



## PRESS RELEASE

07 February 2023

Public thematic report

### UNIVERSITIES AND TERRITORIES

**In France, the number of higher education graduates in the 25-34 age group is good (49.4% compared to an average of 45.6% for all OECD countries). However, if we look at the geographical distribution of this graduation rate, we can see that there are still territorial inequalities with regard to access to higher education: the more rural the region, the more the number of graduates decreases. Indeed, there are many difficulties in finding a stable doctrine, the current one oscillating between a guaranteed local offer throughout the territory on the one hand, and accepting the existence of territorial inequalities in the offer of higher education on the other. The social background of students remains the main cause of inequalities in access to higher education. The report published today by Public Finance Court highlights the complex and persistent relationship between higher education and geographical origin.**

#### **Territorial issues in missions of higher education and student life**

Social and geographical inequalities in access to university education around the country remain an issue, despite attempts to reduce them. To remedy this, university branches have been opened or maintained in order to improve access across territories. There are approximately 150 of them, and together they have close to 91,000 students. According to the Court's survey, the cost of these courses is comparable to, or even lower than that of courses at the main sites. Moreover, the success rate observed in the branches is very similar to that of the parent universities. The rate of continuation to postgraduate education, however, is low. Connected campuses are another response to the geographical and social difficulties in accessing higher education, although their success appears to be mixed. The fight against inequality also involves welcoming and supporting students: some universities are making significant efforts to pursue an ambitious student life policy. However, the Court found that there were significant differences between institutions. Coordination between Crous centres and universities, particularly in the areas of accommodation and catering, is lacking on all sites.

#### **The need to acknowledge the disparateness of universities to ensure their management**

Today, clear divisions are appearing between institutions: although sharing the name "university", they no longer have anything comparable with each other. For example, some universities conduct world-class research and focus their training on this, while others provide more undergraduate education and concentrate their research strengths on a few disciplines, as they are not able to benefit from funding through calls for projects. Universities have also

started to rank themselves by forming associations, whose names indicate their goal: “French research universities”, “research and training universities” or “small and medium-sized universities”. Moreover, the rise of private institutions granting themselves the title of university, regardless of the law, or issuing degrees theoretically reserved for public institutions contributes to the confusion. The Court has therefore considered three options to ensure better management of institutions that no longer receive the same student profiles, do not carry out the same missions and no longer receive the same funding.

### **Institutional relations vary in scope from one territory to another**





Local and regional authorities are valuable allies for universities owing to the funding they provide - about €1.5 billion per year - and their often proactive policies. Despite this, there are too few forums for the exchange of information and the implementation of joint actions by all the authorities, which hinders the implementation of a coherent and controlled strategy. This also leads to a suboptimal distribution of funding and, in some situations, to a dispersion of funding. Meanwhile, the Ministry of Higher Education is struggling to involve local authorities in the contracting it carries out every five years with universities. Currently, it swings between a (recent) decentralised system whereby institutions are managed by regional education authorities, and a management system that remains highly centralised. In the field, the role of higher education officer, created in some regional education authorities in 2020 to facilitate dialogue with universities, is being gradually established, but without clearly defined missions or full delegation from the chief education officers of the academic regions.

### **Recognition from the business world still to be established**

Economic players are becoming essential partners for universities, which involve businesses in their strategic bodies or pedagogical councils, in particular for professional bachelor degrees and in master's programmes. However, these initiatives remain scattered. The Ministry of Higher Education has not developed a more systematic approach and methodology. Doing so would make it possible to calculate the return on investment of higher education spending, which could be a decisive element in budgetary negotiations with the budget department. However, there are mixed opinions among business leaders: the majority would like to be more involved in the definition of curricula and be better informed about the university training offer, which is still considered too complex and not very clear. Most also deplore a lack of responsiveness in the construction and accreditation of government-recognised diplomas.

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