IMPROVING REGIONAL COOPERATION

The Institut «de la Francophonie pour l’Entrepreneuriat»

by

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The Institut “de la Francophonie pour l’Entrepreneuriat”

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INTRODUCTION

In Africa, poverty affects an important segment of the population. Poverty is a disease which requires a cure and “the creation of wealth is a vaccine against poverty” (Fortin\(^1\), 2000). All actors (university institutes, enterprises, political leaders) are concerned.

We live in an environment marked by vast, unexpected and swift changes. One in which technology advances at a steady pace and information circulates at an unimaginable rate, and in which “change is constant and the ingredients of success need to be rediscovered” (Carrier\(^2\), 1997). There is a need for all institutions and structures (universities, enterprises, etc.) to adapt to these changes.

At a time when financial resources are increasingly scarce, the survival of any institution requires imagination and creativity in exploring new fields or in restructuring. It not only entails availability of financial resources to survive, there is also a need to “restructure existing structures with a view to finding innovative solutions that range from designing new service products to introducing differentiation” (Osborn\(^3\), 1988).

A few years ago, natural resources and capital were determinants in the quest for economic growth, today however, the raw materials are ideas and the enterprise drive which “reside in the head and the heart” (Fortin, 2000). One needs to know how to “undertake in one’s career and lifetime” (Gasse\(^4\), 1989).

Graduates of university institutes, in addition to academic training, should acquire free enterprise values, so as to develop useful entrepreneurial skills for jobs. As entrepreneurship promotes job creation, it is an important tool for persons who seek to come out of poverty, especially as the number of paid jobs on the market no longer matches the high job demand.

Change is essential and universities should be at the center of that process, as “well-built societies equally have well-built university institutions. That is because these institutions trace the future path for knowledge sharing in the world” (Michèle Gendreau-Massaloux\(^5\), 2002). Thus, flexibility, an inventive spirit, tolerance in the face of uncertainty, risk taking and resourcefulness will be management tools in institutes which seek to emerge in that environment.

Structures should change or improve their methods, they need to cultivate a sense of initiative to anticipate and produce the required changes.

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\(^1\) P A Fortin, *La culture entrepreneuriale, l’assurance qualité* (The Culture of Enterprise, quality assurance), *Accès Entrepreneur* 2000

\(^2\) C Carrier, *De la créativité à l’intrapreneuriat*, (From Creativity to Intrapreneurship) *Presse Universitaire du Québec*, 1997


The ideal situation would be to cause university structure managers to act as entrepreneurs, that is, capable of defining objectives, achieving visions and building dynamic and efficient systems of relations and organizations (Gasse, 1993).

It is a great honor to participate at this meeting whose aim is to share experiences on the best ways to induce innovation, change and transformation for the improvement of tertiary education.

I am also happy to present the case of the institute for entrepreneurship, the Institut de la Francophonie pour l’Entrepreneuriat (IFE) in Mauritius, and to humbly share an experience drawn from a professional life marked by a series of job changes, with the most determining occurring after my graduation from IFE.

It was after my training at IFE that my dream of being self-employed was realized. I became “my own boss” by setting up a consultancy, confident that I had the energy, business acumen and the proper management skills to operate in this risky field. Training at IFE was also an opportunity to join a dense and well-knit network which extends beyond business.

IFE is rather unique in its workings and academic system as compared to traditional university institutions (three of which I had the privilege to attend during my studies).

In an attempt to address the various issues in the terms of reference, this paper is divided into parts as follows:

- Firstly, I will present IFE, by highlighting its purpose, regional and international dimension, as well as principal achievements and benefits, since its creation in 1998;
- Secondly, I will attempt to portray, what in my opinion, makes IFE unique, compared to other university bodies (in terms of functioning and optimization mechanisms, key success factors, network system, etc.)
- Since this conference focuses on developing regional cooperation, the third part will attempt solutions to issues raised in the TOR;
- Lastly, I will humbly share a personal thought on good practices for consolidating regional cooperation in this sector, based on the IFE experience.

