

The Franco-British Connections: A Student/Alumni Network Supporting Franco-British Student Initiatives

David Wahl

Introduction

Since the opening of the Eurostar and the development of low-cost airlines, it has never been easier to travel between France and Britain. In terms of international relations between universities, this opens a wealth of opportunities for joint projects initiated and organised by students. This is not the usual structure of university international programmes for students. These typically take the form of long-term exchanges or joint diplomas, and are organised by staff. As will be argued below, student-led and staff-led approaches are complementary. If student-led projects can overcome certain of their inherent weaknesses there is much scope for their development in terms of international cooperation, especially in the Franco-British context.

Once initiated, student projects face difficulties in sustainability due to the particular dynamics of student societies. Inevitable annual turnover magnifies the challenges of long-term existence and improving best practices over time. Adverse selection problems also arise when the project holds enough prestige so as to be a valuable addition to a curriculum vitae (CV). One way of overcoming both these challenges is for ex-students of a society to maintain an alumni network which works closely with present students in those societies.

The Franco-British Connections is one such initiative. The role of alumni within this association will be to transmit their experience in organising cross-Channel student projects, with the aim of encouraging other students to develop their own initiatives, and help students in ongoing projects to stay in touch with their predecessors. The focus on cross-Channel relations is due to the belief of participants that such projects are not only highly desirable because of the special history of France and Britain, but also have an advantage in terms of feasibility owing to geographical proximity.

The chapter is organised as follows. In the following section, the motivation for cooperation at the student level is discussed. From this

discussion, it will be concluded that student-led initiatives, especially short-term projects, are a complement to existing university programmes, as universities generally cannot expend the time required to organise them. The third section highlights some of the difficulties in developing sustainable student projects; it outlines the dynamics of student societies, and how to overcome these difficulties. These introductory sections lay the foundations for the main argument, in the fourth section, which is that Franco-British student cooperation is both desirable and feasible. The following section presents the Franco-British Connections, and how as an alumni network it aims to be of utility to current student and universities.

Student-Level Cooperation Compared with Research-Based Cooperation

In examining the motivation for universities to promote student-based cooperation, this section will highlight some of the differences between student-based and research-based cooperation.

Broadly speaking, international cooperation between universities can be divided into three areas:

- *administrative*, where universities share administrative resources such as local publications, databases, knowledge on methodologies for university governance and so forth;
- *research*, in the execution of research projects involving faculty from more than one university;
- *student*, in joint diplomas, exchange programmes, internationalisation of the student body and so forth.

Research and teaching are the *raison d'être* of universities, and hence receive the bulk of the attention within the sphere of international cooperation.

From a research perspective, the availability of international partnership programmes broadens the scope for academics to find colleagues specialising and excelling in their field. Casting a wider net by looking internationally necessarily increases the researcher's chances of finding another research group that will be a 'perfect match'. Furthermore, international cooperation diversifies a researcher's access to sources of funding. The main beneficiary of international research partnerships are the academics themselves, and hence cooperative projects tend to be led by researchers. The university benefits in two ways. Firstly, the quality of its research is increased. Secondly, it advertises the fact that the university produces high-level research, since the number of international partnerships and publications is used as a proxy measure for research quality.

The motivations for student-based international collaborations can be viewed from two angles, depending on how one views the role of universities. If university education is a way to develop independent

thinkers (i.e. universities at the service of the individual), students who have had a more diverse education will have been better able to test their thoughts and develop their unique palette of opinions. If university studies are seen as way to produce skilled entrants to the labour force (i.e. universities at the service of the economy), international exposure diversifies the working situations a student encounters as well as the network of contacts. The conclusion is that whichever combination of the above views one has on the role of universities, international cooperation provides students with opportunities to diversify their learning experiences.

In both cases, the researchers and the students are the direct beneficiaries of the efforts, but there is a subtle difference which shapes how cooperation within each of these areas is carried out in practice. Researchers are by definition the experts in their projects, and assuming their aim is to produce good research, they are therefore in the best position to judge of the quality of the projects proposed to them or that they are proposing. The result is a one-to-one ratio between the prime beneficiaries and the organisers of joint projects. That is, the academics are both sides of the equation: one academic = one expert. Students, on the other hand, attend university with the explicit aim to be taught. They have some idea of what they wish to achieve, but lack the bigger picture, which comes with experience. In terms of international cooperation at the student level, this has two implications. Firstly, the universities will want to be involved in judging the quality of proposed projects, as it cannot be assumed that students will set up programmes that are in their best educational interest. The second implication follows from the first: there is no longer a one-to-one ratio between the prime beneficiaries of cooperation (the students) and the organisers (university staff/faculty), with the result that the potential for organising joint programmes does not scale with the number of students. Universities will allocate some resources for student-based cooperation, but these will inevitably be limited.

