

Chapter 7

Reconciling Republican ‘Egalité’ and Global Excellence Values in French Higher Education

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7.1 Introduction

The focus of this volume is on policies to promote world-class higher education and world-class universities. The idea of world-class universities has attracted a great deal of attention from policymakers in government and in the higher education sector (Liu 2006, 2007; DIISR 2009). Many universities have become caught up in the race for world-class status and in particular in the global university rankings published annually (Vught and Westerheijden 2010), and national governments often seek to make their higher education institutions more visible on the world stage through world-class university programmes (WCUPs). But what has been missing to date – with the exception of this volume – is more critical academic interest, seeking to explore the outcomes behind this increasing trend.

Embedded within this movement is the belief that world-class universities are a vital element of a competitive higher education system and that supporting an élite group of universities creates a wider set of societal benefits and returns (Wildavsky 2010). At the same time, there is a growing critique of the notion of world-class universities for being overly focused on a limited range of variables and emulating a particular kind of university – the Anglo-American research-intensive university (the so-called Stepford University as identified by Head 2011) – not necessarily beneficial in every situation. These critiques argue that WCUPs are a drain on,

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rather than a benefit to, national higher education systems and give a limited number of élite institutions the capacity to withdraw from national arenas into exclusively serving these narrow global positions (Altbach and Balán 2007).

In this chapter, we contribute to a critical academic debate about the meaning and practice of the idea of a ‘world-class university’. We start by offering a note of caution to the two normative positions outlined above and arguing that what is necessary is an objective framework by which the public benefits of WCUPs can be understood, and against which the claims by interested parties may be tested. We argue that the benefits of WCUPs are an *emergent* property, which is to say that under certain circumstances they might drive up standards whilst in others they might contribute to a fragmentation of national systems. It is therefore necessary to identify the potential contributions which WCUPs might make to national systems and map the changes resultant from particular policy interventions to better understand how WCUPs redirect national higher education systems.

To test our framework, we explore an interesting example, the case of France, where one would expect the benefits to be clearest, and the problems to be minimised. The French higher education system is strongly rooted in what might be considered Republican values of equality. But at the same time, France has had since pre-Revolutionary times an implicit segmentation in its higher education; the *Grandes Écoles* were created as higher vocational colleges but evolved into finishing schools for the Republican technocratic élite. France has sought to use the idea of a WCUP as part of a decade-long reform programme to address the stagnation in its university sector.

In this chapter, we consider whether these reforms have shown signs of improving the situation in France. We firstly set out our framework for understanding the public benefits potentially offered by universities and set out the criteria by which the public benefit of a WCUP can be tested. We then present the French case study, which we split into three elements, a first historical element looking at the divisions in the system to which reforms were a proposed solution, secondly setting out the reforms themselves, and then examining the extent to which these reforms created public value in the university system. On this basis, we outline some preliminary findings about the characteristics upon which the public value of WCUPs might depend and suggest future research directions.

7.2 Higher Education Systems and the Public Value of a WCUP

In this chapter, we seek to contribute to an increasingly important strand of debate seeking to refocus higher education’s research attention onto the importance of understanding how higher education institutions (HEIs) function within national and international systems. At a recent public lecture, the Executive Director of the OECD’s Centre for Education Research and Innovation (CERI),

Dirk van Damme (2011), called for higher education research to move beyond its narrow focus on new public management towards a concern with managing higher level systems. His argument was that attempts to assume that competition between universities would produce socially optimal outcomes had reached a practical limit and that a more pressing problem was the need for increased collaboration between universities to collective societal ends than encouraging efficiency in quasi-markets.

In a recent book, Professor Ellen Hazelkorn (2011) has also pointed to the inadvertent and unintended consequences of an obsession with league tables for higher education performance. She argues that there are three problems with the idea of world-class universities: they promote a neo-liberal model based on concentrating resources in a few good universities, a misapprehension that more world-class universities raise system performance, and teaching is arguably universities' most important social contribution whilst strangely absent from ranking criteria. It is the second of these points that we believe is most important in meeting Van Damme's challenge: it remains to be empirically proven that creating world-class universities improves a national HE system. Whilst intuitive – more, better universities can only be a good thing for a country – the case of France suggests the opposite. A few élite institutions may dominate public discourse and funding discussions, leading to a neglect of the 'ordinary' universities, which in France became problematic.

7.2.1 The Public Value of a Higher Education System: A Conceptual Framework

In this chapter, we want to explore how a policy intervention – World-Class University Programmes – can create overall public benefits. We situate this in a distinction which economists have made about education as a product dating back to Adam Smith and *The Wealth of Nations*. The argument is that higher education deserves a public subsidy because it creates public benefits beyond the benefits which accrue to individual recipients. Although higher education does create private benefits, it is the public benefits that justify subsidy (see also Bergan et al. 2009). Universities provide a skilled workforce, create knowledge for businesses and public and voluntary organisations, and have become significant economic sectors in terms of their purchasing power and their salary impacts. Table 7.1 below, taken from Institute for Higher Education Policy (IHEP) (2005), provides a snapshot of higher education's most important private and public benefits.

Building on Van Damme's argument, we think it is important to consider these benefits – public and private, and economic and social – within the system of higher education and understand how the WCUP creates different outcomes by shifting the system. At its most simple level, a higher education system is a process which converts inputs (funding from inter alia governments) through these three processes (education, research, and knowledge exchange) into outputs, which are in part public.

