Grandes Écoles: Have they become more socially inclusive since the mid-2000s?

Using a rich new dataset, this policy brief documents the evolution of recruitment for France's *Grandes Écoles* since the mid-2000s, according to various characteristics: social composition, geographical origin of students, and gender distribution. Despite the "opening up" measures implemented by some *Grandes Écoles* in an attempt to diversify their student profiles, their recruitment base has remained very narrow and has hardly changed over the past 15 years. While enrollment has increased significantly in this period, these elite higher education institutions have remained almost entirely out of reach to students from disadvantaged social backgrounds, the share of students from outside the Paris region has not increased, and girls remain underrepresented. This persistent inequality of access to the *Grandes Écoles* is only partly explained by the differences in academic performance between the groups in question. It has its source upstream in the lack of diversity in the recruitment for preparatory classes and post-baccalaureate schools. The inability of measures implemented since the mid-2000s to initiate a democratization of the *Grandes Écoles* highlights the limits of the approach that has been favored up to now: a proliferation of local initiatives, with no real national coordination and very little evaluation. This failure invites us to rethink the levers that could be employed to diversify recruitment for selective courses and to encourage greater circulation of elites.

- The recruitment base of the *Grandes Écoles* is very narrow: Two-thirds of their students come from a very privileged social background, one-third had their secondary education in the Paris region (40% in the most selective *Grandes Écoles*), and boys make up nearly 60% of their students.

- The probability of attending a *Grande École* varies considerably from one high school (*lycée*) to another: half of the general and technological high schools provide only 13% of the students at the *Grandes Écoles*, while at the other end of the spectrum, 17% of the general and technological high schools alone provide half of their students.

- The differences in admission rates to the *Grandes Écoles* according to social background, gender, or geographic origin are of the same order of magnitude as the inequalities in access to the educational programs that prepare students for them: preparatory classes and post-bac schools.

- Differences in academic performance explain less than half of the social inequalities in access to preparatory classes and *Grandes Écoles* and less than 20% of the geographic inequalities in access. *A fortiori*, academic performance does not in any way explain the under-representation of girls in the *Grandes Écoles*.

- Despite the "opening up" measures implemented by certain Grandes Écoles, recruitment to these institutions has remained virtually unchanged since the mid-2000s.

GENES
Groupe des écoles nationales d'économie et statistique

pse
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In the French educational context, competitive examinations have long been considered a means of guaranteeing republican meritocracy by allowing fair and equitable access to the most prestigious programs. However, this positive vision of meritocracy is increasingly challenged by the extent and persistence of social inequalities in access to the most selective institutions: the preparatory classes and the *Grandes Écoles*.

It is in this context that, since the beginning of the 2000s, several *Grandes Écoles* have implemented "opening up" measures to try to diversify their recruitment. These measures take several forms: upstream sponsorship and support programs for high-school students from disadvantaged social backgrounds, changes in recruitment procedures through the introduction of parallel admission channels and, downstream, the implementation of financial aid and support measures for students with social grants.

The objective of the report on which this policy brief is based is to determine whether the initiatives put in place over the past 15 years to broaden the recruitment base of the *Grandes Écoles* have indeed led to a diversification of their student profiles, based on solid empirical evidence. The study favors a quantitative approach based on a set of administrative data that have not, to date, been systematically exploited. These data are used to study inequalities in access to selective courses in a multidimensional way: according to social background, gender, and geographic origin.

This policy brief focuses on inequalities in access to *Grandes Écoles* from bac+3 to bac+5. The complete study also compares the recruitment for *Grandes Écoles* with that of university programs at the same level of study, as well as an analysis of recruitment for the bac+1 and bac+2 programs that lead to them (preparatory classes and post-bac schools).

Grandes Écoles: Overview and measures to improve social inclusion

The Ministry of National Education defines a *Grande École* as "*an institution of higher education that recruits its students by competitive examination and provides high-level training*". This definition encompasses a very heterogeneous group of institutions.

