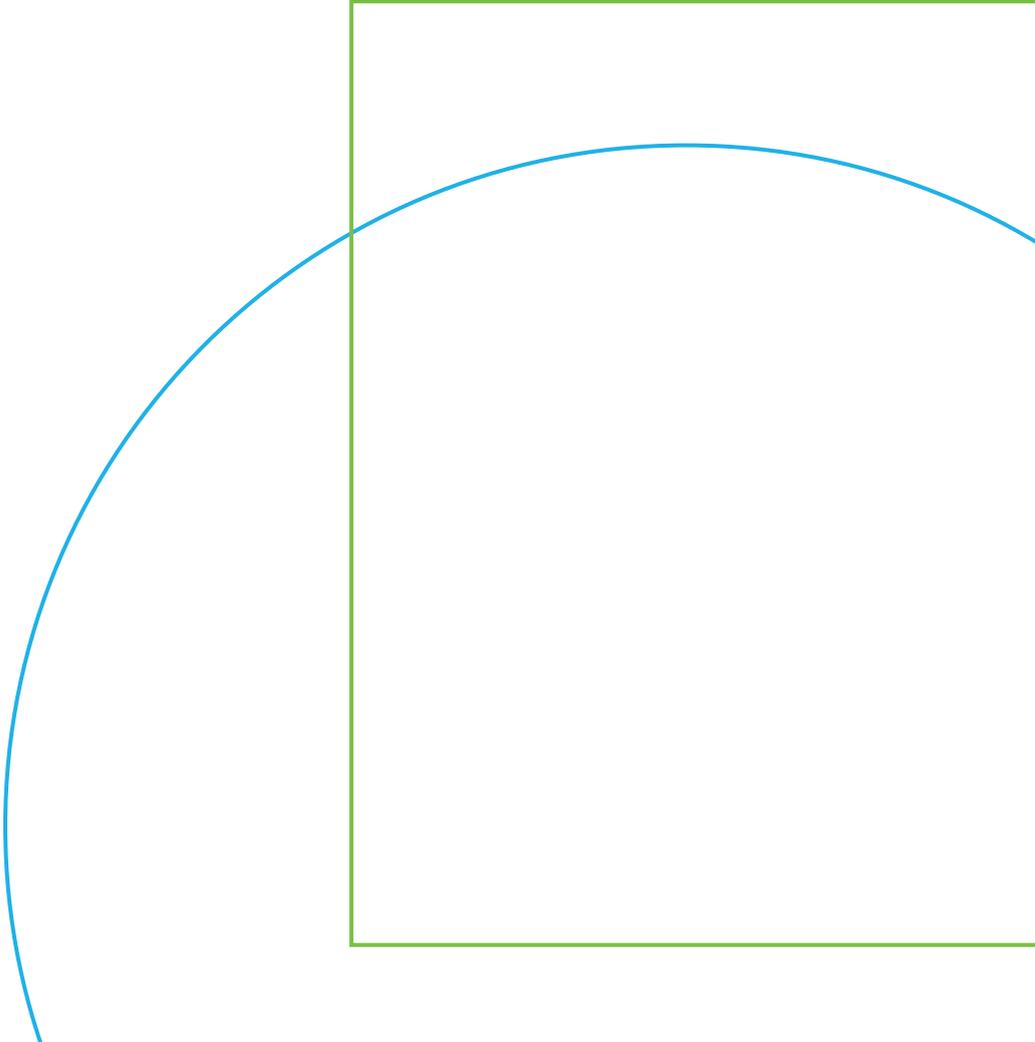


The country vignette series:

# Pre-experience graduate management education in France

Graduate  
Management  
Admission  
Council®



# The Country Vignette Series

The *Country Vignette Series* has been developed to illustrate how pre-experience business master's degrees have evolved over a ten-year period. Focusing on the supply of, and demand for, English-language taught master's programs in a single country, each vignette combines quantitative data—compiled from GMAC research on the entire market—with qualitative insights from domestic business schools.



