



# Towards New Forms of Institutional Cooperation : The Story of a Pole of Research and Higher Education (PRES) in the East of Paris

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# Towards New Forms of Institutional Cooperation

## The Story of a Pole of Research and Higher Education (PRES) in the East of Paris



Patricia Pol

Within the framework of the numerous reforms implemented during the last ten years in France, the creation of the Poles of Research and Higher Education (PRES) in 2006 have turned out to become a tremendous means to reshape higher education in France around new forms of institutional cooperation. Through the example of the PRES Université Paris-Est (UPE), the reasons for creating new autonomous public institutions are questioned: in which field does a PRES bring an added value to its stakeholders? The answer to this question is far from simple; the establishment of a 21<sup>st</sup> century ‘confederal university’ in France which has differing existing entities as its constituents would be a long process and should not be taken for granted.

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For your convenience, all articles have already been organised by chapter and subchapter online at [www.lg-handbook.info](http://www.lg-handbook.info). This article, D 7-2, has been assigned to:

Chapter D: Leading a Higher Education Institution: Issues, Tools, Practices  
Subchapter 7: Building Partnerships and Networks

## 1. Introduction

### The 'Shanghai' effect

In 2005, political leaders in France discovered that only three French universities appeared in the Top 100 of the Shanghai ranking<sup>1</sup>. It was as if a bombshell had hit the French university community – or at least its elite! Many of the weaknesses of the French higher education system may be explained partly by its fragmentation but above all by a lack of international readability through the new comparative and measuring tools. 'A reaction is urgently required' was a message hammered home the successive ministers of higher education and research. The objective of excellence moved then to the forefront of national preoccupation, just as excellence also led in the debates and practices in Europe and throughout the world. In France, this search for excellence by all means has been pursued through strategies of consolidation or institutional cooperation, illustrated notably by the Poles of Research and Higher Education (PRES, Pôles de Recherche et d'Enseignement Supérieur).

### PRES, institutional structures of cooperation

Regarded as the PRES that first reflected a real harmonious strategy of cooperation, PRES Université Paris-Est (UPE) is a very interesting example of the powers and contradictions that these new structures bring to the French higher education and research landscape. The specific national context is a strong explanatory factor in understanding this new trend for reshaping higher education and research in France. After a brief reference to the main characteristics of the French higher education and research system, this article will focus on Université Paris-Est, a new public institution, and discuss the rationale that has shaped the strategies of cooperation among a wide range of institutions. It will also consider the need to implement new strategies due to mutual concerns shared by these institutions.

## 2. A national context in search of excellence

### 2.1 A fragmented system

### A system divided between specialized institutions

The French system of higher education and research was built on strategies of strong divisions between public mass universities (with an open admission policy in the first year) and 'Grandes Écoles' (with competitive entrance and strict selection policies) and between research organizations and higher education institutions. These strategies corresponded to a historical division between education and research, and general education and professional education which has

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<sup>1</sup> The Academic Ranking of World Universities, ARWU, Jiatong University, Shanghai.

existed in France since the Revolution of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. However, the last four decades and notably the last ten years have been marked by major change. On the one hand, the training of graduates employable in the private sector labour market is no longer a privilege of the 'Grandes Écoles' as, since the 70s and 80s, the universities have opened up many courses known as professionalized courses, in all kinds of disciplines<sup>2</sup>. On the other hand, the development of the Joint Research Units<sup>3</sup> between the research organizations, the universities and the 'Grandes Écoles' allows much cooperation between all the stakeholders involved.

Nevertheless, these connections do not prevent the French system from remaining divided and therefore having poor external readability as regards the criteria laid down by international rankings. Thus, according to 'webometrics', CNRS (Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique) is ranked fourth in the world, first in Europe and second for its contributions to the famous British journal *Nature*. However, these excellent results are not reflected in the publication figures of the most well-known university rankings (Shanghai or Times Higher Education, for instance). And yet, among the 30,000 CNRS researchers, a large number are faculty members at universities that operate within the framework of the joint research units.

**A fragmented system  
with poor readability**

In 1968, the university sector also experienced a movement of fragmentation, and a very large number of universities have since been established along disciplinary lines. In 2008, there were, for instance, 3 universities in Strasbourg, 3 in Marseille, 3 in Nancy, 4 in Bordeaux, 3 in Lyon, 3 in Rennes and 17 in Paris.

This type of organization satisfied the sharp increase in student demand for higher education between the 60s and the year 2000<sup>4</sup>. The universities absorbed a very large part of this growth: up to 75 % for Bachelor and Master's Degrees, and 100 % for Doctorates until the middle of the 90's.

