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10 National and International Students’ Definitions of Merit in French Grandes Écoles

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Introduction

In order to maintain their position and power, elites usually have to face the question of their legitimacy (Weber 1922). One of the main means of legitimacy in modern democracies is found in the creation of meritocratic selection devices (Parsons 1951; Young 1958). In the education-based meritocratic model (Tenret 2011), school achievement is crucial in justifying high-status/high reward positions, as purporting to provide and certify the distinctive skills and competencies which are associated with such positions. In the case of France (Duru-Bellat 2006; Iriarte 2006) elites are selected and trained through a distinctive and integrated track following from the baccalauréat (secondary school certificate). From among the highest school achieves a small number among those who apply are selected to enrol in a special programme called classes préparatoires where they are “prepared” over two to three years for the concours, the highly competitive entrance exams to the Grandes Écoles.1

However, this meritocratic model relying on a dual higher education system has been criticized in two directions. On one hand, the work of Bourdieu and Passeron from the 1960s, showed the importance of particular forms and volumes of cultural capital in academic success leading to elite reproduction. This consequently questioned the ability of schools to guarantee a fair and equitable selection (Bourdieu and Passeron 1964, 1970; Bourdieu 1989). More recent research on social closure of elite formations (Euriat and Thélot 1995) has renewed criticisms of the legitimacy of such a socially biased selection. On the other hand, since the early 2000s and in a context of increasing globalization, the low ranking of the Grandes Écoles in international league tables (such as the Academic Ranking of World Universities also known as the Shanghai ranking and the Times Higher Education World University Ranking)2 has raised the question of the efficiency of the French model3 (Harfì and Mathieu 2006).

These internal and external criticisms of the French elite education system have had both political and institutional implications. They have led institutions to open new entrance pathways in the Grandes Écoles for students from disadvantaged backgrounds and for international students. In selecting these new students, various procedures – ranging from main competitive exam, specific competitive exam, no competitive exam – have been implemented by these institutions, depending on their status (public/private) and their core curriculum (academic/vocational) as well as on path dependency pathways related to their institutional history (Darchy-Koechlin 2013).

Such measures directly question the legitimacy of French meritocracy and of the elite education system, which was built around the uniqueness of the entrance competitive exam, the cornerstone of this system, and of the Grandes Écoles’ Malthusian elitism. How do Grandes Écoles and their students react to these measures? What are their perceptions of the legitimacy of their position? To answer this question, we conducted 150 semi-structured interviews with first- and last-year students from four of the most prestigious French Grandes Écoles (École Normale Supérieure, École Polytechnique, IGS, Sciences Po).4 We interviewed both national and international students (about a third of the respondent pool) in each of the four Grandes Écoles.

The Definition of Merit and its Perception by Students

By its very solemn and codified nature, the competitive exam offers both institutional and social recognition of the GE students’ merit, and has been an essential ingredient for future elites’ self-perception and perception by others as deserving. That is why the first definition is, what we have called the ‘zero definition’ that students give of their own merit, most frequently mentions the sanction of the competitive exam: if the institution has ‘elected’ them, they certainly deserve it. By using this expression we mean that merit is a question that, in principle, no longer arises. It is obvious for the interviewed students, as for their institutions, that they deserve their place. This ‘zero definition’ of merit is simultaneously the most spontaneous and most basic; the zero is used to denote the lack of conceptual content that characterizes this circular or tautological definition of merit (‘I merit because I deserved entering here’):

The question (do you feel that you deserve being in this school?) is weird. Because for me, the system of competitive exam implies that merit depends solely on the success in the entrance examination. It seems that it is truly hypothesis. Having passed the ENS means we passed the competitive exam. So we cannot have stolen our place.

(Antonin, École Normale Supérieure)

I think anyone who has passed the competitive exam deserves his place. That is logical. It is as if you said to me: ‘Do I deserve to have the Bac [Baccalauréat]?’ He had his Bac, he got it.

(Julien, HEC)

These reactions show how the competitive exam is considered or presented as the ultimate proof or, in a number of cases, as the unique evidence of merit, thereby providing a restrictive definition of the concept.

The statements of these students echo Bourdieu’s analysis of the entrance exam as a true ‘rite of consecration’ (Bourdieu 1989), considered fair, insofar as it
appears to meet two requirements: through anonymity and standard tests of selection procedures, it is supposed to ensure equal treatment of applicants; given the purely academic nature of the subjects tested, any enrolled and deserving student has in theory the opportunity to pass the examination.

