

# France's Quest for Excellence in Higher Education

## Towards a New French Revolution?

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Since 2010 France has undertaken an ambitious programme of reforms aimed at improving significantly the performance of French higher education in the global knowledge and education marketplace. The French excellence initiative (Idex) has devoted about €10 billion to financing activities undertaken by five to ten groupings of higher education and research establishments. The goal was to facilitate the emergence of a few comprehensive entities able to compete with the best in the world. The Idex/I-Site initiative represents a truly transformative project. For the first time, French universities and Grandes Écoles have begun thinking strategically about their common future. Features that facilitated the process included the establishment of an international jury, the requirement of a midterm review, good sets of performance indicators and reliance on hearings that proved crucial in clarifying actual progress towards the objectives of the application. Major limiting factors stemmed from a lack of government coherence, the limited flexibility and autonomy enjoyed by French higher education institutions, the resistance to change of the Humanities and Social Sciences in many universities and various internal obstacles. The main challenge facing the government remains strengthening universities' autonomy and simplifying management rules and procedures.

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## 1. Introduction

### Challenges in the French system that influence international rankings

Since 2010 France has undertaken an ambitious programme of reforms aimed at improving significantly the performance of French higher education in the global knowledge and education marketplace (Marginson & van der Wende, 2007). The French system indeed suffers from a number of challenges that influences the international rankings of its universities as well as its research and education performance. One of the main factors that affect the ranking results is the fragmentation of research between partially specialised universities (with a few exceptions) and national research organisations (NROs). The latter may cover many disciplines (such as the CNRS – *Centre national de la recherche scientifique*) or be more specialised, such as the *Institut national de la santé et de la recherche médicale* (INSERM) for health sciences, the *Institut national de la recherche agronomique* (INRA) for agriculture, the *Commissariat à l'énergie atomique et aux énergies alternatives* (CEA) for energy, or the *Institut de la recherche pour le développement* (IRD) for research in developing countries.

In addition, there is a split between the *Grandes Écoles* (such as *Polytechnique*, *Mines*, *Pont-et-Chaussées*, *Centrale*) and the universities. Whereas the *Grandes Écoles* that cover the whole spectrum of scientific disciplines<sup>2</sup> are highly selective, universities as enshrined in law are non-selective at the first year of study. This system has long been both heavily criticised and praised. For instance, Michel Crozier's critical analysis of the "stalled society" that it engenders remains relevant (Crozier, 1973). Issues relate to marked inequalities in funding, the reproduction of elites, and the monopoly that graduates from the *Grandes Écoles* hold over top positions in politics, in the administration and even the private sector. A further challenge is that universities, *Grandes Écoles* and National Research Organisations (NRO) each have independent research strategies but with NRO research staff being distributed within joint laboratories in universities and *Grandes Écoles*.

### Presentation of preliminary observations on the process

In late February 2017 the latest recipients received the coveted label of excellence and the French Excellence Initiative completed a 6-year cycle during which the Investments for the Future Programme (*Programme d'Investissements d'Avenir* or PIA) has supported higher education and research institutions' determination to work together to

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<sup>2</sup> Apart from the *École normale supérieure* (originally designed to train secondary-school teachers), the various political science institutes, and the *École nationale d'administration* (created to unify the recruitment of the high civil service), these are mostly engineering (such as *Polytechnique*, *Mines*, *Centrale*, *Ponts et Chaussées*, *AgroParisTech*) or business schools (such as *HEC – Hautes Études Commerciales*), art schools and architecture schools.

create stronger, more effective entities (so-called ‘target universities’) that will enjoy greater visibility (CGI/ANR, 2017). This latest cycle of project evaluation concludes a remarkable process of transformation, one that promises to make a durable impact on French higher education. This article presents a set of preliminary observations on the process and outcomes of this initiative, and identifies some lessons based on the experience and perceptions of the international jury in charge of the evaluation of the competing universities.

## 2. Purpose and Evolution of the Initiative

The French excellence initiative (Iindex), roughly modelled after the 2006 German one of the same name, was launched in 2010 by President Sarkozy. It was one of the recommendations of a bi-partisan report written under the direction of two former prime ministers, Alain Juppé and Michel Rocard (Juppé & Rocard, 2009). The first Shanghai Ranking, a sign of the globalisation of higher education, came out in 2003 and it subsequently rang alarm bells across Europe; France was no exception. It led to the adoption of PIA. Initiated in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis, its purpose was to increase French competitiveness by encouraging innovation. Indeed, investment in research needs to be further developed in the French industrial world. Compared with Germany, for example, companies located in France (both national and foreign) are investing much less in research than their foreign counterparts and, with a few exceptions, fail to use universities as strategic partners.