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<sup>2</sup> They awarded degrees, for instance, to 100 % of the doctors, schoolteachers, teachers and faculty members, 95 % of the jurists, 60 % of the engineers, of the managers, of the technicians and many executives specialized in a great number of market and non-market sectors/public and private sector professions.

<sup>3</sup> The Joint Research Units (Unités Mixtes de Recherche, UMR) gather staff from Research organizations such as CNRS or INSERM and faculty members from universities; such a Research Unit may be located in either of the cooperating partners, be it the university or the research institute.

<sup>4</sup> In 1960, there were 309 000 students in higher education in France; in 1970, 850 000; in 1980, 1.1 million; in 1990, 1.7M; in 2000, 2.1M; in 2005, 2.2M. The number of students has been since stabilised. Source: Ministère de l'enseignement supérieur et de la recherche, MESR.

**Insufficient critical mass** Since the worldwide comparisons of the type mentioned above tend to favour research strengths with bibliometric methods suited to sciences, technologies and health, the performance of institutions that are discipline(s)-specific cannot be optimal. Therefore universities with a high contribution to Human and Social Sciences have no chance of being well positioned in these rankings. The most renowned ‘Grandes Écoles’<sup>5</sup> are actually very small (with about 1,500 students and less than 200 doctoral students each), which also makes it impossible for these institutions to reach the critical mass necessary to feature prominently in the rankings, even though they enjoy strong international recognition and have shown very high levels of scientific outputs and employability.

## 2.2 A centralized system

**Centralized decisions and financing** The French higher education system is also characterized by a high level of centralized financing and decision-making that rests with the Minister of Higher Education and Research. Although the two laws known as Faure (1969) and Savary (1984) have greatly contributed to make universities more autonomous, they still had little scope to define independent institutional policies and academic and scientific strategies. The Ministerial Directorates General of Higher Education and Research still played a central part in the process of allocating means to institutions.

**A contractual policy** The contractual policy set up by the Ministry of Higher Education in the beginning of the 90s has certainly helped to promote an objectives-based management method, but the funding allocated within the scope of this policy barely exceeds 15 % of the whole university budget and has been decreasing steadily since 2000.

As far as the research budget is concerned, until 2008 the Ministry allocated it directly to each accredited research laboratory, thus making strategic choices more difficult at an institutional level. Nevertheless, nothing prevented the academics of different faculties and laboratories from raising funds outside the wider state sector, but the size of this income depended significantly on the academic and administrative human resources already available through previous State allocations.

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<sup>5</sup> The Ministry of Higher Education and Research identifies 24 intensive research ‘Grandes Écoles’. Among them, Ecole Polytechnique, Ecole Centrale, Ecole des Ponts et Chaussées, Ecole des Mines. See the website of the ministry, [www.recherche.gouv.fr](http://www.recherche.gouv.fr)

### 2.3 Significant reforms for higher education institutions in the 2000s

Since the beginning of the noughties, in this strongly centralized and non-egalitarian national context, but at the same time increasingly open to the reforms related to the construction of the European Higher Education Area and to worldwide competition, France has seen one reform after another. Through these reforms, governments have redefined the respective roles of the State, the institutions and the market in accordance with the strategies advocated by the New Public Management (Ferlie, 1996, Le Galès, 2008).

In France, the reforms were in line with the General Reform of Public Policies<sup>6</sup> and, concerning the higher education sector, they aimed at a global reshaping of the higher education and research system, with higher education and research remaining two inseparable dimensions in the French universities.

The bachelor, master, doctorate reform (Licence-Master-Doctorat, or as is commonly known LMD) that was introduced in 2002 was designed to adapt all higher education degrees to the Bologna Process action lines (mainly as regards transition to a three cycle structure, implementation of ECTS and of the Diploma Supplement, establishment of a qualifications framework and promotion of mobility). The 2002 reform was followed up by a reform of the doctoral studies in 2005 and a new one concerning the first cycle in 2011.

#### The LMD reform

A Law commonly called LRU<sup>7</sup> that was passed in 2007 addressed the governance and management of the universities. It strengthened executive power within universities (by reducing the size of the administrative board and increasing the power of the President) and provided universities with new competences as regards human resources management (transfer of the salaries from the Public Treasury to institutions, enlargement of private contract employment), financial (global budget) and real estate management. Thus, universities would have more tools to set up strategic management methods capable of reinforcing the results and the quality of the institutions and thereby of the system itself.

#### The LRU law

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<sup>6</sup> The general reform of public policies (Révision Générale des Politiques Publiques, RGPP) is a programme aimed at the modernization of Government support as far as all public policies and ministries are concerned. More than 300 reforms were initiated between 2007 and 2010 and 150 new measures are planned for 2011 – 2013.

<sup>7</sup> Libertés et responsabilités pour les universités (LRU), Freedom and responsibilities for universities.

