Highlighting Systemic Inequalities: The Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on French Higher Education

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INTRODUCTION

After several months of protests within the French academic community against a new law on higher education (HE) and research, the movement culminated with a strike and protests on 5 March 2020 under the rallying cry 'Today, university and research stop!'. A few days later, universities had to close because of the lockdown proclaimed by President Macron due to the rising COVID-19 infection rates. The congruence of these two crises provides a good starting point to reflect on the pandemic's effects on the French HE system.

This contribution tackles the impact of the pandemic with a focus on the growing differentiation between higher education institutions (HEIs). It deals primarily with the system level and the macro level of decisions and policies conceived by the highest executives (President Macron and

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the Ministry of Higher Education and Research, based on recommendations by the Ministry of Health).

In what follows I show how the construction of the public health priority (the pandemic problem) has conflicted with the priorities of HE (the teaching and learning problem). These conflicting narratives have shaped policy implementation: the public health priority was challenged by the HE minister's will to show that she cared for the students' well-being and the growing demand for on-site classes. Thus, the management of the pandemic in French HE has led to a permanent reorganisation of teaching. The chapter asks to what extent this changing regulatory framework has affected the functioning of HEIs depending on their status, resources, size, and other particularities. This requires considering the meso level and looking into how different HEIs have dealt with the leeway granted to them to organise remote, hybrid, or on-site teaching.

Crucially, attempts by different policy players to gain legitimacy in the face of strong public criticism made the implementation of the public health measures (lockdown and distance learning) even more chaotic and disruptive.

The chapter draws on 34 interviews conducted within the framework of the international research group on 'The Effects of the Pandemic on European Higher Education', as well as on a questionnaire with over 4300 responses.[1] It also analyses the legal and official documents related to the framework in which HEIs have had to operate. The chapter helps refine the approach highlighting distinctions between research-oriented and teaching-oriented HEIs on the one hand, and between Universities and *Grandes Écoles* on the other. Pointing out these distinctions is important but not sufficient to understand French responses to the pandemic. The refined qualitative and quantitative data show differences in anticipations and adjustments to changing health conditions. These differences are substantial between the richest among the *Grandes Écoles*, whose resources far exceed those of public universities. However, there are also noticeable discrepancies between universities, depending on factors such as governance problems, internal conflicts, cohort sizes, proportions of students coming from underprivileged social groups, and disciplines.

The chapter is structured as follows. In the first part, it presents the pre-existing conditions of the French HE system and analyses how the Ministry of HE, bound by demands from the Ministry of Health and the President himself, designed the changing framework applied to French HEI. In the

second part, the chapter discusses how the French universities and *Grandes Écoles* responded to the pandemic and how these responses, as well as the pandemic as such, affected the academic community.

Investigating the Pandemic's Impact: A Mixed Methodology

Following the process-tracing method, the lens of public policy analysis was applied to the study of the pandemic's impact on French HE, focusing on policy sequences and explaining change. The leading policy players involved in framing decisions that affected the operation of HEIs during the pandemic were identified. Process tracing, which used to be considered a metaphor, has since been recognised a valuable analytical tool in qualitative studies (Bennett & Checkel, 2015). While many variations on the method co-exist, scholars agree that it is useful to identify causal mechanisms of consecutive policy sequences (Palier & Trampusch, 2018). Process tracing 'is not only a method that helps identify and highlight causal mechanisms; it also aims at studying their contents. It goes beyond highlighting the correlation between dependent and independent variables to show what links causal factors, events, sequences, and outcomes' (Palier, 2019, p. 512). Process tracing is not necessarily a linear reconstruction and it may involve a multi-causal and inductive explanation. Referring to Mayntz's (2002) work on 'causal reconstruction', which considers historicity and complexity, Guzzini (2017, p. 748), suggests that 'interpretivism can include a form of explanation, if redefined, by developing social/causal mechanisms in an interpretivist process-tracing that answers the "how possible" questions'.

In order to understand how French HE reacted to the pandemic at the system level, process tracing as an 'analytical tool phrasing descriptive and causal inferences' helps us to focus on the 'unfolding events or situation over time' in order to 'characterize key steps in the process' (Collier, 2011, pp. 184, 824). Once the process has been evidenced, we will try to explain its main sequences and changes drawing on Tannenwald (1999, in Collier, 2011).

The chapter draws on 34 semi-directive interviews conducted in four HEIs, which we found representative of the French HE system: three universities and a Grande Ecole (see Table 4.1). Additionally, interviews were conducted with two representatives of the Ministry of HE and Research, five representatives of the CPU (University Rectors'

Table 4.1   French HEIs in which interviews were conducted in 2021

HEI 1 is a large, internationally recognised, research-oriented Paris-based university. Interviews were conducted at the Law School and at the Department of Political Science, and at top executive and administrative levels.

HEI 2 is a medium-sized university based in a smaller post-industrial city and is more teaching than research-oriented. Interviewees came from the political science, economics, and IT departments. Several top executives and staff members (in charge of HR, student affairs, IR) were interviewed, as well as four student representatives.

HEI 3 is a small-size *Grande École*. It is public but can be considered semi-private as the students pay moderate (compared to private HEIs) tuition fees, dependent on their parents' income. Interviewees include the school director, the administrative staff in charge of IR and student affairs, and academics with teaching and management responsibilities.

HEI 4 is a large university, the recipient of an 'excellence fund' (IDEX), and considers itself a research university. We conducted interviews at the top executive and administrative levels. We also met with administrative representatives, academics, and students at the Faculty of Law.

Case 4b is an institute within HEI 4, but one enjoying a considerable degree of autonomy, offering vocational training (IUT, Institut Universitaire de Technologie). We conducted interviews with executives, academics, and students of the Department of Communication studies.

conference), including five current or former university rectors and a representative of the Conférence des Grandes Écoles (Conference of selective public and private higher schools' rectors).