Success in the competitive exam is a key element for the Grande Ecole in legitimizing the merit of the ‘chosen’ (Karabel 2005), they have every incentive to maintain the meritocratic fiction on which their reputation for excellence and prestige rests. In fact, the welcoming and integration rites put in place by the institutions serve to confirm and provide a second consecration to confirm and celebrate success in the entrance examination, through the use of performative speech that decisively ushers the candidates into their new role as elite:

If there is one message that we can deliver to you today at the start of your career here at this school, it is this: you may rest assured and maintain an unwavering confidence in the quality of the intellectual and scientific training you are about to receive at our institution. Trust in what you are about to learn; make no mistake, the education being offered to you is without a doubt among the best in France if not the world. [...] All roads will be opened to you. But for this to be true, it is important for you to believe in the intellectual value of what you possess. Your future is bright.

(Director's commencement speech to the entering students of the École Normale Supérieure)

As we have shown elsewhere (Darchy-Koechlin et al. 2015), the preparatory class plays also a role of 'propaedeutics of meritocracy'. In the course of time spent in prep school and as students invest in their education, their sense of legitimacy, their feeling of deserving their status as member of a chosen and future academic and social elite increases, even among those who harboured doubts initially. The intense pace of work imposed throughout the preparatory class works to 'convert' them. The preparatory class thus ensures that students are gradually accepting of the verdict of the competitive exam and the resulting hierarchies and distinctions. Indeed, more than the legitimacy of their present position, it is the legitimacy of their future place in the highly selective entrance exam that the preparatory class intends to ensure that it will be accepted by the students themselves. This is why we can see the prep schools as an 'antechamber of meritocracy', as they help convince those who attend them that it is only success at the competitive exam that will grant them access to an elite position.

Changes and Limits to Changes in the Definition of Merit Within the Grandes Écoles

There is a significant change in the operational definition of merit within Grandes Écoles themselves which can be characterized as a process of 'cooling out' (Clark 1960). Whereas the entrance rituals which welcome new students are intended to acknowledge and confirm their academic success to themselves and to the institution, their family members and the entire nation at large, they also signal that this Grande École track itself will be critical into transforming them into elites.

In fact, the commencement ceremonies in the four case study Grandes Écoles, through a performative speech, serve both to recognize past achievements and to signal the future work to be done if they are to translate their promise into the possibility of entry into elite positions. In this way, Sciences Po's director remarked to the students during his commencement speech in 2009, the terms in which the former president of the National Foundation of Political Sciences, addressed the chosen ones:

He enjoined them to assume the responsibilities their admission had granted them by the very fact of it, to show themselves forever grateful that chance, hazard or Providence had got their foot on the ladder. And to know that they were not the elite of the nation.

The Director of Sciences Po added:

They still have not said anything, done anything, seen anything [...] Being admitted to Sciences Po does not confer status, entering at Sciences Po is a starting point, not a point of arrival. [...] Belonging to elite is not decided. One is not self-proclaimed member of elite ...

The reasons for this process are diverse. The discourses first of all aim to help the successful candidates understand that, however deserving they may be, they still have to demonstrate, by their accomplishments within the Grande École, that the institution made a winning bet on the educational and human capital they represent. Clearly, the institution expects a real 'return on investment' for individuals whose training cost is very high. This institutional strategy also aims to raise awareness among the new students that the rules of the game will no longer be the same, regardless of their success and ranking in the competitive exam, as preparation for social functions and professional elite positions require the acquisition and sanction of skills other than the purely academic. Indirectly, this strategy serves to legitimize the very existence of the Grandes Écoles, which are claiming more than a simple role of 'empty shells' welcoming the successful candidates at the entrance exam.

This commencement strategy also erases the systems of school hierarchy that emerge through recruitment channels and standing in the competitive exam. Furthermore, it increases the schools' internal social cohesion and encourages a sense of commonality among students rather than emphasizing the principle of inter-individual competition which tends to prevail during the process of the application. Competition could be an obstacle in building strong solidarities between students (Cuche 1988; Bourdieu 1989; Faguer 1991). The effectiveness and excellence of the Grandes Écoles are indeed largely based on their ability to integrate individuals and to foster a sense of belonging to an elite corps and to
projects of 'common good.' In other words, the Grandes Écoles thus operate, at face value at least, as a 'levelling out machine': the only important thing is to have been accepted and to be among the chosen. If the competitive exam is based on a process of selection and distinction of individuals on the basis of merit, the schooling in the Grandes Écoles is about something else, it relies on a process of aggregating these individuals.