# Pre-experience graduate management education in France

## The Grandes Écoles



A decade ago, arguably the most well-known feature of the French graduate management education market was the *Grandes Écoles*—elite professional schools that produced many of France’s top leaders. Nowadays, while the *Grandes Écoles* are still very much France’s elite, the country’s business education market is as diverse as it is distinguished.

The *Grandes Écoles* of management have their roots in Napoleon’s civil service and formally emerged at the end of the 19th century when French society sought to create specialized institutions outside the university system. Students were subject to a highly selective admissions process that kept the *Grandes Écoles* firmly out of reach for the majority, and students graduated with a diploma that was roughly equivalent to the master’s degree. The selectivity of the *Grandes Écoles* is one reason employers value them so highly—students are effectively pre-vetted during the rigorous application process before they enter the job market. According to one survey, 84 percent of the 546 top executives of France’s 40 largest companies were graduates of the *Grandes Écoles*, alongside numerous leading politicians.

However, selectivity has been a doubled-edged sword for French management education. Critics in the country regard the *Grandes Écoles* as elitist, for the privileged few rather than the masses, and their high fees—up to 10,000 euros per year—are at odds with France’s long-held socialist belief that education should be free. Every student in France who passes the *Baccalauréat* (*Bac*) exam (taken between ages 17 and 18) has the right to go to university under law, and universities are not able to select students for entry to *Licence* (bachelor’s) programs. Furthermore, universities cannot set undergraduate fees themselves; fees are set by the Ministry of National Education and are approximately 185 euros per year for undergraduate studies. Meanwhile, employers, recovering from the global financial crisis and spurred by the opportunities of globalization and the digital revolution, have needed to hire more management graduates to fuel their growth.

# The expansion of French graduate management education

This issue of graduate supply is one factor that drove expansion of the French graduate management education market in the 1950s to create the *Instituts d'Administration des Entreprises* (IAEs), or university schools of management. It was in these institutions, among others, that the Master in Management was pioneered as a graduate program that delivered advanced general management knowledge to engineering and social science graduates with minimal work experience. The Bologna reforms, which harmonized European higher education around a bachelor's-master's-doctorate structure, facilitated the widespread transition of these diplomas to master's degrees and also brought the IAEs and Grandes Écoles into alignment.

The contemporary Master in Management has been a growth engine for business schools across France. High employer demand for the degree has ballooned student populations, who are coming from further afield than ever before. This greater demand from both students and employers has prompted huge growth in program supply. Research conducted by the Graduate Management

Admission Council (GMAC) shows that the number of English-language master's programs offered by French business schools increased from 113 to 292 between 2007 and 2017 (158%). Growth in the Master of Science (MSc), the designation used by Grandes Écoles when more than 50 percent of the courses are delivered in a foreign language, was even more marked: from 61 to 206 (238%) in the same period. These numbers clearly illustrate that Grandes Écoles are driving internationalization within French graduate business education. Across all master's programs, the number of schools using the Graduate Management Admission Test® (GMAT®) exam increased from 26 to 106 (415%) in the same period.

Michelle Sisto, associate dean for graduate studies at EDHEC Business School in Nice, Lille, and Paris, confirmed the shift: “In 2007, we had seven different specializations in our Master in Management degree. Now, we have 13 different master's degrees—including a new MSc in analytics and digital business—designed to create a connection between business and technology.”

# Employer demand

Employers have contributed to the rapid expansion of French graduate management education. Over the past decade, France's business schools have increased their efforts to ensure that the graduates they produce remain attractive to potential employers, whose hiring needs are changing more quickly as globalization and digitization become more of a focus.

The business schools are adapting to the needs of employers by offering new specialized master's degrees, and by changing the content of existing master's programs. Sisto provided an example: “There has been a shift from technical knowledge to strong interpersonal skills among French employers. So, we have striven to offer more coaching on emotional intelligence [handling interpersonal relationships judiciously and empathetically].”

Another big employer focus in France is data analytics and artificial intelligence (AI). Businesses have realized the potential of data to reshape their decision-making processes

and help them better advertise to consumers. Organizations are also aware of the risks of mishandling personal data and security breaches.

