Grade Inflation in France

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Introduction

Over the past few years, I have heard the following comments:

* *"With a pass rate in the High School leaving exam of 80%, either the students and teachers have suddenly become brilliantly successful or standards have dropped" (*A listener on a recent French radio phone-in show).

* *"In our finals exams, we can't set such complicated problems now as we did ten years ago".* (A French Professor of Mathematics).

* *"Students nowadays can't write two words without making a mistake in spelling or grammar".* (A teacher of the French language in a secondary school).

* *"The* ***Baccalauréat*** (High School leaving exam) *no longer gives a satisfactory indication of a young person's academic abilities".* (A company recruitment officer).

* *"A* ***Licence*** (Bachelor degree) *is no longer worth the paper it's written on. They'll soon be selling them with the soap-powder in the nearest shopping mall".* (An apparently disillusioned French academic).

If true, the above statements present a very worrying picture of the state of the education system in France in 2001. What is the real situation? Are such comments as those above merely the mistaken opinions of people who still yearn for what they perceive as a past "Golden Age" of education when standards were much higher than nowadays, or is there a grain of unpalatable truth to be found in such statements? Is it possible to find objective statistical evidence that standards have risen or fallen dramatically over the past decade? This article attempts to answer these questions.

The following framework should be borne in mind while analysing the situation in France:

* There are some 90 "Universités" in France in the year 2001, varying in size from a few thousand students up to around 50,000.
* There are some 170 "Grandes Ecoles" in engineering in France, whose size rarely exceeds more than 1,000 students each.
* 1.25 million people are paid by the Ministry of Education, 70% of whom are teachers.
* There are currently some 1.5 million students registered on course of Higher Education in France.
* Just over 23,000 "Diplômes d'Ingénieur" (Engineering Diplomas) are awarded every year in France, after a period of 5 years studies after the High School leaving examination.

To examine the theme of "Grade Inflation" this article will concentrate on two examples, one from the "Université" system and the other from the "Grandes Ecoles".

The French Education System

Education is compulsory up to the age of 16 in France. For those students who remain to the very end of the secondary school cycle, a national examination called the "Baccalauréat" is taken at the age of 18 or 19. Passing this examination means an automatic passport into the "Université".

Table 1 presents French education system from the end of secondary school up to Ph.D level. The situation is unlike that in most other western countries insofar as, for reasons dating back to the end of the 18th century, two parallel systems exist in the field of Higher Education : the "Universités", on the one hand, and the "Grandes Ecoles", on the other.

Table 1 - Education in the USA and France

Years	**France** "Grandes Ecoles"	**France** "Universités"	**USA**
8	Doctorat	Doctorat	Ph.D
7			
6			
5	Diplôme d'Ingénieur	Diplôme d'Etudes Approfondies (DEA)	MS
4		Maîtrise	BS
3		Licence	
2	Competitive Entrance Exam to "Grandes Ecoles"	DEUG/DUT/BTS *	Associate Degree
1			
Years	"Grandes Ecoles"	"Universités"	University
	"Baccalauréat"	"Baccalauréat"	High School

* DEUG: Diplôme d'Etudes Universitaires Générales
* DUT: Diplôme Universitaire de Technologie
* BTS: Brevet de Technicien Supérieur

The "Baccalauréat" or the High School Leaving Examination

Education is mandatory up to the age of 16 in France. At the age of 18 or 19, those students who stay on until the very end of the secondary school cycle take a national examination called the "Baccalauréat". This examination exists in three different forms, according to the specialisations chosen by each student:

* Le "Baccalauréat Général", which covers one of the following three fields : Arts and Literature, Sciences, and the Economic and Social Sciences. This is the most sought after of the three forms of the "Bac", and is taken by around 56% of all candidates.

* Le "Baccalauréat Technologique" is taken by around 29% of all candidates
* Le "Baccalauréat Professionnel", a more vocationally-oriented examination, is taken by the remaining 15% of candidates.