### Origins of Iindex

Endowed with €47 billion, PIA is managed by a distinct administrative structure, the State Investment Agency (*Commissariat général à l'investissement* – CGI), placed under the direct authority of the Prime Minister (Maystadt, 2016). The programme was initially allocated €35 billion in 2010 to finance 45 activities. In 2014, a second cycle (PIA-2) was given an extra €12 billion for 31 activities, several of which were extension of earlier ones (such as the Iindex programme). The CGI was renamed *Secrétariat général pour l'investissement* (SGPI) in 2017, but the former acronym, CGI, will be used throughout the paper.

Over half of this sum, or €27,2 billion<sup>3</sup> was devoted to strengthening research in general and improving the quality and visibility of French higher education. Close to half of this amount underpinned a variety of initiatives in higher education, the most important of which were Iindex (*Initiatives d'excellence*) and, later, I-Site: Nine Iindex projects and

### Investment in Iindex initiatives

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<sup>3</sup> €21,9 billion for the first cycle of projects (PIA-1) and €5,3 billion for the second cycle (PIA-2) (Maystadt, 2016).

nine I-Site projects received in sum €10, 346 billion. The amount granted the Idex/I-Site initiative, as remarkable as it is, in fact hides a creative financial plan that does not overburden the French national budget. Allocations are not directly available to successful applicants. Rather, disbursements come in the form of interest earned on the amount awarded. The interest rate was decided by the state (and differed from one call to the next) but will remain in perenity.

### Further fundings

Further funding went to the following higher education initiatives:

- Labex (*Laboratories of excellence*), €1,942 billion for 171 projects;
- Equipex (*Equipments of excellence*), €1,021 billion for 93 projects;
- University hospitals institutes (€590 million for six projects) and
- Idefi (*Initiatives d'excellence en formations innovantes*), around €175 million for 36 projects.

In addition, PIA actions were intended to increase the value-added aspect of existing research and encourage technology transfers through a network of centres linking public research with private industrial partners. This led to the multiplication of new organisations: eight Technology Research Institutes (IRTs), 13 Institutes for Energy Transition (ITEs), six university hospital institutes, 14 Societies for the Transfer of Technology (SATTs), six Thematic Valorisation Consortia (CVTs) and France Patents (Maystadt, 2016). Thus, substantial funding was made available for ambitious projects and commitments of a transformative nature.

### Two objectives of Idex

As envisaged by the Juppé-Rocard report, the aim of Idex was to devote €10 billion to financing truly transformative activities undertaken by five to ten groupings of higher education and research establishments selected by an international jury. The ambition was to facilitate the emergence of a few comprehensive entities able to compete with the best in the world (Juppé-Rocard, 2009). Yet, the initiative was two-pronged: one objective was indeed to promote excellence and the visibility of French science; but another was also to reduce the fragmentation of the French system of higher education of long-standing (between universities, Grandes Écoles and national research organisations), compounded by the division of existing universities after 1968. The scheme included a probationary period of four years and a confirmation procedure in order to guarantee both the meeting of commitments and the long-term continuation of the structuring action.

Applicants were given the possibility of proposing a variety of integrative organisation models. These were on condition that the institutions agree on the education and research objectives they were pursuing, the governance they had chosen to adopt, and the competences they decided to exercise jointly. The outcome would be the implementation of an ambitious university development policy, and recognition

as a complete university by the international scientific community. Thus, it was indeed an exercise in imagination and rather than triggering new dynamics, the Idex programme has been useful in supporting and reinforcing existing dynamics.

The initiative evolved. Indeed, whereas the first call for projects (PIA-1) had limited its action to the original concept of the Idex initiative, PIA-2 supplemented this objective by creating the I-Site label which recognises sites whose scientific forces are restricted to a limited number of fields, and which have demonstrated the willingness and the capacity to develop a targeted strategy rooted territorially. By selecting these I-Site projects, PIA-2 made it possible to support a new type of ambition which reinforces the specialisation of site-based and regional initiatives, as promoted by the European Union in particular, by highlighting their specific characteristics and their potential attractiveness. Following the two Idex/I-Site initiatives (under PIA-1 and PIA-2) and taking the end-of-probationary-period assessment of PIA-1 into account, nine Idex projects and nine I-Sites were selected by the time of writing our observations.