Sisto said: “There is a huge shortage of people with data analysis skills. So, beginning next year, every EDHEC Business School MSc student will have to take a course on how AI is impacting business and society. And with new privacy regulations coming into force in France [the European Union-wide General Data Protection Regulation], we will explore the legal, compliance, and ethical risks of handling personal data.”

# Internationalization

In addition to employers, an expanding and increasingly diverse student body is another reason for the growth in program supply. The value proposition of French business schools has grown as they have performed well in prestigious university and program rankings, and as a stable political climate has become more inviting to international students.

One-third of EDHEC Business School master's students are from outside France—including China, India, and the United States. GMAC data shows that score sending to master's programs in France has almost tripled since 2007, with China, France, and India leading the charge.

“The size of our courses has grown tremendously—so much so that we've had to split some degrees into two cohorts,” notes Sisto. “Take our one-year consulting, strategy, and digital innovation MSc, we have 300 students enrolled in that course today; last year we had under 200. And we've had 50 percent more applications this year than in 2017.”

The globalization of graduate management education in France has impacted business schools in more ways than

one. Program design and delivery have evolved as schools have endeavored to offer students international experiences that enrich learning and improve employment prospects, as many firms desire graduates who can travel and lead global teams. Some schools such as ESSEC Business School and ESCP Europe Business School have established campuses in Singapore, Morocco, Germany, Spain, and other overseas locations. Other schools have preferred to partner with education providers abroad and use their already established infrastructure, facilities, and faculty.

EDHEC Business School, for example, has 140 global university partners where students can study as part of formal exchange programs. In addition, the business school offers 20 double-degrees with other institutions around the world. Sisto believes this approach works best because it provides a more international experience: “When business schools open campuses abroad they tend to move the same French students around. When we send students to other schools, they mingle with local students. It is more immersive.”

# Changes to pedagogy



While the location of study for French graduate management students has changed, the way it is taught has also evolved. Students today are more digitally-savvy than any generation before them, so distance learning has become increasingly important.

The demand among master's students for more digital content has changed the way instructors teach. “Millennial students today are much more demanding of what happens during the time they are physically in a classroom. They want a lecture to be different to something they can find on YouTube®,” Sisto explains.

“That has forced us to think about what we are doing and why—to be more reflective. We are putting more classes online so that students can master material before coming to campus, which is reserved more for debate and group projects. So, the role of the professor is shifting from a lecturer to a facilitator. We have also established a Pedagogical Innovation Lab (<https://www.edhec.edu/fr/creation-pedagogique-pilabo>) to help faculty adjust their approach and add greater value to classroom debates and group work.”

# Admissions and student selection

Teaching methods are not the only thing changing. With a growing student population and suite of graduate management degree programs, French business schools have changed their student selection and admission requirements to ensure they remain fit for purpose.

Admission requirements have been notoriously tough at business schools in France, particularly some of the more highly ranked Grandes Écoles. While that has not changed, the emphasis has shifted. Historically, French business schools focused solely on standardized testing and academic attainment in the admissions process. Now, they are looking to evaluate prospective students' creativity and motivation too, as an indicator of their potential for success in their future careers.

This shift has been in response to the increasingly international applicant pool, according to Sisto: “We want insight into our candidates' personalities and motivations, which do not always come across in the written parts of the application process.”

The admission policy has changed for domestic candidates, too. EDHEC Business School previously required French applicants to participate in interviews, answering questions in front of a group of professors and administrators. Now, the interview process is more interactive and collaborative. Prospective students are typically asked to work on a case study—solving a business problem faced by a real company, often for alumni.

Sisto explains: “Ten years ago, thinking outside of the box—being creative and innovative—was not a key factor in admission decisions. The focus was more on academic achievements. Today, that has completely reversed. We have introduced more collaborative case studies to look for students who are going to be engaged with their future employer, be innovative, and have an impact on business and society. We are no longer [only] interested in a strong academic background. We want to see leadership and contribution potential. Using this method of assessment gives us a broader view of a candidate.”

