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HIGHER EDUCATION IN A GLOBALISED WORLD
BETWEEN STANDARDS AND INFLUENCES, WHAT TRAINING IS NEEDED FOR FUTURE MANAGERS?

SUMMARY OF CONTRIBUTIONS AND DISCUSSIONS

Speakers (in order of appearance):

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INTRODUCTION

This conference is the second in a series called "At the Heart of Influences", organised by the SKEMA Publika think tank to analyse influences in various fields. This Paris-based international think tank affiliated with SKEMA Business School was launched in late February 2022. Its aim is to produce analyses and recommendations on societal, geopolitical and sustainable development related issues to inform public debate and help guide public policy makers.

The theme chosen for this new conference was influence in higher education. Indeed, in a globalised world undergoing radical changes, higher education is a key issue to tackle, as it helps to shape the minds of future managers and leaders. More than that, higher education is vital to meeting the challenges of the future (climate change, sovereignty and influence, technological advances, global trade, etc.).

HOW ARE HIGHER EDUCATION MODELS EVOLVING IN A GLOBALISED WORLD?

Until recently, higher education was not seen as an object of influence. Now, countries around the world see it as a real weapon of influence. There is a lack of awareness of this within the higher education and research sector. While academia has evolved considerably, it remains a protected world apart (notably through the peer-review process), yet at the same time it is increasingly at the heart of economic relations.

In every country, the higher education and research model is subject to its own set of standards and influences (e.g.: Europe emphasises critical thinking, Asia quality, and the United States adopts a positivist view of higher education). The models compete on ways of thinking. Thus, when a French school wishes to establish itself abroad, many parameters (compliance with that country's rules and standards[1]) come into play. In France, international establishments seem to run into fewer barriers. Higher education systems are highly protected to avoid any misconduct. One major challenge when French establishments are setting up abroad lies in successfully connecting French diplomas with local qualifications.

Since the end of World War II, several standards have been introduced for business schools. The United States has created accreditations such as the AACSB (Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business). This is a specific accreditation that takes five years to obtain. Europe has developed the EQUIS (European Quality Improvement System) accreditation, focusing on quality. One of the aspects it analyses is whether or not an establishment's strategy makes sense given its human and financial resources. Certain Asian countries are also starting to introduce their own accreditation processes.

In summary, higher education and research models have three characteristics:

1/ a system that is not widely known
2/ a high level of performance required
3/ a war of standards and influences

DO EUROPEAN AND INTERNATIONAL STANDARDS INFLUENCE COURSE CONTENT?[2]

Most of the rules regarding quality assurance and the accreditation of higher education establishments and their programmes, and most of the bodies responsible for ensuring their application, are national. This observation, analysed by Dirk van Damme in a remarkable article published by the OECD in 2003, remains mostly true today.

However, to facilitate international mobility and to make it easier to understand, compare and even recognise qualifications and institutions around the world, several types of global standards have gradually been developed.

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[1] For example, introducing courses on Xi Jinping Thought in China, scrupulously abiding by the number of credits to allocate to a subject in the United States, and ensuring professors in Brazil meet the requisite 800 hours of teaching per year.

[2] At the request of the speaker, their contribution to the discussion has been reproduced in full.

We are going to take a brief look at two of these, on either end of the granulometry spectrum. This will give us a good idea of the issues involved.

First, the **generalist and indirect approach.**

It is in Europe that this approach has had the greatest success, with the Bologna Process. Remember that in 1998, following an initial phase consisting in harmonising the structure of higher education in Europe into three cycles (LMD reform in France) and the duration of each in principle (3 - 2 - 3), the countries participating in the process wished to establish a common reference framework for quality assurance. They entrusted this task to the four main organisations in the tertiary sector, namely the EUA, the ESU, the ENQA and EURASHE (collectively known as the E4 Group), in collaboration with the European representatives of social dialogue, BusinessEurope and Education International).

This led to the approval, in 2005, of the European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Education Area (ESG) by the European ministers involved in the Bologna Process. These standards, revised in 2015, concern education and training only, but they do not establish quality levels for course content, although they do set framework conditions and the requirement for student-centred teaching. They set out principles to be followed at three levels: the processes to follow for internal quality assurance (Part 1, ten standards), for external quality assurance (Part 2, seven standards), and finally those to be followed by the quality assurance agencies responsible in each country for monitoring the standards set out in Part 2 (Part 3, seven standards).

On 8 March 2008, this European system was supplemented by the creation of the European Quality Assurance Register (EQAR) in the form of an international association under Belgian law, founded by the E4 Group. This register, supported by 47 European member countries of the association, is tasked with accrediting the agencies that apply, provided that they demonstrate compliance with the standards set out in Part 3 of the ESG (and thus also the closely related standards outlined in parts 1 and 2). There are now 56 registered agencies, which considerably improves user confidence in the reliability and comparability of the quality assurance systems in the countries concerned. In several countries, an agency must be registered on the EQAR in order to be recognised as an agency authorised to offer its services in the country in question (20 countries, including Austria, Germany, Belgium, Finland, Poland and Switzerland; however, France, Italy and Spain are not part of this group).

