

## A report on SOCRATES Exchange Programme in Geography between the University of Oulu (Finland) and the University of Caen (France)

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The inspiration of writing this article came when Professor Jarmo Rusanen, the Head of the Geography Department at Oulu, mentioned the marking of the 50th anniversary of the Department. To commemorate the occasion we thought of highlighting the accomplishments of the exchange programme established between the University of Oulu and Caen by looking at the existing archives and collecting comments and impressions from faculty and students engaged in the programme.

Currently it has been more than ten years since faculty and students from the two universities have been drawn in a mutual academic exchange relationship. Among many, Élise Lépy and Benoît Raoulx have been part of this exchange for years by travelling between Caen and Oulu. Élise Lépy, a PhD student from Caen has visited Oulu for five years for preparing her doctoral research on environmental impacts of ice growth and melting on littorals of the Baltic Sea. Benoît Raoulx, a faculty member

Table 1. Figures and information about exchange students between Oulu and Caen

Year	Oulu → Caen			Caen → Oulu		
	Gender	Year of study abroad	Diploma* prepared	Gender	Year of study abroad	Diploma prepared
2007-2008				Male	3	Bachelor
2006-2007				Female	4	Master
2005-2006				Male	3	Bachelor
2004-2005	Female	3.	Bachelor	Female	7	Doctorate
2002-2003	Male	3.	Bachelor			
2001-2002	Female	3.	Bachelor			
2000-2001	Female	5.	Master	Male	4	Master
1999-2000	Female	5.	Master	Male	4	Master
1998-1999				Male	5	Master
				Male	4	Master
1997-1998	Female	4.	Master	Male	4	Master
	Male	5.	Master			

\*Translated to the new European system Bachelor's – Master's – Doctorate

at the University of Caen, has taught several courses in geography at the University of Oulu.

## **The exchange in figures**

The SOCRATES exchange programme agreement was signed in 1996 spring by Mr. Michel Chesnais and Mr. Arvo Naukkarinen, the respective Heads of the Department of Geography at Caen and at Oulu. Ever since, the contract has been renewed every year: the last agreement was signed in 2006 for three years (2007-2010). Presently, the contract assigns exchange of one student per semester between the two Departments. The following table is a summary of all the students who have visited Caen and Oulu.

Since 1997, seven Finnish students from the Department of Geography came to study at Caen for one or two semesters, enrolled for Bachelor's and Master's Degree programme. In this, Aila Ryhänen, from the University of Oulu, wrote her Master's Thesis about Caen (cf. list of works). From Caen, on the other hand, nine students participated in the Erasmus programme at Oulu. Most of the students were enrolled at the Master's programme in Geography; several conducted their fieldwork in Northern Finland who shared their insights at the end of this article. In their view they considered Finland as a very interesting case study.

Along with students, the role of faculty members from both Departments also needs to be commended. Faculty members participated in conducting classes and making presentations on their field of

research. For instance, Pekka Kauppila, in October 2002, introduced "Tourism Geography" as a research field in Oulu addressed to students coming from Caen. Toivo Muilu and Jarmo Rusanen from Oulu went to Caen for a Socrates (then Erasmus) preparatory visit in December 2005. During their visit, they met faculty members from the Department of Geography and discussed on strengthening student exchange and research cooperation projects. Besides promoting relations through meeting colleagues and comparing both systems, Jarmo Rusanen also taught GIS at Caen. From the French side, Benoît Raoulx has often visited Oulu and taught several courses in social/cultural Geography, including "Geography of Europe" (focusing on the heritage making in Caen and Le Havre) and "Documentary film making and Social Geography" (master's level).

