France – Initiatives for excellence in higher education

One of twelve case studies produced as part of the project on Structural Reform in Higher Education (EAC-2014-0474)

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Table of Contents

Introduction 4
France – Initiatives for excellence in higher education 5
   Introduction to the structural reform and its main goals 5
   Context and background to the reform 6
   Design process for the reform 7
   Policy instruments used 8
   Implementation of the reform 8
   Monitoring, evaluation and feedback 9
   Important changes in context for the reform 10
   Achievements and effects 11
   Summary 11
   Interviewees 13
   References 13
Introduction

This case study is part of the “Structural Higher Education Reform – Design and Evaluation” project, commissioned by the European Commission (EAC/31/2014). The main objective of this project – carried out by the Center for Higher Education Policy Studies (CHEPS), University of Twente, the Netherlands, and the Centre for Higher Education Governance Ghent (CHEGG), Ghent University, Belgium - is to investigate policy processes related to the design, implementation, and evaluation of structural reforms of higher education systems. The focus is on government-initiated reform processes that were intended to change the higher education landscape, with the following questions foremost: What kind of goals were envisaged with the structural reform? How was the structural reform planned and implemented? What have been the achievements of the structural reforms? How can these achievements be explained in terms of policy process factors?

Three types of reform were distinguished: reforms designed to increase horizontal differentiation (developing or strengthening new types of higher education institutions such as the creation of a professional higher education sector), reforms designed to increase vertical differentiation (bringing about quality or prestige differences between higher education institutions, e.g. by creating centres of excellence) and reforms designed to increase interrelationships between institutions (supporting cooperation and coordination among institutions, forming alliances or mergers). In total, structural reforms in twelve different countries (eleven in Europe, one in Canada) were investigated: Austria, Belgium (Flanders), Canada (Alberta), Croatia, Denmark, Finland, France, the Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Spain, United Kingdom (Wales). The twelve case studies – for ease of reference published as separate documents - all follow the same logic and are presented in a similar format, with sections relating to the reform and its context, policy goals, policy design, policy instruments, policy implementation, policy evaluation and goal achievement.
France – Initiatives for excellence in higher education
Emmanuel Boudard & Don F. Westerheijden

Introduction to the structural reform and its main goals
France’s higher education institutions did not appear in large numbers in the first global university ranking, the 2003 Shanghai Ranking. This ‘Shanghai shock’, coming at a time when the Bologna Process was already leading to changes, was a prime occasion for the reforms in this case study.

The fragmentation of the French higher education and research systems into many institutions, each primarily focused on either education or research, was generally seen as a major cause for France’s invisibility in international rankings (with university rankings seen as an exponent of increasing globalisation, which was prominent around the turn of the century). The structural reforms all focused on integration into larger units of higher education and research. A second focus was the long-term underfunding of institutions, especially universities. Thirdly, it was felt that a well-functioning knowledge economy needed tight relations between higher education and its environment — to be defined at the local or regional level, while the institutional logic of the higher education and research systems had been oriented to the nation state as a whole in previous centuries.

There are two lines of policy initiatives developed in response to the contextual impetus: Line A focuses on the concentration of higher education and research institutions; Line B on investing money in facilities and projects in the best institutions.

In 2006, Line A of concentrating institutions started with the PRES (‘pôles de recherche et d’enseignement supérieur’): to establish virtual and physical campuses of cooperating higher education and research institutions. PRES were collaborations of various (types of) higher education institutions (for example Grands Établissements Public or Grandes Écoles and universities) and research institutions; they mostly focused on doctoral training and clarification of research strengths. Taking part in a PRES was voluntary, though there were additional financial means and additional personnel posts to make participation attractive.

From 2014 onwards, these PRES further grouped into ‘Communautés inter-académique d’universités et d’établissements’ or COMUE (inter-academic communities of universities and institutions). COMUEs are made up of one or more previously existing PRES. The COMUE reform is obligatory. The extent of cooperation (from coordination in specific areas up to merger) is a free choice for the partners in the various COMUEs.