More recently, in 2018, the European Register set up DEQAR, a database containing the review reports of different institutions, produced by registered agencies, and published online on a voluntary basis. There are now almost 80,000 published reports assessing 3,721 institutions. This enables users to view the review reports produced by independent experts, as well as accreditation decisions if there are any (which varies depending on the system). The programmes themselves are not listed in DEQAR.

Overall, there seem to be no equivalent efforts at harmonisation and transparency anywhere else in the world. Moreover, if we attempt to analyse the advantages and disadvantages of the system put in place by the ESG, we can observe the following five points:

- the ESG are a good example of collaboration between private and public organisations: established by four private associations that include stakeholders working "on the

ground", they were approved by the Bologna Process ministers of education and then adopted in various forms by the legal systems of the various countries. In Switzerland, for example, the requirement in the Swiss Higher Education Act to comply with "international standards" (art. 32 LEHE) is a reference to the ESG.

- far from prescribing a comprehensive and rigid quality assurance system, the ESG leave countries free to choose the consequences of the self-evaluations and expert reviews, and of interventions by agencies (simple evaluation, certification, accreditation), or to choose their frequency (from three to six years depending on the ratings received by programmes or institutions in Bulgaria; five years in France; seven years in Switzerland). The scope of the reviews (institutions or programmes) is not prescribed either. However, in Europe there is a clear trend towards institutional evaluation or accreditation, with accredited universities taking responsibility for accrediting their programmes themselves or having them accredited externally on a voluntary basis. This is the case in Switzerland, the United Kingdom and Norway, for instance.

- the ESG state that the primary responsibility for quality assurance rests with the higher education institutions. Consequently, they limit the rules applicable to them to a few principles deemed essential, such as student participation in the development of institutional systems, or the objective of student-centred teaching, without laying down any guidelines for programme content.

- given their generally indirect approach that also respects the differences between national systems, choice of institutions and disciplinary cultures, the ESG have neither the ambition nor the possibility of even implicitly providing the basis for a qualitative ranking of countries or of their universities and schools; this may be regrettable or something to be commended.

- lastly, and on the other hand, transparency and publicity are a major principle of the ESG which is reflected at all stages, from the quality strategy of the institutions to the predictability of the criteria, right through to the full publication of the experts' reports (standard 2.6). With the development of the DEQAR database, the implementation and development of this principle have been spectacular, enabling future students, for example, to find out the experts' opinions on hundreds of European institutions.

It can be useful to compare this generalist approach — and this will be the subject of my second analysis — with that involving the **international certification of institutions or programmes in certain disciplines.**

In the field of **engineering,** first of all, the EUR-ACE (EURropean ACcredited Engineer) label was created in 2006 on the initiative of the ENAEE (European Network for the Accreditation of Engineering Education). It is important to note that the ENAEE does not directly accredit engineering education programmes. Based on the criteria specified in a reference document (EAFSG, for EUR-ACE Framework Standards & Guidelines), the ENAEE evaluates the policies and procedures implemented by the accreditation and quality assurance agencies that have applied for an authorisation to award the EUR-ACE® label to the programmes they accredit. The EAFSG themselves incorporate the views and perspectives of the main stakeholders (students, higher education institutions, employers, professional bodies and accreditation agencies) and are largely modelled on the ESG. As at 31 December 2022, the ENAEE database listed 4,162 accredited engineering courses. It should be noted that while

accreditation decisions must be published, the reports produced by the accreditation panel may be only partially published[3].

The **management and business schools** arena is, of course, another example of international standards, but which long predate the ESG. The European Foundation for Management Development (EFMD), a private global organisation founded in 1972, traditionally runs an accreditation programme for institutions (EQUIS) along with a complementary system for accrediting their programmes (EFMD accredited). These accreditations are intended to serve as a mark of quality. In the same arena, the Association of MBAs (AMBA), founded in England in 1967, only accredits programmes (MBA, MBM, DBA), does so directly, and today limits the number of AMBA-accredited schools to 300. There are currently 150 institutions with EQUIS accreditation and 225 accredited by the AMBA. Note that, in both cases, only the accreditation and its duration are published; the preceding documents are strictly confidential. The public, and future students in particular, thus do not know what recommendations might have been made to the institutions at the end of the process.

There are, of course, other examples of international certification, but management and engineering studies are, in our view, the best examples.