Overview of the Grandes Écoles

In 2016-2017, there were 234 *Grandes Écoles* listed in the SISE information system (see Box for a presentation of the data used in this study). These schools, which account for nearly a quarter of all students with a bac+3 to bac+5 level, are divided into five categories of very unequal size:

engineering schools (44% of students at *Grandes Écoles*), business schools (46%), Institutes of Political Studies (6%), Écoles Normales Supérieures (2%), and other specialized schools[1] (2%).

The level of selectivity of the *Grandes Écoles* varies greatly: While 74% of the students in the top 10% of the most selective schools obtained the "very good" mark in their baccalaureate (compared to 14% of all students with a bac+3 to bac+5 level), this proportion is less than 10% in the bottom 50% of the least selective schools (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: Distribution of baccalaureate honors for *Grandes Écoles* students (bac+3/5) in 2016-2017, by institutional level of selectivity
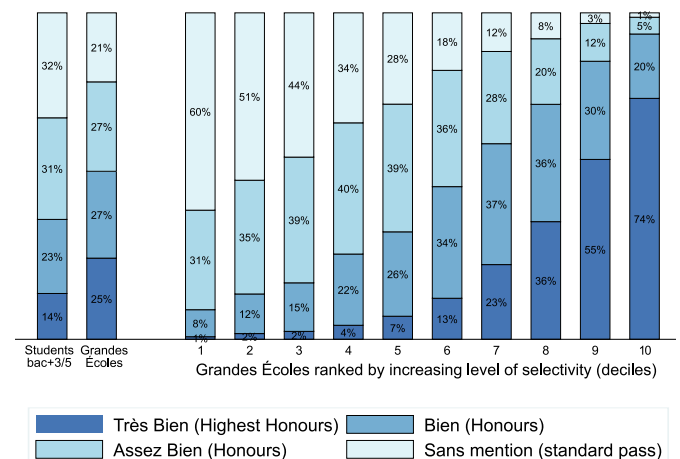
Interpretation: 74% of students enrolled in 2016-2017 in the most selective 10% of *Grandes Écoles* obtained a " very good " mark in their baccalaureate.
Notes: *Grandes Écoles* are ranked by selectivity decile based on the average percentile rank of their students in the general baccalaureate (calculated separately by exam series and year).
Sample: French students in *Grandes Écoles* (bac+3/5 level) in 2016-2017.
Sources: SISE (MESRI-SIES) and OCEAN (MENJS-DEPP) data.

The *Grandes Écoles* are very unevenly distributed across the country: Almost one-third are located in the Paris region (18% in Paris alone). This geographic concentration is even more pronounced when one considers the top 10% most selective *Grandes Écoles*: 35% are located in Paris, 35% in the Paris region (excluding Paris city), and only 30% outside the Paris region.

Social inclusion programs in the Grandes Écoles

In light of the lack of social diversity in recruitment for *Grandes Écoles*, a review of their inclusiveness was initiated at the turn of the millennium by the various actors in higher education in France.

The Institut d'Études Politiques (IEP, also Sciences Po) in Paris was one of the first selective higher education in-

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[1]This category includes the École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales, the École Nationale des Chartes, the École Nationale Supérieure du Paysage, the École Nationale Supérieure des Sciences de l'Information et des Bibliothèques, the Écoles Nationales Vétérinaires, the Muséum National d'Histoire Naturelle and the École Pratique des Hautes Études.

