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Introduction

The institution now re-branded as *Sciences Po*, an abbreviation of the Paris Institute of Political Science, has a long history that goes back to the aftermath of France's defeat in the Franco-Prussian War in 1871. Traditionally a training ground to groom the elite for entry into the judiciary, the Ministry of Finance, leading media groups, and the nation's most prestigious firms, Sciences Po had been through many changes over the years. But in 1996 it remained the premier *grande école*, eschewing the open admissions policies of French universities in favour of a merit-based entry system fed by a hyper-competitive preparatory track, the *écoles préparatoires*.

The 1990s were a time of significant international change in higher education: EU integration accelerated with the decision to introduce a single currency; the internet helped reduce distances and improve communication; labour became ever more mobile. All these changes affected education, resulting in an increased emphasis on international competitiveness between schools (with international rankings becoming a proxy for individual reputations), and prompting students to give more thought to options abroad. While the world around it was changing, Sciences Po seemed largely unaffected, focused as it almost exclusively was on the French educational context.

In April 1996, Richard Descoings was appointed director of Sciences Po. He had had a long association with the school, holding various faculty and management roles since 1984, and hence understood the institute and its context very well. Unbeknown to many of those electing him, he had a vision for the future of French education, believing that as a leader it was incumbent upon him to “dream” and to share his dream with others (since no one else working in the system “would have time”). Descoings recognised that changes were taking place in higher education globally and realised that Sciences Po's France-focused curricula (for example in the field of law) would be a hindrance in the future, given EU integration and globalisation, and wanted to do something about it. His vision was to turn Sciences Po into “the Harvard of Europe”.

Others failed to perceive the gathering threat. Indeed, in some quarters it was felt that Descoings was not under pressure to make major changes. As was typical of professional bureaucracies where administrators like him lacked budgetary and numerous other powers, and where faculty bodies and student associations wielded significant power, radical change seemed almost impossible. However, the appointment of Richard Descoings to replace Alain Lancelot would prove to be the trigger for the radical transformation of this hallowed institution. Few others would have dared to dream his dream, and fewer still would have had the strategy to pull it off.

The School

Since the late nineties, Sciences Po had been undergoing a number of changes, some of which had radically altered the way the institute functioned. The school changed its undergraduate programme to conform to a three-year course structure agreed by the Bologna process. Moreover, there was an increased focus on internationalisation through a compulsory third-

year internship programme abroad, greater numbers of international students (the number of applications for the international programme increased from 200 in 2002 to 800 in 2007),¹ and more exchange programmes and international partnerships. The latter were supported by expanding the language of instruction from French to include English and other relevant languages, including German, Spanish, Portuguese, Czech, Hungarian, Polish, Arabic, Chinese, Korean and Japanese. There were also multiple new campuses opened outside Paris.

In addition, Descoings had gained much publicity for the school through the initiation of an “affirmative action” programme to accept students from economically deprived areas, in particular the suburbs of Paris. This was a first in France. It was a controversial decision that risked the reforms being labeled “American”, and resulted in a national debate on the subject, culminating in legislation allowing for this “experiment” to proceed.

Industry

France was famous for its civil unrest, from the Revolution of 1789 to the student protests of May 1968. In the ensuing decades, the legacy of the *soixanthuitard* ('68) protests which had that rocked France that spring continued to be felt, while the schools of the UK and the US forged ahead with more market-oriented policies.

Globalisation, the internet and cross-border mobility meant that international comparisons of higher education were very much *en vogue* by the 1990s. The picture that emerged from these rankings, fallible as they were, was of a world dominated by Anglo-American schools (19 of the top 20 schools in one list considered by Sciences Po, with only the University of Tokyo bucking the trend).² They had the resources and history, alumni support, the advantage of the increasingly-used English language and name brands to attract the best researchers and students from around the world (particularly given the rise of the Asian student as a major part of the system). It was clear to Descoings that their strong emphasis on research underlay their dominance.

Sciences Po, meanwhile, had come to be seen less as a centre of scholarship and knowledge and more as a centre of power. Much as its prestige within France allowed it to partner with the best foreign schools for exchange programmes, interactions were frustrating because of what Richard called the “complexity, opacity and singularity” of the French higher education system.³ Universities in France had two alternatives: focus inwards and risk losing relevance as education became more and more globalised, or transform themselves to compete internationally.

Secure in its reputation within France as an avenue (sometimes referred to as “the royal path”) to the upper echelons of society, Sciences Po saw its counterparts in other countries, such as the London School of Economics and the Ivy League schools in the US, setting up increasing numbers of international exchanges and even full campuses abroad, attracting diverse students from around the world. Moreover, they were able to use their scale to dominate the research areas linked to the subjects taught.

1 Wikipedia: Sciences Po

2 Sciences Po: De La Courneuve à Shanghai, a book by Richard Descoings.

3 Ibid.

The Issue

The key player in the transformation of Sciences Po was clearly Richard Descoings. Before his appointment as director he was already participating in board meetings in his prior position and understood the situation faced by the school. With a vision to make Sciences Po the Harvard of Europe – a stretch goal to say the least – he saw himself on a mission. The biggest challenge was to convince the board of trustees, faculty and students of the need for change when many were content with the status quo.

Descoings was faced with a number of constraints: he did not have much control, as both finances and faculty were beyond his area of responsibility. Additionally, this was an extremely political transformation that involved not only government but also affected the interests of students, faculty, alumni and society in general. He believed that he needed to create a grand vision that would motivate people to break the inertia, first by convincing them of the need to change and later deciding on the specific actions needed.

