

Four Ways for France to Get Higher Marks

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Abstract

The COVID-19 crisis has challenged the French higher education and research system. The government must now engage in sound reforms to make the system sustainable in the long run. The challenge is finding out where to begin and identifying what mechanisms are in place and how to change them.

France has been losing its global visibility both in terms of attracting and retaining international students on French soil and publishing international research papers.

The COVID-19 pandemic has put universities to the test. The French higher education and research (HER) system was already riddled with multiple challenges: severe underfunding, demographic influx, and a lack of attractiveness, to cite only a few. All of these have become even more salient with the pandemic. From student despair to heavy staff fatigue, multiple tensions are at work in French universities. If anything, COVID-19 has revived the debate about what these institutions should offer, and to whom. It has also evidenced how France's HER is dramatically weakening.

France's Struggle to Make its Mark

France has been losing its global visibility both in terms of attracting and retaining international students on French soil and publishing international research papers. In 2000, France ranked 5th by number of scientific and technical publications, then fell to 8th in 2016. With 30 French institutions listed in the [Shanghai 2020 ranking](#), France only ranked 10th, behind the United States (206 institutions ranked), China (144), the United Kingdom (65), and Germany (49).

These lukewarm results show that France is struggling to compete internationally and has to become more attractive to both students and faculty worldwide. Better working conditions abroad—not to mention salaries—have led the best French researchers, and often the best students, to leave the country. Such a brain drain can, in part, be explained by the chronic underfunding from which the French HER is suffering. France's HER economic model has reached its breaking point.

In Dire Need of a New Economic Model

France needs to expand its public spending on higher education and research. Specifically, France ought to dedicate 2 percent of its GDP to higher education (vs. 1.5 percent to date) and 3 percent to research (vs. little more than 2 percent to date). Concretely, that would mean EUR 10 billion and EUR 20 billion, respectively. Overall, France's indicators remain below the OECD average. As a comparison, Germany dedicates 3.1 percent of its GDP to research, and Japan 3.2 percent.

But such expenditure cannot rest solely on public authorities, whose budgetary means are all the more constrained following the COVID-19 crisis. An increase in private funding is equally necessary—through a moderate raise in tuition fees for bachelor and master degrees (and excluding doctorates). In France, tuition fees for a bachelor and a master cost respectively around EUR 170 and EUR 243 per academic year. By contrast, annual university fees in Spain are around EUR 1,500; EUR 1,600 in Italy; and EUR 2,000 in the Netherlands—not to mention Canada (EUR 4,600), nor the United States (EUR 7,400). Hiking tuition fees for French universities up to EUR 1,000 per academic year would intrinsically change France's HER economic model.

A Three-Act Structure for Students

Such an increase in tuition fees, though moderate, will inevitably be seen as inconceivable by students unions, which served a population of [2.7 million students](#) in 2019–2020. In France, one student in five leaves higher education without graduating—around 75,000 students per year. And only 30 percent obtain their bachelor's degree in three years, and 40 percent in four years. These alarming numbers call for a new student-oriented approach to tuition fees. The nucleus of that approach could be a universally accessible system of income contingent loans (ICL), to cover not only tuition fees but also living expenses. ICL aims to democratize education by providing all students with the

financial means to study, as is done in Australia, New Zealand, or the United Kingdom. But this is only acceptable and justifiable if certain conditions are met. France must expand its current financial support for those who really need it. Around 222,000 students currently benefit from French social assistance schemes. That is too small a number. A final proviso to be noted: To prevent student loan balances from spiraling out of control, there must be a sustained commitment to HER by the state. The French government could adopt a multiannual programming law for higher education, similar to the one that already exists for research.

The Need for an Evolution of Governance

Education in France can be defined as a *sui generis* system. Its fragmented and stratified landscape between different administrations, universities, independent research institutions, and mixed research units poses problems of liability and governance.

Comparing the French model with foreign examples illustrates to what extent the governance model of French universities is not self-evident. The fact that members of the board of governors (*conseil d'administration*) are essentially chosen by staff, students, and faculty members is highly atypical. Similarly, electing the president—an indirect appointment by staff, students, and faculty members—remains rather unusual. While such appointment methods have some perks, they can also exacerbate internal quarrels or prevent out-of-the-box thinking. The boards of governors of French institutions should be reformed in accordance with international standards (limited number of members, majority of external members). By and large, it seems quite logical to choose a president for his or her management skills and leadership, and not necessarily from among the faculty members of the university.

French Universities Must Be Accountable—But to Whom?

In France, the intricate relationship between the state and universities illustrates how highly the latter depends on the former. The ministry of higher education, research, and innovation (*Ministère de l'Enseignement supérieur, de la Recherche et de l'Innovation*) oversees everything from recruitment procedures to funding, including conferring degrees. Over the past 15 years, French universities have undergone a large series of reforms aimed at improving the autonomy of institutions—or lack thereof. Granting an appropriate level of autonomy to French educational bodies would significantly boost their performance.

To reach this goal, [Institut Montaigne](#) published a [report](#) laying out several recommendations, among which we can single out the following one: reduced supervision and broader responsibilities for universities. In line with the approach advocated in the report, a funding agency would specifically be responsible for allocating resources depending on the project and strategy of each educational institution, and also according to its performance. This agency would rely on a modernized, national evaluation commission for research and education, applying internationally practiced assessment methods. Absent from such a link with universities, the ministry could refocus on its strategic missions and leave financial support for students and recruitment (e.g., tenure tracks) to universities.

Conclusion

France can no longer delay reforming its HER system. The government needs to take action if it truly wants to generate a positive impact on education. A new mode of governance must be given to universities, which ought to become the driving HER actors in France. Limited state control over universities, arm-in-arm with significantly increased public funding, would allow French institutions to truly reach their potential. Through the ICL system, students would be able to become autonomous instead of remaining dependent on their families. ▲

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