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### Engineering access to higher education through higher education fairs

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# **Engineering access to higher education through higher education fairs\***

Agnes van Zanten, Amelia Legavre

(April 2014)

## **Introduction**

In 2013, 577.220 secondary school students obtained their baccalaureate in France and most of them continued their studies in higher education. If we add together all those students who apply to institutions of higher education each year after some work experience and those already in higher education (2.387.000 in 2012), it seems relevant to consider transition to higher education as a major social process. This transition has been mostly studied by French sociologists of education and higher education from perspectives focusing predominantly on the role of the socio-economic status, academic profiles and different tracks followed by secondary school students (Merle 1996, Duru-Bellat and Kieffer 2008, Convert 2010), and, to a lesser extent, on the types of secondary schools attended (Duru-Bellat and Mingat 1998, Nakhili 2005) and the local higher education provision (Berthet et al. 2010,

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\* Text from van Zanten A., Legavre A. “Engineering access to higher education through higher education fairs”, in Goastellec G., Picard F. (ed.) *The Roles of Higher Education and Research in the Fabric of Societies*, Leuven, Sense Publishers, 2014 (in press).

Orange 2013). Although these structural determinants play a major role in explaining significant regularities, they provide more powerful explanations for individuals representing the extremes of the different variables considered (upper-class versus lower-class students, students with high grades versus those with low grades, students in prestigious academic tracks versus those in less prestigious professional tracks, urban students versus rural students), leaving room for the influence of other major factors for those students in intermediate situations. In addition, even in the case of students occupying extreme positions, structural perspectives better explain the distribution of students between different higher education tracks than they do between institutions and disciplines.

In this chapter, we adopt a perspective that we see as complementary to and interacting with the perspective centred on structural determinants by focusing on the role of the devices that mediate the exchanges between students and higher education institutions (hereafter referred to as HEIs), and more specifically on one device: higher education fairs. The notion of ‘device’ (Callon et al. 2007) refers to all the assemblages that play a role in the construction of concrete market exchanges, although we adapt it to fit an exchange not only structured by the market but by the state as well. Indeed, higher education fairs constitute a hybrid object with features specific to ‘market devices’ as well as others that are more typical of ‘policy instruments’ (McFall 2014). We focus on two types of mediations that take place at fairs and that contribute, at another level, to their hybrid character. The first is the mediation of the exchange between providers and consumers of higher education through a classic market device, the ‘packaging’ of products and services (Cochoy 2002). Contrary to all appearances, higher education fairs are not events that favour a direct exchange between

providers and consumers. Rather, HEIs, with at least some indirect state support, attempt to attract and hook consumers at fairs through the use of devices and instruments similar to those seen in other markets. The second is the mediation of these exchanges via devices that play a major role only in the case of non-standard goods, where prices are not the only nor the major means of articulating provision and demand, and where considerations of the quality (Callon et al. 2001) and status (Podolny 1993) of goods and services play a major role. In these types of cases, providers and consumers tend to rely on ‘judgement devices’ (Karpik 2010), that is assemblages that provide them with additional information and advice both on variations in the characteristics of goods and services and on the extent to which these characteristics match their own so that they can increase the benefits and satisfactions linked to their use and to associating with them.

Our purpose in doing so is not only to document how these various devices frame, in ways that remain largely unexplored by researchers, exchanges between providers and consumers of higher education but also to point out – and further explore in future publications – how these devices, and the specific features of fairs, contribute to the reproduction and transformation of educational inequalities in access to higher education (Benninghoff et al. 2012). To do so, we will focus not only on how packaging and advising might affect student choices but also borrow some elements from the perspectives adopted by researchers who have studied fairs as ‘tournaments of value’ (Anand and Jones 2008) and ‘field configuring events’ (Lampel and Meyer 2008). Although these notions have been applied mostly to fairs in the creative industries (Moeran and Pedersen 2011) and to fashion trade fairs (Skov 2006), which serve purposes other than the exchange between providers and consumers, they help us to account for the fact that fairs are socially,

spatially and temporarily bounded events. They bring together a large and diverse number of participants involved in the production and distribution of the goods and services being exhibited. By doing so, they contribute to the structuring of specific fields, in this case the field of higher education. Following Bourdieu's definition of field (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992), fairs can be seen as recreating a socially structured space in which agents (in this case, HEIs) struggle to maintain or improve their position through the different devices previously evoked but also through competition and cooperation within the network of HEIs and related agents created by the event itself (Moeran and Pedersen 2011). Our complementary hypothesis is that these processes in turn affect the way in which visitors perceive the landscape of higher education and the different positions occupied by different institutions within it, in ways that might significantly affect their choices.

The results and interpretations that follow are based on an on-going research project on the transition to higher education that takes into account the role of different types of determinants and mediations, including the role of policy instruments and devices<sup>1</sup>. This study of fairs currently includes the analysis of nine fairs that took place in Paris between 2011 and 2014 and incorporates the collection and analysis of Internet advertising and paper brochures as well as the conducting and analysis of interviews and observations. For this paper, we chose to focus only on the six most recently studied fairs (between November 2013 and January 2014) because of

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<sup>1</sup> This project is supported by a public grant overseen by the French National Research Agency (ANR) as part of the "Investissements d'Avenir" program (reference: ANR-11-LABX-0091, ANR-11-IDEX-0005-02).

the more systematic character of the fieldwork<sup>2</sup>. Four of the fairs were organised by the two agencies presented in the next section and the other two by public-private or private agency networks. In addition to analysing the fairs' websites and a sampling of the brochures distributed by the different HEIs at the events, we observed 37 booths (between five and seven at each fair) and eight lectures. We also conducted short interviews with 67 booth hosts and five long interviews with students working at booths. In addition, we use data from three interviews with lecture organisers as well as from a small visitor survey conducted at a fair in 2011.