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stitutions to modify its admissions process in an attempt to diversify the social profile of its students, through the implementation of the Conventions d'Éducation Prioritaire (CEP). Launched in 2001, this program creates a special track for students from partner high schools in priority education. Within the *Grandes Écoles*, Sciences Po's CEP remains one of the most ambitious equal opportunity programs insofar as these agreements explicitly implement a policy of positive discrimination. Since its inception, however, this program has only involved a relatively small number of students admitted to IEP Paris (about 100 per year out of a cohort of more than 1,500 students). Launched in 2008, the "*Cordées de la réussite*" program aims to promote equal opportunity through collaboration between secondary and higher education institutions and the professional world. Most of the "*Cordées de la réussite*" programs are tutoring initiatives designed to support students in priority schools. This scheme, which was merged with the "*Parcours d'excellence*" program in 2020, only concerns around 80,000 secondary school students each year, which is less than 1.5% of secondary school students.

After the signing in 2005 of the Charter for Equal Opportunity in Access to Training for Excellence, many *Grandes Écoles* have put in place their own measures to promote social inclusion, in the form of partnerships, tutoring programs, or parallel admission exams. Despite the proliferation of these initiatives, there are few impact studies of the implemented measures. Existing evaluations have focused specifically on the CEP program at IEP Paris (Oberti, 2013; Thibaud, 2019) and on some of the measures at-

tached to the national "*Cordées de la réussite*" program (CNRS-GRECSTA, 2013; Ly et al., 2015). While these evaluations show positive effects on average on the motivation and academic performance of the beneficiaries, their conclusions regarding the capacity of these schemes to diversify the social recruitment of *Grandes Écoles* are more mixed.

The objective of the present study is to evaluate, based on the almost exhaustive data now available, whether the social inclusion measures implemented since the mid-2000s have made it possible to broaden the recruitment base of the *Grandes Écoles*.

A very narrow recruitment base

Analysis of administrative data on enrollment in higher education in 2016-2017[2] highlights the very narrow recruitment base of the *Grandes Écoles*, in terms of their students' socioeconomic (SES) background, gender, academic profile, and geographic origin.

In 2016-2017, students from very high SES categories (managerial roles, CEOs, intellectual and liberal professions) represented 64% of *Grandes Écoles* students, whereas only 23% of young people aged 20-24 and 47% of students in higher education programs at the bac+3 to bac+5 level were from these social categories (see Figure 2a). Conversely, only 9% of *Grandes Écoles* students came from a disadvantaged SES (blue-collar workers and

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[2]The 2016-2017 academic year is the last year for which we have complete data.

Figure 2: Characteristics of Grandes Écoles students (bac+3/5) in 2016-2017

(a) Social background (SES of legal representative)

Legend:
- Disadvantaged SES
- High PCS
- Medium SES
- Very high SES

(b) Geographical origin (baccalaureate academy)

Legend:
- Outside Île-de-France
- Paris
- Île-de-France (outside Paris)

(c) Distribution of girls/boys

Legend:
- Females
- Males

Interpretation: In 2016-2017, 64% of *Grandes Écoles* students came from very high SES (socioeconomic status) categories, 8% passed their baccalaureate in Paris, and 58% were male.
Notes: Very high SES: managerial roles, CEOs, intellectual and liberal professions; high SES: intermediate professions; medium SES: employees, farmers, craftsmen, retailers; disadvantaged SES: blue-collar workers and those without professional activity. The distribution of the population ("cohort" column) is estimated from the SCOLARITÉ data by calculating the distribution by SES, gender, or school department of the students in the cohorts concerned when they were enrolled in secondary education (all classes combined) at age 14.
Sample: French students in *Grandes Écoles* (bac+3/5 levels) in 2016-2017.
Sources: SISE (MESRI-SIES), SCOLARITÉ and OCEAN (MENJS-DEPP) data.

those not in the workforce), compared to 36% of all young people aged 20-24 and 20% of students at the bac+3 to bac+5 level. This under-representation also concerns students from high (intermediate professions) or medium SES backgrounds (employees, farmers, craftsmen, shopkeepers): These social categories made up only 10% and 18% of *Grandes Écoles* students in 2016-2017, respectively, compared to 14% and 27% of all young people aged 20-24 (11% and 22% of students at the bac+3 to bac+5 level).