The academic excellence of the newly admitted students is then relativized and presented as a means rather than an end in itself. They have yet to join the ranks of the 'true elite' which is presented as 'total,' polymorphic and versatile, rather than simply endowed with academic virtues. This strategy of 'cooling out,' more generally, has an ethical dimension in as much that it ensures that new entrants adopt the moral posture deemed most appropriate, that is to say the discretion, humility and sense of responsibility appropriate to a state elite (Draelants and Darchy-Koechlin 2011) and, at the same time, this is set over and against the charge of arrogance that regularly arises in French public debate about the state elites, an accusation based on a mix of reality and stereotype.

The fact that the Grandes Écoles develop and recognize another form of merit that could be termed 'collective merit' which, although it occupies a limited place in the French education system, breaks with the tradition and practices of working alone and inter-individual competition promoted by secondary education and elite prep schools. This different form of pedagogical relation is evident in some of the Grandes Écoles, where we observed that students were encouraged in some programmes to design and implement a business project or to conduct an investigation and then to present their result in small teams. The evaluation by a jury of such projects is not individual but examines the teamwork and cooperation capabilities that groups of students develop in carrying out and presenting the collective task. The civic engagement throughout the curriculum in Grande École is also an opportunity for students to demonstrate that they have skills other than purely academic, whether sporting, artistic, managerial, educational, political or moral.

The analysis of the evolution of merit thus shows a dimension specifically related to the construction of self in school during the Grande École years. It is striking how students categorize themselves according to their capacity for self-growth, borrowing from English (nobody) the term 'nobs' to describe some of their peers who seem to 'be nobody' because they have little social life in the school and fail at demonstrating to others their possession of non-academic skills. In this sense, the model a number of the Grandes Écoles offer to their students is inspired in part at least by the Anglo-Saxon model of the well-rounded elite (Kingston and Lewis 1990) rather than only by the education-based meritocratic model. The importance of this new dimension of personal construction in assessing the merit of individuals, however, varies from one school to another. Considered a prerequisite in schools highlighting vocational merit like HEc or Sciences Po which practice motivational or personality interviewing as part of the entrance exam, it is much more implicit in schools such as the École Normale Supérieure where academic merit still prevails. At the ENSc in fact it seems that this personal construction is much more independent of the curriculum and the institution and is not the subject of any specific evaluation. The school which most formally institutionalizes this personal training in the curriculum is the École Polytechnique where human and military training gives rise to an assessment done under military supervision.

The interviews also revealed that the model of academic merit instilled by the prep schools cannot be erased so easily and that the acceptance of this new 'meritocratic contract' tends to create divisions among the students. If the institutions are doing everything possible to neutralize the pre-existing hierarchies between students, these hierarchies are recreated quickly. At the beginning of their schooling in each Grande École, the students construct and use fine distinctions between different types of merit within a single institution or between institutions thus breaking the outward appearance of unanimity that the institutions strive to maintain.

First of all, the existence of various access routes to Grandes Écoles tends to maintain an implicit hierarchy between students. There are indeed in each institution alternative tracks which allow specific categories of students (mainly students from French universities and international students) to be recruited without passing the general and traditional concours. They will instead be recruited under specific conditions which are perceived by some students as more flexible and less rigorously selective. Indeed, the students accepted by entry routes other than that of the competitive exam remain more or less permanently regarded by many of their peers as 'second rank' students in the order of academic merit. It is then the various access channels to the competitive exam which implicitly determine the degree of merit among students and consequently their greater or lesser legitimacy as a student of the institution. Furthermore, the academic aspects of the competitive exam tend to be more highly regarded and valued because they are viewed as more oriented towards abstraction and thus more demanding and discriminating than another aspects of the exam. Even if there is then a tacit contract between students, encouraged by the institution, to sweep under the carpet these hierarchies inherited from the competitive exam, they structure nevertheless the perception that students have of their respective merit and value.

