ways,<sup>3</sup> there are similar patterns of curriculum structure. Analysis of four masters’ curricula in social sciences<sup>4</sup> shows that there are significant transformations in the programs of study that attest to this tendency. The two indicators on which curriculum content analysis was based are the ‘classification’ and ‘framing’ relations between and within knowledge and practices. They were examined through segmentation, hierarchisation and stratification of contents within curriculum, so as to consider the principles commanding recontextualisation of knowledge.

Analysis of these four curricula suggests the following:

- Curricula tend to a greater *cooperation between disciplines*, both regarding object’s definition and regarding contents, contributing by theoretical or methodological approaches.
- They are characterised by new forms of pedagogy: a *less rigid hierarchical relation* between transmitters and acquirers. The focus is on teamwork products and not on individual ones. *Groups’ composition is heterogeneous* for students and teachers, academics or professionals coming from different disciplinary backgrounds.
- Pluridisciplinarity is more a *serialisation of disciplinary knowledge within specialisation* (thematic or competence-centred) than an integration within a pedagogic or academic project. Each discipline is taught in distinct modules, taken from other disciplines or transversal modules.
- *Disciplinary knowledge selected to be transmitted is specialised knowledge*: some knowledge is ‘de-contextualised’ from the discipline’s inner logic and generative context and it is ‘re-contextualised’ to the specialised object of study. Especially in the case of institutionally autonomous pluridisciplinary courses, disciplines appear from the beginning as a specialised knowledge, where the ‘decontextualisation-recontextualisation’ process is not visible to students (i.e. for sociology modules, students are directly confronted with how to solve ‘social problems’, instead of understanding first how disciplinary tools for solving these problems were generated and how to turn a social problem to a sociological one).

- Whilst pluridisciplinarity means openness, within newly established French curricula sequencing reveals a tendency to more restraint or specialised knowledge-fields. Transversal modules are ateliers of elaborating mission or diagnostic projects, simulating concrete situations. These modules are the most important in terms of hour or credit-volume and always appear in the last semester's program. *Transversal modules' dominance on disciplinary modules* shows the existence of implicit 'recognition' and 'realisation' rules for curriculum structure: a 'projected' to profession curriculum.

The study of internal relations shows that whilst classification between disciplinary knowledge is fading, framing on the communication context strengthens. Thus, 'regionalisation of knowledge' within these courses leads to the embedding of an instructional discourse (of pluridisciplinary knowledge) in a regulative discourse of social order (control of external fields on legitimate communication), a displacement from internal intellectual necessity to external social or economic necessity. The originality of this approach, as we shall see in the next section, is that it enables a connection to be made between the relations within the pedagogic text and the process of recontextualisation at a macro-level: classifying and framing relations between and within fields of recontextualisation through their activity.

### **Constructing a pedagogic discourse: differing perspectives and compromising solutions**

'Regionalisation' is about moving boundaries, displacing borders between academic programs, between knowledge and between pedagogic identities. 'Regionalisation' is plural as it is realised in different curricular and pedagogic forms, but it is also plural for the reason that it is planned by groups having differential cultural standpoints and social bases and, thus, differential registers of action. That is why the focus is not only upon displacing boundaries. It is also upon conflicting logics, which come to compromise solutions as to legitimise this process of displacement.

### ***Transnational agencies reforming universities in a globalised context***

The institutional space of higher education's reform lies beyond national borders: a European space of conception of policies and public action. Moreover, it is this European context that appears as the basis (and pretext) of change for universities. Since 1998, the date of the launch of the Bologna process and of what will be called later the process of construction of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA), restructuring of universities became a transnational affair. In the French case, the implementation of the LMD Reform in 2002 concerned 'the application within French higher education system of the construction of EHEA'. The 3-5-8 system regarding harmonisation of degrees' structure or the ECTS credits system are only some of the explicit measures prescribed by European official texts and reinterpreted by national ones. Other incitements are progressively defined within these texts: students' and researchers' mobility, European cooperation of evaluation mechanisms, definition of 'quality' standards, development of 'employability', lifelong learning, EHEA's attractiveness within international context etc. I discuss here that orientations are not imposed in a linear way, but that their definitions are elaborated in the interaction between *communiqués*, declarations and reports.