In comparing these two approaches, four observations can be made:

- 1/ certifications or accreditations of specific programmes or schools no doubt reflect a desire on the part of institutions to differentiate themselves with prestigious labels in areas where the training and education market is particularly competitive. The fact that the public cannot be informed of the details of evaluations, but only of their overall outcome, can no doubt be explained by the schools' own desire not to reveal details they consider confidential. It is striking to note that when the standards are developed by a mixed group including student representatives, as in the case for the ESG, there is much more transparency. In our opinion, this is a major flaw in the accreditation of management and engineering courses, and is detrimental to providing comprehensive information to external stakeholders.
- 2/ when narrowing down to specific fields such as management or engineering, the advantage is that the assessment systems developed are better adapted to the specific requirements of the disciplines; conversely, there seems to be a greater risk of ending up with a standardisation of degree courses, leaving no room for the creativity and autonomy of the institutions.
- 3/ This last point also partially applies to the debate between accreditation of programmes and accreditation of institutions; whether in the context of private accreditations in the fields of management or engineering, or in the context of the public accreditations of programmes which are still required in many countries, the accreditation of programmes is always a much greater infringement on the autonomy of institutions. Moreover, it can be a particularly burdensome process in cases where it must be undertaken twice — once to obtain an accreditation considered essential in the market, and once more as a requirement of national legislation.

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[3] Point 3.2.5 of the EAFSG states that: "Agencies should also give consideration to publishing some parts of the report of the accreditation panel, subject to any limitations arising from confidentiality and other relevant considerations."

- 4/ While preparing for this day, I heard comments about the difference between the accreditation standards of (higher education) schools and those of universities, as supposedly those of the former are more detailed. In my opinion, this is somewhat of a misleading leap based on the unique situation in France, where the dominant position of the *Grandes Écoles* in management and engineering are a well-known reality. In most other countries, higher education is the responsibility of universities in all disciplines, which does not prevent many economics and management faculties, for example, within their university, from obtaining their EQUIS or AMBA accreditations without any problem (e.g. the faculties of McGill in Canada, TUM in Germany, Esade/Ramon Lull in Spain, HEC Lausanne (the Faculty of Business and Economics), or Solvay Brussels at ULB).

In **conclusion**, one cannot help but be struck by the proliferation of quality control procedures, which could lead the unfortunately well-known phenomenon of "QA fatigue". The coexistence of general and public procedures for all establishments and of private procedures that meet the specific positioning needs of certain disciplines is an inescapable fact that it would be illusory, and indeed inappropriate, to try to eliminate. In an ideal world, then, every effort should be made to reduce the administrative and time burden as much as possible so that the two types of procedures can coexist. In my view, the first step would be to limit the general public accreditation strictly to that of the institution, which should be trusted to do the rest. Secondly, for the accreditation of schools and/or programmes specifically in those disciplines for which it is desired, joint processes should be put in place that are undertaken simultaneously, combining the general standards common to both accreditations and those specific to the field in question. As an example, this is what happened at EPFL where, with the agreement of the CTI, the Swiss quality assurance agency agreed to incorporate the specific accreditation process for engineering courses under the European accreditation system into the official accreditation process that is required of the school under Swiss law. In my opinion, this type of approach should be adopted systematically in Europe, to show that we are in favour of pragmatic solutions that are beneficial to all concerned.

ARE HIGHER EDUCATION AND RESEARCH STANDARDS STILL A GOOD FIT FOR THE REALITY OF A CHANGING WORLD?

Standards are not neutral; they reflect neo-liberal versus humanist oppositions. Moreover, by their very construction, they embed a certain way of thinking. Higher education and research should not be too standardised, because standards are about controlling the present, whereas higher education and research are about inventing the future.

In these times of ideological and political upheaval, we need to move away from standards. These accreditations (AACSB, EQUIS, etc.) are underpinned by values and concepts that are becoming outdated. Indeed, globalisation is subject to a wide range of influences (biodiversity, inclusion, etc.). Standards detach managers from reality, but this new organisation of the world confirms a return to reality. Students are very aware of reality. We need to bring local reality back into the equation, given that young people are interested in the local dimension in both their personal and their professional lives.

This change in ideology is enabling the creation of new economic opportunities. In the 2010s, there was opposition between pro-business and anti-business. Today, particularly in the United States, we are seeing a return to economic patriotism and a desire to reshore certain types of production. The major characteristic that is emerging is that politics and economics, citizens and managers, cannot be separated from the local dimension. There is a desire to reconnect managers and students to reality and prevent them from becoming detached from their role as citizens.

THE ECONOMIC INTELLIGENCE VIEWPOINT

Standards are essential for convincing parents, because they provide a guarantee as to the quality of the education they are buying for their children.

What are the influences at work in the field?

There are eight:

1/ "Showbiz society": teachers are increasingly having to be entertaining; they must be inventive to capture the attention of their students and even make a performance of their lectures.

