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The EU's modernisation agenda for universities: the rising stars of French higher education

Ludovic Highman

Executive Summary

- > Several EU member states have embarked on major higher education reforms pertaining to structural issues (Germany, 2005-2007; Finland, 2010; France, 2008; Ireland, 2011).
- > The EU's 'modernisation' agenda for higher education has urged member states to improve the governance and funding of higher education.
- > The quantitative growth in student numbers and the EU's 2020 higher education attainment target of 40% of all 30-34 year olds has led to an increased strain on public resources.
- > Concentrating public resources in a small number of higher education institutions has become an increasingly popular policy choice.
- > Competitions that evaluate and reward the research intensity of a higher education institution will find it difficult to discourage a 'one race for all' type of competition. Such a competition is detrimental to diversity, however, because the stakes are too high.

Ever since the Lisbon European Council declared in March 2000 that Europe was to become the "most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world", European Union (EU) institutions have actively promoted various strategies to achieve this ambitious goal. For example, as early as 2003, the European Commission strongly advocated for a "Europe of Knowledge" (2003), and in the following years has regularly released Communications (2005, 2006, 2011) explicitly nudging

member states to 'modernise' their higher education systems and universities.

The purpose of this Brief is to examine what approach to higher education and research funding France has taken and to place it within the EU 'modernisation' discourse. In an era where everything is assessed and compared, in particular at the EU level, with its ever more comprehensive arsenal of benchmarks, scoreboards and country reports, are there implications for common trends in higher education and research reforms in the EU-28?

With the European Commission's consultation for a "renewed Modernisation Agenda for Higher Education in the EU" closed as of 29 February 2016, the time seems ripe for a stocktaking examination of member states' higher education policies, to examine what has been deemed necessary to reform since the last call for such an 'Agenda' was issued by the Commission in 2011. At the time, the Commission (2011: 1) had bluntly claimed that "the potential of European higher education institutions to fulfil their role in society and contribute to Europe's prosperity remains underexploited".

To what extent can one distinguish an emerging European trend, as encouraged by the EU institutions, in investing in higher education and research, and can the diversity of missions and profiles of institutions be respected when competing for public funding?

Firstly, the Brief examines the implications of a policy of differentiation and how the European Commission has encouraged such a policy within its broader modernisation agenda for higher education. Secondly, it focuses on how this EU promoted policy has trickled down to the national level, and what the French government has prioritised in its higher education reforms.

Differentiation: a policy transcending national borders?

There are two types of differentiation. Horizontal differentiation is concerned with how higher education institutions differentiate between themselves in terms of what they do. Vertical differentiation goes further and benchmarks those activities an institution has chosen to offer against others catering for the same target audience, ultimately leading to increased competition and rankings that promote a hierarchy of institutions. Horizontal differentiation suggests, for example, that some institutions should be highly research-intensive, while others will need to be almost completely focused on teaching. Within research-oriented institutions, it may also lead to differentiating between basic and applied research.

A policy of explicit and politically imposed differentiation between higher education institutions has traditionally been avoided on the continent. Instead, the tradition has been for national governments to promote a world-class higher education system as a whole. This holistic approach was the one taken by France, very much attached to the egalitarian model of its university sector, although recent policy choices in this country seem to indicate a certain departure from it (Opération Campus 2008; IDEX 2011).

In an attempt to preserve diversity, the Commission has been a strong advocate of differentiation between higher education institutions, and has taken the view that too many institutions seek to compete in overlapping areas. Institutions are spreading themselves too thin which results in detrimental competition, the direct correlation being that too few European universities are recognised as global academic powerhouses in research-oriented world university rankings. While the Commission recognises that there is no 'one size fits all' excellence model, and while it is also careful not to tread on member states' competences, reforms are encouraged and promoted through the European Semester mechanism and its binding Country Specific Recommendations (CSRs) and the Europe 2020 country specific assessment of national targets and progress. The EU Horizon 2020 research funding programme also explicitly promotes measures targeting an increase in capacity and scale, for example through the 'teaming action' geared towards associating research institutions, or the 'twinning' measure, which seeks to link at least two internationally-leading institutions in a defined field of knowledge, in particular from low-performing member states in terms of research and innovation, in order to maximise their chances in securing funding.