The Sorbonne's declaration, signed in May 1998 by the British, French, German and Italian ministers responsible for higher education, aimed to harmonise national systems (developing 'Europe of knowledge' independently of the economic dimension of European cooperation), whilst the second declaration of Bologna, signed by 29 ministers, made a double objective of the process clear: an 'internal' one, 'compatibility and comparability' between systems within Europe, and an 'external' one towards 'greater competitiveness of European higher education system'. This shows the schizophrenic character of the objective: in the first case, EHEA is an addition of differential parts getting together, in the second, EHEA is a whole, a unit claiming a place within international space.

This double tendency also reflects in the nature of groups participating in this process. Until 2000, orientations were the product of an intergovernmental cooperation, directed by the Ministers' Council. Since 2001, the date of the Prague Conference, this cooperation has become a communitarian policy, introducing European institutions and associations into the decision-making process: the 'Bologna Follow-up Group' (European commission's members, European Council's members, but also members of the European University Association, the European Association of Institutions of Higher Education and of European Students' Information Bureau). The supranational character of this process is then highlighted, since the control goes from government hands to transnational institutions' hands. The presence of the European commission within this group is fundamental, as it represents a European, communitarian institution, which declares being politically neutral and independent from national governments. Texts no longer aim at European cooperation but at standardisation procedures: the establishing and charging of specific transnational agencies with responsibilities of defining criteria and tools for recognition and for the 'quality' of degrees and qualifications.

These European associations introduced into the decision-making process, thereby new perspectives and interests (coming to consensus) entered the arena: the European University Association assembling agents who belong to the higher education and research fields; the European Association of Institutions in Higher Education representing institutions of professional higher education and having the intention to 'defend the interests of the professionally oriented institutions; whilst the European Students Union aims at 'promoting educational, social and cultural interests of students' of Europe. These three associations, together with the European Association for Quality-Assurance in Higher Education, named 'the E4', work on the elaboration of a 'quality-assurance' European system. Each one of them has contributed, throughout its reports (funded by the European Commission), to define orientations for Prague's *Communiqué*, whereby have arisen notions such as those of 'employability', 'lifelong learning' or 'quality' with negotiated meanings. Progressively, through their activity, these associations have turned from the status of corporatist organisations into essential actors of the European Higher Education Area.<sup>3</sup>

The Berlin conference highlighted the importance of mechanisms and procedures of accreditation and assessment. At the European level, ministers called for a collaboration between these agencies to develop 'standards' and 'guidelines', with the European Network Information Centres in the European Region and the National Recognition Information Centres in the European Union taking responsibilities and involving UNESCO in the arena. However, the social basis of the process becomes more and more complex, with interest groups and lobbies entering the process; the Bergen's conference, in 2005, welcomes the association of 'Education International'

(EI) and the ‘Union of National Industries of European Community’ (UNICE). The conflict relations between them show the existing differences between action lines: EI is the ‘voice of education’s sector in the world’ assembling teachers and education staff; UNICE is ‘representing industrial and economic organisations within European institutions’ and ‘encouraging a competitive industrial policy within Europe’. A space of negotiation between national, European and international agencies and institutions, on one hand, and between professional and interest groups, governments and technocratic institutions of the European Union, on the other hand.

It is worth noticing that the EHEA process rests more upon a *horizontal* form of governance (‘partnership’) than on the basis of a strong hierarchy between administrations. Orientations are progressively defined within this recently institutionalised space of negotiation, a plural space of agencies who manage to generate a consensus. Interviews, conducted by Croché (2006) with members of these European agencies, show that groups controlling the process ‘are like instances who have managed to develop a culture and working methods allowing them to easily agree on the reform’s meanings’ (205). The meanings are constructed in the interaction between these different logics and the consensus has as a fundamental basis the change into a technocratic process (an expertise function) in managing higher education. It rests upon a management perspective of social and economic problems by transforming higher education and, inversely, it rests upon transforming higher education through management criteria and technologies. In other words, it appears that the European project of higher education is a part of a wider process of both political and social rationalisation depending on economic rationality and legitimated by a more and more formalised activity within a plural space of agents.