The chapter refers to documents issued mainly by the Ministry of Higher Education and Research, but also to data obtained from the Rectors' conference (minutes of an ad hoc working group of university rectors dealing with the pandemic) and from the Conference of Grande Écoles's directors and to the debates on HE that have been aired in both the general and the specialised press during the pandemic. Moreover, the chapter builds on recent data drawn from over 4300 questionnaire responses. This data helps us understand how different HEIs have addressed the COVID-19 crisis and how the academic community has experienced the pandemic sequences and their effects.

A Questionnaire on French Higher Education's Handling of the Pandemic[2]

With the help of two research assistants, we have produced data using an ad hoc questionnaire that we designed and circulated in May–June 2021 among students, academic teachers, researchers, and administrative staff. We collected 4312 complete responses, including over two-thirds (2944) from students. A total of 951 responses came from academic teachers (22%), 362 from administrative staff (8.4%), and 55 from researchers (CNRS mainly) who do not necessarily teach. About 81% of the answers come from universities, about 13% from *Grandes Écoles*, and about 3.8% from preparatory classes based in lycées. The questionnaire was filled out by members of a vast number of HEIs (94% of which are public) in the whole country. Most respondents (64%) are female. While most items were multiple-choice questions, several open-ended questions were asked. The answers to these questions were coded and analysed with the help of the TXM textometry open-source software.

An aspect that will not be expanded upon in this chapter is the emotional quality of some of the interviews. Emotions such as anger, a sense of injustice or vulnerability, frustration, weariness, and also pride of having soldiered on were voiced by many students and teachers. As 'emotions and emotional issues are central to social and political life' (Soss, 2015, p. 180), it seems important to stress that the data we have generated contains accounts of the pandemic's impact on the emotional state and mental health of the interviewees. From a public policy perspective, several decisions announced by the French executive were justified in reference to emotions (see also Clarke in this volume).

A Centralised and Stratified HE System Facing the COVID-19 Pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic hit a HE system that was already suffering from the costs of decades of public under-investment in the context of massification of access to HE (Beaud & Millet, 2021; Carpentier &

Courtois, 2020). In the months preceding the pandemic, draft reforms of HE and research had triggered mass protests. Against this backdrop, we retrace the consecutive sequences of HE governance in the context of the pandemic and the relationship between the Ministry of HE, the Rectors' conference, and the HEIs' leadership.

How It Started: The Structural Preconditions of the French HE System

The French HE system is dominated by the public sector and by universities, which, respectively, accounted for 80% and 60% of the student population in 2020 (MESRI, 2020). It is characterised by broad access to the universities since the *baccalauréat* diploma (the nationwide examination marking the end of secondary education) gives its holders automatic access to universities, but not other HEIs. In the 1980s, at a time when roughly a third of young adults held that diploma, Socialist party governments promoted the goal of getting *baccalauréat* success rates up to 80%, as a result of which thousands of students from underprivileged backgrounds entered university (Beaud, 2003; Carpentier & Courtois, 2022). During the pandemic, *baccalauréat* success rates reached an unprecedented level (93.9% in 2021), which contributed to the further growth of the student population (MESRI, 2021b).

Beyond the primarily public orientation of the HE sector, structural differences between HEIs have had a tendency to exacerbate over time. The public funds invested in universities, 'Grandes écoles', and 'prep classes' (*Classes Préparatoires aux Grandes Écoles*, CPGE) that train high school alumni for competitive entrance exams of the *Grandes Écoles* are unequal. The average annual cost per HE student in 2019 was 11,530 €. But the average public expense for a student in a prep class was 15,710 €/year while the average cost per university student was 10,110 € (MESRI, 2021a). These average numbers hide significant disparities as in less funded universities, public expenditure averages only 3000 €/year per student. The students of a few of the most prestigious *Grandes Écoles* designed to train higher public civil servants, such as the Ecole Normale Supérieure, Ecole Nationale d'Administration (ENA) and Ecole Polytechnique, are recruited among the most privileged social groups and receive a salary during their studies. Therefore, the annual cost of studying in these most selective and prestigious HEIs is far higher than at public universities. An

annex to the 2017 budget law estimated the yearly cost of an ENA student at 83,206 € (République française, 2016, p. 206).

Carpentier and Courtois (2020) indicate that the French HE system is structured in a tripartite way between 'universities (mainly non-selective and public), *Grandes Écoles* (highly selective, public or private), and 2-year vocational institutions (selective through limited capacity, often public)'. However, the traditional distinction between *Grandes Écoles* and Universities does not reflect the growing diversification of the French HE system.[3] Firstly, the competitive funding schemes introduced in the mid-2000s (Programme d'Investissements d'Avenir, PIA, Initiative d'Excellence, and the National Research Agency, ANR, see Musselin, 2017) were aimed at promoting major universities that would be able to compete in global academic rankings. This policy was temporarily halted during the first lockdown when other priorities emerged, such as the need to assist students facing severe precarity.

Secondly, beyond their unequal funding system, the differences between universities and *Grandes Écoles* tend to be increasingly blurry as some universities and degrees have become highly selective over the last few years. Thus, the social composition of student cohorts tends to be increasingly stratified owing to a new post-baccalaureate recruitment system called *Parcoursup* set up under Minister Frédérique Vidal (2017–2022). *Parcoursup* enables universities to define the profile of the students they seek to recruit and, therefore, select them. Some prestigious universities within the greater Paris area have introduced drastic selection criteria to recruit only the best high school alumni (*bacheliers*). Also, at the master's level, competition and selectivity have increased in some disciplines and institutions (Blanchard et al., 2020). Finally, some private HEIs termed 'Écoles' are less prestigious than the *Grandes Écoles*, and lack ministerial recognition.