Yet standardized testing remains important, perhaps even more so today than a decade ago. GMAC data shows the number of French master's programs using any standardized exam grew from 40 in 2007 to 120 in 2017; while the share accepting GMAT scores rose from 65 percent to 88 percent during the same period.

All international applicants to EDHEC Business School are required to sit for the GMAT exam because the school values the exam for providing a clear indication of a candidate's reasoning and language ability: “A high GMAT score is not necessarily a good predictor of whether someone will be successful in our master's programs. But it provides an indication of whether they are at the right academic level. That's why we rely heavily on a candidate's GMAT score when deciding whether to admit them, or not. Some of our programs have a minimum [score] and if you're below it, you don't get in.”

# Looking forward



While it is impossible to predict future trends, it is clear that further change is likely. One big driver is internationalization and global competition. Business schools all over the globe are competing to attract a more diverse pool of applicants that will enrich the educational experience. Schools also know that diversity contributes to their success in rankings, and that employers demand more international teams. That means French business schools aren't just competing among themselves but with those abroad, too.

Digitization is one way in which French business schools are hoping to compete moving forward. By putting some of their content online, or establishing entire digital master's degree

programs, they hope to reach people overseas who cannot physically attend campus due to work or other commitments.

Sisto concludes: “We want to become more and more international. The competition is no longer with French schools but international institutions. The digitization of content and programs will accelerate. We are looking into ways to do that, for example, creating online degree programs and more blended [online and face-to-face] degree programs, to connect with people who cannot attend a full-time program. I expect there will be a shift, to more part-time programs and distance and blended learning in the French business education market of the future.”

# Appendix: Graduate management education in France

There are two primary types of graduate management education providers in France: the *Instituts d'Administration des Entreprises* (IAEs) and *Grandes Écoles*.

- **IAEs** are independent, mostly autonomous, business schools that remain part of the university system. There are currently 35 IAEs but this number may decline as the trend toward university mergers continues. These voluntary mergers have arisen as an indirect result of legislation in the 2010s that mandated the creation of university communities to address market fragmentation. Through the creation of multidisciplinary research institutions, France hopes to improve the global ranking of its higher education.
- **Grandes Écoles** are elite, private institutions that have their roots in the chambers of commerce, trade boards that represent French industry nationally and internationally. Thirty-eight of these schools offer programs across 191 campuses, both in France and abroad. As with the universities, *Grandes Écoles* have also been merging, the major drivers of which are reduced funding, a high dependence on domestic students, and the need to build an international reputation.

Both IAEs and *Grandes Écoles* offer *Licence* (bachelor's) and master's degrees but have different mechanisms by which they gain the right to award degrees, and have them officially recognized. Under the French system, the master's degrees awarded by each are different; not all *Grandes Écoles* award recognized degrees.

<sup>1</sup><http://www.iae-message.fr>

Despite differences in how students are admitted to the programs offered by both institution types, all students need to pass the *Baccalauréat* (Bac) exam. Taken in the final year of compulsory education (students are between 17 and 18 years old) over the course of one week, the Bac is not a legal requirement but is necessary to enter higher education, and passing the Bac guarantees entry to any French public university.

Within France, higher education is structured to fit a 3+2 model: a three-year *Licence* (bachelor's) followed by a two-year master's degree. What makes French business education rather unusual is that it typically starts in the final year of the three-year *Licence* (bachelor's) program as domestic students transfer into the IAEs and *Grandes Écoles* from other institutions.

