

Online-Seminar

„European Perspectives on Rare Disciplines.
The German-French Mapping of Rare Disciplines”

Online, 1:30-4:30pm (MEZ/UTC+1)

1:30-1:40pm	Welcome
1:40-2:15pm	“Mapping of rare disciplines in Germany.” <ul style="list-style-type: none">- Annemarie Deser and Katharina Haas, Office of Rare Disciplines, University of Mainz, Germany
2:15-2:50pm	“Challenges and impact of the implementation of a mapping of rare disciplines in France” <ul style="list-style-type: none">- Prof. Dr. Sébastien Chevalier, Ministère de l'enseignement supérieur et de la recherche, France
2:50-3:00pm	Discussion on the projects in Germany and France
3:00-3:15pm	Break
3:15-3:55pm	State of the art: Challenges and projects regarding rare disciplines in ... Latvia <ul style="list-style-type: none">- Dr. Agnese Rusakova Denmark <ul style="list-style-type: none">- Prof. Dr. Annika Hvithamar and Magnus Børlum Dam Olesen
3:55-4:25pm	Perspectives on cooperation between the European countries
4:25-4:30pm	Summary of the transfer-workshop and farewell

Moderation: Prof. Dr. Paul Indelicato, France Universités (FU)

Documentation on the Online-Seminar:
„European Perspectives on Rare Disciplines.
The German-French Mapping of Rare Disciplines”,
2nd of November 2023

Introduction

When the project "French-German model mapping of rare disciplines" started in 2018, some rectors' conferences (namely from France, Germany, Hungary, Poland, in an early stage the Netherlands) already have had several meetings on Rare Disciplines before. They agreed on the necessity of European Networking on the topic and to joint forces to get information about the situation of scientific fields or disciplines which are relative rare, and maybe might be endangered because of local decisions based on financial constraints and the number of students.

A useful instrument on this behalf already existed in Germany at that time, the so called "mapping of "small" disciplines". At a meeting in 2017 Germany and France agreed on a pilot project to transfer the methodology of mapping already existing in Germany to the French higher education system. Today France has established an own mapping of rare disciplines.

Goal for the seminar now was to continue and expand the European networking on the topic "Rare Disciplines" and to share information on the projects in France and Germany as well about the initiatives in Latvia and Denmark.

Annemarie Deser and Katharina Haas from Arbeitsstelle Kleine Fächer presented how the mapping of rare disciplines is organized in Germany. Afterwards Sébastien Chevalier from the French Ministry of Higher Education and Research (MESR) presented how France adapted and modified the definition and methodology used in Germany for their own needs. After a short break, Agnese Rusakova from the Council of Rectors of Latvia, and Annika Hvithamar and Magnus Børllum Dam Olesen from the University of Copenhagen presented their relatively new initiatives on the establishment of a mapping of rare disciplines in their countries. (For details, please see the presentations attached). There was time for discussion and questions after each contribution which are documented in the following.

Discussion on the presentation from Germany (Annemarie Deser & Katharina Haas)

It was asked for the existence of a long-time funding of rare disciplines in Germany. Because of the German federalism, state funding of Higher Education institutions is task of each federal state of Germany. Besides each state's regular financing, there is no general extra long-term funding for small disciplines. The participants from Germany explained that there existed several projects related and timely-limited funding programs for rare disciplines for example financed by the German Ministry of Education and Research (BMBF) or the VolkswagenFoundation Hannover within the last ten years. But the German Ministry of Education and Research is by law not allowed to involve in long-term funding at higher education institutions.

Another question concerned the information on the number of students of small disciplines in Germany. The number of students of small disciplines is not collected by Arbeitsstelle Kleine Fächer. Quite often rare disciplines do not have their own specialized study programs at their higher education institution. Scientist of rare disciplines are involved quite often in general study programs or do teaching exports to their neighbor disciplines. That makes it difficult to count the number of students of rare disciplines. The question is for what each student is counted for in first place. Approximations can be made for several small disciplines by the national statistics on higher education, but quite often the small disciplines of Germany are not recorded here as categories but are summarized under broader entities.

It was asked for the role of politics in the decision-making processes regarding the closure of rare disciplines. The decisions in case of closing out disciplines from the higher education institutions disciplinary spectrum are made by the universities themselves. Each federal state might have own regulations, but politics do usually not question the universities' autonomy. From time to time the closure of rare disciplines in Germany is caused through financial restrictions on which each federal state is deciding about. But the institutions themselves decide how to save the money. There is no general rule to close disciplines for example because of a low number of students.

The question was raised for the knowledge on existing cooperations and agreements between different European countries regarding their concentration in bigger institutions at one university. Examples can not be given for universities from different European countries. But for some German universities such strategical measures have been realized, as to strengthen rare disciplines in bigger entities at one university than to hold single professorships at different institutions.

Discussion on the presentation from France (Sebastien Chevalier)

The establishment of a mapping for France and the nationwide survey of all scientists carried out during the project met with a positive response. Sébastien Chevalier concluded: On the one hand, it is important to have similarities between Germany and France in terms of methodology and, at the same time, to develop the best system for France. He summarized that the experience gained by France (and Germany) in the project can be helpful for other countries to find a specific and suitable approach to map rare disciplines for their respective countries. It must be considered that the field is diverse and heterogeneous.

