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# **Institutional *habitus* of French elite colleges in the context of internationalisation. An in-depth look at the *Écoles normales supérieures***

**Anne Schippling**

## **1 The system of elite education in France: traditionally anchored and facing new challenges**

The French system of elite education, in its structure and function, cannot be understood without taking into consideration its interdependence with the state. The foundation of the so-called *grandes écoles* – the elite education institutions – began in the pre-revolutionary period. For centuries, the *grandes écoles* have remained unchallenged as centres of elite education, while universities were considered, at least in the past, as “either too influenced by the Church or too autonomous to produce the kinds of competent military and civil servants that would be loyal to the state” (van Zanten and Maxwell 2015: 74). While, in more recent times, the French universities have become institutions for mass education, which in the main have no special admission processes, the *grandes écoles* have remained exclusive higher elite institutions due largely to their “unique” (Jurt 2004: 92) and very competitive selection procedures.

The French elite education system is comprised of two levels: the *classes préparatoires aux grandes écoles* (CPGE), a two-year preparation course offered at certain secondary schools, with the most elite in the Parisian region<sup>1</sup>, and the *grandes écoles*. The preparation courses begin after the students’ 12<sup>th</sup> year and their award of the *baccalauréat*. These courses intensively prepare students for the admission exams for the *grandes écoles*: the so-called *concours* (e.g., François-Poncet and Braconnier 1998, Darmon 2013). The *concours* is a very selective, written and oral exam. Only those students with the highest results will be offered the small predefined number of places available each year across the various *grandes écoles*. This stringent admission procedure is seen as promoting the meritocratic ideal of education (e.g., de Saint Martin 2005, Darchy-Koechlin and van Zanten 2005, Tenret 2011, Zymek 2014, van Zanten 2016).

Despite a strong discursive commitment to the meritocratic basis of France’s elite education system, which is supported by the state, the *grandes écoles* themselves, and many members of

the French population, increasingly there is evidence of strong social selectivity regarding who gains a place at these elite institutions. The student populations at the *grandes écoles* – especially at the most renowned – mainly come from the upper classes – (e.g., Bourdieu 1989, Baudelot and Matonti 1994, Euriat and Thélot 1995, Albouy and Wanecq 2003, Duru-Bellat, Kieffer and Depledge 2008). Therefore, in the last few decades, the elite education system has faced a degree of criticism and pressure to change from both, politicians and industry.

In response to such challenges, some institutions have sought to introduce new admission pathways for students from socially disadvantaged areas – as done by *Sciences Po* in 2000/2001, the so-called *Conventions d'Éducation Prioritaire* (CEP). Nevertheless, this and other initiatives, such as the tutoring programme *Une grande école, pourquoi pas moi?* (PQPM) (Eng. ‘A grande école, why not me?’) introduced by the *École supérieure des sciences économiques et commerciales* (ESSEC) and the programme *talENS* (*Tutorat d'accompagnement de lycéens de l'ENS*) (Eng. ‘Tutorial for accompany the *lycéens* of the ENS’), have not led to any substantial change in terms of the social diversity of students attending the *grandes écoles* (e.g., Allouch and van Zanten 2008, Pasquali 2010, van Zanten 2010, Allouch 2013, Schippling and Allouch 2015, van Zanten and Maxwell 2015).

A second set of challenges to the elite French higher education and research landscape has come from processes of internationalisation and globalisation that have affected universities across the world. First, the traditional, rather small and exclusive *grandes écoles* are internationally less visible, largely because they are quite small, often focused on teaching, and therefore do not produce as much research as other elite higher education institutions elsewhere. This has meant that no *grandes écoles* can be found amongst the top universities in worldwide rankings (see also Harfi and Mathieu 2006). In the *Academic Ranking of World Universities* of 2015/2016, for instance, the *École normale supérieure de la rue d'Ulm* comes 54<sup>th</sup>, the only French higher education institution in the top 100.