2/ The influence of social media: teachers now spend a lot of time deconstructing the influences received from social media. Teachers must now assert their natural authority to a greater extent, because students check everything online where misinformation is rife.

3/ Academic freedom is being challenged by "preachers", pressure groups that are working to reduce the length of traditional courses in order to promote their own ideas.

4/ Digital technology is becoming increasingly widespread. Teachers also have to manage the technical aspect (PowerPoint, online courses, online examinations conducted remotely, adding course content to online platforms, etc.), and online teaching has its own characteristics that require specific skills.

5/ Internationalisation is another influence at work. The English language is becoming increasingly dominant. Cultural sensitivity is becoming increasingly significant, and it is particularly important not to make value judgements about international students.

6/ There have also been two major influences on school funding. On the one hand, international students contribute to the equilibrium of schools. On the other, the development of sandwich courses has led to a better social mix (where French students are concerned).

7/ Assessments are now meaningless, as a result of new practices and innovations (ChatGPT, distance learning, teaching across several time zones, outsourcing thesis writing for a fee). Its methods need to be reviewed.

8/ Research is also facing a number of influences, such as global competition, which is hitting it hard, and pressure groups (religion versus science, ideology versus science). Higher education institutions, the bastions of knowledge, are under threat.

AUDIENCE CONTRIBUTIONS

1/ Given the climate change issues the world is now facing, some are calling for an end to international student and scholar exchange programmes. Against a backdrop of heightened nationalism, others are suggesting that these international students are in fact migrants in disguise. How should this be interpreted? Are these limits we will have to live with?

This depends on the model of the higher education establishment. For example, business schools have more of an international outlook than engineering schools. The size of the establishment should also be taken into account.

In response to the climate-related concerns of some students, the CDEFM (the Conference of French Management School Deans) has produced a guide to sustainable development and CSR skills for management schools. However, even though young people do not all think the same way (some young people do not express any particular concerns regarding climate change), there must be a common denominator.

Standards actually help to increase Europe's influence around the world. By welcoming international students to France, we can spread the country's values and expertise in higher education around the globe.

2/ Does higher education have an impact on France losing ground on the international scene?

Young people need to be rearmed based on reality. They need to be taught about economic warfare. A second battle is also being waged on the standards front and Europe would do well to lean into the open method of coordination (non-binding coordination of public policies in education and higher education, for example). Young people do not realise that the European Union is strong when it comes to propelling companies on the international scene. In fact, it is this same European standard that decides the place of European countries in the world. Europe's inability to rise to challenges does not apply to higher education and research. The Bologna Process, which has 49 participating countries, has made degrees easier to understand and read (common language, Diploma Supplement). However, no one is proactively trying to make it a standard that will win international recognition.

3/ How can the attractiveness of French higher education and research be enhanced and what role should selection play? What possibilities are there for the French-speaking world?

You have to be discriminating to attract the best students and researchers in their area of specialisation or talent. Detecting talented individuals is difficult, but once they have been identified they have to be taken to their highest level. The French system of *grandes écoles* is effective, even though it has limited resources. In terms of the influence of French diplomas,

the Ministry of Higher Education, Research and Innovation recognises French diplomas awarded abroad in schools that have an overseas campus or have specific agreements in place with international establishments.

Language plays a central role. Language and thought interact. So while courses in English are an entry point to the international scene, they also have limitations. If we are aware of the cognitive biases inherent in a standard or norm, particularly as a result of the language or culture of the entities establishing these standards, how can we define their criteria? Indeed, impoverished language leads to pared-down thinking, as some students' limited command of English prevents them from properly articulating their thoughts. Nevertheless, French institutions can attract international students to programmes taught in English, while also offering courses taught in French.

4/ Why isn't the French press more interested in higher education and research?

Outside of specialist publications, the French national press takes little interest in higher education and research. French people have a fairly negative image of the country's higher education and research, because they are not told about it. Print media is less interested, because there is not really any demand from readers for these types of articles. Newspapers do, however, produce rankings based on their own criteria, which they try to look at objectively. Perhaps it would be better to establish openly subjective rankings based on explained criteria.

5/ What improvements can be made?

One European strength could be that everyone speaks their own language, plus two other European languages. To date, this idea has not met with much success.

France's higher education and research policy should serve as a major instrument of influence for the country. It should detect skill and talent. The French system needs to be reformed in order to identify the best individuals and bring them together as a team to achieve excellence. Training people who cannot work as a team is of little use.

Selection is very important and must be done in an appropriate and considered manner. In France, the target is 80% high school graduates, whereas in Switzerland it is 30%. 70% of Swiss high school students choose the apprenticeship route. Selection takes place before the baccalaureate (equivalent to the high school diploma and British A-levels), but the system is somewhat flexible (it is possible to undertake further studies later if someone wishes to increase their level of qualifications).

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