Table 7.1 The array of higher education benefits

	Public	Private
Economic	Increased tax revenues	Higher salaries and benefits
	Greater productivity	Employment
	Increased consumption	Higher saving levels
	Increased workforce flexibility	Improved working conditions
	Decreased reliance on government financial support	Personal/professional mobility
	<i>More research and innovation</i>	<i>Status/reputation resulting from research outputs</i> <i>Financial benefits resulting from research outputs</i>
Social	Reduced crime rates	Improved health/ life expectancy
	Increased charitable giving/community service	Improved quality of life of offspring
	Increased quality of civic life	Better consumer decision making
	Social cohesion/appreciation of diversity	Increased personal status
	Improved ability to adapt to and use technology	More hobbies leisure activities

Source: IHEP 2005, p. 4 (*benefits in italics added by authors)

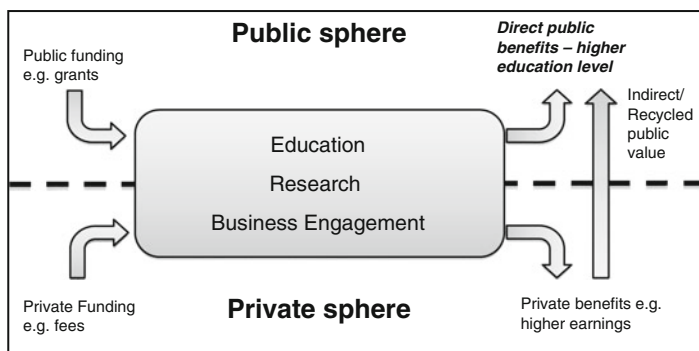


Fig. 7.1 A systems model of investment in the higher education sector

In the absence of public funding, the equilibrium consumption of higher education would be much lower than socially optimal, so through public funding of higher education, higher public returns are produced. Thus, the idea behind any public subsidy for a higher education system is to maximise the public benefits, both directly and indirectly (i.e. public benefits which accrue from recycled private benefits such as increased salaries producing additional taxation) (Fig. 7.1).

There is no necessarily direct value added in a WCUP which simply involves additional expenditure. It is uncontroversial to argue if you spend more money on an activity, you can increase the volume of outcomes. The basic argument underpinning WCUPs is an efficiency one, namely, that resources spent on the sector are better

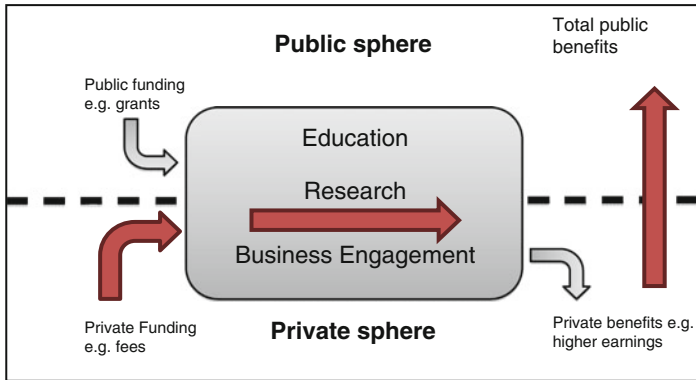


Fig. 7.2 A WCUP programme increasing higher education system efficiency

spent on a few world-class universities than across the system. From a system analysis perspective, this involves a normative claim – that public funding means that the same amount of money spent on WCUPs produces a greater public benefit. In Fig. 7.2, we identify how a WCUP might bring system benefits.

A WCUP might improve the functioning of the system as a whole in four ways. Firstly, it might attract more private funding into the system. Secondly, it might lead to individual processes within the system such as the education, the research, and the business engagement, functioning more effectively. Thirdly, these more effective processes might produce greater direct societal benefits. Fourthly, greater private benefits might be recycled into greater public benefits. At this point, we make two caveats. Firstly, this is a conceptual model, and whilst it might make sense to conceptually distinguish greater private inputs from more efficient research, in practice, the four elements will be unrelated. Secondly, this refers to the overall output from the system rather than the performance of individual institutions.

7.2.2 *The Systems Effects of a World-Class University Programme*

Higher education’s public benefits stimulate thinking about whether WCUPs improve public value. Today, universities’ research takes place within global knowledge systems in which they are just one node. They may attract foreign companies to co-locate on campus via research and development, bringing external resources into the nation, which create spillover benefits for the economy, but which also create infrastructures and attract talent that flow into other higher education institutions. Globalisation and internationalisation provide new opportunities to

reform national higher education systems and acquire more highly educated citizens and more public benefits:

Every nation wants strong research universities. Every research university wants to lift its reputation. All are focused on policies to lift capacity and performance. (Marginson and Van der Wende 2007, p. 34)

World-class university policies contribute to ensuring that higher education delivers the anticipated public benefits and national socioeconomic growth. Sadlak and Cai (2009) argue:

Universities, particularly those considered as ‘world-class’, hold a special place in the chain of innovation. They are [...] viewed as the key to realizing significant economic returns.

Such policies are said to:

- Raise investments in research, both public and private, and national and international, leading to more and better public benefits (both social and economic)
- Increase research outputs, measured, for example, by bibliometrics and citation studies and further boosted by cross national research flows (another global externality; see Marginson and van der Wende 2007)
- Create a better educated workforce, in large part by attracting bright students and staff within and beyond national borders. World-class universities are assumed to effectively advance the overall educational attainment of a country’s labour force (IHEP 2005).
- Promote knowledge transfer, that is, the processes by which knowledge, expertise, and skills transfer between the research base and its user communities to contribute to economic competitiveness, effectiveness of public services and policy, and quality of life (DIUS 2003; DELNI 2010)

Taking our systems perspective outlined above, we characterise these benefits of WCUPs for university systems into five classes:

1. *Increased exogenous resources*: The attraction of additional staff, students, and research funding from outside the country/higher education system which spill over to other higher education institutions.
2. *Increased private endogenous resources*: Greater private resources that would have either not been spent in the country’s universities or gone to other universities go into the sector, which spill over to other higher education institutions.
3. *Systemic improvements*: The presence of a world-class university improves the functioning of the higher education system and produces more efficient use of public resources.
4. *New products*: By creating new globally competitive higher education products (such as graduate school trajectories), the sector is more competitive in export terms, attracting more students as a whole.
5. *Reputational benefits*: All national universities benefit from a higher external awareness/reputation from the presence of one or more world-class institutions in the system.

7.2.3 The Tensions of World-Class University Programmes: From Individual to Systems Benefits

In the above characterisation, there is an implicit assumption that the benefits must automatically be positive (or zero). This is tied to the normative belief that WCUPs are intuitively a sensible approach with the capacity to greatly improve national higher education systems. We argue that this benefit remains to be empirically proven. The imminence and urgency associated with the rise of league tables have precipitated premature reactions from policymakers primarily concerned with reputational benefit. Nevertheless, our contention is not that WCUPs are a bad idea but that the empirical evidence underpinning claims they are always beneficial is thin.