#### **Creation of the I-Site label**

Universities that earned the Idex label are Aix-Marseille, Bordeaux, Strasbourg, Grenoble, Lyon, Nice, Paris-Sciences et Lettres, Saclay, and Sorbonne Universités. So far, only the first three have been confirmed after the initial probationary period. The I-Sites are Auvergne, Bourgogne Franche-Comté, Lille, Lorraine, Montpellier, Nantes, Paris-Est, Paris-Seine and Pau. The diversity of selected institutions is striking: Some were preeminent older universities, others much younger and smaller institutions. Indeed, reputation was no guarantee of success; innovative and credible projects were. Not all of the 78 French universities submitted an application, either because their research potential was limited or because there were strong intellectual or institutional opposition to the initiative; others were unsuccessful because their project was deemed too narrow or lacked credibility.

#### **Universities with Idex and I-Site label**

### **3. Lessons From a Successful Process**

One major feature of the PIA was the establishment of international juries. In the case of Idex, the selection made by an international jury with members representing a broad range of academic, government and industrial experience brought credibility and objectivity to the evaluation process and guaranteed the relevance of the selected projects in an internationally comparative context (CGI/ANR, 2017). In addition, the jury enjoyed a high degree of independence in terms of the methodology that it devised in relation to the aims of the call for projects. For example, it determined the weight assigned to each of the dozen evaluation criteria identified by the government, as well as the

#### **Establishment of international juries**

criteria that would automatically eliminate an applicant. These were communicated to the applicants and adhered to throughout the process. The jury enjoyed the freedom to organise its deliberations and the decision-making process without interference. Representatives of the CGI and ANR (but not of the ministries concerned) were present during the hearings, but only as observers and in a supportive capacity. The final recommendations were then presented to the government jointly by the head of the jury and the head of the CGI who always ensured that the independence of the jury be respected.

**Features by the government**

Features devised by the government that facilitated the process included

- the development of clear evaluation criteria (although these were somewhat repetitive and could have been more limited in number),
- good sets of performance indicators, and
- the use of oral hearings which proved crucial in clarifying aspects of each application.

This was particularly important in judging the extent to which various institutional components of the proposed target university believed in the project, and in assessing how the governance team operated and the degree of confidence it displayed in achieving a project. Although the weighting of the various criteria involved did not change, internal governance issues became more prominent in the jury's thinking as the process evolved. In many cases, there was no lack of aggregate research excellence; but the proposed governance of the target institution often lacked credibility in the face of strong internal opposition and institutional rivalries among future partners. This pointed to the rapid recognition of the importance of leadership in ensuring future success once the IDEX label had been granted.<sup>4</sup>

**Review and evaluation**

The requirement of a midterm review and evaluation of the successful projects also played a key role in driving the initiative. The same jury conducted this through evaluation. The 2016 review of the projects accepted in the first wave surprised some as out of eight projects, the jury recommended that three should be definitively confirmed, three should have their probationary period extended (for up to two years), and two should be stopped. All IDEX and I-Site projects that were subsequently accepted will undergo a similar process.

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<sup>4</sup> Leadership has many facets and rests on credibility and representativeness. It was striking to see the marked gender imbalance within projects management teams, symptomatic of a pervasive situation that afflicts French academic leadership.

Final decisions were the responsibility of the Prime Minister (four altogether were in charge throughout the process) who unfailingly followed the recommendations of the jury, sometimes in the face of strong opposition from candidates not used to public rejection and also pressure from local elected officials. As was the case for the evaluation of the initial applications, the jury put forward a positive recommendation only when a two-third majority supported an application. This follows standard procedures in many countries where juries only make recommendations to granting agencies (the CGI in this case). The government could have gone against the jury's decisions (and it was under pressure to do so in a couple of instances), but it would have had to explain why and suffer the political fallout since the jury's decisions were public.

#### **Final decision by Prime Minister**

Early in the process, however, the government, for reasons that remain unclear, went beyond the jury in two cases in order to accommodate or console unsuccessful projects by providing some funding to enable them to compete again. These were projects that were not recommended by the jury, although a majority (but not by two-thirds) of its members had graded them positively. They received substantial financial support for three years in order to help them submit stronger applications. One of them failed on a resubmission, the other succeeded provisionally.

