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Note of intent

EMI The Great Transition course

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The Problem

What problem are we answering?

How to help students in order for them to feel integrated and develop a sense of belonging in prestigious universities regardless of their social origin, knowing it is quite difficult to bring students out of their comfort zone and to push them to break the ice in order to ease interactions with one another?

What do we know about the context?

The French “Grandes Écoles” are meant to be the breeding ground for the country’s elite. Despite the desire to promote equality and republican meritocracy within these types of schools, the issue of elitism is still alive and well. The said elitism is largely based on the existence of a higher endowment of cultural capital detained by certain social classes, primarily intellectual social classes. In the French “Grandes Ecoles” context, it is likely to highly intimidate students from social backgrounds that have not necessarily received or been exposed to the same “type” of cultural knowledge from a young age.

Indeed, despite the rigorous selection process established by schools before enrolment, students from disadvantaged background can feel illegitimate largely because of the cultural capital differences they may have with their peers. This sentiment, is particularly exacerbated by a competitive environment in which the mainstream culture and codes are different from what they are used to. In this context, we establish – as it was witnessed both in general and through our own personal experiences- that this could lead to self-marginalization and perhaps even university drop out in some cases.

This is of major concern as this feeling of illegitimacy or more commonly known as “the imposter syndrome”, may reinforce isolation of certain students. Often times, they tend to stay on the margins of groups in schools inducing lack self-confidence and leading to less brilliant academic or professional careers. This is all the more damaging to society, as this process of self-doubt reinforces the already strong social reproduction system. By tackling the issue of isolation and more generally “the imposter syndrome” we hope to contribute in breaking this vicious cycle.

What needs?

We need to enable students to have confidence in their academic path, and go out of their comfort zones to encounter other students who might have the same issues of feeling out of place.

What constraints?

We cannot measure how “legitimate” a student feels, or how much of an outcast he is/appears to be.

What is at stake?

We need to be able, through a good or a service, to allow confidence-lacking students to succeed in a University with highly competitive environment regardless of their social background.

Why is this problem important?

Considering the context in which schools of an elitist nature are truly beginning to make efforts in opening up their doors to more diverse communities and social classes as well as more nationalities. We are thus fortunate to act in this context of reform. Taking the example of SciencesPo, who has recently declared that the entry exam was no longer applicable in the application process, is going exactly in this direction. This recent reform, will necessitate even more attention to an increased population of students from disadvantaged social or financial classes.

Proposed Concept

The Concept:

In order to tackle the issue at hand, and loneliness more generally, we suggest to combine cultural activities and social interactions in the context of an integration week. This particular week, is often aimed at forging friendships and 'finding one's place' in this new environment, very different from home. This is why, this specific time frame is extremely important as it set the pace for the rest of the scholar cursus and that first impressions and interactions are extremely determining on whether students feel secure or not to be able to confidently express themselves fully. The main goal is to provide a way to learn and interact with others, in order to limit the feeling of illegitimacy of some prestigious university students coming from disadvantaged social classes. This is not a project only to integrate students who feel marginalized with an introduction to the so-called dominant culture, but also to introduce different cultural concepts that should allow better integration.

The service to prestigious universities is split into two main axes. On one hand, we would like to offer cultural paths through museums visits and cultural sites in Paris and its outskirts to create new type of cultural exchanges mixing classic cultural events and much more intimists and insolit ones. The idea is to let the student discover each other giving them a common base to interact. On the other, hand since we want to tackle loneliness and inclusion we would distribute at the beginning of the integration week, a "blank poster" that would allow students to map the interactions and visits they completed over time. Each time students complete a specific path with one of our partners in teams, he/she receives a token to stick on his/her poster. This physical proof will allow students to keep track of their experience and act as a booster of self-confidence as a reminder of unexpected discoveries with peers.

Moreover, students will be able to discover new "paths" through a mobile application that would reference all the existing partnerships we established with our partners.

Scope:

The scope is “grandes ecoles” students, regardless of their degree or university year. We cannot measure the sense of “belonging” and “confidence” therefore we propose having the service mandatory as to push students to get out of their comfort zone. We have many allies that could cooperate to this service. The school administration seem to be our closest ally, in this sense, as they are responsible for devising programs and activities within universities. We trust that they will make the necessary effort in promoting cultural/financial/social diversity within the integration week. In this sense, we would be aiding the administrations of school, who have sometimes been criticized in their efforts to build stronger diversity.