In Line B, Plan Campus dedicated €5 billion in 2008 to renovate university buildings and facilities. Universities were invited to present a plan in a competition for the funds; the Ministry did not present—as had been its wont—a national plan. The intention was to bring a limited number of French universities to the level of the

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1 This summary was drafted by Don F. Westerheijden, Center for Higher Education Policy Studies, University of Twente, the Netherlands, on the basis of the (longer) case study report written by Emmanuel Boudard, La Rochelle Consult, France.

2 For a brief explanation of some of the different types of institutions, see the following section or Kaiser (2007).
international playing field. Twelve universities (original plan: ten) were selected (in addition twelve others have been nominated for limited funding of about €400 million). At the time of writing in 2015, Plan Campus is still ongoing.

Partly in parallel, and at an even larger scale of funding, IdEx (‘Initiative d’Excellence’) was announced in 2009 and implemented since 2010. It aimed to establish physical campuses of excellent higher education and research institutions, focusing on particularly ambitious scientific projects, while partnering with their ‘economic environment’. IdEx are funded by the PIA (‘Plan d’Investissements pour l’avenir’, or ‘Plan for Investments in the Future’) for a total of €35 billion for all areas of public policy to respond to the 2008 international financial crisis. Eight initiatives were to be selected in IdEx (Sursock, 2015), concentrating on institutions facing the highest level of international competition, namely research universities. The initiative is pushing for differentiation across institutions. The excellence initiatives aim to ensure the scientific reputation of France abroad and attract the best teachers, the best researchers and the best students.

At the strategic level, the government intends the structural reform to achieve:

- Higher education and research institutions that are excellent at a global level (highly visible in the international university rankings)
- Significant contributions to innovation and the economic growth of France
- Modernisation of the national higher education and research system

Operational goals (in summarised form) included:

- Create a small number of large higher education and research institutions (PRES)
- Further development of PRES into COMUE:
  - further integration within PRES or by combining several PRES, and
  - bring all universities into the new COMUE
- Provide incentives to enable some institutions to become competitive internationally (Plan Campus). Grants were made available for willing higher education and research institutions to compete, be selected and obtain additional funds.
- Create and facilitate a small number of innovative (research) projects to ensure that some institutions are competitive internationally (IdEx)

The different policy instruments were clear in their operational goals. Plan Campus and IdEx have a detailed (and largely similar) procedure for submission and further handling of proposals, which makes the goals and deadlines explicit. Similarly, how PRES, and later COMUE, were to be composed was clear, although there were intentionally flexible elements.

**Context and background to the reform**

Higher education in France is offered in a mainly public system, with historically-grown differentiation among types of institutions and with many different degrees. Within each formal category of institutions, all were treated equally; there were no officially recognised differences in status or quality.

Reforms over the decades have often taken the form of adding new types of degrees or new institutional units next to maintaining previously existing ones,
making the system hard for outsiders to understand. With the Sorbonne and Bologna Declarations (1998 and 1999) the degree structure was modernised to focus on the three cycles, abbreviated in French as the LMD-degrees.

At the start of the 21st century, the university sector was the open-access part of the higher education system, while (elite) professional training takes place in the ‘Grandes Écoles’ which select their enrolling students; there were about two dozen very prestigious Grandes Écoles and in total around 200 of them. After 1968 universities were split into separate universities, especially in metropolitan areas, often along disciplinary lines, and partly in reaction to their growing size. Thus Paris came to have 13 universities, while in total France counted at least 81 universities in 2005 (Kaiser, 2007). Another characteristic of the French higher education system was the separation of education and research, which was largely concentrated in laboratories under the national research organisation CNRS, while for universities and Grandes Écoles, education was the primary mission. Since 1995 cooperation between CNRS and universities has been increasingly institutionalised (Kaiser, 2007).

Regional cooperation (and regional public co-funding), rationalisation of the higher education institutions and in general emulating the success of Silicon Valley had been themes of French policy since the 1980s, when the ‘Universités 2000’ plan was launched, but had never gained high priority until the Bologna Process reforms after 2000 (Filâtre, 2004; Sursock, 2015). Reforms from 2008 onwards, especially IdEx should be viewed in the context of tighter economic conditions.