#### **Exceptional cases**

In another case, the contract that a successful candidate signed with the government did not correspond to the project submitted to the jury. That project was subsequently negatively evaluated and stopped. In a third case, one of the original key institutions subsequently removed itself from a project that had been accepted, the government then reduced the funding made available rather than choose to stop the project altogether (Maystadt, 2016, p. 11).

Later, the jury's decision, endorsed by the government, to stop two IDEX projects at the end of their initial probationary period was a major clarion call that firmly established both the credibility of the process and the commitment of the government in its desire to encourage real transformation. In these cases, as in other cases of unsuccessful applications, one notable change was the attitude of territorial authorities. Whereas, early in the process they tended to appeal directly to the government and make the case for their candidates, but later on (with a couple of exceptions), they tended not to pressure the government but rather their unsuccessful candidates and urge them to restructure their proposal to improve their future chances, on pain of seeing a sharp drop in their financing.

One key question concerns the relationship among various initiatives conducted under the higher education and research programme of the PIA. On the one hand, they are conceived as complementary, building on existing strengths but also filling specific gaps and ultimately

#### **Risks of initiatives conducted under PIA programme**

strengthening the foundations of future universities of excellence. On the other hand, there was the risk of spreading the available funds too thinly without strategic thinking at the local level.

Another issue is path-dependency. First (and understandably), success in Idex/I-site often rested on the outcome of the Labex/Equipex competitions. It was also correlated with previous success in other competitions, including the Plan Campus. Eight of the nine universities granted the Idex label benefited from the Plan Campus (see below). Accordingly, those universities that for various reasons were not competitive in the early rounds (when applicants had very little time to submit proposals) may have been subsequently handicapped. However, the data do not support the reverse argument, namely the existence of a bias in favour of Idex applications from Universities that had been more successful in these competitions. Additionally, several major research universities did not make it, and most of those who did are in probation. In addition, Nice had relatively few Labex awards, Paris Seine only a couple and Pau none.

Yet, several Idex projects revolve heavily around Labex grants and some aim to continue supporting them at the end of the Labex funding. Even though two-thirds of the Idex/I-Site financing supports various other actions and universities can use this funding to develop new research teams, feelings of internal inequities could be exacerbated, which in turn will make more difficult further progress toward integration. Moreover, some of the results of the Idex projects are highly dependent on appropriate implementation of their Labex grants. All this threatens to reduce the role of Idex in fostering the emergence of pioneering research programmes unless dynamic teams lead them.

## **4. Impediments and Opportunities**

### **4.1 Issues of Coherence**

One major and familiar limiting factor stems from a lack of government coherence, because the time frame encompassed the work of successive governments. First, the programme was pursuing goals that may have been incompatible at times. For example, it sought both general excellence and the establishment of universities of excellence. As well it promoted groupings on the basis of geography according to a territorial logic (through successive reforms such as Plan Campus and the creation of the PRES followed by the COMUE) while looking for excellence from the PIA initiatives. Geographical clusters, however, do not necessarily promote excellence (Maystadt, 2016) nor would returning to the pre-1968 situation be the only way to develop a



strong, competitive university system for the 21st century. Again, a diversity of models may co-exist.

### The Plan Campus

With funding of €5,18 billion, the Plan Campus, adopted in 2008, was a programme designed to boost university infrastructure in a limited number of major sites, although it also included two components that were also part of IDEX applications (scientific and education ambition, and quality of life on campus). The PRES (*Pôles de recherche et d'enseignement supérieur*) were created in 2006 in order to regroup independent higher education establishments in a given territory. They were replaced in 2013 by the COMUE (*Communauté d'universités et d'établissements*) that enjoy wider powers.

As the Maystadt report pointed out, more could be done to strengthen the relation between Grandes Écoles and universities. However, by allowing Grandes Écoles the right to grant undergraduate and doctoral university degrees, the Ministry of Higher Education and Research (MESR) in effect weakened any incentives they may have had to become more closely and meaningfully integrated with universities. The extension of the right to grant doctorates was intended to encourage engineers to write theses; it did not lead to closer ties with universities until the IDEX programme was established. In practice, many of the new doctoral programmes are joint ventures with universities. Yet, as the Maystadt report again pointed out, fragmentation, a lack of critical size of engineering schools and weak research performance compared to universities (with a few exceptions) should push them towards integration. At the same time, the financial gap between the Grandes Écoles and the universities keeps widening, with the state typically spending up to three times as much per student in the Grandes Écoles.

