that opportunities for funding will dismiss—if not silence entirely—academic work outside party ideology. Perhaps more chilling is the 2013 leak of an internal CCP directive called "Document Number Nine," which outlines seven topics allegedly banned within universities and related sectors, including universal values, civil society, a free press, and questioning China's governance. While there is little public information on the ban's implementation, it echoes reports of a common understanding of what is off-limits, including "the three Ts"—the autonomy of Tibet, Taiwan's status, and the 1989 Tiananmen Square protests. The CCP's policing of these and other ideological constraints is evident in part by so-called "student informants," who report controversial comments or teachings to party and university officials, often resulting in severe disciplinary actions against professors.

Unsurprisingly, with impediments to free inquiry and autonomous governance, many Chinese scholars have had to choose to either abandon their country or their academic profession altogether. In other cases, academics have been wrongfully detained, arrested, and prosecuted. The trend has extended to students, with an uptick of reports of repression on the mainland. It is alarming that censorship and repression are occurring in China with increased frequency within Chinese higher education, through enhanced methods, and enshrined in law, as enormous effort is applied to achieve a reputation as a world-class knowledge producer.

SAR's *Obstacles to Excellence* challenges the current metrics in rankings to take academic freedom and institutional autonomy into consideration. Likewise, it urges China and the global higher education community to position institutional autonomy as a bedrock of academic freedom and quality universities. Embracing and committing to these values will help China cultivate truly world-class universities from which everyone benefits. ■



# Reforms in France: When Competition and Cooperation Clash

**Christine Musselin**

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Many studies show that cooperation among competitors may have positive effects. But, sometimes, competition and cooperation clash. The reforms of the French higher education system are an interesting case for exploring this issue as they increased the level of competition, but also favored cooperative consortia of institutions at the local level.

## More Cooperation...

For many years, the institutional divide between universities, *grandes écoles,* and national research institutions has been a recurrent concern for political actors. In order to overcome this institutional divide, the 2006 law on research and innovation made it possible for higher education institutions to form local consortia called PRES (higher education and research "poles") and to develop common activities. Beginning in 2007, a number of PRES projects were selected and received funding. But, that same year, a new act increased the autonomy of French universities. The appetite of university presidents for PRES decreased: with increased margins for maneuver at the university level, most became reluctant to transfer powers to the PRES. The latter were maintained but were not very active: some common doctoral schools were created at that level, but universities kept other responsibilities under their own roof.

This situation evolved after the election of François Hollande to the French presidency in 2012. The new minister of higher education and research strengthened the policy for local cooperation: the PRES became COMUE (Community of Universities and Institutions) and, as a result of the 2013 act, every higher education institution must now be part of a COMUE and transfer some powers to that level. The role of the COMUE is to develop cooperation among its members, such as managing COMUE doctoral schools, creating COMUE research labs, asking all academics to include the name of the COMUE in their signature, etc. COMUEs should also define a higher education and research policy on their territory and sign a five-year contract with the ministry, replacing contracts with each individual

institution. The idea behind the COMUE was also to simplify the French higher education landscape: the map of a COMUE looks very much like a *jardin à la française*, compared with the fuzziness of universities and *grandes écoles*. With their larger size, the consortia were also expected to be more visible on the international scene.

### ...And More Competition

While these policies aimed at developing proximity-based cooperation, others aimed at identifying the best institutions, rewarding (mostly research-based) performance, and enhancing differentiation.

This was a major change. Of course, competition already existed, but the French university system relied nevertheless on a principle of national equivalence. Everybody knew that this was not actually the case, but the ministry was expected to guarantee this principle of equivalence. With the reforms of the 2000s, the discourse changed: they wanted to allocate more resources to the best institutions. Highly selective national calls for projects were launched: the call for the creation of PRES or for scientific networks (RTRA, advanced thematic research networks), the Plan Campus that funded new buildings linked to innovative scientific projects, and finally the multiple calls of the Investment Program for the Future (PIA), which invested EUR 27 billion into higher education and research. One of the many instruments of the PIA—the Idex ("initiatives of excellence")—sought to identify "excellent institutions," with the goal of selecting 10 Idex that would receive funding from an endowment upon a favorable evaluation after four years. Up to now, four Idex have been confirmed and six are still being assessed, while one has been discontinued.

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### Interferences between Competition and Cooperation

These two reform streams raised contradictions. One of the main issues about the competition schemes was whether universities and/or consortia should compete with one another. In 2007, while the ministry increased the autonomy of French universities, it launched the Plan Campus for which only the PRES—not individual universities—were allowed to apply. This was reinforced with the call for Idex. After a fight for influence between the ministry and the agency in charge of the PIA, it was decided that only PRES (later COMUE) could apply for an Idex. Therefore, from the very beginning, Idex developed in a tension between two logics: a purely scientific logic pushed by the agency and aimed at identifying the best institutions, and an institutional logic pushed by the ministry and aimed at overcoming the institutional divide.

This institutional logic impacted the results of the competition for Idex. The three first Idex set the tone, with the jury favoring projects based on mergers. Some consortia with excellent scientific potential were not selected because the governance of their projects was not integrated enough. For the following calls, all projects proposed a more integrated governance and a merger mania began: nine mergers have now already occurred, involving 25 institutions, and three more involving 16 institutions are due by January 2020.

These calls for Idex highlight some of the contradictions that arose. Cooperation does not come easily between universities and *grandes écoles*. Up to now, mergers have mostly involved universities because their culture, the status of their personnel, their salaries, etc. are very different from *grandes écoles*. Furthermore, most *grandes écoles* are afraid of having to submit to the rules, practices, and culture of the much larger and powerful universities in their COMUEs. The institutional divide remains very strong.

COMUEs where members have received the status of Idex have become weaker, and their relationship with these members is strained: the winners are not ready to share their Idex funding with other members of the consortium and, in terms of cooperation, they prefer working with their (generally not local) scientific counterparts. COMUEs without Idex also suffer from increased competition, as their strongest members in terms of scientific reputation prefer running independently and so reduce their cooperation with the consortium to a minimum. Furthermore, these COMUEs have nothing attractive to offer, as they receive no extra funding from the state.

This reflects the contradictions between proximity-based cooperation, on which COMUEs rely, and status-based cooperation, on which scientific networks rely. As a result, many COMUEs are about to dissolve or to be redesigned: with the current government, COMUE members are allowed to rethink their status and the way they are run, or to be transformed into a rather loose association of institutions. ■