Among the specific categories of students, international students appear to be twice 'outsiders' (Elias and Scotson 1965). As foreigners and as aliens to the French Grandes Écoles and prep school system they are usually not familiar with the French education system and its meritocracy norms and rules. Consequently, their experiences and perceptions offer some different and useful insights into the formal and informal integration processes in the Grandes Écoles and can thus serve to highlight the specificity of the French definition of merit.

**The Perception of the Merit of Foreign Students in French Elite Institutions and Their Own View on Merit**

Alternative non-traditional access procedures – which include the admission procedures for international students – have a tendency to be devalued by those who have passed the traditional entrance examination, for different reasons. First
of all, the students who are consecrated by the concours suspect these alternative modes of recruitment to be less rigorous and to have lower requirements. A second reason is, to some extent, the opacity of the selection criteria. Foreign students, taking the full Grande Ecole track, also pass competitive exams, but these exams are adapted to their prior curriculum experience. The degree and forms of adaptation varies nevertheless across the institutions. On the one hand, state schools such as the Ecole Normale Superieure or the Ecole Polytechnique where merit is still tightly related to academic achievement have somehow 'translated' and adjusted their traditional competitive exams, preserving as much as possible the academic content and the existing criteria of assessment and selection. Nevertheless, other criteria, less official or explicit, can play a role in the process of selection for specific countries, depending either on curriculum compatibility or on historical ties – namely colonial history. On the other hand, private or semi-private Grandes Ecoles like HEC or Sciences Po have developed two different strategies regarding the competitive exam. At Sciences Po the choice was made to circumvent the exam altogether and to admit international students through a different application procedure based on files and interviews, while in HEC students are assessed through standardized tests like GMAT or TAGE-MAGE (Darchy-Koechlin 2012). A third reason for the ‘insiders’ suspicion of the legitimacy of the presence of international students is that their recruitment exempts them from attending the demanding classes preparatoires track.

There is a big and absolute contempt of the students directly admitted. Because they actually think that when you’re directly admitted, you made no preparation. And that they really merit because they have done a prep school and it was super hard.

(Noémie, HEC)

Thus, if the rite of institution, that constitutes success in the traditional or ‘first’ competitive exams, consecrates the majority of students of the studied Grandes Ecoles, it actually tends to marginalize international students as well as those national students, less numerous, who enter by other specific routes. The very notion of consecration seems dubious in their case. The creation by the Grandes Ecoles of various parallel admission procedures for the admission of a growing number of students or national students who have not passed the first competitive exam (post-baccalaureate or post-prep schools) creates heterogeneous status groups inside these schools, established on the basis of differences between fully legitimate students whose enrolment and presence based on examination is seen as self-evident, whereas others are only ‘admitted’, which implies that their presence is ‘unnatural’ and a challenge to the traditions and purpose of the institution (Darchy-Koechlin and Draelants 2010). Concomitantly, it is therefore not surprising that these students do not necessarily perceive the exam as consecration.

The marginalization of ‘parallel admission’ students is also created through subtle terminological distinctions that schools themselves operate among students according to their mode of admission. For example, at the Ecole Polytechnique the exclusive title of Polytechnicien is denied to foreign students by certain French students who believe that they should be called ‘Foreign student, EV2 of the Ecole Polytechnique’ (EV2, meaning elevé de la voie 2, that is students that were recruited through the international procedure and not through the concours). The same is true for students of the ENS who do not afford foreign graduates the prestigious title of ‘former student of the Ecole Normale Superieure’. The traditional employers of the graduates of these schools, moreover, represent yet another obstacle to a greater opening of these schools to foreign students. In fact, with the sole exception of the HEC (Ecole des Hautes Etudes Commerciales), historically an important mission of these schools has been to train the high officers of state. These careers, being as they are specifically French, are either unattractive or inaccessible to foreign students.

When they enter these Grandes Ecoles, most international students have no idea of their perceived meritocratic status among the French student community. Their lack of knowledge of the Grandes Ecoles’ meritocracy scale is due to the limited influence and reputation of these institutions on the international scene, except in some highly specialized milieus. Their modest size (a few hundred students for most of them) render them less visible compared with much larger ‘global’ institutions such as Stanford, Harvard or Princeton in the United States. Besides, the very specific nature of these schools, where the challenge of producing a state elite, which is partly meant to provide a cadre of civil officers for the country, serving the French Republic (the common mission of these schools, with the exception of HEC) is often misunderstood in the international arena. The Grandes Ecoles are indeed intimately tied to a history that is above all national. Moreover, the very specific, homogeneous, and Malthusian nature of their recruitment, their slow adaptation to and use of international standardized exams and admission policies have not helped to heighten awareness of these schools outside France.