The dependence on state funding could be a stabilising factor during external shocks such as the COVID-19 pandemic. While HEIs in the UK or the US have been subjected to far-reaching privatisation for a few decades (Carpentier, 2021) and are as a result heavily dependent on fees and on international students, this is not the case of French public HEIs. Instead, the pandemic highlighted their structural underfunding. The structural inequalities stemming from the historical trajectories of the French HE system have been a significant factor shaping the system's response to the pandemic, helping it to absorb this external shock. The pandemic thus made these existing inequalities more visible. A minority of

students who received a salary from the state and who come from privileged social groups were protected by their status and working conditions. Students from underprivileged social groups who lost their jobs were more exposed to precarity.

A Tale of Two Crises: Collision Between the Pandemic and Funding Cuts

The public health crisis and its fallout on teaching, research, and administration erupted at a point where the French HE system had already been experiencing a crisis for 15 years. Since the mid-2000s, reforms promoting excellence and international competitiveness of domestic research have made French HEIs participants in a 'big race' (Musselin, 2017), but they have also triggered large-scale protests (Aust & Gozlan, 2018) against the backdrop of austerity policies and budget cuts (Nixon, 2017). Considering the lockdown came after months of protests and demonstrations against the Research programming law (2021–2030) and President Macron's reform of pensions, we hypothesise that it had particularly disruptive consequences in the faculties where teaching had been interrupted by weeks, sometimes months, of strike and protests. Some of the universities affected by the social movement were prestigious HEIs such as HEI 1.

When lockdown took effect, many research labs and scientific journals were fighting a battle against the Ministry of Higher Education. In Autumn 2019 and in the first months of 2020, protests were held against the draft Law on Research Programming (*Loi de Programmation de la Recherche*, LPR) and the underfunding of the HE and research system (Flacher & Harari-Kermadec, 2021). Over the last decade, universities have absorbed most of the excess student population resulting from demographic trends, while the number of permanent teaching staff remained stable (Molénat, 2018; Beaud & Millet, 2021). As new staff recruitments decreased, the yearly expense per student dwindled. [4]

Lecturers mobilised to denounce their poor working conditions and growing precarity (Noûs, 2019). They stressed that on average, temporary agents, who teach a third of all classes in universities, are paid less than the minimum wage (Harari-Kermadec & Noûs, 2020). The effects of the COVID-19 pandemic are therefore difficult to isolate, because that crisis met a context that was already unstable and tense, as the use of 'instruments of competition' (Musselin, 2017, 2020) promoted greater institutional differentiation (Harari-Kermadec & Sargeac, 2021). This brings to

the fore a set of pertinent questions: To what extent has the pandemic reinforced structural inequalities, that is, the gap between underfunded HEIs and those that receive the bulk of public funding? To what extent are *Grandes Écoles* and research-intensive universities better able to absorb the shock? While it is still too early to establish whether the lockdowns had a negative impact on HE funding, the survey results show that the perception of inequalities in the academic community has become more acute.

The conflation of the temporalities of the contested HE reform and of the pandemic had direct effects on the relationship between the academic community and the Ministry. First, it helps understand the mistrust expressed by part of the academic community against the minister during the pandemic. Secondly, it explains why university rectors frequently consult with the Ministry.[5]

Muddling Through: The Central Administration's Management of the Health Crisis

The French regulatory HE framework has gone through several changes, especially during the academic year 2020–2021. Since the onset of the pandemic, most universities have experienced three chaotic semesters: the summer semester of 2020 and the 2020–2021 academic year. The sequencing of the pandemic's management sheds light on the power relations between different poles of the executive.

Decision Centralisation and Presidentialisation of Crisis Management
The first lockdown, announced by President Macron in March 2020, which meant that schools and universities effectively had to close, came as a shock.[6] In this unprecedented situation, HE Ministry officials spent at least four weeks making sure that the governing bodies of the universities were able to carry on with their work. In some universities, elections for governing bodies had to be rescheduled.[7] This context of strong uncertainty required close and frequent dialogue between university rectors and the Ministry of HE's General Directorate for Higher Education and Occupational Integration (DGESIP). The Ministry delegated academic consultants to answer questions and created a website to gather the data relative to the existing regulation, for sharing best practices, and FAQs.[8] The dialogue with the Rector's conference presidency and secretary-general became more frequent than usual. Some participants described this system as 'Jacobin', as university representatives constantly sought

advice from the Ministry, despite the supposed legal autonomy enjoyed by public universities.[9] The presidents of universities also sought the advice of the Rectors' conference on issues pertaining to the reorganisation of teaching and human resources.[10]

The pandemic made the Ministry dependent on negotiations at the highest executive levels, which included the President's Office (referred to as 'Elysée'), the Prime Minister's cabinet (referred to as 'Matignon'), and the Ministry of Health. In this inter-ministerial negotiation, the Minister of HE and Research, Frédérique Vidal, tried to speak in the name of the academic community. However, she had to defer to the decisions of the Ministry of Health and of the president himself. Starting in summer 2020, Vidal asked for a return to face-to-face teaching as soon as possible and for material help. This insistence on in-person instruction was a way to placate those academics who had become distrustful during the first lockdown, believing that the Ministry was eager to impose distance learning in the long run to save money.[11] However, the exclusive focus on face-to-face teaching, without anticipating a possible second wave of cases, resulted in a chaotic and unstable organisation of teaching.

The provisions that affected HEIs the most related to the possibility of on-site or distance teaching and learning. The academic year 2020–2021 was characterised by frequent legal framework changes, which impacted teaching and caused considerable workload increase. Between the instructions of the Minister of Higher Education and Research and the official announcements of President Macron, no less than five consecutive adaptations of the teaching process had to be arranged during the academic year. Before showing how HEIs implemented these provisions, we must unfold the 'jerky' sequences of the policy process that was imposed on HE during the academic year 2020–2021 (Fig. 4.1).

Inequities at the Fore of the Race Against Time
While the first and most drastic lockdown concerned most sectors—as well as schools—those that followed in Autumn 2020 and Spring 2021 did not affect universities and the preparatory classes to the *Grandes Écoles* in the same way. These unequal effects have fuelled an increasingly heated debate on inequalities and student precarity.