In 1900, a total of 5647 students passed the "Baccalauréat", a figure which had reached 500,000 in the 2000 session, a year in which more than 80% of all candidates were successful. Put another way, 63 French children out of every 100 in the 18/19 year age group now pass the "Baccalauréat", thus obtaining an *automatic passport* to continue their education at the "Université". In 1985, fewer than 30 out of 100 French students managed to pass this same High School leaving examination, a fact which has stimulated a lively nationwide debate concerning the true value of the "Baccalauréat".

*"The **Baccalauréat** has become a mere certificate symbolising the transformation of the High School into a kindergarten"* said a disenchanted Physics teacher recently. He went on: *"A student who answered all the questions correctly would get a grade of 21.5 out of 20"*. On the other side of the fence, French government ministers point out that the 80% pass rate in the "Baccalauréat" shows that both students and teachers are working hard and reaping the rewards of all their effort.

The French University System

How has the success rate in the "Baccalauréat" affected the French universities, which have no independent entrance examinations and are legally obliged to offer places to all those students who pass the "Baccalauréat"? **Table 2** shows us the case of the 3rd and final year of the "Licence de Mathématiques" (Bachelor of Mathematics) at the University of Western Brittany over the period 1990-2000. This course appears to be relatively representative of the situation in many French universities.

Table 2 - The final year of a "Licence"/BS in Mathematics

Year	Total	Fail		Pass	
		Nb	%	Nb	%
1989-1990	90	42	47 %	48	53 %
1990-1991	80	36	45 %	44	55 %
1991-1992	173	105	61 %	68	39 %
1992-1993	197	109	55 %	88	45 %
1993-1994	211	126	60 %	85	40 %
1994-1995	257	146	57 %	111	43 %
1995-1996	224	122	54 %	102	46 %
1996-1997	198	113	57 %	85	43 %
1997-1998	174	96	55 %	78	45 %
1998-1999	152	71	47 %	81	53 %
1999-2000	107	58	54 %	49	46 %
Totals	**1863**	**1024**	**55 %**	**839**	**45 %**

Pass		Quite good		Good		Very good	
Nb	%	Nb	%	Nb	%	Nb	%
34	71 %	9	19 %	3	6 %	2	4 %
34	77 %	10	23 %	0	0 %	0	0 %
49	72 %	12	18 %	6	9 %	1	1 %
80	91 %	2	2 %	4	5 %	2	2 %
75	88 %	9	11 %	0	0 %	1	1 %
92	83 %	14	13 %	4	3 %	1	1 %
78	76 %	20	20 %	3	3 %	1	1 %
74	87 %	4	5 %	6	7 %	1	1 %
70	90 %	5	6 %	2	3 %	1	1 %
57	70 %	12	15 %	8	10 %	4	5 %
39	80 %	7	14 %	2	4 %	1	2 %
682	**81 %**	**104**	**12 %**	**38**	**5 %**	**15**	**2 %**

Three major conclusions may be drawn from these results over the 10 year period :

* The failure rate of 55% is extremely high, especially since this is the final year of the Bachelor course. Selection seems to take place during the course itself and the drop-out rate is also certainly very high.
* The number of students with a simple "Pass" is extremely high (81%).
* The number of students with good or excellent grades is very low (7%).

This general pattern is also apparent in **Table 3**, showing the final grades of another course, the DEUG (equivalent of an Associate Degree) in Mathematics and Computing Applied to Sciences:

Table 3 - Grades for a DEUG/Associate Degree in Maths and Computing Applied to Sciences

1999-2000	Total	Fail		Pass	
		Nb	%	Nb	%
Totals	3483	1513	43 %	1970	57 %

Pass		Quite good		Good		Very good	
Nb	%	Nb	%	Nb	%	Nb	%
1642	83 %	257	13 %	61	3 %	10	1 %

Here, only 4% of students obtained grades in the top two categories over the period 1990-2000, but 57% of all candidates did actually pass the exam.