In practice this means that universities tend to organise long-term exchanges or joint teaching programmes, where the need to invest in administrative overheads arises relatively infrequently. Another key focus is on stable programmes that can be repeated year after year, with little need for redevelopment.¹ Such an approach leaves a void in two senses: there tends not to be many short-term joint projects (say of a few days) due to the regular organisational costs involved; and joint projects tend not to be run by students since they cannot provide either long-term exchanges or stability. This void is also an opportunity: students could step in to develop complementary exchange projects on a one-off basis.

1 This is in contrast to research projects, which tend to be much more *ad hoc* even though they might be long term.

Inevitably, however, there is an initiative barrier for students who feel they need to ‘compete’ to create a different way of doing things in a space occupied by official programmes (like a ‘first mover’s advantage’ notion, though in this case there is no explicit notion of competition). They firstly need to have the creativity to come up with their proposal; then they need to convince others (i.e. other students, or their own faculty, maybe their family) that what they are proposing is a valid complement (or alternative) to existing programmes. From the point of view of students, this entails a big investment of time, which has to be contrasted with the ease of simply participating in existing programmes. This can be a daunting prospect for an undergraduate!

As we will see below, it is possible to reduce the initiative barrier by passing on knowledge of past projects from one student generation to another. Unfortunately, student associations also suffer from inherent instability, which is a hindrance to such propagation of knowledge. These instabilities, and more importantly potential solutions to overcome them, are discussed below.

Building Sustainable Student Projects

There are a number of reasons why student associations have difficulty in finding stability. Two of the most obvious ones are: a high turnover, and adverse selection problems.

Typically, a student will be involved for just one year at committee level in a society, implying a 100 per cent annual turnover of staff. A society that is well run one year might disappear the next year due to a lack of incoming students, or because the incoming students are not as talented or as diligent as the previous committee members. The result is an inherent instability in the level of activity of these associations, or indeed a threat to their continued existence.

Survival is not usually a problem for prestigious societies, where many students compete for committee positions, or where reputation alone is sufficient to quickly recuperate visibility and partners. But in less glamorous societies, in which category cultural societies typically fall, an under-performing committee can cause a society to become effectively dormant for a number of years. A dormant society will not attract new students and hence it is very hard for it to become revitalised. Even if there are sufficient committee members, due to the high turnover incoming committee members will benchmark themselves only against the previous year, which favours the status quo. This leads to the emergence of a pattern where excellent practices are hard to maintain through time, and where, once non-optimal practices set in, they are hard to eliminate due to the disappearance of knowledge.

In clubs or societies where survival is not an issue (popular sports clubs, student unions/*bureau des étudiants*), stability in the effective-

ness of committees is the greatest challenge. This would be true of any institution with a high staff turnover, but it is particularly true in student associations where being on the committee entails some form of prestige. Students realise the need to pad out their CV, and hence attempt to position themselves within associations. The more prestigious the association, the greater the CV points and the greater the risk of attracting students who wish to use the society as a stepping stone rather than because they are passionate about the project they are meant to represent. For example, a student who wishes to make political contacts is unlikely to try to do so by being part of a small theatre production, but is likely to attempt to occupy a hand-shaking role in an association with contacts with government officials, diplomatic corps or political parties. The risk is once again that a society can become dormant as the student focuses on posturing and neglects the day-to-day affairs of the association. In cases where there is no guaranteed inflow of new talented students to the committee, a once prestigious association can be well on the way to becoming dormant in the space of one year.

This paints a negative picture of student societies, quite contrary to the aim of the present chapter. Of course, the vibrant sphere of university student societies demonstrates that many of these problems are overcome by students themselves. But the analysis also leads to the prediction of a clear role for society alumni.

As discussed previously, high student turnover leads to a loss of knowledge, and societies tend towards a stable state of affairs where their effectiveness is well below its maximum potential. The propagation of knowledge could be achieved by maintaining good archives of past activities, but it is easy to guess that these archives will be neglected at when a poor committee is in office, and will therefore fail to be transmitted. The key would be to transfer the management of the archives to a more stable institution. A potential solution is the creation of an alumni network specific to the association, which has the advantage that student societies continue to be self-contained. An alumni network reduces (but does not eliminate) the utility of a formal written archive, since knowledge is maintained orally. Incoming committees will then have access to the knowledge of past high watermarks (a sort of communities of practice for student societies) and be able to gauge where they want to take the association under their leadership. Note that this is not the only solution, and archives maintained by centralised student unions, or by the universities themselves, would also fulfil the role of knowledge transfer. The latter solutions, however, have the disadvantage of requiring expenditure from an institution that is external to each individual society, and it is not clear that these institutions will wish to take on such a role.