In September 2020, most HEIs began the semester with on-site teaching (providing masks to students), but they had to switch to a 'hybrid' mode a few weeks later. In October, the Minister reduced the room occupation rate to 50% after images of packed lecture halls were published in
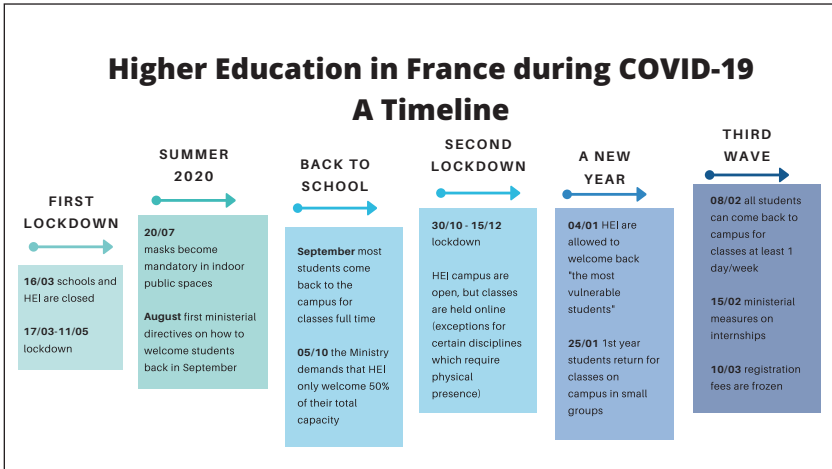
Higher Education in France during COVID-19
A Timeline

FIRST LOCKDOWN

16/03 schools and HEI are closed

17/03-11/05 lockdown

SUMMER 2020

20/07 masks become mandatory in indoor public spaces

August first ministerial directives on how to welcome students back in September

BACK TO SCHOOL

September most students come back to the campus for classes full time

05/10 the Ministry demands that HEI only welcome 50% of their total capacity

SECOND LOCKDOWN

30/10 - 15/12 lockdown

HEI campus are open, but classes are held online (exceptions for certain disciplines which require physical presence)

A NEW YEAR

04/01 HEI are allowed to welcome back "the most vulnerable students"

25/01 1st year students return for classes on campus in small groups

THIRD WAVE

08/02 all students can come back to campus for classes for at least 1 day/week

15/02 ministerial measures on internships

10/03 registration fees are frozen

Fig. 4.1 Higher education in France during COVID-19. Source: The author, based on publicly available data

the media. A third system came into force in November, consecutive to President Macron's 28 October announcement of a second lockdown due to skyrocketing infections. Universities had to switch to distance teaching, although the libraries remained open under certain restrictive conditions. As this second lockdown began, the issue of *inequity* surfaced as students of the same age found themselves in very different teaching and learning situations. Most preparatory classes to the *Grandes Écoles*, situated in lycées, remained fully open, as the lycées depended on the Ministry of Education and were not affected by the lockdown. This caused distress among university students, who were locked in their rooms (or sometimes crowded family flats) while their peers in the prep classes (coming from more privileged social groups) went on with business as usual.[12]

With each new official announcement, the Ministry had to follow up on presidential demands and hastily publish new decrees. This changing regulatory framework produced a permanent tension within the universities: students were waiting on information; faculties and academics had to rethink teaching entirely within a matter of days while waiting on official recommendations from Rectors' offices. The Rectors' offices, for their part, were waiting on official texts from the Ministry. Consequently, the recommended deadlines were often impossible to meet.

This impasse was strikingly illustrated when university Rectors received a Ministerial decree on a possible and limited reopening of face-to-face teaching on Sunday 20 December 2020, the first day of the Christmas break. One of the rectors asked whether Christmas elves were supposed to help university personnel organise the return from the holidays while the university was closed.[13] This situation, which fuelled the resentment against the Ministry, had to do with the lengthy inter-ministerial negotiations involved in the policy process. Regulations proposed by the Ministry of HE had to be validated by the Ministry of Health, the President, and the Prime Minister.[14] Some university executives announced that it would take weeks or months to revise their teaching organisation.

The fifth mode of teaching at universities since the beginning of the academic year was announced by President Macron on 21 January 2021 during a visit to the Saclay Campus. Students were now allowed to return to campus for one day per week (or with a 20% occupation rate) and entitled to a one-euro meal in the campus canteens. This was a reaction to shocking revelations on student precarity in early 2021, when images of students lining up at food banks made national headlines. Student protests are usually observed with caution by policymakers. During a January 2021 meeting with students, the president acknowledged 'a form of injustice' between the preparatory classes and the universities, which the partial reopening of classrooms was meant to repair.[15]

The president's announcement produced mixed results. In the same HEI, sometimes within the same faculty, different solutions were applied. Some departments took this opportunity to resume on-site teaching, based on a liberal interpretation of the president's declaration. Others, especially those dealing with large numbers of students, decided to carry on with distance teaching. Some students who had terminated the lease on their rented flat and moved back with their families could not come back to campus in person. President Macron's announcement of a third lockdown, on 31 March 2021, resulted in further differentiation between HEIs. The Rectors' conference welcomed the possibility of face-to-face teaching under certain conditions (CPU, 2021). Most of the universities that had opted for distance teaching maintained this principle until the end of the academic year. Some Grandes Écoles, which had resumed in-person instruction at the beginning of 2021, decided to follow an 'ethic of responsibility' and went back to distance teaching.[16]

Although governmental decisions could have devastating effects on the community (students that suffered under lockdown and teachers swamped

with work), policy-making under crisis also had more neutral outcomes. First, the relationship between universities' (and *Grandes Écoles*) Rectors, the Ministry and the Rector's conference tightened. Both the Ministry and the CPU strived to provide information, help universities to carry on their primary functions, and provide material help to students.

