

The AgroParisTech “Social Openings” mission

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Abstract

Underprivileged secondary school and college students tend to demonstrate limited ambitions with regards to further education and acquiring superior qualifications. In a partnership with higher education schools, such as AgroParisTech, encounters have been organised between high school students and higher education students acting as volunteering mentors.

The aim is to present the high school students with the opportunity to explore new opportunities as well as to provide them with information about high profile careers and higher level training through various activities led by the higher education students, as well as through meetings, visits, weekends organised around a specific theme. Examples of such initiatives show what benefits both the high school and higher education students can derive from them.

Keywords: training, tutorship, high school students, higher education students.

1 Introduction

High school students from a socially and economically underprivileged family or whose family background is impaired tend to have limited ambitions in the area of higher education, sometimes unconsciously, and this is often the case even for those whose school results are of an excellent standard.

The “Cordées de la Réussite” (Ropes of Success) were set up in France in 2008 by the Department of Education, the Department of Higher Education and Research and the Department of Urbanism and Social Cohesion, with a charter established in June 2010 within the framework of the Government Policy for Equal Opportunities. Within each Regional Educational Area, they represent an active partnership between:

- senior high schools with “preparatory classes” - designed for entering high profile further education schools - as well as other high schools, both junior and senior, located in areas designed as priority zones with students benefiting from the scheme;
- one or more higher education schools, with university-level students acting as “mentors”.

The point is for the young students to broaden their horizons in terms of studies, to be presented with opportunities for new discoveries, to be informed about a whole array of training areas and professions often unknown previously.

In 2012, 326 “cordées” or ropes were organised, involving 50,000 junior and senior high school students in France.

2 Organization and objectives

2.1 Organization

Convinced that the diversity in the social and economic background of the students enables mutual enrichment and an increase in performance, the group of the twelve ParisTech Engineering Schools is committed to taking part in the *cordées*. Here below, we shall describe in more detail the activities undertaken by the Social Opening Mission of one of them, the AgroParisTech Institute, in the Paris area.

AgroParisTech is a High Profile Further Education School which trains engineers (engineering students) in the areas of agronomy, forest management and the food sector in syllabi lasting 5 years after the French Baccalaureat or high school final examination.

The main priority of the Social Opening Mission and the heads of the involved schools is the organization of the mentorship, to which is added the creation of strong ties between the various schools of a same area, for better mutual acknowledgement and joint decisions towards common action.

Each tutoring group is built at the beginning of each school year. It includes (Fig. 1):

- 5 to 7 Student Mentors (university students), engineering students (20 to 24 y.o.) in their third or fourth year of studies;
- 10 to 18 students of a same academic level in the same school (junior or senior high school).

In 2012 AgroParisTech was in charge of a network of 4 *cordées*, involving 9 junior high schools (students aged 15 approximately), 6 high schools (aged 16 to 18) and a “Boarding School for Excellence” (designed for favouring the conditions of learning for some students). In total, 300 high school students were put in touch with 100 higher education students.

All of them, pupils, and students, committed to taking part in the endeavour for the whole of the school year.

Throughout the year, each group of high school

students is taken in charge by the same group of higher education students which enables the establishment of relationships throughout the activities, each session lasting from 1 to 2 hours, outside of lesson hours for each group. The total number of sessions over each year depends on groups and their availability; with all activities included, there can be from 12 sessions to more than 20.

The organization is ensured through the collaboration of the Social Mission, the Heads and the various other representatives of the Schools, and the mentors. The agreement of the parents of the High School Students must also be secured. Financial and human resources are necessary for the follow-up of the activities: the training of the student mentors, the trips to the sites and meeting places; the organization and the contacts within the schools, the search for participants and the decisions to be made about their participation. Financing is provided by different public organizations (ACSE Department for Social cohesion; MESR Ministry Higher Education and Research; Ile de France Area; Regional Educational Authorities of Versailles & Créteil).

2.2 The aims

The activities organised aim to develop “knowledge and proper behaviour” essential to the **high school students’** future life, both personal and professional:

- intellectual curiosity, ability to debate the news, to argue one’s point while listening to others, expansion of the intellectual horizons, improvement of general knowledge, while stepping out of the usual environment;
- acquiring more self-confidence through techniques of oral and bodily expression, games, theatre, public behaviour, all of this in group works;
- knowledge of various professions, of the means to exert them, in order to better define one’s professional and personal goals.