However, and apart from all the above reforms, in order to improve in international competition, the merits and dangers of which were discussed endlessly, it was necessary to go further. Thus, the implementation of the Pact for Research in 2006 completed the French response to the international reformist pressures.

## 2.4 New regulation and cooperation structures

### Regulation structures

The Pact for Research, which was initially aimed at reforming the system of research and innovation, also involved the creation of new structures to regulate public policies at the risk of turning Napoléon up-side-down, as two French researchers remarked in a recent article (Aust, Crespy, 2009).

On the one hand, the implementation of public regulation structures led to the creation of two great agencies: the National Agency for Research (Agence Nationale pour la Recherche, ANR) and the Evaluation Agency of Research and Higher Education (Agence d'Evaluation de la Recherche et de l'Enseignement Supérieur, AERES<sup>8</sup>).

ANR is a public funding institution set up to finance research projects on a competitive basis. On the web page of ANR<sup>9</sup>, it is specified that the aim of ANR is to *'increase the dynamics of the French system of research and innovation by providing more flexibility'*.

AERES brings together, in the same 'independent administrative authority', the missions previously carried out within the National Committee of Evaluation (CNÉ, Comité national d'évaluation), the National Committee of Research Evaluation (CNER, Comité national d'évaluation de la recherche) and the Directorate of Higher Education and Research (accreditation). This made it possible, within the same authority, to provide for the evaluation of the institutions of higher education and research organizations, of degree programmes, of laboratories and research units, which was almost a unique case in the world.

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<sup>8</sup> [www.aeres-evaluation.fr](http://www.aeres-evaluation.fr)

<sup>9</sup> [www.anr.fr](http://www.anr.fr)

On the other hand, two kinds of cooperation structures were created at laboratory and institutional level:

### Cooperation structures

- At laboratory level, the Thematic Networks of Advanced Research (Réseaux Thématiques de Recherche Avancée, RTRA) and the Thematic Centres of Research and Care (Centres Thématiques de Recherche et de Soins, CTRS) which were to allow the concentration of resources on federated structures of research;
- At institutional level, the Poles of Research and Higher Education (PRES<sup>10</sup>) which were to allow the development of cooperation between institutions.

For these new structures, the law intended to be flexible: the objective was that the stakeholders maintained the initiative and organized themselves in light of local or regional specificities, as diversity remained significant in France. *'The variety of the possible organizational forms will respond to the diversity of situations'* stated the bill, which proposed two legal forms and set the general missions of these new public institutions.

The two unions with the strongest representation within higher education, UNEF (National Union of Students) and FSU-SNESUP (University Faculty Union), mobilized to fight the LRU law but did not succeed in reversing the trend, even after a strike of many weeks waged in the majority of the French universities in 2009. The movement 'Sauvons la recherche'<sup>11</sup> (save research) remained active and critical of the strategy of competition which came with increasing the share of the budgets allocated to projects won through a tendering process while the regular funds decreased. Although they questioned the logic of the AERES rating system, institutional teams nevertheless engaged in restructuring, in the hope of improving their results and satisfying the new criteria of resource allocation, programmed in a computerized model called 'sympa' (pleasant)!

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<sup>10</sup> On the webpage of the Ministry of Higher Education and Research, it is specified that: "The Poles of Research and Higher Education (PRES) allow the universities, 'Grandes Écoles' and research organisations to operate with coherence and to pool their activities and resources. The goal is to offer more coherent and readable research and higher education programmes better adapted to regional needs."

<sup>11</sup> See their webpage [www.sauvonslarecherche.fr](http://www.sauvonslarecherche.fr) to better understand their claims.



## 2.5 Impressive results

### Accepted reforms

Rapidly, just one year after the creation of PRES, nine projects were implemented; in 2011, 21 PRES brought together more than 85 % of universities and 'Grandes Écoles'. A study carried out by the Sociology Centre of Organization (Aust, CSO, 2008) and then a report from the General Inspectorate of the Administration of the French Education and Research Department (IGAENR, 2010) showed that the flexibility allowed by this law led to the implementation of a great variety of PRES structures. If 'to each his PRES' had been the tendency, a typology seemed to emerge which revealed a lower or higher level of institutional integration according to contextual, institutional and individual factors:

- Pre-merger PRES: preparing universities for merger, such as Aix Marseille (2012), Lorraine (2012), Bordeaux (2014);
- Confederal PRES, grouping of one site or one region universities, 'Grandes Écoles' and research organizations;
- The PRES that only pooled activities and services.

According to successive ministers, this diversity pointed out the potential for and the ability to change of all stakeholders in order to seize the new tools that were introduced by the public authorities. Others, among them many university presidents, admitted having no choice.