The "Grandes Ecoles" System

Unlike the "Université" system, the "Grandes Ecoles" are based on a highly selective process in which the top one per cent of students are creamed off immediately after the High School leaving examination. Those students who receive top grades in the "Baccalauréat" can ask to be admitted to the special "Classes Préparatoires" which, over a two-year period, give those students admitted a very intensive course in mathematics and physics, culminating in a national, competitive examination for admission to one of the 170 engineering "Grandes Ecoles". Some "Grandes Ecoles" have their own entrance examinations, while others group together to form a common entrance examination. The author's college falls into the latter category, with eight colleges having the same examination. In June 2000, the admission figures to the 1st year programme of each of the eight colleges can be seen in **Table 4**:

Table 4 - Entrants to 1st Year

Name of college	Students admitted to 1st year
Ecole Nationale des Ponts et Chaussées (Paris)	96
Ecole Nationale Supérieure de l'Aéronautique et de l'Espace (Toulouse)	108
Ecole Nationale Supérieure des Techniques Avancées (Paris)	86
Ecole Nationale Supérieure des Télécommunications (Paris)	112
Ecole Nationale Supérieure des Mines (Paris)	84
Ecole Nationale Supérieure des Mines (Saint Etienne)	96
Ecole Nationale Supérieure des Mines (Nancy)	149
Ecole Nationale Supérieure des Télécommunications de Bretagne (Brest)	129

Total admitted to 8 colleges: **860 students**.
N.B. **9848 students took the common entrance examination**. (Admission rate: **10.4%)**.

These students are present for a 3-year programme, made up of a common core lasting 3 or 4 semesters and a final year specialty. The students are joined at the beginning of their 2nd year by Direct Entrants to each "Grande Ecole" coming from the "Université" and having already achieved a "Maîtrise" degree (4 years after High School). In July 2000, there were 227 candidates for admission to the author's college, 42 of whom were admitted for the beginning of the academic year 2000-01. The selection process is based on the quality of the "Maîtrise" degree from the university. A further 16 non-French candidates were also admitted directly to the 2nd year programme, as can be seen in **Table 5**:

Table 5 - Entrants to 2nd Year

Grade obtained in "Maîtrise"	French students	%	Foreign students	%
Very good	2	4.8	1	6.3
Good	16	38.1	6	37.5
Quite good	22	52.3	5	31.2
Pass	2	4.9	0	0
No French equivalent	0	0	4	25
TOTAL	**42**	100	**16**	100

The most difficult thing to achieve is to actually be admitted to a "Grande Ecole". Unlike at the "Université", there is no official classification system on graduation from a "Grande Ecole", and the drop-out/expulsion rate is virtually nil. Grades are given internally for every subject and module but the Degree Certificate simply states that the student is a graduate of the "Grande Ecole".

Conclusions

* For the French "Universités", the selection process takes place during the students' academic programme. The drop-out rate is extremely high, perhaps due to the higher number of students who now obtain the "Baccalauréat", which is an automatic passport to the "Université". (63% of all 18 year olds in 2000 / 80% of all candidates). Grade inflation does NOT seem to have taken place within the "Universités" themselves, but the system in its present form may lead to accusations of a dreadful waste of resources. Annual tuition fees in the "Universités" are of the order of $100 per year!

* For the engineering "Grandes Ecoles", grade inflation has certainly not taken place during the entrance examinations, as only one in ten candidates actually obtains a place in the more prestigious colleges. Annual tuition fees in the "Grandes Ecoles" are of the order of $800 per year, a ridiculously low sum given the quality of the equipment available to all students and of the first class teaching and research environment. There is currently a great lack of engineers in France, especially in the field of Information Technology, and the number of annual engineering graduates (23,000 per year) will soon be increased.

* The dual system of Higher Education in France (with the "Universités" and the "Grandes Ecoles") make France a special case, but, with the harmonisation currently taking place within Europe together with the phenomenon of globalisation in the field of engineering, a more rational approach will, in the author's opinion, soon have to take place, not least concerning the thorny issue of tuition fees.

References

* The French Ministry of Education (www.education.gouv.fr).
* The "Grandes Ecoles" (www2.cefi.org).
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