> What has changed and has been appreciated is that we had real exchanges on what was going on in the universities … I think that the CPU has really adapted to the demands and needs of university rectors; we have been the intermediaries between the ministry and the universities.

Secondly, interviewees at different levels stressed that HEIs have coped with the crisis, enabled the existing governing bodies to carry on with their work, ensured a minimum degree of pedagogical continuity, brought back exchange students, and took care of the international students remaining in France.[17]

A top administrative manager at HEI 2 states that his 'university has reacted rather well to the introduction of teaching and research conditions that were very peculiar and deteriorated. We have been fairly flexible. (…) our academic community has had a good response to the crisis and approach to crisis management, knowing what its role is and implemented interesting tools, even though I am aware that distance teaching is difficult for students and academics'.

A head of a Grande Ecole defined the pandemic period as an ordeal that may have some positive outcomes for his HEI and serve as an opportunity to accelerate some reforms that were already under way.

> I think that this crisis is creative destruction, as Schumpeter used to say. There are things that we wanted to implement that we will be able to implement much earlier and on which we will be able to lean on to move forward.[18]

A high-level executive of HEI 4, when asked about the potentially positive aspects of the pandemic management, said:

> We've hung on. We switched 50000 or 100000 hours from face-to-face to remote teaching within days. There were lots of difficulties, but still. (…) We did it (…) I find that our colleagues, heads of departments and research centers, administrative staff, have done a great job. This really is a beautiful success. (Interview HEI 4, May 2021)

On the other hand, some department heads, including from prestigious HEI, painted a sobering picture of the pandemic's management:

> I get the sense that for universities, the pandemic has highlighted what it has also highlighted in hospitals, meaning a lack of resources that everyone has been aware of for years but which is finally blowing up in our faces and well, we manage, we patch things together somehow, but that's all we're doing, patching things together. Universities in France have really been neglected, the students anyway, since the universities closed while the Grandes Écoles remained open, so why were we closed?[19]

While the top leadership at the Ministry and HEIs underline their teams' commitment and their institutions' resilience, accounts coming from academics, administrative staff, and students paint a more nuanced picture of the pandemic's effects on their everyday activity and on their workplaces, as the next section shows.

Lost in Translation: How HEIs Responded to the Crisis

Having retraced the political and epidemic context that informed the successive policy sequences that have shaped French HE since March 2020, we can turn to the HEI level to see how the implementation of the governmental measures affected the academic community. The responses to the pandemic at the institutional level shed light on the divide between universities and *Écoles* but suggest a refined assessment of this problem. While it is too early to ascertain whether the pandemic will have lasting effects on the structural inequalities between HEIs, the data show that these inequalities have been felt acutely in the academic community. The pandemic has deeply affected both students and teachers alike.

Facing the Lockdowns: Beyond the Universities/Grandes Écoles Divide

Overall, the pandemic produced a situation of extreme uncertainty and tension within an already exhausted academic community. The first lockdown came as a major shock. Responses to this unprecedented situation do not only reflect differences between universities and *Grandes Écoles*. Those were relatively easy to predict: considering the differential in

expenses per student, the *Grandes Écoles* were usually better equipped to weather the storm. Some of them were already using new technologies such as videoconferencing tools and distance teaching and they had more developed international cooperation and extensive mobility programmes. But interviews also show significant differences between universities, depending on the local context, pre-existing governance problems, and in part the size of the HEI in question.

The first difference between HEIs lay in the handling of the beginning of the academic year 2020. Many university rectors used the leeway afforded by the Ministry's flexible approach to announce a return to 100% on-site classes in September 2020. In these HEIs, the teaching staff faced a significant work overload due to the continuous modifications of the official instruction framework. They had to readapt their working environment constantly.

For those providers, mainly *Grandes Écoles*, which had already anticipated that the pandemic was not over after the first lockdown (Summer 2020), the transition to the 50% room occupation rate was swift. At the time, many of them had introduced safety measures such as a 50% attendance cap, and blended/hybrid teaching. Smaller cohorts, making for easier management of lecture rooms, enabled a flexible approach. Secondly, some *Écoles* managed to resume face-to-face teaching by January–February 2021, which proved more difficult for universities dealing with larger cohorts. Smaller *Écoles* took more liberty in implementing the official instructions. Some of them set in-person student attendance at 50% for 2021.[20] During the first lockdown, the implementation of distance learning was very chaotic, putting pressure on lecturers and students. In 2020, most HEIs did not have adequate tools for distance learning; teachers were muddling through, sending their course contents per e-mail, or recording them in an improvised manner.[21]

In many universities, no on-site teaching took place until autumn 2020. There were social reasons involved: faculties were aware that given the higher share of students from underprivileged social backgrounds in universities, some students did not have sufficient equipment or a good internet connection. Recording courses—or sending their written version per e-mail—was considered socially fair. This reasoning did not take into account the growing isolation and disorientation of students who missed a regular schedule and in-person exchanges. The organisation of distance instruction was a factor that deepened inequalities between universities and private tertiary education institutions or public *Grandes Écoles*. In the

latter, a more coherent online teaching system had already been implemented during the first lockdown.

The main common objective set up by the Ministry and university Rectorates was to ensure 'pedagogical continuity'. However, the latter terms were left up to the departments. During the first lockdown, some faculty members and administrative staff spent a considerable amount of time calling the students to ensure they were equipped and did not require extra help. This kind of assistance happened both at universities and *Grandes Écoles* but was easier in the latter, considering that their cohorts are both smaller and their students are better equipped.

However, beyond the usual divide between universities and *Grandes Écoles*, many faculty members consider that their alma mater did the best they could to adjust to this unprecedented situation.[22] Universities made a significant effort to help reach and equip students. Some underfunded universities found extra resources to offer or loan personal computers to students in need. Some of them attempted to cover travel costs for students who were stuck abroad.[23] Smaller universities were able to inform their students swiftly and identify those in need. Some large prestigious universities, even if they are selective and welcome students from privileged social backgrounds, faced governance problems and had to contend with internal conflicts over the mode of organisation of exams during the pandemic.

