



A French revolutionary

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Although his reforms have attracted criticism, Richard Descoings, the head of Sciences Po, tells Atossa Araxia Abrahamian that he is determined to fashion a modern, outward-looking institution with a diverse student body

When I ask students at Sciences Po what they think about the leader of their university, they all make the same face. Eyebrows shoot up; bitten lower lips betray ambivalence; hidden smiles denote a sincere, if grudging, affection; and mischievous glances suggest that Richard Descoings is anything but your average university administrator.

Indeed, Descoings' public persona is a far cry from what one would expect of the director of a prestigious and famously stuffy French institution. A tall, gangly man whose shirts don't quite fit, he speaks an unpretentious French with the odd Anglicism thrown in: "mainstream"; "affirmative action"; "liberal arts"; "positive reinforcement". He is known for his approachable nature, and frequently makes appearances at student parties. Descoings is also an avid Twitter and Facebook user, and blogs regularly.

"It's humanising," he says of his online presence. "I log in to Facebook in the morning and leave it open until I leave my office so that I can respond when students have questions or concerns." Today, the issues range from debates over the inequalities in French education (rampant) to Descoings' travel itineraries (Brasilia, New York, London), comments on the film *Invictus* (terrible, for the most part) and observations about the weather (frightful).

Descoings' willingness to embrace technology and engage casually yet directly with his students says a lot about his professional outlook. He is a prolific, controversial reformer who is unafraid of change and immerses himself in his work.

You don't have to go far to see the impact he has been making. In the crowded entrance of 27, rue Saint-Guillaume, the original Sciences Po building, students are quick to mention the "modernisation" of the university as an important aspect of his tenure. Another often-mentioned element is "internationalisation". A quick walk around the building confirms their claims. In queues, one can hear German, English and Polish being spoken; by the vending machine, two young ladies speak to one another in Turkish while a young man answers his mobile phone in Russian. And chatting near the lecture hall are a group of exchange students from Canada and the US.

The Institut d'Études Politiques de Paris, as Sciences Po is formally known, was founded with the goal of preparing its students for French public service, and it has come a long way since its last major reform after the Second World War.

Descoings can attest personally to how much things have changed. An alumnus himself, he remembers the place from which he graduated in 1980 as being much smaller, focused on a very narrow field of study, and having a decidedly homogeneous student body. "But the world was different then. The Berlin Wall hadn't come down, there was no European Union, and we didn't talk about globalisation like we do today."

When he took up the post of university president in 1996, after 10 years working in Sciences Po's administration, Descoings was determined to keep the institution relevant and competitive, and he continues to do so aggressively. Among his moves have been closing the business school (it couldn't compete with the likes of those at Harvard University or the University of Pennsylvania, he says), founding the Journalism School in 2004 to accommodate the rise of new media, opening six new undergraduate campuses around the country and expanding master's programmes.

Descoings is always thinking ahead - so much so that some find it difficult to keep up.

"His reforms are so numerous that they are starting to lack focus," comments Bruno, a second-year undergraduate. "It's great that he's modernising the university, but sometimes it seems like he wants change for its own sake. I don't know what on earth he's got planned for us next. It's making my head spin."

"And," he adds, "he wants to turn us into an American university."

Bruno is not the only one to express this view. Descoings' "windows on the world" seem to reflect North America more and more. His latest initiative is an anglophone "transatlantic" undergraduate campus in Reims, a small city about an hour outside Paris that is undergoing considerable redevelopment. Sciences Po has already opened five other campuses in the past decade: Poitiers, which focuses on Latin American, Spanish and Portuguese studies; Menton, with its Middle Eastern-Mediterranean curriculum; Dijon, for Eastern European studies; Le Havre, for an East Asian programme; and Nancy, which offers a Franco-Germanic track.

Since their conception, these satellite campuses have been controversial. Observers from inside and outside higher education and students at the flagship Paris campus worried that expanding admissions might "cheapen" the elite Sciences Po brand and that the quality of education might suffer.

Francoise Mélonio, the dean of the university's undergraduate programmes, insists that such fears are misplaced because the branch programmes share the same roots that have made the mother institution so successful: a humanities curriculum with common examinations and required courses in law, economics, political sciences, history and sociology; a specialisation in one of the five subjects beginning in the second year; and elective courses in the humanities, as well as a mandatory year abroad. The only difference between Sciences Po Paris and, say, Le Havre is the specialisation; moreover, Mélonio points out, having separate campuses dedicated to specific interests only makes them stronger.

