

The French Universities Revolution Is en Route

Description

by Stephanie Braudeau

Making French universities more attractive?

Last December, French President, Nicolas Sarkozy announced that a €35 billion national loan will prioritise higher education and training. At the press conference he expressed the desire to produce the best universities in the world. In order to achieve his objective, he decided to inject €7.7 billion for a project of creating between 5 and 10 *initiatives d'excellence*, elite campuses in order to compete with the best world universities. These campuses will be linked with their economic environment, allowing a better cooperation between Grandes Ecoles and universities as well as research institutions to contribute to the economic integration of their surroundings. They will also be targeting stellar professors, researchers and students.

For a decade, the higher education environment has been changing in France. In order to be more competitive in the international market, more and more schools are merging such as between the two Grandes Ecoles ESC Lille and Ceram Business School into SKEMA Business School in 2009 or ESCP Europe born from the École Supérieure de Commerce de Paris and the EAP (Ecole Européenne des Affaires) merger in 2000. Networks or alliances are also flourishing, such as the creation of Paristech in 2007, a centre of excellence gathering 12 prestigious Parisian Grandes Ecoles.

In 2007, the government implemented the project of giving more autonomy to public universities. The goal is that by 2012, all French universities will be autonomous in terms of human resources and budget management.

Public universities have been granted a yearly budget of €1 billion whilst other European countries are cutting education budgets.

Can maintaining the prestige and high cost of selective Grandes Ecoles be compatible with the goal of allowing 30% students from poorer backgrounds to register?

On the one hand, Sarkozy would like to offer as much as 30% of Grandes Ecoles places to students from poorer backgrounds. These expensive elite schools have a better reputation among employers than public universities as their examination entrance comes after 2 years of selective and intense studies *classes préparatoires* (preparatory classes). Public French universities are nearly free and access is entitled to any French student that passed the baccalaureate.

On the other hand, a major concern raised among the Conférence des Grandes Ecoles CGE (a gathering of 220 Grandes Ecoles) that imposing a 30% admission quota for poorer students will diminish the entrance levels and therefore decrease the selectivity and reputation of the diploma they deliver.

Since those exchanges a few months ago, Mrs Valerie Pecresse, Minister for Higher Education and Research affirmed that entrance quotas will not be established at Grandes Ecoles. However, it still remains an objective of the government.

To help achieve the aim to allow 30% of students from poorer background to access Grandes Ecoles, Mrs Pecresse announced the opening by 2011 of 100 new preparatory classes – the majority intended to welcome disadvantaged students.

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