Whereas universities are under the authority of the MESR, the Grandes Écoles may be independent or under various administrative authorities: MESR (*École normale supérieure* – ENS), Ministry of Defense (*École polytechnique*), Ministry of Economy (Mines), Ministry of Agriculture (SupAgro), Paris Chamber of Commerce and Industry (*Hautes études commerciales* – HEC), etc. This diversity of supervising authorities poses difficulties and allows the Grandes Écoles to play an independence card; some ministries may be keen on 'their sponsored schools' to retain their autonomy and wish to influence their curriculum and admission policies. In addition, some schools are part of national specialised networks, which may have felt the need to limit the scope of any integration with a local university. The question remains whether local and regional divisions merely reflect those divisions at the level of central government or whether they spring from local dynamics. In contrast to universities whose presidents are elected, the heads of the public Grandes Écoles (unlike private ones, such

**Relations between  
Grandes Écoles and  
universities**

**Grandes Écoles  
independent or under  
various authorities**

as HEC) are appointed by the government. Why then did the system generally not select ‘well oriented’ and ‘international class’ directors willing and able to facilitate the emergence of strong IDEX projects? Rather, they relied on financial and political support from their ministries. Many schools had few incentives to compromise and build larger and putatively more internationally visible entities. In addition, the role of a strong brand (although often strong only nationally), an elitist student culture and powerful alumni networks combined to resist forging closer links with universities. The perception by the Grandes Écoles themselves and the higher civil service (staffed by many graduates from the same schools) that the Grandes Écoles are nimbler (whereas university governance is seen as too heavy, bureaucratic and controlled by unions) reinforces this attitude.

#### **4.2 The Legislative Context: An Obstacle to Innovation**

Beyond these contradictions in macro-policy, French higher education establishments suffer from a lack of flexibility and autonomy compared to many of their foreign competitors. The state still looms large in terms of funding, governance, staffing and curriculum, so that innovative institutions often have to work in the interstices of state control. The need to change existing legal instruments (related to governance and hiring for example) was strongly felt during the IDEX process, to the extent that the government commissioned a report from the General Inspectorate of the French National Education and Research Administration (IGAENR) in order to clarify desirable legal changes (Cytermann, 2016). Consequently, and more markedly toward the end of the process, project leaders were strongly encouraged to present their organisation and governance model irrespective of existing legal impediments (CGI/ANR, 2017). In this context, the Education Code provides substantial possibilities for introducing temporary waivers (up to ten years) to its provisions (Cytermann, 2016).

#### **4.3 Archipelagos of Resistance**

Within universities, the extent and causes of the resistance of the humanities and social sciences (but primarily the former) to the overall process needs to be investigated further. The IDEX applications often were driven by hard, natural and applied scientists, but resisted by the humanities. Explanations such as the existence of ‘two cultures’ do not suffice. What should be analysed is the extent to which other variables or conditions transformed different fears and sensibilities into outright opposition. An obvious one is concern about the distribution of power. Misperceptions compounded ideological opposition that saw universities being too close to industry or feared the consolidation of a two-tier university system. Indeed, the intellectual home of many French

**Concern with the distributed power**

professors in the humanities is the plethora of post-1968 academic discourses which privileged – and still privilege – issues of representativeness, small-scale units and eminence-based recognition (Abel & Magni-Berton, 2015). Thus, it is the very philosophy of the PIA initiative that was often questioned, not the specific institutional project academics were asked to support. Since the humanities themselves may have lost faith somewhat in the dialectic potential of their views, they did not even bother engaging institutional leaderships in a fruitful dialogue. To a certain extent, however, the experience of Aix-Marseille, Grenoble and Strasbourg shows that this attitude can evolve.

To be sure, one should note the oddity of having universities specialised in these fields, that have had limited opportunities to interact with other disciplines and, as a result, have developed a hardened identity and culture. In this context, the IDEX/I-Site initiatives could be seen as representing a much-needed lifeline to the humanities and social sciences. In many of the initiatives the jury supported, the humanities were reinventing themselves in innovative and exciting ways through close collaboration with basic and natural science colleagues. Although the world of higher education has much to learn from these initiatives, in general, the humanities often missed an opportunity to shape these initiatives and their input into the process, including individual applications, has been disappointing, both in terms of quality and quantity.