What solutions already exist?

We mainly compete with two types of existing organizations/solutions to solve our problem but since each of them is only answering partially to our need, we wanted to design a more inclusive one. The integration week, moment when we want mainly to intervene is already organized jointly between students and the administration, hence we must find our place in this ecosystem. The introductory courses and the activities and parties proposed on the Paris campus especially are not the most effective way to get students from a same degree to get to know each other and form links that would last through university years and to get to know each other without a latent will to impress the others from some students contributing to deepen the gap between the ones who appear to be confident and the ones who appear not to be.

Another actor already promoting student inclusion and participation to school life are students clubs and associations. However despite their existence student still can feel stressed and uncomfortable: on top of not being easily accessible for someone who does not know the codes of the Paris campus compared to delocalized ones they gather students with a common interest which does not necessarily favor interactions with people having different ones or people who feel uncomfortable getting involved with others voluntarily.

Feasibility, originality and effectiveness:

We believe that our project will be effective because, through social interactions, the students will be able to both bond with their peers but also share their culture/immerse themselves in others. Our solution is original, because it includes items that are already incorporated in regular university courses (the integration week) with a focus on culture and linkage between the students. Finally, we believe that our solution is feasible, because we have a narrow and clear target audience as well as an already existing framework (integration week).

How do we measure the impact?

In order to understand the impact of contributing to breaking this social vicious cycle, we aim at measuring our impact on the long term. This would essentially imply tracking and following the receivers of our program's professional career and path, comparing it to those in previous alumni registries which have not benefitted from the same project.

POC and tests

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As a conclusion of this test we can say that even though the solution is not completely revolutionary and presupposes the use of pre-existing tools in the cultural landscape which would be adapted to students, what is new is bringing them to higher education with a defined purpose. As for the efficiency since we think the most outstanding results might be reached on a long term we did not think our solution was worth 3 points, however we have little doubt on its feasibility as cultural institutions are generally open to collaboration.

Expected positive impacts of the solution:

Our project allows students to meet peers of different origins and centers of interest in the framework of activities open to all, without prerequisites. Our goal is to be different from student associations, which in most cases favor interaction based on shared common interests. In some cases, these activities can also be costly for the students, creating a barrier to students from disadvantaged social backgrounds. We thus have the ambition to overcome this problem. By creating a varied cultural base common to the students, our solution aims - in the longer term - a positive impact on the students' grades and stimulating new interests. We are convinced of the benefits of art and culture in a broader sense for the personal and intellectual development of students. And, we would like to insist on the fact that "art" and "culture" are not understood as dominant codes but can emerge from all backgrounds. This is the meaning of our approach that is inclusive rather than integrative. It's about bringing out links that would not exist in "normal" circumstances.

Sustainability of the solution

The basis of organizing a cultural framework during integration weeks is sustainable, as it can be done again and again each year, in our targeted Grandes Ecoles but also in a larger scope to any university willing to integrate this experience to their integration planning. The partnerships done with cultural institutions will guarantee the sustainability of the service, as they can be changed or deepened.

Major risks and actions to reduce them

What could constitute a real disadvantage would be mainly the school's administration's lack of interest in our project. As for the partnerships for the constitution of cultural paths, we are less worried thanks to the reputation of the schools like SciencesPo as well as the general will of the actors of the culture to be points of meeting and exchanges. Finally, for the solution to be effective the majority of students must use it and find into it a real personal interest. It is therefore up to this interest and to present this experience as truly enriching, indispensable and an integral part of the student experience in the Grande Ecole. Thus making it mandatory during this integration week. Good communication is essential in exhibiting the benefits for both the school's image and especially the benefits for students, always in the optic of "openness" to different cultures. In order to convince both students and the school administration, our cultural paths should be adaptable and interesting. It seems essential to balance both the dominant culture (museums, cultural sites) and the minority cultures (suburbs visits...) in order to avoid backlash from either sides.

Deployment strategy and major milestones

Prior to anything else, we should focus on establishing solid partnerships with various cultural entities in order to develop a rich and diversified panel of partners. From urban art galleries to well-established museums, these partnerships will represent the core of the program. Each partner will be given specific tokens to distribute to students when they complete their trail.

Whenever a sufficient amount of partnerships is reached, we should focus on developing the “app” that will reference our partnerships, the trail they are attached to and their location in Paris. We shall then upload the app into an application store (Google/Apple etc...)