With his vision in mind, Richard set himself the task of developing different alternatives and strategies for this transformation. This was done in collaboration with the executive board, which served as his main support. The board was comprised of seven people from diverse backgrounds, including a lawyer, the dean of education studies, the dean of research, the dean of international affairs, and, perhaps most importantly, people with private-sector experience who had not spent their entire careers in academia. No other French university had such a body for strategic planning. During the process, Richard also found support and ideas on the board of trustees, which was comprised of faculty and CEOs from leading European companies. The CEOs brought a market orientation and hence helped Richard in not only convincing other members of the need for change, but also in generating ideas for the new direction. This unusual exposure to market ideals was a critical element in explaining why it was Sciences Po that was in the vanguard of change.

As this transformation was going to have a significant impact on students' lives and society, and would require support from each, they were also included in the process. He created an open door policy for students to visit Descoings and discuss their suggestions. This open door policy along with a national dialogue in the media were two important sources of input.

While his predecessor and mentor, Lancelot, had preferred not to make personnel changes in order to achieve objectives, Descoings' approach was, in his own words, "brutal" by comparison.⁴ He knew that people would have to go if they were determined to stand in the way of his transformation, and he made changes (such as transfers) where necessary, within the ambit of his limited power, in order to secure his designs. But otherwise a very consensus-driven approach to decision-making was followed. He couched his language in the form of questions: "What are your thoughts on...?" and "What do you think about...?" in order to ensure there would be consensus. In this process, two bodies played critical roles in the decision making – the board of trustees and the students. In addition, the opinions of the Ministry of Education, faculty and alumni would also play an important role.

Descoings kept an important political perspective during the selection process. He understood the relevance of having the students agree with the process and to achieve that he included

4 Interview Notes: Richard Descoings

student bodies in brainstorming sessions (which conveniently presupposed that some sort of change was necessary). He prompted students to try to adopt changes in their own interests themselves, without imposing changes on them. He maintained a sense of closeness to students, using innovative solutions such as Facebook. He even outflanked the left-wing student movement on the issue of tuition fee increases by “being even more left than left” – he cleverly combined the tuition rise with a two-tier system to allow underprivileged students to pay lower fees, thus making the process more socially equitable while gaining much-needed funding for his many initiatives.

To the board he presented the changes in a non-threatening manner. His communication skills proved highly useful in the process, as he often used mass media as an outlet for his ideas. He skillfully announced changes through press articles and used political connections and the school’s central Paris location (close to the seat of French government) to gain support for the changes. All the while, he adhered to a policy of “never show people the other side of the moon”, that is, of holding his cards close to his chest. He believed that explaining his specific plans to all in advance would simply invite opposition. He would often, for example, gain support for his initiatives externally before presenting them as a *fait accompli* internally. For these reasons he should be viewed as a master tactician, able to foment tremendous positive change in a deeply conservative institution without the formal powers apparently necessary to achieve this.

Thus Descoings was able to mount a significant campaign to modernize Sciences Po in response to the changing international environment, with a long-term vision for the future of the school. Not every step was a success: for example, an abortive attempt to open a campus in Morocco. However, he was able to implement slowly and deliberately over the course of a decade the changes that would allow the school to compete with top institutions around the world for researchers, professors and students. He did this even while hobbled by the less competitive aspects of the French system, such as lower pay compared to top private institutions abroad.

Analysis

1. Characterise the context in which strategy making has occurred, i.e., was this a growth context, was it a turnaround situation, during an M&A effort, during a leadership change, during an industry decline, during the introduction of a new technology, etc.

Industry changes in the background. However, the key context has been the leadership change. We recognise the international changes but believe that there is a lack of urgency due to a belief that France and Sciences Po would be insulated from these changes.

2. What can you say about how the company made strategy?

- a. What factors affected how the company made strategy?
 - b. Was there a specific methodology or consulting company used by the company to help it make strategy?
 - c. How long did the process take?
- a. Richard's weak position; the overall inertia; the lack of strategy making on the part of his predecessor, Lancelot; left-wing student views/history of protest; initial lack of acceptance that something needed to change; Richard's willingness to make personnel changes to further his reform agenda
 - b. No. No specific such process is evident. However, given another opportunity to speak to Descoings, we would like to ask what in his past prompted him to undertake this, and whether he solicited the advice of or read books by any so-called gurus.
 - c. Indeterminate – it began in 1996 and is on-going. This year, for example, Descoings expects to open an international law school. He was the trigger and had a long-term vision. The process was inclusive in that it involved all key stakeholders in the brainstorming and ultimately the decision-making. Starting with his vision, he allowed others to come up with means of achieving his goal, which got them on board with the whole project. This was important given the French consensus-driven system and his weak position. Given the inertia and number of people involved in decision-making, it is easy to imagine how long the process would take for approvals for changes.

3. In your opinion, what is it most important to pay attention to when making strategy during the situation that you described in point 1 above?

There will always be supporters of the old system who do not appreciate the change and a few parties who will support it strongly. It is important for the leader to recognise the former and be prepared to convince them or let them leave the organisation. Descoings talks about how many of his ideas came from Lancelot. However, he was able to implement the ideas because of his "brutal" nature of letting people go who did not believe in his strategy. The most important aspects are to have a grand vision to which people can aspire without becoming bogged down in debates about specific initiatives, to allow those who could derail the changes to have a participatory role in the process, while not revealing too much of one's specific plans and tactics, lest people be able to oppose them.

4. Give one recommendation for someone making strategy in such a situation.

People, by nature, resist change. The leader should ensure that he involves all key stakeholders in the strategy-making process and hence avoids alienating too many people while formulating changes. As we have seen, Richard achieved this by involving his board, students and faculty in developing ideas. While the ideas were evaluated for implementation and impact by his team, the board and students felt involved in the process and were more accepting of the changes that were eventually selected.