

Managing the enrollment of new students in French open-door universities and institutional change

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In France, a movement has long set itself the task of documenting the policies from the second half of the twentieth century devoted to the egalitarian expansion of access to secondary and higher education and their mitigated implications considering democratization. This same movement is now engaged in a bifurcation for documenting the post-welfare state policies, promoting new values and objectives for educational policies with compressive effects on the conditions and modalities of access to higher education. While French universities may have been considered to have taken the principle of social democratization the furthest, with their free access, they are fully in line with this trend.

This article documents the changes through a functional-institutional lens in relation with the academic, political, and economic structures of French universities. This exploration opens the way to a discussion about the crisis of mass and open-door university and the sociology of higher education institutions.

Introduction

French universities are internationally known for their “*non-selection*” rules for entering students (Deer 2005, 230). University registration fees are low and annually set by State decree. Up until recently, the only official condition for admission was to have passed the baccalauréat exam. This exam marks the end of secondary education for high school students and allows them to enroll at university. However, this feature, which has been key among French universities for almost thirty years, is now compromised. Following a range of reforms since 2007, in March 2018, a new law on student orientation and success was passed.

The extent to which these reforms actually constitute a change is a matter of debate. The legislators claimed they had not touched the “*principle of equal access to higher education*” (educational code fixed by the 1984 Savary Law) and “*selection for admission to the first year of university*” is still considered contrary to the values and missions of the university (Igaenr 2016). But the new law does make *pre-registration* procedures compulsory thanks to an online platform, *ParcourSup*. Thus, “*all candidates are free to enroll in the institution of their choice,*” but only if they pre-register, and admission is only mandatory in the candidate’s home region, and even then, only if capacity is not already exceeded. In addition, the section of the law dedicated to the course of undergraduate studies has increased tenfold in volume, the first three paragraphs becoming ten numbered paragraphs addressing a variety of elements that make up new *admissions policies*. The Ministry, the national representatives of the disciplines, and the universities formulate their conditions according to available seats, prerequisites, and “*expectation*” which are supposed to serve as warnings for candidates. In turn, capacity limits have been generalized leading, when demand exceeds supply, to ranking and selection. The reform also

introduced the possibility of a so-called “zero” year before the first year of the *licence* degree, an equivalent to a preparatory or remedial year. The *Conseil d’Etat* has ruled that pre-enrollment procedures, even those that are explicitly pre-selective, do not derogate from the “*constitutional requirement of equal access to education*” (*Conseil d’Etat* 2017) whereas the National Consultative Commission on Human Rights considers the assignment system implemented through the *ParcourSup* platform to call into question the “effectiveness” of the principle of equality (...) [and] “*lead to the abandonment of the principle of non-selection for admission to licence degrees (...)*” (Translated, CNCDH 2021, 3-6).

In universities and among students, the main argument put forward by its opponents is that the reform introduces selection at university, while its promoters could argue that it was to break away from failure-based selection. The legal and political qualification of the reform, as well as the social controversy, challenge the status of French universities as open-door institutions or mass universities, both in the past and present. A look back at history shows that the issue of university admissions selection is not so new on the French political agenda and that the principle of non-selection at entry had long been considered established and “*almost non-negotiable*” (Deer 2005, 230) precisely because of the strength of the social and political struggles in its favor since the 1968 student demonstrations and then the tragic end of the 1986 “*Selection and Reform Project*” (Richter 1988, 53)¹.

Given this panorama, a research question is raised about the extent of the changes affecting French universities, their forms, the stakeholders involved, and their driving forces. Considering the issue of university admissions and the open-door status, as well as the sociological debate on the institutional mechanisms producing student admissions, exclusions, and exits, this article combines an institutional analysis with a functional one, focusing less on the relationship between traditional or meritocratic academic habits and students’ educational capital underpinned by class society, and more on the relationship between universities as productive organizations and their environment of demands and resources (1). Relying on combined contributions regarding methods and types of data from educational sociology, organizational and public policy analysis, and historical institutionalism, the results are divided into two parts. First, the long-term timeframe, from the 1960s to the 2010s, helps to identify the functional and institutional structures that fuel the regulation of entrants (allocation, control, and sanction) and what is changing (2). The analysis of the design of reforms and their implementation in universities aims to understand the systemic conditions, demands, constraints, and resources in which universities and their academics and other staff are acting (market-making State and marketized higher education system) and which ultimately have repercussions on their relationship with their students (3).

Method and data

To describe, understand, and explain university policies and practices for regulating admissions and new entrants, my method combines insights from the sociology of education, organizations, public policy, and historical institutionalism.

¹ During the student demonstrations against the reform in Paris, one student died as a result of altercations with police. The minister stepped down and the prime minister halted the reform.

Data are threefold. First, an analysis of the policy design behind the recent reforms (political discourses and reports, political construction of the public problem, causes and means, education legal code modifications, public policy tools). The starting point is the “Plan for Success in *Licence* Degree” implemented from 2007 to 2012. This program accompanied a new law relating to the freedoms and responsibilities of universities (known as the “2007 LRU Law,” August 10, no. 2007-1199) and was formally drawn up to fight against undergraduate student failure at university. It marks a key step in the implementation of pre-registration procedures and the national admissions policy unfolded from 2009 to 2021. The “2018 ORE Law” (March 8, no. 2018-166) on “Student Guidance and Success” introduced a pre-registration rule based on an online platform².

The second material corpus is related to the implementation of these policies in French universities. Secondary data has been used to grasp how the reforms have been integrated into universities nationally and to document trends and differences in university strategies (research publications and national evaluative reports). Primary data were collected on a case study: a University of Letters, Languages and Human and Social Sciences. Universities of Letters and Humanities have been particularly shaken by the changes. They have embraced the concept of open institutions the most, and consequently, they are also the most affected by admissions reforms and most vulnerable to present students’ study program choices. The case studied is located in a French regional metropolis, Toulouse, which annually hosts 24 000 students. The vice-president in charge of enrollment at this University, two managers at the central level, and five other student managers were interviewed in 2016. The policy-making in relation with the management of the undergraduates in the context of the reforms has been analyzed: minutes from meetings, informal discussions, notes, strategic documents, and statistical data. Observations of registration processes and participant observation of the academic work relating to new undergraduate students and academics’ arguments in promoting/opposing the reforms completed the case study. The third material is historical, based on the same university’s archives since 1967 (reports and minutes of university councils) filtered for information about admission, classification, and management of undergraduate students. These archives document the history of a university but also provide information about the State agenda and other contextual details related to universities.

Analysis of policy design and implementation serves to understand the sociological rationale behind the changes underway, the controversies, the conflicts between interdependent logics, and the power struggles. The long-term timeframe helps to identify the institutional structures that fuel the regulation of entrants and better understand what exactly is changing. It reveals the academic and bureaucratic motivations while placing them in their context of constraints and opportunities.

² The online platform, which opened in 2009 under the name *Admission post-Bac*, was modified in 2017 and then renamed *ParcourSup*.

1. *Theoretical framework: Open-door institution, entrance regulation and sociology of the institution*

The main aim is to qualify the changes in admissions management in French universities and its parameters. A review of literature on university admissions and the specifics of open-door or mass university demonstrates that the binary classification used between non-selective/selective or open/closed national higher education (HE) systems or HE institutions (HEI) is more complex than it initially appears. It sheds light on the interpenetration and blending of forces of openness and closeness in open-door institutions with regard to their incoming clientele. In so doing, it elaborates an analytical framework of the institutional regulation that facilitates the understanding of the current changes.

