

SOPHIE ORANGE

## 9. DEMOCRATIZATION OF POSTSECONDARY EDUCATION IN FRANCE: DIVERSE AND COMPLEMENTARY INSTITUTIONS

French higher education (HE) incorporates a diverse group of institutions with different objectives, characteristics, and organizational structures. Some are selective, while others have open admission; some offer academic programs, while others offer vocational programs; some are public, while others are private; some have low tuition fees, while others have very high ones; some are located on college campuses, while others are located in secondary schools; some employ research professors, others only secondary school teachers. The plurality of institution types is both a result and a cause of the massification of French HE.

The HE space is divided differently in France, compared to other countries. There are three main groups: (i) public universities, by far the largest; (ii) the so-called *petit enseignement supérieur* (vocationally-oriented postsecondary institutions); and (iii) the *grandes écoles* (elite institutions). Each group is relatively heterogeneous in its management, its enrollment process, and how students are assessed. The place of each group in the hierarchy of French HE reflects the status of the professions that the institutions prepare for, the social and academic composition of their constituencies, and the specific role they have played in broadening access to HE.

Currently, 60% of the student enrollment is distributed among 74 French public universities. Public universities have relatively low tuition fees. They offer three levels of qualifications in different academic fields: *Licence* (undergraduate degree), *Master* (masters degree), and *Doctorat* (PhD). These programs train doctors, lawyers, teachers, researchers, and senior executives. Public universities are open to anyone who has obtained the baccalauréat (secondary school leaving certificate), and, in principle, students are not selected on the basis of other details of their academic history or on their application form.

The *petit enseignement supérieur* refers to short vocational training programs, such as the STS (*Sections de techniciens supérieurs*—higher technicians sections), the IUT (*Instituts universitaires de technologie*—university institutes of technology), and paramedical and social work schools, that deliver a higher national diploma and

are meant to lead directly to employment after two years of postsecondary education. This sector accounts for 19% of the student population, distributed among the 3,079 institutions (public or private high schools, and specialized schools).

CPGE courses (*classes préparatoires aux grandes écoles*—preparatory classes for the *grandes écoles*) are taught in high schools<sup>1</sup> to prepare students for the competitive entrance exams for admission to the elite *grandes écoles* (*Sciences Po Paris, Écoles normales supérieures, École polytechnique, etc.*) and higher schools of art, business, and engineering that lead to masters level programs. Twenty-one percent of the student population attends 1,381 elite institutions.

In France, HE has gone through two periods of massification during the last fifty years. In the 1960s, the number of students grew from 309,700 to 850,600—a 175% increase. Between 1985 and 1995, the number of students increased from 1,124,990 to 2,140,900—a 90% increase. Since the early 2000s, the student population has stabilized, although since 2015 a new demographic expansion has been observed. These three phases have affected different segments of the French HE system and have contributed to its diversification.

In France, higher education programs lead in principle to a career. Upon entering higher education, students pursue a specific discipline or course program, that they follow exclusively until completion.

