

Adapting on French Terms: The Evolution of French Secondary Education Policy in the Context of the Bologna Process, 1993–2026

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ABSTRACT

This study examines how French secondary education policy evolved under the influence of the Bologna Process between 1993 and 2026. Using Simon Bulmer's domestic politics approach to Europeanization, it traces the structural transformation of the *lycée* and the *Baccalauréat* from a rigid, self-referential system organized around fixed academic tracks to a modular, competency-based one integrated with the European Higher Education Area. The analysis is organized around Bulmer's four pillars: institutional architecture, governance regimes, misfit and adaptational pressure, and the two-way dynamic of uploading and downloading. Drawing on legislative texts, policy documents, statistical data, and scholarly literature, the study finds that French secondary education did not simply converge toward a European model but adapted on French terms. Centralized institutional architecture enabled sweeping national reforms, soft law governance allowed France to set its own pace, ideological misfit shaped adaptation without blocking it, and France uploaded its own preferences to the European level even as it downloaded European frameworks. The study concludes that Europeanization in sovereignty-sensitive domains like education operates less through direct imposition than through prolonged negotiation between supranational pressure and domestic institutional mediation.

Keywords: Bologna Process, French education policy, Europeanization, secondary education, Baccalauréat, Bulmer, soft law, competency-based curriculum, *lycée*, LMD system

INTRODUCTION

The transformation of education policy across Europe over the past three decades represents a significant shift in the governance of knowledge, citizenship, and human capital development. Among European Union member states, France presents a uniquely compelling case for examining the interplay between supranational integration and domestic educational reform. Since ratifying the Maastricht Treaty in 1993, France has navigated a complex relationship between its deeply ingrained Republican educational traditions and the increasingly influential framework of European coordination. This study addresses the

question: How has secondary education policy in France evolved in the context of the Bologna Process since its membership in the European Union, 1993-2026?

The significance of this research lies in its investigation of how a centralized, historically insulated educational system has adapted to the pressures of European integration. The French secondary education system, particularly the *lycée* and its culminating examination, the Baccalauréat, has long served as a symbol of national identity, Republican universalism, and state-centered meritocracy (Duru-Bellat & van Zanten, 2016; Robert, 2015). The French model traditionally privileged *savoirs* (knowledge) over the *compétences* (skills) framework increasingly promoted by European institutions (Duru-Bellat & van Zanten, 2016). This tension raises fundamental questions about the limits of European integration in domains historically considered the preserve of national sovereignty (Pons, 2012) and the compatibility of the French Republican model with the European-driven emphasis on measurable learning outcomes (Mons, 2007).

The Bologna Process, initiated in 1999, was formally a higher education reform. It introduced the Licence-Master-Doctorat (LMD) system and the European Credit Transfer System (ECTS) to make degrees readable across borders. But its effects did not stop at the university gates. Over time, the Bologna framework created downstream pressure on secondary schools, particularly through what Buisson-Fenet and Rey (2018) call the "Bac -3 / Bac +3 Continuum," the structural integration of the final years of *lycée* into the logic of the European degree architecture. The Blanquer Reform of 2019-2021, which abolished France's traditional academic tracks in favor of modular specialties, is the most visible result of this pressure (Gautier, 2022).

The impact of this research extends beyond French borders, offering insights into the broader dynamics of Europeanization in policy domains traditionally considered the preserve of member states. Education policy, while formally a matter of national competence, has become increasingly subject to the "soft law" mechanisms of the European Union, including the Open Method of Coordination (OMC), benchmarking, and peer review (Pons, 2012). These mechanisms have shaped national policy agendas through the circulation of international comparisons and the construction of transnational policy communities (Pons, 2012).

The period from 1993 to 2026 saw the French secondary education landscape change gradually and then dramatically. Early debates about adapting the *Baccalauréat* to European credit systems gave way to the competency turn of the 2000s, which gave way to the structural overhaul of the 2010s and 2020s. Scholars have traced this arc from multiple angles (Mons, 2007; Duru-Bellat & van Zanten, 2016; Gautier, 2022). Robert (2015) argues that the dissolving boundary between secondary and higher education is not just structural but ideological, a slow unraveling of what the French *Lycée* was always supposed to be.

France's response to the Bologna Process has not been one of passive adaptation but rather of selective appropriation, negotiation, and at times, resistance. The implementation of European-inspired reforms has generated significant local friction, as teachers have often viewed European metrics as technocratic impositions rather than organic pedagogical evolutions (van Zanten, 2019).

The literature review section surveys the existing scholarship on French secondary education policy and the Bologna Process. It is organized into four thematic clusters: structural alignment between the *lycée* and the LMD system, the governance mechanisms that enabled Europeanization, the shift from knowledge-based to competency-based curricula, and the historical context that frames these developments. Each cluster identifies what the literature establishes and where gaps remain.

The methodology section explains Simon Bulmer's domestic politics approach to Europeanization, the theoretical lens used in this study. It describes the four pillars of Bulmer's framework (institutional architecture, governance regimes, misfit and adaptational pressure, and uploading versus downloading) and outlines the case study design, periodization, and data sources used in the research.

The historical background section traces the evolution of French secondary education policy across four phases, from the pre-Bologna Republican model through the structural reforms of the 2010s and 2020s. It establishes the institutional and political context that the findings section will draw on.

The findings section presents eight figures that trace the evolution of French secondary education policy between 1993 and 2026. Each figure is interpreted through Bulmer's framework. The section moves from chronological context, to structural change, to empirical outcomes, to the human dimension of reform.

The analysis section steps back from the individual figures to consider what they mean collectively. It returns to the research question and evaluates how well Bulmer's framework explains the French trajectory. This section also addresses the limitations of the study and suggests directions for further research.

The conclusion section summarizes the central findings and reflects on what the French case reveals about Europeanization, sovereignty, and the future of education policy in the European Union.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This literature review examines existing scholarship on the evolution of French secondary education policy in the context of the Bologna Process. By analyzing key academic works and policy analyses, it identifies prevailing themes and recognizes gaps in the literature. The review is organized into four sections: structural alignment, governance, pedagogical shifts, and historical context.

Structural Alignment

A central finding in the literature is that the Bologna Process, while formally directed at higher education, has exerted significant pressure on French secondary schooling. Buisson-Fenet and Rey (2018) identify the "Bac -3 / Bac +3 Continuum" as the key policy framework linking the final three years of *lycée* to the three-year Bologna Licence. Their analysis shows that the 2018 Loi ORE and the Parcoursup admissions platform were not simply technical adjustments but represented a fundamental reorientation of upper-secondary education. Under this framework, the *lycée* functions as a preparatory cycle designed to

channel students into the European-standard degree architecture. Students are now required to construct academic projects compatible with university prerequisites, which embeds the logic of Bologna-aligned orientation into the final years of secondary schooling.

Crosier and Parveva (2013) support this finding through their UNESCO report on the Bologna Process. They document how the three-cycle degree system created downstream pressures on upper-secondary education across all signatory states. The French case fits within a broader European pattern. The introduction of the Licence-Master-Doctorat (LMD) architecture required corresponding adjustments in how students were prepared and selected at the secondary level. The report notes that the French *Baccalauréat* evolved from a standalone school-leaving certificate to a credential that must facilitate articulation with European degree programs. This comparative perspective reinforces the view that French secondary policy evolution cannot be understood in isolation from the European Higher Education Area.

Gautier (2022) provides the most recent account of structural alignment through her evaluation of the Blanquer Reform. She argues that replacing the traditional S, ES, and L tracks with customizable specialties was an intentional decision, one designed to mirror the modular credit logic of the European Credit Transfer System. Where previous reforms adjusted the existing track structure, the Blanquer Reform dismantled it entirely, replacing rigid disciplinary silos with a flexible combination of courses that students could tailor to their higher education aspirations. Gautier contends that this modularization represents the culmination of two decades of structural convergence, in which the principles of the ECTS (choice, accumulation, transferability) were gradually inscribed into the architecture of the *Baccalauréat*.

These three sources together establish a clear narrative. Buisson-Fenet and Rey identify the policy mechanism, Crosier and Parveva situate it within a European context, and Gautier traces its most recent instantiation. What emerges is a portrait of the French *lycée* increasingly shaped by the imperative to prepare students for a Europeanized higher education sector. However, the literature tends to treat secondary education as something Bologna acted upon, not something that pushed back. Limited attention has been paid to how France's centralized governance, its Republican traditions, and its powerful teaching corps mediated, filtered, and sometimes resisted alignment. Convergence is not the whole story.