## **Different approaches of Geography and methods**

The purposes of participating in an academic exchange programme mainly concerns two aspects, which could be defined by the exploration of the international dimensions of an academic field and the discovery of a new culture. These assist in gaining intercultural competences in the field. What is interesting in the case of Caen and Oulu is that teaching and learning approaches in the field of Geography are different. While the French Geography takes an essential place where geography mainly belongs to human and social sciences also as at the University of Caen, Geography constitutes a whole faculty by itself. In Oulu, geography

is however closer to the Anglo-Saxon geography, where the department belongs to the Faculty of Science. Furthermore, the research in Geomatics at Oulu is very advanced, and the city is known in Finland for Research and Development within High Tech sector.

These two different ways of approaching Geography have proven attractive for students from both universities. Heini, during her exchange at Caen in 2004, noted that she was introduced to famous geographers that she had never heard before in Finland. Kevin, in exchange at Oulu in 2005, thinks that studying Geography in Finland gave him the opportunity to learn more about English speaking geographers.

Even while both academic systems have integrated into the new European system, the organization of courses however, in both departments is totally different. At Caen, courses last for one entire semester; at Oulu, the courses are taught in few weeks-one after the other. Sophie, an exchange student in Oulu in 2006, has appreciated the course flexibility and the multiple chances to pass an exam, which does not exist in Caen. In fact, even the exams organization system is not similar. Teija (1997) and Heini insisted on the satisfaction with oral tests they never had in Finland. The main problem mentioned by most of the students interviewed was concerning the language. Romuald, during the exchange at Oulu in 2000, regrets that most of the courses were provided in Finnish language, which has had a big influence on the organisation of the exams. On the other hand, Heini, Teija and Markus from Oulu, underlined the difficulties they faced in initially following a course taught in French. Despite these

difficulties, the students were all satisfied to have been able to improve their French and English language capabilities and, in some cases, were being able to learn some basic Finnish.

All the students from Caen agreed by noting that the facilities for studying and living are highly superior in Finland as compared to France. The students also found the use of technology for lectures and teaching was noted to be very impressive. The easy access to computers available throughout the campus, efficient services provided by the university library, finer student accommodation along with activities arranged by the international office at Oulu made student's rating very high for Oulu. The Finnish students however, have regretted for not finding similar facilities in Caen. However, according to some the city of Caen provides a large range of cultural activities, such as movie theatres, art houses, and numerous public spaces like cafes, etc., which have been a source of entertainment and enjoyed by the exchange students from Oulu.

### **Attractiveness of both cities**

Travelling, along with exchanging ideas is part of the experience of geographers. In fact, a geographer has embodied a gaze into the world, so that the travel experiences, along with the exchanges with people from different cultures, is an informal way of comparing, questioning and challenging our geographical knowledge and routine. Socrates Programme has been an incentive for many students who could have otherwise never gone abroad.

At the Faculty of Geography in Caen, Oulu has always been a stable destination for SOCRATES Programme due to the reliability of the warm welcome and appeal from an “unknown” country, different from France. Indeed, although Oulu and Caen offer a littoral situation – one on the Baltic Sea, the other one on the British Channel - both cities have different geographical characteristics making them quite attractive. From a geographical point of view, the attractiveness of Finland and especially Oulu lies on the Nordic landscape of forests, the cold and snowy winter, the day/night length... lakes, rivers and sea waters get frozen every winter turning the country into a “magical” landscape for the French. The imaginary of Finland is very appealing for the French (even they do not know much about Finnish culture and geography...). On the contrary, the mild climate of Caen and the French culture may attract Finnish students. Also, Caen is an historical place from the Second World War with remains of the D-Day all along the coast making it popular among the students interested in history.

These different characteristics specific to each place, bring some different research points of view. For example, in Oulu, Benoît Raoulx wanted to know more about spaces of low income groups, the issues of inequalities, housing, segregation, visibility and level of poverty among others. During his stay at Oulu, he learnt that in a Nordic Welfare state like Finland, the relationship inequalities/space is very different from other countries. On the other hand, at Caen, the Finnish colleagues interested in rural development had to reconstruct the notion of rural tourism in

a space of higher density, where the cultural notion of landscape and region is different. These are small examples, embedded in the geographer’s practice from the two universities reminding us to challenge the knowledge through academic research and also from the ground -in a dialectic way. In this way, it helps to innovate.

