



University Admission Practices - France

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Relevant country background

“Matching in Practice” is a research network that brings together the growing community of researchers in Europe working on the various aspects of assignment and matching in education and related labour markets.

These country profiles are part of a collective effort by network members to map matching practices across Europe

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In France all students follow the same program until the age of 15. Afterwards they enter high school (lycée) for another three years where they specialize and prepare for a national standard test (baccalauréat).³ The baccalauréat gives students access to higher education.

France has a distinctive higher education system. It is divided between public universities governed by the ministry of higher education and research, technical high schools and preparatory schools governed by the ministry of education, the grandes écoles governed by other ministries or chambers of commerce,⁴ and a few private institutions. Grandes écoles do not recruit directly after the baccalauréat: Students must be admitted first to preparatory schools and prepare during two years for an entrance examination.

One clearinghouse, called Admission Post Bac (APB) APB, allocates students to universities, preparatory schools, and technical high schools, whereas several clearinghouses are used to allocate students to grandes écoles (one for each subject, science, business and art). This profile focuses on the clearinghouse APB.

Participation to the clearinghouse is voluntary for institutions of higher education, but in practice most of the slots are allocated through APB.⁵ We can distinguish between selective and non-selective institutions of higher education. With the exception of technological faculties, state universities are not allowed to select their students.⁶ As soon as a student passes one of the different baccalauréats, she can enter any bachelor program at a state university of her choice. All the other types of educational

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³ 77,3% of the pupils of a same-age cohort finally pass one of the many baccalauréats.

⁴ The École Polytechnique in Paris for example depends upon the French Ministry of Defense whereas HEC upon Paris Chamber of commerce and industry.

⁵ In 2012, 62% of those who passed the baccalauréat were admitted through APB, 26% did not carry on with higher education, and the remaining 12% were admitted outside the centralized procedure.

⁶ Non-selective slots represent 48% of the admission through APB.

institutions are allowed to select their students, either based on criteria determined by the state or based on criteria of their own choice.

In France, higher education is publicly funded. This results in low tuition fees for students ranging from 150€ to 700€ per year for public universities and grandes écoles run by ministries (and up to 15.000€ a year in some other grandes écoles or private universities).

Summary box

Organization of higher education	Universities, preparatory schools for grandes écoles and technical high schools.
Stated objectives of admissions policy ⁷	Centralize information about studies and admissions, optimize the allocation of students according to their preferences and the available slots, guarantee a fair process for all students.
Who's in charge?	The clearinghouse APB (voluntary participation) and the programs
In place since	2009
Available capacity	State universities have a legal obligation to accept all candidates from their district who hold a baccalauréat. ⁸ Other institutions can restrict access according to capacity.
Timing of enrolment	Students apply by late March of their final year in secondary school and rank their choice at the end of May. Acceptances are sent out in June and July. An additional phase deals with students who did not get a seat.
Information available to parents prior to enrolment period	Documents needed for application, description of the procedure, but no historical data and no description of the algorithm or of the tie-breaking.
Restrictions on preference expression	Students can rank at most 12 programs per type of institution (technological faculties of state universities, other faculties of state universities, preparatory schools, technical high schools) and at most 36 in total.
Matching procedure	An undisclosed matching algorithm is applied three times with manual rounds in between where students can temporarily or definitively accept offers.
Priorities and quotas	Selective programs use either state-determined criteria or criteria chosen by the institution itself. Non-selective programs use geographical priorities.
Tie-breaking	Selective programs can choose a tie-breaking rule. Non-selective programs must use the rank of the program in the student preference list and random draws.

⁷ Source: IGEN *Rapport 2012-123*

⁸ Articles L612-3 D612-9 *code de l'éducation nationale*

Description of current practices

The clearinghouse to apply for universities, preparatory schools, and technical high schools is accessible through the webpage www.admission-postbac.fr (APB). Participation is voluntary for institutions, but the state encourages institutions under its governance to participate. Today almost all institutions whose recruiting process is compatible with the mechanism's deadlines require application through this clearinghouse. For those not in APB, the procedure is decentralized.⁹ Application requirements vary between selective and non-selective institutions.

Selective institutions have their own criteria for selecting students. They range from the type and the grade in *baccalauréat*, the grades in lycée, to motivation letters, recommendations from professors, interviews or entry exams.

Except for technological faculties, bachelor slots in state universities are non-selective. But problems of limited capacity arose in some of the more demanded bachelors. To solve this, the following priorities were defined:¹⁰

1. Students from the district of the university have priority over those from other districts in the region of the university. The latter, in turn, have priority over those from other regions, who have priority over international students.
2. Within each priority class, students who applied to less than six bachelors in state universities have the lowest priority.
3. Within the class of applicants from the district, students who ranked the given bachelor first among the set of bachelors of this district have priority over those who rank it second and so on.
4. Inside the other priority classes of applicants, universities sort students according to the rank each gave to the bachelor among the set of bachelors in state universities.
5. Finally a random draw is used to break remaining ties.