Governance

A second body of literature examines the instruments through which European influence has operated in the education domain. Pons (2012) focuses on the soft law governance of the Open Method of Coordination (OMC). He demonstrates how French education administrators deployed international benchmarks, including PISA results and EU indicators, to bypass domestic political resistance and legitimize secondary school assessment reforms aligned with European norms. His analysis reveals a paradoxical dynamic. Europeanization advanced not through top-down imposition from Brussels but through the active appropriation of European instruments by national policy actors. By framing reforms as responses to objective international comparisons rather than as compliance with European directives, French policymakers presented structural changes as technically necessary rather than politically

motivated. The OMC functioned not merely as a coordination mechanism but as a political resource, providing reform-minded administrators with evidence to challenge entrenched interests.

Ravinet (2008) addresses the temporal dimension of this process. She asks why countries have continued to align with the Bologna Process over such an extended period. Her answer is that the process evolved from a voluntary intergovernmental agreement into a system of monitored coordination with binding soft-law effects. Through regular ministerial conferences, progress reports, and peer review mechanisms, Bologna created a self-reinforcing policy regime that generated persistent pressure for alignment. Ravinet shows that this pressure was cumulative. Each round of coordination established new benchmarks that became the baseline for subsequent reforms, creating a ratchet effect that progressively deepened European influence on national systems. This analysis helps explain how Bologna's influence on French secondary education could intensify over decades rather than fade after initial implementation.

The current literature highlights the soft law mechanisms that have enabled Europeanization in a sovereignty-sensitive domain like education. However, it does not fully explore how French policymakers have used these same mechanisms to upload domestic preferences to the European level. The uploading dimension, in which France has sought to shape EU education initiatives to reflect its own priorities, remains underexamined. The literature could also benefit from closer attention to moments when French authorities resisted or ignored European benchmarks rather than adopting them.

From Knowledge to Skills

Beyond structural and governance dimensions, the literature documents a transformation in the conceptual foundations of French secondary education. Mons (2007) provides the most comprehensive account of the shift from *savoirs* (knowledge) to *compétences* (skills) as the organizing principle of curriculum and assessment. She traces how the vocabulary of French education legislation altered under the influence of European policy frameworks, documenting the progressive replacement of encyclopedic knowledge acquisition with competency-based learning objectives. For Mons, this linguistic shift is not superficial. It reflects a reorientation of educational purpose from the formation of the cultivated citizen, steeped in a shared national culture, to the production of the employable learner equipped with transferable skills recognizable across European labor markets.

This shift has direct implications for assessment. Traditional French grading, with its 0-20 scale and emphasis on disciplinary mastery, has been supplemented by competency frameworks imported from European institutions. The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR), which assesses language proficiency on a scale from A1 to C2, represents the most visible instance of this change. It establishes pan-European standards that French secondary students are now expected to meet. The *Socle Commun de Connaissances, de Compétences et de Culture*, introduced in 2005 and updated in 2015, institutionalized a competency-based approach directly inspired by the European Union's Key Competences for Lifelong Learning. Mons argues that these developments challenge the Republican educational tradition, which historically privileged the transmission of a unified body of knowledge over the cultivation of differentiated skills.

Verdier (2017) connects the competency shift to the broader European agenda of employability and labor market integration. He examines how EU frameworks, including Bologna, the Copenhagen Process, and the Lisbon Strategy, have reshaped the relationship between secondary schooling and employment expectations in France. Verdier argues that the competency-based approach serves a dual function. It facilitates student mobility within the European Higher Education Area while also aligning secondary outcomes with the needs of a European labor market. This dual orientation, he contends, has altered the social contract implicit in French education, reorienting it from the production of citizens to the production of workers. For secondary education policy, this has meant an increased emphasis on vocational pathways, apprenticeship programs, and digitally certified skills through platforms like Pix, aligned with the European DigComp framework.

The Blanquer interview (2020) provides primary source evidence that these ideological shifts were actively embraced by reform-minded policymakers. In his defense of the new *Baccalauréat* and the *Grand Oral*, Blanquer frames the reform as necessary to produce self-directed learners capable of navigating Bologna-aligned university models. He describes the *Grand Oral*, a twenty-minute oral defense introduced as a mandatory component of the *Baccalauréat* in 2021, as an exercise designed to cultivate the argumentation skills and intellectual autonomy valued in European higher education. Blanquer's intervention is significant not as objective analysis but as evidence of policy discourse, revealing how European compatibility served as a legitimating rationale for domestic reform.

The current literature effectively traces the shift from knowledge to skills and connects it to European frameworks. However, it focuses primarily on policy documents and ministerial discourse. Less attention has been paid to how teachers, students, and families have experienced or resisted this shift. The literature could also benefit from a more sustained analysis of whether the competency turn has delivered on its promises regarding student mobility and employability.

Historical and Comparative Context

This section of this review turns to the historical and comparative context that frames these developments. Baudelot and Establet (2009), two of France's most prominent sociologists of education, offer a critical account of the French Republican model's confrontation with international comparisons. They examine how external evaluations, particularly the OECD's PISA assessments, destabilized the legitimacy of traditional French educational structures. The French system's historically self-referential character, grounded in Republican ideology rather than empirical outcomes, was fundamentally challenged by the arrival of comparative performance metrics. This challenge, they argue, created the political and discursive opening through which Bologna-aligned reforms could subsequently advance. Their analysis provides essential background for understanding why a system long resistant to external influence became increasingly permeable to European frameworks.

Maroy (2021) situates the French case within a comparative framework, analyzing the convergence of European education systems toward common structural templates. His monograph documents how continental education systems, with a focus on France and francophone Belgium, have progressively abandoned rigid national paths in favor of modular, choice-based architectures. Maroy identifies the

modularization of the French *lycée* as a direct structural response to downstream pressures from the European Higher Education Area. His comparative approach is methodologically significant because it addresses a potential objection to the Europeanization thesis. If French secondary education reform were purely a domestic phenomenon, one would not expect to observe similar trajectories in other European states. Maroy demonstrates that such trajectories are indeed observable, strengthening the case for a causal link between Bologna and secondary education policy evolution.

Finally, Hörner, Döbert, Reuter, and von Kopp (2015) provide a systematically structured overview of the French system at a midpoint in the period under study. The France chapter offers precise institutional description of the secondary education landscape as it existed in 2015, detailing the structure of the *collège* and *lycée*, the organization of academic tracks, and the legislative framework governing educational provision. While this source does not advance a specific analytical argument, it provides reliable baseline data against which structural change can be measured. For a study covering a 33-year period, having a scholarly snapshot of the system at mid-trajectory allows for accurate mapping of institutional transformation.

The current literature provides solid historical and comparative context. However, the periodization tends to cluster around specific reform moments, such as the LMD implementation in 2002, the Loi ORE in 2018, and the Blanquer Reform in 2021, rather than tracing the continuous arc of policy evolution. A longitudinal perspective covering the full period from 1993 to the present would allow for a more complete understanding of how incremental adjustments accumulated into structural transformation.

Identifying the Gap

The existing literature provides a solid foundation for understanding how French secondary education policy has evolved in the context of the Bologna Process. Scholars have documented the structural mechanisms of alignment (Buisson-Fenet & Rey, 2018; Gautier, 2022; Crosier & Parveva, 2013), the governance instruments that facilitated Europeanization (Pons, 2012; Ravinet, 2008), the ideological shift from knowledge to competencies (Mons, 2007; Verdier, 2017), and the historical and comparative context that frames these developments (Baudelot & Establet, 2009; Maroy, 2021).

However, a notable gap persists. The literature tends to treat secondary education policy evolution as a dependent variable responding to higher education reform, with limited attention to the reciprocal dynamics of this relationship. The specific institutional characteristics of French secondary education, including its centralized governance, its Republican ideology, and its powerful teaching corps, have not been fully examined as factors that shaped the manner and extent of Bologna's influence. The French case is often presented as an instance of convergence or Europeanization rather than as a site of negotiation where national structures have mediated, filtered, and sometimes resisted European pressures. Furthermore, the periodization of the existing literature clusters around specific reform moments rather than tracing the continuous arc of policy evolution across the full 1993-2026 timeframe. This study addresses these gaps by offering a longitudinal analysis that attends to the interplay between supranational pressure and national institutional mediation across the entire period from Maastricht to the present day.