In the last few years, the French government has launched various programmes under the general term *Investissement d'avenir* (*Investments for the future*), awarding around 47 billion euros to the higher education sector, primarily in research and technology. The strategy has been to cluster higher education and research institutions – arguably the most prominent is the *Université Paris Saclay* cluster which, at the time of writing, brings together 19 research and higher education institutions such as the *École normale supérieure de Cachan*, the *École*

*Polytechnique* but also universities such as *Université Paris-Sud* with the aim of increasing the international visibility of *grandes écoles* and strengthening cooperation between them, universities and other research institutions. It is uncertain whether and how this strategy is going to a) improve the international ranking of various French higher education institutions, and b) shift the relationships between and perceived status of universities and the *grandes écoles* in the longer term.

A second issue for the French elite higher education system in terms of international recognition is that access to the *grandes écoles* is highly restricted for international students, due to both cultural and linguistic barriers, but crucially, the strong relationship between attending the preparation classes and successfully completing the *concours*. In those cases where international students are admitted to the *grandes écoles* – via other admission paths<sup>2</sup> – they are often viewed as being of lower status compared to their fellow French students as they have not completed the rigorous and perceived meritocratic *concours* (e.g., Darchy-Koechlin and Draelants 2010, Zymek 2014, Schippling 2015, Darchy-Koechlin, Draelants and Tenret 2015).

To examine the pressures faced by elite education institutions due to processes of internationalisation within higher education, and how these are being responded to, this chapter explores in-depth the response of one key institution – the *Écoles normales supérieures*.

## **2 The discourses on internationalisation at the *Écoles normales supérieures*: theoretical and methodological approaches**

The *Écoles normales supérieures* – especially the most renowned *École normale supérieure de la rue d’Ulm* found in the centre of Paris – have traditionally educated primary and secondary school teachers for the French state. During the 20<sup>th</sup> century they became institutions for the education of the academic elite. In this context, Bourdieu (1988: 19) designed the *ENS de la rue d’Ulm* as “the apex of the whole academic hierarchy” in France. Until the 1960s, the *normaliens*<sup>3</sup> exerted “a real hegemony on the most important sections of the disciplines” comprising the scientific and the literary section (Karady 1986: 362) (see also Rieffel 1994). A recent unpublished institution ranking by Jonathan Wai and Stephen Hsu shows that the *ENS de la rue d’Ulm* holds first place worldwide regarding the proportion of

undergraduates of the respective institution that went on to win a Nobel Prize between 1901 and 2015 (Clynes 2016).

In France there are currently four *Écoles normales supérieures*: the *ENS de la rue d'Ulm* which offers study and graduate programmes in natural sciences and humanities; the *ENS de Lyon* that merged with the former *ENS – Lettres et sciences humaines* (ENS-LSH) in 2010, also offering courses in natural sciences and humanities; the *ENS de Cachan*, founded in 1912, which specialises in the area of (applied) natural sciences and technical courses; and the recently founded *ENS de Rennes* that until 2013 had been a branch of the *ENS de Cachan*, which specialises in (applied) natural sciences and sports sciences.

This study on the *Écoles normales supérieures* is an analysis of the self-representation discourses articulated by academics working at two ENS, the *ENS de la rue d'Ulm* and the *ENS de Cachan* with a special focus on the semantic field around 'internationalisation'. The aim of this chapter is to reconstruct this semantic field and, on this basis, work out elements of an institutional *habitus* at the *Écoles normales supérieures* related to 'internationalisation'.<sup>4</sup>

Theoretical resources informing this study mainly come from Bourdieu and colleagues' work on social reproduction and the formation of elites, with a particular focus on the theory of *habitus* and distinction (e.g., Bourdieu 1979, 1989; Bourdieu and de Saint Martin 1978, 1987; Bourdieu and Wacquant 1991). These theoretical concepts, understood as heuristic elements, have been developed further, through a focus on internationalisation, during the research process. The concept of *habitus*, for example, was applied to the institutional context following Reay (1998: 521), who understands the institutional *habitus* as "the impact of a cultural group or social class on an individual's behaviour as it is mediated through an organization".