Beyond the distinction between universities and *Grandes Écoles*, the French HE system also includes a few elitist niches at the Bachelor level, such as the preparatory classes to the Grandes écoles, housed in lycées, secondary education institutions. These *classes prépa report to both* the Ministry of HE and the Ministry of Education. Combined with short vocational (and selective) courses (STS), the *classes prépa* host 12% of the student population.[24] Compared to other HEIs, they are perceived as extremely privileged. They did not necessarily comply with the health measures required from HEIs and continued business as usual. While in most universities, the students experienced (chaotic) distance learning, in the *classes prépa*, students spent most of the 2020–2021 academic year learning on-site with no social distancing. In many of them, the number of students per class was higher than in university classrooms.[25] In this case, the requirements of preparing students for the competitive entrance exams, granting access to the elitist system of social reproduction, prevailed over public health imperatives.

Overall, after the initial blow of the March 2021 lockdown, the data show that smaller HEIs tended to absorb the shock more quickly. The better-endowed *Grandes Écoles* already had some experience of distance learning and were therefore able to switch more rapidly. As the public health crisis went on, even faculties and departments of the same HEI responded differently. For instance, some departments decided to resume on-site teaching after the second lockdown in February 2021, whereas other departments carried on with distance teaching.

Although their roots are structural, the inequalities between France's HEIs were perceived with increased acuity during the pandemic. Both the interviews and the questionnaires included questions about these discrepancies. Most students who answered the questionnaire felt that the pandemic had 'strongly' increased the inequalities between HEIs (52%). For 29% of students surveyed, inequalities between HEIs have 'somewhat' increased. In a similar way, most academic teachers found that the pandemic has increased the disparities between HEIs in some way (27%) or rather strongly (51%). The perception of these inequalities is even stronger among the students from *Grandes Écoles*: over 60% found them to have increased 'strongly' during the pandemic (Fig. 4.2).
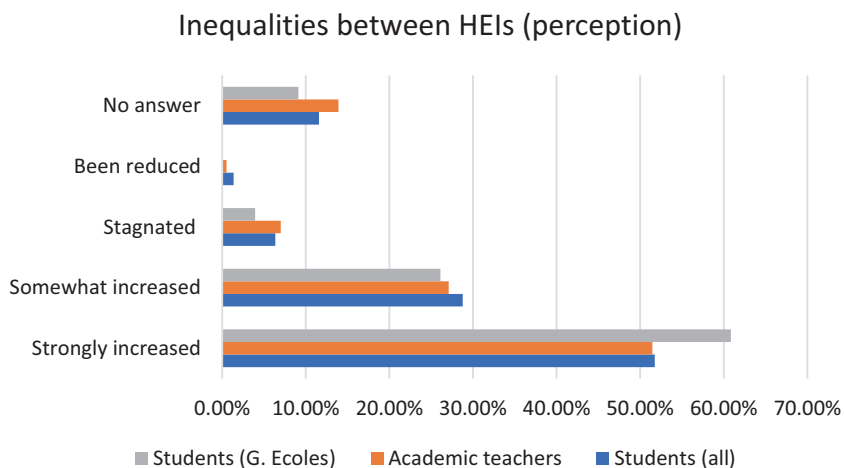
Inequalities between HEIs (perception)

Fig. 4.2 Perception of inequalities between HEIs (students and academic teachers). Source: Questionnaire mentioned in the method section, 2021

Effects on Students and Academic Staff

The questionnaire shows the exhaustion of academic teachers, following the consecutive lockdowns. At some universities, even the most prestigious ones, online teaching could not be arranged during the first lockdown. In some cases, it was minimal even during the second lockdown. Opinions on online teaching are generally critical. The experience is deemed best a temporary solution but mainly a painful experience for the teachers and the students. Several of the interviewed lecturers expressed a fear of a political push to continue distance teaching due to staff and room shortages.[26] Many interviewees felt that distance learning would have some long-term effects. On the one hand, having invested heavily in remote platforms and audio-visual equipment, HEI executives intend to use it further.

> We had a project … for which we got plenty of government funding through our digital services directorate. They received tons of money to set up cameras, microphones for distance teaching, hybrid teaching in the rooms and buildings (…) These are not temporary solutions: if you put so much money in these tools, you know they will not disappear (…) you have to make them profitable. (Interview HEI 2, Assistant Professor, February 2021)

While there is a shared feeling among academics that tools for virtual meetings are likely to remain, the opinions on remote teaching as an alternative to in-person teaching are mainly negative.

> Maybe some courses will remain taught remotely. I am not in favour. I think that teaching is a direct relationship between a group of students and a teacher. You can do anything you want remotely, but it never works as well. (HEI 4, Professor, Law, June 2021)

On the other hand, distance teaching has triggered a reflection in many departments on the need to rethink pedagogical methods. Still, it remains uncertain whether this reflection, forced by the unprecedented pandemic situation, will have longer-term effects on teaching methods. The evolution of teaching and evaluation methods depends on reforms that predate the pandemic. The *Grande Ecole* under study here had already started reforming its teaching and learning methods (focusing more intensely on learning outcomes, skills, reducing the number of final exams). In this case, online teaching has only accelerated existing trends. Other

universities and some *Grandes Écoles* may have returned to more traditional teaching methods (large classes/lectures/final exams) soon after distance teaching ended. After the shock of the first lockdown and the cumbersome reorganisation of 2020–2021, academics re-entered a world that was meant to be filled with promises of pedagogical innovation. Instead, they sometimes had to resort to old methods and engage in fierce competition due to the lack of resources.