This qualitative study allowed us to conduct direct observations of material arrangements, events and discourses in real time and reduced classic problems such as the interviewers' limited recall of facts and their tendency to provide idealized visions of their role and activity. Nevertheless, it also involved some of the weaknesses of observational studies, notably a selectivity bias (Yin 2009). Even in those cases where we could rely on a team of observers (three fairs were observed by groups of 10 to 18 students), it was impossible to study a large number of booths and, while for each fair we took an initial sampling in order to represent their variety, we had to take into account important limitations to and opportunities for observations and interviews that were dependent on the contexts and situations as well as on individuals' perceptions of the study. Observing interactions in the booths was the most difficult task. Although it would have been useful to stay 'hidden' for long

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<sup>2</sup> The six fairs observed are: the *Studyrama* fair for *grandes écoles* (Nov. 9-10, 2013), the SAGE-*Le Monde* fair for *grandes écoles* (Nov. 16-17, 2013), the European fair on education & *L'Etudiant* fair (Nov. 21-24, 2013), the *Studyrama* fair for secondary school students (Dec. 7, 2013), *L'Etudiant* fair for *grandes écoles* (Dec. 13-15, 2013), and the *Admission Post-Bac* fair (Jan. 10-11, 2014).

periods in order to observe the similarities and differences between booth hosts and the interactions between a single booth host and different visitors, it was difficult to do so without being noticed. It was only at the most popular booths that we could observe and go unnoticed but then the noise levels at such booths prevented us from listening to conversations. We therefore decided to tell booth hosts about the research<sup>3</sup> and ask them for short interviews while accepting to be interrupted at any time if a new visitor came to the booth. This proved to be a productive technique in most cases and allowed both for interviews and observations of conversations with visitors. Also, in those booths where there were not many visitors and the booth hosts were interested in the topic, we were able to conduct interesting group interviews and observe group discussions between booth hosts. In addition, we negotiated longer interviews with student hosts while they were not working. As a general rule, we took a few notes at booths during observations and interviews and completed them shortly after the event once out of the participants' view. Observing at lectures was easier although it was important to arrive early to get a seat (and this was not always possible when visitors remained in the room for several lectures in a row). Also, it was sometimes difficult to identify the speakers and hear the questions. While the material collected is abundant and varied, we still lack significant information on the visitors. Therefore, in addition to further analysing the short questionnaire given to a sample of parents and students, we are planning on conducting interviews with some of them at other fairs and analysing the visitor information collected by fair organisers.

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<sup>3</sup> Amelia Legavre told booth hosts she was a research assistant and used her student status to create a good rapport with student booth hosts. The booth hosts were asked about visitor profiles and typical visitor questions and about what kind of information and advice was typically given to them.



## **1 Fairs as organised micro-fields and micro-markets**

### *1.1 Organisers and forms of organisation*

Higher education fairs are organised in France mainly by two main private agencies, L'Etudiant and Studyrama. L'Etudiant belongs to the Express-Roularta media group whose majority shareholder is Roularta Media France, an international multimedia group. Created in 1972, L'Etudiant was initially a journal. In 1983, a series of guides on higher education was added to the brand. In 1986, it organised the first ever higher education fair in Paris and after the group was bought by Express-Roularta in 1988, it further developed the sector by targeting other French cities. L'Etudiant currently offers publications, fairs and Internet services, some for free and some for profit, and around 50 people work in its newsroom. Studyrama is an independent media group founded by two management and finance students. They started off by writing a free magazine and a guide on 'good student plans'. In 1994, the company launched a series of education guide books and then organized its first higher education fair in Paris in 1998. It is now part of a larger media group, Studyrama-Vocatis, that employs around 150 workers and offers publications, fairs and Internet services that focus on educational guidance, student life and professional success.

The State is also an actor in higher education fairs, in several ways. L'Office national d'information sur les enseignements et les professions (ONISEP), a public agency created in 1970, is also a central provider of information and guidance for higher education studies. It organises two fairs: the ONISEP education fair, which takes place within a larger fair, the European fair on education, in which L'Etudiant and other public and private agencies also

participate; and a fair created in 2010 in collaboration with a private media group to help students make good use of the new central Internet application system for higher education, Admission Post-Bac (APB) known as the APB fair. ONISEP, the Ministries of Education and Higher Education and regional educational and political authorities also take part in the organizing committees and sponsor the fairs organised by L'Etudiant and Studyrama so that visitors do not have to pay. It is important to note, however, that regional political and educational authorities are much more involved in organising and sponsoring those fairs taking place outside the Paris region, partly because public HEIs are much more present at these fairs.

Almost 150 higher education fairs have taken or will take place during the 2013–2014 university year. As is true for all events of this type, these fairs are temporarily and spatially bounded. Their temporality depends on the calendars of schools and HEIs, and especially on the time line imposed by the new APB application system. Most fairs take place before the APB system is opened, i.e. between November and January, and then again when is open and students are still reflecting on their choices, i.e. between January and March (the APB system opens around mid-January and applications must be completed around mid-March). While the two private firms organize almost exactly the same number of fairs (71 by L'Etudiant, 70 by Studyrama, and six by other agencies or groups of HEIs), they try to not hold them simultaneously in the same place. The cities that can only hold two to three fairs each year, for their part logically want to spread them out over the five most intense months. Depending on their degree of specialization, HEI fairs last one to three days, with longer fairs usually taking place towards the end of the week and the rest taking place over the weekend. Fairs are also

spatially bounded and their spatial distribution is very unequal: 41 fairs take place in the Paris region (38 in Paris proper) and 106 in other regions. Almost two-thirds of the 47 cities outside the Paris region that host fairs have only one fair per year; Lyon is second to the Paris region with 14 fairs. The spatial differences are also qualitative. While half of the fairs (51%) are non-specialized and the other half are devoted to specific types of higher education tracks and occupational and professional sectors, students living in or near cities hosting one or two fairs do not have access to specialized fairs. Those living in cities hosting between three to seven fairs have access to both non-specialized fairs and fairs on different higher education tracks, but not to fairs on different occupational and professional sectors; the latter are only organised in Paris and Lyon.