METHODOLOGY

Theoretical Framework

This study employs a qualitative case study design, using Simon Bulmer's domestic politics approach to Europeanization as its theoretical lens. The research traces the evolution of French secondary education policy from 1993 to 2026, examining how domestic institutional structures, normative commitments, and governance traditions have mediated the influence of the Bologna Process. Bulmer's framework, which blends historical institutionalism with Europeanization theory, explains how member states respond differently to common European pressures based on their internal political and administrative configurations. Rather than treating France as a passive recipient of EU policy, the approach captures the two-way dynamic of downloading European frameworks and uploading national preferences to shape the European agenda.

Bulmer's approach organizes analysis around four interconnected concepts. The first, domestic institutional architecture, holds that the internal structure of a state determines how it processes external policy pressures. The distribution of authority across ministries, the centralization or fragmentation of decision-making, and the presence of veto points all shape whether and how European initiatives are adopted. In the French case, this directs attention to the highly centralized Ministry of National Education, which concentrates policy authority in Paris and allows for coordinated, top-down responses to European frameworks. This structural feature differentiates France from federal states like Germany, where education policy is dispersed across *Länder* governments, producing varied and incremental adoption patterns.

The second pillar concerns governance regimes. A key insight from Bulmer and his collaborators is that EU governance operates through multiple modes, not a single hierarchical model. In policy domains where the EU lacks legislative competence, it relies on "facilitated unilateralism," a mode of governance in which member states retain formal sovereignty while participating in voluntary coordination mechanisms such as benchmarking, peer review, and soft law instruments. Education policy falls squarely within this regime. The Bologna Process, the Lisbon Strategy, and the Open Method of Coordination all exemplify this indirect mode of influence. This pillar focuses the analysis on how France has navigated a governance environment where compliance is technically voluntary but politically structured through comparative performance metrics and transnational policy communities.

Third, Bulmer's concept of misfit and adaptational pressure holds that the gap between European models and domestic structures determines the intensity of pressure a state experiences. Where European frameworks align with existing national arrangements, adaptation proceeds smoothly. Where there is significant distance, states face a choice between costly domestic reform, resistance, or attempts to reshape the European agenda itself. In the French case, the EU's emphasis on human capital, employability, and market-driven skills creates a sharp ideological misfit with the Republican tradition of *l'école républicaine*, which prioritizes civic formation, social cohesion, and secularism. This pillar directs attention to how France has managed this tension, selectively adopting European frameworks while preserving core Republican commitments.

Fourth, Bulmer's framework rejects a one-way model of European influence. States do not simply download EU policies; they also upload domestic preferences to the European level to minimize adjustment costs and shape collective outcomes. France, with its strong administrative capacity and political weight within EU institutions, is well positioned to exercise this upward influence. This pillar structures analysis of how French policymakers have sought to mold European education initiatives, such as the European Universities Initiative, to reflect French priorities rather than market-based models favored elsewhere.

Case Study Design and Periodization

The study employs a single-country, longitudinal case study design covering the period from the ratification of the Maastricht Treaty in 1993 to the present day. A single-country design was chosen because the research question concerns the specific institutional and ideological characteristics of French secondary education. Understanding how these characteristics mediated European pressure requires sustained attention to a single case rather than a broader comparative sweep. The longitudinal timeframe captures the full arc of policy evolution, from the early adaptation of the Baccalauréat to European credit frameworks through the structural overhaul of the lycée under the Blanquer Reform. This design allows the research to identify patterns of continuity and change that would be invisible in a snapshot analysis of any single reform moment.

The periodization follows four phases. The first phase (1993–2002) covers the pre-Bologna period and the initial implementation of the LMD system in French universities, which created the first structural pressures on secondary education. The second phase (2002–2012) examines the consolidation of the competency turn, including the introduction of the Socle Commun in 2005 and the growing influence of international benchmarking. The third phase (2012–2021) analyzes the Loi Peillon, the Loi ORE with its Parcoursup platform, and the Blanquer Reform, which together formalized the Bac -3 / Bac +3 Continuum and abolished the traditional lycée tracks. The fourth phase (2021–2026) addresses ongoing adjustments to the reformed system and the broader trajectory of alignment with European objectives. This periodization structures both the historical background section and the presentation of findings.

Data Sources and Selection Criteria

The study draws on three categories of evidence. Primary policy documents trace the formal evolution of French secondary education policy, including legislative texts such as the Loi Fillon (2005), the Loi Peillon (2013), the Loi ORE (2018), and the Loi Blanquer (2019), as well as ministerial circulars, official reports, and curriculum frameworks. Bologna Process communiqués and EU Council recommendations provide the European-level policy context. The academic literature supplies analytical depth, situating primary documents within scholarly debates on structural alignment, governance mechanisms, and ideological shifts. Public discourse by key policy actors, including the 2020 interview with former Minister Jean-Michel Blanquer in *Le Débat*, offers evidence of how policymakers have framed reforms in relation to European objectives.

The literature review drew on fifteen academic sources, including peer-reviewed journal articles, monographs, and policy analyses. These sources were identified through searches of academic databases including [Cairn.info](#), JSTOR, and Google Scholar, using combinations of search terms such as "French secondary education," "Bologna Process," "Europeanization," "Baccalauréat," "competency-based curriculum," and "Open Method of Coordination." Searches were conducted in both English and French to capture the full range of relevant scholarship, since much of the foundational literature on French education policy is published in French.

Sources were selected based on three criteria. First, they had to address the intersection of French secondary education and European frameworks directly, rather than treating either domain in isolation. Second, they had to cover different dimensions of the research question, including structural change, governance mechanisms, pedagogical shifts, and historical context. Third, they had to be published by recognized academic presses, peer-reviewed journals, or established policy institutions such as UNESCO or the OECD. Sources that focused primarily on higher education without connecting to secondary schooling were excluded, as were sources that did not engage with European frameworks in any substantive way. Where sources predated the most recent reforms, such as Deer (2002), they were retained for their value in establishing the baseline conditions against which later change could be measured.

No formal date restriction was applied, since older foundational works on the Republican educational model were considered necessary for understanding the historical context. However, the majority of sources selected were published after 2007, reflecting the acceleration of scholarship following the introduction of the Socle Commun and the growing visibility of Bologna-related pressures on secondary education. Preference was given to sources that combined empirical evidence with theoretical analysis, rather than purely descriptive accounts of policy change.

Analytical Procedure

The analysis proceeds thematically, using Bulmer's four pillars to structure the empirical investigation. For each pillar, the study identifies relevant evidence from the French case, assesses how domestic institutional and normative factors shaped policy outcomes, and evaluates the degree to which the French trajectory diverges from broader European patterns. The analysis pays particular attention to moments of tension between European frameworks and French Republican traditions, as these moments of misfit reveal the mechanisms through which domestic structures mediate external pressures.

Each of the eight figures presented in the findings section is analyzed through the lens of at least one of Bulmer's pillars. Figure 1, the timeline of reforms, is interpreted through the governance regimes pillar. Figure 2, the before-and-after comparison of the Baccalauréat, is interpreted through the institutional architecture pillar. Figure 3, the PISA performance graph, is interpreted through the soft law dimension of governance regimes. Figure 4, the pass rate and continuous assessment graph, is interpreted through the misfit and adaptational pressure pillar. Figure 5, the mobility trends graph, is interpreted through the uploading and downloading pillar. Figures 6, 7, and 8 provide additional evidence that supports multiple pillars simultaneously.

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This design allows the study to explain not only what changed in French secondary education policy between 1993 and 2026, but also how and why it changed, and why the French response to the Bologna Process has differed in significant respects from that of other member states.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The evolution of French secondary education policy since 1993 cannot be understood without first recognizing the institutional and ideological foundations upon which the system was built. The French educational model has long been distinguished by its centralized structure, its Republican ideology, and its reverence for the *Baccalauréat* as both a national institution and a rite of passage. Any account of how European frameworks came to reshape this model must begin with the system as it stood at the moment of the Maastricht Treaty, before the Bologna Process introduced new pressures and new possibilities.

The Republican Model Before Bologna

Prior to the 1990s, French secondary education operated according to principles that had remained largely stable since the late nineteenth century. The *lycée*, established under Napoleon, served as the cornerstone of secondary schooling, offering a rigorously academic curriculum culminating in the Baccalauréat, a national examination first introduced in 1808. The system was highly centralized, with the Ministry of National Education in Paris exercising authority over curriculum, teacher recruitment, assessment, and the allocation of resources. This centralization was not merely administrative but ideological. Education was understood as an instrument of Republican integration, charged with transmitting a unified national culture and forming citizens capable of participating in democratic life (Mons, 2007).