The mentors involved in the activities go through a humanitarian experience in teams,

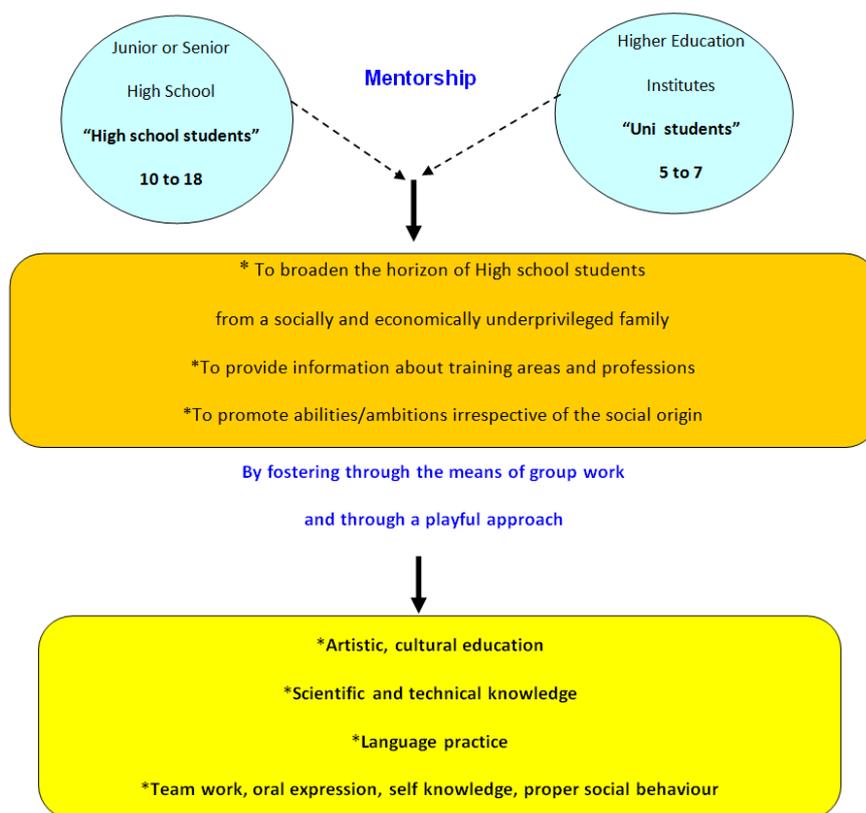


Figure 1: Example of mentorship and objectives

helping out students in a close age-group, by acting as decision-makers to prepare the actions but also by trying to predict the possible behaviour and reactions of the group of high school students. Their mission involves:

- getting the high school students interested in the project, favouring their active involvement by taking their wishes into account;
- defining with the high school students the themes to be dealt with throughout the year;
- planning activities with regards to the contents and duration, choosing activities, choosing the participants, while trying to reach the goals established;
- taking responsibility in the pupils' lives without playing the part of a teacher or a parent.

3 The activities proposed during the encounters

3.1 The basis: group sessions (1 to 2h)

These take place once a week after school at the junior or senior high school or preferably at the University acting as a framework to the action. One of the aims is to take the students out of their environment while making allowances for the school timetable.

The sessions are prepared by the university students, but also according to themes defined by the high school students; they usually comprise: a short snack, a quiz about the news, individual and team games, debates around a given theme, the preparation of the following sessions and out-

ings. The games are proposed by the students who tried them out during the preparation or communication modules.

During the sessions the **themes dealt with** in 2011-2012 may be taken up by various groups:

- proposing themes for debate and looking for information on those themes;
- introducing oneself, expressing oneself in public, thinking and debating on news issues or centres of interest;
- taking the time to listen to one another's opinions, high school and senior students alike;
- meeting up with people of various professional backgrounds in order to explore what studies are necessary to succeed in them, for what results;
- suggesting outings and preparing them;
- numerous team games allowing everyone to get involved, to perform impersonations, to be creative;
- visit to the high school by the university students and vice-versa;
- cooking of dishes from France and various other countries and preparation of meals by the students (site AgroParisTech Grignon).

Some of the themes dealt with may also depend on the form of the high school students involved. Here are examples of those themes:

1. in Troisième (or High School 4th Year)
 - Christmas traditions;
 - discussions about racism;
 - sessions of improvisation/theatre, workshops/games with a teacher;
 - the cinema; shooting of a short movie with a teacher;
 - discovery of various professions, according to the wishes of the students or the visits paid (ex Archaeology);
 - sensitization to first aid;
2. in Seconde (or High School 5th Year)

- working out of an article about the role of the police;
- showing of a film "Nourrir les hommes" (Feeding the World) followed by a debate;
- elections and public debates as broadcast on TV;

3. in Première (or High School 6th Year)

- reflection about Justice with games involving accused/alibi/judges, followed by a debate about a current prosecution (during the second session, based upon articles);

4. in Terminale (or High School 7th and Final Year)

- quiz about the cinema; rock dancing;
- debate about consumption and its excesses;
- introduction of various study syllabi (IUT or University Institutes of Technology, Preparatory Classes for the entry to Superior Higher Education Schools, Schools of Building and Civil Engineering Works) ; Schools for Economy (questions prepared by students);
- simulation of job interviews.

3.2 Outings with visits (duration 1 to 2 hours)

The point is to get out of the usual environment for a limited time and to get confronted with a new, enriching one. The visits are prepared and accompanied by tutors or/and a guide.