I also draw on Bourdieu's work *La noblesse d'état* (1989), in which he showed how the field of the *grandes écoles* contributes to the reproduction of the national elites. However, Bourdieu never directly engaged with the dimension of internationalisation, so the analysis in this chapter seeks to examine how these more recent developments, spurred on by processes of globalisation within higher education, could be integrated into the offered insights regarding elite education and the production of national elites in *La noblesse d'état* (see also de Saint Martin 2005, Darchy-Koechlin and Draelants 2010).

The study reported on here is based on a data corpus of 23 semi-directed expert interviews (of which 5 took place in an exploratory study) with professors and lecturers at the *ENS de la rue d'Ulm* and the *ENS de Cachan* lasting between 30 and 90 minutes, and an analysis of self-representation documents of both institutions (websites, brochures, posters) (see further details in Schippling 2015). The principal aim of these interviews was to generate institutional habituated knowledge (see Meuser and Nagel 2005: 75), which is embedded in self-representation discourses of the *Écoles normales supérieures*. The interviews with the academic staff started with an open stimulus examining how they would describe their institution, followed by open questions about the role of their institution within the current transformation processes of the French higher education landscape, admission procedures and how they understood the concepts of 'elite' and 'excellence'.

To reconstruct elements of an institutional *habitus* through an analysis of the self-representation discourses, the documentary method (e.g., Bohnsack 2010, Nohl 2012) was chosen as the method of analysis. This method, developed by Ralf Bohnsack with references to the traditions of the sociology of knowledge by Karl Mannheim (1964) and ethnomethodology by Harold Garfinkel (1967), aims primarily to reconstruct the *modus operandi* of social actors and, consequently, offer an analysis of "atheoretical knowledge" (Mannheim 1964) or "tacit knowledge" (Polanyi 1958). For that reason, this method provides a reconstruction of *habitus* on a micro-analytical level (see also Bohnsack 1993, Meuser 2007). A key concept within this method is that of 'orientation patterns', which examines how implicit knowledge might be related to social practices (see Bohnsack 2003: 132f.), which I understand as offering insight not only into the individual but also the institutional *habitus*.

In the following sections, I offer an analysis of self-representation discourses constructed during the interviews with professors and lecturers of the ENS, focusing particularly on internationalisation. Five reconstructed orientation patterns will be outlined, evident across both ENS colleges, and argued to constitute elements of an institutional *habitus*. I will then consider the similarities and differences between the two *Écoles normales supérieures*.

### **3 Orientation patterns of the *Écoles normales supérieures* in the context of internationalisation**

Across both colleges homological patterns were found in the orientation patterns narrated during interviews with professors and lecturers, which I examine further here as constituting elements of an institutional *habitus*. Below I outline the five patterns, while also highlighting any important variations found between the two institutions being studied.

Five basic orientation patterns were identified for both institutions which could be considered relevant to discourses around internationalisation:

- Orientation towards tradition-transformation
- Orientation towards research
- Orientation towards competition
- Orientation towards social commitment
- Orientation towards selection

These orientation patterns are highly interrelated and do overlap.

### ***Orientation towards tradition-transformation***

This orientation pattern was found for both *Écoles normales supérieures*. Whereas the orientation towards tradition was stronger at the *École normale supérieure de la rue d'Ulm*, the orientation towards transformation was especially highlighted in the discourses of self-representation at the *École normale supérieure de Cachan*. Regarding the identity construction of the *ENS de la rue d'Ulm*, the academics often referred to a long-standing tradition. In this regard, the necessity for the foundation of the *grandes écoles* after the French revolution is highlighted: “It could be observed that the universities formed neither engineers who were needed to build roads, bridges etc. nor teachers who were really needed //mmh//, er, for educational purposes [...]”<sup>5</sup> (Monsieur Albert, ENS Ulm). It is pointed out that during this time no competent specialists were produced at French universities despite an urgent need. In this description of the historical context, in which the *ENS de la rue d'Ulm* was founded, there appears on a discursive level a distinction mechanism of this elite education institution towards the French universities, a mechanism which is characteristic for both ENS. The distinction of the *Écoles normales supérieures* from French universities is a central element of the institutional identity construction.