The curriculum reflected this mission. French secondary education privileged *savoirs*, or encyclopedic knowledge, organized into clearly defined disciplinary boundaries. Students in the *lycée* were sorted into distinct academic tracks, or *séries*: the scientific (S), the economic and social (ES), and the literary (L). Each track prescribed a fixed sequence of courses, with limited opportunity for students to combine subjects across disciplinary lines. The *Baccalauréat* served as the culminating examination, a high-stakes test of disciplinary mastery that functioned simultaneously as a school-leaving certificate and a passport to higher education. As Baudelot and Establet (2009) note, this system was deeply self-referential, grounded in Republican ideology and largely insulated from external comparison or international benchmarking.

At the higher education level, French universities operated according to a similarly distinctive national logic. Degree structures were complex and difficult to translate internationally. Students progressed through the DEUG (a two-year diploma), the Licence (a further year), the Maîtrise (a fourth year), and then specialized postgraduate diplomas such as the DESS or DEA. This architecture, while internally coherent, created significant obstacles to student mobility across European borders. A French degree did not easily map onto those of neighboring systems, and credits earned at a French university could not be readily transferred to institutions abroad.

This was the landscape in 1993, when the Maastricht Treaty formally established the European Union. Education remained a matter of national competence, and there was little indication that the French model would soon face a sustained challenge from European coordination mechanisms. Yet the treaty created new political and institutional channels through which education policy would gradually become subject to transnational influence. The stage was set for a transformation that would unfold over the next three decades.

The Pre-Bologna Period and Early Pressures (1993–2002)

The first phase of this transformation began not with secondary education directly but with higher education. In 1998, the Sorbonne Declaration, signed by the education ministers of France, Germany, Italy, and the United Kingdom, called for the harmonization of European degree structures to facilitate student mobility and enhance the international competitiveness of European universities. The following year, the Bologna Declaration expanded this initiative to twenty-nine signatory states, launching what would become the Bologna Process and the construction of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA).

France moved quickly to implement the Bologna framework. By 2002, French universities had adopted the Licence-Master-Doctorat (LMD) system, replacing the old national degree structure with the three-cycle model common across Europe. The Licence now required three years of study (180 ECTS credits), the Master required five (300 credits), and the Doctorat required eight. The European Credit Transfer System (ECTS) allowed students to accumulate and transfer credits across institutions and national borders, making mobility a structural feature of the system rather than an exceptional arrangement (Crosier & Parveva, 2013).

At first glance, these reforms concerned only higher education. However, they created immediate downstream pressures on secondary schooling. If universities were now organized around a three-year Licence, then the preparation students received in the *lycée* needed to align with the demands of this new architecture. The Baccalauréat, traditionally a terminal examination certifying completion of secondary studies, began to be reimagined as a gateway to a European-standard degree path. The rigid tracks of the *lycée*, designed for a national system, now appeared ill-suited to a higher education landscape oriented toward flexibility and cross-border mobility (Gautier, 2022).

The Competency Turn and International Benchmarking (2002–2012)

The second phase saw the influence of European frameworks extend beyond structural questions into the content and philosophy of secondary education. The Lisbon Strategy, adopted by the European Council in 2000, set the goal of making the EU "the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world." It introduced the Open Method of Coordination (OMC) as a governance mechanism, using benchmarks, indicators, and peer review to guide national policy without binding legislation. Education, though formally a national competence, became increasingly subject to this soft law governance (Pons, 2012).

In France, the most significant domestic expression of this shift was the Loi Fillon of 2005, which introduced the *Socle Commun de Connaissances et de Compétences*, or Common Base of Knowledge and

Skills. The *Socle Commun* specified a set of competencies that every student was expected to master by the end of compulsory schooling. These competencies included not only traditional academic skills but also social and civic competences, autonomy, and initiative. The framework was directly inspired by the European Union's Key Competences for Lifelong Learning, a document that had identified eight domains of competence necessary for participation in a knowledge-based society and economy (Mons, 2007).

The introduction of the *Socle Commun* marked a significant departure from French educational tradition. Where the Republican model had emphasized the transmission of a unified body of knowledge, the competency-based approach focused on measurable learning outcomes and transferable skills. The vocabulary of French education policy shifted accordingly, with *compétences* gradually displacing *savoirs* as the organizing principle of curriculum design. This shift was not merely terminological. It reflected a deeper reorientation of educational purpose, from the formation of the citizen to the preparation of the employable learner (Verdier, 2017).

During this same period, French education faced growing exposure to international comparisons. The OECD's Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), first administered in 2000, provided comparative data on student performance across participating countries. France's results, while not catastrophic, were mediocre enough to generate public concern and political pressure for reform. As Baudelot and Establet (2009) argue, the arrival of these comparative metrics destabilized the legitimacy of the French system's self-referential character. The system could no longer justify itself solely by reference to Republican principles. It was now accountable to empirical outcomes measured against international benchmarks.

The Formalization of the Continuum (2012–2021)

The third phase witnessed the most far-reaching reforms to French secondary education since the establishment of the modern *lycée*. In 2013, the Loi Peillon, officially titled the "Law for the Refoundation of the School of the Republic," sought to address persistent inequalities and respond to European benchmarks on early school leaving. The law reaffirmed the *Socle Commun*, updated in 2015 to include digital competence and other domains aligned with evolving EU frameworks. But the more transformative changes came later in the decade.

In 2018, the Loi ORE (Orientation et Réussite des Étudiants), known as the "Student Plan," introduced the Parcoursup admissions platform. Parcoursup replaced the previous Admission Post-Bac system, which had relied in part on random selection when demand exceeded available places. The new platform required *lycée* students to construct academic projects, articulating their motivations and demonstrating their preparedness for specific university programs. This mechanism transformed the final years of secondary schooling into an orientation funnel. Students now had to align their specialty choices, their academic records, and their project proposals with the prerequisites of Bologna-structured Licence programs. As Buisson-Fenet and Rey (2018) argue, the Loi ORE formalized the "Bac -3 / Bac +3 Continuum," treating the *lycée* and the university not as separate institutions but as integrated segments of a single educational pathway.

The culmination of this phase came with the Blanquer Reform, announced in 2019 and fully implemented in 2021. Named after Jean-Michel Blanquer, then Minister of National Education, the reform abolished the traditional S, ES, and L tracks that had structured the *lycée* for decades. In their place, it introduced a system of "Specialties," allowing students to choose three subjects of in-depth study from a menu of options that included mathematics, physics-chemistry, humanities and philosophy, history-geography and geopolitics, foreign languages, and others. This modular architecture was explicitly designed to mirror the logic of the ECTS, giving students flexibility to construct academic profiles suited to their higher education ambitions (Gautier, 2022).

The reform also introduced the *Grand Oral*, a twenty-minute oral defense before a panel of examiners, as a mandatory component of the Baccalauréat. In his defense of the reform, Blanquer described the *Grand Oral* as an exercise intended to cultivate the argumentation skills and intellectual autonomy valued in European higher education. The traditional written examinations were supplemented, though not replaced, by a system of continuous assessment (*contrôle continu*), which accounted for a portion of the final Baccalauréat grade (Blanquer, 2020).

These changes were not uncontested. Student unions and teacher syndicates expressed concern that continuous assessment would lead to grade inflation and deepen inequalities between well-resourced *lycées* and those in disadvantaged areas. Teachers, as Agnès van Zanten observed, often viewed European metrics like the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) as technocratic impositions rather than organic pedagogical tools. Yet the direction of travel was clear. By 2021, the structural alignment between French secondary education and the Bologna framework had moved from indirect influence to explicit design.

Ongoing Adjustments (2021–2026)

The period since 2021 has been one of consolidation and fine-tuning. The reformed Baccalauréat and the Parcoursup platform has continued to operate, generating data and experience that have prompted incremental adjustments. The coefficient of the *Grand Oral*, initially set at 10 for general tracks, was scheduled for reduction to 8 starting in the 2027 session, reflecting ongoing calibration of the balance between continuous assessment and final examinations.