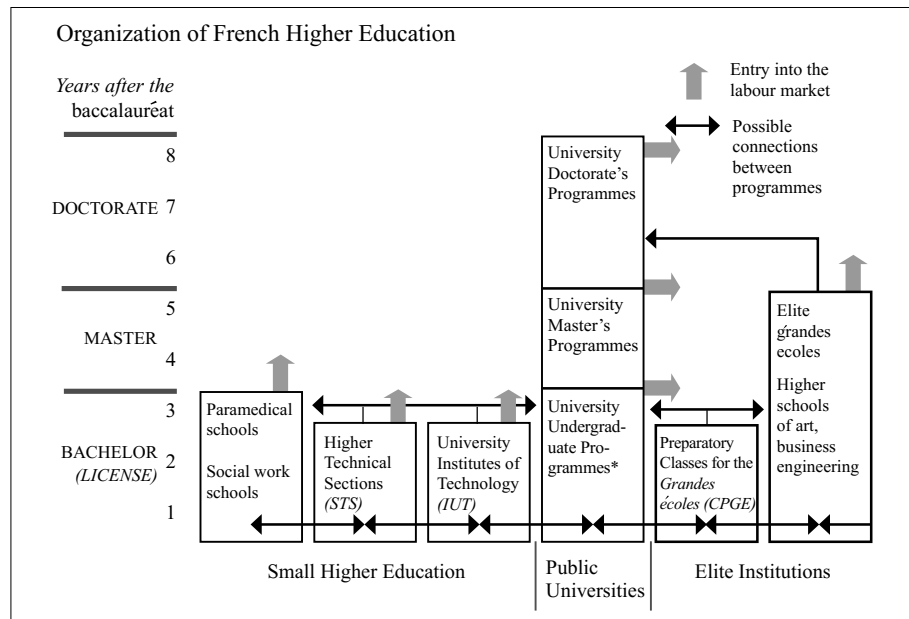


Figure 1: Organization of French Higher Education

\*Academic fields of University undergraduate programmes (Licence): Literature and the Arts/Humanities/ Material Sciences/Engineering Sciences/Natural and Life Sciences/Languages/Law, Political Sciences/ Economics, Management/Social and Economic Administration/Health/Physical and Sport Activities

#### EVOLUTION OF THE STRUCTURE AND ORGANIZATION OF THE TRANSFORMATION AND DIVERSIFICATION OF THE PUBLIC UNIVERSITIES

In the early 1960s, public universities enrolled 70% of the total student population. The university model remained similar to that of medieval universities, with a limited number of faculties open to all *baccalauréat* graduates, without any selection procedure and at relatively low cost. These programs primarily trained medical doctors, lawyers, teachers, and researchers. During this period, university enrollments increased from 214,700 to 637,000 (+11.5% per year), generating an internal overhaul of the curricula and a development of greater infrastructure. By increasing the degree of autonomy of university governance, the *Loi Faure* (Faure Law) of 1968 allowed for greater diversification of university programs, in line with the academic and professional expectations of a new student audience that was academically weaker and with fewer social advantages. New professional programs, such as economic and social administration and science and technology of physical activities and sports, were created in the early 1970s (Felouzis 2003). The number of university degree programs gradually increased with a corresponding decrease in state control during the 1980s (Musselin 2006). This resulted in a multiplicity of *licence* titles in the early 2000s, and the development of professional university degrees (professional *licences* and professional masters).

Widening access to HE also expanded university locations. Public universities gradually outgrew their buildings in the historical centers of the large cities and moved to the suburbs, and then to smaller towns. Public policies supported this decentralization that improved access to university programs throughout the country. The *Université 2000* plan, implemented in 1990, led to the establishment of new universities and decentralized campuses. As a result, the democratization of HE was strengthened, geographical access to first degrees widened, and cost to families was reduced. This decentralization was a product of both, increased autonomy awarded to the universities and increased participation of local authorities in institutional management and funding. Since the 1982 and 1983 decentralization laws, regions have a greater influence in guiding and supporting high school graduates in HE, and determining the selection of degree programs on offer.

#### PETIT ENSEIGNEMENT SUPÉRIEUR

Increasing labor market demand for middle managers led to two new types of short-cycle vocational institutions (Clark 1960), following OECD recommendations and similar developments in other countries. In 1959, *Sections de techniciens supérieurs* (STS, Higher technicians sections) were created. STS are two-year training programs de-

signed to produce technicians for the industry and service sectors and taught in secondary schools. In 1966, the *Instituts universitaires de technologie* (IUT, university institutes of technology) were created within the universities and designed to train middle managers. These two training programs were also a way of managing the flow of new students (Erlich 1998), namely first-generation students from low-income families, who were not expected to pursue longer-term degree programs. These students are mainly holders of a technological baccalauréat (established in 1968) or a vocational *baccalauréat* (established in 1986), that are less prestigious than the general *baccalauréat*. These two *baccalauréat* diplomas have contributed to the political goal of 80% of the age cohort finishing secondary school (Beaud 2002) as well as improving opportunities for HE access to working class students.

*Petit enseignement supérieur* training programs also include paramedical schools: three-year preparation for mid-level healthcare professions (nurses, physiotherapists, etc.); social work schools offering three year programs leading to the professions of educator or social worker; and smaller business schools, that offer short study programs in accounting and commerce. These programs help enroll 50% of the age cohort to a HE program, a more recent HE goal (Law on Higher Education and Research 2013). Paradoxically, it is mainly these selective course programs that have expanded the social diversity represented in HE. Non-selective public universities contributed to expanded access to HE, but during the 1980s and the 1990s, the quantitative but also qualitative democratization of HE was mainly carried out by short, selective public and private training programs.

