THE POLITICS OF INNOVATION IN FRENCH HIGHER EDUCATION: THE UNIVERSITY INSTITUTES OF TECHNOLOGY*

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ABSTRACT

The creation of the French university institutes of technology (IUTs) in 1966 is characteristic of attempts by a number of industrialized nations to establish institutions of higher education better adapted than the traditional university to new cohorts of post-secondary students. The IUTs provide intensive short-cycle programs to train middle-level personnel in technical and administrative fields. Although the courses are designed as terminal, over one-third of IUT graduates go on to higher education, including a disproportionate number of students from lower social strata. Their staff are drawn from the universities, technical secondary education and the professions. Administratively, the IUTs occupy an uneasy position partly connected with the universities and partly under direct ministerial authority; there is substantial involvement on the part of representatives of employers and trade unions as well. Despite this ambivalence of function and status, the IUTs are now well established as a modestly successful innovation. They represent a major aspect of the attempt by French policy-makers to introduce more effective methods of instruction and evaluation into the universities and to render them more responsive to the needs of the society and the economy.

Introduction

The past decade has been one of change in the educational systems of Western Europe and there has been growing awareness of the multiple and interrelated functions played by education among policy-makers and the public. Above all, the pursuit of greater social equity in and through the schools and the economy's demands for skilled manpower have been the objects of much policy debate. Social concern has underlain the massive expansion of enrollments at secondary and higher levels; and economic

motives have spurred attempts to provide differentiated institutions, more adapted than the traditional university to the career needs of the new cohorts of post-secondary students. This latter development accounts for the widespread interest in such short-cycle institutions as the American community colleges, the British polytechnics, the German Gesamthochschulen and the French university institutes of technology, or IUTs (OECD, 1973).

The IUTs were established by the French government in 1966 as two-year institutions for training upper-level technicians for a variety of industrial, administrative and service positions. Their brief history makes a fascinating and paradoxical case study. Since 1968 they have been partly integrated with the universities; yet their pragmatic, vocational orientation and school-like methods are quite alien to the university system and in some ways very much akin to the grandes écoles. Their aim was to provide a terminal course of training; yet a substantial proportion of their graduates go on to further study. The primary motivation in founding them was economic; yet they appear to be providing a distinct channel of upward mobility for a markedly higher proportion of lower class youth than any other sector of higher education. They have had their share of institutional rivals and political opponents, but they are a relatively successful innovation, in a society that is notorious for its hostility to innovations.

Establishment of the IUTs

The French system of post-secondary education has historically been characterized by a sharp division between the university faculties (which were open to all holders of the baccalauréat and prepared students for the medical, legal and secondary-school teaching professions), and the grandes écoles, which were highly selective and led to a wide range of technological and business careers. The most elite of the grandes écoles in the narrow sense, such as the Ecole Polytechnique, the Ecole Nationale d'Administration and the Ecole Normale Supérieure, still provide access to positions at the highest levels of public and private administration. Among the lesser schools, the Ecoles Nationales Supérieures d'Ingénieurs (ENSI - higher national schools of engineering) were loosely attached to the universities¹, but technological faculties as such were never established.

The instruction given at the grandes écoles differed from that in the faculties in its technological orientation; the courses were also more intense and regimented with frequent examinations. In 1964, as the groundwork for the IUTs was being laid, some 320,000 students were enrolled in the universities as against 40,000 in the public grandes écoles (and 20,000 in private ones), no more than 12,000 of whom were attending the most elite of the grandes écoles (Ministère de l'Education Nationale, 1966, pp. 18, 34). Rates of attrition in the faculties had reached severe proportions — some-