1.1. Entrance regulation in open-door higher education institutions

Firstly, “open-door institution” refers to a formal aspect that should not be underestimated in the analysis of university staff practices, but rather articulated in relation to other values and opposing forces. The conditions for admission are mainly based on social justice and equity. The “open” aspect emphasizes accessibility in terms of entry requirements, subject choice, and learning methods. The concept is closely connected with the idea of a social and democratized institution, in a context of social-democracy and welfare state, offering broader access to HE, regardless of the students’ financial, cultural, social, and educational backgrounds. In France, entrance is open to anyone once they have obtained the *baccalauréat* degree: free-entry (quasi-free of charges), no entrance exams, no tests, and an enrollment process that can be administratively and pedagogically fastidious, but which nonetheless guarantees access. The term “open-door” has been used less frequently than that of “mass university,” then in a positive, democratic and liberal sense: “*the university is both a mass world and an atomized world (...). The former aspect refers to the high number of students and the organization’s limited control over their behavior whereas the latter is related to the heterogeneity of individuals, the diversity of their origins, backgrounds, and plans*” (translated, Dubet 1994, 511).

Secondly, there is a systemic feature in that the open-door status and scales of openness/closeness must be measured in relation to the characteristics of the national HE system, its diversification and stratification. The openness function is variably shared internally in a national system, depending on the level (secondary education/higher education), the type of HEI (State/private or elite/mass status), and the diversification/stratification scale of the secondary and higher education system. For instance, Wolter et al. (2014) state that access to Swiss universities is open due to the fact that selection is made before entry, Switzerland being among the countries with the lowest *baccalauréat* rate. In the United States, community colleges (which offer two-year higher education (HE) degrees) are widely known to serve as open-door institutions in a hierarchical HE system. In France, the hierarchy of the HE system is even more complex considering that French universities are both open-door institutions and the main venue for advanced studies and research. Nevertheless, the French HE system, as well as French universities, are not immune from social stratification and elitism, distributing social demand first among the three types of *baccalauréat* degree and then among the non-selective (university general

undergraduate degree programs), short-selective vocational (in technological institutions and in high schools), and more or less elite-selective HE programs (two-year preparatory programs for prestigious HE institutions – *grandes écoles* –, engineering, business, and other specialized schools, ranked in order of prestige) (Duru-Bellat, Kieffer 2008). It is therefore quantitative, rather than qualitative, democratization of the HE system and/or segregation, rather than uniformity, that show how the expansion and massification of education have been accompanied by social stratification in relation to gender, social class, and cultural background (Merle 2009). Moreover, French universities tend to experience a “downgrading” (Vatin, Vernet 2009), considering that the social profiles of their first and second-year students are less diverse and the weakest, academically speaking.

Thirdly, there is the institutional level of admissions process, its governance and professional practices. Previous analysis demonstrates that it is less a question of absence of selection than one of methods of selection that specifies open-door institutions. The landmark theory about admissions to open-door institutions dates back to the 1960s and is based on the case of community colleges. Within the American HE system, “open-door institution” means three things (Marginson 2018). “*The multitude are encouraged by ‘open-door’ admission to public-supported colleges*” (Clark 1960, 569). Colleges are “*unselective in admissions and by law, custom, and self-conception, accept all who wish to enter*” (Clark 1960, 572). These same colleges regulate the demand in that they “*cool*” the desire to pursue HE for those deemed too weak academically (Clark 1960; Beach 2012). In France too, it is possible to understand the past and present of the practices dedicated to accepting clientele in line with these forms of regulation: since the end of the 1980s, the dominant paradigm among French universities has been that of the “*floating*” (Jellab 2013) or “*indeterminate and anomic*” university (Felouzis 2001a) (students are on their own, receive no guidance, and their motivations and goals are vague or even unknown). Yet these organizational shortcomings when it comes to considering the needs of undergraduate students can also be interpreted as serving the need to regulate admissions for institutional drivers and professionals who cannot, either because of a lack of resources or due to academic preoccupations, meet sharply rising student demand. Some studies are even highly critical of the French open-door university system, considering selective and open-door institutions to not be so different fundamentally, given the meritocratic or academic function (or professional *habitus* and practice), coupling equal and fair access with the process of selection and assessment of academic ability (Patterson 1976):

«In selective systems (USA), entry is limited by pre-enrollment selection...but the socioeconomic status of the students is supposed to be eliminated as a barrier by free HE, scholarships and subsidies.” On the contrary, in the open-door system (France), entry “is guaranteed to all who want it with, at most, nominal enrollment selection, such as the baccalaureat.” In this latter, “sorting becomes a major internal consideration and selection of students is made after entry, often covertly» (Patterson 1976, 174-175).

Fourthly, reviews of more recent international comparison studies show an increase in explicit practices to regulate admissions thanks to formal *admissions policies*, a term originating in North American universities. In the United States, public open-door institutions, as well as selective and private ones, have admissions policies and they

are even more complex and decentralized, and also more multi-layered, in order to control a range of pluralist indicators. Typologies of national admissions systems (Helms 2008; Freeman 2020) include secondary leaving exams, entrance exams, standardized aptitude tests, multiple exams, as well as no exams at all. These indicate a dominance of secondary leaving examinations, particularly in Western Europe, France included (the French *baccalauréat*). In French universities, admissions policies were not a thing, or the task was outsourced in support of the final secondary exam. However, this literature shows a process of rationalization underway at the supranational, national, and institutional levels, aimed at controlling inflows and outflows. It also highlights the difficulties in producing rational admissions policies (government versus institutional control, objectivity versus subjectivity, financial sustainability, equity issues, quality assurance, career guidance, internationalization). The aim of this literature is to find the best admission, selection, or recruitment methods to achieve the best match between students' potential and higher education programs

1.2. Sociology of the university as an institution

First of all, the sociology of the internal selection of students at open-door institutions aligns with broader statements about educational institutions. Meritocracy «equal opportunities for all individuals, regardless of background, to gain admission to a course suited to their ability and aspirations» (Adnett *et al.* 2011, 28) is an academic value, albeit ambivalent in itself. Admissions policies and practices imply a subtle balance between equity and selection, equality and excellence, or elitism and universalism (Timmons 1982; Belanger 1986; Tuijnman 1990). They aim to establish the dominance of an academic conception of quality, excellence, success, and/or accomplishment, on the basis of which hierarchy and classification are justified. If this domination succeeds, diplomas are recognised as the best way to access satisfactory professional and social positions in society. And while university staff and experts on the HE system are not fooled by the limits of meritocracy when the conciliation between equity and selection is at stake, they fully endorse the academic model of excellence and tend to consider it the only model of quality. The result of all this is a vicious circle: how the imperative to provide equal opportunities for all individuals, regardless of background, can be reconciled with the fact that “*prior attainment data remains the best single indicator of success at undergraduate level, and continues to be central to the admissions process*” (Schwartz 2004, 5). Zanten suggests that it can be a contest between conflicting action values: in elite programs, the meritocratic value of academic sanctions for candidates and students enrolled is combined with a *sponsorship* value (Zanten 2019). Meritocracy would therefore ultimately act as an illusion, considering the non-neutrality of the educational institution as well as the system of relations that unite the education system and the class structure of society (Bourdieu and Passeron 2005). This creates selection and reproduces social injustices in students' paths, for example, among those who drop out (Beaupere *et al.* 2009) and those who, lacking the required skills, demonstrate a capacity to “*hold steady*” (Nielsen 2015).