#### THE ELITE INSTITUTIONS

The elite institutions, the *grandes écoles*, are the most prestigious institutions of French HE. These institutions train senior executives, engineers, scientists, business leaders, and politicians. Elite programs include the two-year, post-*baccalauréat* preparatory classes that prepare for entry into the prestigious *grandes écoles*, and the *grandes écoles* themselves (*Écoles normales supérieures*, *École polytechnique*, *Sciences Po Paris*, *École des hautes études commerciales* HEC, etc.). The competitive entrance exams to the *grandes écoles* consist of written and oral tests based on academic knowledge in various disciplines. Their admission rates are very low (for instance, an average of about 2.5% of applicants are accepted to the *École normale supérieure*). These, often old, institutions are both public and private and enroll the most socially advantaged students from the most prestigious secondary schools (mainly from the scientific stream of the general baccalauréat). The profile of students admitted to these institutions has barely changed despite the massification of HE; they remain highly selective institutions. For some, particular business schools or institutions such as *Science Po Paris*, recruitment strategies have changed to achieve greater diversity. They have added more nonacademic criteria to their selection procedures, so that the social resources of the candidates tend to be considered along with their academic

abilities (Karabel 2006). This group of elite institutions also includes many private *grandes écoles* (in business, engineering, etc.) whose numbers increased in the 1980s and 1990s. These schools recruit directly from the *baccalauréat* and offer *licence* and masters-level programs, and access is further limited by their high level of tuition.

During the 2000s, increasing access became a priority for the most elite institutions of the system. Yet, in these institutions, the teacher/student ratio and levels of government funding per student remain the most favorable, while the social diversity in these institutions continues to be very narrow. Some measures intended to promote access for candidates from low-income families (mentoring programs, implementation of specific pathways for graduates from disadvantaged high schools, etc.) have been implemented. However, the number of students involved in these initiatives is very low and diversity in these elite institutions remains minimal (van Zanten 2010).

#### THE END OF THE CENTRAL ROLE OF THE PUBLIC UNIVERSITY IN FRENCH HE?

For many years, the public university has been the dominant model of French HE, due to the large percentage of enrollment (70% of all the student population in 1960), and due to its prestige (Bourdieu and Passeron 1974). These universities remain the center of scientific research production, accounting for almost 50% of France's researchers (MESR 2014). Other major research organizations, such as the *Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique* (CNRS, National Center of Scientific Research) and the *Institut National des Études Démographiques* (INED, National Institute of Demographic Studies), employ a third of the researchers. Other researchers work in *grandes écoles*. Institutions belonging to the group of *petit enseignement supérieur* are almost absent from the research sector. Teachers in STS and in paramedical and social work schools are high school teachers or instructors from the professional world. Only IUTs have a number of teachers-researchers.

The current diversification in HE and the increased competition from institutions such as specialized *grandes écoles* or vocationally oriented training programs could be considered a challenge to the university model. With declining university enrollments during the 2000s, it is evident that the attractiveness of a university degree has diminished. Students are opting for alternatives in selective courses such as IUT, STS, or specialized *grandes écoles* (business, law, engineering, etc.) Furthermore, in a national and international context of increasing privatization and new institutions competing for market share (Attali 1998), the relevance of a public, nonselective, and virtually free university is being questioned.

Table 1: Statistics about the different HE institutions

		Number of institutions			Number of students (including part of private sector in 2013)		
		1993	2003	2013	1960	1983	2013
<i>Petit enseignement supérieur</i>	Higher Technicians Sections (STS)	1,864	2,118	2,334	8,000	93,901	231,600 (26.3 %)
	University Institutes of Technology (IUT)	88	113	113	–	55,962	115,800 (0 %)
	Paramedical schools	596	420	415	nc	68,747	100,700 (24.1 %)
	Social works schools	151	147	217	nc	17,035	32,200 (97.2 %)
	Public universities	84	82	74	214,672	863,078	1,499,484 (0 %)
	Private universities & other universities	18	21	21	nc	19,099	61,300 (57.9 %)
<i>Elite institutions</i>	Preparatory classes for the grandes écoles	470	405	451	21,000	44,003	81,200 (14.0 %)
	Grande école of arts	243	261	267	nc	nc	67,400 (47.6 %)
	Grandes écoles of business	276	228	195	5,286	22,821	136,800 (100 %)
	Grandes écoles of engineering	227	244	254	20,770	40,412	132,500 (35.4 %)
	Other grandes écoles	182	225	193	nc	nc	55,100 (85.1 %)
	Total	4,199	4,264	4,534	309,700*	1,225,058*	2,429,900* (18.3 %)

\* Estimation.

nc: data not available.