**IDEX lifeline to humanities and social sciences**

Not all failed integration attempts were due to SSH resistance, however. Sorting out the relative weight and the conditions under which the following factors proved crucial would be useful:

**Different concerns**

1. fears by some institutions of losing power or prestige/status in favour of others (some SSH universities fearing capture or domination by the hard sciences; others refusing to assume the debt of their future partners);
2. fears by some groups of losing political power (e.g. competing unions);
3. decades-old ideological animosities between universities;
4. simple fear of change, including employment level, task redistribution, and salary issues; and
5. difficulties of reconciling different cultures.

One key to removing some of these fears has been in the co-construction of and vision for an ambitious project with all stakeholders under the leadership of a strong project team.

Finally, some national research organisations, such as the CNRS, have adopted a strategy that emphasises strengthening their role in the strongest research sites. Though a meaningful integration into the IDEX

**Central control vs local interests**

and I-Site groupings has a long way to go, a significant change is taking place. The IDEX/I-site programme gives universities an incentive to take full responsibility for their research strategy. As a result, the role of NROs is evolving, from being the driving factor of the national research strategy to supporting the strategy of local actors (though NROs maintain national responsibility in some key areas, such as large national facilities). This will call for renewed thinking regarding the proper relationship between these two sets of actors, as universities reinforce their governance structure. NROs seem to be open to this change even though they are still to adapt fully to this new role. This tension between the development of a research strategy from the centre (the headquarters of the NRO) or from the periphery (the local IDEX/I-site programmes for example) has become a major issue. The insistence on central control, manifested by central contracts, diffuses academic ownership by local universities and is bound to take less notice of local constraints and opportunities. This is an issue that the government needs to address.

#### 4.4 Pathways to Excellence

##### Top-down or bottom-up?

Given the government's wish to foster integration among existing universities on the one hand, and closer links between the latter and the Grandes Écoles as well as the national research organisations on the other, applicants conceivably could decide to follow one of four pathways depending on their ambition and internal institutional dynamics (although a lack of time in the first call restricted the types of available strategies). The first one is top-down that is integration by political fiat from the central administrations of universities and Grandes Écoles. The reverse option rests on a bottom-up process that builds on the outcomes of the various competitions (Labex, Equipex, Idefi, etc.) as well as on various initiatives from components of these future entities. In this case, the issues are coherence, the general fit with the strategic plan and ensuring that targets will be met.

##### A third path

A third path is functional, one that starts with integrating functions across a number of institutions, such as curricula and diplomas, with the hope of fostering 'an ever-closer union' through spill-over effects and a redefinition of the interest of the parties involved. Indeed, several applicants made progress by building on a coalition of the willing rather than attempting to be inclusive. One of the issues this approach faces is that members may be in as long as there is something to be gained, unless ways can be found for them to redefine their interests in line with a collective interest.

This approach in terms of concentric circles seems to be the future path of choice of several COMUE. The COMUE framework could indeed prove a useful instrument for the second and third path toward integration. In practice, despite candidate university complaints about

the constraints that the COMUE framework posed, one had the sense that their interpretation of what they could do under the COMUE was not primarily a function of the various straightjackets that a COMUE may impose. Rather, the assessment of the nature and degree of the constraints COMUE presented was a function of the direction universities had already chosen.

Applicants variously adopted these first three options. A fourth path, akin to a more Schumpeterian (entrepreneurial) approach, could also be developed. It would focus on 'pioneers' that are highly motivated, capable, and dynamic individuals, institutions and subunits. They would be granted holistic support (in terms of financing, flexibility, fewer regulatory constraints, visibility, etc.) and would become the main driver of change, in the long run forcing others to follow suit. IDEX indeed gives them the tools for such experiments.