The social profile of *Grandes Écoles* students diverges even further from the prevailing social structure of the 20-24 year-old population as the level of selectivity of the schools increases: The share of students from very privileged social backgrounds reaches almost 80% in the most selective 10% of the *Grandes Écoles*[3].

The geographic recruitment of the *Grandes Écoles* also appears to be highly concentrated, particularly among the most selective institutions (see Figure 2b). In the cohorts examined, 3% of the individuals studied in Paris and 16% in the other departments of the Paris region, while 8% of *Grandes Écoles* students took their baccalaureate in Paris and 22% in the Paris region. For the most selective institutions, these proportions are 17% and 24% respectively.

At the sub-departmental level, the probability of entering a *Grande École* varies considerably from one high school (*lycée*) to another. One of the advantages of the data used for this study is that it is possible to identify precisely the high school attended by *Grandes Écoles* students when they were in their senior year. Analysis of these data reveals that the general and technological high schools that supply the *Grandes Écoles* are relatively few in number (see Figure 3): Half of the general and technological high schools supplied only 13% of *Grandes Écoles* students in 2016-2017, while at the other end of the spectrum, 17% of the high schools alone supplied half of their students. This concentration is even greater when we consider only the most selective 10% of *Grandes Écoles*: In 2016-2017, half of their students came from only 8% of general and technological high schools.

Finally, the *Grandes Écoles* are characterized by a strong under-representation of girls. In 2016-2017, girls accounted for 55% of students in baccalaureate programs, but only 42% of students in the *Grandes Écoles* and only 37% of students in the 10% most selective *Grandes Écoles* (see Figure 2c). This under-representation of girls is not uniform, however: It is particularly marked in the engi-

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[3]The *Grandes Écoles* are ranked by decile of selectivity according to the average percentile rank of their students in the general baccalaureate (calculated separately by exam series and year). The most selective 10% of the *Grandes Écoles* includes École Polytechnique, École des Mines de Paris, CentraleSupélec, École Nationale des Ponts et Chaussées, ENS Ulm, ESPCI Paris, ENSAE, Télécom ParisTech, HEC, Centrale Lyon, Centrale Marseille, IEP Paris, ENS Lyon, École Nationale des Chartes, and ESCP-Europe.

Figure 3: Concentration of general and technological high schools where *Grandes Écoles* students passed the baccalaureate (Lorenz curve), 2016-2017
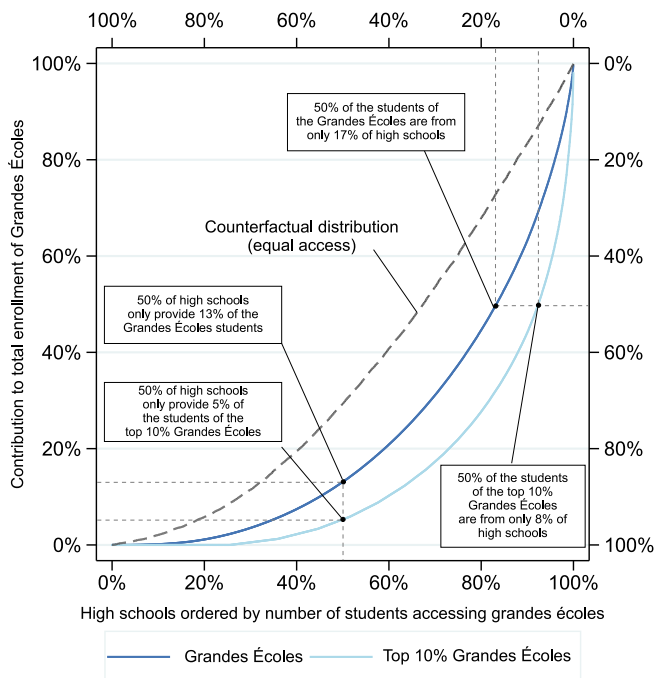
Interpretation: Half of the general and technological high schools provided only 13% of the *Grandes Écoles* students in 2016-2017. At the other end of the spectrum, 17% of general and technological high schools alone provided half of *Grandes Écoles* students.