NB: The different HE institutions depend on various supervisory authorities. This makes it difficult to obtain accurate data on the number of teachers of technical colleges, many of which are private, as well as for CPGE and STS, as teachers are allocated partly to these training programs, and partly to secondary education. <http://piketty.pse.ens.fr/fichiers/enseig/memothes/DeaZuber2003.pdf>

Source: Ministère de l'Enseignement supérieur et de la Recherche ; Ministère des Affaires sociales et de la Santé. Government expenditures: Zurber 2003.

Table 1: Statistics about the different HE institutions (continued)

		<i>Part of scholarship holders</i>	<i>Government expenditure per student</i>	<i>Number of teachers</i>
		<i>2013</i>	<i>2001</i>	<i>2013</i>
<i>Petit enseignement supérieur</i>	Higher Technicians Sections (STS)	43.8 %	10,562€	nc
	University Institutes of Technology (IUT)	42.9 %	9,331€	9,868
	Paramedical schools	nc	2,721€	nc
	Social works schools	nc	7,732€	nc
	Public universities	28.3 %	8,585€	73,473
	Private universities & other universities	nc	nc	nc
<i>Elite institutions</i>	Preparatory classes for the grandes écoles	27.6 %	14,503€	6,000*
	Grande école of arts	nc	nc	nc
	Grandes écoles of business	11.4 %	nc	nc
	Grandes écoles of engineering	14.3 %	12,736€	2,635
	Other grandes écoles	nc	nc	
	Total			

\* Estimation.

nc: data not available.

NB: The different HE institutions depend on various supervisory authorities. This makes it difficult to obtain accurate data on the number of teachers of technical colleges, many of which are private, as well as for CPGE and STS, as teachers are allocated partly to these training programs, and partly to secondary education. <http://piketty.pse.ens.fr/fichiers/enseig/memothes/DeaZuber2003.pdf>

Source: Ministère de l'Enseignement supérieur et de la Recherche ; Ministère des Affaires sociales et de la Santé. Government expenditures: Zurber 2003.

#### THE HE PRIVATIZATION TREND

Private HE has expanded greatly since the 1980s. Privatization refers to three distinct, yet relatively convergent processes (Vinokur 2002). Mostly, it refers to the growth of private sector training programs in a system largely dominated, until the 1980s, by the public sector. The number of private schools and their enrollment have increased sharply over the period, from 111,313 students in 1980 to 443,600 students in 2013. However, private HE training programs have always existed in the French system. Their inventory (Bodin and Orange 2016) and their control by the state (Musselin 2006) have improved only progressively, preventing a real evaluation of impact over time. Indeed, Charles and Orchard (2012) have shown that liberal and private HE course programs are not new: Catholic schools and business or engineering schools supported by private funds have existed since the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

The privatization of French HE also refers to the introduction of the managerial spirit to the public university. The decrease of public funding and the budgetary autonomy of universities have led to the rationalization of resources and a need to pursue new sources of revenue, leading to partnerships with the private sector (development of continuing education programs; increase in contracted research, etc.) Public universities now must deliver results to justify continued public financial support (Vinokur 2006). The management of the public university is growing increasingly similar to that of a private institution, as illustrated by the outsourcing of a number of ancillary services (maintenance and cleaning buildings; security, etc.) and teaching activities (use of temporary teachers; skills certifications outside of the university; development of internships as part of training programs, etc.) Increased tuition fees at public universities have not yet been implemented for fear of social protest (Chauvel et al. 2015).

Finally, the privatization of French HE has been facilitated by the development of new legal forms, such as the *grand établissement* (large establishment) status, since 1984, which awards institutions greater autonomy in financial management, administration, student selection, and setting tuition fees. A few public universities have already changed their legal status to become private institutions, such as the Université Paris-Dauphine in 2004 or the Université de Lorraine in 2012.

#### RATIONALIZATION AND CONVERGENCE OF THE MODELS OF GRANDES ÉCOLES AND UNIVERSITIES

The weakening of the university model is also observed in the growing similarities of functions and curricula. The massification of HE coincides with rising prerequisites for employability, with professional training programs increasingly taking the lead over programs oriented toward the transmission of academic knowledge. The current trend is to prepare graduates for the workplace and to reinforce the relationship



between education and employment. This ideological change appears in the professionalization of training programs, in the rise of project-based learning, and in an emphasis on skills assessment. The rise of interdisciplinarity and modules shared between various programs at the undergraduate level have altered the classical, discipline-based curriculum at the university, in favor of a form of education closer to that of *grandes écoles* or secondary schools.