Furthermore, the European Innovation Scoreboards, first launched in 2013, enable for a comparative assessment of research and innovation performance between EU

member states categorised as 'leading', 'strong', 'moderate' or 'modest' innovators. A key indicator to score well is dependent on how a country performs with regard to the 'Open, excellent and attractive research systems' dimension, which is based on a sub-set of parameters that measure the international competitiveness of the science base of a member state by focusing on international scientific co-publications, most cited publications and the number of non-EU doctoral students. Therefore, the attractiveness and research intensity of a country's higher education is crucial.

The Commission (2011: 3) is keen to stress that viewed in the context of the Bologna Process, the EU agenda for the modernisation of higher education and the European Research Area, the challenges facing higher education in Europe, and the potential policy responses clearly transcend national borders. Higher education is expected to play a key role in the Europe 2020 strategy for smart, sustainable and inclusive growth but in order to do so, the Commission has identified several areas where reforms are needed. These include a higher number of graduates in all areas and at all levels, the enhancing of the quality and relevance of human capital development, effective governance and funding mechanisms and a strengthening of the knowledge triangle with closer links between education, research and business.

Improving governance and funding

A main objective instigated by the Commission is to improve the governance and funding of higher education systems and higher education institutions in the EU. The Europe 2020 strategy emphasises the "need to protect the growth-enhancing areas of education and research when prioritising public spending" (EC 2011: 8), and the Commission has been critical of the average amount of investing in higher education in Europe when compared to the USA or Japan. However, with regard to public spending toward higher education and research, there is a marked dichotomy among member states between those countries that have decided to invest massively in higher education and research (for instance France, Germany), and those that have disinvested (such as Ireland and the United Kingdom) as a result of what the Commission identifies as the current pressure for fiscal consolidation.

While it is acknowledged that public spending "must remain the basis for sustainable higher education" (EC 2011: 8), the sheer amount of funding required to sustain and expand higher education systems, illustrated by the EU 2020 higher education attainment target of 40% of all 30-34 year olds, requires a more nuanced approach through a greater diversification of funding sources (both public and

private). However, it is up to member states to decide how they wish to fund their higher education and research, and approaches vary greatly. As of 2014, only 37.9% of this age group had completed tertiary education, a percentage that varies significantly from one member state to another.

The Commission focuses on two policy issues with regard to effective governance and funding that are of relevance here, namely for member states to increase their efforts in the careful targeting of investing in higher education and research, through performance-related funding mechanisms that promote competition. Competition for funding should not lead all institutions to compete against one another. Therefore, these performance-related funding mechanisms should be tailored to the needs of different institutional profiles in order to encourage institutions to think strategically and focus on their respective strengths, thereby promoting a diversity of missions within a higher education system.

France's higher education system: an unclassifiable system

Like many other EU member states, France has been landscaping its higher education sector for various reasons, whether to identify research centres of excellence or to coordinate the course offerings and research strategies of individual institutions, all with the underlying objective to stimulate the sector and to improve the position of its higher education institutions in international league tables such as the ones issued by the Times Higher Education World University Ranking or the Academic Ranking of World Universities, in an overall attempt to increase the visibility and the attractiveness of its higher education sector abroad. How France has decided to allocate public funds in higher education and research closely resembles the earlier German Universities Excellence Initiative and could further set a blueprint for the governance and funding of higher education systems by other member states.

France has a peculiar higher education system that experts find difficult to classify into one of the existing organisational models, whether university-dominated, dual, binary, unified or hierarchical. It has traditionally offered students a dual track at higher education level: a selective and prestigious *Grande Ecoles* sector that caters for the large part for students in the areas of Business Studies, Engineering and *Sciences Po* and a mainstream non-selective (at entry point) university sector that caters for all types of students and for all subjects.