Based on the 'systems benefits' schematic, WCUP advocates must demonstrate WCUP's aggregate public benefit if they are to become a tool used by public investment. There have been cases of private funding seeking to create world-class institutions, such as the private endowment which came with the merger to create Finland's Aalto University (Aalto University Foundation 2008). But because these privately funded mergers do not involve public subsidies, the evidence that they function to the overall benefit of the system is less compelling.

Playing devil's advocate, one could envisage situations for each of the five variables outlined above where the 'world-class' institutions get stronger but the system as a whole is weakened. As well as creating linkages, world-class university policies could create barriers between the 'haves' and the 'have-nots'. Rather than acting as an entrepôt to the 'world' for the rest of the universities, they may act as a kind of enclave for global actors exploiting the best of the country's resources, whilst restricting the benefits that can be created. There might also be a beggar-thy-neighbour effect, where the benefits to one national system come at the expense of another. This would mean that WCUPs were effectively a state aid distorting the trade of educational services (an issue that lies beyond the scope of this chapter).

A hypothetical example might be a research department at a world-class university which signs an exclusive confidentiality agreement with a leading firm located in its science park which in turn has a no-compete clause for its employees. Millions of Euros may be spent on the research without any public benefit. In such a case, the public resources invested in making that department world-class and attracting the private investment are spent on benefits which are exclusively private.

Clearly the public benefit of WCUPs is an emergent question that remains to be empirically delivered rather than proven conceptually. In this chapter, we therefore seek to establish the conditions under which a WCUP might produce the greatest public benefit. Do WCUPs offer public value for money at a time of fiscal austerity? We operationalise that concern into our research question of 'can world-class university programmes produce clear public benefits to national higher systems?'

To address that question, we look how one WCUP attempted to solve a systemic problem in French higher education, namely, the segmentation between the élite *Grandes Écoles* and the mass university system, in a country whose universities have performed sluggishly in the league tables (Ritzen 2010). This segmentation was specifically blamed by Valérie Pécresse, the French Minister for Higher Education, for this poor performance. Thus, a decade of reforms culminating in *Opération Campus* appears to use a WCUP to address an identified system problem. France therefore offers an interesting case to explore this issue of WCUPs.

The case study also offers an interesting set of tensions and contradictions. There is a strong culture of Republican *égalité* – or equality – in French public life, and although the elitism of the *Grandes Écoles* is accepted, there is a sense that the universities are mass, rather than élite, institutions. Encouraging competitive improvement runs directly counter to these Republican values which are a critical and central guiding feature of French education. Even those activities which have been successful, such as attempts by one of these *Grandes Écoles* (Sciences Po) to improve its recruitment from less wealthy areas, have been criticised for running counter to French Republican values (Grove 2011).

We present this case study and analysis at three levels. We firstly present an overview of the idea of Republican values in French education. We then consider the last decade of reforms which have set the context for the French WCUP which we define as *Opération Campus*. We then present the French WCUP and in particular the new kind of global managerialist discourse it has introduced into French higher education. This provides the basis for the identification and analysis of the public value embodied in the WCUP as outlined in our conclusions.

7.2.4 Republican Values as the Guiding Principles of French Higher Education

The French higher education system is classically described as a ‘dual’ system, in which the publicly funded universities and the state- or privately managed *Grandes Écoles* coexist. Within this system of two competing but complementary sectors of education and training after the *Baccalauréat*, young French citizens are equipped with the knowledge and skills necessary to make them effective contributors to French society and the French economy.

Since its considerable expansion in recent decades, the university sector, which is unselective, has been viewed as catering for the mass of French students, whereas the highly selective *Grandes Écoles* sector, despite the ‘massification’ of the universities, has continued to cater for an élite minority. In order to discuss the university and *Grandes Écoles* components of the French higher education, we provide an overview of the system and how it is structured (Toulemonde et al. 2006; Chapoulie et al. 2010).

7.3 The French Higher Education System

7.3.1 An Overview

The public university sector comprises a large number of *Universités* (otherwise described as '*facultés*'), *Instituts universitaires de technologie* (IUT), and other institutions (Kaiser 2007). There are currently some 80 universities and 120 IUTs, organised and named 'geographically' reflecting the strong linkages between the traditional universities and their cities and regions as well as the tendency for French students to attend their local university.

Following the Faure reform of the organisation of the university sector implemented in late 1968 in reaction to the student and social protests of May-June 1968, 'traditional' universities were separated into their constituent elements (science, law and social sciences, arts and humanities, medicine). Bordeaux University, originally founded in 1441, was split in 1970 into the universities of Bordeaux I (science), Bordeaux II (law, social sciences), and Bordeaux III (arts and humanities). An earlier reform of the university sector in the 1960s – the Fouchet reform – had added one or more IUTs to the majority of the traditional universities from 1966. Using the example of Bordeaux again, the reform resulted in IUT Bordeaux I (1966) and IUT Bordeaux III (1966).

Many universities have adopted names reflecting their disciplinary specialisations and their regionalism. Thus, although Bordeaux I retains its descriptive title 'Sciences et technologie', the arts and humanities university is Bordeaux III – Université Michel de Montaigne, and law and social sciences university Grenoble II is the Université Pierre Mendès-France. Within each university, still often referred to as '*facultés*', different groupings of individual or related subjects/disciplines, known as *Unités de formation et de recherche*, provide the teaching and research supervision for undergraduate and postgraduate students.

The *Baccalauréat* (created in 1808) has traditionally been considered the first qualification of the higher education system, conferring the right to pursue tertiary education in a university. Degree programmes generally last 3 years after the *Baccalauréat* ('Bac +3'), resulting in the obtaining of a 'Licence'. Postgraduate courses take 2 years of study after the Licence, resulting in a Master ('Bac +5'), with PhD students undertaking research for a further 3 years ('Bac +8'). Taken together, these three qualifications represent the Licence-Master-Doctorat (LMD) reform, part of the European Bologna process. Until 2007, an intermediate qualification rewarding 2 years of successful study, called the *Diplôme d'études universitaires générales* (DEUG), also existed for students unable to complete a *Licence*. This LMD system replaced a slightly more confusing system of DEUG, *Licence*, *Maîtrise*, DEA, and *doctorat* during the mid-2000s with the current 3:5:8 progression. IUTs deliver 2-year courses leading to the *Diplôme universitaire de technologie* (DUT), generally regarded as a worthwhile and respected 'more vocational' qualification than a *Licence*.