International students, however, gradually discover their meritocratic inferiority in the eyes of their French peers as well as in the distinction Grandes Ecoles make among the student body. Most of them tend to internalize this stigma, which thus jeopardizes their social and academic integration. They have then to develop coping strategies to overcome the obstacles and difficulties they meet (Darchy-Koechlin 2012). We will now look as some of these strategies.

The first type of adaptive response may lead the international students to assume their role as a Grande Ecole student and play the game of socialization and integration in trying to understand the institutional rules and master the culture and its codes. Integration is then assumed by social acceptance and participation in festive and associative forms of socialization in the school. This adaptation relies on the adoption and mastery of social codes that may seem anecdotal or folk, but which have a decisive function, as for example the jargon of the schools or various rites of integration organized by students (traditional, sometimes secret, induction ceremonies in the student community). Being a foreign student considered a stranger does not always make things easy and most international students experience a double externality, as non-native speakers and immigrants, of the language of the host country and that of the initiatory language of the institutions. Typically international students try to make efforts to adapt while
developing nonetheless at the same time forms of linguistic resistance. Some international students may hyper-identify with the role of Grande École student: they express during the interview a strong sense of belonging to their Grande École and full adherence in the model of selection, training, socialization and consecration. Such students feel almost members of the French elite. They then carry the official word of the institution.

Some of the Grandes Écoles’ international students, including many Asian students in particular, internalize the rules of a scholaric game that fits, by its academic standards and competitive aspects, in the continuity of preparatory classes for the Grandes Écoles. Confronted with the competition with their peers, they take full account of the acquired benefits the French students enjoy. Those indeed who are insiders have a more intimate and direct knowledge of the curriculum and its requirements. Asian students tend then to invest heavily or exclusively in school work, in order to ‘catch up’ on the curriculum and the school advantage that the prep’ school years gives to the French students. Yet the effects of this adaptive response characterized by over investment can be very uncertain, mainly due to the evolution of the definition of merit in the Grandes Écoles as described above.

A second adaptive strategy is ‘exit’, which is manifested by refusal to enter the academic game. Such a strategy is evident among a small number of international students who face difficulties in coping with academic requirements and also risk academic burn-out and losing face in relation to school competition. Many such students retreat from the double bind in which they find themselves: they are not being recognized as legitimate in the academic competition by national students because of their foreigner status, which is a depreciated status but not enough to justify any form of affirmative action. They then resign themselves to their lower status position, finally accepting that their foreigner status entitles them to no particular attention, neither solidarity nor empathy.

Conclusion
The meritocracy that characterizes French society is a meritocracy based on titles, ranks and prestige, shaped by the French Revolution but also inherited from the Ancien Régime. Through the analysis of the perception of merit by national and international students, we have highlighted the centrality of merit in the French model of elite education and more specifically in the identity of higher education institutions (and their academic and intellectual traditions) and in the identity of students who enter these sites of elite formation. This work therefore indirectly demonstrates that very competitive entrance examinations, relying strongly on academic skills remains the cornerstone of the French republican ideal of meritocracy and of the egalitarian passion that animates it, even if this ideal operates primarily as a founding myth (McNamee and Miller 2004) for the resulting academic hierarchies or perhaps as a ‘necessary fiction’ (Dubet 2004).

International students in these Grandes Écoles are selected through entrance examinations which are supposed to ensure their legitimacy. Nevertheless their status is not perceived as being equivalent to that of French students. This may seem counter-intuitive in relation to the republican meritocratic imagination, but the acceptance of equivalence would mean giving less importance to the traditional entrance examination system and to the terms and conditions of its implementation (competitive and highly codified written and oral exams to test a well-defined preparatory programme).