### *The struggle for definitions within national context*

However, the French national context of reform is itself a plural space of agencies. The plurality refers to relations between the State and its agencies, the Universities’ local agencies and agents from the pedagogic field directly implicated in the elaboration and teaching of programs of study.

These relations are formalised through an institutionalised process of ‘contractualisation policy’ as the instrument of higher education’s governance by the State. Each university has to elaborate institution plans called *projets d’établissement* (institution projects) or *contrats quadriennaux* (four-year contracts, established 1984). These last are signed by the Ministry of Higher Education and Research and the university institution to conditionally guarantee block grants for four-year periods. They consist of an assessment report of the last four years, giving out positive and negative points through predetermined indicators, and a plan on further organisational and curricular development, according to the guidelines defined by the ministry. At the same time, ‘authorisation campaigns’ for university courses have been introduced by the State, whereby curricula are examined every four years by the Ministry’s evaluation agencies, to attest quality but also to condition funding for universities.

These procedures imply an ‘internal evaluation’ for each university, subject to ‘external evaluation’. At the internal level, the evaluation is carried out by a group of agents, (‘manager-academics’ as suggested by Deem, 1998), elected in three different bodies: the Scientific Council, the Council of Studies and University Life and the Administration Council, each one headed by a Vice-President. The role of these three councils has been reinforced since the implementation of LRU Reform in 2007 stressing

the 'autonomy and responsibilities' of local agents (no. 2007–1199). At the external level, evaluation has been carried out by the valuers of the Agency for Evaluation of Research and Higher Education (AERES) since its creation in 2006, whilst the final decisions and authorisations come from the General Direction of Higher Education.

The plural national space of reforming French universities reflects in this contract-based system, involving the contribution of each one of these agencies to 'dialogue' and 'negotiation'. The starting point for negotiation over the restructuring process of university curricula was that of the 'Report Attali' (1998) promoting a 'European model of higher education' and of the reform act that followed (the LMD Reform of 2002), presenting the need for curricula change. But, as I have already argued in this paper, *vagueness* is an essential characteristic of orientations to change in higher education. Besides consensus on 'more openness' (openness to other disciplines, to other departments and faculties, openness of higher education to other fields, openness to market field, to economy, openness to other higher education systems etc.) there is a plurality in meanings; even contradictory meanings. Within the national context, there is a tension of meanings between political deciders, ministry's valuers, university's local agents and academics participating in courses' planning.

As I have pointed out, official texts associate two principles for change, '*professionalisation*' and '*pluridisciplinarity*', though without explicitly defining them. In consequence, notions are defined throughout the negotiation procedures, with each agency being a carrier of a specific recontextualising logic intervening in its activity:

The instructions' guide for elaborating the four-year contract takes up the suggestions of the European guidelines. The AERES agency takes up these guidelines. However, the European guidelines are extremely vague .... From the moment these guidelines are recovered by the French State, the State makes use of them according to its own philosophy. And then, when it comes to the university institution, it makes use of them according to its own philosophy too. So, each time there is an additional pressure and specific indicators. (Vice-President of the Council of Studies and University Life)

For the Agency for Evaluation of Research and Higher Education, formed by academics designated by the Ministry, the valuation consists of studying the courses and filling an assessment form by attributing marks to several criteria. Here, the professionalising character of the course is measured by the explicit proposition of job prospects, the connections made between the course and professions, the partnership with the profession's community and the monitoring of employment of former students. Pluridisciplinarity refers to the pedagogic connections made between departments and schools within the course. Assessment rests on a standardised procedure evaluating a '*lower or higher degree of pluridisciplinarity*', for which agents may adopt personal, professional and disciplinary logics. As one of the Ministry's evaluators explains:

A is excellent, B is mediocre, C is ... insufficient, but, can you imagine a scale that goes from A to C? What does this scale mean? So, that's it. We receive the forms, we fill them, we encircle a mark, we add two or three lines of comments and then we pass some more global evaluations of the project. And that's it. We put a date on it, we sign, and send the whole thing to the Ministry. And we never hear about it again. I've never had a feedback on my evaluation method. (AERES' expert)