However, at least three other sociological causalities must be considered when analyzing the institutional regulation of university newcomers in the context of

contemporary university institutions and the growing influence of institutional governance and bureaucracy in competition with academics.

Therefore, the second factor is organizational: university is no longer “*an organized body of professional teachers providing for its own perpetuation*” (translated, from Durkheim, Bourdieu, Passeron 2005, 173). The French sociology of “*the school*” (Secondary Education Institutions) (Felouzis *et al.* 2013) examines the cumulative effect of secondary schools’ institutional strategies of distinction and family choices in producing social and territorial segregation. In a similar way, the sociology of universities (Musselin 2017) relies on the concept of “*configuration*” and the triptych of institutional governance, academic disciplines, and state government. In this way, the university corresponds to a model of national polycentric coordination that combines the professional autonomy of actors according to a disciplinary logic (academics and their representative bodies) with the presence of a hierarchy made official by bureaucracy. This hierarchy is increasingly internalized through the governance of institutions, although it was traditionally externalized through supervision by the national political-bureaucratic system.

In this regard, selection responsibilities must also be attributed to the challenges facing the institution as an organization and public administration. The selection process not only links class society and academic habitus, but also involves organized action by an institution within a political, economic, and social context of resources and demands. Clark emphasizes that the “*cooling out*” regulation is not just a matter of filtering social demand to make it competent and productive externally, in line with what is expected of these intermediary HEI, but also of ensuring, for the colleges and their staff, their place and their reputation in the American HE system, not to mention to upgrade their standing. The new preoccupation of selection at entry cannot be explained solely by the relationship between academics and students, it must rather be understood in the context of the relationship between universities, the State, and the higher education (HE) supply-and-demand market.

Furthermore, while self-perpetuation is indeed an infrastructural determinant of the institution in the generic sense, the third factor is actually the relationship between the institution and its environment. The “*openness*” and “*responsiveness*” of the HE institution (Rhoades 1983; Fulton 1984) are “*institutionalized*,” which means that while responding to external demands and needs, universities expand and preserve themselves: “*the ways groups within institutions reacting or responding to these demands are selectively attentive to them and even distort them*” (Rhoades 1983, 288). In any case, we can’t escape from the concept of “*institutional*” or “*field*” effects (Bourdieu 1997). However, in this phenomenon, the environment is the driving force behind the institutionalization, or the *autopoiesis* and *perdifferentiation* (Luhmann 1999). In short, the opposite choice from that taken by Bourdieu and Passeron (2005, 174) is made, giving back space to external and functional determinants within the fabric of the university institution in a context of significant exogenous and endogenous changes.

The fourth and final factor concerns taking change into account considering that, in the institutional self-perpetuation process, it is less a conservative logic and more a logic of change that is at work, connected with the capacity for receptiveness to the concrete environment of resources and demands. The functional-institutional approach

better addresses the institution's potential for change, documenting not so much the effects of closure and reproduction as the mechanisms of layering, displacement, drift, and conversion (Maggetti 2014). There are dynamics of change in the French HE system that need to be documented. Universities have changed in various ways, albeit only in morphological terms. This is particularly true in France, where the number of members who consider themselves part of the university corporation has quietly decreased. For now, it consists of 68 institutions distributed throughout mainland France and overseas territories. This community shares an open-door status for most of its degree programs, programs based on academic and scientific rules, even when the professional destinations are more varied. The recent implementation of university clusters and mergers has also had an impact, shifting the emphasis from disciplinary criteria to those of critical mass, and redefining the rules of governance and university democracy³. In addition, French HE studies now document the transition from policies of the second half of the 20th century, devoted to the egalitarian expansion of 'access' to secondary and higher education, to post-welfare state policies of the first half of the 21st century, promoting new and marketized values for educational policies, institutions, and individuals, with compressive effects on the conditions and modalities of access to higher education (Tomlinson 2005). The post-welfare era hypothesis reflects these, discussing the hypermodern characteristics of contemporary societies: the accentuation of processes typical of modern societies (functional differentiation, rationalization, industrialization, individualization), accompanied by inflexions in the forms in which these typical features of modernity have manifested themselves until now (denationalization, destruction of integrative systems of capitalist production and public services, marketization, hybridization, and decline of social institutions (Crouch 2013; Touraine 2013). In line with these post-welfare and hypermodern hypotheses, recent HE studies have documented how, in open-door institutions, cooling-out practices declined while contrasting warming-up practices rose, aimed at supporting undergraduate students (in order to combat dropouts, grade repetition, and failure) within rational organizations dedicated to their users (Convert 2010; Borrás 2011; Sarfati 2013). These studies echo others from other countries, which deem the openness of universities to be defined as their organizational capacity to respond to "student diversity," in particular their ability to focus "on the needs of students at risk of failing or early departure" (McInnis 2003, 389). It is in this atmosphere of modernization and rationalization that new admissions policies are promoted today and on the basis of the 'selection by failure' counterexample (Adnett et al. 2011; West and Gibbs 2004)⁴.

2. Regulating incoming students: Permanence and change

This section explores the historical structures of entry regulation in French universities, as well as the characteristics relating to their evolution.

³ April 2006 'Research Pact' (agency-based management and university grouping and mergers).

⁴ This failure rate specificity of open-door institutions is a persistent idea, but exaggerated, considering, first, that these failure rates include dropouts before exams, reorientations, breaks in study, part-time work, student perseverance, etc. Moreover, more closed university systems are not immune to these phenomena (Kapur 1972; Wimshurst, Allard 2008; Quinn 2013; Troelsen, Laursen 2014; Wolter et al. 2014).

2.1. Historical conditions of the open-door status of French universities

In accordance with non-selection rules for entering students, university registration fees are annually set by State decree⁵. The only official condition for admission is to have passed the *baccalauréat* exam. This exam marks the end of secondary education for high school students and allows them to enroll at university. The other well-known characteristic of the French higher education system is its “*duality*”: there is an “*open university sector*” where access is open to all holders of the *baccalauréat*, and a “*closed sector*,” the “*grandes écoles*,” where admission is selective (Eicher 1997, 185). This duality acts as a graduated measuring scale of social and functional distinction, between democracy and elitism, and between HEI and types of HEI. Moreover, throughout the second part of the 20th century, French State has continuously supported extended schooling and a HE public sector. The institutional structures of French universities as open-door institutions or mass universities were defined by the 1969 law (known as the Faure law)⁶, following the events of 1968: an open university as a societal projection, combating social elitism in universities, opening up education and training opportunities to external needs and beyond the reproduction of the academic corporation. This law also focused on university democracy, with the idea of participation from all its stakeholders, academics, other professionals, and students. The target of the 1984 law (known as the Savary law)⁷ was ‘social democratization’ which aimed to substantially increase the number of students and remove barriers to access to HE. Between 1985 and 1995, the percentage of students with a *baccalauréat* rose from 30% to 63%, and then, between 2009 and 2015, this number rose again, from 65% to 75% (Figure 1). The pursuit of HE has gradually become the norm. Thus, in 2023, 74% of *baccalauréat* holders continued on to HE⁸.