PRESENTATION OF IFE

The Summit of Heads of State and Government of French-speaking countries that held in December 1995 at Cotonou, Benin, endorsed the creation of IFE at the behest of the Government of Mauritius. The francophone university agency, the Agence Universitaire de la Francophonie (AUF), was mandated to execute this decision. The AUF manages a network of graduate (troisième cycle) international institutes offering excellent training courses in new fields tailored to regional demand6.

6 The other AUF institutes are:

- l’Institut de la Francophonie pour l’Administration et la Gestion (IFAG), the institute of administration and management, in Sofia (Bulgaria)
- l’Institut de la Francophonie pour l’Informatique (IFI), the institute of computer science, in Hanoi (Vietnam)
- l’Institut de la Francophonie pour la Médecine Tropicale (IFMT), the institute for tropical medicine, in Vientiane (Laos)
IFE opened its doors to the first batch of students in February 1999. Speaking on how that institution was set up, its Director said it had been necessary to adopt three principles “…provide tertiary education with a professional orientation and a regional vision, in a place where a network of influences converge” (Ponson, 2000).

Training objectives

Training at IFE targets candidates who, for diverse reasons, are interested in entrepreneurship, creating or buying-back enterprises, and those who would like to master concepts and methods for the success of their own projects. The main purpose of IFE is to provide support and develop innovative projects.

IFE target candidates comprise:

- candidates with enterprise creation or buy-back projects, or persons seeking to evolve as salaried workers in innovative entrepreneurial projects;
- candidates seeking to qualify as consultant, to provide support services or conduct training in enterprise creation or entrepreneurship;
- management staffs of enterprises planning to create or develop their own enterprises or buy-back existing enterprises.

Admissions trend and characteristics of IFE students

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Batch</th>
<th>Distribution by gender</th>
<th>Total</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>F</td>
<td>M</td>
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<tr>
<td>1st Batch</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>14</td>
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<tr>
<td>2nd Batch</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>20</td>
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<tr>
<td>3rd Batch</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>19</td>
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<tr>
<td>4th Batch</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5th Batch</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total number trained</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Since its creation, IFE has trained 124 persons, out of which 33 (26.6%) are women. Considering only the four batches that have graduated, 82 out of 93 students were successful (though 3 students of the 4th batch will re-sit the examination in December 2003).

The highest number of IFE graduates came from Madagascar (about 40%), followed by Mauritius and the Comoro Islands, while zones other than the Indian Ocean are beginning to send in more students (over 20 trained in the first four batches).

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7 In Acte Colloque International « L’entrepreneuriat dans un contexte dynamique » (Proceedings of the International Colloquium on « Entrepreneurship in a dynamic context), Madagascar 2000
8 Still undergoing training
9 These students are from the following countries : Benin, Togo Côte d’Ivoire, Mauritania, Senegal, France, Burundi Chad, Central African Republic, Djibouti, Haïti, Cameroon
Current information indicates that all graduates of the first three batches are largely employed in activities related to entrepreneurship and the promotion of same (though a few are traditional salaried employees) and 2 are pursuing the doctorate degree (1 each in France and Canada).

**Curriculum and courses**

IFE offers a set of courses over a two-year period which cover both theory and practice. The courses are designed to stimulate innovative, coherent and sustainable projects.

Year one is dedicated to sensitization and preparation for entrepreneurship, knowledge and techniques acquisition, project preparation (decision-making tools and submission of preliminary draft dissertation).

Management courses are conducted in a unique manner which emphasizes the student’s contribution to the implementation of various phases of an entrepreneurial project (initial concept development, opportunity assessment, feasibility analysis, project finalization and launching).

Year two is spent on the implementation of the project, with support being provided through tailored follow up and attendance at professional seminars.\(^\text{10}\)

Assessment marks are broken down as follows:

1. marks for all year one modules = 50 %
2. marks for the preliminary draft dissertation (at end of year one) = 20 %
3. marks for the project (end of year two) = 30 %

Consequently, IFE offers tertiary level training, with a highly professional orientation. Thus, starting with the project concept submitted as the candidate seeks admission, the graduating student leaves with a well-structured project.