The strategy of competition was relentless and finally rather well accepted among the university elite, even if some of them noticed that excessive differentiation between institutions might increase disparities. For most university presidents in 2011, it appeared to be one way to ease or empower institutions regarded, up to now, as smothered by the constraints imposed by public administration. But for quite an important part of the silent academic community, it was not the best way to improve the quality of education and research but a very good way to increase complexity and competition.

### **3. PRES-UPE: a political, scientific and academic construction at the East of Paris**

PRES Université Paris-Est (UPE) was one of the first projects to be recognized by the ministry in 2007 and on this account received, as did all the other PRES institutions, four million Euros to set up. More than an area for scientific cooperation, PRES UPE had the ambition to draw the outline of new confederal forms. This orientation was much connected with the politics of the regional context of Ile-de-France and the specific situation of the east of Paris.

#### **3.1 The Ile-de-France region: a multitude of strong institutions**

The Ile-de-France region is the first French region in terms of student population (600,000 students, that is to say 28 % of the total number of students in France), international students (80,000 out of 250,000 at national level) and of the French research network (83,000 researchers, 41 % of the national expenditure for research).

Particularly concerned by the fragmentation already mentioned, the institutions in central Paris did not have a strong culture of inter-university or inter-‘Grandes Écoles’ cooperation. The break-up of Paris University after 1968 resulted in the establishment of eight universities inside Paris, set up along disciplinary and often ideological lines and pursuing disciplinary development strategies.

To face the very sharp increase in student numbers five universities were first created in the near suburbs in 1970.<sup>12</sup> In 1991, within the framework of a project named Université 2000<sup>13</sup> four universities were founded in what were called the new towns of the Parisian suburbs. Enjoying a dispensatory status, these last four universities were established around strong strategies of local economic cooperation. That is how Université Marne la Vallée was set up in 1991 in the cluster of the Cité Descartes<sup>14</sup> which also housed an engineering school of the Chamber of Commerce of Paris (ESIEE). In 1997, the first French

**The beginnings of a culture of cooperation**

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<sup>12</sup> Paris 8 in Vincennes, then in Saint Denis, Paris 10 in Nanterre, Paris 11 in Orsay, Paris 12 in Créteil and Paris 13 in Villetaneuse.

<sup>13</sup> The plan, called U 2000, enabled the creation of eight universities in France, three of which, namely Cergy Pontoise, Versailles-Saint Quentin in Yvelines and Marne la Vallée are at the Region Ile de France.

<sup>14</sup> The Cité Descartes was created in Champ sur Marne in 1983 with the ambition of becoming a large technology park. Little by little, it brought together companies, residential areas and higher education institutions but never became a real high-tech park.

engineering school (est. 1747), l'École Nationale des Ponts et Chaussées (ENPC), moved from Paris to la Cité Descartes. In 1995, all stakeholders involved created a public consortium called 'polytechnicum' as part of their respective institutional strategies. The objective at the time was to pool services or to answer invitations to tender jointly.

### **3.2 From institutional strategies to logics of a site**

Although the political leaders' avowed aim was to bring 'Grandes Écoles' and universities closer, the situation was particularly complicated in this part of France, even though there were several projects on the horizon.

In 2002, the leaders of Université Marne La Vallée and ENPC were two personalities well known and influential on the academic and political scene. They both exercised strong leadership as managers and academics at national level. The director of ENPC had run this 'Grande École' since 1999 and his research was focused on spatial and regional policies. He believed in close cooperation between the leading engineering 'Grandes Écoles' and was planning a merger between the three biggest ones. Faced with the impossibility of making this project a reality due to strong disagreements among two of these 'Grandes Écoles', he resigned in 2003. He was replaced by a director who was more favourable toward cooperation between 'Grandes Écoles' and universities within the framework of this regional strategy.

#### **Gathering 'Grandes Écoles' and Universities**

While the Pact for Research was being prepared, the President of Université Marne la Vallée (2002 – 2007), who was much involved in the preparation of the national reforms at a ministerial level, began negotiations as early as 2006 regarding the transformation of the Cité Descartes into a PRES Université Paris-Est. As a former trade unionist turned sociology professor, he believed in the urgent necessity in France of bringing universities, 'Grandes Écoles' and research organizations closer, in order to reinforce the international readability of the higher education system and to reduce its disparities. He seized the opportunity offered by PRES to develop his vision of higher education in France. In 2007, he became President of PRES Paris-Est, formed then from three founding institutions located on the site of la Cité Descartes: a university, Université Marne La Vallée, UMLV; a Grande École, ENPC and a research organization, Laboratoire Central des Ponts et Chaussées LCPC, which was strongly connected with ENPC in civil engineering research.