The website hosting the clearinghouse is open from December 1st to middle of September of the following year. The students have to register and go through different steps within the following deadlines.

From 20th January to 20th March, they have to register on the clearinghouse website.

Before 2nd April, students have to select the programs they want to apply for and send their application files. Before 31st May, they have to rank their applications. They can send and rank at most 12 applications per type of institution and at most 36 in total.¹¹

⁹ One well-known university not on APB is the University of Paris Dauphine. Furthermore, paramedical schools and political science schools are not on APB either. The timing of admissions for those institutions varies considerably. Students can apply in parallel through APB and outside of the system. Some institutions require foreigners to apply directly and not via APB.

¹⁰ For bachelors who are unique or rare in the region or in France such as cinema, fine art, or Hebrew, there are other specific tie-breaking rules.

The institutions examine the files they received and sort them according to their preferences. Toulouse University runs the matching algorithm.¹² Each student is offered her highest-ranked application that received a positive answer. The applications below are cancelled automatically. In addition to the list of students to which it directly offers a seat, institutions can create a waiting list. The students on this list are those who have a chance to be accepted if seats are freed up in the next rounds. The applications for which a student does not even appear on the waiting list are cancelled as well.

During one week at the beginning of June the first response stage takes place. A student has to reply to her offer by choosing between 4 options. She can either accept the offer and cancel her other applications. Or she can accept the offer but wait until the next stage before cancelling her other applications. Or she can refuse the offer but wait until the next stage before cancelling her other applications. Or she can cancel all her applications.

Then the program takes into account the replies and runs the matching algorithm again. The second answer stage takes place during one week at the end of June. This stage is exactly the same as the first one. Finally, APB removes those who failed the *baccalauréat* and repeats the same procedure again and students have to definitely accept or reject their offer around mid- July. Students receive an email from the institution that accepted them and can finalize the registration. Accepting an offer is not legally binding, so if a student receives an offer that she prefers from an institution that recruits outside of APB, she can still choose it.

There exists an additional procedure for the students who have not been allocated by the end of the third round. The additional procedure allows students to apply for seats that have not been filled yet. Students can apply for up to 12 positions without ranking them. They have to reply to an offer within a week. This additional procedure is open during the summer until the end of September.¹³

Recent policy change

APB was launched in a few districts in 2008 and extended in 2009 to the rest of the country. Before, aside from some specialized clearinghouses (admission prépa, RAVEL), admissions were decentralized. Every year new institutions are joining APB. In 2012 around 80% of the seats were assigned through it. Since 2014, students who already started a bachelor and want to switch can also use APB. The tie-breaking rules that are currently used were implemented in 2011.

¹¹ There are 9 types of institutions: Technological faculties in state universities, other faculties in state universities, preparatory schools, technical high schools, engineering schools, business schools, architecture schools, art schools, and the rest.

¹² In their paper, Victor Hiller and Olivier Tercieux (2014) claim that the mechanism used in APB is the university-proposing deferred acceptance mechanism. However, in private correspondence other researchers who have investigated the mechanism suggest that this is not entirely evident. Only 8% of the students receive a better offer after the first stage, i.e., after the mechanism has been run once.

¹³ In 2008/2009, 88% of the applicants who applied through APB received an offer. Out of those who received an offer, 80% accepted the offer. 57% received an offer from their first choice institution, 16% from their second choice, 8% from their third choice and 5% from their fourth choice. See Chiffres Clés (2012).

Perceived issues

The main issue of this system is the complexity and the opacity of the priorities used for public universities. These rules are hard to find and are not based on any legal text. When a student applies to a non-selective bachelor, the website recommends applying for more than 6 bachelors among which one is from her district. It asks students to be honest and assures them that the institutions will not be informed of their stated preferences. The real rules could only be found in a report written for the minister of higher education or on the website of some high schools or parents associations. In June 2016 the ministry of education publicly released these rules under pressure from students associations.

Non-informed students are penalized because the rules incentivize students to strategize when submitting their preference lists. Moreover, the optimal strategies are particularly sophisticated. The rank taken into account for priorities is not directly the rank that the applicant gave to the given bachelor. Ranking a preparatory school before or after a bachelor application does not change the priority for that bachelor. But ranking a bachelor from another district before or after a bachelor from her district does not change the priority in the latter but does change the priority in the former. Finally, data on the number of applicants, on capacities and on the rank of the last accepted student are hard to find.

Lawyers recently raised the question of the legality of the priorities and are suggesting that students challenge rejections in courts. They won a first case in Bordeaux in June 2016 where the court declared the random tiebreaking illegal .