Once this is done, we must pitch and sell the program to a Grande Ecole (in this case Sciences Po) that will provide us with information as to how many students will be enrolled in the program and when will the launch period take place. Once these variables are known, we can start crafting the posters.


On the first day of the program, we should take up to an hour in order to explain to the students the purpose of the program and how it works. We should describe how to use the app and why fully embracing the program would be to their own benefit. We would then distribute the posters, making sure nobody is left out without one.

Throughout the experiment we should make sure to post weekly news and challenges about upcoming cultural activities [example: This week, get a specific token if you come to “chipchop” gallery and complete the trail with three or more friends"]. The news and challenges are communicated through app-notifications and digital newsletters.

At last, we should occasionally ask for feedbacks from the students in order to improve our services’ quality and develop new partnerships with always more diversified entities.

Return on investment analysis

As far as financial sustainability is concerned this project which is punctual and recurrent at each beginning of the semester would not be too difficult to operate. Since new students are coming each year, that we know in advance their number to plan the activities and that SciencesPo would be financing the program thanks to student tuition fees there is no uncertainty on that level. In fact student are currently already paying for an integration week organized by the school with formal activities and classes.



When introducing this cultural path to any integration week, we can easily imagine that the cost that was already allowed for these activities, that were not the most appropriate answer for student looking for new landmarks in terms of relationship but also apprehending the new city they are in, would be allocated for the program we propose. For the project we introduce is about changing the access to higher education and have an impact on the long term on the relation between the student and the institution it is difficult to identify a clear return on investment.

We could divide in two times our approach to which extent the project is sustainable and efficient: first would be a global improvement on what student thought of the integration week they had in terms of learning from each other and feeling comfortable in their new environment. Building friendship and feeling secure can then be the basis for more implication and success at school and indirectly more success in satisfying the main goals a higher education institution set for herself. These are mainly accompanying the student toward the best professional path possible for him or her and forge his or her critical spirit.

Considering it another way a return on investment would be observing less withdrawal from student, which is a huge loss and proof of failure for the institution considering the time used during the selection process for example. An observation of less absenteeism and a lesser need of support from part of the medical team can also be indicators of a better integration and therefore of an improvement of psychological well being of the students. So in that sense investing on the solution would reduce other cost for the institution.

Concerning the partners involved the benefit can definitely be more visibility and the creation of new opportunities for exchange. One of our objective being to create dialogue and trigger interest from the students we hope that those actors could be involved on future projects students might work on or propose their projects, collaboration would be the most interesting outcome for them apart from the financial retribution they would get. We can easily imagine student redacting report on how to attract a new public to the place they visited or conducting a historical research on a certain period for a museum.

Organization

In order to implement this project, we would need partnerships with sponsors and cultural and political institutions.

The first type of sponsors that might be interested are from the public sector. One of the main public partners might be the ministry of youth and the ministry of Higher education. The issue of well-being and welfare being a quite burning one today. We believe that their support might not only be financial but also in terms of image. Having them as a partner might help us gain credibility when dealing with universities. Another possible partner from the public sector are Municipalities and the Region Ile de France. Although the region is not really concerned with higher education, the Municipality and the Region organize multiple cultural events and might share free places and exclusive access to some events.

As for the private sector, we might find 2 types of sponsors. The first one are private foundations, such as luxury brands' foundations which often organize cultural events. These might be very enriching for students which might spontaneously not think about participating in cultural events organized for instance by YSL Foundation, but which might find it very enriching. the partnership might take the form of a simple sponsorship or special events organized for our students. The interest for these foundations and companies might be, additional to PR, one of potentially recruiting students from the country's best Universities.

Another type of sponsors and partners are of course museums and other cultural institutions such as L'institut du monde arabe, and the cultural institutes of different countries. Sciences Po being a melting pot, discovering the others' culture from the beginning might be a brilliant way to better integrate students by a bottom-up approach, not by imposing a single dominant culture.

The last kind of sponsors are simply artists, in the very wide sense. These might be singers, actors, painters, sculptors and so on. Having them as partners would allow us to broaden our offer and include cultural events that are little known and very diverse. From the exhibition of photography to a slam concert. The idea being again of having a very wide offer of cultural events, students might exchange about, and take part to together. These kind of partnerships might be mutually beneficial, as artists gain in reputation, and the students discover talented artists they wouldn't have known otherwise.