## *1.2 Activities, agents and visitors*

Fairs typically propose two main forms of interaction between higher education providers and consumers. The first is one-to-one interactions at exhibitor booths. While it is crucial to have an objective representation of the profiles of the HEIs present at these events so as to understand the processes at work, this is a very difficult task requiring the collection of data on size, academic provision and degrees, staff and student composition, job openings, etc., for the hundred or so HEIs present at each fair. Not only are the HEIs not the same from one fair to another, but this information is also not always readily available. However, a more superficial analysis of the HEIs present at the nine fairs observed between 2011 and 2014 (four organised by L'Etudiant, three by Studyrama and two by other bodies) shows that at fairs organized in the region of Paris, two main dimensions contribute to a biased representation of the French field of HEIs. The first has to do with HEIs' institutional

status and funding: while only around 30.000 students (18% of the total number) in France are educated at private HEIs, these institutions, which strongly depend on student tuition for survival, are greatly over-represented at fairs. On the contrary, public universities are under-represented, given the nature of their funding, which makes them both less dependant on external funding and less able to spend money on booths at fairs. Also, given the fact that although they are now losing students, they are not used to the market themselves. The second dimension is prestige. The most prestigious HEIs, especially top grandes écoles, are either totally absent from the fairs or only present at the fairs specializing in grandes écoles. More generally, HEIs that invest money and time at fairs are those that cannot count on their reputation alone to attract enough students or enough students of the ‘right’ calibre<sup>4</sup>.

The people working at HEI booths are usually institutional staff members in charge of communications and guidance and, less frequently, admissions, as well as students from the institutions. In a small number of cases, directors and professors also participate. The number of individuals per booth varies greatly based on its size as

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<sup>4</sup> The French higher education landscape is extremely complex. In this chapter, we will make the following distinctions: universities (i.e. public non-selective universities offering bachelor’s, master’s and PhD degrees); *grandes écoles* (i.e. prestigious and selective three to four years HEIs, public or private, offering master’s or equivalent degrees); *classes préparatoires* (i.e. two-year preparatory classes after the baccalaureate needed to present the competitive examinations for accessing *grandes écoles*); *écoles post-bac* (i.e. public and private HEIs of medium to low prestige offering bachelor’s and master’s or equivalent degrees, notably in engineering, management and education); professional *écoles*, technology institutes and technical post-bac tracks (i.e. two to three years of professional training in a wide variety of areas including social work and the paramedical professions). For a more detailed presentation of this landscape and the different types of institutions involved, see the various *Notes d’information* on higher education at <http://www.enseignementsup-recherche.gouv.fr/pid24800/notes-d-information.html>

well as the institutional status of the HEI: booths for public universities and small professional écoles usually have fewer hosts, sometimes as few as one or two, while private low-prestige écoles post-bac, notably in management, frequently have many representatives, especially students. The type of individuals involved also varies based on institutional profile and prestige. Most grandes écoles and écoles post-bac of medium prestige send administrative and managerial staff members. Directors are usually only present in the case of low-prestige écoles post-bac, while professors are mostly found at the booths of professional schools and, less frequently, universities.

Students, hereafter referred to as ‘student ambassadors’, to use a folk term (Slack et al., 2012), are present in most if not all booths. According to the director of L’Etudiant, student participation in fairs was a movement started 20 years ago by private HEIs in search of students; it advocates a consumer-oriented approach and has now become a general trend (October 2011 interview). Student ambassadors are not usually paid but their participation is usually taken into account in their studies, as an exercise in communication with strangers, and is sometimes subject to evaluation, especially in the case of students preparing for management careers. Some students receive a short training from the institution before their participation at fairs, usually a short PowerPoint presentation of major institutional characteristics and selling arguments, as well as some advice regarding how to behave towards visitors. However, the main difference between booths has to do with the degree to which the students’ activities are supervised by senior staff members, this

being much more frequently the case in the booths of *écoles post-bac* in management<sup>5</sup>.

The second most central form of interaction is the one that takes place during lectures. Depending on the expected number of visitors and the fair's main themes, between four and 12 one-hour lectures are organized at each fair. A lecture typically involves three to four speakers who are commonly representatives of different HEIs (directors, managers, professors, etc.) and a moderator who is usually a journalist specialized in a specific area of higher education or, more exceptionally, a psychologist or counsellor. Student ambassadors also frequently attend lectures as part of their training exercise. Analysis of the 652 lectures organised or to be organised by L'Etudiant in 2013-2014 (Studyrama does not systematically publish the titles of lectures beforehand on its website) shows that 255 (40%) of the lectures focus on specific occupations, professions and higher education tracks, while 17% are devoted to *grandes écoles*<sup>6</sup> and another 17% to higher education choice based on secondary school track. Lectures on two-year track studies are well represented when discussed along with work-study opportunities and apprenticeship (13%), whereas universities are strongly under-represented (only 17 lectures, i.e. 2%) and most lectures devoted to them focus on the

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<sup>5</sup> Fairs also include other types of booths offering different services (banking, student insurance services, youth services, book exhibits and 'counselling spaces' where students can get information, advice and coaching on preparing CVs, writing cover letters or conducting admissions interviews), as well as booths with recreational activities, food and beverages. Although some of these mediations are also significant to understanding student choices, we will not focus on them in this chapter.

<sup>6</sup> Most *grandes écoles* are present only at fairs on *grandes écoles*. The most prestigious public *grandes écoles*, which are mostly engineering schools, are totally absent from fairs while the most prestigious private *grandes écoles*, which specialize in management, are present at some.

most prestigious and selective disciplines, medicine and law. Moreover, as lectures on universities are almost always organised by the Ministry of Higher Education and Research, it is likely that they are at least to some extent imposed on organisers by the state in return for state sponsoring of fairs.