Existing data

L'état de l'Enseignement supérieur et de la Recherche en France (2015) : <http://www.enseignementsup-recherche.gouv.fr/cid91022/l-etat-de-l-enseignement-superieur-et-de-la-recherche-en-france-n-8-juin-2015.html>

Repères et Références Statistique pour les enseignements, la formation et la recherche (2015) : <http://www.enseignementsup-recherche.gouv.fr/cid92179/reperes-et-references-statistiques-edition-aout-2015.html>

IGEN (Inspection générale de l'éducation nationale), (2012) "Analyse de l'orientation et des poursuites d'études des lycéens à partir de la procédure admission post-bac", Rapport n°2012-123: <http://www.ladocumentationfrancaise.fr/var/storage/rapports-publics/134000054.pdf>

Legal texts

Code de l'éducation: article [L612-3](#) and article [D612-9](#)

[Arrêté du 8 avril 2011 relatif à la procédure de préinscription en première année d'une formation postbaccalauréat](#)

Other resources and references

Chiffres Clés (2012): <http://www.admission-postbac.info/fr/chiffres-cles.html>

Hiller V. and Tercieux O. (2014) "Choix d'école en France: une évaluation de la procédure Affelnet", *Revue Economique*, 65, pp 619-656.

Admission Post-Bac, Student guide:

<http://www.admission-postbac.fr/index.php?desc=notices>

Description of the priorities:

Press article Le Monde:

http://www.lemonde.fr/campus/article/2016/06/01/admission-post-bac-l-algorithme-revelateur-des-failles-de-l-universite_4929949_4401467.html

Lycée Christophe Colomb:

http://www.lycee-christophecolomb94.com/IMG/pdf/questions_reponses_APB_2011.pdf

Parent association PEEP:

<http://sup.peep.asso.fr/documents-pratiques/admission-post-bac/>

Legality of the tie-breaking procedure:

<http://www.village-justice.com/articles/admission-post-bac-apb-comment,20196.html>

http://www.liberation.fr/france/2016/06/23/apb-un-etudiant-recale-de-la-fac-par-tirage-au-sort-gagne-en-justice_1461536

MiP Country Profiles downloadable from matching-in-practice.eu

MiP Country Profile 1. Cantillon, Estelle (2011), [Matching practices for elementary schools – Belgium \(French-speaking region\)](#).

MiP Country Profile 2. Kübler, Dorothea (2011), [University admission practices – Germany](#).

MiP Country Profile 3. Irving, Rob (2011), [Matching practices for entry-labor markets – Scotland](#).

MiP Country Profile 4. Kiselgof, Sofya (2011), [Matching practices for universities – Ukraine](#).

MiP Country Profile 5. Biró, Péter (2011), [University admission practices – Hungary](#).

MiP Country Profile 6. Biró, Péter (2012), [Matching practices for secondary schools – Hungary](#).

MiP Country Profile 7. Chen, Li (2012), [University admission practices – UK](#).

MiP Country Profile 8. Chen, Li (2012), [University admission practices – Ireland](#).

MiP Country Profile 9. Cantillon, Estelle and Koen Declercq (2012), [University admission practices – Belgium](#).

MiP Country Profile 10. Chen, Li (2012), [Matching practices for elementary schools – Ireland](#).

MiP Country Profile 11. Chen, Li (2012), [Matching practices for secondary schools – Ireland](#).

MiP Country Profile 12. Manlove, David (2012), [Matching practices for primary and secondary schools – Scotland](#).

MiP Country Profile 13. Merlino, Luca Paolo and Antonio Nicoló (2012), [Matching practices for elementary schools – Italy](#).

MiP Country Profile 14. Merlino, Luca Paolo and Antonio Nicoló (2012), [Matching practices for secondary schools – Italy](#).

MiP Country Profile 15. Merlino, Luca Paolo and Antonio Nicoló (2012), [University admissions practices – Italy](#).

MiP Country Profile 16. Hiller, Victor and Olivier Tercieux (2013), [Matching practices in secondary schools – France](#).

MiP Country Profile 17. Calsamiglia, Caterina (2014), [Matching Practices for elementary and secondary Schools – Spain](#).

MiP Country Profile 18. Lauri, Triin, Kaire Põder, and André Veski (2014), [Matching practices for elementary schools – Estonia](#).

MiP Country Profile 19. Salonen, Mikko A.A. (2014), [Matching practices for secondary schools – Finland](#).

MiP Country Profile 20. Terrier, Camille (2014), [Matching practices for secondary public school teachers – France](#).

MiP Country Profile 21. Basteck, Christian, Katharina Huesmann, and Heinrich Nax (2015), [Matching practices for secondary schools – Germany](#).

MiP Country Profile 22. Cantillon, Estelle (2015), [Matching practices for secondary schools – Belgium \(French-speaking region\)](#).

MiP Country Profile 23. Frys, Lucien, and Staat, Christian (2016), [University admission practices – France](#).