

Note

## Honors education in France – preliminary research results

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### 1. Introduction

This note discusses study opportunities for the most motivated and talented students in the French system of higher education. Preliminary results of the Honors in Europe research project of the Hanze University of Applied Sciences Groningen (Netherlands) show that talent development in France is mainly stimulated through the hierarchical structure of the higher education system, although the number of additional, selective study programs for the best-performing students has substantially increased in the past decade. This note first examines how excellence is embedded in the French system of higher education, after which the preliminary results from the Honors in Europe research project are discussed.

### 2. Excellence in the French system of higher education

As opposed to many other continental European education systems, the concept of excellence is clearly ingrained in the hierarchical structure of French higher education. Higher education is mainly provided by public universities and CPGE/*grandes écoles*, which both complement and compete with each other (Cremonini et al. 2013, pp. 106-108). A relatively clear hierarchy exists between these two types of higher education: in most disciplines, obtaining a degree from a prestigious, highly selective (and often elitist) *grande école* is the highest possible achievement from an academic and career point of view. Universities, on the other hand, are generally unselective and provide higher education for 'the masses' (Cremonini et al. 2013, p. 106). The reputations of universities and *grandes écoles*, which are often historically rooted and can be different for specific disciplines, play an important role in these hierarchies. Excellence is thus embedded in the French higher education system through the strong differentiation between types and reputations of institutions.

Students are admitted to programs at *grandes écoles*, which generally cover the third year of undergraduate degree level and the two years of graduate level higher education, after a highly competitive examination process (*concours*). Students usually partake in the *concours*

after following two or three years of so-called preparatory classes (*classes préparatoires aux grandes écoles* (CPGE)) (Vrignaud, Bonora, and Dreux 2005, pp. 218-219). The CPGE expose their students to a heavy workload and tough examination under high pressure. Admission to the CPGE is based on a pupil's secondary school results, motivation, the type of courses the pupil has followed and (sometimes) the school's reputation.

### 3. Preliminary results

The Honors in Europe research project aims to map and explore talent programs of European higher education institutions. These 'honors programs' are defined as 'selective study programs linked to higher education institutions. They are designed for motivated and gifted students who want to do more than the regular program offers. These programs have clear admission criteria and clear goals and offer educational opportunities that are more challenging and demanding than regular programs' (Wolfensberger, 2015, p. 12).

Desk research has been done to find and explore possible talent programs at French higher education institutions. The websites of 69 French universities and 24 *grandes écoles* have been analyzed in order to find information on talent development programs, after which each university has been contacted to gather further information. Considering the hierarchical structure of the French higher education system (as discussed above), priority was given to exploring universities (*universités*) rather than *grandes écoles*, as the latter already have highly selective admission procedures.

#### 1. Limited number of programs

Although the process of contacting institutions is still ongoing, first results have found only a very limited number of programs that match (or come close to) the definition of an honors program. Many universities offer their students the opportunity to obtain additional certificates in addition to the regular program, but these are mainly related to a specific skill in the field of languages or IT (such as an English language proficiency certificate). French universities are also increasingly starting new bachelor's and master's programs for which they can select their students (in contrast with the non-selectivity principle the university system follows in general) (Abdoul-Maninrouline, 2017). These programs, including 'double degrees' and international exchange programs, are sometimes dubbed 'excellence degrees' (*formations d'excellence*), but generally cannot be considered as specific, additional talent development programs for a certain group of students.

#### 2. Excellence tracks (*filières d'excellence*)

Some universities do offer 'excellence tracks' (*filières d'excellence*) in some of their undergraduate degrees (*licence*). These tracks are selective, additional study programs, consisting of extra courses and seminars (De Tricornot, 2015; Deumier & Teyssié, 2012; Stromboni, 2015). Some programs run during the entire course of an undergraduate degree, while others start later, for example in the second year. Students are selected on their grades and motivation. These tracks are particularly common in law departments, where they are used to create selective 'law colleges'. The first 'law college' (*collège de droit*) was founded at Pantheon-Assas University (Paris 2) in 2007, mainly to compete with the well-known *grande école* Sciences Po (Franceinfo, 2014). Departments in other fields have also announced that they are considering or planning to create 'excellence tracks' (Stromboni, 2015).

### 3. *Magistère degrees*

A number of universities offer *magistère* degrees for certain disciplines (L'Étudiant, 2014; Sitbon, 2014). The degrees aim to offer their students 'excellent' education through additional courses and seminars, which are often strongly linked to academic research or the professional field. The *magistère* diploma was created in 1985 to enable universities to compete with *grandes écoles*. The programs run from the third bachelor year throughout the two-year master phase and admit high-performing students from CPGE and regular university programs based on their grades and motivation (sometimes complemented by special exams).

### 4. Discussion

The French system of higher education approaches the concept of 'excellence' in a complex, ambiguous way. On the one hand, the system's hierarchy between universities and CPGE/*grandes écoles* aims to facilitate a meritocratic 'race to the top' in higher education. Interestingly, attention for excellence within the public university system is increasing too, exemplified by the growing popularity of excellence tracks and selective bachelor's and master's programmes in addition to the existing range of *magistères*. On the other hand, there is a strong commitment to equality in French educational culture, which may complicate the development of excellence initiatives (Cremonini et al., 2013, p. 106). Student unions, for example, have raised strong objections against the recent development of excellence tracks and selective degrees at universities (*filières d'excellence*) (Abdoul-Maninroudine, 2017; De Tricornot, 2015; Stromboni, 2015). Further research within the Honors in Europe project should clarify how these different opportunities for talented students complement or compete with each other (universities with *grandes écoles*, for example) and how new excellence initiatives are positioned within France's hierarchical structure of higher education and the cultural and political contexts.

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