**Design process for the reform**

The initiative for the policy seems to have come largely from the Ministry responsible for higher education and research, though the need for reform was widely acknowledged in the academic community around 2004. There was also a consensus on the need for reform in the political system. However, a single solution was not in sight at that time. The Plan Campus decision was eventually made by president Sarkozy, and the project was prepared by a bipartisan committee led by two former prime ministers, Rocard and Juppé.

No options other than the decentralisation/autonomy strand on the one hand and the subsidy plans on the other were debated. Main initiatives were formed at the central level, with the Ministry for Higher Education and Research a major hub in the network. The political system was involved through presidential decisions, through the input of ministers and through the committee chaired by the two former prime ministers, which was symbolic of both the importance of the issue and the broad support for it.

Consultations took place with representatives of the higher education institutions, especially the ‘Conférence des Présidents d’Université’ (CPU). The CPU played a marked role and managed to steer the policy into a more autonomy respecting direction than the original more centrally oriented direction.

We conclude from the interviews that the actors’ aims around 2004 were largely convergent, although there was some resistance among academics, labour unions of university teachers, students and their unions. Additionally, the universities leaned towards policy instruments that would respect their autonomy, leaving more room for higher education institutions to engage in the competitions for funding or
to continue as they were. Interactions between governmental actors and the higher education institutions appear to have not been very frequent for most of the period of the development of policies.

Design and implementation cannot be completely separated chronologically. The PRES were designed first (concentration = Line A, step 1), then came Plan Campus (funding = Line B, step 1). After a number of years of experience, step 2 in Line A, the concentration dimension, involved the COMUE (a conceptually simpler further development of PRES), while before that the IdEx funds as part of the PIA made up Line B, step 2, in parallel with Plan Campus.

**Policy instruments used**

There were two main policy instruments:

- *Regulation* for Line A: concentration of higher education institutions into larger constellations mostly with a geographical circumference, though the regulation left much room for various levels of intensity of cooperation (up to merger)
- *Funding* for Line B: project funding for improvement of facilities.

Obviously, Line A also needed funding and Line B needed regulation, we only stress the main instruments above. For instance, in what we call Line A there were additional financial means and additional personnel posts to make participation in a PRES attractive to universities. In an opposite example, for Line B competition rules had to be designed and agencies authorised to select proposals in the competitions.

*Information* played an auxiliary role in all of these reform policies, to make the opportunities known in the system and to persuade a sufficient number of universities to take part in them. *Organisation* also was a minor instrument, as setting up new agencies was largely avoided. Existing agencies were given additional roles, e.g. the national research funding agency ‘Agence National de Recherche’ (ANR).

**Implementation of the reform**

The implementation of the concentration strand of policies depended on the regulation by the Ministry of Higher Education and Research (MESR), and on the initiative of universities, other higher education institutions and research organisations to join each other in PRES or later in COMUE. This implied a major cultural shift in the ministry; from seeing itself as the central node steering the higher education system in a directive mode it became a process manager (Aust et al., 2008).

For the funding strand a combination of existing and new agencies at the national level were involved. At first, Plan Campus was managed by the MESR. When the budget became even larger, and was included in the general framework of the multi-sectoral PIA, one agency, the ANR was involved, though others were involved for other sections of the PIA.

In addition, the ‘Commissariat Général à l’Investissement’ (CGI) was created by bipartisan agreement in 2009 as a service attached to the prime minister. It was to administer the PIA funding programme in response to the economic crisis across all sectors involved: higher education, research and innovation; SMEs; and key sectors
(life sciences, carbon energy and efficiency in resource management, the city of tomorrow, the future of mobility, and the digital society). The CGI is located within the office of the prime minister to maintain focus on longer-term goals rather than fall within the ministerial and political routines with their short-term goals.

The ANR has been given an additional role as the operator in charge of selecting, contracting, funding and monitoring IdEx. Under IdEx 1 eight projects were selected for a total of €7.7 billion, and IdEx 2 is aiming at a budget of €3.1 billion. As it does with its normal project funding, ANR had the IdEx proposals evaluated by peer reviewers, however, unlike other ANR selection processes, all evaluators were foreign. Moreover, many were not public sector researchers but were instead managers of research and researchers from the private sector.

