

From “temple” to “research university”? Discourses on the internationalisation of the *Écoles normales supérieures*

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When it comes to international rankings such as the Academic Ranking of World Universities also known as the Shanghai-Ranking, France is not placed at the top in global comparison. Orivel (2004, p. 2) blamed this on, among other things, the division of the French university system into universities and elite educational institutions, the so-called *grandes écoles*. According to his argumentation, these elite institutions, having educated the French top executives for centuries, monopolised the best students to the detriment of universities and research. The *Écoles normales supérieures* occupy a special position in the *grandes écoles* system. Especially the *ENS de la rue d’Ulm* regards itself as an institution from which the future research elite emerges (see ENS, 2013). Pierre Bourdieu (1988, p. xix) located this institution at “the apex of the whole academic hierarchy”.

In the course of internationalisation processes affecting the French higher education system and the concomitant competition dimensions, caused among other things by rankings, the traditional, rather small and internationally less visible *grandes écoles* come under pressure while still occupying the top places within national borders. Pierre Veltz (2007, p. 59) assumed that these institutions are “particularly affected by global changes”¹ due to their strong foundation in the national culture.

The contribution will focus on the academic identity patterns of the *Écoles normales supérieures* – especially on those of the *ENS de la rue d’Ulm* and *ENS de Cachan* – taking into consideration current transformation processes focusing on the dimension of internationalisation. The qualitative-empirical study is based on a corpus of data drawn from self-representation discourses of the higher-education institutions in question, comprising 25 expert interviews with ENS professors, the institutions’ websites and brochures as well as participant observation of culture-related events (e.g., welcome events for new students,

¹ All translations are the responsibility of the author.

graduation ceremonies, etc.).² The main purpose of the contribution will be the presentation of some of the results of the empirical material analysis focusing on the discourses of internationalisation and the concomitant repositioning of the elite institutions in the current transformation processes of the French higher education system.

In a theoretic dimension, the research project positions itself within critical research on elites. It continues especially what could now be called the classical works of Pierre Bourdieu and his colleagues on the French system of elite education (e.g., Bourdieu, 1989; Bourdieu/de Saint Martin, 1978, 1987; Bourdieu/Wacquant, 1991). The data analysis will be conducted on the basis of the methodology of the documentary method (e.g., Bohnsack, 2010; Nohl 2010) and refers to the discourse concept of Michel Foucault (1969, 1971).

To sum up, the contribution will respond to a research desideratum of empirical studies, mainly of qualitative nature, of internationalisation in the French system of elite education (e.g., Wagner, 1998; Lazuech, 1998, 1999; Darchy-Koechlin/Draelants, 2010; Draelants, 2011). The main objective is to show how the *Écoles normales supérieures* are positioning themselves in the process of internationalisation and in this context (re-)shaping their academic identity. It will provide new insights into recent transformations of this system.

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² The data were collected from October 2010 to July 2011 during a research residence at the *Centre Maurice Halbwachs* at the *École normale supérieure de la rue d'Ulm* in Paris funded by the *German Academic Exchange Service* (DAAD) (first research results see Schippling 2012, 2013 a, b). The planned contribution is based on a secondary analysis of these data in view of internationalisation processes. The research project entitled "French Elite Institutions in the Process of Internationalisation. A qualitative analysis of the *Écoles normales supérieures*" is funded by the *German Research Foundation* (DFG).

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