The *Grandes Écoles* sit outside the university system. The original rationale behind the *Grandes Écoles* system was that France required a highly trained élite able to drive development through all sectors of the economy and society. The *Ancien Régime* and the Revolutionary periods saw the creation of institutions for the training of engineers of all kinds. The *École des ponts et chaussées* was set up in 1747, the *École des mines de Paris* was created in 1783, and the *École polytechnique* and *Conservatoire national des arts et métiers* was created in 1794. These have always been highly selective, and the rigorous selection of entrants is still common to the *Grandes Écoles*. Whereas universities are ‘mass’ institutions for all those possessing the *Baccalauréat*, *Grandes Écoles* use highly competitive examinations known as ‘concours’ to select students. The preparation for such examinations may take a number of years of intensive coaching in specialised schools.

7.3.2 *The Mass-Élite Split in French Higher Education*

During the French Third Republic (1870–1940), there was an increase in the number of state universities as well as private *Grandes Écoles*. This was linked to the increasing need for more highly educated individuals in an albeit slowly modernising economy, along with the will of Republicans both to consolidate the Republic and to link socioeconomic progress to Republican values via the medium of education. As far as the *Grandes Écoles* were concerned, the introduction of compulsory primary education and widening access to secondary schooling should have given, at least in theory, access to a wider range of French citizens. Throughout this period, the driving principle was the creation of an ‘*élite républicaine*’ through meritocratic selection.

Universal secondary education was introduced in France in 1958, creating the opportunity for mass higher education. In 1929, 5% of the population completed the Bac. By 1958, this had risen to 23% and by 1985 67%. As secondary education has been massified and democratised in France beginning in the early 1960s with a greater proportion of each age group sitting and passing the Bac, the university system has been progressively squeezed by the democratically mandated right to higher education at age 18. The minimal annual fees paid by students (€177–€372, depending on level of study) are set to encourage participation, but help little with universities’ funding needs.

The French university system, with the occasional exception of IUTs, has been continually criticised for poor infrastructures and an inability to deal satisfactorily with the large and increasing numbers of students. Despite the best efforts of teachers and administrators, these mass universities have acquired the nickname of ‘la Fac poubelle’ (or ‘rubbish-bin university’). Beginning with the socialist governments of the 1980s, there have been calls for a target of 80% of age groups to obtain the *Baccalauréat*. The overall success rate for the diploma seems to be stabilising at around 85%, but the percentage of young people who actually obtain the qualification is failing to rise above 65–70%.

Occasional government attempts to introduce university selection have met with violent opposition from secondary pupils and university students alike. Nonselective entry to public courses leads to overcrowding, lack of individualised attention, and a subsequent weeding out of weaker students through academic failure. At each stage of university education, this '*sélection par l'échec*' can reach 50% (Beaupère and Boudesseul 2009). Although IUTs generally select their intake, study at university is a massified experience where only the 'fittest' reach the higher levels of *Master* and *Doctorat*, at which point group sizes and resources are better and there can be high-quality teaching informed by research. Increasingly, universities have tried to create prestigious and market-facing 'professional' *Licences* and *Masters* in order to bolster the attractiveness of university qualifications to employers, but traditionally it has been higher education in the *Grandes Écoles* sector which has provided the most prestigious diplomas.

The dual system of mass higher education in universities and élite training in *Grandes Écoles* that has developed in France since the 1960s has been matched by a similarly dualistic system of research activity. The French research effort has traditionally been led by state organisations specialised in specific fields and collaborating with universities, *Grandes Écoles*, and other partners through shared research teams, research groupings, thematic programmes, and other mechanisms.

The *Centre national de la recherche scientifique* (CNRS) has played a central role in coordinating pure research in all fields through joint research projects and teams organised with universities, *Grandes Écoles*, and other state organisations and industry. There are many other organisations who are significant research funders, including:

- The *Commissariat à l'énergie atomique* (CEA), which directs nuclear research (pure and applied)
- The *Centre national d'études spatiales* (CNES) in the area of space research
- The *Institut français de recherche pour l'exploitation de la mer* (IFREMER) in the marine science field

Grandes Écoles were thus essentially 'vocational', training experts for work in industry, commerce, administration, technology, and engineering, rather than academia. In the schools devoted to the arts and humanities as well as the sciences, such as the *Écoles normales*, training teachers and lecturers, teaching and research intermingled. But research was principally undertaken in the universities, and therefore research and theoretical teaching were perhaps surprisingly associated with mass institutions, whereas sectoral training in particular technocratic fields was an élite activity.

7.3.3 *The Long-Term Effects of a Mass-Élite Split*

The defining characteristic of French universities has been the notion of 'merit', crucial to the organisation of the system of élite tertiary education. In the years

before the massification and democratisation of the ‘Bac’ and before proper sociological understandings of the workings of social and cultural capital, the contribution to social mobility made by the *Grandes Écoles*’ meritocratic selection was minimal. Iconic examples of ‘grand mérite’ (humble origins transformed into high Republican service), such as Edouard Herriot or Jean Jaurès, were few. Most social mobility was limited to the ‘petit mérite’ of underprivileged children obtaining junior posts in the civil service (Borne 2007).

This reflected the reality that the *Grandes Écoles* were not about equality, but rather about providing a technocratic French élite able to manage its progressive modernisation. An example of this principle was the creation in 1946 of the most celebrated of France’s *Grandes Écoles*, the *École nationale d’administration*, charged with producing the senior civil servants needed to restore French grandeur. In the private *Grandes Écoles*, especially the business schools, high-quality intensive teaching is provided to children of privileged socio-professional groups in exchange for substantial annual registration fees.

Both *Grandes Écoles* and universities were traditionally aware of the need for social inclusivity, albeit interpreted in a minimalist fashion because of the tension between Republican attachment to ‘egalitarian’ treatment of all and problems associated with the favouring of some on the basis of ‘need’. There was therefore a system of scholarships and fee waivers, but awareness of social inequalities reflected in educational attainment increased throughout the later decades of the twentieth century (Bourdieu and Passeron 1979). The underrepresentation of lower socio-professional groups in *Grandes Écoles* and the higher levels of university (*Licences* and *Masters*) increasingly came to be seen as morally and socially unacceptable and wasteful of France’s human capital.