At the *École normale supérieure de Cachan*, while linking to notions of tradition, participants did so through engaging in a distancing from too much reverence for tradition:

Well, er, when a student at Rue d'Ulm enters the school of Aron, Sartre, Foucault, Bourdieu they feel like they're carrying a weight on their shoulders right? It is a... the feeling, like entering some kind of temple and, er, here no one is entering a temple which means that here we are, we have, we have very good students, er, we have people who have had who will have very interesting careers and who will perhaps become the next Bourdieu or the next Foucault or the next, but you do not have this weight, if you want so, of the the history, [...] (Monsieur Laval, ENS Cachan).

The focusing metaphor “temple”, in this case used to describe the *ENS de la rue d'Ulm*, serves as a negative contrast for the *ENS de Cachan* which wishes to distance itself from the “weight [...] of the the history”. By referring to well-known personalities, who are alumni of the institution, it is stressed that attending the school can also represent a “weight” upon the students because of the high expectations they would be confronted with. In contrast, while *ENS de Cachan* is highlighted as an institution that undertakes high-level research and produces “people [...] with very interesting careers”, they are nonetheless free of the “weight” of too high a veneration for tradition.

The self-representation discourses found through discussions at the *ENS de Cachan* are therefore more focused on transformation:

So, we are mainly concerned with the ties between education and research, but which are based much more on the research and the international exchanges in research. So this is still in progress //mmh// this hasn't finished but //mmh// we have, we have changed the a ::, the active, the type of international activity (Monsieur Besand, ENS Cachan).

Here the orientation towards transformation is directly related to being more ‘international’. There had been fundamental transformations of the *École* in terms of “the type of international activity” pursued, particularly around exchanges in research and the generation of ideas.

### ***Orientation towards research***

In discussions about the nature of research undertaken and its value, the *ENS de la rue d'Ulm* professors suggested they pursued an orientation towards undertaking purer research, whereas the *ENS de Cachan* narratives place an emphasis on research related to “practical sciences”, where research plays “a particular role in the connection of fundamental research, applied sciences, industry or, er, fundamental research” (Monsieur Besand, ENS Cachan).

In the context of internationalisation such different orientations have various implications. The orientation towards “practical sciences” focuses on closer cooperation with international companies in industry and technology:

And the last, er, fundamental change, (which is) a change, and which occurs rather slowly. Due to our fields of activity at the *École*, er, of course technological fields of activity, there has always been a lot of cooperation with companies, there have always been research contracts with companies, in mechanics with Renault, with big aircraft manufacturers, with, er, in electrical engineering with all people who deal with questions of electrical systems or magnetism etc., er, but, er, this cooperation goes even beyond, there are developed partnerships, there were, were, the *École* has increasingly filed patent applications [...] (Monsieur Besand, ENS de Cachan).

Internationalisation with regard to institutional *habitus* at the *ENS de Cachan* is linked to the idea of an opening up and out towards industry and fuelling economic development at a more global level now. At this point, there is an overlapping of two orientation patterns: transformation and research. Processes of internationalisation have led to an increasing focus on research in cooperation with companies, many of whom now operate on a global level; which in turn positions the college within the international field of research, as it competes with other universities and research institutes for funded projects and innovative contributions.

Research is also central to the institutional *habitus* of *ENS de la rue d'Ulm*; however, here the focus is on research that is conducted in a closed, silent and peaceful environment [see “temple” metaphor (Monsieur Laval, ENS Cachan)]. Elsewhere, the institution is compared to the “Tübinger Stift”, which functions at this point as a positive contrast:

The (.) there is an institution, which I often compare to the *École normale supérieure*, the so-called *Tübinger Stift*. It is a similar institution. There, you find a selection of the best students of the schools ((door slams)) //mmh// which then enter the *Stift* in order to study theology, philosophy, ancient languages, but essentially theology, in a place with little student numbers, material support, an important pedagogical support. Here, we are not talking about a seminary, right? The, the, the, the, the scientific topics are very broad, but the principle is the same. (Monsieur Poitier, ENS Ulm)