We should stress that local initiative was important in these policies: there had to be a local platform willing to submit proposals. The willingness of local leaders of higher education institutions to engage in such rapid and deep change was seen as remarkable and unexpected (Mignot-Gérard, 2012), although some admit that there is an element of imitation in the university mergers and similar cooperative developments (Finance et al., 2015). A major motivation to engage actively in the opportunities of the policies may have been the anxiety, even—or perhaps especially?—among less prestigious universities, to avoid becoming a ‘loser’ (Mignot-Gérard, 2012).

The implementation process was characterised by a relatively smooth roll-out, without adaptations within each of the two steps. Yet the fact that there were two different steps in itself implies significant adaptation of the concentration stream as well as of the funding stream. The step up from PRES to COMUE can be seen as continued, though intensified, implementation of the original strategic goals. The step up from Plan Campus to IdEx is connected rather to a change in the environment, i.e. the economic crisis of 2008/2009 and the general increase in size of response of the French government to the crisis through the PIA.

Actors continue to learn: in the Ministry’s experience, universities and COMUE are presenting ever better project proposals. However, the multitude of initiatives led to confusing situations in some cases. While in most regions there was only a single PRES, in Paris a single Plan Campus site included parts of universities belonging to different PRES (Sursock, 2015).

Resistance against all these changes and competitions built up among ‘shop floor’ academics, students and their respective unions. This was due in part to inadequate intra-institutional communication resulting from the speed of the process, and in part for other (including ideological) reasons. The internal atmosphere may have prevented some institutional leaders from ensuring that their higher education institutions took part in the grant competitions. Precise information on this is not available.

**Monitoring, evaluation and feedback**

There were few formal evaluation and feedback processes, apart from an early evaluation (in the first year of their existence) of the formation of PRES (Aust et al.,

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3 Before beginning the third PIA, which currently is under discussion, the government intends to commission an evaluation of all investments so far.
An evaluation of the PIA is expected before a third round will be implemented in 2016; note that this concerns all of the PIA in all sectors, not just the IdEx.

At the foundation of the PIA in 2010, the information base included:

- OST (Observatoire des Sciences et Technique) prepared a statistical assessment of the bibliometric performance of all 13 IdEx-project partners in 2010.4
- OECD prepared a review in 2009/10 of the French higher education system.

However, public higher education institutions report annually to the MESR for their annual funding and every four years there are extensive negotiations between higher education institutions and ministry about quadrennial funding contracts (Kaiser, 2007).

In IdEx, annual monitoring through indicators was foreseen from the start and acceptance of cost statements of annual expanses, an assessment of the status at the start (with bibliometric indicators from OST/HCERES), and an evaluation four years after the start (the first 4 years being a trial or ‘probation’ period) predicate the promise of capital (though kept by ANR for six more years). However, income is well-nigh certain indefinitely, since the interest from the capital can be sufficient.

Annual monitoring of IdEx projects is based on predefined indicators (see call for tender5 pages 16-19) and a briefing session between the government and each IdEx. Beginning in 2016 (four years after the start), the jury that selected IdEx will review progress of IdEx as foreseen in their contract. The jury will decide whether IdEx will then be allowed to continue, to continue under certain conditions or with less funding, or will not be allowed to continue. The evaluation results are confidential, as a rule not individually available (those available are anonymised, which as there are only twelve IdEx is almost impossible). Annual evaluations are not public, because if targets are not achieved, publicity of evaluations would create pressure and make the jury’s task even more difficult. In case of large difficulties, projects may be adjusted. For example, one consortium was amended and another partner left a PIA project.

**Important changes in context for the reform**

The 2008/2009 financial crisis triggered the PIA of which IdEx forms a part. This implied a stepping up of the funding for investments for the future in selected higher education institutions/PRES/COMUE.

It is remarkable that the change of government (from a right-wing president of the republic to a left-wing one) did not affect the implementation or even the direction of the policies for excellence. This bipartisan agreement on the direction of policies is uncommon in French higher education.