> Like many, I felt there was a new energy after the first lockdown, that we were going to rethink the way we were working in a more cooperative direction. And like everyone else, I was disillusioned after the second and the third lockdowns. We appear to have come back to the way things were before, but it's even worse now because we have fewer resources. There is a heightened competition for resources that are more and more limited.[27]

One of the most publicly debated topics in the winter of 2021, the students' malaise, transpires in our questionnaire responses. However, the main challenges cited by the students who answered our questionnaire are not necessarily the same as those that were publicly discussed. When asked about their main problem, over 27% of students cited following courses online, 25% isolation, 20% mental health, 12% dropping out, 7% technical connection problems, and only 2% precarity. It is also worth noting that even among problems ranked second, third, and fourth, precarity appears in only 3% of responses. Over 90% of students reported having asked for (financial or psychological) help from their family or institution.

When we consider only the responses from students in *Grandes Écoles*, the hierarchy of problems does not differ much: 32% cite following online instruction, 22% isolation, almost 20% mental health and 10.8% dropping out, and 1.7% precarity as their primary challenge during the pandemic.

Most academic respondents mentioned the constant reorganisation of teaching due to lockdowns and the changing ministerial recommendations as a major challenge. They cited the changing regulatory framework as the main challenge for their HEI, followed by student precarity (even though a minority of the students themselves brought it up). Among the factors that helped HEIs facing the crisis, a vast majority of the teachers (59%) mentioned the commitment of the teaching and administrative staff, followed (28%) by the leeway given to teams to find adequate local solutions.
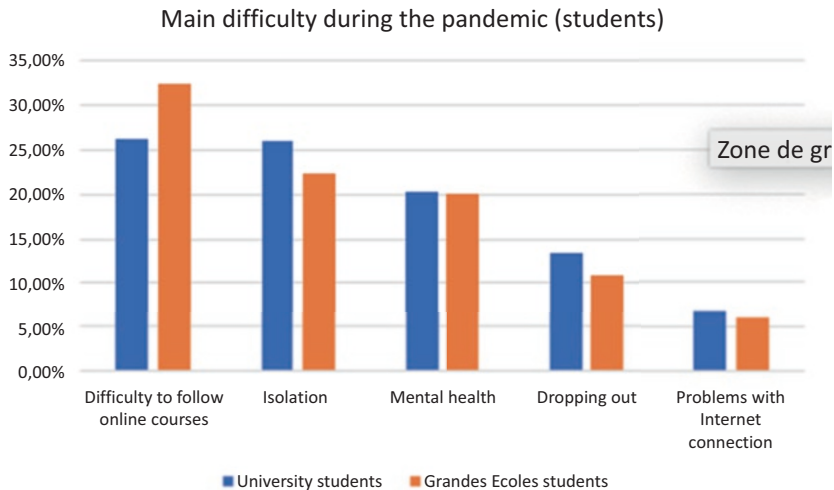
Main difficulty during the pandemic (students)

Fig. 4.3 Main difficulty (no. 1) during the pandemic

The majority of academics reported that the crisis and the associated frequent changes in the legal framework caused a significant work overload. However, their estimations of this increase vary: 34% said that their workload increased by 25–50%; 29% said it increased by 50%; 23% indicated that they had to work between +5% and + 25% more than usual (which is still a lot considering they already had a heavy workload). In this respect, university teachers are much more affected by this extra load than *Grandes Écoles* teachers, who have fewer students (see Fig. 4.3). The surplus of administrative work, the requirements of providing moral support to students, the evaluation of essays online, and the increased number of emails are cited as the main factors of the work overload. The administrative staff suffered from a slighter work overload, which can be explained by the fact that some have fixed office hours: 26% reported an increase of 5–25%; for 25%, the workload remained stable, whereas 9% reported having saved time (Fig. 4.4).

A less discussed result of the pandemic and of the mobilisation of the academic community alongside the ministry to help HEIs continue to operate is that it has stifled the opposition against HE and Research reforms.
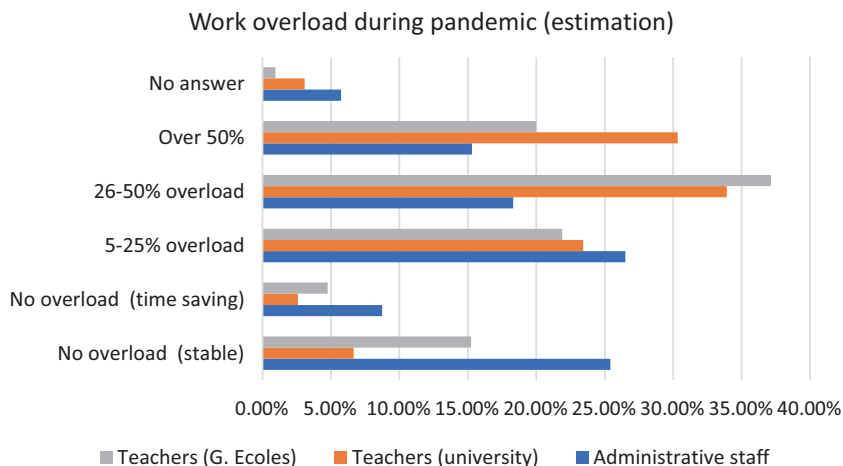
Work overload during pandemic (estimation)

Fig. 4.4 Work overload during the pandemic (estimation by staff)

Before the pandemic we were constantly out in the street against the new LPR programming law, and only the lockdown stopped the protest (…). But with the lockdown, it has become impossible to react. People just sit in front of their screen and try to figure out how they're going to manage with their next class.[28]

CONCLUSION

The COVID-19 pandemic has shaken the French HE system, revealing both its vulnerability and its resilience. Recent studies on the topic have shown that institutional resilience during crisis entails a combination of stability and change: 'the ways in which individuals, organisations and/or societies respond, recover and return to "normality" always entails a change' (Frigotto et al., 2022, p. 10). Here the political and institutional management of the crisis deserves further research to understand why and how some leaders 'seize on the opportunity to push for renewal and reform' while others seek an (impossible) return to the 'status quo as it existed before the crisis' (Boin & Lodge, 2016, p. 293).