More broadly, the trajectory of French secondary education policy continues to be shaped by European frameworks. The European Education Area, launched in 2017, and the European Universities Initiative, championed by French President Emmanuel Macron, have reinforced the integration of national systems into transnational networks. The Pix certification, aligned with the European DigComp framework, has replaced older digital competence assessments, making digital skills a mandatory component of secondary education. The CEFR continues to define language proficiency targets, with students expected to reach B2 in their first foreign language and B1 in their second by the end of the *lycée*.

What this historical trajectory reveals is a gradual but unmistakable transformation. The French secondary education system that entered the European Union in 1993 was centralized, self-referential, and organized around the transmission of a unified national culture. The system that has emerged three decades later is modular, competency-based, and structurally integrated with a European higher education architecture

that did not exist when the Maastricht Treaty was signed. This transformation has not been linear or uncontested. It has proceeded through moments of resistance, selective appropriation, and strategic uploading of French preferences to the European level. Yet the cumulative effect is unmistakable, and it is this cumulative effect that the present study seeks to understand.

FINDINGS

This section presents empirical evidence tracing the evolution of French secondary education policy between 1993 and 2026. The eight figures that follow are organized to reflect the four phases identified in the historical background and are analyzed through the lens of Bulmer's domestic politics approach. Each figure illuminates a dimension of how centralized institutional architecture, soft law governance, misfit between European and Republican models, and the two-way dynamic of uploading and downloading have shaped the French trajectory.

Figure 1: Timeline of Key French Secondary Education Reforms and European Policy Milestones, 1992–2021

Year	French Domestic Event	European Milestone
1993	—	Maastricht Treaty enters into force
1999	—	Bologna Declaration signed
2000	—	Lisbon Strategy adopted
2002	LMD system implemented in universities	—
2005	Loi Fillon creates Socle Commun	—
2013	Loi Peillon (Refondation de l'École)	—
2015	Socle Commun updated	—
2017	—	European Education Area launched
2018	Loi ORE launches Parcoursup	—
2019	Loi Blanquer (Pour une école de la confiance)	—
2021	New <i>Baccalauréat</i> fully implemented	—

Note: Data compiled from [Legifrance.gouv.fr](https://legifrance.gouv.fr), European Commission official documents, and Bologna Process communiqués.

Figure 1 provides a chronological overview of the parallel development of French domestic legislation and European policy frameworks. The timeline reveals a consistent pattern. European milestones precede French reforms, but the intervals vary. The Bologna Declaration of 1999 was followed three years later by the French LMD implementation in 2002. The Lisbon Strategy of 2000 preceded the Loi Fillon and its

Socle Commun by five years. The European Education Area, launched in 2017, framed the context for the Blanquer Reform of 2019.

Figure 2: Structure of the French *Baccalauréat* Before and After the Blanquer Reform (2019–2021)

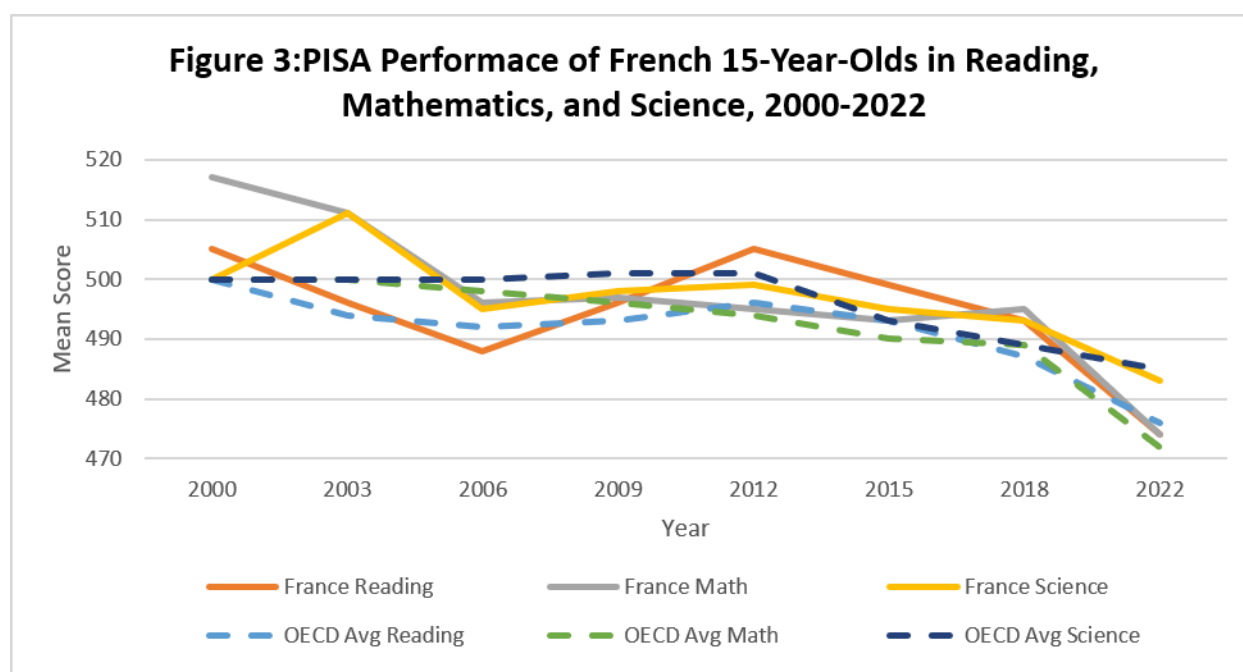
Feature	Pre-Reform (Before 2021)	Post-Reform (2021 Onward)
Track Structure	Three rigid séries: S, ES, L	Séries abolished; customizable Specialties
Student Choice	Fixed courses within chosen track	3 specialties in première, 2 in terminale
Assessment	Heavily weighted final written exams	Hybrid: final exams + continuous assessment
Oral Component	None	Grand Oral (20-minute defense)
Modularity	None; tracks self-contained	Students combine subjects across disciplines
University Entry	Automatic for Bac holders; random draw when demand exceeded places	Parcoursup platform; active orientation with prerequisites
Curriculum Logic	Encyclopedic knowledge (savoirs)	Competency-based (compétences); aligned with EU Key Competences
Language Grading	Traditional 0-20 scale	CEFR levels (A1-C2); B2 expected in first language, B1 in second
Digital Skills	Optional B2i certificate	Mandatory Pix certification (aligned with EU DigComp)
International Recognition	Baccalauréat difficult to translate	Bac structured to mirror ECTS modularity

Note: Adapted from Ministère de l'Éducation nationale et de la Jeunesse (2019, 2021) and Gautier (2022)

Figure 2 captures the structural transformation at the heart of this study. The shift from rigid tracks to modular specialties is the clearest empirical manifestation of Bologna's influence on secondary education. As Gautier (2022) argues, the new architecture directly mirrors the logic of the European Credit Transfer

System. A student who previously had to choose between science, economics, or literature can now combine mathematics with history-geography and geopolitics or pair physics-chemistry with a foreign language.