#### **Doctoral schools: key point of competence transfer**

Since its creation, each one of its components has decided to transfer its competences in the field of doctoral schools to the PRES. It is the PRES which now delivers the doctoral degree, and has become a model for all the other PRES in France. This transfer has become an obligatory condition for each and every institution wishing to join

UPE. From the outset, this very specific association between a mass university and a very prestigious ‘Grande École’ has made any institutional merger seem impossible. The main issue was to structure the site of “La Cité Descartes” at the level of post graduate studies and by doing so make it much more attractive.

### **3.3 From logics of a site to institutional regional policies**

In order to become a great multidisciplinary institution, with better readability at international level, the founding members of PRES UPE knew that they had to find additional partners. Indeed, initially, the three founding institutions pooled together just 450 doctoral students who defended one hundred theses per year, and did not offer any degree or conduct any research in either law or medicine. Along with the first steps taken towards its establishment, even before any negotiations had taken place, PRES UPE welcomed Université Paris 12 Val de Marne (UPVM), based in Créteil.

Université Paris 12 Val de Marne was the largest multidisciplinary university of the Paris region in terms of the number of students (30,000 in 2008). Each one of its faculties, Science and Technology, Languages and Humanities, Law, Economy and Management, Medicine, and Social Sciences were therefore competing directly with the universities of Paris Centre, which were in general better financed in terms of human resources (administrative and academic staff).

The President in place in 2006 launched negotiations in the south of Paris with the universities Paris Sud, Versailles Saint Quentin and a ‘Grande École’, the École Normale Supérieure de Cachan. The leadership of this PRES project was carried on by the former President of Université Paris Sud, located mainly in the plateau of Saclay, and at that moment, the second French university in the Top 100 in the Shanghai ranking.

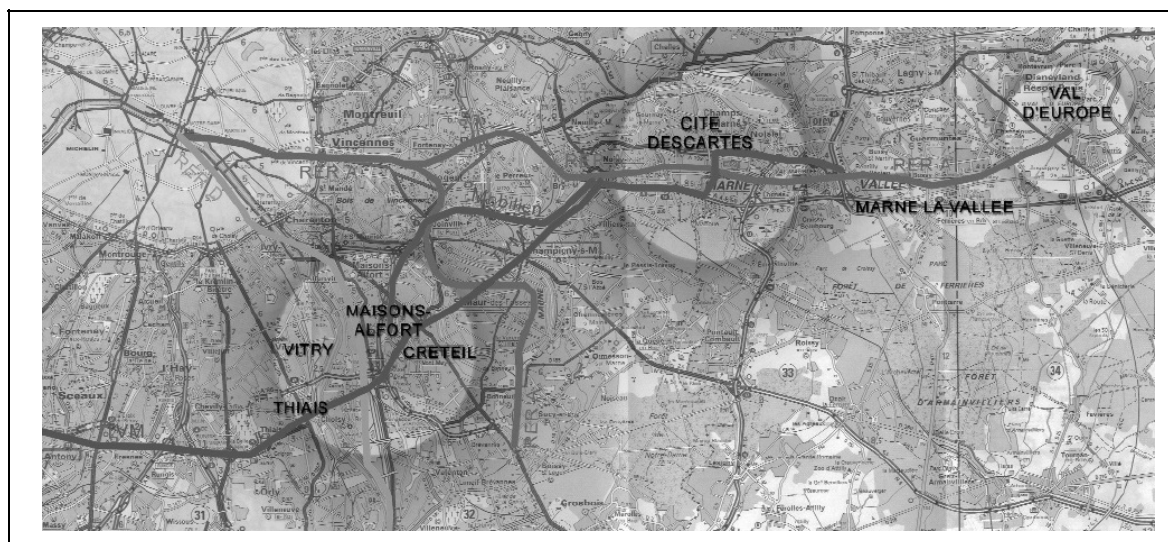
The President of Paris 12 believed that it was better to become associated with a large scientific university. The two respective faculties of medicine could also provide better competition to Paris Centre. The Science Faculty of Créteil could be boosted and Humanities and Social Sciences, weaker in Paris Sud, could therefore take a leading role inside the new PRES Universud Paris.

The negotiations also covered board representation, where Paris Sud deemed that votes should be in proportion with scientific power. In 2007, the change of president at Université Paris 12 changed the odds.

**The regional strategy**

The recently elected new president of Paris 12 considered moreover that this unbalanced project did not follow any regional strategy. Therefore, negotiations began with PRES UPE's President. In 2008, the Administrative Board of UP12VM accepted this new situation<sup>15</sup>. Eventually, five founding members formed this new PRES: four at Cité Descartes and one 20km further, Université Paris 12 Val de Marne.