Notes: High school of origin is the high school of graduation. The x-axis ranks the general and technological high schools by increasing number of students entering the *Grandes Écoles* among those who took their baccalaureate at the high school. The y-axis shows the cumulative contribution of the high schools to the number of *Grandes Écoles* students. The dotted line (equal chances of access to the *Grandes Écoles*) does not coincide exactly with the 45° line because of the unequal sizes of the high schools.

Sources: SISE (MESRI-SIES), SCOLARITÉ and OCEAN (MENJS-DEPP) data.

neering schools (26% girls), whereas the business schools have, on average, comparable proportions of girls and boys.

The narrowness of the recruitment base of the *Grandes Écoles* is even more marked when one considers the three most prestigious *Grandes Écoles*: École Polytechnique, ENS Ulm and HEC. Even more so than in the other *Grandes Écoles*, students from very privileged backgrounds are over-represented (85% of students on average), as are students from Paris (26%) and the Paris region (25%). Girls account for only one-third of their students.

Upstream inequalities can only be partially explained by differences in academic performance

To better understand the determinants of unequal access to the *Grandes Écoles*, we focus our analysis on students who were in the ninth grade (*troisième*) in 2005-2006 and who can be followed until 2014-2015, nine years after middle school.

The first lesson to be learned from this cohort follow-up is that inequalities in access to the *Grandes Écoles* according to social background, geographic origin and gender are largely predetermined, upstream, by inequalities in access to the programs that prepare students for the *Grandes Écoles*: preparatory classes (8% of students with a bac+1 and bac+2 in 2016-2017) and post-bac schools (5% of students with a bac+1/2). Among ninth-grade students in 2005, those from very high SES backgrounds were 9 to 10 times more likely to enter these programs than students from disadvantaged SES backgrounds (17.5% vs. 1.9%), Parisians were three times more likely to enter than non-Parisians (15.1% vs. 5.8%), and boys were 1.3 times more likely than girls (7.2% vs. 5.8%).

A second lesson from the analysis is that inequalities in access to the *Grandes Écoles* can only be explained in part by differences in academic performance between the groups considered. To measure the contribution of social, educational, and geographic factors to inequalities in access to the *Grandes Écoles*, the proposed approach is based on the Blinder-Oaxaca decomposition method[4]. This approach is applied to break down the differences in access rates to the *Grandes Écoles* according to three categories: between students from very high and disadvantaged SES backgrounds, between Parisian and non-Parisian students, and between girls and boys.

Inequalities in access by social background: In this cohort, the access rate to the *Grandes Écoles* for students from disadvantaged SES backgrounds (1.6%) was 14.4 percentage points lower than that of students from very high SES backgrounds (16.0%). About half of this gap can be "explained" by the lower average academic performance of students from disadvantaged social backgrounds at the end of the ninth grade[5] (for 5.8 percentage points, or 41% of the overall gap) and by the fact that they tend to be over-represented in departments where, for comparable academic performance, access to *Grandes Écoles* is less likely (for 1.3 percentage points, or 9% of the overall gap). However, half of the differential in access rates to the *Grandes Écoles* according to social background (7.2 percentage points) remains "unexplained" by these two factors. This unexplained share tends to be greater for business schools (61%) than for engineering schools (42%) and for the most selective 10% of *Grandes Écoles* (33%).

The social selectivity of the *Grandes Écoles* thus goes beyond the levels predicted by their academic selectivity. This phenomenon is partly due to the decisive role played by post-bac schools, which recruit their students directly after the baccalaureate: Average differences in academic performance according to social background at the end

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[4] The details of this method are presented in Chapter 6 of the report (Box 2, pp. 166-168).