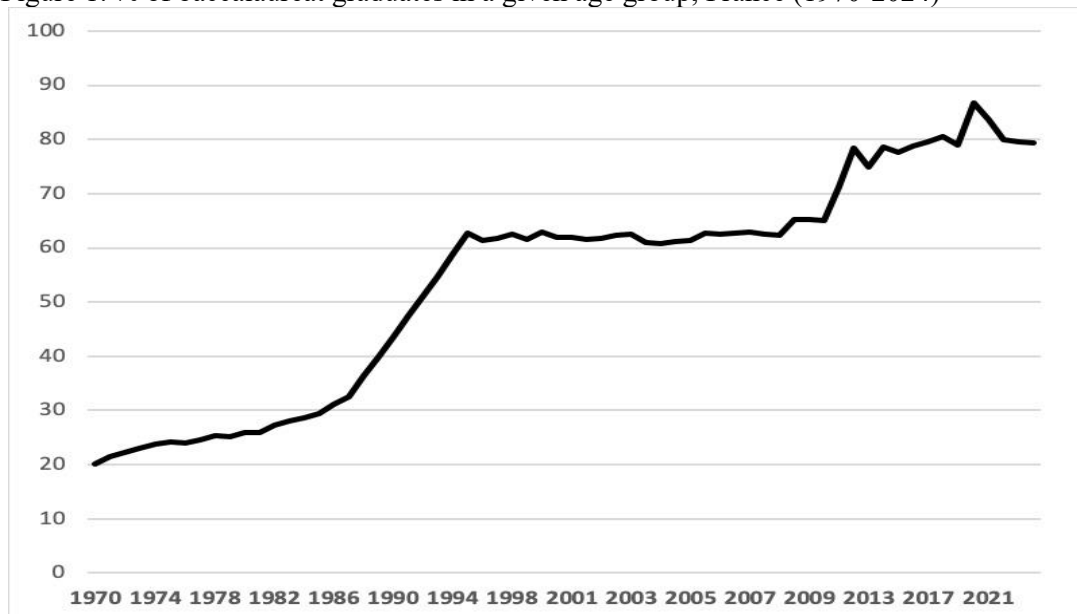
⁵ As of 2025, university registration fees are set at €178 per year for the licence degree (a three-year undergraduate degree), while education is free for low-income students with need-based scholarships (37% of student population in 2023), to which a student life fee (€105) was recently added.

⁶ 1968 Faure Law, framing the HE, November 12, 1968, no. 68-978 [<https://www.legifrance.gouv.fr/>].

⁷ 1984 Savary Law, on HE, January 26, no. 84-52.

⁸ This overall increase in graduation rates masks disparate success rates, depending on the type of baccalaureat: general, 94%; technological, 81%; vocational, 47% (unless otherwise specified, the statistical data are taken from publications by the Ministry of Higher Education’s statistical and evaluation services, particularly the annual report on higher education [<https://publication.enseignementsup-recherche.gouv.fr/FR/eesr/>]).

Figure 1: % of baccalauréat graduates in a given age group, France (1970-2024)

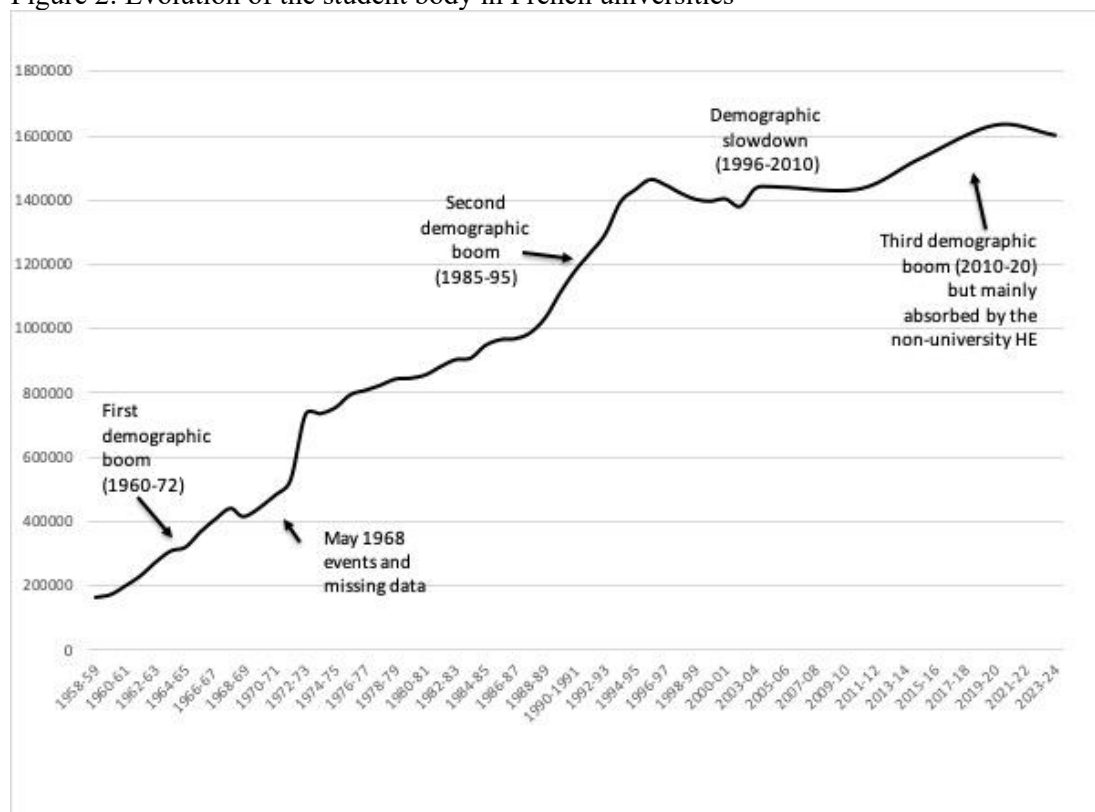


Three types of *baccalauréat* exist: general (which has undergone substantial changes recently), technological (of which the first class graduated in 1969), vocational (of which the first class graduated in 1986 and vocational education was reformed between 2011 and 2014).

France excluding overseas departments and regions until 2000, France excluding Mayotte since 2001. Figure and data: MESRI-SIES, State of HE, 2024 and 2025 editions, <https://www.enseignementsup-recherche.gouv.fr/>.

These are the three reasons behind the statement that “*for the last 30 years... universities have been assigned the task of supporting the strong tendency to pursue higher education*” (Beaud, Millet 2018). The first student “explosion” took place in the 1960s when student numbers rose by 10% a year (Figure 2). The second occurred between 1985 and 1995, when student numbers increased by 6% a year. The creation of new universities and the opening of branches in medium-sized cities linked to main campuses in metropolitan areas have made it possible to respond to this growth. In these historical conditions, the principle of an open-door institution has sedimented deeply in the structures of the French university system. After a settling period, and since 2012, positive growth has restarted and continued until 2025 (between 2.6% and 3.2% a year). The latest demographic trends undermine rather than support the French universities’ status since the growth is mainly absorbed by non-university HE.