For the university agents responsible for internal evaluation and local decision-level, consensus rests upon the idea of 'more professionalization and more pluridisciplinarity', as a solution for qualified students' unemployment problems. A professionalising

course is a course whose specialisation and contents have an economic interest; a way to ‘open university’s qualifications to another labour market than the one of public service’. Professionalising is also synonymous with a ‘statistical prove of the course’s guarantee for students’ employment’. Interviews with university experts reveal:

The criterion which dominated was that of employment. There are many ideas in that term. There is the idea of giving to the Ministry the very name of the company where each student could work. And I’m hardly exaggerating when I’m saying that. The idea of the contribution of professionals and industrial actors to the elaboration of courses. The Ministry is also very interested in the presence of professional consultants within teaching. And there’s also the idea of the qualification forms we have to fill ... a skills coding. It’s like a professions’ repertoire. And these are things towards which the Ministry starts paying a lot of attention. (Member of Council of Studies and University Life)

So the academic staff elaborates projects, which are then discussed within the Council of Studies and University Life and then, are sent to the Ministry. Beyond their internal criteria of value, the courses have to correspond to the external demand. The idea is not to abandon the classic courses of study. However, the LMD Reform gives us the opportunity of imagining new diplomas which have other aims and potentials than these of the public service and of education. So, the work I’m trying to do here, with some others, is to stress this potential, to stress the competences a student acquires rather than the knowledge transmitted. (Vice-President of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences Faculty)

Within the university agents’ discourse, pluridisciplinarity is integrated to a professionalising objective: a means for ‘creation of new research objects’ by ‘assembling research units’, an ‘interaction of disciplines by constitution of new fields of knowledge having a potential in the economic field’. As a Vice-President of the Council of Studies and University Life stated in an interview:

The Ministry’s valuers required transversality. Our university has been criticised on that. We had to work on our courses and ask the departments to re-examine that. The LMD Reform let the universities free to name their courses, whilst before there were documents which prescribed Sociology’s bachelor, Physics’ bachelor etc. We couldn’t give the courses the label we liked. But with the LMD Reform we were free to do it. We had to invent our courses. For that, we had to take pluridisciplinarity into account. Create new objects of research, of production. For example, cartography, where geographers are working with mathematicians, working with sociologists. Really new sectors. We have to encourage this.

What is at stake for these agents is to optimise the chances of the university’s courses of study to be authorised by the ministry. This is the reason why these agents define terms according to the ministry’s evaluations. However, the breathing space they benefit from in their activity enables them to introduce their own local logic of recontextualising.

For example, for all local agents, contrary to other agents outside university, this curricular restructuration has to come ‘from the inside’; a majority agrees that university does not necessarily have to observe the external needs to invent new programs. Professionalisation is more a question of form than of content; a question of ‘translating acquired knowledge in acquired competences’, ‘understandable’ and ‘visible’ for employers (Vice-President of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences). Another example is the fact that local agents take into consideration the diversity of disciplines, for their evaluation, whilst the Ministry’s agencies tend to use the same criteria for all disciplines:

The Ministry appreciates the formal structure, in the aim to harmonise. They appreciate when we fill their boxes. The model we used for internal evaluation was ... our

colleagues of the Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences' sector didn't really like it. They are unfamiliar with ISO normalisation, for example. We marked with 0 or 1 a certain number of criteria. It was quantitative. But we tried to take into consideration the differences between ... that practices completely vary from discipline to discipline. So, for example, the criterion of the international character was important for a language course but not so important for a mathematics course. (Member of Council of Studies and University Life)

Nonetheless, the production of pedagogic texts remains under the responsibility of academic staff, with the occasional exception of the university Councils' initiatives for regrouping departments and so courses of study. Academics participating in curriculum planning within departments are more critical in regard to the procedure of restructuring – they hold a position of 'resistance'. They explain their plans of 'professionalising' courses, but through 'generalist' education; they are especially critical with regard to ministry's responses on evaluation, having their effects on diminution of teaching hours for theories and other general knowledge-centered contents or on adapting contents to the immediate needs of private companies. For the pedagogic field, this last purpose is contradictory to university education, since it is aimed at the short-term instead of the long-term:

We train students who will be able to work for a long time, for forty years and more ... at least forty years! The needs of the economy field won't be the same within these forty years. What we find better to do is to give a general training, a generalist education which can prepare our students for anything. (Academic staff, Professor in Urbanism Studies)

But most academics defend openness between disciplines by creating thematic-transversal specialisations. The logic here is that of resting upon intellectual fields' productions to create new objects of study. Thus, resistance relates more to the intervention of external valuers and of external criteria in the realisation of academic projects; whilst their pedagogic autonomy gives them the opportunity to develop various conceptions of pluridisciplinarity in reinventing objects. However, we can highlight here that the French pedagogic field, as in the wider international scene (Davies, Gottsche, and Bansel 2006), doesn't reflect 'a collective position of resistance' but is characterised by tensions.

### ***From negotiation to control***

Given this plural space of decision-making and action, we come to a first conclusion that the process of reform of the French higher education is not a linear one. 'Regionalisation of knowledge', as a specific curriculum restructuring principle, is generated through the negotiation that takes place within and between these different agencies. The pedagogic texts produced by academics undergo transformations from one field of recontextualisation to another and from one level of construction of pedagogic discourse to another; what attests to a dynamic perspective of the reform process.

The reform process implies the contribution of a plurality of agents coming from different institutional levels and from different socio-cultural worlds. In this sense, one could think that relations between these groups of agents are horizontal and that all groups can exercise the same degree of control on meanings. However, this is not the case. The essential proposition here is that, beyond plurality and beyond horizontality

of contractual relations, there is a strong framing on the production of pedagogic discourse.

By this framing I refer to the expansion of neo-liberal management and principles to institutions of public service and, thus, to universities; in other words, the rise of technologies and instruments of the New Public Management (Vinokur 2006, 2008). The paradox is that this framing was wrapped in a paper named ‘autonomy’ and so has entered the academic world progressively – incitement to ‘innovation’, synonymous with inventing new courses, with developing heterogeneity and diversity for competition. At a political moment where ‘autonomy’ is promoted according to market principles, regulation by the State becomes more and more important (Middleton 2000). As Naidoo (2008) showed for the British context, regulation by the State and coordination by the market field are two mechanisms that tend to articulation. In the case of French higher education, this took place through the establishment of a new public governance system, distributing public funding according to performance goals (LOLF Reform Act, no. 2001-692), a contractual-based system and the emergence and multiplying of assessment institutions at all levels. The idea of necessity for change of higher education’s role in the context of economic globalisation, elaborated within supranational context, has been recovered and recontextualised by the State to serve its own national policy.

The State, in consequence, contributes to the legitimation of these orientations to change by reinforcing control procedures. Despite of the possibility for all agents of participating in the definition of meanings, the control-based system doesn’t enable this: ‘auto-evaluation responsibilities’ and ‘performance culture’ initiated by the State establish hierarchy relations between the Ministry’s political level and agents at local level:

Quality takes the orientation of the strategy we give it and this is always in the perspective of organizing good practices according to aims. So ... for example, quality doesn’t necessarily include pluridisciplinarity. But the ministry requires pluridisciplinarity within courses. In that case the ministry’s texts are setting conditions. So, we are translating them into terms of quality. We have to take into consideration the ministry’s demand, since it’s our first client. We are a public service. And it’s the ministry who will evaluate our case file for funding. (Vice-President responsible for Quality mission)

Maton (2005) distinguishes between ‘positional autonomy’, referring to the nature between specific positions in the social dimension of a field and positions in other fields, and ‘relational autonomy’, referring to relations between the principles of relation (ways of working, practices, aims) within a field and those emanating from other contexts. Following this distinction we can argue that even if university local agents or pedagogic field’s agents still benefit from a ‘positional autonomy’, having the scope for making decisions within the negotiation process, they are characterised by the weakening of their ‘relational autonomy’ (in whose terms the change takes place and for what legitimate reasons). This means that academic criteria for restructuring curricula are progressively being dominated by external criteria, political and economic. The process of defining meanings is not a ‘bottom-up’ process, but a process where terms and aims (translated in indicators) are coming from the top: internal criteria of students’ achievement are less important than external ones (employment), curriculum contents tend to be translated more into market-centred competences than into knowledge, indicators are always quantitative, even if the pedagogic field insists on the qualitative aspect of professionalisation, pluridisciplinarity within courses is not evaluated as a pedagogic project but according to its professional