Relations between the two sectors have historically been limited, but have opened up in recent years because of the

necessity for French higher education institutions to achieve greater international visibility through critical mass, in particular for the smaller, specialised *Grandes Ecoles*. Former President of Sciences Po Paris, Richard Descoigns (as cited in Lebègue & Walter 2008), once dramatically stated that *“les grandes ecoles sont des etoiles mortes; elles brillent encore, mais c'est fini”*. Now institutions from both sectors are merging into single institutions in order to achieve higher rankings in international league tables where French institutions have consistently underperformed. In several French cities, the reunification of specialised universities has already taken place to form single multidisciplinary universities (University of Strasbourg re-established in 2009, the Universities of Aix-Marseilles and Lorraine in 2012, etc).

Merging the once unthinkable: bridging the historic divide

The French government is actively encouraging the reconfiguration of higher education institutions, promoting mergers across the two sectors, through its ambitious IDEX programme first launched in 2010. In what some have referred to as the “biggest shake-up in French higher education for almost 40 years” (Grove 2011), the so-called IDEX, which are essentially a label granted to France's best universities, an initiative originally driven by former President Nicolas Sarkozy, are designed to establish ten world-class universities with the financial means to compete globally. A second wave of the IDEX was launched in January 2015, accompanied with the promise made by François Hollande at a speech made at the University of Strasbourg of another extra two billion euro. The last two recipients of this prestigious award were nominated on 22 January 2016, enabling for a full picture of the geographical distribution of the IDEX.

In order to obtain the *“initiatives d'excellence”* (IDEX) label, French institutions had to merge in a coherent way, overcoming the historical divide between *Grandes Ecoles* and universities but also addressing the fragmentation of 1968, following which universities were split according to disciplines. As admitted by then French Higher Education Minister Valérie Pécresse: “now we know that good research and good teaching means you need a multidisciplinary university” (Guttenplan, 2011). It was the law of 22 July 2013, adopted by the French National Assembly and the Senate that officially redefined the French higher education landscape into 26 groupings known as the *“communautés d'universités et d'établissements”* (COMUE) to reinforce synergies between partner institutions, coordinate course offerings and research strategies while increasing the attractiveness of the sites abroad.

Table 1 presents the 10 selected projects awarded the IDEX label.

Table 1: IDEX laureates

Region (names of regions before 1 January 2016)	IDEX Project name (acronym)	Awarded funds in mio. EUR (year awarded)
Alsace	Université de Strasbourg (UNISTRA)	750 (2011)
Aquitaine	Université de Bordeaux (BORDEAUX)	700 (2011)
Ile-de-France	Université Paris- Saclay (SACLAY)	950 (2012)
Ile-de-France	Paris Sciences et Lettres (PSL)	750 (2011)
Ile-de-France	Sorbonne Université (SUPER)	900 (2012)
Ile-de-France	Université Sorbonne Paris Cité (USPC)	800 (2012)
Midi-Pyrénées	Université de Toulouse (UNITI)	750 (2012)
Provence-Alpes- Côte d'Azur	Aix-Marseille Université (A*MIDEX)	750 (2012)
Provence-Alpes- Côte d'Azur	Université Côte d'Azur (UCA JEDI)	580 (2016)
Rhône-Alpes	Université Grenoble Alpes (UGA)	900 (2016)

Liberté, égalité, fraternité versus IDEX

The flagship programme of the *Investissements d'Avenir* (Investments in the Future), the IDEX, were to be financed through a specially created funds of €7.7 billion to be shared among a select group of universities. During a probationary period of four years, a revenue share of this capital will be paid to each laureate to finance the first expenses to implement its project. After the probationary period, and depending on an assessment of the objectives achieved, each labeled university will receive a capital endowment whose earnings will provide funding over time. This provision, which may be up to 1 billion euros, will complement private funds raised. This represents a significant U-turn with regard to the policy of differentiation on the continent (Bonaccorsi & Daraio 2008: 5). The reality on the ground is now in contradiction with the principle of equality, and priority has been given to help the emergence of ten global, research-oriented universities (see Table 1).