All students are expected to come with projects on enterprise creation, buy-back or development, or plans for developing innovative projects within an existing organization. Students may also come with the goal of acquiring knowledge to qualify as an entrepreneurial support or training consultant.

**IFE : a center for excellence**

Not all project dissertations are approved. In the first batch, two students failed to meet the quality requirements and consequently, did not graduate, though they had successfully passed all year one academic courses without problems.

IFE students spend eighteen months to obtain a research-oriented graduate diploma in entrepreneurship, the *Diplôme d’Études Professionnelles Approfondies* (*DEPA – Master en entrepreneuriat*). This is a tertiary level diploma awarded by institutes of the AUF network. Students may also register for a business-oriented graduate diploma in enterprise creation and innovative project management, the *DESS “Création d’entreprise et gestion de projets innovants”*, which is awarded by the Université Montesquieu Bordeaux IV, with candidates sitting the examinations in Mauritius. In 2001, all 15 candidates who registered for this French state diploma fulfilled the requirements.

\(^{10}\) Training on specific themes: negotiating, human resources, leadership, communication, quality, standard, corporate culture, etc.
Once student projects have been designed in the second year, although IFE does not grant students initial financing, it links them to various networks, partners and potential clients, who finance enterprises or are major economic operators in their countries of origin.

Regional dimension

IFE’s geographic location was based on a number of parameters. As entrepreneurship is a major factor for promoting economic development in the Indian Ocean region, emphasis is placed on enterprise creation and development, as well as innovative project development.

Mauritius, IFE’s host country, is internationally reputed for its openness, dynamism, economic achievements and regional influence. Therefore, there was no better choice for locating that institution.

The FRANCODE program

IFE was selected by the intergovernmental agency, Agence Intergouvernementale de la Francophonie (which was formally, ACCT) to implement the FRANCODE program, in conjunction with three other institutions: Université Senghor in Alexandria, INSCAE in Casablanca and INDE in Bucharest.

This program is conducted by institutions in Geneva (World Trade Organization, United Nations Conference on Trade and Development, International Trade Center) and it is aimed at training French-speaking trainers on international trade negotiations, marketing and finance, possibly using visioconférence. After the training of trainers seminars, IFE and its partner institutions will conduct other seminars for enterprises in the region.

The intergovernmental agency’s FRANCODE program has entered a very active phase. In November 2000 in Mauritius, IFE hosted a seminar on multilateral trade negotiations involving participants from 10 francophone island countries.

IFE was also selected to develop FRANCODE program’s component 2, which involves the training of 12 training consultants in SME export competitiveness.

THE UNIQUENESS OF IFE

Training at IFE targets candidates who, for diverse reasons, are interested in entrepreneurship, creating or buying-back enterprises. IFE is not a center for designing enterprise creation projects (centers for assistance to entrepreneurs, nurseries, business incubators and chambers of commerce should assume that role). The Institute offers high level academic and professional training which provide analytical skills which trainees should integrate into their projects during training, and later, into their various projects, for enterprise creation, intrapreneurship or entrepreneurship support services consultancy.

Examples abound of training establishments which offer courses in one or more areas entrepreneurship (management, human resources, project management, auditing, etc.). IFE is unique in that it has established a private enterprise training program which includes all courses in the field. In addition, IFE’s greatest influence, and a vital one, is on the development prospects of the countries and the sub-region through the spreading of entrepreneurship concepts by its graduates.
Tutoring

Thus, in addition to theoretical courses and case studies, each student is tailored and systematic tutoring, in accordance with a principle which requires that each student be assigned an entrepreneur to serve as his/her tutor.

Mauritian entrepreneurs, though very busy people, generously accept to tutor students at IFE. During the work placement period, entrepreneurs in students’ home countries complete the exercise. Work placement takes up a good portion of year two and is conducted in the home country.

To ensure proper student tutoring at the place of implementation of his/her project, IFE appoints a contact person in each country. The latter’s role is identify tutors both for academic and professional purposes.

