



# French universities attacked

## Admissions policy for poor 'shocking'

By Ben Hall in Paris

France's elite universities or grandes écoles, once regarded as the pinnacle of a meritocratic education system, are facing strong criticism over their apparent reluctance to take in more poor students.

The association of grandes écoles (CGE) triggered a furore when it attacked the idea of quotas and ruled out changing recruitment procedures, insisting the only way to increase admissions from poorer families was through individual support for candidates. "Any other policy would inevitably lead to a lowering of the average standard," the CGE said.

Luc Chatel, education minister, said the CGE's statement was "deeply shocking" while Yazid Sabeg, a government commissioner for equal opportunities, described it as "scandalous".

Richard Descoings, director of Sciences Po and a pioneer in recruiting students from poor backgrounds, said the grandes écoles' stance "cast into doubt the republican idea that you

can succeed in school whatever your social origins".

The furore over admissions policies has highlighted the role of grandes écoles in French society. These small, selective universities – ranging from the engineering schools such as

the Ecoles des Mines to HEC, France's leading business school – have long educated French elites.

In the French republic, education was traditionally revered as a social elevator, particularly for the post-war generation. But since

then, middle-class families have tightened their grip on admissions.

President Nicolas Sarkozy's government wants to reverse this trend by opening up the grandes écoles to students from poorer backgrounds. It set an objective: 30 per cent of candidates on courses preparing for entrance exams to the grandes écoles should be recipients of grants given to students from low-income families.

Elite university leaders fear ministers will move to fixed quotas for admissions. The government denies it plans to impose quotas, but has called on the grandes écoles to change the way they recruit.

"Don't be afraid of changing your recruitment methods for young people who have value," Valérie Pécresse, higher education minister, urged them.

Last year Ms Pécresse said the "social elevator was stuck", notably because the grandes écoles practised "hyper-selection through an incredible battery of tests".

A spokesman for the CGE said the grandes écoles were not against taking students from poorer backgrounds but objected to quotas for each institution.

## Sarkozy pledges altered carbon tax

Nicolas Sarkozy vowed to implement an amended carbon tax yesterday following last week's ruling by France's constitutional council that the original proposal was unlawful, writes Ben Hall in Paris.

The French president told ministers at the first cabinet meeting of the year that the tax – intended to raise €3.5bn (\$3bn, £5bn) a year – would come into effect on July 1, six months later than planned.

The tax, the flagship initiative in Mr Sarkozy's drive to cut carbon dioxide emissions, was supposed to have come into force on January 1, making France the largest economy so far to adopt a levy linked to the price of carbon.

However, the constitutional council, which rules on the validity of laws,

objected on the grounds that the tax contained too many exemptions and therefore violated the principle of equality.

In particular, the council ruled that the government was wrong to exempt some 1,000 of the biggest industrial emitters – on the basis that they were already covered by the European Union's emissions trading scheme – because their emissions permits were distributed for free until 2013.

The exemptions for businesses would have covered 93 per cent of France's industrial emissions, the council concluded.

The original tax would have added up to 4.5 cents to a litre of petrol and would have raised domestic gas bills by 7 per cent.