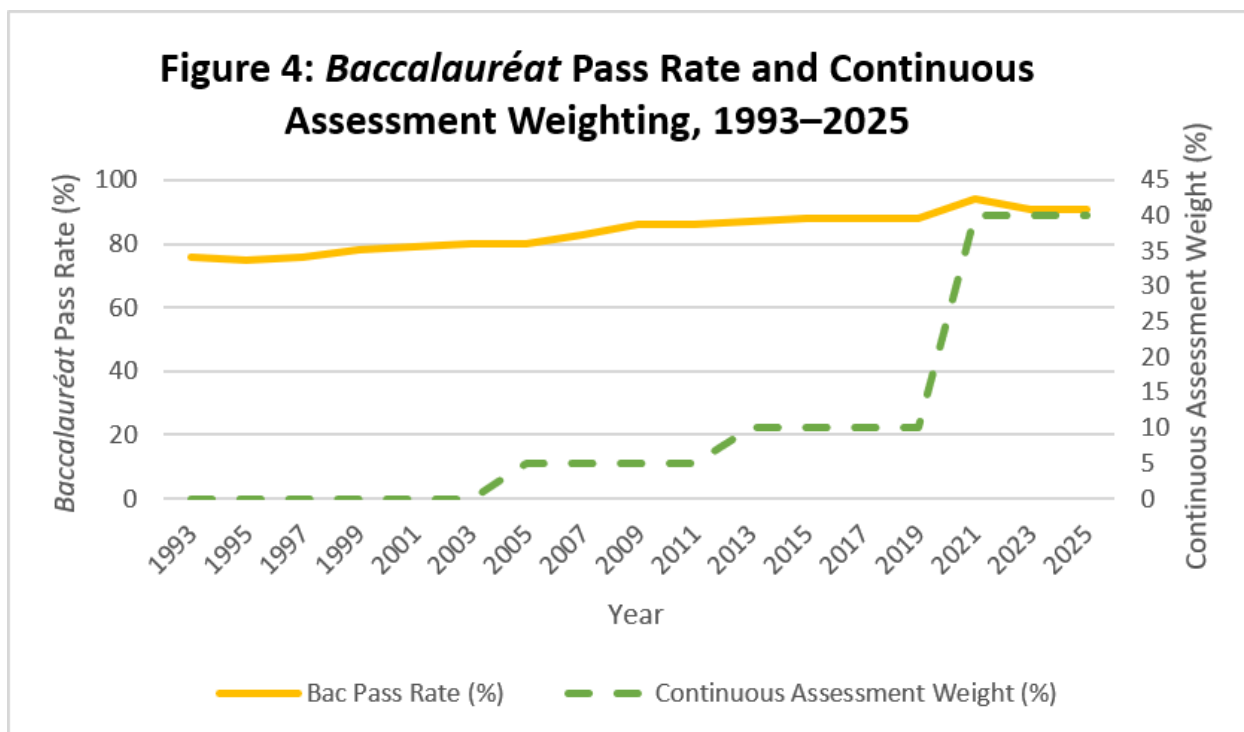
But the table captures more than just the track change. It shows how the reform touched every dimension of the student experience. Assessment moved from a single high-stakes examination to a hybrid model that incorporates continuous assessment. The Grand Oral introduced an oral defense component that had no equivalent in the old system. University entry, previously automatic for Bac holders, now runs through the Parcoursup platform, which requires students to construct academic projects aligned with specific Licence programs. Even language grading shifted, from the traditional 0-20 scale to the CEFR framework used across Europe.



Note: Data from OECD PISA Results, 2000–2022. OECD average shown as dashed line. Available at <https://www.oecd.org/en/data/datasets/pisa.html>.

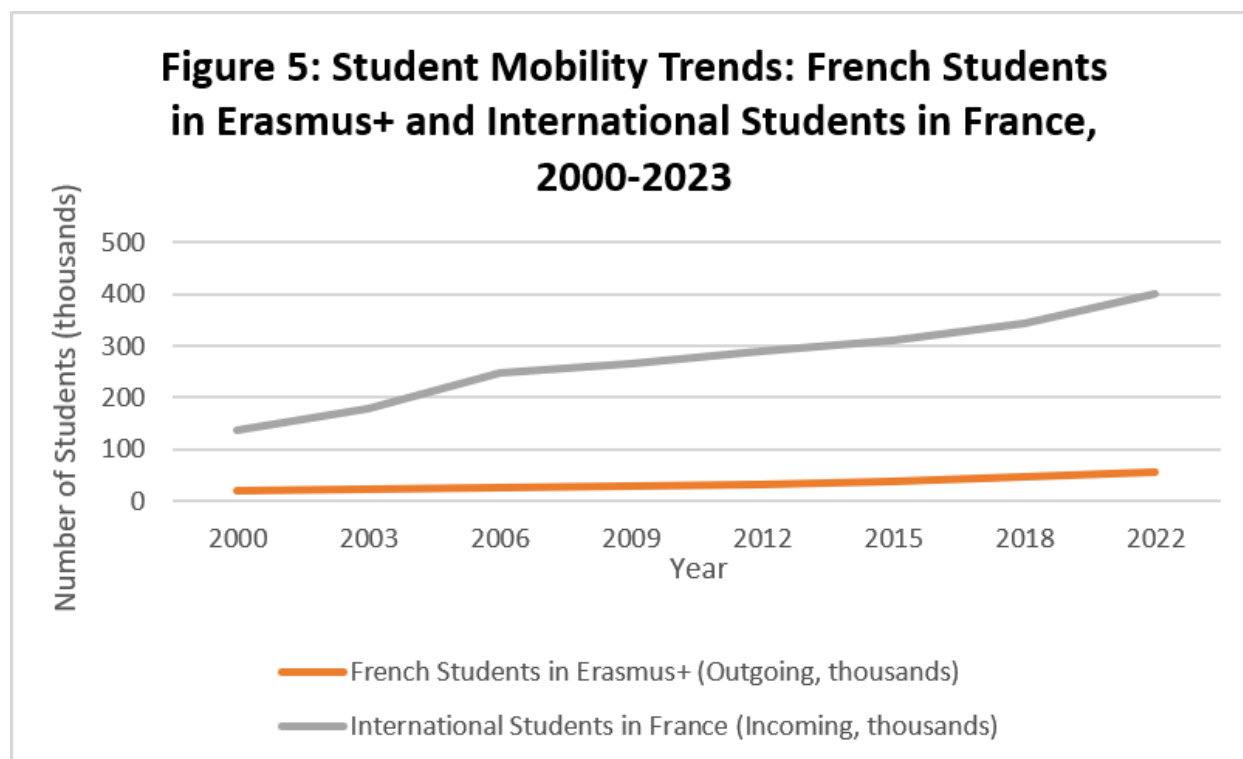
Figure 3 situates French secondary education within the international benchmarking environment that Pons (2012) identifies as a key mechanism of Europeanization. French PISA scores have remained

consistently close to the OECD average across all three domains since the first assessment cycle in 2000. Reading scores declined slightly from 505 in 2000 to 474 in 2022. Mathematics followed a similar trajectory, falling from 517 to 474 over the same period. Science performance remained comparatively stable, moving from 500 to 483.



Note: Pass rate data from Ministère de l'Éducation nationale, DEPP, "Résultats définitifs du baccalauréat," various years. Available at <https://www.education.gouv.fr/resultats-definitifs-du-baccalaureat>. Continuous assessment weighting from Gautier (2022) and Ministère de l'Éducation nationale (2019).

Figure 4 tells a story of changing assessment philosophy. The *Baccalauréat* pass rate, historically hovering between 75 and 80 percent through the 1990s and early 2000s, rose steadily after 2010 and exceeded 90 percent following the Blanquer Reform. Simultaneously, the weighting of continuous assessment increased from negligible levels in the 1990s to approximately 40 percent of the final grade under the 2021 system. These trends are linked. As assessment shifted from high-stakes terminal examinations to a hybrid model incorporating coursework and ongoing evaluation, pass rates climbed.



Note: Outgoing data from European Commission, Erasmus+ Annual Reports, Statistical Annexes. Available at <https://erasmus-plus.ec.europa.eu/resources-and-tools/statistics-and-factsheets>. Incoming data from Campus France, "Chiffres clés," various years. Available at <https://www.campusfrance.org/fr/ressources/chiffres-cles>.

Figure 5 provides evidence of the outcome toward which structural alignment has been directed: student mobility. Both outgoing and incoming mobility have risen substantially since the early 2000s. French students participating in Erasmus+ programs increased from approximately 18,000 in 2000 to over 55,000 in 2022. International students enrolled in French higher education rose from approximately 137,000 to over 400,000 over the same period. The incoming curve steepens notably after 2018, reflecting the combined effect of Parcoursup, the European Universities Initiative, and the broader legibility of French degree structures to international applicants.

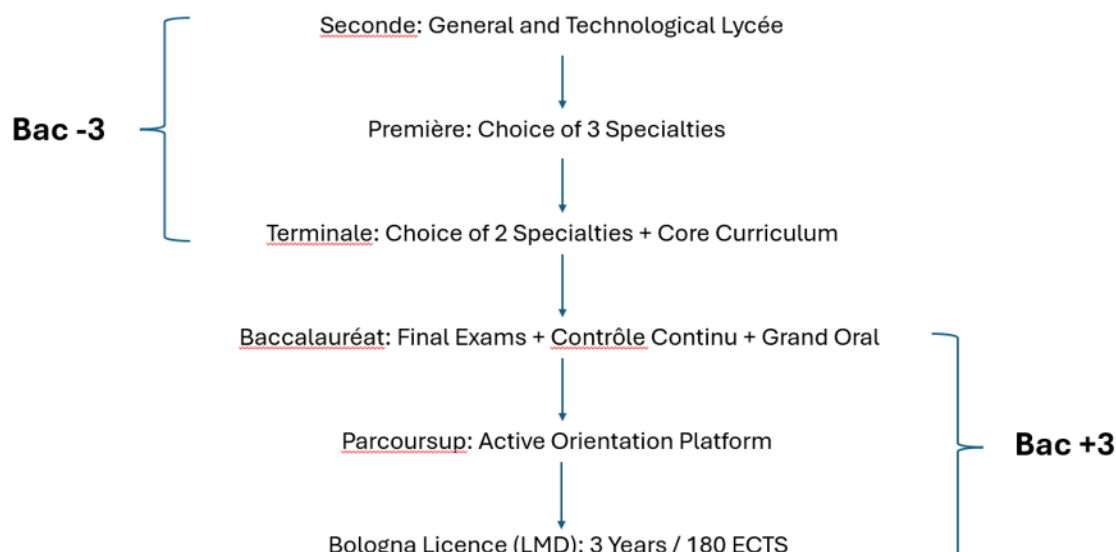
Figure 6: Expansion of Bologna Process Membership, 1999-Present



Note: 1999 and 2011 maps from GlobalHigherEd (2011), available at <https://globalhighered.wordpress.com/2011/04/20/mapping-bologna-process-membership>.
Current membership data from EHEA official website, available at <https://ehea.info/page-members>.