outcomes. In ‘regionalising knowledge’, as I have illustrated, pluridisciplinarity is integrated to a projected pedagogic discourse, which is based less on a cumulative theory of learning for the student and more on the performance potentials of the competences acquired, defined by external needs: the ‘separation of knowledge from the knower’ (Bernstein 1996). Thus, whilst universities’ ‘institutional autonomy’ is promoted (LRU Reform Act, no. 2007-1199), the autonomy for producing knowledge and for producing pedagogic identities is getting weaker.

### **Behind consensus: from external struggle to struggle within knowledge**

In this paper, I have attempted to demonstrate how curricular change within French universities, which is the emergence of ‘regions of knowledge’, is inscribed in an institutional context of struggle for control. I first showed that the change to be considered is not the rupture between traditional social science disciplines and ‘regions of knowledge’, but the transformation of boundaries between fields of knowledge, between knowledge and within learning. What knowledge is to be acquired within university courses varies through geographic and historical contexts and according to what is culturally at stake in each context. Thus, in this paper’s focus, the question is: why, today, do we create master’s degrees in ‘Urbanism and development’, in ‘Administration of education’ or in ‘Managing social risks of ageing’? What is the common curriculum logic of these courses, to which ones disciplinary curricula cannot respond? This is also why the case of the French university, as a traditionally disciplinary one currently subject to change, has a vested interest in being examined.

The second proposition was that of defining agents that shape concerns in this process. I argued that this curricular change is made by the confrontation of an array of agencies at different levels and holding differential logics. This is, primarily, according to their position within institutional-level, whether they belong to an international, European, national or even local university level, pedagogic-department level or regional level. At each level, political stakes differ. And, especially at the national level, institutional hierarchy relations influence discourse. Secondly, the discourse and action perspectives depend on agencies’ membership to wider bodies and on the relations of these last to education field; whether they are situated inside higher education field or outside. Finally, their perspectives vary according to their status: intellectual groups, administrators, professional corporations and associations, political sets or technocratic institutions. Curricular change within French universities is a product of conflict and of negotiation on the definition of principles to orientate change.

What is crucial, though, is not only the complexity of the institutional context and the plurality of agents and their logics. It is also the fact that social and cultural differences between agents and their logics are faint, masked or subjugated by a process of multiplying procedures of control and evaluation, initialised at every level. Not only at the national level, with its new Agency for Evaluation of Research and Higher Education, but also at the European level with its ‘quality-assurance’ mechanisms, and within universities, with their recently institutionalised ‘auto-evaluation responsibilities’, charging academic staff with new tasks and public bureaucracy. It is the entry of universities into what Albert Ogien (1995) would call, a ‘managing spirit’ (*esprit gestionnaire*), a rationalisation of procedures for universities’ governance, defining knowledge, planning curricula, a rationalisation of thinking, producing and reproducing science. ‘Proceduralisation’ within universities displaces the focus. It leaves no place for political debate (Vinokur 2008). It dissolves conflict, for the regulation of

the relation between what Moore and Maton (2001) describe as the ‘arbitrary’ and the ‘non-arbitrary’ in numerous micro-negotiations. It changes it to little ‘disagreements’ and ‘misunderstandings’, which no longer divulge the tensions and struggle over social control. And yet, social control is being reinforced on what ‘thinkable’ is to be produced within higher education; where the thinkable happens to be that of the cultural ideal of new capitalism marketising of non-commercial goods, such as knowledge, and codification of human qualities through devices of institutional and individual autonomisation and responsabilisation (Boltanski and Chiapello 1999). This is one side of the coin. The other side is that of considering the plurality of the recontextualising field as that of a non-determinist process, constantly enabling the production of an ‘alternative’ definition and orientation of principles.