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Achievements and effects

The operational goals were achieved: regional concentration of higher education institutions took place, in various constellations, some more engaged in the international prestige race than others, and with differentiated levels of investment in upgraded facilities. Moreover, at the strategic level, the higher education landscape has changed remarkably as a result, indicating a successful reform. The number of higher education institutions has been reduced from several hundreds to a few dozen major players and is bound to drop even further with current plans for a single COMUE in every large region of France. On first January 2015, 25 groups of universities (COMUE) including most universities were given official status (see http://www.cpu.fr/actualite/regroupements-universitaires-25-grands-ensembles-pour-viser-lexcellence/). Some independence is maintained, especially among specialised institutions such as business or engineering schools.

Some subsidiary goals, operationalized in selection criteria, had to be softened or eliminated due to reactions from the university sector. For example the goal of large-scale restructuring of institutional governance structures to resemble American structures was abandoned following reactions by the CPU. Additionally, narrow international excellence criteria in PIA were broadened to allow more proposals to qualify as excellent (Mignot-Gérard, 2012).

The number of French universities prominent in the international rankings has, however, not changed much since 2003. The only element of the ‘Shanghai shock’ that was overcome is that in every year since 2008 there have been two French universities in the top-50, compared to between zero and two from 2003 to 2007.

Among other things, side effects included:

- The university is at the centre of this vast reorganisation (research centres and business or engineering schools had been more favoured in the recent past);
- Vast movement of modernisation in areas other than research clarification and doctoral training, such as better undergraduate education, better curriculum, etc.);
- More university mergers, which were not directly intended by the different policies (might be seen as desirable side-effects);
- The PIA process has brought international standards into the French system for awarding project funds (until then, competitions in for example ANR were mostly about French peers awarding funds to each other);
- The PIA has strengthened the professional capacity of central university staff (institutions are increasingly in charge of their own strategy);
- Lower resistance among academics and students than in the past with minds gradually changing about the challenges ahead (or the need to modernise).

Summary

To improve the competitiveness of French higher education and research at a global scale, major mergers and differentiation among institutions based on large investments in facilities and in world-class research were undertaken since around 2006. Each action line affected about a dozen out of the original several hundred
higher education institutions. It was intended to make some but not all higher education institutions competitive at a global scale. Other higher education institutions — since 2015 all others — are stimulated to become stronger by cooperating or even merging with other higher education and research institutions. In response to the 2008 global financial crisis, the French government stepped up its investments.

The policy design and implementation processes have seen a new role for the Ministry of Higher Education, which used to be a strong central planner but has now taken up a role as process coordinator, facilitating local or regional initiatives for cooperation and merger.

The case shows that a sense of urgency (the ‘Shanghai shock’) in combination with a lot of money (in this case partly from selling state energy company EDF) can lead to major structural changes. These actions have reached their operational goals and also seem to be on the way towards their strategic goals, although we have to take a long-term perspective with the PIA (at least ten years) and Plan Campus (25 years). The higher education landscape has been modernised on a large scale and in a short timeframe with the important aid of bipartisan political support, all of these are achievements that have not happened in the past. This structural reform was challenging for all actors, but the positive side is that funding has been increased and that minds are changing (interview MESR; Finance et al., 2015).
**Interviewees**

Mr Arnaud TORRES, director, “Direction des Investissements d’Avenir et de la Compétitivité”, ANR – The French National Research Agency (Agence Nationale de la Recherche)

Mr Jean Pierre KOROLITSKI, Directeur de programme centres d'excellence,

Mr Vincent MOREAU, Conseiller chargé du suivi des investissements, CGI – (Le Commissariat général à l'investissement) in charge of piloting the programme “investissements d’avenir”

Mme Diane Pouget, “sous-direction de l’immobilier”, MESR – Ministry of Higher education and Research

Mr Alain Abécassis department head of “Service de la coordination des stratégies de l’enseignement supérieur et de la recherche”, MESR – Ministry of Higher education and Research

Mr Eric Piozin department head of “service de la stratégie de contractualisation, du financement et de l’immobilier”, MESR – Ministry of Higher education and Research

Pierro Mutzenhardt, President, University of Lorraine

Khaled Bouabdallah (COMUE de Lyon) Campus & IdEx 2016, Head of universities Lyon/St Etienne

Gérard Blanchard (La Rochelle)- COMUE, Head of universities La Rochelle

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