A résumé on the established label “discipline rare” was requested: Also in France, the responsibility for rare disciplines lies with the highly autonomous universities and not (only) with the state. In the two years that have elapsed since the start of the labelling process, no clear advantages have yet been identified for the disciplines. Chevalier summarized that the project is an attempt to generate funds for small disciplines and to encourage stakeholders/universities to include and promote small disciplines in their strategies. The French national funding agency (ANR) has now been approached. The question of responsibilities for safeguarding and promoting rare disciplines was discussed controversially by the French participants. It was noted from the French participants that the universities were in a poor position and that a national position is necessary in this matter. E.g., it is difficult for university leaders to establish new professorships of their own, which would be accompanied by internal conflicts. From ministerial perspective the creation of professorships "from above" by the ministry is associated with the risk that the universities can then reallocate them. It was noted that including rare disciplines in university strategy is seldom and complicated. But 'protecting' disciplines might be a way, particularly for recruiting new professors, as the pool is often small and can pose problems. Having a European-level network can open the pool. It was proposed that for example a specific "concours" and support (research grants) for doctoral students, could perhaps provide this protection.

The question was raised as to what role student numbers play in management decisions in France. In Germany for example, there are some federal states in which minimum student numbers are not specified for small disciplines to get state funding or are set lower than usual. The question was if there is something similar for France. Chevalier replied that there is currently not even a consensus in France on what “rare discipline” mean and there are even stakeholders who do not yet know what is meant by rare disciplines. Although the French and the German system are completely different, one of the French participants mentioned that in France, student numbers also count for the state funding of higher education institutions. It might be that there is the case that the ministry does not even realize that a discipline is a rare discipline, but that it is already a financial burden for the individual university to have it. From the French team was noted that the common goal should be diversity in science. The established Steering Committee (COPIL) takes a macro perspective on the topic and is looking for ways forward. The

French conclude regarding the status of the establishment of the mapping: The mapping is an aid for the scientists for networking initiatives. What works well in Germany is the collection of information on the rare disciplines, but in France this is currently still difficult or non-existent.

Discussion on the presentation from Latvia (Agnese Rusakova)

Due to generally shrinking student numbers and financial cuts, higher education institutions and especially small disciplines in Latvia are currently getting under massive pressure. Study programs offered at several universities are being cut back to one and courses with fewer than five students are discontinued by the ministry. Money is the central argument. Rusakova emphasizes that universities in Latvia are obliged to meet the social needs of a knowledge-based society. As a result, it is necessary to offer a wide range of disciplines at the universities. The range of disciplines offered by each individual university is the result of years of competition between the disciplines university locations. In this process, the universities have found niches for their specific programs. This process is ongoing and necessary. It was noted that EU funding is of great importance to Latvia. STEM disciplines are more strongly promoted by the EU than Humanities and there is no EU funding for national research.

On the question whether there is already a debate in Latvia about small disciplines or whether the topic is new in higher education policy the representative from Latvia explained, that there is little discussion about the political measures implemented. Although there have been some cautious statements on the subject from the Academia, but less from the ministries. Rusakova forecasted that an EU position/initiative on this issue would help universities and small disciplines in Latvia a lot, as the ministry is strongly aligned with EU policy.

Discussion on the presentation from Denmark (Annika Hvithamar & Magnus Børlum Dam Olesen)

All the eight universities in Denmark are public and financed by the state. The Danish universities are regarding small disciplines dependent on partners in other European countries. Denmark is therefore particularly interested in linking Danish universities with small disciplines to other European universities that offer these fields.

The status of a small discipline already exists in Danish higher education policy. The definition of a small subject in Denmark to date refers primarily to courses of study. By definition, a small discipline in Denmark is represented at only one of the eight Danish universities. In Denmark, only ten disciplines, mainly from the humanities, are recognized officially as a small discipline and receive additional monetary support to be able to maintain their range of courses. They are supported with an additional €233,000 per year.

Courses of study in Denmark must have >20 students at BA level and >10 students at master's level, otherwise they would be discontinued. At the university of Copenhagen five disciplines were closed within the last ten years. In Denmark 20 small disciplines were closed.

A mapping project for Denmark has been launched at the University of Copenhagen (at the Department of Cross-Cultural and Regional Studies), which is the university with most of the small subjects in Denmark. Through this project and the exchange with the other European countries, Denmark is now rethinking what is meant by small disciplines. A mapping should enable academics and university policymakers in Denmark to identify academic communities in other countries that have a similar specialism. As there is often only one professorship in the whole of Denmark, cooperation, for example in the form of joint teaching programs, could ensure that study programs can be maintained at Danish universities and relieve professors of some teaching duties so that they can conduct more research. However, according to a comment from the plenary, it should be considered that hybrid teaching needs a lot of effort as joint study programs which already exist show.

In summer/autumn of 2023, the Danish project team applied for funding to set up a mapping database.

To answer a question about the affiliation of the project team and its role for Denmark the Danish team assumed: The work among Danish organizations might be more effective in collaboration on the topic than the work of one national organization.

Further Topics

It was proposed to apply to the COST-program ([COST | European Cooperation in Science and Technology](#), Accessed 13. Nov. 2023) to get funding for more meetings and meta-transfer.

It was asked about further networking initiatives on the topic, e.g., between the Northern European Countries and in the countries that has been represented by present participants. The Danish team reported that right now there is exchange on the topic between Northern European partners but on an informal level. Participating representatives of the National University of Ireland reported that right now universities in Ireland are preoccupied with the question and are currently working on a definition for rare disciplines.

It was concluded that the topic must be promoted in the context of the European Union.

Carle Bonafous-Murat (France Universités, FU) reported from the EUA Council on 28 October 2023: The project and topic were presented by FU and HRK.

The responsible persons from Germany and France stated that they are open to share their experiences and to expand the collaboration on the topic to the interested project teams from other countries. The exchange and discourse with Latvia and Denmark are already a grand opportunity on this behalf. Persons involved within the field from further countries are welcome to get in contact with the project teams and join the network.

Other attachments

- Presentation from Germany
- Presentation from France
- Presentation from Latvia
- Presentation from Denmark