Therefore the question of the evolution of the national entrance exams system is raised, along with that of the harmonization of recruitment procedures in order to adjust the French definition of meritocracy to the new context of the Grandes Écoles as international institutions of Higher Education. Should the specificity of national entrance examinations be maintained and should international selection procedures be drawn closer to national selection procedures? Or, on the contrary, should the national selection be opened to more international forms of selection likely to ensure a better measure of equity and diversity in the profiles of the chosen candidates and attract more international students?

In that respect, the recent policies aiming at the international opening of higher education in France stress the need to reflect on entrance exams and the republican meritocratic model, even more so because the French selection system and training of its elites is questioned by international evaluations such as PISA. The French system is therefore facing competition from other national models that appear to be more efficient and more equitable in selecting and training a less Malthusian and more diversified elite.

The perception of merit by national and international students has consequences for students and their identities as elite students. It produces also significant effects on the institutions and on the system of elite education as a whole and more specifically on the identity of higher education institutions and the identity of the French elite higher education system. These higher education institutions, based on an esprit de corps in which merit is the keystone – dependent on success in the competitive entrance exam – are weakened by the differentiation of national and international students, which create social and cultural divisions within institutions. As Bourdieu put it:

The influence of highly integrated groups […] stands for a large part to the fact that they are linked by a collusion in the illusion, a fundamental complicity in the collective fantasy which ensures each member experience an exaltation of self, the principle of a solidarity rooted in adherence to the group’s image as enchanted self-image. Indeed, it is this feeling socially constructed of being from a superior essence which, with the solidarity of interests and affinities of habitus, contributes the most to create what we must call an esprit de corps.

(Bourdieu 2004, p. 19)

France continues to want to protect the Grandes Écoles, considered as a French exception in the global space of higher education, but the international opening up of these elite institutions inevitably raises questions about the French definition
of meritocracy, and about the future role of the Grandes Écoles nationally and internationally.

Notes

1 Contrary to most OECD’s higher education systems, in France universities are not the main higher education institutions preparing for the core of elite professions: the main channel for education in Engineering, Management and Politics goes through the Grandes Écoles and their preparatory classes. Whereas the university is open to every holder of the baccalauréat, Grandes Écoles are selective higher education institutions. There is first a selection for entry into the preparatory class, on the basis of application files, and then the competitive examination for entry into the Grande Ecole. The Grandes Écoles and their preparatory classes enrol about 5 per cent of an age class (or one in ten students, knowing that there is about 50 per cent of an age cohort in higher education).

2 With the notable exception of HEC presented for several years in the Financial Times ranking as the best business school in Europe and one of the top business schools in the world.

3 In 2006, in the ARWU ranking established by the Shanghai Jiao Tong University, the ENS reached the 99th place, the École Polytechnique was classified beyond the 200th place and the École des Mines for its part ranked beyond the 300. In response, the École des Mines established a rival ranking based on the measurement of career success rather than on criteria of scientific production, as is the case for the Chinese university ranking. In the ranking of the Ecole des Mines (September 2007 edition), the methodology consisted in counting the number of each institution’s alumni reaching number one positions in the 500 largest companies. Consequently, five major French schools (Polytechnique, HEC, Sciences Po, ENA and Mines) appear in the top ten, along with Harvard, Stanford and MIT. We bring to attention that in the last editions of the Shanghai Times rankings, some French grandes écoles have somehow improved their scores but remain far from the world’s top twenty (in the 2013 ARWU, the ENS is 71st, Polytechnique 201–300th and Mines 401–500th and in the 2014 Times ranking, the ENS is 65th, Polytechnique 70th and Mines 193rd).

4 This research was directed by Agnès van Zanten and funded by the Agence Nationale de la Recherche (ANR). Its complete results will be published in 2015 (van Zanten et al. 2015). Our case studies are not representative of all of French Grandes Écoles. "Prestigious among the prestigious" (Euriat and Thélot 1995), their recruitment process is the most competitive in their respective field of training (engineering, humanities and sciences, business, human and social sciences). The uniqueness of the social composition of these institutions is clear, not only in relation to the entire French population, but compared with all students enrolled in French selective higher education. Although recent data are lacking, the information gathered during our research suggests that working-class students remain significantly under-represented in these institutions (less than 10 per cent while there were on average 21 per cent in other GÉ according to statistics published in 2002 by the association which federates and represents the vast majority of French Grandes Écoles. The proportion of international students in the studied Grandes Écoles varies from 10 to 35 per cent with their level of international openness.