[5] Academic performance at the end of ninth grade is measured by the grades obtained in the French and mathematics written tests of the middle-school national diploma (*diplôme national du brevet*).

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of middle school only manage to explain less than a third of the social inequalities in access to these often very expensive courses, whereas they explain almost 60% of the social inequalities in access to preparatory classes.

Inequalities in access between Parisians and non-Parisians: It is even more difficult to explain geographic inequalities in access to preparatory classes and *Grandes Écoles* by differences in academic performance and social composition between departments. Among students who were enrolled in the ninth grade in 2005-2006, only 5.1% of non-Parisians entered a *Grandes Écoles* compared to 13.9% of Parisians, a differential of 8.8 percentage points. Differences in social composition and average school performance between departments only explain a small part of this gap: 1.8 percentage points, or 20% of the overall gap. The explanatory power of these two factors is even weaker (10%) if we try to explain the advantage enjoyed by Parisian students in access to the most selective 10% of the *Grandes Écoles*.

These results indicate that geographic inequalities in access to the *Grandes Écoles* have causes that are largely unrelated to the social background and academic performance of students, starting with the high spatial concentration of preparatory classes and *Grandes Écoles* in the Paris region, which tends to penalize non-Parisian students in gaining access.

Gender gaps: Gaps in academic performance do nothing to explain the under-representation of girls in the *Grandes Écoles* and their preparatory programs. In the cohort studied, the access rate of girls to *Grandes Écoles* (4.9%) was 2.0 percentage points lower than that of boys (6.9%). The Blinder-Oaxaca decomposition indicates that given their higher average academic performance than boys at the end of ninth grade, girls' access rate to *Grandes Écoles* should actually have been 1.6 percentage points *higher* than boys'. The "unexplained" part of their access rate differential thus corresponds to 180% of the overall gap. It is due to the strong under-representation of women in engineering schools and to their under-representation in the most selective 10% of the *Grandes Écoles* (all types combined).

Recruitment has changed little since the mid-2000s

The social composition of the *Grandes Écoles* has changed very little since the mid-2000s[6] (see Figure 4a). During

the 2006-2016 decade, the *Grandes Écoles* enrolled about two-thirds of their students from very high SES, 10% from high SES, 17% from medium SES, and less than 10% from disadvantaged SES backgrounds. The extreme stability of the social recruitment of the *Grandes Écoles* is all the more remarkable given that their intake increased significantly during this period and that several *Grandes Écoles* set up parallel admission channels. This quantitative expansion was not accompanied by a diversification of the social profile of their students.

Like their social background, the geographic origin of *Grandes Écoles* students remained remarkably stable between 2008 and 2016[7] (see Figure 4b): The share of Parisians remained between 7% and 8% of students; the share of others from the Paris region was between 20% and 22%.

Gender parity has not improved in the *Grandes Écoles* since the mid-2000s (see Figure 4c): While nearly 60% of students enrolled in university programs at the bac+3 to bac+5 level during the period 2006-2016 were girls, this proportion remained close to 40% among students in the *Grandes Écoles*, and less than 30% in engineering schools.

Conclusion: What levers can diversify recruitment for the Grandes Écoles?

Examining the study's results, one thing is clear: **The "opening up" measures put in place since the mid-2000s to diversify recruitment for the *Grandes Écoles* have not achieved their objectives**. These elite institutions have remained largely closed to students from disadvantaged social backgrounds, the proportion of students from outside the Paris region has not increased, and girls remain underrepresented.