The Bologna process and the construction of the European HE area launched in 1999 was intended to bring about greater uniformity among heterogeneous programs. Within the context of internationalization of HE and stabilization of student numbers, the aim is now to bring more clarity to the system, internally (for future students) and also externally (within the European area). The harmonization of degrees along three levels (*Licence–Master–Doctorat*, 3+2+3) is a critical element of this trend. The use of the same term, master, for graduates of the second cycle (following the *licence*) at a university or *grande école* illustrates this trend (Musselin 2006).

While public universities tend to adopt the model of the *grandes écoles*, convergence affects the *grandes écoles* as well. These have borrowed traditional features of the university, such as their recent investment in scientific activity: hiring of research professors, racing to publish, competing for scientific funding, etc. (Blanchard 2015). Their need to have their qualifications nationally recognized requires *grandes écoles* to be part of accreditation processes. Public universities have thus recently lost their monopoly over national masters degrees, and more recently over PhD degrees, and some *grandes écoles* are now accredited to deliver these degrees.

The current policy of governance and funding of French HE and research promotes the establishment of specialized and clearly identified centers of excellence, with national and international stature. Thus, partnerships between *grandes écoles* and universities will tend to increase and that contributes to the likelihood that French institutions will do better in the international rankings. The state has promoted this trend by creating the status of COMUE (university and institution communities) in 2013, that followed another form of consolidation, *pôles de recherche et d'enseignement supérieur* (PRES, university clusters for research and higher education), in 2006.

#### THE REGULATORY ROLE OF PUBLIC UNIVERSITIES

The various institutions that make up the French HE system remain more complementary than competitive. Indeed, each type exists to serve academically and socially different target groups (Convert 2003), and each plays a specific role in improving access to HE.

Public universities continue to play a central regulating role in determining access to HE (Bodin and Millet 2011) and in setting standards, despite the increased number of non-university HE institutions (including private) during the last 50 years, and

despite internal and external criticism (Vatin 2009) and changes in management and operation (Granger 2015). In principle, open to all, without selective admission in the first year, public universities have a unique function of redistributing students between different training programs, as explained below.

To understand the challenges of the recent diversification of HE in France, it is worth considering the dynamic of student pathways (Bodin and Orange 2013). The HE institutions that have expanded in recent years, especially the *petit enseignement supérieur* (paramedical and social work schools, STS, IUT), and also *grandes écoles* (business schools, schools of journalism, etc.), often recruit among university *licence* graduates, not directly from high school. For a number of students, the university acts as a preparatory school, its courses prepare students for the competitive entrance exams of selective institutions and allows students time to mature and refine their academic and career plans. Official statistics do not track students who change programs or institutions, so this redirection of studies remains largely undocumented, or, rather, it is included in the massive dropout rates at the undergraduate level at universities. Likewise, a significant number of students from *grandes écoles* or *petit enseignement supérieur* continue their studies at the university, in masters or doctoral programs. The absence of selective admissions procedures and low tuition fees give universities a filtering and orientation role, and provides channels of social advancement. This system facilitates and regulates nonlinear pathways, allowing students to test, repeat, extend, and adjust, and offers flexibility in a strongly hierarchical system (Bourdieu 1970). The result is a kind of French paradox. On the one hand, the fact that only one-third of the students complete their undergraduate program in three years places France among top rankings for dropout rates in OECD member countries. On the other hand, the high rate of successful shifts to other course programs places the French HE system among the most efficient in terms of completion rate (OECD 2008, 96).

## CONCLUSION

The French HE system is currently subject to two divergent forces. The goal of the state is to attain good placements in international rankings; this leads to a regrouping and standardization of forms of education (harmonization of degrees, harmonization of educational models, increase of partnerships between institutions, development of mutual quality indicators between institutions, etc.) in a system that is very heterogeneous. At the same time, the aim to include 50% of a generation in a postsecondary degree program maintains the segmentation of the system, between elite clusters of *grandes écoles* and university masters and doctorate programs on the one hand, and short cycle *petit enseignement supérieur* institutions and university undergraduate programs on the other. Indeed, first generation students from low socioeconomic backgrounds are widely tracked into short vocational cycles, while students from upper classes continue to dominate in the most prestigious institutions.

## NOTE

<sup>1</sup>CPGE and some petit enseignement supérieur programs are taught by secondary school teachers and located in high schools.

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S. ORANGE

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