Figure 6 provides the geographic and institutional context for the policy evolution traced in the preceding figures. The two maps, showing Bologna Process membership in 1999 and 2011, capture a dramatic expansion. What began as an agreement among 29 signatory states, concentrated in Western and Central Europe, grew within twelve years to encompass 47 countries stretching from Ireland to Kazakhstan. By 2024, the European Higher Education Area included 49 members. The visual contrast between the two frames underscores a central point in the literature. The Bologna Process was not a static framework but a dynamic, expanding regime.

Figure 7: The Bac -3 / Bac +3 Continuum: From *Lycée* to Bologna Licence



Note: Adapted from Buisson-Fenet & Rey (2018) and Ministère de l'Éducation nationale (2019).

Figure 7 translates the abstract policy concept of the "Bac -3 / Bac +3 Continuum" into a visual pathway. The flowchart traces a student's progression from *seconde* through *première* and *terminale*, the new *Baccalauréat* with its specialties and Grand Oral, the *Parcoursup* orientation platform, and into the three-year Bologna *Licence*. The left bracket, labeled "Bac -3," groups the final three years of *lycée*. The right bracket, labeled "Bac +3," groups the three years of the *Licence*. The arrows between stages are not merely decorative. They represent the structural linkages that did not exist before the reforms of 2018–2021.

This figure is the visual corollary of Buisson-Fenet and Rey's (2018) central argument. The Loi ORE and *Parcoursup* transformed the *lycée* from a self-contained institution into an orientation funnel. A student's choice of specialties in *première* now determines which *Licence* programs are accessible via *Parcoursup*. The Grand Oral prepares students for the oral defense culture of European universities. The continuous assessment grade contributes to a dossier that follows the student into higher education. Each stage is connected to the next in a way that the old track system, with its single terminal examination, never was.

Through Bulmer's institutional architecture lens, this flowchart also reveals the centralized design of the reform. The pathway is uniform. Every French *lycée* student, regardless of region or socioeconomic background, follows the same sequence of choices, assessments, and orientation procedures. The centralized Ministry of National Education designed the pathway, mandated its implementation, and controls its operation through the *Parcoursup* platform. A federal system could not have produced this degree of structural integration. The Continuum is both a product of European pressure and a testament to the distinctive institutional capacity of the French state.

Figure 8: A Student Delivering the Grand Oral Examination



Note: A *lycée* student during the Grand Oral, a 20-minute oral defense introduced as a mandatory component of the reformed *Baccalauréat* in 2021. From "Grand oral du bac : le stress de la première fois," *Le Parisien*, June 20, 2021. Available at <https://www.leparisien.fr/societe/grand-oral-du-bac-le-stress-de-la-premiere-fois-20-06-2021-5BQR7VJWFDVLJTJP7LNLE43EE.php>.

Figure 8 brings the policy analysis into the examination room. The photograph shows a *lycée* student standing before a panel of examiners, delivering the Grand Oral. This exercise, introduced as a mandatory component of the *Baccalauréat* in 2021, requires students to prepare a 20-minute presentation on a topic related to one of their specialties, followed by questions from the jury. It is, by design, a rehearsal for the oral defense culture of European higher education.

In his 2020 interview in *Le Débat*, Jean-Michel Blanquer described the Grand Oral as an exercise intended to cultivate the argumentation skills and intellectual autonomy valued in Bologna-aligned university models. The photograph captures this ambition. The student is not sitting for a silent written examination but standing, speaking, defending ideas before an audience. This is a significant departure

from the traditional French assessment culture, which historically privileged anonymous written examinations as the guarantor of objectivity and merit.

The photograph also captures the human dimension of reform. Behind every policy document and statistical trend are students navigating new expectations, teachers adapting to new assessment formats, and examination panels implementing new procedures. The stress referenced in the article's title ("le stress de la première fois") reflects the friction inherent in institutional change. Bulmer's misfit concept operates here at the individual level. The Grand Oral represents a competency imported from European models, and its introduction into the high-stakes environment of the *Baccalauréat* generates both opportunity and anxiety. The photograph does not resolve this tension. It simply makes it visible.

ANALYSIS

This research aims to understand how French secondary education policy evolved under the influence of the Bologna Process between 1993 and 2026. The analysis is structured around Simon Bulmer's four pillars of domestic Europeanization: institutional architecture, governance regimes, misfit and adaptational pressure, and the two-way dynamic of uploading and downloading.

Institutional Architecture

Bulmer's first pillar holds that the internal structure of a state determines how it processes external policy pressures, and the French case confirms this clearly. The Ministry of National Education exercises authority over curriculum, teacher recruitment, assessment, and resource allocation for every *lycée* in the country. When the Bologna Process introduced modular, transferable credits through the ECTS, France responded with a comprehensive national overhaul. The Blanquer Reform, captured in Figure 2, abolished the entire track system in a single reform cycle, with no regional pilots, no opt-outs, and no variation by académie. Centralized architecture made this possible.

This distinguishes France from federal member states. In Germany, education is dispersed across sixteen *Länder*, each with its own ministry and reform timeline. A Bologna-aligned reform like the modular *Baccalauréat* could not have been implemented uniformly across Germany because no single authority has the power to mandate it. Germany adopted competency-based curricula in staggered fashion between 2004 and 2008, while France adopted the *Socle Commun* nationwide in 2005. The difference is institutional, and centralization gave French policymakers a tool their German counterparts lacked.

The same architecture shaped the Bac -3 / Bac +3 Continuum. Figure 7 maps the pathway from *seconde* through the Bologna Licence as a single, nationally standardized sequence. The Parcoursup platform processes every application through the same interface, so a student in Paris and a student in rural Brittany navigate the same system. This uniformity is a direct expression of centralized institutional design.

Governance Regimes and Soft Law

Bulmer's second pillar concerns the mode of governance through which European influence operates. In domains where the EU lacks legislative competence, it relies on facilitated unilateralism, meaning member states retain formal sovereignty while the EU facilitates coordination through benchmarks and peer review. Education falls squarely within this regime.

The timeline in Figure 1 makes the governance dynamic visible. European milestones consistently precede French legislation, but the intervals are irregular. The Bologna Declaration came in 1999, France implemented the LMD system in 2002, the Lisbon Strategy launched in 2000, and the Socle Commun arrived in 2005. The pattern is not compliance on a fixed schedule but selective, domestically paced response. France adopted European frameworks when they aligned with domestic agendas and took its time when they did not.

Pons (2012) provides the mechanism. French administrators used international benchmarks, including PISA scores, as political resources. Figure 3 shows French performance hovering near the OECD average, and this mediocrity generated steady adaptational pressure. Reformers could point to stagnant scores and argue for change. The data did not compel any specific reform, but it provided discursive cover for changes already under consideration. No one in Brussels told Paris to abolish the S, ES, and L tracks, but when French policymakers decided to do so, they could cite European benchmarks as justification.

The limits of soft law are equally visible. France ignored European benchmarks when they conflicted with domestic priorities. The EU's emphasis on market-driven skills never fully displaced the Republican commitment to civic formation, and the Grand Oral evaluates argumentation and intellectual autonomy, not workplace readiness. France adopted the form of European frameworks while adapting their content to fit domestic norms. Facilitated unilateralism gave it the space to do so.