The regional strategy was further pursued in 2010, when the PRES UPE changed president: all higher education institutions of East Paris, namely Maisons Alfort, Créteil, Vitry, Marne la Vallée (Cité Descartes and Val d'Europe), became members of PRES UPE.



**Figure 1** PRES UPE regional scope in East Paris

East Paris became a real Higher Education Area but it faced competition from the other parts of the Ile de France region (mainly Paris and the South of Paris). Consequently, it became important to focus on a strategy of differentiation based on East Paris' main scientific and academics strengths.

<sup>15</sup> In 2010, Université Paris 12 Val De Marne changed its name and became Université Paris-Est Créteil (UPEC). Université Marne la Vallée did the same in 2009 and became Université Paris-Est Marne la vallée (UPEMLV).

### 3.4 From regional policies to scientific and academic strategies

While PRES UPE had just been formed by five founding members, the national invitation to tender for ‘Campus’ funding, launched in 2008 to finance university infrastructure, was used as a platform to define new strategic orientations.

The PRES UPE President’s ambition was to build ‘a 21<sup>st</sup> century confederal university’. After much consultation and a diagnosis of the main academic and scientific strengths of each partner, the whole academic and research community, although rather dissipated, decided to focus on two major interdisciplinary orientations: i) the city, its environment and engineering and ii) health and society. These choices were the result of identification and consequent combination of shared strengths within each site and institution, la Cité Descartes aiming to become the centre of excellence for “city, environment and engineering”, and Créteil aspiring to become the centre of excellence for health and society.

At the end of 2010, thanks to this academic and scientific profiling, new associated members joined PRES UPE to reinforce both these priority and interdisciplinary fields: three Schools of Architecture, two of them in Paris; two more Schools of Engineering specializing in civil engineering, also in Paris, namely EIVP (École d’Ingénieurs de la Ville de Paris) and ESTP (École Supérieure des Travaux Publics, Grande École of Civil Engineering); and finally, in the field of health, ANSES (the National Agency of Health Security).

Thus, by June 2011, PRES UPE was composed of 16 members, located mainly in East Paris and in Paris itself (see appendix 1). The consortium brought together 45,000 students and 1,400 young doctoral researchers spread out over 100 research units belonging to the institutions forming the consortium. More than 500 doctoral students were undertaking research on city, environment and engineering, which allowed the consortium to reach a critical mass, with the intention of gaining a national and European leading position in this field.

**A ‘confederal’ university**

**A favourable critical mass**

## 4. PRES UPE: a strategic positioning along the way

The establishment of this new institution, which composed of a vast number of institutions with different missions and cultures, brought up difficult issues of strategic positioning that will now be examined.

### 4.1 Towards an 'adhocratic' structure<sup>16</sup>

In this kind of federative structure, the participating institutions hold a determining place, as they contribute human resources, offices and other financial means. Therefore, an overly rigid official structure would not help the projects progress because such a structure would be competing with the institutions themselves. Consequently, this meant that, step by step through negotiation, it was necessary to identify areas for consultation and collaborative work between the different people involved. Such a structure would at first focus on the main activities of PRES UPE and the available opportunities. At a later stage the stakeholders would suggest action lines that would allow each of them to find an added value within this organization.

During the first steps of PRES UPE establishment, for which a top-down approach was adopted, it proved essential to take the time to organize consultation structures, to enhance the ownership of the PRES structure by each member institution and to facilitate the creation of a common identity. Five working groups chaired by vice presidents or directors were set up and met monthly to share experiences and build common projects in the fields of international cooperation, documentation, technology transfer, information systems and communication. While regular meetings with the institutional directors and presidents and among the vice presidents became the main political processes, the administrative board remained the central strategic decision making organ of the PRES<sup>17</sup>.

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<sup>16</sup> In reference to Mintzberg, H, (1989), the adhocratic structure is a 'project based' organization with many mutual adjustment structures and 'grassroots' decision-making processes.

<sup>17</sup> The board is not elected (as it is in a university in France) but the 22 members are nominated by each institution with a specific distribution of votes depending on the contribution of each institution. The (5) founding members have more votes than the (16) associate members. The universities and the École des Ponts, have 4 members each, which gives them a stronger role in the decision-making process.

During the attempt to set up a confederal university, it rapidly became evident that it was necessary to concentrate on finding ways to offer added value that was clearly readable to each institution participating in PRES UPE. The structure would then follow the strategy.

## **4.2 A brand and a critical mass for the doctoral education and publications**

Since the creation of the PRES UPE in 2007, the three founding members had agreed to transfer their doctoral schools to PRES UPE and to use a single joint institutional signature, 'Université Paris Est', for all their publications. The objective was to attain the necessary critical mass in order to get more financing, to pool activities across doctoral schools, as well as to create an 'UPE' label of quality that could eventually promote and facilitate the readability of the PRES UPE at both national and international levels.