In the 1980s, the socialist administration was concerned about the strength and competitiveness of French science, technology, and industry, prompting the *Assises nationales de la recherche* in 1982. During the 1990s, the French state recognised the need to ‘modernise’, by improving teaching in the university and *grande école* sectors in parallel with their contribution to France’s overall research efforts.

In the early 2000s, France undertook a series of wide-ranging reforms of its higher education. These reforms were intended to make universities and *Grandes Écoles* more fit-for-purpose in terms of efficiency, equality, and their contribution to French competitiveness. Towards the end of the 2000s, concern about the continued need for modernisation of the tertiary education sector and its associated research activities was translated into the world-class university programme.

7.3.4 Reviving the Mediocre Mass Higher Education System

The post-2001 French HE reforms have had two foci. First, they have sought to improve the sector’s financial efficiency and productivity, along with boosting France’s human capital through enhancing ‘democratisation’ of access to higher

education. Old-fashioned and restrictive interpretations of the concept of 'sélection méritocratique' have been tempered by studies demonstrating the socially narrow recruitment to *Grandes Écoles* and higher levels of university study/research. In response, 'egalitarian' approaches have been replaced by attempts to make education 'equitable'. This concept of 'equity' emerged in the mid-1990s through – amongst other *fora* – the study commission led by Alain Minc on the future state of France in the year 2000. Undertaken within a wider survey of 'the state of France', it recommended renovating the university sector as part of a synthesis of Republican values and neo-liberal economic efficiency in French society more generally (Minc 1994).

7.3.5 *A Decade of Reforms in French Higher Education*

Measures supporting a broadened uptake of élite higher education gained support in the late 1990s and early 2000s. These were often equated to US initiatives of positive discrimination which is controversial in France. The highest profile initiative was implemented by the Institut d'études politiques de Paris ('Sciences Po.') from 2001. In 2001, the prestigious École supérieure des études économiques et commerciales (ESSEC) likewise implemented a similar mechanism aiming to combat social inequality in recruitment.

Sciences Po., an innovative initiative in favour of widening participation, started in Paris in September 2001 with the *Conventions Éducation Prioritaire* (CEP). Talented Baccalauréat-level students were identified in seven lycées participating in the scheme and given prioritised institution entry. By 2011, 85 lycées were involved in *conventions* with Sciences Po., 850 students had been recruited via the scheme, and six cohorts had graduated from the 5-year (including Masters-level) course. By 2011, the CEP scheme was well established despite ongoing criticisms from inside and outside the institution. Sciences Po. undertook an assessment of the on-course performance and employment history of the 172 students who graduated 2006–2011.

This study demonstrated the project's success, contradicting negative press claims that the students from 'non-traditional' catchment areas given special admission via the CEPs were weaker in performance and employability than 'normal' students recruited via competitive selection from 'privileged' backgrounds (Tiberj 2011). In terms of on-course success, CEP students reported finding the first year of study more challenging than other entrants, with a larger proportion being required to retake the first year before continuing with progression towards graduation after year 5. The initial difficulty of adapting to expectations and ways of studying experienced by CEP students was not surprising. Despite the fears of some, it did not lead to ongoing poor performance or failure for the candidates, and equally positively for Sciences Po. itself, the institution has been able to adapt to the needs of a more diverse student body.

Tiberj's study also demonstrates how the scheme has contributed to the social diversification of the institution itself, in response to concerns in previous years about its role in the social reproduction of French and Parisian élites. A decade of CEP recruitment has attenuated the overrepresentation of privileged socio-professional categories at Sciences Po. Although the institution is now more 'open' than other *Grandes Écoles*, it remains significantly less representative of French society overall than the state university sector student population. A key indicator is the percentage of scholarship students (the government target since 2007 is 30%) in selective higher education, and the 27% of 'boursiers' at Sciences Po. in 2009/2010 compares favourably with other *Grandes Écoles* such as Polytechnique (11%) or HEC (12%) (*ibid.*).

Since 2007, French governments have sought to diversify recruitment to *Grandes Écoles* through a target of 30% of students on state scholarships entering the 'preparatory' schools which coach young people for the *concours* (competitive entry exams for *Grandes Écoles*). Universities progressively realised that alongside 'formal equality' of standardised admission, teaching, and assessment, some students required extra support and tutoring of various kinds to achieve their real 'merit' in a mass system long characterised by a sink-or-swim institutional approach. Existing systems of (small) grants and subsidies for university study have been simplified and extended, to facilitate access to higher education by underprivileged students.

During the 2000s, French governments attempted to modernise the university sector to better align it with perceived 'international' models whilst encouraging a neo-liberal efficiency compatible with Republican values. In parallel with the reform of the public management approach (aligning neo-liberalism with traditional technocracy) came the so-called LMD reform of degree structures. This package coincided with the adoption of various measures inspired by the Bologna Agreement (1999) and was intended to internationalise the system from 2002 by fitting France's higher education into the increasingly 'Anglo-Saxon'-dominated European qualification structures.

Perhaps more challenging to the universities were the reforms implemented from late 2007 by conservative governments under President Sarkozy. The first of these was the August 2007 law on the freedoms and responsibilities of universities (hereafter LRU). The LRU reform was presented by the government as a way of creating a 'New University' culture at the service of 'equal opportunities for all'. But underneath the apparently traditional Republican values of *égalité* lay a shift which mirrored the general shift in administrative culture. These equal opportunities for all were to be delivered by a fairly traditional programme of marketisation and competitiveness in the sector, freeing universities from the control of central government and making them compete for their public funding on the basis of outputs. There was considerable resistance to the removal of universities' perceived privileges as state organisations and to the loss of security which these new freedoms would bring, particularly with the attempts to cut staff salary costs as part of the reform programme.

