

The Training Model in the École nationale d'administration

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Abstract

The mission of the École nationale d'administration is to recruit high-ranking French civil servants and provide them with vocational training. Since all the courses offered are professional in nature, learning is based on real-life professional situations and practical workshops; there are also key lectures and professional exchanges. Systematic assessments, such as 360-degree feedback, are used to improve the curriculum, which is under constant review. Today's trends are innovation in public policy design and the customisation and digitalisation of teaching.



France is well-known for its model of public administration. The *École nationale d'administration* (ENA) is a unique part of the French model. The training model used in France and throughout the public administration has changed significantly in order to adapt to current and future public sector needs. Nowadays, the ENA has five missions: the recruitment of high-ranking civil servants, their vocational training, ongoing training, preparation for European studies and international relations, especially with regard to public governance. In this paper, we will focus solely on vocational training.

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Just after the Second World War, the elite were accused of being responsible for the military defeat and the country's subsequent collapse. The provisional government wanted to rebuild the State. The first step was therefore to create a school that would train skilled high-ranking officials and be based on two premises: a rejection of specific examinations for each branch of public administration (criticised for their inequality, failure to adapt to needs and concealing of co-optation), and a rejection of the teaching in Sciences Po (considered too bourgeois, Parisian and disconnected from reality).¹ That is

1. The Board of examiners regrets the same for candidates in entrance examinations, nowadays. However, Science Po trains most of the candidates and laureates. Michèle Kirry, *Rapport du jury du concours 2017*, 22 Feb. 2018.



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why ENA has never remained cooped up in ivory towers but has always been heavily involved in every reform project implemented by the State.

This short historical background can help us to understand current constraints on pedagogy (1) and the objectives of ENA (2). The pedagogical methods used aim to achieve a compromise between constraints and objectives (3), which leads to criticisms (4) and ongoing changes for future years (5).

1. The pedagogical scheme: under constraints

ENA is no classic academic institution. It faces three main constraints that have significant consequences for pedagogy.

First of all, ENA undertakes the initial training of high-ranking French officials. In

order to gain admission, candidates need to pass a competitive examination, taken either at the end of university-level studies or when the candidate is already in the civil service or working professionally. A large majority of the candidates have already graduated from other elite schools. This is a tough challenge for curriculum design because students' academic background is highly varied: more and more already have an MPA, an MBA and solid erudition and knowledge in management and budgeting but no real experience; others are lawyers but are not skilled with numbers; a small number have no qualifications at all but strong experience and a high level of "know-how". Furthermore, a third of every yearly intake is made up of international students, coming from foreign administrations with their own unique cultural characteristics. The competitive entrance examination ensures that every student has a strong basis in all the teaching areas, yet this is one of the ENA courses' current limitations, as we aim to customise the curriculum and offer more tailor-made teaching, which leads to the second difficulty.

The only goal of the teaching is to prepare course participants for a large choice of careers in the upper echelons of civil service. For this reason, ENA does not award graduate degrees to French students.² There is "only" a ranking at the end of the course. According to their

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2. However, ENA does also contribute to courses leading to graduate degrees, based on partnerships with other universities, professional schools (grandes écoles) and other institutions at a similar level located in France or elsewhere in Europe.



merit-based ranking, students can choose the position they want to join at ministries, prefectures, embassies, high-level administrative bodies, etc. This system ensures total impartiality in the recruitment process and prevents any co-optation or patronage. The main problem is that this ranking has a great influence on the career that former students will go on to have so it is essentially recruitment by competitive examination. Former students who start at the top of the ranking can choose the best opportunities in the top corps of the senior civil service (grand corps). Therefore, pedagogy cannot be too personalised because of the principle of equal access to public offices and positions. All students strongly expect to receive equal treatment. This very competitive examination at the end of the class hinders the task of innovation.

If an important issue becomes crucial for the administration, ENA has to adapt its curriculum to meet the political demands of the minister concerned. The pedagogical team needs to be sharp, flexible and very efficient

The school is continually in the media spotlight³ and the political agenda can therefore interfere with the pedagogical programme revised for every year. If an important issue becomes crucial for the administration, ENA has to adapt its curriculum to meet the political demands of the minister concerned. Given all this, and considering the need for free time to pursue personal work and activities, the pedagogical team needs to be sharp, flexible and very efficient.

3. Even if the school has received a large amount of criticism over many years, every parent dreams, nonetheless, that his/her child will pass a competitive exam and become an "enarque" (ENA graduate).

2. Teaching goals: improving technical skills

Due to the very professional aspect of the school, the curriculum is based on skills management. Jointly with the Directorate General of Public Administration and Civil Service (DGAFP) and the pedagogical team, the directors of ENA determine the skills needed for current public administration and for the high-ranking officials of tomorrow. The curriculum is based on the various positions that will be offered to students as well as changes expected in terms of demography and technology. A skills framework is then agreed on and the pedagogical team looks at how these skills can be implemented.