In 2009, PRES UPE, which brought together nine doctoral schools deriving from each of the participating institutions, decided to reorganize. The objective was to create a real feeling of belonging to the same academic community, to improve the existing performance and to strengthen research activities and education. The doctoral schools were aware of the fact that considerable work was needed in this area.

Following a number of mergers and splits, six interdisciplinary doctoral schools emerged. For instance, the Doctoral School 'Organizations, Markets and Institutions' brought economists, managers and jurists together, whereas 'Cultures and Society', gathered all the researchers in humanities and social sciences. 'Science, Engineering and Environment', brought together engineering sciences and fundamental sciences working on environmental issues. "City, Transport and Territory" (VTT), combined specialists coming from research laboratories working on engineering, economy, sociology and mobility.

In 2011, the six doctoral schools had 1,400 doctoral students, of whom 52 % were international students, and around 250 doctoral diploma degrees per year were granted. Even if these figures were still far from those French universities which featured in the Shanghai ranking<sup>18</sup>, the analysis of future prospects is important and above all the positioning of some of the doctoral schools is a determining factor for the success of the whole project. For example, the results of the Doctoral School VTT were among the highest in France in this field, as this Doctoral School brought together all the doctoral students of prestigious schools and research institutes making up the PRES.

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<sup>18</sup> For instance, Université Pierre et Marie Curie delivered 800 doctoral diploma degrees per year in 2011.



It seems that prioritising doctoral studies as an integrating element brought a clear added value to the consortium. Indeed, the overall budget for doctoral training within PRES UPE increased by 50 % in three years. Various training elements were set for all doctoral students, which allowed a certain level of interdisciplinarity and efficiency, notably in terms of research methodology, job opportunities, help for publication, presence at international conferences, grants for international mobility and invitations to foreign faculty members and researchers.

### **4.3 New competences shared to respond to “excellence initiatives” competitive calls**

Another opportunity to position the PRES appeared with the increase in competitive calls for proposals in the framework of the national Program of Investment for the Future (Programme d’Investissement d’Avenir, PIA), launched at the end of 2010. All applications were submitted through PRES UPE; the capacity to bring together (specific) stakeholders around new projects meant that it became a main activity, with the help of external consultants, specialized in the design of projects. Five projects were elaborated in the framework of the Excellence Laboratory (LABEX) call for proposals. Of those, four were selected in the two scientific priorities defined by UPE, ‘City’ and ‘Health’. Would they have succeeded if they had been directly developed and submitted by the individual institutions? Nothing allows us to confirm or dispute this. The ‘Initiative of Excellence’ application (IDEX) led to a project which built new connections between both priority orientations ‘city’ and ‘health’. This choice was clearly based on the experience of PRES UPE and the previous projects led with all the members in these fields. The proposal was not selected but one of the main reasons seemed to be that it had not reached the critical mass of its competitors, among them the three “big” PRES’s in the Region Ile de France<sup>19</sup>.

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<sup>19</sup> The winners are PRES Sorbonne Paris Cité, PRES Sorbonne Université, PRES Paris Saclay, PRES Paris Sciences Lettres, and Université de Strasbourg, PRES Université de Bordeaux, Université Aix Marseille and PRES Université de Toulouse.

#### 4.4 Resistance to sharing some competences

The area of international activity is a good example of where resistance was encountered. The PRES UPE wanted to be a vector to reinforce and improve the international development of the institutions. Indeed, when Université Paris 12 Val de Marne decided to be part of PRES UPE, its President accepted to transfer part of its international activities to the PRES and as a result restructured its internal organization by delegating the strategic development, as well as the operational international engineering activity to the new structure.

In the case of Université UPEMLV, it was also decided not to have an international vice-presidency anymore and to let the PRES organize a coordinated development. The objective was to define a common international policy around strategic partners and to convert UPE into an efficient platform for the development of European projects. A vice-presidency for international development as well as an operational structure for planning international projects was established at the PRES. A permanent working group with strategic objectives met monthly to define priorities and implement new projects.

Each one of the founding members had to contribute to internationalisation by delegating means and notably human resources. However, it turned out rather rapidly that beyond the exchanges of practices and experiences, essential in view of these very different organizations, and a handful of common projects targeted at foreign institutions, the founding members did not want to go further. The ‘International Field’ remained a private hunting ground where each institution could find itself competing with the activities of the PRES. Besides, at this point of the development of UPE, to speak of common international policy was certainly too premature and, in the eyes of the stakeholders too weakly linked to a real added value, even though they had not clearly defined their priorities for this area.