A final and central question about fairs concerns the number and characteristics of the visitors. Numbers are difficult to estimate because the only figures available are those provided by the agencies themselves. Not only do they not provide the numbers systematically, they also tend to publish only those of the most popular fairs. However, from the figures that we were able to collect, it appears that numbers in the Paris region range from 10.000 for one-day fairs targeting specific segments, such as the SAGE fair on grandes écoles in 2012, to up to more than half a million (550.000, considered a record) for the four-day European fair on education in 2013. One of the most non-specialized and well-known fairs, le Salon de l'Etudiant de Paris, seems to attract between 200.000 and 300.000 visitors each year and its equivalent in Bordeaux 50.000 visitors. In any case, fairs are clearly popular events for a large number of students using the APB application system<sup>7</sup>, as well as for all those students already in higher education who are planning on changing tracks or institutions. It is nevertheless important to note that there is no direct relationship between the number of visitors and a fair's 'efficiency' or 'effectiveness' in terms of the percentage of students applying to the HEIs present at the event. While Studyrama's fairs get less visitors on average than L'Etudiant's fairs

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<sup>7</sup> In 2013, of the 754.000 candidates created an electronic form on the APB system, 710.000 indicated at least one choice and 667.000 validated it. (Source: [http://cache.media.enseignementsup-recherche.gouv.fr/file/médiathèque/49/5/Dossier\\_APB\\_10\\_juin\\_2013255495.pdf](http://cache.media.enseignementsup-recherche.gouv.fr/file/médiathèque/49/5/Dossier_APB_10_juin_2013255495.pdf))

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due to their duration and location, some of the HEI representatives interviewed remarked that the Studyrama fairs produced greater returns.

It is more difficult still to get information on visitor characteristics. From the small survey we conducted at the Salon de l'Etudiant in 2011, whose results are not representative given the small sample size and the fact that the questionnaire was filled out only by voluntary visitors, it appears that of the 66 students (out of 75) who answered the question regarding their father's occupation, 18% came from upper-class families, 44% from middle-class families, and 38% from lower-class families. Our qualitative observations corroborate the idea that fairs are probably 'a middle-class affair', although the proportion of students from different social classes clearly varies based on the fair's theme, with more upper-class visitors at fairs on grandes écoles and a wider representation of lower-class students at fairs on two-years studies and apprenticeships. Our observations also allowed us to get some idea of the age of visitors and their visiting patterns. A very salient element is the significant presence of parents, this being particularly the case at fairs on grandes écoles. For the director of L'Etudiant, parental presence, which is clearly the consequence of the parents' increasing anxiety about their children's futures and their growing investment in educational choices (van Zanten 2009a), is the most significant and striking change in visitor profiles over the last 10 years (November 2012 interview). Some parents, most often mothers, come with their son and, more frequently, daughter, but some also come by themselves. Students who do not come with their parents most frequently visit fairs with their boyfriend or girlfriend or with one to five friends. A few of them come alone. During weekdays, there are also groups of students who visit non-specialized



fairs, such as L'Étudiant fair for secondary school students and the APB fair, with their secondary school teachers.

## **2 Higher education fairs as ‘packaging’ devices**

### *2.1 The material packaging of HEIs*

As stated in the introduction, fairs ‘engineer’ the relationship between providers and consumers of higher education through the packaging of products and services. The first type of packaging concerns the fair setting. In the region of Paris on which we will concentrate our analyses from now on, both L'Étudiant and Studyrama rent space in three of the ten centres for conventions, exhibitions, fairs and related events that belong to the Paris Chamber of Commerce and Industry. In that sense, educational products and services are proposed to consumers in the same way that commercial products and services are proposed to consumers attending commercial exhibitions and events. However, it is important to note that Studyrama frequently rents another space at the Cité Internationale Universitaire de Paris (CIUP), a private foundation recognized to be of public utility that was created in 1920 and funded by private philanthropists, business and foreign governments. As the most important place of residence for foreign students studying in Paris and a provider of different services for the academic community such as libraries, concerts, films and plays, it is a prestigious academic setting clearly chosen to encourage visitors to envision themselves in ambitious careers of study, especially at the international level.

A second form of packaging concerns the ways in which fairs are publicised. The higher education fairs are advertised through

different channels: the websites of each agency, ONISEP and the state and private agencies that sponsor them; adverts in non-specialized, specialized and professional magazines; strategically placed posters, including in the Paris Metro; and especially written information sent to secondary school professionals and, more exceptionally, oral presentations given at schools (interview with an agent in charge of L'Etudiant fairs, March 2011). In order to make fairs attractive, all agencies provide free entrance tickets on the Internet, a service which allows them to attract visitors to their websites, gather information on visitor characteristics such as gender, age, level of study and occupational areas of interest, and send the interested parties additional information by e-mail and SMS. Posters, adverts and presentations on websites emphasize both the wide variety of HEIs present at each fair and the need to think seriously about one's transition to higher education.

The packaging continues within fairs through the location and general design of the exhibitors' booths. Booths are generally physically placed in a way that both facilitates the free flow of visitors and presents a 'rational' grouping of HEIs based on their institutional status (universities on one side and écoles on the other) or the occupational and professional sectors they prepare students for. In some cases, however, we observed that the grouping was also based on institutional prestige, this being especially the case for top grandes écoles at fairs dedicated only to grandes écoles. However, as at other fairs (Moeran 2011), exhibitors can reinforce their attractiveness by buying more square meters for their booths or the most strategic locations, e.g. near the entrance. Each HEI present also micro-engineers exchanges with visitors by strategically designing its booth. In that respect, we observed a significant difference between university- and école-run booths. The former are

generally closed, creating impersonal settings for the interaction between booth representatives and visitors, whereas the latter are generally open, allowing visitors to enter the booth and, symbolically, the institution as well. Moreover, while university booths are almost bare, many of the booths of the écoles post-bac and the professional écoles (especially of those of low prestige) have colourful and sometimes striking visual devices.