IFE has a resource list for most francophone countries, comprising academic and professional experts, most of whom are drawn from networks of regional entrepreneurs and partner institutions.

Each student is entitled to three tutoring sessions during their second year. For that purpose, a schedule of local meetings is drawn up for each country. Those meetings are for assessing projects status and to provide students with advisory services tailored to their needs. Tutors may, of course, be contacted by electronic mail, facsimile or by telephone.

In general, students are bound to inform IFE about their projects through monthly project status updates.

Another unique aspect is that courses begin with an integrative seminar to permit students to better understand and discover the true wealth of the group, its multidisciplinary nature (physician, pharmacist, jurist, scientist, lawyer, accountants, engineers, economists, managers, trainers) and the often very rich and diverse professional experiences, as well as cultural origins.

Relationships are established with the Mauritian professional milieu, thus affording students with an opportunity to study the behavior and problem-solving methods used by professionals.

IFE networking system

IFE has a very small staff strength, with functioning system based on a large and diversified network of university and professional institutes.

The institute started with one staff, the Director, who was the main actor from the project’s inception to its launching.

In September 1998, with the appointment of a project head, who later became the director, the project used the services of AUF regional offices and sub-branches, SYFED centers and supporting institutions in Belgium, Canada or France to set up the IFE. There was also a need to promote the Institute in the Indian Ocean region (Mauritius, Madagascar, Comoro Islands, Réunion, the Seychelles, as well as in Mozambique and South Africa).

In its first year, IFE received 147 applications from 13 countries and the board pre-selected 84 candidates who were later interviewed in each country by a national panel of examiners (comprising one representative of university institutions, one representative of the professional milieu and one representative of either IFE or AUF). The construction of a web site for IFE (www.mu.refer.org/ife) greatly eased the pre-selection of candidates.
The Institute set up a network of national focal points for centralizing information (distributing brochures and application documents, in particular), serving as relay and contact persons in relations with local partners, and for gathering and forwarding application files. They are an important link in proximate relations.

IFE started with very limited human resources and developed under fairly precarious working conditions. Mr. Ponson’s role, as pioneer Director, was a determining factor. It should also be noted that the Institute was also assisted by the Université de Maurice and the Mauritius Institute of Education, the SYFED-REFER Center in Mauritius, which offered IFE permanent use of a lecture hall, a video projection hall to be used when needed, a hall for discussions and meetings between students, and finally, offices for administrative staff, in addition to granting students access to diverse on-campus services (bookshop, canteen, photocopying, etc.).

A year ago IFE obtained moved into new premises on the 6th floor of the MCA building on the university campus at Réduit, offered at no cost by the Mauritian State.

Today, IFE has 5 salaried employees (a director, a director of studies, an administrative assistant cum accountant, a communication cum documentation officer, an office clerk).

**IFE management structures** comprise:

- a *Support Committee* of organizations which provide it with funds or human resources. This committee no longer exists (its purpose was to launch the institute);

- the *Consortium of partner establishments* which examine pedagogic issues and makes proposals for curriculum improvements;

  The consortium is made up of 7 institutions located outside the region (Université Paris XII Val de Marne, Université Montesquieu Bordeaux IV and ESCP-EAP in France; Catholic University of Louvain in Belgium; Université du Québec at Trois Rivières, HEC Montréal, and Laval University in Canada), and 3 others in the region (Université de la Réunion, Université de Maurice, and INSCAE de Madagascar).

  The consortium holds one meeting at the beginning of October each year and two other restricted meetings (see statute) which serve as the academic council (to examine issues raised by students).

  Full meetings of the consortium play a very important role, as they foster loyalty among members that provide the lecturers and pedagogic documents (HEC Montréal, for example). This arrangement also permits IFE to award two kinds of diplomas, with the French State’s DESS (from Bordeaux IV and Paris XII universities) and certain graduates to pursue a doctoral program. All meetings of the consortium hold at the Institute.