## **Future for the relationship**

In order to further strengthen this programme, the contribution of foreign scholars should be more integrated in the student curriculum in Caen, similar to Oulu. Furthermore, in the future, it would be interesting to try to set up teaching between different departments, at the University of Caen to combine the Nordic languages department with Geography.

In the future, the programme in our view could be enhanced by focusing on increasing the momentum of exchanges and setting up new avenues for research projects. For instance, seen from a geopolitical point of view, France offers a window to African and Arabic countries; Finland links with Russia, Nordic Countries, Subarctic and Arctic spaces are essential. However, while all the countries have been impacted by the emerging wave of “globalization,” the geographers are more concerned about some essential issues such as concerning environment impacting our lives and the future. A research concerning sea ice processes and its impacts in the Baltic (Elise Lépy’s Ph.D) raises interest for French academics, because of the emerging global warming issues and debates.

The students who responded to our questions have been really satisfied of their experience abroad from a personal and student sight. According to Heini, her experience “was a leap to become more independent” and a good way “to see how things are done in other places and cultures to get a broader perspective”. Most of them enjoyed to have been able to improve English or French as Markus who “learnt languages, culture and life”. From the French side, Kevin remembered to “have learnt a lot about the Finnish culture and have become a “sauna addict””.

It has happened that the good experience witnessed by those students made them stay in the country. For instance Romuald lived three years in Finland, Teija went back to France four years after the exchange to study the second year of Master’s, Markus stayed one more year to complete his Bachelor’s and Élise has been back to Oulu quite often to complete her doctoral thesis. All these experiences should encourage and support other students to experiment the exchange student life abroad.

## Acknowledgments

This paper has been based on comments and experiences of some French and Finnish students who participated in the SOCRATES programme. We are grateful to the Finnish students Markus Kurkela, Teija Mikkilä, Heini Rosqvist and Aila Ryhänen, and the French students Sophie Leguillon, Kévin Mary and Romuald Wera to have replied to our questions. We also appreciated the comments and the support of the Faculty members involved in this

programme and the commitment of the staff from both universities.

## List of works:

### University of Oulu / Master’s thesis:

Ryhänen Aila, 2003, Jokainen voi osallistua. Caenin kaupunkisuunnittelun institutionaalisten toimijoiden asenteet kaupunkilaisten suunnitteluun osallistumista kohtaan (The attitudes of the institutionalized urban actors of Caen towards the participation in urban planning).

### University of Caen / Master’s thesis:

Lacaine Ludovic, 2000, La technologie et ses espaces dans la région d’Oulu, Finlande du Nord (Technology and its spatial distribution in Oulu region, North Finland)

Legac Guillaume, Sanson Nicolas, 1999, Aménagement touristique et développement régional en Finlande : le cas de la région de Kuusamo (Tourism and regional development in Finland: the case of Kuusamo region)

Rouzin Thomas, 1999, Télédétection appliquée au site Aakenustunturi : techniques, méthodes et opérations pour la cartographie de la végétation d’un relief lapon (Applied remote sensing to Aakenustunturi site: techniques, methods and operations for Sami landform vegetation mapping)

Wera Romuald, 2001, La dégradation de l’environnement Saame (Exemple de la Laponie finlandaise) (Sami environmental degradation (The case of Finnish Lapland))

**University of Caen / Doctoral projects:**

Lépy Élise, 2003, Mise en valeur de l'espace marin de la Baltique. Étude comparative des interactions entre les processus d'embâcle et de débâcle et les sociétés, dans l'espace littoral des Golfes de Botnie, de Finlande et de Riga (The Baltic marine area. Comparative study of interactions between ice growth and melting processes and societies, in littoral areas of the Gulfs of Bothnia, Finland and Riga)