1. In Troisième (or High School 4th Year)

- Site of Grignon (AgroParisTech) (castle, amphitheatre, student homes); the world of farming with the nearby farm (stables, cattle and sheep, tasting of dairy products);
- visit of the Quai Branly Museum (exhibitions: invention of the Savage; Samurai);

- Palais de la Découverte (Discovery Palace Museum) (interactive scientific games) and Planetarium;
- Visit to the Grand Rex Cinema (areas of the Cinema normally not open to the public);
- Salon de l'Agriculture (Farming trade fair);
- Museum d'Histoire Naturelle (*Museum of Natural Science*), Gallery of Evolution (biodiversity, classification);
- Visit to Paris with OPENTOUR (two-deck buses).
- Bastille Opera, ballet.
- Show in English "Wild about Oscar" (+ preparatory session for the introduction of new vocabulary) (Seconde to Terminale students).

3.3 Week-End Outings/Visits

These consist of a trip over two days in groups including high school and university-level students, which will make it possible to discover a region and its highlights but also to get to know one another better over a longer period of time spent together.

- Touraine: visit to the Clos Lucé (Leonardo da Vinci) in Amboise (+ art workshop), to the castle and mini-castles (Troisième);
- Normandy: Caen Mémorial, American cemetery, Arromanche, crossing of the Bay of the Mount Saint Michel with a guide (Troisième);
- Strasbourg: European Rallye in the city, Museums, boat ride (Seconde);
- Marseilles with the Castle of If, visit to the Panier District, the Marseilles rocky stretch called calanques (Terminale).

3.4 Other activities offered according to the groups

- « **Self-Awareness** » **internship** with a psychosociologist (2 days during the school holidays) allowing each High School student to define their individual motivations, aspirations and talents and their possible fulfilment.
- **English "immersion" week-end** (residential) with 4 English-speaking participants, to foster expression, strengthen the bases, expand the linguistic knowledge in a playful way.
- **Cordées of Success National Days** in January (2 days), national event organized locally in each Regional Educational Area according to the resources of the partners (economic, associative and university spheres) with conferences, exhibitions, debates, talks and visits.
- **Days dedicated to exploring professions** with the testimonies from people with an entrepreneurial background (2 days).
- **Intensive Internship « Objectif Bac »** (preparation of the Terminale students for the Final Examination) (1 week in a boarding school during the Easter holidays) with classes, exercises, mock-examinations, training for the oral examinations, all in small groups. Documents provided for each subject.
- **Post-Final Exam Internship for the preparation of the university year** (2 weeks, beginning of July) (offered by the Association « Réussir Aujourd'hui » (Succeeding Today), in order to consolidate what has been achieved in Terminale (knowledge of the syllabus, personal work and sports), discover new personal work methods to be efficient in the future activities. This placement is aimed at students having chosen highly demanding careers: preparatory classes for high profile further education schools, those schools themselves, universities, medical studies, law studies. . .

4 Conclusions

Through the year, each activity or encounter ends with the drafting of a short personal account by a university student, with the place and date, the theme, the chronology of the activities as well as the participation and some retrospection to check what could be improved « If we could do it again. . . ». The unique aspect of the relatively short encounters between high school and university students consists of the establishment of mutual relationships, in a formalized, yet voluntary way. Everyone takes part in his or her own way and tries to discover what can be gained from the experience. The outcome varies depending on the interest raised in the participants and their will to move forward. The absence of certain students in some of the encounters may be due to a problem met with transport, a lack of information, a lack of interest in the theme dealt with or a lack of simplicity.

A closing session getting all the participants of the cordées together, with the high school and university-level students, the parents, the school heads and their subordinates, the Referent Personnel of the Social Mission, makes it possible to finish the year with short presentations by the students about the activities undertaken.

For the high school students just as for the university-level students (engineering students) these encounters represent an opportunity to practice team work by planning activities as well as carrying them out and through the team games, discussions and activities. They enable every participant to develop public speaking, listening and time management skills. Getting people to get together for an extra one to two hours' period after their regular time of study is a real challenge which nevertheless appears to be possible to fulfil, the results of which appear to be profitable to all as well as enriching owing to its unique character.

For the high school students this makes it possible not only to develop an interest in further studies beyond the Baccalaureat, or High School Final Examination, and the possibility to follow them, but also to discover various, previously unknown areas of interest. This happens as the students are guided through visits and given chances to meet with young people from a different back-

ground, which constitutes an opening towards the world.

The development of relationships between youngsters, exchanges around a snack, attending shows, debates, sharing in laughing fits, all of this is part of opening up to others, with their knowledge, their experience, their hopes, their wishes and for their futures.

For the university-level students, these encounters give an opportunity to develop tolerance and to understand and overcome obstacles, even though this might be problematic and success may only be partial. This is a whole experience grounded on the collaboration of human beings who endeavour to share what they each have to offer.

It is difficult to assess the benefits of such actions for the high school students since they are closely tied to the students' upbringing as well as to their personal and family lives. For the university-level students, this is an opportunity to develop listening skills and group animation as well as planning management abilities, all things which will prove essential in their future career. A mention will be made at the end of their studies in the "Diploma Supplement", but the benefit will be far beyond this document.

It would be interesting to know whether similar attempts are led in other countries in order to perhaps find other ideas in practice.

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