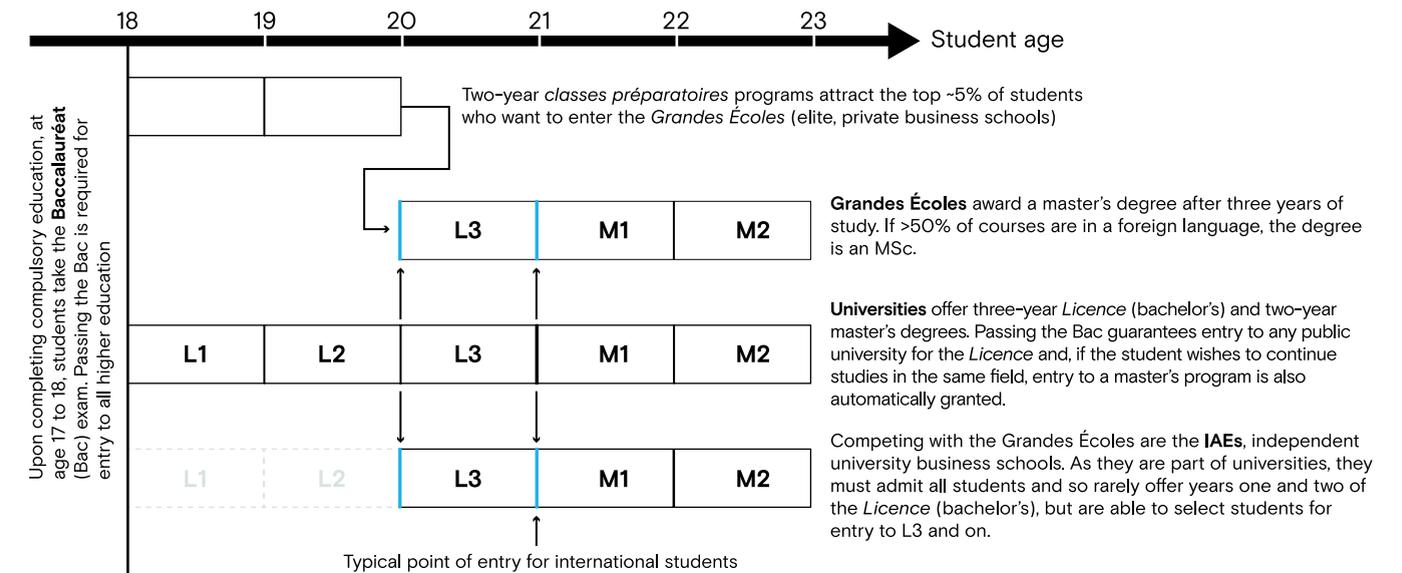
- **IAEs** welcome students for the final year of the *Licence* (L3) or to year one of the master's degree (M1). They rarely offer programs covering the first two years because, by being part of the university system, French legislation prohibits student selection in L1-L2 (the first two years of a bachelor's program). The most common admission exam used is the IAE Message<sup>1</sup>, a three-hour multiple choice exam covering current affairs; logical and numerical reasoning; and comprehension and writing of both French and English.

- As with the IAEs, **Grandes Écoles** also select students for entry in the final year of the *Licence* (L3), or year one of the master's degree (M1), but by competitive process:
  - Entry to L3 typically requires two years of intensive study in the classes *préparatoires aux grandes écoles* (competitive programs enrolling the top 5 percent of students) followed by national exams.
  - A limited number of seats for entry to L3 are available for university students through a parallel entry system

based on performance in a different set of exams. There are multiple providers, so candidates may sit for more than one exam depending on where they are applying.

- Entry to master's programs after completing the *Licence* elsewhere also requires students to sit for exams, the exact one depending on the school they are applying to (the exams used under the parallel track will have a modified offering for this level). International exams such as the GMAT exam may also be used.

## High-level diagram of French graduate business education





For questions or comments regarding this vignette, please contact GMAC at [masters@gmac.com](mailto:masters@gmac.com).

## Acknowledgements

Thank you EDHEC Business School and GMAC staff for your contribution to the vignette.

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GMAC provides world-class research, professional development opportunities and assessments for the industry, designed to advance the art and science of admissions. Owned and administered by GMAC, the Graduate Management Admission Test® (GMAT®) is the most widely used graduate business school assessment, recognized by more than 7,000 programs worldwide. Other GMAC assessments include the NMAT by GMAC™ exam, for entrance into graduate management programs in India and South Africa, and the Executive Assessment, specifically designed for Executive programs around the world. Our flagship portal for graduate management education resources and information, [www.mba.com](http://www.mba.com), receives 14 million visits a year and features the School Finder search tool and Graduate Management Admission Search Service (GMASS), matching candidates and business schools.

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