The focusing metaphor “Tübinger Stift”<sup>6</sup>, used here to compare the *ENS de la rue d'Ulm* with this institution in Germany, shows that, according to the interviewed professor, there are different “scientific topics” at both institutions, but that “the principle” is the same for both. It refers to two focus points: selection of students and providing to only a few students special education and working conditions which, in turn, are claimed to be the basis for fruitful

scientific work. At this point, a picture of a place of retreat, silence, leisure and isolation from the external world is drawn in which some people can devote themselves to research. Internationalisation appears, in this context, to be a threat to carrying out research in “silence and freedom” (Humboldt 1964: 255f.). It becomes clear that the research orientation pattern in this case is affiliated to the orientation towards tradition. However, I also found some engagement with an orientation towards transformation around research at the *ENS de la rue d’Ulm*. One professor for example emphasised that isolation from the external world would obstruct an international opening up of his institution, which would become especially problematic when considering how best to prepare their students for futures in a largely globalised professional world (Monsieur Albert, ENS Ulm).

### ***Orientation towards competition***

Research was often discussed in relation to increasing competition due to processes of internationalisation affecting higher education and research. For academics at the *ENS de la rue d’Ulm*, in particular, such pressures were contrasted negatively with the desire to undertake research in the context of silence and security. Yet, participants also acknowledged that if the college did not attempt to take part in such a competitive, international field, it will directly threaten the much-valued status of their identity. When discussing such tensions, the small size of these elite institutions and the negative impact this had on their ability to competitively locate themselves within international rankings was a recurring motif in the discussions with academics at both ENS institutions.

The *École normale* is, er, the *École normale supérieure* is ((telephone rings)) a little small in, er, in, er, in the contemporary world of of research, there is a total globalisation right, er, of the higher education sector and of research. And so the *École normale supérieure* is a little small, thus we decided to build alliances //mmh// right and we have established alliances with institutions, not with the big universities but with relatively small but very renowned institutions (Monsieur Muller, ENS Ulm).

The strategy of building alliances with other renowned institutions prevents an institution’s own prestige from being called into question, while allowing it to gain in size and visibility as is, e.g., the case for the alliance PSL (*Paris Sciences et Lettres*, since 2015 COMUE<sup>7</sup> PSL research university), whose members are the *ENS de la rue d’Ulm* and other renowned institutions such as the *Collège de France* and the *Institut Curie*. This is just another example of the preference for traditional distinctions, where no “big universities” are involved in the creation of such alliances. The *ENS de Cachan* is also engaged in a building alliances (for

example since 2014 it has been part of *COMUE Université Paris Saclay*), but participants appeared more open-minded towards forging partnerships with private enterprises, technological-focused partners and developing links with French universities.<sup>8</sup>

### ***Orientation towards social commitment***

The orientation towards “practical sciences” and the cooperation of the *ENS de Cachan* with economic and industrial institutions is strongly linked to a ‘social commitment’ orientation pattern. The institution is committed to supporting the development of societal progress and well-being on a national and international level:

Th- there are, for example, students who built schools in Laos, in Madagascar or things like that. I like that. Those are, those are, those are the students who believe in something and who do not not hesitate to invest time to to participate in activities, er, in in order to do specific things //mmhh//. So yes, that is a good thing. That is a *normalien* right. He is brilliant and at the same time he contributes to society, he participates in society. (Monsieur Monier, ENS Cachan)

In this statement the professor constructs a particular way of understanding who a *normalien* is. Social commitment – in addition to being ‘brilliant – are core attributes that students have and which are further embedded during their time at the institution. In this statement, social commitment is linked to having an impact in the international dimension. There is therefore a shift away from the traditional understanding of the *normaliens* as future members of a national elite with close connections to the French state towards students who make an international contribution.