Figure 2: Evolution of the student body in French universities



Data were collected from publications of the French HE ministry statistical services and reprocessed in order to give an internal and temporal consistency despite issues relating to changes in methodology and legislative decisions affecting the scope of university HE.

2.2. Regulating university entrance: allocation, control, and sanction

An analysis of a university's archives filtered for information about admission, classification, and management of undergraduate students shows that the regulation of incoming students is a constant concern for its leaders, academics and staff, as well as for state policies. The classification of the university records resulted in a three-dimensional regulation: Allocation (actions and tools that are expected to serve the needs of students and better support them); Control (controlling the number of entering students); Evaluation (of students' work).

Allocation: implementing organizational modernization

The challenge of managing undergraduate students underwent significant development as universities emerged as modern and rational organizations (at the end of the eighties in France). The archives of the University of Toulouse show that actions were already being taken at the end of the 1960s to improve orientation and support for new students as well as the information given to them about degree programs, services, and the examination process.

At that time, increasing the number of course programs (such as preparatory courses for *grandes écoles*, vocational tracks, and partnerships with companies and non-profit organizations to broaden students' career prospects) was seen as a way to motivate

students and combat failure. These local measures were bolstered by the 1970s reforms which promoted better alignment between university studies and job opportunities and created new, nationally recognized and vocationally oriented undergraduate and postgraduate diplomas for all universities.

The ‘University 2000’ Plan (1990-1995) addressed the problem of undergraduate students in a territorial way by constructing and renovating university buildings and campuses and creating new, smaller campuses in middle towns that functioned as warm and welcoming communities (Felouzis 2001b).

The 1997 ‘Bayrou university reform’ (named after the Minister of National Education) promoted practices such as tutoring, orientation meetings for new students, and remedial classes.

The 2001-2002 ‘Bologna Reform’, launched to Europeanize the French HE system⁹, was also implemented to tackle student failure. At the University of Toulouse, this reform resulted in a subtle orientation strategy described as “*innovative*”: diversified degree programs (with a major and minor specialization); ways for students to change degrees; programs for continuing education, apprenticeship, and vocational postgraduate programs; expanded foreign language courses.

Between 2007 and 2012, the Plan for Success in *Licence* focused public attention on student failure at university, dropouts, and absenteeism. This plan was presented as a symbol of a new client-centered French university (diversified program offering, orientation and career training, increased advice and support for students). Other measures complemented and extended this program by focusing on pre-registration procedures called “*active orientation*” before the 2018 reform made it compulsory.

However, these allocative policies are not equivalent answers, as some are oriented toward openness (University Plan 2000, 2001-2002 LMD reform), while others are mainly aimed at closeness (the relative anomy of the 60s and 70s, the 1997 Bayrou university reform, the post-2000s policies). Moreover, all are fueled by ambivalent motivations and effects. The tools designed to better respond to student diversity and focus on the needs of at-risk students generate “warming up” as well as “cooling out” effects. Active orientation generates support and supervision of students’ paths: “[active orientation] *helps them to define their personal and professional goals and enables them to embark on an educational path best suited to their profile; this is an indisputable guarantee of their chance of success*” (Translated, *Cour des comptes* 2012, 669). Diversification and professionalization of degrees are another illustration of the ambiguities surrounding these warming up policies, generating both segmentation and hierarchy within the university.

Control: Limiting the number of students or making it sustainable

Implicit forms of control can be observed through dropouts and early departures, absenteeism, failed exams, repeated years, as well as through a “*laisser-faire*” regulation, considering the liberal/anomic traditional characteristics of universities as “*organizations*”. In turn, temptations to formally and explicitly restrict admissions

⁹ The *licence* (baccalauréat +3 years), *master* (bac+5), *doctorat* (bac+8) reform.

tend to increase during periods of growth in student demand: the 1960s, 1980s, and 2010s.

The archives enable us to go back to the pre-1968 years, when universities were confronted with the first boom in student demand. The failure rates were surprisingly similar to those that served to justify the more recent reforms: of the 835 students enrolled in the preparatory year for literature and humanities, only 54% remained after their first year, while the remaining 46% failed and 27% of them did not even sit their final exams (Kayser and Gaudemar 1967). In the end, only 25% of the students in the initial cohort ended up graduating. For most of them, the degree took a long time: only 12% managed to complete it on time, while the vast majority needed 4 or 5 years, and for some, finishing the degree was a real struggle, lasting up to 6 or 7 years. These results echo those of Bourdieu and Passeron (1964) and Antoine and Passeron (1966) who stated that humanities and social sciences faculties serve as a “*refuge*” for students who do not hold the most prestigious *baccalauréats*. These statements persist today in “*segregated democratization*” and the “*downgraded university*”. Eliard, a well-known French education sociologist, placed less emphasis on the entrants’ profile than on academic issues in order to explain the high failure rates: “*even though no barriers to access have been built, the faculty of letters selects candidates severely*” (translated, in Kayser and Gaudemar 1967, 4). He also argues that the preparatory studies year in sciences and literature faculties, which is officially supposed to prepare candidates for HE, in fact serves as a second barrier after the *baccalauréat*. In 1966, the Fouchet Reform repealed this “second barrier” that the preparatory year had become. In reaction, one of the suggestions addressed to the Minister of Education was to set up another one: selection at admission. In fact, the dean of the Faculty of Sciences in Paris called for this in an open letter, “*It would be disastrous for thousands of young people to come to university only to go astray on a path that they will abandon without any academic qualification, sometimes after several years*” (translated, regional newspaper, “*Students should be selected based on their ability to enter the faculty,*” 6 October 1967, University archives). The May 1968 student protests were related to this threat of selective admissions in humanities universities (Prost 1989, 63).

In the 1980s, voices in favor of selection at entry could also be heard, although they did not carry the day. In 1981, within the University of Toulouse, the head of the psychology department asked that the number of incoming students be limited: “*We can only accept 500 first-year students; for the rest, it is up to the university to decide what it will do with them*” (Council of the University, 3 June 1981, university archives).

The campaign for the launch of the Plan for Success in *Licence* stated that, out of 100 students enrolled, only half carried on into their second year while the other half ‘failed’ (48%). Precisely, only 41% of first-year university students went on to their second year, 26% repeated the first year, and 32% left the university system all together (Ministry of Education 2011). At the end of the public program, things were roughly the same.

Statistics for dropouts (students who did not necessarily fail their exams) were included in failure rates (Legendre 2008). These dropout rates reveal the importance

of ‘natural’ selection, which is an indirect and complex result of the choices made by students and their families, the labor and HE markets, and the very structure of the mass university. Other implicit practices participate in this control: reducing the involvement of tenured faculty members in teaching first-year courses (as this year is increasingly considered a filter to weed out weaker students), as well as privileging research over teaching in the choices made by HEIs and faculty members.

Evaluation: guaranteeing the value of students, diplomas, universities, academics, and other university professionals

Selection becomes explicitly done through assessments of students’ work.

The importance of exams can be seen in the emphasis given to them in university calendars (at least 25%). What matters is “*the [academic] level,*” said journalist Jean-François Revel, questioning the interest behind the Fouchet reform deleting the preparatory year (Revel 1966). It implies guaranteeing students’ academic level and the value of their diplomas, which of course reflects the value and reputation of the institution awarding the diploma, and more broadly, the value of the university to which these students and their staff are inevitably linked.