In France, a country fiercely attached to the principles of “*liberté, égalité and fraternité*”, distributing public funds to some institutions over others has represented an ideological *quonundrum*. Article L. 111-5 of the French Education Code makes no qualms over this, since an

amendment in 2013 added a third paragraph that stipulates in broad terms that the State is the guarantor of the principle of equality before the public service of higher education throughout the territory. The principle of equality of the public sector, amended in 2013 to the principle of equality before the public sector, has been elevated to a general principle of French law since 1911. However, and by virtue of the concentrated location of the IDEX that by financial necessity cover only six regions, a large proportion of students will not have access to an education in these potentially global universities, with all the benefits that this may entail (wider recognition of diplomas, stronger international links and opportunities to study abroad at leading counterpart institutions, access to renowned researchers and professors, fast track to further postgraduate programmes in the same institution, etc.), simply based on their location. This policy of mergers and concentration of resources also seems to end a series of politically imposed decisions generously establishing institutions as universities with the power to award doctorates all over the territory, such as the University of Nîmes in 2007, and motivated by a desire to make higher education accessible to all. Can the principle of equality cohabit with the IDEX?

How the IDEX label parallels EU key policy priorities

The IDEX are a key component of the French government's wider *Investissements d'Avenir* programme, a huge funding scheme representing €35 billion, which is expected to enable France to respond to tomorrow's great challenges and turn it into a knowledge society, notably through the public funding of higher education, research and innovation, industry, small and medium enterprises, sustainable development, biotechnology, etc. To this effect, €22 billion have been agreed to be put aside for higher education and research alone. To get a better idea of the scale of this sum, the EU Horizon 2020 Research and Innovation programme will release €80 billion for the period 2014-2020, to be shared amongst the most competitive projects originating from 28 member states and associated countries. What that global sum might represent at a member state level can be illustrated by Ireland's ambitious objective to secure €1.25 billion of those EU fund.

There is no doubt that the priorities identified by France echo the ones found in the Commission's Communications, surrounding the “Europe of Knowledge” (2003) and effective governance and funding of higher education and research. France seems to have disregarded the current climate of fiscal consolidation and instead decided to invest public funds massively. However, it has decided to invest

selectively in order to make for a more efficient redeployment of resources.

What is striking in the case of France is the new desire to have some universities above others (*'au dessus du lot'*), which marks an important departure from the original French concept of equality and stresses the urgency of the reforms needed. The concentration of resources in a group of highly research-intensive universities is a first step in achieving a careful targeting of spending, a key policy issue emphasised by the Commission, but whether it encourages institutions to truly differentiate from one another and specialise in their respective strengths is yet to be discovered.

A more responsible and holistic strategy for higher education: putting diversity at the core

Because of the sensitivity of member states with regard to competences in higher education, and because of the significant divergences in the structure of higher education systems in Europe, it is difficult to predict a European policy trend that would follow suit from the French case. However, presumably, many member states are facing the same challenges, in particular with regard to the challenge that represents higher education expansion. With such a quantitative pressure in mind, how can member states ensure their higher education remains effective and attractive while catering for new types of students? In the Commission's consultation (November 2015-February 2016), the latter asked stakeholders and individuals including students, higher education institutions, government bodies, relevant associations and umbrella organisations whether they thought higher education

institutions receive enough funding overall for them to fulfil their missions effectively and whether the way research is funded rewards quality. These are key questions, and the answers collected will be crucial in examining to what extent reforms are perceived to be successful. Nonetheless, with national and European funding competitions promoting a 'winner-takes-all' sort of scheme rewarding a minority, a strong displeasure will no doubt manifest itself in the data.

When promoting a policy of differentiation and more efficient governance and funding mechanisms for higher education systems and institutions, the EU institutions must be careful to deliver the right message: first, to avoid governments establishing a 'one race for all' type of competition that would lead to a decreasing diversity of institutions within a higher education system; second, to avoid creating a 'two-tiered system' with on the one hand a small number of institutions deemed to be excellent and receive the lion's share of public funds and on the other hand those institutions whose mission was not primarily research oriented and who might feel left out. Embracing and promoting diversity means enabling for policies to protect other than research-focused missions as well, be they arts or teaching-focused and so on. More needs to be done to show lesser research-oriented higher education institutions that they are also a valued part of the higher education system. The global, multidisciplinary model is not necessarily the model all higher education institutions should aspire to, and specialisation needs to receive due recognition. Promoting a diversity of missions needs to go beyond paying lip service to the ideal that is often far too obvious in political statements. The race to reach the stars must not lead to giving up on Earth.

Further Reading

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