The *ENS de la rue d’Ulm* participants also referred to social commitment, although more often aligned this with a reflexive approach. The *grande école* appears here as a “place of reflection on big challenges which currently concern the world” (Monsieur Albert, ENS Ulm). In this context, the students are characterised as focused on ‘research’, devoted to science and intellectual contributions – ones that will have an impact globally, but which is undertaken in a secluded context – ‘the temple’.

### ***Orientation towards selection***

Discussions around ‘selection’ highlight important differences in engagement with the international at both ENS. Whereas the *ENS de la rue d’Ulm* supports the maintenance of the traditional national selection procedures of the *concours* (with, at the same time, the creation

of the *sélection internationale*<sup>9</sup> as a special *concours* for foreign students), colleagues at *ENS de Cachan* appeared more open-minded towards the development of alternative admission procedures:

I think that they [the ENS; A.S.] must be substantially more open-minded towards the international and this is a little bit difficult, because, well, it is a little bit in contrast compared to its republican, very French character of their functioning. So, er, I think, they must open up towards the the international which may er, er (.) bring along changes within the selection procedures, that, in turn, means not to recruit only from the *concours* of the French *classes préparatoires*. We have to find other ways (Monsieur Legrand, ENS de Cachan).

This professor is calling for the implementation of alternative admission paths in order to facilitate the entrance of more foreign students. Thus, a stronger orientation towards transformation found at the *ENS de Cachan* is aligned with a commitment to changing current selection procedures as well.

### ***Discussion***

Through careful analysis, elements of an institutional *habitus* were reconstructed for both *Écoles normales supérieures*. The orientation pattern towards tradition-transformation, in relation to the *ENS de la rue d'Ulm*, places greater emphasis on tradition. Internationalisation, often associated with the idea of transformation, therefore functions as a negative contrast in the sense of posing a threat to the institution identity, which is strongly tied to tradition and its place in French history and the notion that research is best undertaken in silent, closed-off spaces. Meanwhile, at *ENS de Cachan* there is a greater openness to transformation, linked to internationalisation regarding research engagement; reach, how students and the institution demonstrate their social commitment; and college admissions procedures. Internationalisation poses a threat for both institutions when considering increased competition for status, funding and students. While alliance building to increase size and visibility is engaged with by both ENS, again their approach to who is welcome and a fruitful partner differs – which links back to their different orientations to the tradition-transformation continuum. Whether or not the orientation towards tradition or transformation towards internationalisation have positive or negative effects on the ENS' status as institutions of formation of the future research elite, remains an open question with no definitive answer because it is dependent on constantly changing power relations in local, national, international and transnational contexts in the

French system of higher education. These contexts provoke a permanent restructuring, sometimes with ambiguous dimensions, of their institutional identity.

The reconstruction of these five orientation patterns as well as the reasons for differences found within institutional *habitus*, clearly brought to light through a focus on internationalisation can be usefully applied to other elite education institutions in France, who also face the same challenges and possibilities that have emerged through processes of internationalisation.

#### **4 Future prospects: Internationalisation processes in the field of elite education in France – an almost untouched area of enquiry**

The French system of elite education can be regarded as a perfect example of a system that has developed over centuries and is shaped by national culture, especially because of the distinctiveness of its admission procedures – the interplay of *classes préparatoires*, *concours* and *grandes écoles*. It is secured by ideologies as “the social fiction of meritocratic mobility within the educational system” (van Zanten 2015: 36, also Dubet 2004, Tenret 2011, van Zanten and Maxwell 2015). Despite processes of transformation found in the French higher education and research landscape in recent years, such as the effect of the Bologna process for instance, the system of elite education has proved very resistant in its structure and function.

The pressure to be visible at an international level for both research, but also to students who are an increasingly mobile population and central to higher education institutions’ attempts to become ‘the best of the best’, makes the study of the French system fascinating – due to the fact it is so closely managed by the French state, and so central to the production of the French elite. Thus far there have been only a few isolated studies focused on this question. These have tended to be more descriptive or focused on analysing the (self-)perception of (international) students at the *grandes écoles* (e.g., Darchy-Koechlin and Draelants 2010, Darchy-Koechlin 2012, Zymek 2014, van Zanten and Maxwell 2015, Darchy-Koechlin, Draelants and Tenret 2015).