Academics and managers took care to “*guarantee the academic level and value of the qualifications and diplomas awarded*” (meeting minutes from the Steering Committee, 21 May 1976, University archives). This concern continues to be central, even when that very same university experienced strikes that severely disrupted classes and examinations. There is a fear that assessment standards would be affected by the “democratization” of access. The preservation of the expected level of academic performance is crucial, as expressed in the following remark: “*The level has dropped, dangerously. I asked the teachers to read copies because I was surprised by the grades which seemed harsh to me and in the end, I thought they were inflating the marks*” (department secretary, woman, social sciences, interview). Staff, academics, as well as bureaucrats, navigate between a liberal and conservative attitude, using different ways to assess students’ productions, from a formative assessment to a sanction-based one, always taking this part of their job seriously.

2.3. What has changed since the 2000s? Allocation by enhanced organizational support and stronger and explicit control

In the 2000s and 2010s, the allocation logic translated into extensive organizational and individualized support and, moreover, new control practices emerged for dealing with incoming students.

Bodin and Orange (2013) elaborate a trilogy for classifying 2000s’ university actions: selection, professionalization, and propeadeutization. The policies confusingly mix the three, the Plan for Success in *Licence* focused on the latter, whereas it is obvious that the latest 2018 reform, focusing on compulsory pre-registration procedures, highlights the former, that is, selection before entry.

On the basis of the tridimensional regulation of entering clientele objectified before, the “allocation” dimension has taken a negative turn that is similar to the concept of propeadeutization, and a positive turn that can be summed up by the idea of individualization of institutional support. The first includes the growing frustration of academics and experts surrounding the low academic level of incoming students,

neglecting the plural parts of their contemporary identity, experiences and competences, and their “external” and non-academic motivations (Nielsen 2015), reducing them to their young and student identity¹⁰. Then, the years spent working toward an undergraduate diploma, especially the first year, acquire a preparatory function by advocating a return to basics (Orianne, Draelants, Donnay 2008). The second includes the semantic of rational organizations dedicated to their users.

Moreover, the “control” dimension has become stronger at entry and throughout the individual student path, and more importantly, has become explicit. Some universities have been attempting, and some have succeeded, to change their legal status in order to introduce formal selection for entering students. All the universities have developed undergraduate selective programs. More significantly, in Science and Humanities faculties, where the *baccalauréat* as the sole criterion for admission has been, the more strictly, implemented, different forms of selection have become widespread. The random system, which in political theory can be recognized as the most democratic method, has been used for courses in high demand but with limited resources and on the grounds of avoiding ranking candidates. It was first recognized by the State (ministerial circular of April 24, 2017) and then banned following student association complaints and on the classical academic argument that it did not guarantee an “*equal access to higher education for all on the basis of merit*” (Excerpt from a decision of the *Conseil d'état* June 2, 2017¹¹). Since then, a category of *licence* degree programs that are in high demand but the capacities of which are limited (sports science, health, law, psychology) has been created with specific authorizations in terms of admissions and pre-selection. Finally, most universities took advantage of the national pre-registration tools introduced after 2009 to apply pre-requisites and capacity thresholds. Faculties that wish to maintain the principle of open access can set the highest threshold, exceeding demand, but the aim is also to integrate classroom capacity, teacher-student ratios, and the equipment needed for learning.

Finally, in a novel move, universities are now developing and internalizing real “admissions policies” on their own since the French *baccalauréat* is no longer considered to be sufficient for entry but knowing that neither tuition fees nor entrance exams can be used by open-door universities. These policies take a new place in the national system, as well as in universities, as organizations with bureaucratic, professional, and individual impacts¹².

¹⁰ An undergraduate is understood to be a young person who has just passed the *baccalauréat* exam, a student coming directly from high school and completely focused on studying, whereas the place of studies is often relativized in student actual experience. In a university such as Toulouse, in 2009, only 25% of incoming students had received their *baccalauréat* that year, while more mature students returning to study accounted for 33% and those changing degree programs, 41%.

¹¹ Following a joint request from the associations ‘*SOS Education*’ and ‘*Promotion et Défense des Étudiants*’.

¹² Pre-enrollment criteria (tests, competitive examinations, previous academic records, motivation letter, type of *baccalauréat* and subjects studied in high school...); quotas (e.g., minimum percentage of scholarship students, maximum of students from outside the academy...); data about the candidates on their previous academic performances and their contextual information; personalized training and support programs; new professional tasks for managers and teachers for reviewing applications.

3. *Selection parameters or the functional ecosystem of French universities*

It is now important to understand why relationships with incoming students are more defined by control and, moreover, what conditions have made this legal, explicit, and therefore acceptable in the bureaucratic-professional corporation of universities. Nowadays, the social student profile connected to the class society, as well as the meritocratic-academic habitus, are not sufficient on their own to explain the chronic influence of selective practices vis-à-vis the newcomers and the stage recently reached since these two factors are more of a constant than a novelty and, above all, because academic filtering is not independent but, on the contrary, highly receptive to its functional ecosystem of demands and resources, opportunities and constraints. It is therefore a combination of contextual factors that accentuate or contain selective practices in universities, as demonstrated by the previous historical angle: the increase in student numbers creates organizational and academic stress, exacerbated by the inadequacy of facilities and human resources (overcrowded lecture halls, low staff-student ratios, etc.). The State reforms implemented throughout history have increased difficulties and tensions due to the cost of change, the working hours required for implementation, and also because the referential or belief system of these policies is more or less favorable to openness.

Today, the introduction of admissions policies depends on two main parameters: the dismantling of the public HE sector orchestrated by the French State, and then, the marketized and rationalized political demand; logically, the market, or the French HE system of supply and demand, influences bureaucratic and academic practices more today than it did yesterday. It is more diverse and competitive, and is ruled by a quality market rather than a mass economy.

3.1. *The State and universities: dismantling of the public HE sector and the university as a whole*

Universities' agenda and decisions are closely connected to the State in a tripartite co-management system between the Ministry, the universities, and academics, organized into fields of knowledge (*Disciplines*). While Musselin (2017) considers this governance structure still analytically relevant, what is being exchanged has changed significantly in line with the post-welfare state, moving from the “modernizing referential” backed by “neo-corporatism” to that of a “market” one (Muller 1990; Hall 2015). It is still a Weberian domination but now based on market rationality, i.e., a “market-making State” (King and Le Gales 2017).

Firstly, as Dubet (2010) has shown for secondary schools, strengthening, with the consent of the university corporation, the scale of universities as autonomous (and then, accountable) organizations results in dismantling the university as a whole, in favor of universities, in plural. While universities have traditionally been qualified as loosely coupled systems and organized anarchies, weakly inclined to take decisions (the garbage can model) and with an academic power as strong as, or even stronger than, that of university and bureaucratic governance (Clark, Youn 1976), contemporary French universities are more complex and multi-oriented, but are also rationalized organizations strengthening the power of both governing boards and a new upper class of bureaucrats. This empowerment policy did not sustain the university corporation for long, given that the State supported competition at the same

time and reshaped the morphology of universities multiple times by consortia or mergers (from 2006 onwards). Competitiveness and the pursuit of excellence are national priorities which risk splitting up the universities promoting the best universities that attract the best students and researchers as well as those that specialize in pedagogical excellence (projections sustained by reports such as Cohen and Aghion 2004).