In most booths, however, there are posters on walls and vertical supports with the institution's logos and colours and attractive slogans, all emphasizing elements presented as distinctive to each institution. Although some institutions, following a more Anglo-Saxon model, underscore distinctive institutional values in their messages, the majority present more instrumental competitive advantages such as possibilities for internships and apprenticeship, connections with firms and job openings, study abroad opportunities, integration into prestigious networks of HEIs and position in rankings. Another packaging device for attracting visitors to booths and the institution itself are glossy brochures. These brochures present the HEI's different tracks, areas of study and degrees, its selection criteria, funding schemes and job openings, and often frequently contain short narratives of student experiences and colourful photos of buildings, activities and students. Finally, in one more step of packaging, designed to create more expressive ties between visitors and the institution, some HEIs also propose 'goodies' such as pens, pins and even condoms with the HEI's name, logo and colours, as well as more expensive gifts such as umbrellas 'reserved for visitors who are really interested' (seen and heard at a grande école booth at a Studyrama fair on grandes écoles in 2013).

## 2.2 *Packaging through actions and words*

The most important packaging of HEIs at fairs nevertheless occurs in the actions and words of booth hosts, who are themselves repackaged as institutional ‘icons’ via their clothing. Student ambassadors in particular frequently wear t-shirts with their HEI’s name, logo and colours. Although their main objective is to talk to visitors, they also perform two types of activities designed to engage visitors. The first, more frequent in the booths of low-prestige management schools, involves pleasantly greeting with a smile those visitors passing by their booth and immediately addressing those who briefly stop in front of the booth so as to engage them in an immediate exchange. The second is to attract visitors for the future, that is to engage them in a circuit (Trompette 2005) that will eventually lead them to choose their institution. After they have hooked the visitor, the next step is to invite him or her to attend an open day at the institution where, as we have observed in studying more than 20 such events, a more targeted kind of packaging and pre-selection takes place. To achieve this, which is sometimes the booth hosts’ main goal at a fair (‘no matter what they say or do, they must close by inviting visitors to open days’, said the person in charge of the booth for a low-ranked management school at a Studyrama fair in 2013), they ask visitors to write their names and addresses down on electronic or paper forms.

The booth hosts’ discursive strategy includes three ideal-typical forms that are frequently mixed during actual interactions. The first is the delivery of a well-rehearsed discourse, sometimes involving brochures or posters as props, that underscores distinctive institutional assets and qualities. The second is to engage in direct discussion with visitors, letting them ask questions and, through

adapted answers to their queries, channel some of the same institutional messages that others present in the ‘delivery’ mode. The third strategy is to provide short narratives of personal experiences at the institution. The first strategy, which allows for a more in-depth covering of all the dimensions that the institution wants to convey but is less appealing to visitors who may feel that there is no true interaction, seems to be adopted by institutional representatives who stick to a very official definition of their role or by students ambassadors who feel insecure about their knowledge of the institutions or fear a negative evaluation from their supervisors. However, it may be used skilfully by booth hosts who are used to anticipating all possible visitor questions. The second strategy is much more appealing to consumers but forces booth hosts to run the risk of delivering incomplete institutional messages. Some hosts, however, and especially those from management schools, do use it in a very accomplished manner, establishing parallels and links between the tastes and desires of the visitors, especially students, and the characteristics of their HEI. Only student ambassadors use narratives of personal experiences, but this less frequently than other strategies. This discursive form is highly appreciated by student visitors as it provides them with ‘warm’ information about the future of higher education that they in particular are seeking (Slack et al. 2012).

The main arguments used in these different strategies focus, as do the messages on the posters and brochures, on institutional ‘distinctiveness’, a typical market strategy directed towards both consumers and ‘competitors’ (François 2008). However, many of the messages do not contain direct comparisons but rather self-centred expressions such as: ‘We are the only ones to...’ or ‘we offer this or that’. Moreover, while in many market situations, packaging

strategies are oriented towards the creation of subtle and many times artificial differences between very similar products (Cochoy 2002), in the field of higher education, the variety of institutional profiles and services strongly facilitates the task of pointing out how each institution has special qualities that correspond both to visitors' immediate and long-term concerns.

To underscore distinctiveness, some general elements of the curriculum are frequently mentioned. Engineering schools and universities, for instance, will praise their non-specialized or multidisciplinary curricula. Big Parisian universities and prestigious grandes écoles emphasize the qualification of their academic staff while smaller universities near Paris or private institutions of intermediate prestige focus more on their capacity to supervise their students' work thanks to their small size and also closer staff involvement. On the other hand, public and private HEIs proposing two-year professional tracks as well as low-prestige écoles post-bac emphasize their specialized character. The latter also underscore their pedagogical methods (project work, a focus on practice rather than theory) and the fact that their professors are 'true professionals', so as to differentiate themselves from universities whose curricula and professors are depicted as 'too theoretical' and also sometimes to hide the fact that their academic staff is less qualified.

In addition to underlining their distinctive provision, the HEIs' messages also emphasize their utility, that is how their distinctive characteristics are convergent with the visitors' instrumental goals and how that will provide them with greater satisfaction than other institutions. Given the negative situation of the French economy, the major instrumental argument of many HEIs is the extent to which their education will help students remain

unaffected by the economic crisis: ‘a non-specialized école is safer in times of crises’ (said a communication manager of a five-year engineering grande école at the Studyrama fair on grandes écoles); ‘Our sector has not been affected by the crisis’ (student ambassador of an école specializing in the marketing of luxury goods at the L’Etudiant fair on grandes écoles). Each type of institution also focuses on how its distinctive factors are conducive to future positive experiences in the job market. Grandes écoles and universities providing non-specialized training focus on their capacity to help students ‘keep doors open’ for different types of postgraduate education or future jobs (Renkens 2014). And while representatives of the most prestigious and selective grandes écoles also stress the importance of alumni networks in helping recent graduates get good jobs, two-year track institutions insist on the fact that they facilitate short-term access to the job market through apprenticeships, internships and degrees well adapted to employer expectations.

