

Is the *Grandes Écoles*/Universities Divide about to Disappear in France?

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The *grandes écoles*/universities divide is a well-known characteristic of French higher education. It started under the monarchy with the creation of the École des Ponts et Chaussées (school for bridges and roads, 1747) and the École des Mines (school about mining, 1783) and developed under the French Revolution when universities were suppressed and the revolutionaries opted for the creation of new schools (École Polytechnique or École Normale Supérieure, for instance). University faculties were subsequently recreated by Napoleon but the *grandes écoles* sector went on developing and acquired the reputable role of training the French intellectual, economic and administrative elites, while universities welcomed most of the students but trained middle managers, teachers, and academics.

This has been criticized many times, but the two sectors are still there today. Nevertheless, two important trends have occurred, bringing the universities and the *grandes écoles* closer. But is the divide about to disappear?

Post-1980s “Universitarization” of the *Grandes Écoles* and “Professionalization” of Universities

Two different processes have reduced the differences between the two sectors in terms of their curricula, their activities, and their staff.

The first one is linked to the policy led by the government since the mid-1970s to “professionalize” university curricula, i.e., to develop job-oriented programs. Expectations on the capacity of universities to prepare students for the job market have increased, specific “professional” diplomas have been created at all levels (bachelor and master), and internships in firms have developed. In recent years, the concept of apprenticeship has also been introduced in French universities.

Parallel to this trend, since the mid-1980s, the most prestigious business schools have undergone an important transformation. Imitating their counterparts in the world, they created campuses abroad, tried to attract international students, and looked for international accreditations such as the AACSB, AMBA, and the European EQUIS. But to obtain these labels, they had to accelerate their internal transformation and to comply with the model promoted by the accreditation bodies. This meant recruiting a certain level of international students, but also of international academic staff with PhDs. They stopped hiring their former students as permanent professors and looked for more academic profiles: PhD holders with strong publication records. Some business schools even started to deliver their own PhDs, and research became a priority. They thus introduced more university-like standards. Engineering schools have taken this international turn later but are also heading in this direction today.

The Bologna process accentuated this convergence trend: the diploma delivered by the *grandes écoles* has since then been called “master,” like the final diploma delivered by universities.

The Reform Waves of the Last 20 Years

Since 2005, a more structural transformation has been undertaken. The idea is to favor the relationships between the two sectors by locally creating meta-organizations where universities and *grandes écoles* could cooperate. Thus, the 2005 act gave the possibility to create PRES (*pôles de recherche et d’enseignement supérieur*), i.e., consortia within which member institutions could develop and manage joint labs, joint teaching

Abstract

This paper describes the evolution of the *grandes écoles*/universities divide in France. It first shows that while universities have adopted professional training programs, the *grandes écoles* have “universitarized.” Furthermore, in recent years, the policies aimed at the transformation of the French higher education landscape have led to some mergers including universities and *grandes écoles*. Nevertheless the divide between the two sectors remains consequent.

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programs, deliver joint PhD and share the management of some of their competences. By the beginning of 2010, there were around 20 PRES in France, but the member institutions had not delegated much to this meta-level, and common projects remained rather rare.

To dynamize the PRES, the government decided that only PRES could apply for the highly selective Idex calls first organized within the French initiative of excellence framework in 2010 and 2011, and then again in 2016 and 2017. After the 2010 and 2011 calls, eight PRES (Bordeaux, Marseille, Strasbourg, Toulouse and four in or around Paris) had been selected and received extra funding. If they were positively evaluated after four years, they would be confirmed as Idex (excellent institutions) and allocated a permanent endowment that will sustain their budget forever.

The results of these calls reveal that this process has been more complex for PRES that included not only universities, but also universities and *grandes écoles*. With the exception of two PRES, all of them either failed in the calls of 2010 and 2011, or lost their Idex funding upon the results of the evaluation four years later (Toulouse and one of the Parisian PRES). Furthermore, again with one exception, all the Idex-confirmed consortia underwent a merger of two or three universities within them in the first four years. By mimetic isomorphism (copying the winners) many other universities have merged in France after the first calls but none of these mergers included *grandes écoles*.

This changed in 2018. Up to this date, the statutes of all French higher education institutions allowed to be called “universités” had to follow the rules defined by the University Act. But in December 2018, the ministry produced a memo allowing universities to depart from the University Act passed in 2013 on a voluntary basis. They could become an EPE (public experimental institution) and define their own specific statutes. The circular also specified that if an EPE resulted from the merger of universities and *grandes écoles*, the latter could keep their legal personality. This opened the doors to a new phase of mergers that include some *grandes écoles*. In addition to the already completed mergers, this has seriously transformed the French higher education landscape.

A Revolution ? Maybe... Maybe not!

This is thus an important move—and a promising one... if these recent weddings hold. But has France finally left the path of dependence that existed since 1747?

This is all but sure, and not only because divorces may happen within the EPE. First, when the most reputed *grandes écoles* decided to integrate into EPEs, they chose one without university. For instance, the École Polytechnique—the top of the top—has created an EPE made of five *grandes écoles*.

Furthermore, competition for students between the two sectors has never been higher. Many *grandes écoles* have recently introduced a four-year bachelor degree, allowing students to enter the school directly after the *baccalauréat* (instead of preparing the highly selective examination after two years of preparation). Some of these bachelor students can then join the master programs of the *grandes écoles*. The latter therefore increased their number of students and their fees revenue. This year, the share of students enrolled in the private sector has reached 25 percent, and universities have for the first time experienced a decrease in their student numbers!

Since the research potential is primarily located within universities, they remain less prestigious in the heads of many parents or students, as well as in the heads of French politicians and high civil servants. So, the *grandes écoles*/universities divide has been shaken but is still well alive. ▲

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