The extreme stability of recruitment to the *Grandes Écoles* reflects, upstream, the lack of social inclusion for preparatory classes and post-bac schools during the period studied. The analyses proposed in the study indicate that a significant part of the differences in access rates to selective institutions is linked to the fact that, **for comparable academic performance, students choose different trajectories according to their social background**, geographical origin, and gender. Among the factors that contribute to these differences, a distinction must be made between the influence of the family and school environment on the

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[6]To avoid the measured changes being biased by the fact that the number of *Grandes Écoles* present in the SISE information system increased significantly between 2006 and 2010, we work here on a constant sample basis, limiting ourselves to the *Grandes Écoles* that were present throughout the 2006-2016 period (2006 sample, which includes 62% of the schools surveyed in 2016). The conclusions are unchanged

when the sample is extended to the schools covered by the SISE data in 2010 (which includes more than 90% of the schools surveyed in 2016).
[7]Analysis of the evolution of geographic recruitment for the *Grandes Écoles* only begins in 2008 because information on the academy where their students passed the baccalaureate is not sufficiently reliable for previous years.

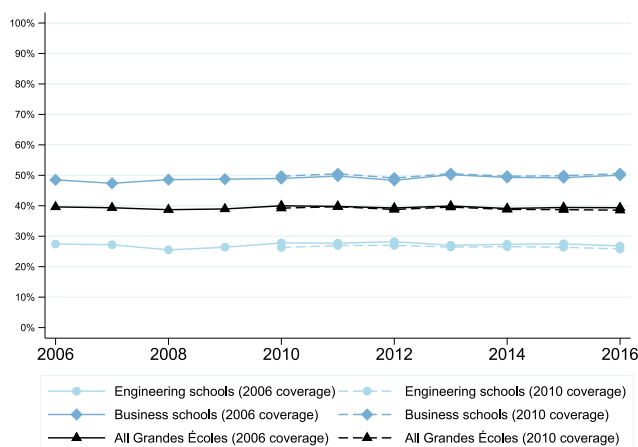Figure 4: Changes in recruitment for the *Grandes Écoles* from 2006-2016

(a) Social composition of the *Grandes Écoles* (2006 sample)
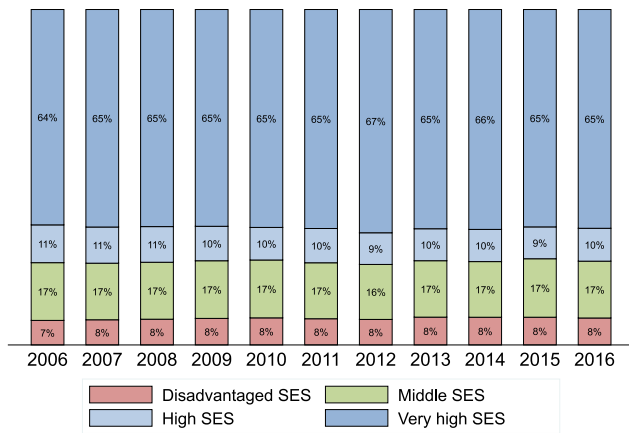
(b) Geographical origin of students (2008 sample)
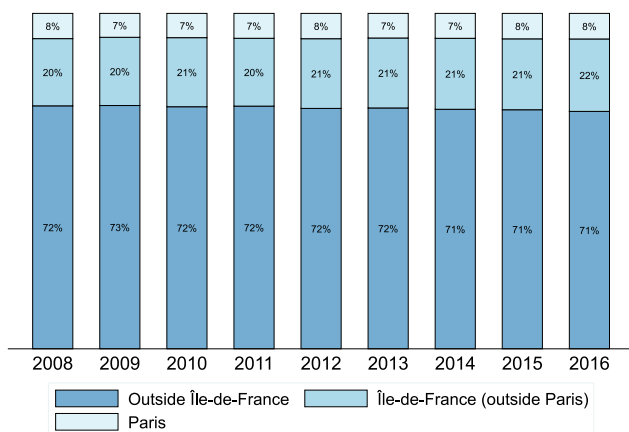
(c) Proportion of girls (2006 and 2010 samples)

Interpretation: In 2006, 64% of *Grandes Écoles* students came from a very high SES background. In 2016, this proportion was 65%.
Notes: The 2006, 2008, and 2010 samples correspond to the *Grandes Écoles* that were present in the SISE data in 2006, 2008, and 2010 (i.e., 62%, 84%, and 91% of the schools surveyed in 2016, respectively).
Sample: French students in *Grandes Écoles* (bac+3 to bac+5 levels) during the period 2006-2016.
Sources: SISE (MESRI-SIES) and OCEAN (MENJS-DEPP) data.

career choices of individuals, the role of the information available to them, and the constraints which they face in making their choices, insofar as these factors call for different methods of intervention.