7.4 From Widening Participation to World-Class Institutions

7.4.1 *Regional Collaboration Initiatives (PRES)*

The LRU clarified a trend already under way for a number of years. The story of WCUPs in France cannot be told without understanding the crisis of 2003, in which French higher education engaged in soul-searching as a result of French institution's markedly poor performance in the 2003 Shanghai Ranking (Academic Ranking of World Universities, ARWU). In response to this crisis, a new policy of research concentrating and profiling was introduced in the mid-2000s (Harfi and Mathieu 2006). The *Pôles de recherche et d'enseignement supérieur* (PRES, see following section) and the announcement of the *Opération Campus* schemes contributing to France's overall world-class university programme, which paralleled the LRU, were a direct result of the crisis.

In 2006, the *Pacte sur la recherche* implemented an initiative to create what were termed *Pôles de recherche et d'enseignement supérieur* (PRES), regionally grouping together the activities of a variety of actors and stakeholders (Aust et al. 2008). This creation process was strongly steered by the national ministry, from the appointment of project managers to the retention by the ministry of the final approval process, and there are suggestions that this was influenced by strong political pressure (IGAENR 2007). By 2011, 21 PRESs involved almost 60 universities, engineering *Grandes Écoles*, *Instituts d'études politiques*, private business schools, public research institutes, and other bodies, alongside research and teaching hospitals. The complete list of the PRESs, although not their participating members, is given in the Table 7.2.

Administratively and legally, the PRES groupings have been set up as *établissements publics de coopération scientifique* (ECPS), seen by government as the most appropriate for the collaborative management of research and teaching. The ECPS is the only legal status which allows the universities working together in a PRES to award degrees and other qualifications. This 'common' identity is further underlined by the requirement that all research work published by PRES members carry the name of the PRES itself, in an attempt to further raise the visibility of France's major centres of research activity. Although research and higher education Minister Valérie Pécresse stated that her motivation was not simply 'big is beautiful', the PRES programme is also described as an 'accelerator' of mergers between universities.

7.4.2 *Opération Campus and the Saclay Super-Campus*

The second part of the reform came in addressing the decades of underinvestment without having to completely rebuild the campus estate. *Opération Campus* was launched in early 2008, promising an infrastructural renovation of a number of

Table 7.2 Pôles de recherche et d'enseignement supérieur (PRES), France, 2011

Aix-Marseille Université
Université de Bordeaux
PRES Bourgogne Franche-Comté (ESTH-Innovation Université)
Université européenne de Bretagne
Centre – Val de Loire Université
Clermont Université
Université de Grenoble
HESAM (Hautes Etudes-Sorbonne-Arts et Métiers)
Université Lille Nord de France
PRES Limousin Poitou-Charentes
PRES de l'Université de Lorraine
Université de Lyon
Université Montpellier Sud de France
Université Nantes Angers Le Mans
Université de Toulouse
ParisTech (Institut des Sciences et Technologies de Paris)
Université Paris Cité
Université Paris Est
Paris Sciences et Lettres – Quartier latin
Sorbonne Universités
UniverSud Paris

Table 7.3 Opération Campus: campuses selected for improvement, France, 2011

Campus	Funding (million €)
Saclay	850
Paris	700
Lyon	575
Aix-Marseille	500
Bordeaux	475
Campus Condorcet (Paris-Aubervilliers)	450
Grenoble	400
Strasbourg	375
Montpellier	325
Toulouse	350
Lorraine	190
Lille	110

France's university campuses. Based on the admission that 30% of campuses were run down and dilapidated, government funding was made available in a competition amongst universities to be one of the dozen or so 'winners' of the programme. As of late 2011, the 12 campuses selected for improvement are listed in Table 7.3.

More than the simple improvement of the nationwide poor university infrastructures that had spawned the nickname of '*la Fac poubelle*', Opération Campus represented a narrowly focused project which sought to transform a limited number of campuses (and a larger number of universities, as some campuses are shared by more than one institution) into internationally visible 'shop windows' of French higher education and research excellence. These '*Campus d'excellence*' have been

Table 7.4 IDEX shortlisted for final round of competition, France, 2011

Region	Acronym	Nom	Project leader
Rhône-Alpes	GUIPLUS	Grenoble-Alpes Université de l'Innovation	Grenoble-Alpes Université de l'Innovation
Aquitaine	IDEX Bordeaux	Initiative d'excellence de l'université de Bordeaux	Université de Bordeaux
Rhône-Alpes	IDEX Lyon Saint-Etienne	Université de Lyon, imagine: Lyon/Saint Etienne, métropole d'innovation et de création	Université de Lyon
Ile de France	PSLétoile	Paris Sciences et Lettres étoile: rendons possible le nécessaire	Paris Sciences et Lettres
Ile de France	SUPER	Sorbonne Universités à Paris pour l'Enseignement et la Recherche	Sorbonne Universités
Midi-Pyrénées	Toulouse IDEX	Toulouse initiative d'excellence	Université de Toulouse
Alsace	UNISTRA	Université de Strasbourg: par delà les frontières, l'université de Strasbourg	Université de Strasbourg

criticised for the way in which they deflected attention from the ongoing difficulties experienced by smaller institutions.

In late 2010, the Ministry of Higher Education and Research announced another programme intended to make French universities more visible on the world stage. This was the '*initiatives d'excellence*' (IDEX) scheme, part of the wider *Investissements d'avenir* ('investing for the future') programme. In March 2011, seven '*initiatives d'excellence*' were shortlisted for the final round of competition, judged on the criteria of excellence in research, the robustness of their management plans, and the intensity of linkages between the public and private sectors (Table 7.4).

By July 2011, the first tranche of three projects was announced. These three '*initiatives d'excellence*' were planned to be the first of some 5–10 '*pôles d'excellence*' to be funded with a war chest of €7.7bn:

- IDEX Bordeaux led by the Bordeaux University PRES (four universities, the Institut polytechnique de Bordeaux and Sciences Po. Bordeaux)
- Unistra led by the University of Strasbourg (formed in 2009 by merger of the universités Louis Pasteur, Marc Bloch et Robert Schumann)
- Paris Sciences et Lettres (PSL) led by a Fondation de coopération scientifique (13 participants including the Collège de France, École normale supérieure, Université Paris-Dauphine, ESPCI ParisTech, Chimie ParisTech, Observatoire de Paris, Institut Curie, and Institut Louis Bachelier)

Perhaps the best-known case study of France's overall policy to create world-class universities is Saclay Campus development in the Parisian *Île de France* region. Saclay was favoured by President Sarkozy, who regarded the Saclay project, grouping universities, public-sector research organisations, private-sector high-tech businesses, and large research infrastructures, as an iconic example of France's global research strength. At the same time, the initiative was widely criticised as exemplifying the many difficulties of the overall plan to create excellence in the university sector.