The aim of the Reims campus is to attract top students from the UK and the US - presenting an alternative to, say, New York University or Durham University. Classes will begin in September with 200 students - a number forecast to climb to about 2,000 by 2015. Thomas Williams, director of recruitment for North America, has been travelling to French and international schools across the US and Canada to speak to potential applicants.

At the moment, the pool is largely self-selecting - students with ties to France or an international background - but Williams says the goal is to move outside this niche. It is conceivable, he says, to expand recruitment efforts to schools in low-income districts; it would make sense, given how modest French tuition fees are compared with those charged by private US universities.

In fact, there are few limits on who may apply to Reims, as long as they have the academic aptitude. The institution is a member of the College Board, which, Mélonio says, has been instrumental in garnering interest from students in the US (the company sends prospectuses and information to potential applicants); scholarships are available for foreign students; and, significantly, knowledge of French is not required for admission.

Many people who reflect on the transatlantic campus, on Descoings' chumminess with Lee Bollinger (the president of Columbia University, who makes regular appearances on Descoings' Twitter feed) and his enthusiasm for Franco-American university partnerships, such as Columbia's Alliance programme with Parisian institutions, conclude that Sciences Po's lexicon - once one of elitism, exclusivity and rigour - is beginning to sound more like that of an American college: diversity, liberal arts, elective courses such as creative writing, and sport.

Descoings responds that dismissive comments about "Americanisation" are made "out of wilful French ignorance". He points out the obvious - that the US academy can mean either Harvard or a community college - but also notes that Sciences Po is, above all, a European university with a long history of welcoming students from all over the Continent. Reims, he says, was the logical next step - with 240 students from the US and Canada coming to Sciences Po each year, and partnerships with North American institutions already in place, there was every reason to go ahead with a transatlantic campus.

Moreover, Americanisation is not necessarily a bad thing, Descoings says. The members of Sciences Po's senior administration are firm believers in the virtues of the liberal arts - but they insist that the Rabelaisian concept of a solid, well-rounded education describes their philosophy more accurately than the "basket-weaving" miscellany offered on some American campuses.

Both Descoings and Mélonio argue that optional classes such as culinary civilisation and creative writing - which are both offered - serve only to broaden students' education.

"Elective creative courses are valuable to society. They avoid too high a level of abstraction and lend sensitivity to a student's thinking," Mélonio says. "The goal is to encourage a multiplicity of viewpoints both inside and outside the classroom."

Building on this philosophy, Descoings has big plans to diversify the make-up of his institution, not only internationally, but also socio-economically. In 2001, he proposed that Sciences Po begin to recruit students from lower-income school districts by exempting those who had attended secondary school in disadvantaged areas from the institution's tough entry competition - the first instance of affirmative action at a high-level French university. (Descoings has since attempted to do away with the competitive entry exams, or *concours*, but with little success.) The programme, which the media immediately labelled "positive discrimination", was met with much resistance from students and faculty alike, but Descoings persisted until the measure was passed. To date, 130 students have been accepted through the scheme, and 116 of them have graduated from the five-year BA/MA programme.

"It's such a waste," he says, referring to the number of students in state schools who do not enter higher education because of outdated notions of class and other inequities. "In French schools, there is a small number of students at the top of their class who are told from the start that they are good enough to make it - to go to a top school, get a good job and so on. But the rest of them - even those who could do well if they simply tried a little harder or received more encouragement - are given no support whatsoever."

Descoings knows from personal experience how harsh the system can be. His upbringing, education and career path resemble that of any model French bureaucrat - he attended private schools, graduated from Sciences Po and then ENA (the Ecole Nationale d'Administration), worked in the Conseil d'Etat (France's highest administrative body, which also acts as a high court) and advised President Nicolas Sarkozy on secondary education reform in 2009. But he has also been bumped and bruised along the way - bumps that shaped his ideas "more than any book or philosophy", he says. Descoings was expelled from secondary school for failing a maths test: his teacher told him that he was "totally lacking in synthesis skills and incapable of keeping up with the class".

Recalling this, Descoings says such an incident would have discouraged most students, who would have agreed with the teacher that they were not cut out for academic success. "But I was too stubborn, so it just motivated me more." Still, he feels for those who take such criticism to heart, and believes that more open methods of evaluation and student assessment - placing emphasis on extracurricular qualities and talents, for example, rather than relying solely on exam results or test scores - can change lives for the better.

He also insists that there is more to life than educational qualifications. "One day, I was looking through the death notices in the newspaper ... they always begin with a name, a school and a graduation date. It would horrify me if my death notice in the paper began: 'Sciences Po, Class of 1980.'

"I don't want to educate young people to become cogs in the machine, or to use education as a status symbol. The important thing is to shape socially responsible students who can make positive contributions to their society."