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This Fall

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Top French Schools, Asked to Diversify, Fear for Standards

By **STEVEN ERLANGER**

PARIS — France is embarking on a grand experiment — how to diversify the overwhelmingly white “grandes écoles,” the elite universities that have produced French leaders in every walk of life — and Rizane el-Yazidi is one of the pioneers.

The daughter of protective North African parents in the tough northeastern suburb of Bondy, Ms. Yazidi is enrolled in a trial program aimed at helping smart children of the poor overcome the huge cultural disadvantages that have often spelled failure in the crucial school entrance exams.

“For now we’re still a small group, but when there will be more of us, it’ll become real progress,” said Ms. Yazidi, 20. But she is nervous, too. “We’re lucky, but it’s a great risk for us,” she said. “We might never make it” to a top school.

Because entrance to the best grandes écoles effectively guarantees top jobs for life, the government is prodding the schools to set a goal of increasing the percentage of scholarship students to 30 percent — more than three times the current ratio at the most selective schools. But the effort is being met with concerns from the grandes écoles, who fear it could dilute standards, and is stirring anger among the French at large, who fear it runs counter to a French ideal of a meritocracy blind to race, religion and ethnicity.

France imagines itself a country of “republican virtue,” a meritocracy run by a well-trained elite that emerges from a fiercely competitive educational system. At its apex are the grandes écoles, about 220 schools of varying specialties. And at the very top of this pyramid are a handful of famous institutions that accept a few thousand students a year among them, all of whom pass extremely competitive examinations to enter.

“In France, families celebrate acceptance at a grande école more than graduation itself,” said Richard Descoings, who runs the most liberal of them, the Institut d’Études Politiques de Paris, known as Sciences Po. “Once you pass the exam at 18 or 19, for the rest of your life, you belong.”

The result, critics say, is a self-perpetuating elite of the wealthy and white, who provide their own children the social skills,

financial support and cultural knowledge to pass the entrance exams, known as the concours, which are normally taken after an extra two years of intensive study in expensive preparatory schools after high school.

The problem is not simply the narrow base of the elite, but its self-satisfaction. “France has so many problems with innovation,” Mr. Descoings said. Those who pass the tests “are extremely smart and clever, but the question is: Are you creative? Are you willing to put yourself at risk? Lead a battle?” These are qualities rarely tested in exams.

But the schools fear that the government will undermine excellence in the name of social engineering and say the process has to begin further down the educational ladder. The state, they say, should seek out poor students with potential and help them to enter preparatory schools. Of the 2.3 million students in French higher education, about 15 percent attend grandes écoles or preparatory schools. But half of those in preparatory schools will fall short and go to standard universities.

In 2001, Mr. Descoings, 52, who cheerfully admits that he failed the concours twice before passing, began his own outreach program to better prepare less-advantaged students for Sciences Po. Last year, the school accepted 126 scholarship students out of a class of 1,300, and two-thirds of them have at least one non-French parent, he said. But that is a far cry from 30 percent.

One of them, Houria Khemiss, 22, is about to graduate from Sciences Po in law. The daughter of Algerian parents growing up in impoverished St.-Denis in the Paris suburbs, she was pushed by a high school teacher to the special preparatory program. She wants to become a judge, “because then you have a direct impact on people’s lives.” Many at Sciences Po will become the leaders of France, she said, “and because we are there it gives them another point of view.”

Oualid Fakkir, 23, who is graduating with a master’s in finance, said, “It’s very dangerous for France to close its eyes and say, ‘Equality. We have the best values in the world.’ It’s not enough. There has to also be equality of chances.”

But other elite grandes écoles are more specialized than Sciences Po, concentrating on engineering, business management, public administration and science, and they are more concerned about the government’s program.

Pierre Tapie, 52, is the head of the business school [ESSEC](#) and chairman of the [Conférence des Grandes Écoles](#), which represents 222 schools.

While he shares the government’s objective of diversity, he said, there is a long educational track before the concours. “We cannot be the scapegoat of any demagogic decision because we are the finest and most famous part of the whole system,” he said. Gen. Xavier Michel, 56, runs [École Polytechnique](#), one of the world’s finest engineering schools and still overseen by the Ministry of Defense. Known as X, the school is extraordinarily competitive, and its students do basic training and parade wearing the [bicorn](#), a cocked hat dating from [Napoleon](#), who put the school under the military in 1804.

“The fundamental principle for us is that students have the capability to do the work here, which is very difficult,” with a lot of math, physics and science, very little of it based on cultural knowledge, General Michel said. Even now, he said, the school takes only 500 students a year, barely 10 percent of its specially educated applicants. “We don’t want to bring students into school who risk failing,” he said. “You can get lost very quickly.”

Despite the misgivings, in February the [Conférence des Grandes Écoles](#), under considerable pressure, signed on to a “[Charter of Equal Opportunity](#)” with the government committing the schools to try to reach the 30 percent goal before 2012 or risk losing some financing.

But how to get there remains a point of contention. There is a serious question about how to measure diversity in a country where every citizen is presumed equal and there are no official statistics based on race, religion or ethnicity. A goal cannot be called a “quota,” which has an odor of the United States and affirmative action. Instead, there is the presumption here that poorer citizens will be more diverse, containing a much larger percentage of Muslims, blacks and second-generation immigrants.

The minister of higher education, Valérie Pécresse, argued that French who grow up in a poor neighborhood have the same difficulties regardless of ethnicity.

But the government is examining whether the current test depends too much on familiarity with French history and culture. “We’re thinking about the socially discriminatory character, or not, of these tests,” Ms. Pécresse said. “I want the same concours for everyone, but I don’t exclude that the tests of the concours evolve, with the objective of a great social opening and a better measure of young people’s intelligence.”

The government, with Mr. Tapie’s group, has moved to unify and expand scattered outreach programs from different schools. Copied to some degree from Sciences Po, the program Ms. Yazidi attends tries to reach out to smart children, give them higher goals and help them get into preparatory schools. About 7,000 high school students are currently enrolled, but it is too early to tell whether it will produce a large number of successful applicants.

At one recent session, 10 students, all children of immigrants, were working to pass a special concours for a top business school instead of going right into the job market. Their teacher, Philippe Destelle, pushed them to “look more self-confident” in oral exams and “don’t be afraid to have an opinion.” He told one, “You have the answers, but you don’t trust yourself.”

Salloumou Keita, 22, is vocal and social, but worryingly behind on his math. “We have to prove something,” he said. “There is a look we always get, a questioning — ‘Can he adapt?’ ”

Awa Dramé, is 22, French-born of African parents, confident and talkative. “I don’t mind being a guinea pig, so long as the

experiment works,” she said. “Reaching this level was unthinkable before, and I can see myself going higher,” she said. “I’m full of dreams.”

Nadim Audi and Scott Sayare contributed reporting.

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