



Commission franco-américaine
d'échanges universitaires et culturels
Franco-American Commission
for Educational Exchange

ADMISSION TO THE FRENCH *GRANDES ECOLES*

The *Grandes Ecoles*, which are considered to be the pinnacle of French higher education, represent a sector of the educational system which is unlike anything known in American academia. They are very selective and prestigious schools of higher education. These institutions, some of which are linked to universities, exist in the engineering, agricultural, applied and physical sciences, the humanities, the social sciences, government administration, management, business administration, management and military studies.

The enrollment consists of those French students who have consistently obtained the highest grades throughout the last few years of their secondary studies. The teaching in these institutes is parallel to that given in the universities. However, the *Grandes Ecoles* remain independent in their goals, administration and programs of study.

There are more than 240 institutions accredited by the Ministry of Education, which are authorized to deliver the *diplôme national d'ingénieur*¹, some 178 of which are public and under the authority of various French Ministries (National Education, Industry and Finance, Agriculture, Defense, Telecommunications, etc.). The remaining institutions are private. Both public and private institutions are supervised and accredited by the Ministry of Education.

More than fifty management institutions are recognized by the Ministry of Education and deliver a degree endorsed by the Ministry. Most of them are under the authority of the Chambers of Commerce and Industry.

¹ The term "engineering degree" would not be an adequate translation for the term. One student could graduate with a degree in chemistry just as another could graduate with a degree in chemical engineering and both would be awarded a *diplôme d'ingénieur*.

BASIC REQUIREMENTS FOR ADMITTANCE TO PREPARATORY CLASSES FOR THE GRANDES ECOLES

The basic diploma which is required in order to be admissible for preparatory classes leading to admission in a *Grande Ecole* is the *baccalauréat général* which is obtained after 7 years of secondary studies. The high school student will have chosen one of the three academic curricula within the *baccalauréat général*: a scientific curriculum, a literary curriculum, or an economics and social sciences curriculum.

In general, the best secondary school students enroll in the courses that are compulsory for the preparation of the *Grandes Ecoles* upon successful completion of the *baccalauréat*.

THE COMPETITIVE ENTRANCE EXAMINATION AND ITS PREPARATION

The admission to each *Grande Ecole* is strictly limited annually by the Board of each institution in connection with the Ministry of Education and the sponsoring ministries. The enrollment depends upon the needs of qualified personnel in each professional sector.

This competitive entrance examination requires intensive preparatory work. A student seeking entrance to one of these schools may complete the work in two years. But three years is not unusual for preparation of the exam after completion of the *baccalauréat général*.

The preparation for the competitive entrance examination may be given in French *lycées* or in specialized private institutions. The classes in which this preparation is offered are called *classes préparatoires*.

It is important to note that the academic quality of these *classes préparatoires* is of the highest level. They are renowned for the intense amount of work expected from their students as well as for the severity of their grading system which is based on a scale of 0 to 20. However, although only the best and brightest students are accepted in these classes after the *baccalauréat général*, the grades earned by these students are usually low, most of the time under 10. There is no particular explanation for this fact; it is simply a longstanding French tradition which may be used in order to motivate the candidates. The appraisals made by each professor on the transcripts reflect the level of the student's work more readily than the student's grades.

There are usually several *Grandes Ecoles* specializing in the same fields of study. Access to the majority of these schools is extremely difficult. The competition is very severe while the study curriculum is vast and the level of instruction high.

In order to increase their chances of gaining admission into a *Grande Ecole*, candidates frequently take the competitive entrance examination of several institutions of varying rank. Thus, if the candidate is successful in gaining entry to several of these schools, he selects the most prestigious. In order to reduce the excessive number of examinations that the students had to go through, some schools have joined together in setting up common entrance examinations.

A listing of the *Grandes Ecoles* is available on the following website: www.education.gouv.fr. A list of those which are members of the *Conférence des Grandes Ecoles*² is available at www.cge.asso.fr.

DURATION OF STUDY AND CAREER OPENINGS IN THE *GRANDES ECOLES*

The usual duration of studies in the *Grandes Ecoles* is 3 years (after the two years of *classes préparatoires*), including several internships in companies amounting to a total of at least six months. However, some schools such as the *Ecoles Nationales d'Ingénieurs*, the *Instituts Nationaux des Sciences Appliquées* and a few others require 5 years of attendance, the *classes préparatoires* being integrated into the global study program of these schools.

The teaching in the *Grandes Ecoles* is of a very high level and is directed towards the preparation of a professional career. This teaching is more theoretical and more general than in American university departments. For instance, at one *Grande Ecole* the students are trained in metallurgy, electricity, civil engineering, aeronautics, computer science, etc. The training is said to be "polytechnical" though students are usually able to choose "major subjects" during the last year of their attendance at the school.

The advanced specialized training which is found in American universities is very attractive to French graduates of the *Grandes Ecoles*, in that they find an extremely useful complement to their French "polyvalent" background.

In all the professional sectors of the French economy, employers often show a tendency to give preference to graduates of the *Grandes Ecoles* over graduates from the French universities.

For further information on the *Grandes Ecoles*, you may contact:

² Not all *Grandes Ecoles* are members of the *Conférence des Grandes Ecoles* which has established specific criteria for its membership, i.e. number of students, duration of existence, research and international activities.