Secondly, the State is a major contributor to the liberalization of the secondary and higher education sector. It funds all types of institutions, including private ones. It also contributes largely to the confusion between public and private, university and non-university, operators¹³. It has widened and relaxed its accreditation policy of HE programs as well as that of statutory rules regarding positions and careers in HE, contributing to the reduction in universities' privileges without, until now, having significantly modified their exclusive open-door responsibilities. If the ministry intervenes, it is not to protect a public university sector, but rather to amend an unfair competition, for instance, when selective admissions to short and vocational public two-year HE programs have been corrected by imposing quotas, particularly for vocational baccalaureate graduates. The introduction of pre-registration measures in open-door universities is another example. It seems likely that liberalizing university admission fees could be the next step in that move.

Thirdly, the country's need for HE qualifications can be translated into objectives, programs, and indicators, such as the percentage of undergraduates who complete their degree in three years (the standard timeframe), the percentage who complete their diploma at the same university where they spent their first year, the percentage of university professors who teach first-year classes, the percentage of dropouts in the first year; the percentage of graduating students who find a job. These social impact indicators also have to be "*efficient*," which officially means: "*to rationalize the use of buildings and classrooms, for the university to find its own funding, to reduce the number of degree programs with few students enrolled, and to reduce the time it takes to complete the degree*" (translated, *Gouvernement français* 2009, 23).

3.2. The HE system of supply and demand: diversification, stratification and competition, or class and status of universities

Economically speaking, universities and other types of HEI produce services for student-clients. Therefore, the recent increase in control over candidates appears paradoxical at first glance but can be explained by the evolutive characteristics of the university economy, which combines features of a planned economy with those of a market driven by quality.

The first paradox is based on the ideal type of industrial or mass economy: greater consumer demand leads to greater capitalist contentment, increased production capacity, yields, and profits. Contrary to logic, control of entry increases when student demand grows. Students are the primary subsistence resource for HEI, not because they pay for the service that they receive, but because they represent a monetary value in a State funding system. Thus, fluctuations in enrollments either increase or decrease

¹³ The Ministry's statistical and evaluation services use phrases from "*private university-type institutions*" to "*private institutions delivering university-level programs*" to present the private offer (Ministry of HE, State of the HE 2024, annual report).

universities' funding and undergraduates are manna from heaven: 60% of students throughout France are undergraduates and first-years alone represent 21% of the University of Toulouse's student population. The demand is nonetheless stable and partly maintained artificially thanks to schooling policies and demographic growth. In other words, the quantity of student demand is not an issue but rather more or less guaranteed. Moreover, resources and means of production are characterized by rigidity rather than flexibility. This means that whenever student numbers increase, tension arises among staff over new entrants. In all cases, resources and means are limited, and staffing levels and equipment never quite align with requirements. Ultimately, it is a planned and under-resourced mass economy.

One exception supports this rule of operation as, from 1996 to 2012, the total number of students enrolled throughout France, after having peaked in 1995, was followed by a relative stagnation until 2004, then a drop of about 4% each year. This was an unprecedented national situation and, considering the regional and local variations, it was even more pronounced in Toulouse: the number of students enrolled in 2008-2009 was close to that of 1990-91, "*that is, 18 years ago*" (self-evaluation report, October 2009, University archives). This was a local observation and emphasized the disappointment experienced by staff, accustomed to growth and unprepared for a decline in student demand. The response was then to define an attractive policy for students.

The second paradox is that the current threat of declining demand is not slowing down the logic of controlling entries. This time, the issue is not just about abandoning the industrial or mass economy business model in favor of the under-resourced planned economy model, but rather about turning to the "*quality market*" model (Karpik 1989; Felouzis, Perroton 2007) that introduces competition, service quality, and reputation. Actions to retain the maximum number of students in school for a long time have stimulated the supply market which has in turn expanded, diversified, but also stratified. While all OECD countries have been affected by stratification accompanying the massification of their HE systems (Hallonsten, Holmberg 2013), France has a few particularities given that universities took on the quasi-monopolistic function of providing academic and advanced degrees, and research, as well as ensuring the democratization of HE. Today, however, monopolies are fading, expansionist ambitions and commuting students¹⁴ are destabilizing the nodal place of universities and their undergraduate degree offer is the first victim of these market dynamics. Moreover, as national statistical services gradually improve their understanding of this area of HE, public HE providers, particularly universities, are becoming aware of the growing importance of private providers (Table 1). They have driven growth and forecasts over the last decade, predicting a slowdown in growth by 2030, suggest that non-university HE will continue to grow, whereas university *licence* programs will welcome fewer students, except for science degrees. Humanities universities are anticipated to be the most affected.

'Quality' specifies a market on the basis that price is not a sufficient source of information for customers, then 'reputation' becomes decisive. It presents the risk of

¹⁴ Graduates from the more or less selective two-year post-*baccalaureate* programs move on to the third year of a *licence* degree at university, then, the first two years of this *licence* degree are becoming less attractive for students as well as for academics.

being primarily based on the past rather than the present, like living on one's reputation, benefitting more from a consideration acquired rather than deserved (seniority and size of law firms for lawyers; academic performance for educational institutions, reflecting the socioeconomic profile of their clientele more than their added value). Moreover, it introduces the increasing role of quality indicators or quantification of outputs and outcomes in a competitive comparison context. Then, a quality-market generates a risk management approach: "*if everything may depend on organizational reputation, then reputational risk management demands the risk management of everything,*" in this case, of prospective students (echoing Dole 2014, 66). It is not only a question of guaranteeing access to HE but also guaranteeing graduation and employment, which is a laudable objective but the controlling effects of which on the material to be processed are obvious. Garcia (2006) has shown how HE "quality" policies identify teachers and universities as responsible for student success or failure.

Table 1: *Enrollment by type of undergraduate programs since 1960, France (in thousands)*

	1960	1970	1980	1990	2000	2010	2016	2026 (projection)
University	215	661	858	1160	1397	1437	1624	1700
Two-year technological institutes		24	54	74	119	117	117	131
Two-year senior technicians' sections in high schools	8	27	68	199	239	242	257	283
Preparatory classes for <i>grandes écoles</i>	21	33	40	64	70	80	86	98
Other HEI and programs	66	130	215	293	454	560	643	854
Total	310	851	1181	1717	2160	2319	2610	2935
University share (%)	69.3	77.7	72.7	67.5	64.1	62.0	62.2	57.9

Data: Ministry of HE, the state of HE, 2018 (July). [<http://www.enseignementsup-recherche.gouv.fr/cid132899/l-etat-de-l-enseignement-superieur-et-de-la-recherche-en-france-n-11-juillet-2018.html>]

Note: Statistical services have gradually improved their measurement of non-public HE activities, which were still underestimated in 2018.

This political and economic ecosystem has a major impact on the relationship between universities and their student-clientele. Marketization and rationalization of production encourage student flow management and accentuate social selectivity (Frouillou *et al.* 2020).

4. Discussion

This paper addressed the traditional process and recent changes in the institutional regulation of entering-undergraduate students in French universities, characterized by a principle of mass or open-door access. Recent events in France have

ushered in new “admissions policies,” meaning the means and strategies by which universities admit candidates (“pre-registration,” “admission,” “orientation,” “recruitment,” “selection,” whatever it is named).

