France reshapes its Higher Education and Research system into 25 clusters
Who are these newcomers to the French HE&R scene?

To meet the challenges of the coming world, a national reform of the French Higher Education and Research system is structuring the country’s strengths into 25 clusters.

HE&R public stakeholders gather their expertise on training and research into new dedicated structures, HE&R clusters. Within these clusters, complementary entities, define common strategic goals and projects, and combine their resources at the local scale. By actively participating in these clusters, national research institutions feed into the entire system.

Why is this national reform necessary?

Building on the reforms of the last decade, this reform will implement the conditions enabling HE&R entities to train the next generation of highly-skilled professionals, to address the major challenges our societies are facing, and to promote the international visibility of excellence-driven top-level research institutions.

These entities have strong ties with local economic sectors; they will build on their connections with the innovation and competitiveness clusters and the networks in which they are involved.

The legacy of centuries for HE&R in France is a rich and complex system, in which a wide range of entities coexist. A longstanding process is underway; it is aimed at gathering scattered HE&R resources: both amongst entities and on the national territory. The national reform of the HE&R system, launched in 2013, is reshaping the scene.

In the context of increased public expectations for smart use of public funding, this reform simultaneously simplifies the national organization of the HE&R system and allows it to better contribute to synergies with economic, youth, employment and cultural policies.

The aim of this process is to create the conditions in which new approaches to HE&R can emerge by helping entities, scattered both thematically and geographically, collaborate and unite, through the critical mass required to define highly ambitious common goals and projects.

It is structuring the national HE&R system, and enabling it to expand its role and impact locally, whilst increasing its international visibility. Working with and for society, making the most of the local ecosystems in which they are rooted, capitalizing on their own characteristics to invent their unique identities, these HE&R clusters will be the flagships of French academic excellence, open to the international context in which they will flourish.

Clustering of HE&R entities and Increased autonomy for HE&R entities
When is this transformation taking place?

The French government passed a bill in July 2013 on HE&R, which enacts the strategic role of the State and calls for drawing up national strategies for both Higher Education and Research. By the end of 2015, all clusters will have their implementing decree and some will be hiring their own researchers and welcome their own students.

Which entities are involved in this process?

4 types of entities are concerned with the reform:
- Universities (both comprehensive and thematic)
- Schools (engineering and other specialized schools)
- National research institutions some multi-thematic (such as CNRS, IRD and CEA) some thematic (such as Inserm – Health and Medical Research, INRA – Agricultural sciences, Inria – Computer science and applied mathematics, CIRAD – Sustainable development of tropical regions Research, IFREMER – Marine and coastal environments Research, etc.)
- Technology Transfer Institutions

How are these HE&R clusters taking shape?

A GREATER DEGREE OF FREEDOM

HE&R entities were granted a high degree of freedom to decide the way in which they wanted to bring their strengths together in a common project. The members of a cluster chose a coordinating entity and decided to what extent they blended their higher education and research activities. They chose the structures best suited to their project.

The law proposed 3 different schemes that stakeholders could choose from or combine when uniting:
- Association: A HR&R entity links itself to another one through an association contract defining areas of cooperation.
- Federation: A new legal structure is created named “Communautés d’universités et établissements” or COMUE. This public entity, to which members devolve part of their remit, can for example deliver diplomas (Bachelors, Masters, and PhDs).
- Merger: A single legal structure in which other entities merge is set up, representing the highest degree of integration. This option is often a step towards a comprehensive University.

AN INVESTMENT FOR THE FUTURE

To bolster this dynamic, the French government has launched several calls for proposals, through the “Programme Investissement d’avenir” (Investment for the future programme). One of the aims of this program is to identify and provide funding to the best and most promising HE&R clusters, through 2 types of grants. These grants, either with a global scope or thematically targeted, are awarded by an international jury. They enable the selected clusters to become beacons of excellence worldwide, by providing the funding necessary to carry out their common project.

Where are these HE&R clusters located?

These new HE&R clusters are rooted in their partnership with national research institutions and in their territories. Expert knowledge of their local context, economic sectors and stakeholders, allows them to smartly develop their clusters’ strategies.

The map illustrates the clusters’ distribution on the territory. It does not include Corsica and French overseas departments and territories.
Higher education and research clusters in France (2016)

This map does not include Corsica and overseas departments and territories.

Source: MENESR - DGRI - SPFCO • Réalisation: MENESR - DGESIP/DGRI - SIES

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