Thus, the research reported on in this chapter offers new insights into these questions – by focusing on the perspectives of the academic staff at two elite institutions, and a reconstruction of their orientation patterns towards internationalisation offers further insights

into their institutional *habitus*. At the same time, the study begins to facilitate greater comparison between national systems of elite education and how internationalisation processes are altering them (e.g., Krüger and Helsper 2014, Maxwell and Aggleton 2016).

A further, yet also significant, contribution made by this research is its ability to extend the classical studies on the French field of elite education such as, for example, found in the work of Bourdieu and colleagues (e.g., Bourdieu 1989, Bourdieu and de Saint Martin 1987, Bourdieu and Wacquant 1991), by considering how internationalisation is shifting priorities for the *grandes écoles*, opening up differences between them and re-aligning relationships between elite and more broadly higher education institutions, the state, private enterprises and actors/institutions based outside France.

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## 5 Notes

1 In the last few years *classes préparatoires* have been increasingly established outside the centre of Paris, also in socially disadvantaged areas, the so-called *zones d'éducation prioritaire* in order to increase the social and ethnic diversity of the student body at the *grandes écoles* (e.g., Buisson-Fenet and Landrier 2008, Pasquali 2010, Allouch 2013, Poulin-Deltour 2013, van Zanten and Maxwell 2015).

2 Special selection procedures were introduced for the admission of international students at the *grandes écoles* which differ from the traditional *concours*. For example, there is often an individual interview with each candidate which does not occur in the classical admission procedure.

3 The designation *normalien* (female form: *normalienne*) functions as a name for the students of the ENS who have passed the classical admission procedures (*concours*). They have the status of a *fonctionnaire-stagiaire* (Engl. *civil servant trainee*), received a monthly salary of 1494.30 euros for 4 years with the obligation to work in the civil service for 10 years which includes the duration of their studies.

4 The research project, whose results will be presented in the following, is entitled “French elite colleges in the process of internationalisation. A qualitative study on the *Écoles normales supérieures*” and was funded by the *German Research Foundation* (DFG) (project period: 01.12.2013-31.05.2015). It is a secondary analysis of data material initially collected in another research context (Schippling 2012, 2013) during a visit to the *Centre Maurice Halbwachs* at the *École normale supérieure de la rue d’Ulm* from September 2010 to July 2011 [funded by the *German Academic Exchange Service* (DAAD)]. In addition to the project director, the following research assistants worked in the project: Tabea Tetzner, Johannes Zimmermann, Maria Schmidt, Lydia Barthels, Wiebke Schramm and Caroline Nolte. The research project closely cooperated with the DFG Research Group “Mechanisms of Elite Formation in the German Educational System” (FOR 1612).

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5 The project director is responsible for the translations into English, which were carried out in collaboration with Johannes Zimmermann. Peter Walton and Claire Maxwell are responsible for proofreading the article.

6 The *Tübinger Stift* was founded in the 16th century is an educational institution where people who wanted to become pastors in Württemberg were educated.

7 *Communauté d'universités et d'établissements* (COMUE) (Engl. *association of universities and higher education institutions*) is a designation for recently founded research clusters, initiated in 2013 by the French government to strengthen the scientific cooperation between these institutions. They are the followers of the so-called *Pôles de recherche et d'enseignement supérieur* (PRES) (Engl. *centres for research and higher education*).

8 Both institutions belong to different alliances, but there is no alliance between the *Écoles normales supérieures*. This situation allows conclusions to be drawn on the power relations in the field of the ENS.

9 Foreign students in the final year of their Bachelor or first year of their Master programme can apply for participation at the *concours* of the *sélection internationale* in which they have to pass several exams. This procedure differs from the traditional *concours* for example in having fewer exams. The students who are accepted at the college receive a monthly grant of 1000 euros. Nevertheless, they do not have the status of a *normalien* with the same conditions as students, who have to pass the classical selection procedure of the *concours*.

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