- the *Institute Council* adopts the statute and regulations. One half of its membership comprises professionals and the academics. It meets in plenary session once a year at the beginning of October and holds three other meetings of with members presents in Mauritius. All meeting hold at the Institute.
Training at IFE is conducted by:

- lecturers who are nationals or expatriates selected on the basis of their high scientific expertise;\(^\text{11}\);
- university lecturers, professors and researchers from francophone countries, with a reputation for excellence in entrepreneurship, who visit the institute for the purpose of lecturing;
- experts, from the regional professional and socio-economic milieu, who are mainly assigned tutoring duties and who offer tailored advisory services on projects.

Since 1999, IFE has attracted renowned lecturers from reputed institutions like the Université du Québec at Trois Rivières, Laval University, Catholic University of Louvain, the Ecole Supérieure de Commerce in Paris, the Université Montesquieu in Bordeaux, the Université du Québec in Montréal, the Université de Maurice, INSCAE of Tananarive, the Université de la Réunion, the Université du Québec at Chicoutimi, HEC Montréal, and the Chamber of Commerce and Industry of Mauritius, among others.

The Entrepreneurial network

IFE can also tap on this network that has over 12 years of experience and research work on the issue of entrepreneurship and small enterprises in the Francophonie, which comprises about fifty researchers from several countries and about twenty universities and grandes écoles. The Network\(^\text{12}\) publishes a six-monthly newsletter and regularly organizes science-promotion days.

The recruitment system

Concerning selection and recruitment, application forms may be downloaded from the following site [www.mu.refer.org/ife](http://www.mu.refer.org/ife) and the Institute also uses the services of AUF regional offices around the world. In some countries, assistance is provided by officials in charge of Cooperation and Cultural Action Services at Embassies of France.

The internet greatly helped to rapidly spread information (systematic use of e-mail and construction of a web site) supported by AUF’s Refer worldwide network.

\(^\text{11}\) Since it was opened in 1999, the Institute has mainly been using the following lecturers:

- Camille Carrier and Sylvie Laferté (Université du Québec at Trois Rivières);
- Yvon Gasse (Laval University);
- Yves Pochet, Pierre Semal, Aly Coulibaly, Christian Delporte and Jean-Jacques Lambin (Catholic University of Louvain);
- Patrice Stern and Alain Ollivier (ESCP-EAP, Paris);
- Jean-Guy Degos, Xavier Noël and Bertrand Saporta (Université Montesquieu Bordeaux IV);
- Alain Delage, Daniel Fokkan, Hamby Narsinghen, Moshin Hingun, Reshmee Baichoo, R. Gunputh and Abendra Patten (Université de Maurice);
- Pierre Cossette (Université du Québec at Montréal);
- David Andrianaivoson, Serge Rahairiniai and Claudine Ratsimbazafy (INSCAE Tananarive);
- Alain Barbier, Christian Dave, Serge Farnocchia and René Squarzoni (Université de la Réunion); Louis-Jacques Filion and Marcel Côté (Ecole des HEC, Montréal);
- Claude Lalonde (Université du Québec at Chicoutimi);
- Bertrand Tursan d’Espaignet and Marc de Boucherville Biaisac (CCI of Mauritius);
- Jean-Marc Sarhan (Ministry of Education, Mauritius);
- Paul-A. Fortin (Consultant, Canada), Jean-Claude Fochi (Consultant, France);

\(^\text{12}\) For more information on the network, visit the web site at [www.aupelf-uref.org/rtt/entrepreneuriat](http://www.aupelf-uref.org/rtt/entrepreneuriat)
KEY FACTORS OF SUCCESS

1. **A rigorous selection system** (pre-selection, written test and an interview with a panel of examiners). Recruitment is based on a competitive examination. Candidates download application forms from the web site or collect them from the AUF regional offices or information centers, and return same duly filled within time limits. Application files are also available at the institute.

Pre-selected candidates will be interviewed by a panel which shall decide on their admission into IFE.