Sarkozy's view was ascribed to a desire to mobilise a group of over 20 stakeholders in the project, thereby creating synergies in innovation and creativity. By centralising the management of Saclay's multiple and disparate activities, the intention was to create economies of scale and foster efficiency. But the head of the CNRS voiced concerns that neither the area's geography, the number of actors involved, nor the proposed governance of the grouping seemed propitious for realising its ambitious and multidimensional goals (Huet 2011). As with the earlier reforms of higher education and research implemented in the 2000s, lecturers and researchers have reacted adversely to perceived threats to their working conditions.

One of the driving principles underlying the ambition to create world-class universities is the 'critical mass' of institutions. The idea of WCUs has therefore become bound up with a move towards mergers and collaboration between universities, research organisations and other bodies. However, in the case of France, which is characterised by an already complex ecology of different HE/research institutions, the creation of this critical mass through new initiatives is actually adding layers of administration, rather than clarifying and simplifying administrative structures. The question is (a) whether this will reinvigorate French higher education fortunes and its global research reputation and (b) what the wider public benefits of the decade of reforms, and the recent plethora of programmes by which France has attempted to address its perceived world-class university gap, are.

7.4.3 Formative Evaluation: France's WCUP and the Five Public Benefits

In the overview of the theory of WCUPs, we characterised five kinds of public benefits which could be produced by WCUPs. These were not private benefits to individuals or to particular institutions but benefits which accrued at the level of the higher education system. In order to bring the French reforms and WCUPs into perspective, we consider the reforms' contribution over the last decade along each variable.

The first variable was the attraction of increased exogenous resources. There has been an increase in the internationalisation of France's higher education system since the late 1990s with numbers of French students studying abroad as well as a marked increase in the number of foreign students hosted in France (Vincent-Lancrin 2009), and France representing both one of the major hosts and

one of the sources of foreign students. In that sense, the reforms, both those with a national logic and those driven by the Bologna process, have come some way in creating public value, bringing new students into the French system as well as providing French students with access to higher education abroad. Although Vincent-Lancrin (2009) points out that other countries have come much further than France (notably China) in terms of both outgoing and inbound market share, France performs well and has improved its performance, which suggests that some level of improvement has been delivered in the system.

The second variable was increased private resources from France that would not have been spent in the HE sector on research. The French WCUP – through IDEX and the PRESs – has formed part of Le Grand Emprunt in which the French state is investing an additional €18.5bn through L'Agence nationale de la recherche (ANR), a research council created in 2005 to award research funding to universities through direct competition (Davesne 2007). These additional resources were not created by the WCUP, but it can be argued that the reforms created an environment where the government was willing to invest greater sums in research, believing it offered promising returns.

The third variable was whether the emphasis upon world-class universities has improved the functioning of the higher education system and produced a more efficient use of public resources. Clearly, the PRESs have the potential to do this, because the biggest challenge for French higher education is enriching the quality of the education that higher education students in publicly funded universities receive. The reforms led to the creation of AERES the Evaluation Agency for Research and Higher Education and in their synthetic evaluation of French research in 2010 were keen to conclude the reforms including Opération Campus and the Grand Emprunt had succeeded. This report presented the results of a comprehensive, four-wave review of all French universities, which ranked all research into four categories. They argued that the pressure to collaborate had led to the creation of a critical mass and raised the quality of higher level training. However, in the absence of a convincing baseline, it is impossible to evaluate this claim.

The fourth variable is related to the creation of new products which increased the overall attractiveness of France as a location for study, including, for example, the creation of graduate schools. As part of the 2010 AERES evaluation, data was presented for universities and their students with foreign diplomas (i.e. non-Bac students); in the 5-year period 2004–2005 to 2009–2010, there was a 7% increase in the number of these foreign students (covering the 82 universities that returned data and excluding the Grandes Écoles) increasing from 153,000 to 164,000 foreign students. Vincent-Lancrin points out that this increase is relatively small but from a relatively high base. How much of this can be attributed to the WCUP is debatable, but it has taken place at a time of increasing institutionalisation.

The fifth area of public value is in terms of improving the public profile for all universities. It is difficult to directly measure this and can only be hinted at with increasing numbers of foreign students. But any thought of an improvement in the prestige of French universities should be tempered by the failure of the reforms to increase French universities' performance in the Academic Ranking of World

Table 7.5 French universities in each of the top ranks 2003–2011

	Top 20	Top 100	Top 200	Top 300	Top 400	Top 500
2011	–	3	7	13	18	22
2003	–	2	8	12	17	22

Source: www.arwu.org

Universities. The Table 7.5 below shows the performance from 2003 (the date of the original crisis which created French policy interest in WCUPs) and the most recent data (2011).

What is notable about this is that the distribution is similar to that in 2003. There are the same number of universities in the top 500 (namely 22), and although there is one more in the top 300, there is one less in the top 200. Despite the efforts to reverse the situation, these changes have not improved French performance. With the funding for improvements only now beginning, and rather more slowly than intended, French universities may improve their position in the future. But this question of the longer-term effects of the reforms is salient, and in order to better understand the perceived public values of this reform, we now turn to the longer-term public value of a decade of reforms seeking to produce competitive, dynamic universities in France.

7.4.4 The Langue Durée of French Higher Education Reform

The French political culture is one in which considerable legitimacy derives from administrative competence. French higher education administration faced a crisis in the early 2000s in response to a perception that France's universities were increasingly out of step with international trends, as demonstrated by Bologna; student mobility; and university league tables. France's interest in world-class universities was restricted therefore to improving resource efficiency but also their symbolical deployment to legitimate French higher education policy on the domestic stage. From this perspective, it becomes possible to frame these reforms as an attempt to reinvigorate higher education through the neo-liberal mechanisms of market-based reforms, competition, and selectivity.