Although to a lesser degree, the discourse of institutional representatives and student ambassadors also focuses on the quality of the expressive experience that their institution provides for students and on how this experience will match their desires. The campus and its surroundings along with the institutional ‘atmosphere’ are frequently mentioned as contributing to the quality of the overall student experience. The grandes écoles and some universities located outside Paris or in semi-rural areas focus on the former, whereas small écoles that stress their ‘human size’ and ‘family’ character, in implicit or explicit opposition to the anomie attributed to large universities, focus on the latter. Some student ambassadors, especially those from grandes écoles and écoles post-bac, also praise the variety of social activities and the quality of student life at their HEI, frequently by sharing personal narratives.

The international nature of these schools is also often mentioned. While this dimension is also presented as an instrumental asset in a 'global job market', the expressive dimensions of studying and living abroad and of being part of a multicultural student body are also regularly shared, sometimes through personal narratives. This focus on personal experiences is partly due to some student ambassadors' incomplete knowledge of the institution, as well as to the fact that they tend to see it as a more truthful presentation of what the institution they are representing is really like and one that is more likely to inspire the student visitors' choices.

Interaction at booths is also conditioned by the demand of visitors who come to fairs with their own personal agendas. Although many visit with only vague ideas in mind or with a feeling of being lost because they lack information or have too much information, they bring with them expectations and desires that in turn influence how booth hosts choose to promote their products and services. Visitor perspectives can nevertheless vary greatly. Although our observations at booths did not allow us to determine the influence of variables such as gender and social background, we did notice important differences related to the position of either parent or student. Parents tend to adopt a strong instrumental perspective, the majority of their questions focusing on funding and job openings. Student visitors, on the other hand, focus more on the content of the curriculum and its relation to desired occupations and professions as well as on factors such as location, from a mix of instrumental and expressive perspectives.

The attitudes of student visitors vary in turn based on their age, institutional status, ways of visiting and types of fairs. Young secondary school students who come with their parents over the



weekend, which is most frequently the case at Studyrama fairs and grandes écoles fairs, and who probably come from higher socio-economic backgrounds ask few questions despite the fact that, in line with instructions from senior institutional staff, booth hosts systematically approach students during the interaction. Students who come alone over the weekend and who are frequently older and already engaged in higher education studies tend to ask precise instrumental questions related to clearly defined study projects. Young students who come over the weekend in groups adopt more expressive perspectives. They focus on the discovery of new occupations and professions and a few use the most outstanding displays to play games. Finally, young secondary school students who come with their teachers to non-specialized fairs are clearly less engaged in interactions and tend to ask questions prepared in advance in class or just say, ‘Tell me more about your school’.

### **3 The fairs as judgement devices**

#### *3.1 ‘Customised’ prescriptions*

Visitors not only go to higher education fairs to look for relevant information on ‘what is out there’, but are also lost in the sense that they do not know how to evaluate the quality and status of the wide array of HEIs presented to them. And even if they did, because they are influenced by their family and school socialisation and are at least partly aware of the possibilities and limitations associated with their past educational paths and present academic profiles, they orient their choices towards specific types of institutions and tracks and often feel quite uncertain about how to make relevant comparisons between similar HEIs and areas of study. Conscious of this, higher education fair staff members and HEI

representatives frequently assume a prescriptive role (Hatchuel 1995) that is particularly ambiguous. This is especially the case for HEI representatives who, being both party and judge, tend to combine advising and sophisticated packaging into their interactions and presentations.

Visitors are especially interested in getting personal advice that takes into account their individual profiles, expectations and desires and suggests adequate 'customized' institutional offers that fit them, thus leading to a satisfying matching between student and institution (van Zanten 2013). This demand leads institutional representatives and especially students ambassadors to provide advice first on selection procedures, through which the actual matching will materialize. This should be easy but is not always. Many visitors have questions, for instance, regarding the possibility or probability of being selected by the institution based on their path and profile. These questions are difficult to answer because selective HEIs may have different requirements for different admission procedures. It is also a delicate exercise because both hosts must take into account particular cases while adopting the generic encouraging discourse concerning selection that most institutions advocate, although with different goals in mind depending on their status.

Low or medium-prestige and not very selective institutions tend to reassure students and parents of the fit between their profile and the institutional expectations or give tips and advice regarding how to improve it, thus increasing the chances that they apply. Representatives from prestigious and selective institutions, on the contrary, tend to underscore their selection criteria and re-route students that, in their view, do not fit their institution. However, they

too develop, more in lectures than at booths, a rhetoric concerning their ‘social openness’ by insisting on the diversity of their admission procedures and their funding schemes (scholarships, apprenticeship in firms and bank loans) as well as on their ‘widening participation policies’ and involvement in ‘equal opportunity actions’ dedicated to reduce self-censorship and encourage ambition among lower-class students. However, these dimensions, especially the latter, are used less to attract new types of students – which remains extremely difficult as funding schemes do not eliminate economic barriers nor do alternative admissions procedures that affect a very small number of students eliminate cultural barriers to success at competitive examinations – than they are used as competitive assets in comparing similar institutions that are less successful in this respect and as a response to accusations of elitism by public opinion leaders (van Zanten 2010).

Booth hosts and lecturers are also asked by visitors to provide more general advice on the soundness and relevance of different types of institutional choices. Their discourse, and especially that of the student ambassadors, oscillates between the two extremes of adopting exclusively the institutional point of view or taking up the visitors’ points of view. Some booth hosts do not hesitate to adopt a clear-cut commercial stance. For example, at the European education fair, one student ambassador from an engineering school told us, ‘Some visitors ask if it is better to choose a professional school or to choose us. Well, naturally, we always answer ‘choose us’’. In other cases, it is more difficult to decide whether the student ambassadors’ advice is dictated by their efforts to package their institutions and tracks or by their ‘institutional habituses’ (Reay 1998). For instance, one of the students ambassadors interviewed told us that he considers himself better positioned than the rest of the booth staff to attract

student visitors to the institution and, more generally, to selective grandes écoles recruiting after two years of preparatory classes, because he himself has gone through these classes and is proud of his path. As he sees it, his ‘mission’ is to destigmatize the preparatory classes and counter their elitist image as well as that of the grandes écoles they lead to (male engineering student at a prestigious grande école, Studyrama fair on grandes écoles).

