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**Abstract**

Since 2010 France has undertaken an ambitious programme of reforms aimed at improving significantly the performance of French higher education in the global knowledge and education marketplace. The French excellence initiative (Idex) has devoted about €10 billion to financing activities undertaken by five to ten groupings of higher education and research establishments. The goal was to facilitate the emergence of a few comprehensive entities able to compete with the best in the world. The Idex/I-Site initiative represents a truly transformative project. For the first time, French universities and Grandes Écoles have begun thinking strategically about their common future. Features that facilitated the process included the establishment of an international jury, the requirement of a midterm review, good sets of performance indicators and reliance on hearings that proved crucial in clarifying actual progress towards the objectives of the application. Major limiting factors stemmed from a lack of government coherence, the limited flexibility and autonomy enjoyed by French higher education institutions, the resistance to change of the Humanities and Social

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Sciences in many universities and various internal obstacles. The main challenge facing the government remains strengthening universities' autonomy and simplifying management rules and procedures. (HRK / Abstract übernommen)