**Entrepreneurial  
approach**

#### **4.5 Benchmarking and Internationalisation**

A final issue pertains to benchmarking (and the implicit models behind the policy). IDEX has helped French universities overcome their insular outlook (that is poor awareness of and limited interest in developments taking place abroad) and benchmarking exercises proved a welcome learning experience for some universities that were forced to try and learn from their peers in the rest of the world. Indeed, internationalisation may constitute one of the most important achievements of the IDEX initiative. French universities are opening up, looking at benchmark universities in other countries, giving courses in English, and recruiting excellent young researchers from abroad (although with some difficulties, given how closed the academic marketplace and limited the possibility to offer attractive packages can be). The number of international institutional collaborations is increasing. French universities are now more active in developing joint programmes with foreign establishments, and more aware of the importance of attracting foreign graduates in a globalised higher education area.

**Advantages of  
benchmarking**

The ambition to create a new Harvard, Oxford or Cambridge, however, may have misled candidates early in the process. They took top-ranked universities as models instead of looking at universities that dramatically increased their reputation and ranking within a short time (such as EPFL Switzerland, Waterloo in Canada, Aarhus in Denmark or Wageningen in the Netherlands). These cases provided lessons that might have been more usefully integrated in the submitted proposals since very few of all French applicants initially were comprehensive universities. The experience of rapidly rising Asian universities (for example NTU in Singapore and HKUST in Hong Kong) was generally overlooked as well. One should keep in mind, however, that a danger for universities lies in desperate and ill-conceived attempts to copy

the best universities, rather than rising to the challenge of developing uniqueness. Models should enlighten and not constrain.

## 5. Conclusions

The Idex/I-Site initiative represents a truly transformative project, not a mere device to supplement the financial resources of some higher education establishments and the label of being an *Institut d'excellence* will endure. Universities and Grandes Écoles have had to come up with a new ambition and think hard about pedagogy and campus life, internal governance, synergies with other institutions, communication of their achievements, international competition and their relationship with industry, all areas that were the main evaluation criteria of the proposals. For the first time, they have begun working together and thinking strategically about their future. They have been reflecting on their location in the global knowledge marketplace, sought to enlist NROs in the support of their ambition, and are beginning to understand the importance of being associated with their economic environment. This represents a strong cultural evolution. No longer does the state decide on a single norm to be applied uniformly, rather it entrusts local actors to develop their own strategy, sanctioned by an international jury whose recommendations the government subsequently followed, often in the wake of heavy criticisms.

The PIA higher education and research initiative also helped overcome a strong sense of institutional entitlement. The few consolation prizes granted a couple of unsuccessful candidates were a mistake since they failed to provide an incentive to come back with a stronger project. This pervasive sense of entitlement proved illusory and the establishment of independent international juries and the creation of a structure directly under the PM allowed for the emergence of new teams and projects usually passed over by traditional structures.

### New challenges

Although the call for Idex projects may be a method well adapted to its objectives, it cannot be the be-all and end-all of French higher education policy. The challenge for the new actors will be to stop looking to the government for directions and to start charting their own paths to international visibility and excellence.

The main challenges that the jury faced, apart from decoding the documents and establishing credibility, was the message and models: namely that mergers were not the only path to meaningful integration. The main challenge facing the government remains to simplify the rules and strengthen autonomy, including admissions, hiring, labour relations and finances. In the words of one of the universities: "Let us experiment." In that regard, the government's message was one of

openness, in effect asking universities and Grandes Écoles to suggest how the system could be made more flexible without questioning core principles. Successful candidates were generally good at finding innovative ways to free themselves from existing constraints. In effect, the government set up a system where experiments could take hold and be disseminated later.

To be sure, challenges remain to ensure that the change momentum is maintained and that its fallout will improve the whole system rather than just the happy few. A significant one is how to move from a project- to a programme-driven initiative and guarantee a sustainable future (both intellectually and financially) from the momentum so successfully initiated by the Idex/I-Site initiative. Confirmed projects will be financed 'in perpetuity' through a specific endowment managed by the state outside the regular government budget. On the one hand, this governmental commitment is remarkable, particularly in times of severe budgetary constraints and heavy pressures from all ministries. On the other hand, one may wonder what 'in perpetuity' really means and how to ensure that such projects can sustain their innovative potential. At the very least, the retention of the 'University of Excellence' label should be used to maintain some competitive pressure. Ways have also to be found of encouraging previously unsuccessful institutions to develop projects designed to improve their institutional standing significantly and so to earn such a label in the future. Others will have to redefine their role and responsibilities in a national, European and international context and abandon the traditional conviction that all universities perform at the same level and should therefore be treated alike. This remains a real challenge globally and in France.

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