The first argument was that the issue of regulating “entries” and “entrants” (at both the level of the large number of applicants and that of each individual applicant) is an ongoing issue in French mass and open-door universities (to welcome and control, to train and evaluate, to consider social backgrounds while meeting academic standards). Indeed, the explicit selection for university admissions has been a recurring but controversial topic in public, political, and academic debate ever since the democratic university was adopted in the 1960s.

However and secondly, current policies represent a step towards the rationalization and formalization of admissions regulation. Gradually, the traditional liberal/anomic structure of the mass university is being replaced by a more rational, national, and local structure of control. While this does not necessarily prevent admission, it does manage access, with implications in terms of human, technical, and organizational resources, as well as the explicit strengthening of checking and testing means for entering students. While these recent reforms relied heavily on the argument of combating student failure at university, they actually only change the instruments used to control access.

The subsequent and third argument was that, rather than being conservative, universities are sensitive to changes in their environment of demands and resources, which have an impact on their relationship with students. Admission practices are becoming more explicit in the French open-door university system due to the intensifying competitive conditions driven by market dynamics and guided by market-based quality values. This is largely due to the reconfiguration of state support in a market-making fashion. These results align with analyses of the transformation of HEIs into productive and commercial organizations focused on the profitability of their actions. (Slaughter, Leslie 1997; Bok 2003).

4.1. Open-door French university, diminutions and shifts

Considering the historical development of the French HE system, the principle of an open-door university has become deeply embedded in the identity and structures of French universities, the HE Ministry, and the French education system more broadly. For nearly a century, the term ‘university’ has been commonly accepted as linked to social democracy. Therefore, current changes are neither harmless nor sudden. Moreover, the open-door university has its conservative advocacy coalitions, primarily ordinary universities, which are seeking to preserve something that is socially distinctive. Furthermore, the pressure to continue studying is more prevalent than ever in political agendas, particularly in the context of an economy based on both knowledge and technology.

Nevertheless, new narratives have now penetrated the French State, HE system, and society. Social criticism of mass university is nothing new, but the hype surrounding student failure at university over the last two decades has borne fruit and converted it from an ideal model into a foil. The liberal/anomic university has been rejected, no longer acceptable, and a reinvention of the open-door university content is underway.

The legislator formally maintained ambiguity about the extent of the change. They claimed not to have modified the principle of equal access to higher education and selection for admission to the first year of university is still considered contrary to the values and missions of the university. At the same time, some of the clauses in the 1984 law were removed and its liberal spirit faded away facing reciprocity and subordination expectations on all scales, from universities to applicants.

The reality of open-door institution still exists but is losing strength because its scope is now reduced and displaced, moving away from openness and more towards closeness: little or nothing has changed for traditional, non-university selective programs; some non-selective programs in universities have become selective; non-selective programs with limited capacity as well as those that are ‘truly’ non-selective because the capacity is greater than the number of applicants have both introduced pre-registration procedures with the possibility of ranking the candidates. The previous access policies and professional practices, such as “*constitutive*” policies (Lowi 1972), postponed and delayed the constraints and operated on individuals’ environment whereas the admissions policies are “*regulatory*” because the constraint is immediate and applies at the individual level.

4.2. Which sociology of institution in condition of hypermodern Society?

The cooling-out hypothesis emphasizes the work of academic institutions, which not only involves welcoming and teaching to students but also positioning the university organization in its environment and ensuring its preservation. This analytical framework, described as “functional-institutional,” puts sociological theories of educational institutions to the test of the post-welfare state and marketized and rationalized HE system.

The Durkheimian perspective on social institutions is functionalist and idealistic (Dubet 2010; Touraine 2013), aimed at the “*travail sur autrui*,” socializing and integrating individuals, particularly children, under the guise of collective values—in this case republican values and democratic school and university—fueled by a nation-state and the collectivization of resources and means. While this perspective may be reflected in student monitoring practices, it is flawed due to its idealism and tendency towards obsolescence in current conditions. Firstly, it is becoming increasingly difficult to interpret institutional practices using a top-down and value-based rational model. Equally, it is hard to understand institutional practices through the prism of the strict relationship with students whereas universities are multi-purpose organizations. Moreover, this is right in relation to the irresistible process of rationalization of modern organizations, which leads to a “reversal” between means and ends (Weber in Vincent 2009, 111), at least, to a “duality” between living *for* the students and living *off* the students. The current selection processes at entry should be understood less as an institution’s means of socializing, qualifying, and classifying individuals, and more as means for rationalized organizations to stake their status and survival in a new environment of cultural, economic, and political demands.

Bourdieu’s perspective provides a partial answer to the changing phenomena of entry regulation for contemporary mainstream universities by allowing us to grasp the “field effects,” i.e., the fact that each field, including the academic one, is defined by specific issues and interests that cannot be reduced to those of other fields. This approach

avoids an overly functionalist interpretation, but tends to postulate the unity and power of the field and neglect its concrete environment. This perspective, which today would imply considering a certain relativization of the power of the academic professions and therefore the academic field as such, emphasizes the endogenous factors (professional factor) of the educational field that produce social and academic selection of students, but neglects the exogenous determinants of these academic practices, except those related to class society.

The organizational approach, for which the scale of the establishments matters, has increased in France specifically since the 1980s, at the same time as central planning was declining and replaced by HEI “*driving their own self-regulations*” (Salto 2018) and managing their relationships with their student clientele on their own. However, on the one hand, it can stumble over an excessive rational organization theory, neglecting the contributions of organizational sociology. On the other hand, organizational sociology grasps institutional problems through the lens of the institution (history, professional values...), organization (a problem-solving organism), dynamic (Selznick 1996), and of an organizational configuration (Musselin 2017) studying the relational tensions between professions (academics/bureaucrats) and decision-making levels (university governance/faculties or ministries/university governance/faculties) rather than tensions between institutions and their environments. Luhmann’s functional approach to hypermodern subsystems appears to represent a step in this direction without compromising the contributions of the institutional approaches outlined above. This approach retains the postulates of field, institution, organization, and system effects when studying functional couplings with the external environment. This allows identity and unity to be preserved through change rather than reproduction (Clam 1997; Luhmann 1999; Lange, Schimank 2001). In a subsystem, self-referential logic is the alpha and omega of functioning. This does not mean that the system is closed and unchanging. In fact, it cannot be, as the very existence of the subsystem depends on its *perdifferentiation* and *self-legitimation* from its environment.

4.3. *What is the future for open-door French universities?*

Under the assumption that the current political *referential* will not change in the medium-term, it is then up to open-door universities, as a status group, to find and defend a new open-door narrative in a HE system where market, reputation, and results are the new norms. In order to do so, it is worth imagining a shift from the meritocratic paradigm. Academics and management staff must develop their capacity for self-reflection and self-criticism with regard to their power to classify students, as well as their own confidence in their collective ability to take advantage of the uniqueness of the university in the production and transmission of knowledge. In doing so, they must promote a positive image of the open-door university and its students. It is necessary to reflect more accurate, yet positive, images that would bring the corporation of open-door universities, their professionals, and their student users together. For example, they could promote the values of lifelong learning attitudes of adult learners. This could take the form of an emancipatory approach to admitting and managing students, putting less emphasis on their family and academic backgrounds, with the aim of

empowering them as creative and responsible individuals, making them aware of the challenges their universities are facing.

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