In questioning curriculum change within higher education, it is worth examining the structuring of institutional arena that generates conditions of possibility and orientations for this change. That was the precise purpose of this paper. However, this is not to argue that examining relations between and within agencies is sufficient as a sociological approach of curriculum change. Such an approach has to be extended to what is really at stake: knowledge. What, in this paper, was tackled as a starting point of this analysis (changes within the pedagogic text), to reach the context from which it emerged is the (often mistreated) object of educational change, since, as already highlighted, what is in fact changing is the legitimate knowledge for individuals to acquire. Thus, research is to be developed into what is changing within these knowledge fields, where individuals are socialised and where they internalise cognitive models structuring their practices.

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### **Notes**

1. Research work presented in this paper is part of a PhD thesis, in progress.
2. Qualitative data, official documents and interviews with institutional agents were collected within the period of 2006–2008. Interview quotes figuring in this paper, unless otherwise stated, are from interviews with the author conducted in this period; the names of interviewees are withheld by mutual agreement.
3. I suggest that there is no single curriculum model that encompasses regionalisation of social sciences, but rather four different types of ‘regions of knowledge’. They can be identified by two fundamental criteria: (1) whether the course is inside or outside disciplinary institutional space (a pluridisciplinary course within a disciplinary department or an autonomous pluridisciplinary course outside disciplinary departments); and (2) whether the course is thematic-centred or professional competence-centred (the first refers to subject or question thematised by a range of disciplines whilst the second refers to specialization in specific competences, of an occupation). Each one of these types presupposes a different curriculum structure and different principles of recontextualising knowledge.
4. Research was carried in two French universities during the period of 2006–2008. The analysis is focused on courses of masters’ degree, elaborated after the implementation of the LMD Reform and declared as non-disciplinary courses: ‘Mediation and cultural engineering’, ‘Urbanism studies and local development’, ‘Ergology’, and ‘Public action and social expertise’. It draws on official documents of the program of study (contents, teaching hours, evaluation modalities) and on interviews with heads of studies and academic staff for each course, concerning curriculum designing and pedagogic practices.

5. It is worth highlighting that the concepts of 'positional' and 'relational autonomy' elaborated by Maton (2005) enable us in this research to go beyond the limits of Bernstein's concept of 'regionalisation'. As I have illustrated in this paper, 'regionalisation' is an interesting descriptive concept for what is currently changing within higher education's curricula, especially in French universities. This is regarding displacing boundaries and regionalising disciplinary knowledge within pedagogic texts. However, 'regionalisation' is a historically contextualised concept. The universal concepts are those of 'classification' and 'framing' within the activity of recontextualising knowledge, which enable the analytical connection between micro and macro levels. From this perspective, 'relational autonomy' is also universal as it interrogates the relations between autonomous (internal to a field) and heteronomous (external to the field) principles structuring this activity. It is a change within these relations that explains the 'regionalisation of knowledge': the weakening of the 'relational autonomy' of agents within the field of higher education.

### Notes on contributor

Sophia Stavrou is a PhD student in Sociology at the University of Provence, Aix-en-Provence, France. Her doctoral thesis, *Transformations curriculaires et recontextualisation du savoir dans les universités européennes* [Transforming curricula and recontextualising knowledge in European universities] develops especially Bernstein's theoretical framework by confronting it to empirical work on university knowledge. In 2007, she participated in the research program EUROPEP, on priority education policies in Europe (National Institute of Pedagogic Research) funded by the European Commission. She has published in French a critical note on Bernstein's work [*Revue française de pédagogie* 2007, 158: 165–8] and an article presenting her research work on recontextualisation of knowledge at university [Stavrou, S. 2008. La recontextualisation à l'épreuve de la sociologie empirique des curricula: Éléments de recherche sur la 'régionalisation du savoir'. In *Actualité de Basil Bernstein: savoir, pédagogie et société*, ed. D. Frandji and P. Vitale. Rennes, Presses Universitaires de Rennes]. She is currently a temporary teacher of sociology in the Department of Sociology of the University of Provence and contributes in research in sociology of education as a member of the Mediterranean Laboratory of Sociology in Aix-en-Provence.

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