Although the preferences of individuals are difficult to manipulate, research has shown that certain forms of intervention can **mitigate the influence of stereotypes associated with social background or gender on career choices**, whether they be policies aimed at strengthening the self-esteem and sense of efficacy of students from modest backgrounds (Oyserman et al., 2016), or, to combat the under-representation of girls on scientific courses, interventions based on female role models (Breda et al., 2020).

In addition, the extreme complexity, and even opacity, of the education offered by the most selective courses creates a cultural gap between families with a good knowledge of the system and those who are more "distant" from the institution. In this context, it would seem appropriate to **provide transparent information to high-school students on the career prospects (employment rates, salary returns) associated with the various courses of study**, based on statistics calculated from the administrative sources available today. Informing students from disadvantaged backgrounds who have high academic potential but who lack information because of their socio-educational context, for example by means of semi-personalized letters presenting the opportunities offered by selective training and the financial aid for which they are eligible, is a promising approach to reducing information asymmetries in career choices (Hoxby and Turner, 2013; Dynarski et al., 2020).

Measures aimed at **limiting financial barriers** (increasing scholarships based on social criteria and total exemption from tuition fees for priority students) and **geographical barriers** (rebalancing the availability of education in France, anonymization of the high school of origin in applications for preparatory classes, increasing mobility grants) could also be envisaged to broaden the recruitment base for selective courses.

Finally, the debate on the diversification of recruitment for elite institutions cannot avoid **a more general reflection on the role of affirmative action policies in achieving this objective**. The diversification of recruitment for the *Grandes Écoles* necessarily involves the diversification of their main pool of students: the preparatory classes. As long as these classes have barely more than 10% of students from disadvantaged social backgrounds, the affirmative action measures that could be implemented at the entry point to the *Grandes Écoles* will have only a limited impact on their actual social composition. From this perspective, the quotas that have been in place since 2018 as part of the Parcoursup procedure to promote the access of priority students to selective courses appear to be a promising avenue, provided that the applied rates

are raised significantly and extended to all private higher education programs. Based on the model of quotas for priority students, minimum rates determined according to the geographic origin of the applicants could also be envisaged to promote greater territorial equity in access to these courses.

More generally, **the extent of inequalities in access to the** *Grandes Écoles* **raises the question of the relevance of the dualism of higher education in France**, which, by separating the training of elites from university and technical education, is an exception on the international stage. Even if it is not possible to abolish this historically rooted institutional duality, the multiplication of bridges between universities and *Grandes Écoles*, and the development of university programs of excellence that allow for progressive specialization in secondary schools appear to be indispensable levers for limiting the social reproduction of elites.

To curb the inward-looking tendencies of the *Grandes Écoles*, it seems more necessary than ever to replace the proliferation of local initiatives with the implementation of **proactive policies based on large-scale experimentation and rigorous evaluation of their effects**, in order to determine the suitability of their eventual widespread use.

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Acknowledgements

References for the study

This policy brief is based on the report "*Quelle démocratisation des grandes écoles depuis le milieu des années 2000 ?*", by Cécile Bonneau, Pauline Charousset, Julien Grenet et Georgia Thebault, IPP Report nº 30, January 2021.
Link: https://www.ipp.eu/publication/janvier-2021-quelle-democratisation-grandes-ecoles-depuis-le-milieu-des-annees-2000

Bibliographic references

References to works cited in this policy brief are provided in the bibliography section of the report.