5 Namely, two or three years of full-time investment for the prep-school students with most of their social life put in parenthesis (Darmon 2013).

6 Civic engagement consists in community service (for example within an association).

7 At the École Polytechnique, 10 out of 400 admissions existing for French candidates are reserved for students coming from universities. International admissions target 100 candidates. At the École Normale Supérieure, the number of admissions for students preparing the degree is not predefined (180 students were admitted in 2009), although almost as much as the 194 students selected through the competitive exam. The international selection recruits annually 20 foreign students. At HEC, direct Master admissions target 50 candidates, whereas 380 places are reserved for CPGE competitive entrance exam; 500 students altogether are welcomed on the campus. At Sciences Po, the number of admitted students varies each year. In 2009, among 1,224 admitted students, 381 were admitted because they were holders of the highest honours at the baccalauréat, 415 through the competitive entrance exam, 126 through the ‘Convention Education Prioritaire’ (a special procedure reserved to students from disadvantaged cycles, a main element of the institution’s equality of opportunity program) and 302 through international enrolments.

8 This opacity of selection criteria goes together with their reluctance to provide data on the national status and social profile of foreign students.

9 First of all curriculum compatibility with some countries, like Morocco for example where schools still teach the traditional mathematics curriculum of the French lycées, or Vietnam, where the French influence is also present as well as that of the Mandarin Chinese system. The same process has been observed within the section of literature and humanities of the École Normale Supérieure, where strong links with Eastern European countries can be observed due to the importance attributed to high cultural capital in the school curriculum of some of them as well as to historical links between France and Romania. Colonial history as well as the influence of French language and culture in some countries is frequently the central factor here as well as geopolitical strategies, financial issues and the search for excellence through symbolically rewarding partnerships.

10 Ancien Régime refers to the pre-revolutionary era where the ruling class was the nobility. From this point of view, the Republic introduced a radical change by giving the school a central role in access to dominant positions, thus creating a 'state nobility' (Bourdieu 1989), based on scholastic achievement and 'esprit de corps' and transforming the essence of social distinction.

11 The Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) is a triennial international survey organized by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) which enables the comparison of education systems worldwide through a test of the skills and knowledge of 15-year-old students and the characteristics of their family and their school (http://www.oecd.org/pisa/aboutpisa/).

References


11 Globalizing Femininity in Elite Schools for Girls

Some Paradoxical Failures of Success

Jane Kenway, Diana Langmead and Debbie Epstein

Introduction

Girls from elite schools appear to have everything – wealthy and well-connected families, regular international travel to study, play and shop, and seemingly limitless ability, confidence and poise. They are high achievers in all school activities – academics, sports and the arts. They are school leaders running student executives, clubs and societies. They serve good causes too, for example working in soup kitchens for the poor or travelling to villages in ‘third world’ countries to provide ‘service’. Their futures are predictably top rung – top universities, prestigious and influential careers, partners in the upper tiers of society and expensive lifestyles. It seems that their propensities for success are endless; that they have infinite agency and worthiness.

Their expensive, exclusive and socially segregated schools like to take much of the credit for such girls’ accomplishments. After all, they groomed them. And one possible inference from this is that these schools provide models for emulation around the world; that they are the inspirational pinnacle in the education of all girls. This is one of the reasons why these ‘A1’ girls (McRobbie 2009) and the A1 schools they attend are of interest.

Many elite schools for girls around the world have been modelled on the elite schools for girls that were established in England in the second half of the nineteenth century. Such schools helped pave the way for major reforms in the education and social role of girls and women. Two of the initiators of the reform agenda in the private girls’ schools of England were Dorothea Beale and Frances Mary Buss (Kamm 2010): their aim was to ensure that the privileged girls at their schools acquired a worthwhile educational and career trajectory. Buss’s North London Collegiate School for Ladies catered for ‘daughters of retired gentlemen, doctors, artists, clerks and the more “respectable” tradesmen’ (Kamm 2012 [1958]: 41). Beale’s ‘Ladies’ College catered for the ‘daughters and young children of Noblemen and Gentlemen ... in Cheltenham’ (ibid: 51).

At the time, privileged single women’s social position was in flux (Vicinus 1985) as changes in the economy were reflected in new configurations of social relationships. These new schools for girls, and the educational philosophies that informed them, disputed conventional, upper class-based modes of femininity and, thus,