Misfit and Adaptational Pressure

Bulmer's third pillar predicts that the degree of misfit between European models and domestic structures determines the intensity of adaptational pressure. The French case involves significant ideological misfit. The Republican tradition, with its emphasis on encyclopedic knowledge and the formation of the citizen, sits uneasily with the European competency framework, with its emphasis on transferable skills and employability.

Figure 4 captures one dimension of this friction. When the Blanquer Reform increased continuous assessment weighting to 40 percent in 2021, the *Baccalauréat* pass rate jumped to 94 percent, and critics alleged grade inflation. The concern reflected a deeper anxiety. Continuous assessment departed from the anonymous, standardized examination model that had defined French meritocracy for generations. The Grand Oral, shown in Figure 8, illustrates the same dynamic at the individual level. A student standing before a panel, defending ideas orally, is a departure from the silent written examination culture, and the misfit played out in the examination room, not just in policy documents.

Yet misfit did not prevent adaptation; it shaped its character. France adopted competency frameworks but retained a strong core curriculum, introduced continuous assessment but kept final examinations, and added the Grand Oral but maintained written exams in every subject. The result was not wholesale

adoption of a European model but rather a hybrid reflecting the negotiation between external pressure and internal norms. Misfit did not block change; it made change distinctively French.

Uploading and Downloading

Bulmer's fourth pillar rejects the idea that Europeanization is a one-way street. States download EU policies and upload domestic preferences to shape collective outcomes, and the French case provides evidence for both.

Downloading is the more visible side. Figure 5 shows French participation in Erasmus+ rising from roughly 18,000 in 2000 to over 55,000 in 2022. The LMD system made French degrees legible across Europe, and the modular *Baccalauréat* prepared students for a university environment operating on similar principles. These are downloaded adaptations.

Figure 5 also tells the other story. International student enrollment in French higher education rose from approximately 137,000 to over 400,000 in the same period, and the incoming curve steepens after 2018, corresponding to the European Universities Initiative championed by President Macron. This was uploading. France used its political weight to shape a European initiative that positioned French universities at the center of transnational networks, reflecting French preferences for state-guided cooperation over market-based models.

The Bologna membership maps in Figure 6 reinforce this point. France was an original signatory among 29 countries, and by 2024, the EHEA encompassed 49 members. This expansion reflected the active efforts of early members to build a regime reflecting their interests. As Ravinet (2008) describes, the more countries joined, the more institutionalized the framework became, and the more French standards became European standards. Uploading and downloading operated simultaneously. France shaped the regime while the regime shaped France.

Synthesis

Taken together, Bulmer's four pillars explain the French trajectory in a way a simple convergence narrative cannot. Centralized architecture gave France the capacity for sweeping reforms that federal states could not match, soft law governance allowed France to set its own pace, and ideological misfit shaped adaptation without blocking its process. France uploaded its own vision even as it downloaded European rules.

What emerges is not a story of a French system that became European but a story of a French system that adapted to Europe on French terms. The centralized state that entered the Maastricht Treaty in 1993 is still centralized, the *Baccalauréat* is still a national institution even if modular, and the *lycée* is still French even if it now feeds into a European degree architecture. Change happened through the filter of domestic institutions, norms, and interests. That is what Bulmer's framework would predict, and that is what the evidence shows.

CONCLUSION

Summary of Findings

This study set out to answer the question: How has secondary education policy in France evolved in the context of the Bologna Process since its membership in the European Union, 1993-2026? The evidence points to a clear answer. French secondary education underwent a structural transformation from a rigid, self-referential system organized around encyclopedic knowledge and fixed academic tracks to a modular, competency-based one integrated with European higher education. The transformation was not a simple case of convergence but a distinctive national pathway shaped by the interaction of European pressure and domestic institutional mediation.

Simon Bulmer's domestic politics approach provided the framework for understanding this pathway, and four findings stand out. First, France's centralized institutional architecture enabled comprehensive, nationally uniform reforms that federal states like Germany could not replicate. The Blanquer Reform abolished the entire track system in a single cycle and replaced it everywhere at once. Second, soft law governance gave France room to set its own pace, as European frameworks created a permissive environment for reform while the timing and content remained under French control. Third, the ideological misfit between Republican traditions and European competency models generated real friction. France adopted the form of European frameworks while adapting their content, introducing continuous assessment while retaining final examinations, and adding competencies while preserving the core curriculum. Fourth, France did not simply download European rules but uploaded its own preferences when the opportunity arose, shaping the Bologna Process even as the process reshaped French secondary education.

Broader Implications

These findings have implications beyond the French case. They suggest that Europeanization in sovereignty-sensitive domains like education operates less through direct imposition than through prolonged negotiation between supranational frameworks and domestic institutions. Centralized states have advantages in implementing sweeping reforms, but they also concentrate resistance. Soft law mechanisms are powerful yet slow, and their effects depend on domestic actors willing to use them. Misfit does not prevent change; it shapes its character. And the most influential member states are those that learn to upload as effectively as they download.

For scholars of European integration, the study reinforces the value of Bulmer's framework for analyzing policy domains where the EU lacks formal competence. The four pillars of institutional architecture, governance regimes, misfit, and uploading versus downloading provide a systematic vocabulary for comparing national responses to common European pressures. The French case demonstrates that these pillars are not merely descriptive categories but analytical tools that generate testable expectations about how states will respond to Europeanization.

For policymakers, the study offers a cautionary lesson. Structural alignment with European frameworks does not automatically produce improved educational outcomes. The PISA data in Figure 3 shows French performance stagnating or declining even as structural reforms accelerated. The pass rate data in Figure 4 raises unresolved questions about grade inflation. Alignment may be necessary for mobility and legibility, but it is not sufficient for quality. Reformers should be attentive to the gap between structural change and educational improvement.

Limitations

Several limitations of this study should be acknowledged. First, the research is a single-country case study. While this design allows for depth and attention to institutional specificity, it limits the generalizability of the findings. The conclusions drawn here apply to France, and while they may have implications for other centralized systems, they cannot be assumed to hold without comparative testing. Second, the study relies primarily on policy documents, legislative texts, and secondary literature. The voices of teachers, students, and families are present only indirectly, through published commentary and policy discourse. A fuller understanding of how these reforms have been experienced on the ground would require qualitative research that this study did not undertake. Third, the period since 2021 remains too recent for definitive evaluation. The full effects of the Blanquer Reform, the Parcoursup platform, and the competency turn on educational quality and equity will take years to become clear. This study documents structural change and early outcomes, but it cannot offer final judgments about success or failure.

Future Research Directions

Several directions for future research emerge from this study and from these limitations. The first concerns the experience of teachers and students. This research focused on policy design and structural change, drawing on legislative texts, statistical data, and policy discourse, but what remains underexplored is how the reforms have been lived. How have teachers adapted their pedagogy to the specialty system and the Grand Oral? How have students navigated the Parcoursup platform and the new assessment format? Qualitative research, including interviews and classroom observation, would add depth to the policy-level findings presented here.

A second direction concerns comparative analysis. This study focused on France, with occasional reference to Germany and other member states. A systematic comparison of how different institutional architectures, centralized versus federal, have mediated Bologna's influence on secondary education would test the generalizability of Bulmer's framework. Do other centralized systems, such as Italy or Spain, exhibit similar patterns? Do federal systems exhibit systematically different ones?

A third direction concerns outcomes. This study documented structural change and mobility trends but did not evaluate whether the reforms have improved educational quality, equity, or student preparedness for higher education. The PISA data in Figure 3 shows French performance stagnating or declining even as structural reforms accelerated, and the pass rate data in Figure 4 raises unresolved questions about grade inflation. Future research could investigate whether the competency turn has delivered on its promises or simply changed the metrics by which success is measured.

Closing Reflections

Finally, the period since 2021 remains unfinished. The Grand Oral coefficient adjustment scheduled for 2027, ongoing debates about Parcoursup, and the broader trajectory of the European Education Area will all shape the next phase of French secondary education policy. The arc traced in this study runs from 1993 to 2026, but the story is not yet over. The tension between Republican traditions and European frameworks will continue to define French education policy for the foreseeable future. How that tension resolves, or whether it resolves at all, remains an open question and a productive one for further study.

What the French case ultimately reveals is that Europeanization is not a destination but a process. It does not erase national traditions or flatten institutional differences. It works through them, sometimes against them, and occasionally in spite of them. France adapted to the Bologna Process, but it did so on French terms, and those terms will continue to shape its educational future long after the reforms of the past three decades have become historical footnotes.

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