Overall, policy initiatives undertaken in France in the 2000s to improve French universities have moved steadily towards a free-market vision of institutions made autonomous from centralised state control and competing in a global environment of knowledge and research. The Sarkozy administration appeared to have adapted, through a form of 'policy transfer', some of the managerialist/commercial value sets that France has previously opposed in other fields, such as culture, or language. Although the value sets at the heart of the policies may be novel for the French state, the often semi-dirigiste nature of the initiatives subsequently employed to effect change suggest that old habits die hard for government.

France's current readiness to espouse what might be called 'managerialist' policy choices in higher education and research as attempts to improve France's knowledge competitiveness in the globalised economy is a clear example of 'policy transfer'. In effect, the French state is adopting attitudes and behaviour it has hitherto strongly resisted in defence of 'French exceptionalism' (Hoareau 2011). It seems that the Sarkozy administration is more ready to move away from French traditions of centralised, public sector-led models of higher education and research. Framed in this perspective, globalisation has been seen as an opportunity rather than a threat.

At the same time, traditional attitudes have remained, evident in both a mix of 'Republican' rhetoric (e.g. around 'Egalité des chances') and semi-dirigiste government initiatives to encourage change in the university sector. One might speculate that elite French administrators feel, analogous to university staff, that their professions are being destroyed by the introduction of foreign values. The frequent attempts by the state to enlist traditional Republican values such as 'Egalité des chances' in support of change to the universities driven by international competition (arguably an anathema to those values) reflects the clear tension and problems in attempting to introduce these new values into French HE.

A major criticism of the French state's current effort to reform higher education and research in general, and simultaneously to improve the visibility and competitiveness of French universities and research worldwide, is that there are too many initiatives creating confusion in the sector (Soulé 2011). It therefore seems that the government runs the risk of fragmentation, with its drive for competition and a plethora of policy initiatives which run counter to the real public value, namely, making French universities more attractive to the world, and providing a more effective higher level education for the French labour market.

7.5 Conclusions

It is clear that the last decade of reform in France has constituted a substantive effort to overhaul the higher education system and in particular to use a world-class university programme to drive a set of changes. Yet, there is a sense that these changes are not producing the desired results. There has been a resistance from university staff and students, in particular, to the highly controversial law for the reform of universities.

The most interesting lesson to be drawn from France is about the more general use of WCUPs as a means of transforming, modernising, and dynamising French higher education. The WCUP was part of a wider transformation process in French public governance and inevitably was influenced by the progress of that broader change. The ideas behind a WCUP were in line with the cultural changes that the French government wished to achieve, creating dynamic and competitive university leadership. But there was a cultural clash between traditions of top-down management and balance, and unleashing the dynamism of competition.

The ARWU crisis was clearly a moment which allowed the government to advance a new administrative paradigm into the French higher education sector. At the same time, having raised expectations of transformation, the ministry found itself pulled towards WCUPs (and indeed much higher funding for the sector) as part of an attempt to complete that transformation. It is therefore important not to interpret the changes in France purely as the rational implementation of a policy. Rather, there were a range of problems which policymakers regarded as important to address, and when particular solutions were implemented, new problems emerged. It is likely that later interventions have sought to undo or remedy some of the higher education system problems.

In this chapter, we have been arguing for the importance of taking a systems perspective in understanding the impacts of WCUPs and in particular to not assume that WCUPs automatically produce positive benefits. There were some hints that the overall transformation process through which French higher education had progressed had indeed made some systems improvements, including widening participation, increasing internationalisation, and justifying increased investments in the system. But the role of the WCUP in that process has not been straightforward, only really emerging towards the end of a wider shift, which itself did not proceed without considerable opposition from key stakeholders.

The challenge for France is the revitalisation of its university sector and, in particular, reconciling the tension between the resource-rich *Grandes Écoles* and the university sector where chronic underfunding has led to a hands-off approach to education and low performances at the undergraduate level. The CEP at Sciences Po. provides very few students for French universities, and the key systems improvements must come through improving the student experience in a mass university system which differs markedly from the Anglo-American university model. In short, the French experience does not demonstrate that WCUPs provide greater value in improving systems than other approaches, beyond that brought by the additional resources.

In the case of France, where one would have expected considerable benefits, we have been unable to identify any intrinsic advantages from the WCUP approach. Advantages have come where WCUP activities have played to existing strengths in the system, or concentrated resources on achieving difficult changes. The French government should be commended for resisting the urge to concentrate resources on the *Grandes Écoles* to simply increase the numbers of French universities in the rankings. Instead, there appears to have been a sincere effort to address the systems problems, and WCUPs have been one element of those efforts.

We therefore call for caution regarding the value of WCUPs. WCUPs have been useful in persuading governments of the value of investing in higher education and for governments seeking to profile their nations more aggressively internationally. This is not to say that the approach has no value but that it has value under particular circumstances, and it is therefore necessary to be much more circumspect about the claims that are made regarding their utility. In particular, we highlight three areas which could potentially benefit from a much greater nuance if national Education Ministries are to improve the quality and performance of their higher education systems as a whole.

The first is the definition of WCUP and in particular in the view that being world-class means being like Harvard or MIT. In understanding the idea of a world-class university, we add to Salmi's (2009) criteria of excellence in teaching, research, and facilities, excellence in national impact. Secondly, we suggest that governments in their use of rankings should understand what matters about higher education, corroborating Hazelkorn's claims that rankings methodologies need to take greater account of outcome rather than volume and resource metrics. Thirdly, there is a need for a much more nuanced understanding of national higher education system conditions to enable governments to nuance their policy choices to achieve what is really desirable rather than simply achieving apparently valuable but ultimately meaningless improvements in league table rankings.

Higher education research is coming to terms with a sense that the paradigm that has dominated the previous quarter century, namely, of driving efficiency improvement competition, has reached the limits of its success and that new approaches are necessary to ensure efficiency of public investments in higher education. A new conceptual framework is necessary for effective coordination between institutions without restricting their freedom to innovate and improve their service delivery. Perhaps the most valuable message to take away from the French experience is the depth of change in the way that the problem is framed within public service that is necessary if this broader change is to be achieved. World-class university programmes must therefore be understood as the first step on a longer journey towards world-class university systems, and this end point will require considerable focus and application to successfully achieve.

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