As insiders of the associations, alumni also are ideally placed to reduce the effects of adverse selection. The adverse selection problem partly arises because of the imbalance between a student's upside and

downside associated with posturing. If a student association runs into trouble due to poor management, the association disappears, and the student omits to mention this on a CV. If a society does well, even if it is thanks only to the work of others, a student can claim the credit with very little risk being quizzed on his or her actual role. The presence of an alumni association reduces this imbalance as it can provide reference points against which to measure the performance of current committee members. The key here is that alumni should be society insiders with real knowledge of how the association operates.² The conclusion is that alumni associations can be useful in reducing some of the stability challenges faced by student-led initiatives.

The previous two sections have laid the foundations for understanding how student associations can contribute to international cooperation efforts, and under what conditions. The next section discusses why France and Britain are particularly well positioned to benefit from such initiatives, and the following section describes an alumni association that is being created to support them.

France and Britain – A Diverse Couple

The reasoning for why France and Britain are well positioned to benefit from student initiatives follows a cost–benefit analysis. Firstly, we will see how cooperation between France and Britain at the student level can be defined as being of high benefit. We will then also see that in the sphere where student initiatives complement official programmes (for example with one-off events), the proximity of the two countries reduces the costs of implementing these projects.

When considering international cooperation for students, universities have to judge the quality of the proposed programmes because of their teaching role. That is to say, they will wish to establish criteria which they think will help identify opportunities which will maximise the learning benefits for their students. A first selection is made by identifying universities where students will encounter teaching standards at least equivalent to those in place at their home institution. This is often the sole criterion applied, with the reasoning that since exchanges are in general beneficial, so long as quality of teaching is maintained, the student is a net gainer.

In the cost–benefit analysis, however, it will be useful to define some characteristics which will help establish an order of desirability among cooperation programmes. For example, given two proposals at universi-

2 It is worth noting that the alumni model is already in place in a number of prestigious and long-running student societies. The Oxford Union is one such example, where students are from the outset encouraged to become life members.

ties with a similar quality of teaching, is it possible to state that one will be more beneficial than another? This, of course, is a difficult task, and warrants a whole study in itself. The arguments laid out above, however, might provide a first clue to how to establish a quality scale. Since the main consideration regarding the benefit of student cooperation is to diversify the experiences of the student, it follows that the more diversity the student is exposed to, the better the project. Measuring or even defining the diversification of experiences will always be complicated, subjective and ultimately inexact. Any statements of preference must therefore be interpreted with caution, and cannot be viewed as being homogeneously applicable.

A simple question helps to develop the notion of relative merit of cooperation projects. In general, would students be expected to benefit more from a Franco-British exchange than if they had done an exchange between two universities of their home country? It seems obvious that the international exchange offers the student more new perspectives, and therefore is more beneficial within the definitions given above. Within one country, education systems tend to be the same, as is the language, the approach to teaching, the national history and philosophy and so forth, hence the diversification factor is not as large. From this example, we derive the notion that the diversification benefit can be graduated. Students will obtain less diversity from programmes that are between universities within a similar system and culture than from programmes involving universities with a completely different outlook.

In this sense, the particular history of France and Britain clearly points to a strong diversification factor. Their traditional spheres of influence, the historical competition between their scientific institutions, their fundamental difference in governance and legal systems, the difference in their higher education systems all offer students opportunities to be exposed to alternative ways of thinking and different networks, and are therefore of high benefit to students.³

Franco-British partnerships also have a cost advantage which is clear to understand. This cost advantage takes on a particular importance in the domain in which student projects might be carried out. As was touched upon above, university staff and faculty tend to focus on long-term exchanges for students and leave a void in the short-term space. This is where student initiatives can step in and complement official university programmes. For example, short-term initiatives can include joint conferences over a couple of days, sports exchanges, cultural visits and so forth. One of the disadvantages of short-term projects is the high ratio of travel cost to duration. In this respect, France and Britain are

3 A further factor is the relative importance of the languages in terms of their international usage. This is not technically an advantage in terms of diversification, but it is a further factor in favour of Franco-British exchanges.

uniquely advantaged, in that transport between nearly all major cities is relatively cheap, easy and fast, with many alternatives to choose from, such as bus, train or plane.

To summarise, student-level international cooperation between France and Britain is both highly desirable (because of the good diversification it offers) and feasible (due to lower costs) even for short-term projects. This opens a window of opportunities for student-led initiatives, so long as a framework is put in place to promote initiatives and propagation of know-how regarding the organisation of events. This is the subject of the next section.

Supporting Franco-British Student Initiatives

Since the development of cheaper transportation between France and Britain, a number of student-led events have been organised with participants from both sides of the Channel. Given the potential benefit to students and the feasibility in terms of costs, among the alumni who organised these events there is the belief that there is scope for events to be held much more frequently. In cooperation with current students, these alumni have set up an association called the Franco-British Connections. It is hoped that students and universities will be able to use this association as a first point of call when setting up new projects, and that we will be able to provide information on logistics, potential partners, contacts with like-minded students on either side of the Channel and so forth.

