



# France: Equal Opportunity Vs. Selectivity

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## Abstract

France focuses on students' socioeconomic backgrounds to ensure equal opportunity. While the system remains unequal and results in social reproduction, there is a national consensus that efforts must be exerted to broaden access and improve the success of marginalized students.

The centralized access procedure to higher education in France was reformed in 2018. Parcoursup replaced a process which was criticized for assigning students to higher education institutions randomly. Since Parcoursup offers more information to help students make choices than the previous system, there was hope that it would be more easily accepted. As soon as it was launched, however, it was criticized for organizing a disguised selection process, and studies have tracked its negative impact on marginalized populations.

## Equal Opportunity vs. Meritocracy

There is a strong consensus in France about providing equal opportunity (*égalité des chances*) and therefore open access to higher education. Nevertheless, this consensus sits uneasily with the concept of “republican merit,” which is enshrined in the ranked competitive exams (*concours*) that Napoléon introduced for the *grandes écoles*, and which result in social reproduction.

This has produced a two-track system: open access to higher education for all *baccalauréat* (secondary education diploma) holders, albeit with some important exceptions such as selective access to an increasing number of university study programs, the *grandes écoles* and segments of a growing private sector.

The social consensus on equality is also at odds with individual strategies. Many French families favor selectivity, although they define it differently depending on their level of education and their socioeconomic status. Selectivity for the children of the bourgeoisie, the school teachers, and academic staff (all of whom understand how to navigate the arcane secondary school and higher education systems) means aiming primarily for the *grandes écoles* and secondarily for the selective university tracks. Selectivity for marginalized and less educated families means aiming for the perceived security of the private sector, which brands itself as providing a more supportive and intimate environment than the large universities.

## How Have Students from Marginalized Backgrounds Fared with Parcoursup?

In France, equity issues are defined narrowly as determined by socioeconomic backgrounds. It is illegal to consider ethnicity, race, or religion, and there is little formal support for underrepresented groups in secondary schools, apart from students with disabilities. The system tries to correct inequality by funneling more resources to schools in marginalized areas, without focusing on supporting special categories of students, again except for those with disabilities.

Funding is not a discriminating issue. The cost of public education is generally low, and need-based scholarships are widely available. The number of students experiencing financial difficulties is low compared to other European countries, less than 19 percent, according to Eurostudent VII 2018–2021, although that number is reported to have risen since the COVID-19-induced inflation.

Despite its cultural and political tradition of equality and solidarity, France is ranked as one of the most unequal countries among OECD members. Eurostudent notes that most students have parents with tertiary education and, worryingly, that the share of those with parents without tertiary education is declining.

Inequality is reflected in both unequal access and success. Women and students whose parents did not attend tertiary education tend to express low self-confidence, which influences how they choose study programs. This leads to gender and social imbalance, particularly in the *grandes écoles*. It is recognized that the *grandes écoles* must extend

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equitable access to students from marginalized groups. They do so through a variety of mechanisms, such as preparing selected students in schools located in poor neighborhoods to apply to such institutions or having a different admission track for those students. However, the number of students affected by such initiatives remains small.

Historically, a significant proportion of students who enter the open-access tracks of universities fail to complete their first year. This concerns mostly holders of the vocational *baccalauréat* diplomas, which draws a significant number of students from marginalized backgrounds. This track is not meant to lead to university-level studies but does not bar students from registering.

### **Parcoursup: A Contested Centralized Clearing System**

Parcoursup uses an algorithm which was criticized for mainstreaming an opaque selection process in a context where any holder of the *baccalauréat* was supposed to be accepted to any university. Tempers flared. A movement to shutdown universities spread in early 2018 after hooded vigilantes assaulted a group of 50 students protesting Parcoursup. Fortunately, the summer came, and things quieted down.

Nevertheless, Parcoursup is still an object of controversy. Although there has been a genuine effort to explain the selection process and to make the system more transparent, the public debate has shifted from the selectivity of the process to the anxiety that it generates and whether all families and students are equally equipped to deal with its complexity.

### **Parcoursup: A Complex Process**

There is no question that the process is complex and that students are left to manage it on their own if their family is unable to help. This is an issue since most French students go through Parcoursup when they are 17 years old. A recent study noted that those from marginalized backgrounds are comparatively more likely to be on their own and to have had little access to independent information beforehand.

Without advice and support, the application process can be very onerous. In 2023, Parcoursup included a whopping list of 21,000 undergraduate study programs. It is possible to apply to up to 20 study programs, and applicants must complete a separate file for each of them.

The process, however, seeks to balance selectivity with equity. The final selection is done by each higher education institution. In universities, students are selected by the faculty responsible for a given program, who are asked to admit a specific proportion of students with need-based scholarships.

### **Stress and Perception of Fairness**

Parcoursup is under the media's continuous scrutiny. The number of students who have received an offer and those who are still waiting are tracked every spring, and the numerous articles about Parcoursup feed the perception that, despite the improvements implemented since its launch, the procedure is still not entirely satisfactory.

Many students find the process stressful and somewhat unfair. This perception is more likely to be expressed by students from disadvantaged backgrounds. Perception of fairness is linked to the choices students make. They are advised to mix safe and stretched choices. The best students (often from the more privileged backgrounds) are more likely to be helped by their parents and to make fewer and safer choices. Therefore, they are less likely to find the process stressful or unfair.

Despite these issues, Parcoursup engineered a small revolution: universities are now able to select in the same way as the *grandes écoles* have been able to do all along. The continuous scrutiny of Parcoursup and consensus around providing *égalité des chances*, however, ensure that equal opportunity—even if not yet a reality—continues to be at the forefront of public debate. ▲

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