Other student ambassadors adopt a more ‘impartial’ stance, either because they play their role with some distance – that is, they do not live up to all the institution’s behavioural prescriptions (Goffman 1961) in order to assert their independence and capacity to adapt their judgement to concrete situations – or because they identify with student visitors or both. They might give different types of generic advice or use their own path to show that many different choices are possible. For example, another student ambassador we interviewed told us that he opted for university studies without having really thought about it. He had a chaotic university experience and did not earn a bachelor’s degree even after five years of study. He then found the post-bac engineering school where is currently studying and finds it ‘a redeeming experience’. His stated ‘mission’ is to show other students that ‘it is not a huge problem to make mistakes but that they should not retreat into solitude and waste their time like he did’ and to ‘help them find their way’ (male, engineering student at a post-bac école, interviewed at the European educational fair).

### 3.2 *Generic advice*

Institutional representatives and student ambassadors nevertheless complain about the fact that they spend a lot of time at

the booths explaining to visitors how the higher education system is organized and especially how the new APB application system works. This was also apparent in visitors' questions during lectures. Not only do many hosts feel that this kind of advice goes well beyond their interests and expertise, but they also think it dispels the 'magic' dimension of the one-on-one encounters between individual projects or desires and packaged institutional products and services, and is at odds with their focus on factors that facilitate rather than constrain access to higher education. Although fair organisers and staff members in particular feel that their role is more than giving specific advice in response to individual questions, they also want to mark the difference between their analyses and goals and those of secondary school teachers and counsellors. While the latter are thought to limit students' choices through their focus on using past paths and grades to determine students' chances of future success and their use of outdated information on HEIs and the job market, fair organisers and staff see their own role as future-oriented, encouraging and informed.

Ideally, they should help students accomplish their dreams and desires and facilitate more ambitious and diverse higher education and job careers by giving valuable advice on 'the tricks and ropes' of higher education, such as alternative admission procedures or possibilities for catching up and getting a 'second chance' despite initial mistakes or bad choices. Lectures are perceived as the best context for displaying this general perspective and providing generic advice of this type. However, actual lectures combine the pursuit of this 'noble' goal with the promotion by institutional representatives (i.e. the main speakers) of their own interests through discursive and practical compromises and arrangements. Many institutional representatives, for instance,

manage to reconcile the organisers' recommendation to avoid talking about their own institution and focus only on general information and advice – a prescription put into practice by not placing institutional name plates in front of the speakers – and their institutional interests by underscoring assets and advantages that only their class of institution possess. In that sense, lectures give institutional representatives from similar types of HEIs an opportunity to adopt a common front either to dispel what they see as negative perceptions of their activity and role or to promote common assets.

For example, representatives from private institutions, which as we mentioned previously are over-represented in fairs in Paris, use lectures to dispel their image as a commercial business by insisting that they are not firms but rather associations or foundations, and that they work closely with representatives of the Ministry of Higher Education and Research and train professionals to work for the state. Grandes écoles also underline that they are not inaccessible to low-income students because of the free character of preparatory classes and of their funding schemes. The most prestigious private grandes écoles also promote their many international advantages (language of instruction, nationalities of teaching staff, study abroad opportunities) and the provision of better opportunities for jobs due to their excellent image, privileged relations with employers and active role of alumni networks. The less prestigious private post-bac schools instead focus on their institutional climate or reactivity: 'in private écoles, the relationship between teachers and students is of higher quality because professors are around all the time, not just during their classes'; 'private schools are more responsive and are closer to firms' (both heard at a lecture at the Studyrama fair on grandes écoles). Although this discourse is presented by institutional representatives as 'non-promotional' because it lacks direct

references to their institution and combines both information and advice, it clearly packages some specific types of institutions, specifically private grandes écoles and écoles post-bac, in a much nicer ‘wrapping paper’ than public universities, which, as previously stated, are frequently absent from fairs.

The ‘disinterested’ character of lectures is also emphasized through the choice of speakers and the discourse of the chairpersons. The former are usually chosen to express diverse and sometimes divergent views but their heterogeneity is seen as conducive to the general positive message that ‘every institution (or track or field of study) has something to offer to some groups of students’, sometimes explicitly stated by the chairperson during or at the end of the lecture. In lectures that group together écoles that differ in institutional and curricular design and prestige, each representative will defend the model used in the class of institutions to which his or her HEI belongs and speak in favour either of grandes écoles requiring preparatory classes and of non-specialized studies or of écoles post-bac and specialized curricula. And although these different types of institutions are not equally accessible to all students, the main focus is to match students’ tastes and projects rather than capabilities and resources with the different institutions, which are not placed, at least explicitly, on a vertical hierarchical order but rather on a horizontal plane. To facilitate this last process, chairpersons working at L’Etudiant propose in the most non-specialized lectures a psychological test designed to help students discover their interests and tastes and how they might fit with specific professions, occupations and higher education tracks. These tools are also frequently employed at the ‘counselling spaces’ present at some fairs and by the coaches who promote their services on the L’Etudiant and Studyrama websites.

### 3.3 *External instruments and criteria*

Although booth hosts and lecture participants encourage students to visit open days to get personally acquainted with their institution and therefore become better equipped to make a ‘patterned’ choice of what is suitable for them rather than a generic choice (Lareau 1989) based only on external evaluations or established reputations, they simultaneously make frequent reference to external instruments and criteria such as rankings, labels and networks. Nevertheless, HEI representatives tend to refer to these external instruments or criteria selectively at their booths as well as in lectures, varying references to them according to what best fits their interests. The most prestigious HEIs refer to well-known rankings but only to those rankings in which they occupy a top position. On the other hand, less prestigious HEIs, especially low-prestige management post-bac schools, frequently mention their rank but then rarely mention the ranking agencies and the criteria and the procedures they use: ‘We are #9 in international openness’ (management school student ambassador, SAGE fair); ‘Our bachelor’s degree is among the 15 best’ (management school student ambassador, L’Etudiant fair on grandes écoles); and even ‘We are the first concerning the activity of students associations’ (management school student representative, L’Etudiant fair on grandes écoles). Some of them also warn visitors about not taking rankings ‘as the final word concerning institutional choice’ (representative of an agency organizing competitive examination for middle-status écoles, Studyrama lecture on grandes écoles).

