



October, 6th2009.

Direction des Etudes

Réf. : EP/DE/INF

TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN

Subject : French higher education and the Ecole Polytechnique's curriculum

The French Grandes Ecoles

The French system for higher education distinguishes between universities and les “Grandes Ecoles”, a group of very selective, educational institutions in a variety of fields ranging from public policy to science. Traditionally, the “Grandes Ecoles” provide France with its most outstanding researchers, executives and political leaders. To gain access to these “Grandes Ecoles”, top students undergo very intensive training for two to three years after high school in several fields, mostly in the “classes préparatoires”. After this training period, they take highly competitive entrance exams which are the gateways to the “Grandes Ecoles”.

The Ecole Polytechnique

The Ecole Polytechnique, which is one of the oldest and the most prestigious of the “Grandes Ecoles”, attracts the most outstanding French students in science. Each year it recruits 400 French students from a total number of 26,000 students registered in the scientific “classes préparatoires”, thus selecting the top 2% of this population. The students recruited have been trained in depth and at a very high level of abstraction in mathematics and physics. After three years, students are awarded the diploma "Ingénieur de l'Ecole Polytechnique", a Master degree which corresponds to a multidisciplinary scientific education.

The grading system

As a rule, French and American attitudes towards grading are different. Because of the competitiveness of the French “classes préparatoires”, the grading is fairly harsh and the marks can be quite low: they seldom rise above 15 out of 20 and an average of 10 indicates a fairly good mastery of the subject. Since 1998, the Ecole Polytechnique has used the ECTS grading system (European Credit Transfer System) set up by the European Union to provide common procedures of academic assessment throughout the EU. The ECTS system is applied independently by each institution, whose goal is to establish a ranking among their own students. Because of the drastic selection and the high academic standards at Ecole Polytechnique, it is not undistinguished for a student to graduate with a "C" average. We have found that our grade A corresponds to a GPA of 4.4, grade B to 3.3, grade C to 2.2 and grade D to 1.1. Grades E and F indicate that the student has failed the subject.

As you reflect upon the acceptability of Mr.
for enrolment in your institution, we ask that you take into consideration the different educational approaches of our two systems.

Yours sincerely

Palaiseau, October 6th, 2009

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