All selection panels are bound to strictly adhere to the interview procedure. Each candidate should be interviewed for 40 minutes:

- an oral presentation lasting a maximum of 10 minutes (following preparation for 10-15 minutes of a general knowledge question drawn from a lot).
- discussion with the panel lasting 10 minutes
- discussion with the panel on the candidate’s motivations, plans and experience, lasting 20 to 30 minutes.

Though the Indian Ocean region (Madagascar, Comoro Islands, Mauritius, Réunion) remains the main target, a number of candidates come from other regions of the world (Asia, Africa, America and Europe). In 2001, the enrolment of 24 students were from 7 countries and, in 2002, the 23 students came from 8 countries.

2. **Use of information and communication technologies** constitute a key element in the mechanism established by IFE. This can be seen in the information and recruitment system (web site, electronic mail, AUF network) and also in the pedagogy, as IFE is now capable of providing distance education, since it moved to new premises.

3. **Small student numbers** to maintain standards of excellence (maximum intake of 30 students);

4. **Financial contribution required from students constitutes a motivating factor**: School fees for the two years amount to 45 000 Rupees (currently equivalent to 1 406 euros, with the considerable appreciated following exchange rate variations!). Fees currently account for about a quarter of budgetary resources. The total grant awarded by AUF or other partners to any single student on full scholarship is 106 250 Rs (or 3 320 euros at current exchange rates) to cover the 18 months study period and two return trips to the student’s home country, if that is in the Indian Ocean zone.

5. **All students have a project** at hand, which facilitates post-training reinsertion (there are very few traditional salaried employees among IFE graduates).

IMPLEMENTATION DIFFICULTIES

- sustained academic work in the first year of study owing to the presence of visiting lecturers who sometimes demand an impressive volume of work from students;

\[^{13}\text{Favors like reimbursing half the cost of air tickets may be granted to students from zones outside the Indian Ocean.}\]
relatively high cost of registration in comparison with the cost of living in a country like Madagascar and in comparison with those in West Africa (from 10 to a maximum of 500 euros) ;

- the preliminary draft dissertation is prepared very far away from the field, in the case of students from “zones outside the Indian Ocean”, a situation which entails considerable additional costs, as transportation between Africa and that part of the world is expensive (about 1 500 euros) ;

- the very small number permanent staff at IFE.

To face these situations, IFE grants certain facilities

- in the field of academics, teaching materials and assessment documents are forwarded using the internet
- payment of school fees in two installments may be authorized
- payment of transportation for Madagascan students
- 50% partial reimbursement of transport expenses for students outside the Indian Ocean zone
- recruitment of additional staff (of two persons, raising the number to 5).

CONCLUSION

The IFE training program cannot be considered as yet another program (since such programs abound, especially in the field of management studies), as IFE is an entrepreneurship institute (a field that is hard to find, in comparison with administration or management) and especially, as it has rapidly and widely spread the private enterprise concept and corporate culture in the Indian Ocean zone. If not for those achievements, the 124 graduates will be of no significance, just like a drop of water in an ocean. That is why its academic positioning is at the tertiary level, since the other branches of education (professional, consultants and lower first and second cycles, secondary education, etc) can be offered by IEF graduates.

Though IFE is certainly unique, it is a model in the field of cooperation. Its entire operating system is based on networking and increasing its influence in the Indian Ocean and Africa.

Using IFE as an example, in the context of developing regional cooperation for the improvement of tertiary education, the following recommendations can be made:

- seek rationalization through the pooling of complementary resources by creating poles of excellence (probably not to the extent of specializing every structures but at least building capacities in their strong areas rather than having them all offering the same courses)
- using a network of loyal and motivated trainers (IFE has successfully attracted leading experts in private enterprise and certainly not as a result of the fees they can pay. It is rather the result of a feeling of belonging)
- structures should blend with their environment, through involvement in socio-economic life, by refraining from offering ex cathedra training, involving students in managing and operating these structures through effective participation and even financial contribution
- develop the spirit of enterprise in all disciplines, to facilitate the integration of graduates into the job market and refrain from training job seekers only.
- use distance education and NICT to reduce operating costs (though it is evident that the materials need to be improved).

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