The French public HE sector's response to the pandemic has been characterised by a mix of suffering and resilience. Students and academic teachers have been heavily affected by the pandemic, due to a fast-changing

regulatory framework, lack of equipment and insufficient administrative personnel. That said, the French universities' budgets were not hit as strongly as in the case of other countries, like the UK (LE, 2020) or the US (Ramlo, 2021). Both the state and HEIs' central administrations play an essential role in funding and shaping French HE. While the management of the pandemic was the subject of tense negotiations between the Ministry of HE and the Ministry of Health—with major decisions announced at the central executive level—it also neutralised the ongoing protest movement and brought university rectors closer to their ministry.

In this chapter, the question was asked about whether the pandemic tends to reinforce existing structural inequities. The academic community in France perceives the pandemic as a sequence that has strengthened these inequalities. However, this view seems to be strongly connected to inequalities in treatment on the issue of remote learning. On the budgetary side, the gap between those who have more resources and fewer students and those who are underfunded and have more students has been widening for years. While the gulf between *Grandes Écoles*, universities, and shorter vocational courses persists, there are growing disparities between universities. This study shows that the distinction between research and teaching universities—which has never been clear in the French case—does not make much sense as far as the management of the pandemic is concerned. Some large and prestigious research universities experienced serious governance problems and internal conflicts during lockdowns. Overall, the pandemic has confirmed ongoing trends. While HEIs' resources were a key factor explaining inequalities and varying degrees of resilience during lockdowns, other, local factors also played a role.

This chapter has shown how contextual parameters (historical trajectories, systemic inequalities in funding, the division between selective and less selective undergraduate programmes) have made some HEIs vulnerable to the crisis. Although it is too early to assess the lasting impact of the pandemic—which is still not over at the time of writing—on the French HE system, many academics consider that this experience will result in long-lasting effects. Some of the digital tools that have been introduced will remain in use, at least for research and for some administrative meetings. Limited use for teaching purposes also remains an option, notwithstanding the academic community's wary response to these tools. The striking funding inequalities between public HEIs characterise French HE. It will thus remain a challenge for future governments to rebalance and increase statutory funding. This is an uncertain prospect under the

current managerial approach, whereby competitive funding, which has been promoted internationally since decades, has become the only game in town.

Concerning the 'generalizability' or 'transferability' of the findings, Schwartz-Shea (2015, p. 142) reminds us that 'the responsibility of the interpretative researcher, in this view, is to provide sufficient "thick description" so that others can assess how plausible it is to transfer insights from that research to study another setting'. The French case study analysed here can be compared to other country case studies presented in this volume. As in the Irish case (Clarke, Chap. 2), some political decisions related to crisis management at HE were emotion-based. Like in other countries under study (as widely reported in this volume), the first lockdown meant a major disruption for teaching at universities even though a pedagogical continuity was maintained. As in the Polish case (Shenderova et al., this volume), policies promoting excellence continued to be pushed during the pandemic. All in all, in the French case, the structural transformation of HE continues mostly due to ongoing reforms that predate the current crisis.

Notes

1. Aarhus University, Danish School of Education, Pandemic Study, https://projects.au.dk/european-universities-critical-futures/pandemic-study/. I thank Séverine Gedzelman and Nathalie de Jong from the Triangle laboratory as well as Clémence Albert-Lebrun for their help with the elaboration and analysis of the questionnaire.
2. https://www.afsp.info/lenseignement-superieur-francais-face-a-la-crise-sanitaire-participez-a-lenquete-en-ligne/
3. A Grande école is officially defined as a HE institution that recruits its students through a competitive exams and offers high-level training.
4. Cf. Thomas Piketty http://piketty.pse.ens.fr/files/ChancelPiketty2021BudgetEnsSuperieur.pdf
5. Interview at the Ministry of HE, interviews at the Rectors' conference (CPU), 2021.
6. Most of our interviewees mention the first lockdown as an external shock.
7. Interview at the French Ministry of HE, 5th March 2021.
8. Ministry of Higher Education and Research, Offre de services. https://services.dgesip.fr/T712/S373/annee_universitaire_2021_2022
9. Interview at the Rectors' Conference, Spring 2021.

10. Interview with three representatives of the Rectors' conference (CPU), 8 April 2021.
11. Several lecturers interviewed confirmed this distrust and fear that distance teaching might be implemented on a long-term basis.
12. Several questionnaire respondents experienced this as a major inequality.
13. Nathalie Dompnier, https://mobile.twitter.com/nathdompnier/status/1340619540334583808, 20 December 2020.
14. Interview at the French Ministry of HE, 5th March 2021.
15. Euronews, 22 January 2021, https://fr.euronews.com/2021/01/22/les-solutions-macron-pour-les-etudiants-insuffisantes-et-problematiques
16. Sciences Po Lille, Actualités, Points de situation, Pierre Mathiot, 31 mars 2021. http://www.sciencespo-lille.eu/actualites/points-de-situation
17. Interviews at HEI 2, 3, 4.
18. Interview at HEI 3, March 2021.
19. Interview at HEI 1, June 2021.
20. Interviews at HEI 3, March–April 2021.
21. Interviews at HEI 1 (large, capital city) and HEI 2 (middle size, smaller city), HEI 4, mid-size city, prestigious university, Spring 2021.
22. Interviews at HEI 1, HEI 2, HEI 3.
23. Interviews at HEI 3.
24. Note d'Information du SIES published on 22 December 2020. https://www.enseignementsup-recherche.gouv.fr/cid156062/les-effectifs-d-etudiants-dans-le-superieur-en-2019-2020-en-progression-constante.html
25. Interview with a *classe prépa* teacher, 5 March 2021.
26. Interviews at HEI 1, HEI 2, and HEI 4, Spring 2021.
27. Interview at HEI 4b, University Institute of Technology, June 2021.
28. Interview at HEI 4b, University Institute of Technology, June 2021.

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