One role of the association will be to provide a reference point to reduce the initiative barrier faced by students. In this case, the role of the alumni association is proactive; alumni seek to be in contact with students with the aim of encouraging them to develop projects. Giving students examples on which to base themselves reduces the perceived uncertainty in taking on a project, since the students get to know that such projects have been achieved by students previously. Furthermore, presenting a range of arguments in favour of working within the Franco-British sphere (arguments which had motivated the alumni when they were students) will also contribute to helping students take on the leadership of cooperation projects.

At this point, a clear distinction must be made between encouraging students to develop their own projects, and trying to convince students to take on projects decided on by alumni. In the first case, as owners of the idea, students will feel passionate about their initiative, and it is more probable that they will willingly take on the associated workload. In the second case, the students would effectively be working for the alumni, with all the management issues that this entails. Our experience has been that the second path is simply not viable, and the Franco-British Connections' efforts to reduce the initiative barrier will focus on

showing students that cross-Channel events are feasible and desirable, by transmitting our own experiences.

Another role (and, as argued, one for which an alumni association is particularly suited) is in helping the stability of general projects of student-level Franco-British cooperation. By interacting with students who are planning projects, alumni can provide input to help students define objectives which are both realistic and ambitious, choosing from the best experiences of past events. In a model where cooperation projects are initiated by student societies in the universities, the Franco-British Connections will be able to help any students who wish to revitalise their association. Interaction with students will also alleviate the adverse selection problem, as incoming students will be aware of the connection with the alumni.

A further role that helps the Franco-British Connections provide stability to student projects is that the association can act as a centraliser of resources. In particular, maintaining continuity with institutional contacts will help create an identifiable 'brand' which can be used by students and institutions alike. Students can use the networks of the association to gain access to academics, officials or sponsors. Institutions can use the networks of the association to make contact with students. It can also be envisaged that the Franco-British Connections can act as repository for sponsorship, reducing the need for students to seek individual deals.

The model adopted by the Franco-British Connections is simple: students propose and implement their ideas, and alumni help where possible. Crucially, this model does not require a large time investment from the alumni, who will tend to be at the start of their careers. Equally importantly, this leaves the potential for innovation in the hands of the students, giving them the chance to generate new ideas and further raise the watermark above that set by previous generations. Finally, with the emphasis on promoting rather than directing projects, it is also an association that has a high potential for growth, as new students graduating from having organised projects can join the association and make themselves available to the next generation of students planning to organise similar events.

The Franco-British Connections (or alumni associations in general) are of course not the only way for promoting student initiatives for Franco-British cooperation. Universities or individual faculty and staff can play a role if they are willing. While a multi-university alumni network has the advantage of breadth of experiences, support originating from within each university has the advantage of depth of relation with students. Universities could, for example, set up a programme to encourage students to develop their own cooperative initiatives, either on a stand-alone basis or within the framework of the Franco-British Connections. There is also a role for other established institutions to set up their own student events, or at least call for students to make

proposals that are aligned with their areas of interest. All the possibilities cannot be listed here, but the conclusion is that many institutions have the potential to provide support for Franco-British student initiatives.

Conclusions

International cooperation between universities has traditionally been an area developed by academic researchers or staff. Even when the main beneficiaries of a joint programme are students, these programmes tend to be led by senior members of the universities. The present chapter has argued that there is a window within which student-based initiatives could complement official programmes, specifically in short-term projects which cannot be organised by universities due to time constraints.

Cooperation between French and British higher education institutions is particularly suited to the development of international student initiatives. In terms of offering students a diversity of experience, the historical differences between the two countries' educational, political and cultural systems will be sure to offer students new perspectives. Hence cooperative projects between France and Britain are highly desirable for students. The geographical proximity and the increase in relatively cheap transport makes even short-term events relatively affordable.

The main impediment to the development of regular student projects is therefore not cost but the instability of student societies, which hinders the efficient transfer of knowledge. Partners are unwilling to invest resources in one-off endeavours, and students face initiative barriers to create new projects. Two of the main sources of instability are a high student turnover and the potential for adverse selection for committee positions. It has been argued that one of the ways to limit these problems is through the creation of relationships between students and alumni of associations, as the latter effectively act as a living library of experience.

It is in this context that students and alumni of Franco-British student events have created an association called the Franco-British Connections. The aim of this association is both to encourage students to organise cross-Channel events, and to act as a catalyst to make projects sustainable. The driving idea is that sharing experiences will reduce the initiative barrier and keep improving on best practices, to contribute to the development of many successful events in the future.