**International activities:  
a competence hard  
to transfer**

It seemed logical then to refocus on both the international development of doctoral schools and activities of benchmarking, while also prioritising the framework of the two scientific priorities defined by all the members.

Beyond doctoral schools and the response to calls for proposal, all attempts to build a ‘confederal university’, by progressively transferring institutional competences to the PRES UPE have turned out to be ineffective as the founding members regarded such efforts as of little relevance or high potential costs.

## 5. Conclusion

The creation of the various PRES in France derived from the public authorities' desire to bring together structures of higher education and research to serve a dual objective within a regulated framework. On the one hand, the goal was to create a set of resources to better face international competition exacerbated since the appearance of international rankings. On the other hand, the aim was to modernize and optimize a very fragmented and poorly readable French landscape of higher education and research, by achieving possible economies of scale. The entire process has been implemented within a law defining the missions and the legal status of such new public institutions.

For five years (2006 – 2011), the majority of French institutions engaged in this cooperative strategy, struggling along and looking for structures and content suitable to defining and implementing common strategies for the benefit of every stakeholder. Of the 21 PRES that have been created, by mid-2012 two mergers had already taken place and others were underway<sup>20</sup>. The diversity of the cases reflects the specificity of the French higher education and research system at regional and institutional levels. One merger, Université de Strasbourg, didn't occur due to PRES but appeared as a way of bringing together three very specialized universities which were not competing with each other, in a context where institutional and regional cooperation was already high. Would the three universities of Marseille and Aix en Provence (in competition with each other) have merged without the PRES? Again, it is not so easy to answer this question but it appears to be very clear that the political will of the university presidents has been critical and decisive. The commitment of the regional or local authorities has played an important role as well. However, since a top down decision-making approach was taken at the beginning of the process, the capacity to involve the whole academic and administrative community still remains a very big challenge.

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<sup>20</sup> Université Aix Marseille, Université de Lorraine. (2012), Université de Bordeaux (2014), PRES Paris Cité and PRES Sorbonne universités (2015), were much more influenced by the Excellence Initiative requirements than the PRES law.

Through the analysis of a concrete case in a very competitive region, PRES Université Paris Est, it has been possible to show that:

- The cooperative strategy to create this new public institution was not clear initially but was built up progressively, according to power relationships between the stakeholders and the mutual interests that each one could find on an ad hoc basis. The strategies that prevailed during these first years changed from institutional interest strategies to regional interest strategies and finally to strategies based on scientific priorities.
- The alliances that were formed do not call into question the integrity of each member-institution. The member institutions maintain their prerogative of governance and have deliberately accepted the transfer of competence for the delivery of doctoral programs. However, activities that have truly been developed on a cooperation basis between institutions have not been easy to find. After much procrastination, it has become clear that the activities which have stood out have been the ones where a real added value could be identified, often in the link between universities and their local environment, where the envisioning and setting up of partnerships was a genuine necessity. The choice to focus on two scientific priorities and through interdisciplinary approaches around “city” and “health” is certainly one of the main outcomes of these last five years. This choice has been possible because, in each institution (university ‘Grande École’ and research organisation), “city” or “health” had already been identified as a strength at a regional, national or international level. Therefore, combining all their strength within the PRES could be a way to give PRES UPE the capacity to build a strong, attractive and competitive cluster, on both a national and international scale. The risk of weakening the other areas in each institution was lower if the PRES could really generate new funding and more international readability.

**Transfers of competence  
with a real added value**

The ground covered by PRES UPE and its results have not yet been externally evaluated, but for the leadership teams of all the member institutions, there is now a “before and after” PRES existence.

## **Appendix 1: List of PRES UPE members (June 2011)**

### **Founding members:**

- Ecole des Ponts Paris Tech (ENPC)
- Ecole nationale vétérinaire Maisons Alfort (ENVA)
- ESIEE Paris
- Institut français des sciences et technologies des transports, de l'aménagement et des réseaux (IFSTTAR)
- Université Paris Est créteil Val de Marne (UPEC)
- Université Paris-Est Marne la vallée (UPEMLV)

### **Associate members**

- Agence nationale de sécurité sanitaire de l'alimentation, de l'environnement et du travail (ANSES)
- Ecole des ingénieurs de la ville de paris (EIVP)
- Ecole nationale d'architecture de Paris-Belleville
- Ecole nationale d'architecture de Paris-Malaquais
- Ecole nationale d'architecture de la ville, des territoires à Marne la vallée
- Ecole spéciale des travaux publics, du bâtiment et de l'industrie (ESTP)
- Institut géographique national (IGN)
- Centre scientifique et technique du bâtiment (CSTB)
- Institut national de l'audiovisuel (INA)
- Pôle de compétitivité Advancity & mobilité

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