After beginning their training, students carry out one year of internships: the first one is an international placement at an embassy or international institution; the second is related to the implementation of public policies, such as placements at prefectures, rectorates or regional public health authorities (ARS); the third is in a private company — big business, family businesses or NGOs. Students learn various skills, especially interpersonal ones, during these three internships. The acquired know-how and skills are implemented during the second year of learning. Students receive their first work experience and are given managerial responsibilities. Teaching is based on two main objectives: critical thinking about day-to-day practice and improving the techniques required for their future positions. That is why there is no academic teaching per se.

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3. Methods of teaching: learning by doing with experts

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No other school exists in France where students learn from the main practitioners, such as prefects, ambassadors and budget directors at the Ministry of Finance. This is the main unique characteristic of the learning technique used at ENA: students have expert practitioners as teachers. The benefit is that students meet high-ranking officials with whom they will work afterwards. There are no real lectures but rather the sharing of experiences. When students enter the school, they also join the great family of civil servants. Because students are bound by the obligation of professional secrecy, the experts tell them what really happens behind the scenes and how to manage these situations. The goal is to improve all administrative actions. Students and teachers will be colleagues



the following year. This is an invaluable learning experience for students, who get the chance to be efficiently prepared, and for professionals, who get to understand their young colleagues. The main difficulty for the pedagogical team at ENA is to find suitable practitioners with extensive experience that has challenged their certitude as well as pedagogical skills.

Teaching is divided into two parts: practical and critical. The primary learning is based on real-life professional situations and practical workshops. For example, students role-play tripartite meetings of European institutions or a national budgetary process: they are in a team, with all the real documents and directives provided by the official supervisor. Experts are on hand to manage everything and give advice. They also have real-life simulations of managing a crisis as members of a prefecture (managing a flood, an accident at a nuclear power-plant, etc.). They are put into situations where information comes in partially and sporadically and the media, citizens and companies, etc., are asking for news and guidance. This is a very stressful exercise that reveals much about the student and teaches him/her how to negotiate and behave in these situations. There are also practical workshops, for example law-making: the participants have received an order from a ministry to prepare a regulation using all the relevant legal materials (current legislation, European directives, case law, etc.). They are assessed according to correctness and quality (i.e. how well written it is). Most of the teaching situations comprise a lecture

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explaining what is expected, a simulation and then a debriefing with personalised recommendations. The goal is to provide students with effective skills and not merely theoretical knowledge.

However, the purely technical aspect is not enough: students must take a step back. That is why there are also key lectures and professional exchanges. Public decision-makers are criticised for not understanding scientific issues? There is a scientific lecture cycle that brings excellent scientific leaders (such as Nobel laureates) to explain current issues in science, what is at stake and how to understand scientific methods. Students want a better historical perspective? A history lecture cycle is co-constructed where academics present their research at a lecture similar to those of the Collège de France. If there is a manual or textbook on the topic, students

can read it and understand it on their own; the only benefit is to open them up to new perspectives and give them something they will never find outside ENA.

4. Permanent assessment: 360-degree feedback

The training given at ENA is in the media spotlight as despite the profound satisfaction of most students, there is always one who will be very vociferous at challenging this training. This harsh criticism can be summed up into two categories. First, very few course participants with a background of academic excellence want more intellectual challenges. They may expect that entering ENA will be like working for a PhD. However, the aim of the training is to achieve high-ranking officials, not academic elites! The second criticism is the opposite: a few want more practical tips. Since they will be able to choose their position after the training, they need to get a broad perspective of every job opportunity. And as high-ranking officials, they need some critical stance on purely technical subjects or they will never be able to innovate.

The best indicators are not the media but the systematic assessments. First, after every class, students assess their experience so that the next classes can be adapted to their needs. Second, and this is the most important aspect, 360-degree feedback is conducted every year, starting 18 months after the graduates have taken up their positions. This helps significantly

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in assessing the efficiency of learning and matching public employers' real needs. The 360-degree feedback is a very detailed assessment, which provides information on how the former students are managing in their positions, the skills they use the most, what they lack, and so on. The goal is to achieve immediate efficiency when they start their new jobs; continuous training is provided for other needs.

5. New trends and the future of ENA

Just like the public administration, ENA is under a constant process of renovation. There are three current trends: innovation, customisation and digitalisation. By performing a yearly hackathon, students obtain skills in public policy design, nudge and ideation. In 2019, based on the immersion that they experience during internships and the challenges they identify, students will develop team projects for public administration reform. ENA has taken on the task of assisting in the development of a project of this type and getting former students to implement innovation processes inside a public administration that is very stable. Ensuring agility and creativity is therefore one of the main challenges. Customisation and digitalisation complement each other. Digitalisation will help to customise the learning experience and better support students during their internships. However, digitalisation requires a thorough change in pedagogical methodology because instructors have little time to prepare and record learning modules. This is one of the

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Should ENA be a more academic institution, with permanent professors? Should it award a PhD in Public Administration? Teaching consistency may be improved but ENA's uniqueness lies in having practitioners and not academics as teachers. It should not be forgotten that the course participants are not merely students but rather high-ranking officials being trained and paid as such. At the end of the training, they have to take the reins of their position in public administration. How could they combine more complex studies with a demanding professional life?

ENA is having to face up to new challenges in order to contribute to the common good of the nation. The future of public administration depends on excellent learning processes: from training to efficiency. ■

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