



Academic Excellence à la Française: Between Excellence and Equality

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Abstract

France launched a funding program in 2010 dedicated to ensuring the emergence of five to 10 French universities at the top of international rankings. This initial goal changed overtime to embrace a larger set of institutions and objectives. This article discusses how the extension of excellence challenged the regulatory role of the State, the capacity of universities to act strategically, the relationship between the State and universities, and the landscape of higher education in France.

In 2010, France launched a program dedicated to financially supporting a number of its universities in response to the country's poor results in international rankings. The initial objective of the Investment Program for the Future (*Programme d'Investissements d'avenir*, or PIA) was to ensure that five to 10 French universities make it to the top of international rankings. This initial goal changed overtime to embrace a larger set of institutions and policy objectives by stretching and expanding the definition of excellence.

This article discusses how this extension challenged both the State, in its regulatory role, and the universities as strategic agents. Both must realign their relationship in a context where university autonomy continues to be constrained and where the State finds it challenging to reshape its role from the promoter of institutional activities to that of a funder and regulator.

The PIA disbursed around USD 96 billion over a 13-year period, in four rounds. During that time, the definition of excellence changed to encompass more than world-class universities. It stretched to different types of institutions, from comprehensive research-intensive universities to those more specialized; from those with international aspirations to those whose primary focus is regional engagement. Beyond research funding, the PIA was used to promote excellence in teaching and learning, doctoral training, campus life, links with stakeholders, internationalization, governance, and management.

From Excellence to Excellences

The extension of the notion of excellence culminated in the most recent funding program titled "ExcellenceS – Excellence in All Its Forms," where the "s" in the word excellence was capitalized to emphasize that selection criteria were sufficiently flexible to let each university set its own strategy to achieve its specific excellence and that the State would support them in defining their own profile. To many outside of France, this may seem unoriginal. For France, with its long tradition of State centralism and political stress on equality, encouraging universities to sharpen their individual profile and strategy has been truly transformative.

The PIA accentuated the differentiation among universities, a trend that started in the twentieth century and saw the creation of new types of universities over the course of three rounds. The PIA was the latest push that led to the establishment of new universities, albeit through a process of university mergers (occasionally with *grandes écoles* and research organizations) rather than through creation of brand new institutions.

These developments—slow burning in the twentieth century, accelerated in the twenty-first century—have resulted in increased heterogeneity within the sector. It has encouraged even those universities that did not receive PIA funding to sharpen their profile and to build on their areas of strength.

According to the Court of Auditors, this heterogeneity poses a three-fold challenge to the French State: to find the right tools that would enable the government to understand this diversity; to set transparent criteria for resource allocation, and to monitor both the quality and relevance of the universities' performance.

While the State has been pushed outside its comfort zone, some of the universities have managed to become more strategic, despite the enduring limits to their institutional autonomy. Indeed, the scorecard on university autonomy that is produced by the European University Association every few years continues to signal the very poor performance of French universities. They lack control over their governance arrangements

(defined by law), and management of their staff (who are mostly civil servants) and of their research activities (which are partly dependent on powerful research organizations); all this means that their room to maneuver is extremely narrow.

Heterogeneity and Isomorphism

How has such institutional heterogeneity come to be despite very strong isomorphic tendencies? A key to the success of the PIA was the confluence of three factors that opened a space for negotiating and engineering change.

Firstly, a few university presidents led the way and provided leadership models to others. These presidents demonstrated effective leadership in persuading their communities to adopt institutional strategies and to embrace the concept of excellence—a controversial notion in egalitarian France.

Secondly, the reliance on international juries and most notably on the stability of the jury that adjudicated the most important PIA program (IDEX, I-SITE funding) ensured constancy in decision-making. That jury was appointed in 2010, kept the same chair and nearly the same membership over the span of 11 years, and strove to make decisions consensually. The political authorities recognized that the jury was immune to political pressures and individual lobbying, whether from universities or political actors. The then-president François Hollande noted that only the Constitutional Council in France can have precedence over the State, but the political authorities made an exception and accepted that the jury operates in total independence as a condition for the international recognition of French universities.

Thirdly, independence of the jury did not mean that there would be no role for the State. The ministry responsible for higher education and research influenced the selection criteria and was instrumental in shifting the definition of excellence from focusing on individual universities to encompassing regional clusters, which was more aligned with its policies. This meant that the initial focus on research strength was enlarged to embrace the governing structures of these clusters as a central selection criterion.

Impact of the PIA

Has the PIA achieved its aims? The results have been mixed.

On the negative side, a tacit goal in creating regional clusters and promoting mergers was to reduce fragmentation caused by the presence of the *grandes écoles*. Their existence makes the French higher education system rather unique in having small institutions at the top of the national hierarchy but hardly visible in international rankings, including those that are research active. Most *écoles* resisted this policy, claiming their strong institutional brand and their feeling of superiority vis-à-vis universities. Those who accepted to be included into newly created universities did so while retaining their name and their autonomy after the State passed an ordinance allowing them to do just that.

Furthermore, the extra funding gained through the PIA is relatively small and does not compensate for the relatively low core funding of French universities as compared to their peers in many OECD countries. Yet, the extra PIA funding imposes major changes. Managing change in a context of relative penury led university staff to quip, “Should we do excellence with three rubber bands and two paper clips?”

Nevertheless, the PIA funding was instrumental in stimulating positive change. It resulted in better management and leadership, provided much-needed funding to enhance research, teaching and social engagement, and improved both strategic intent and focused internationalization. It helped a few French universities reach the top of international rankings and resulted in a more diversified institutional landscape.

To consolidate those gains, the State must now focus on ensuring greater institutional autonomy, increased funding for higher education and, importantly, more policy coherence and constancy. ▲

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