During one-on-one exchanges at booths or lectures, institutional representatives also refer to degrees and labels as criteria for evaluating the quality and status of HEIs but, again, in varying



degrees and in different ways based on their institutional profile. Grandes écoles and universities promote the fact that they award official master's degrees; prestigious private management grandes écoles promote their offer of mastères spécialisés and sometimes MBAs that are recognized by international accrediting bodies. On the other hand, low-prestige private écoles tend to remain vague about their certifications and degrees, which do not have State recognition, and talk about 'a master's level' or 'bac +5', i.e. five years of post-baccalaureate training.

To boost their status (Podolny 1993), some institutions also promote their participation in prestigious networks. This used to be the case mostly for grandes écoles, as the label 'member of the Conference of grandes écoles' (an association that defends the interests of 212 public and private HEIs which are recognized by the State and propose 5-year programmes sanctioned by national official degrees) was originally created to single out the most prestigious écoles from those less esteemed. However, due to the push by the Ministry of Higher Education and Research to create higher education clusters in order to improve the synergy and visibility of French HEIs at the national and international level, many HEIs, and notably the most prestigious ones, are now members of wider networks. In addition to mentioning these new networks, we observed that the less prestigious institutions tend to implicitly borrow some of the features of more prestigious institutions with which they are associated. For example, at a Studyrama fair on grandes écoles, we heard the student ambassador of a management school say, 'We are one of the Shanghai 100's top HEIs', while in fact it is the university with which his management school is associated in a wider network that has been ranked.

It is important to note that visitors seem to show little interest in these criteria in evaluating quality and status and that for at least three reasons. First, as was clear from some of the questions we heard, many visitors have difficulties grasping the different dimensions taken into account in rankings as well as the meaning of some of the labels and the identity of the accrediting agencies. They tend to feel confused and overwhelmed by and suspicious of figures and names they view as ‘esoteric’ professional knowledge. Second, for most visitors, this type of ‘cold’ data is not what they are looking for at fairs (Ball and Vincent 1998, Slack et al. 2012). Even in specialized lectures, many parents – more than students, who participate less in these public settings – ask questions that are either pragmatic, especially on how to use the APB system, or of personal importance. And finally, those parents and students who are more likely to understand and use external indicators of quality or status (i.e. upper-class parents and students) either do not attend fairs because they choose HEIs whose reputation makes getting additional information unnecessary, or prefer to analyse that kind of data at home.

### **Conclusion**

Higher education fairs are presented by both the French national and local authorities who support and sponsor them as well as by their organisers as ‘private events of public utility’. Despite their commercial character, the fact that they provide free guidance services for visitors allows them to be viewed as ‘complementary instruments’ alongside those implemented by public agencies and by secondary schools to help students find their way in a complex higher education system and reduce disparities between social groups tied to a lack of or imperfect information. Yet there has been no

evaluation of their impact on reducing inequalities in access to higher education. In the absence of data – a shortfall that we are trying to rectify through research based on questionnaires and interviews with secondary school students and their parents – those researchers using a structural perspective might be tempted to dismiss the fairs’ influence. However, we believe that this position would be a mistake, not only because it would disregard the role that fairs play in fine-tuning students’ choices between similar types of institutions and different areas of study but also because it would ignore the growing importance of external agents and agencies and of public-private partnerships in the area of educational guidance. On the contrary, we believe that a comprehensive perspective focusing on the role played by different agents, events and devices intervening in the transition from secondary to higher education is needed in order to enrich the analysis of how their interaction at present contributes to the reproduction, exacerbation or reduction of educational inequalities.

The results and interpretations presented in this chapter do not lead to clear-cut conclusions in that respect. On the one hand, it is possible to argue that fairs allow visitors to improve their knowledge of HEIs both in breadth, as many students and parents discover institutions and tracks they have never heard of, and depth. Interactions at booths, in particular, possibly followed by the reading of brochures, give them a much more comprehensive overview of the organisation, curricular content and assets of a particular institution. The large number of visitors who feel ‘lost’ about how to distinguish between institutions, evaluate their quality and status, and find the one that best ‘matches’ their profile, ambitions and desires, can also expect to find some help in these areas. In addition, those students whose teachers have channelled them into low-prestige higher

education tracks which lead to low-prestige and poorly-paid jobs (Willis 1977) might also benefit from the general focus at fairs on their dreams and tastes, as well as from the up-to-date information.

On the other hand, other factors show a more nuanced picture. To start, it would be wrong to consider fairs as a representative sample of existing higher education institutions. Some institutions are over-represented while others are under-represented. Not only does this lead students and parents to adopt an incorrect cognitive representation of the landscape of higher education but has practical negative consequences as well. An important one is that students from lower class or lower-middle class backgrounds may end up applying to private HEIs, thus taking out loans and earning degrees of little value in the job market when they could have studied the same subjects for free at public universities and obtained official degrees well recognized by employers. This risk is significant because it would be naïve to think that fairs promote a direct exchange between providers and consumers. As we have shown, this exchange is mediated both by packaging devices through which institutions embellish and promote their image and by ‘interested’ judging devices through which they lead visitors to focus on certain types of criteria that are advantageous to them. In other words, if fairs, like the market in general, can free individuals from institutional constraints such as diverse forms of institutional channelling by educational institutions (van Zanten, 2009b), these ‘dis-embedded’ individuals are then immediately ‘re-embedded’ in another web of influences whose effects remain to be precisely assessed.

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