

Faten Hidri - VP Higher Education & Research, Paris Region (Ile de France)



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Faten Hidri, VP for Higher Education & Research in the Paris Region (Ile de France), discusses the vital role of academic research and the life sciences in her region and ongoing collaboration with other European stakeholders.

Valérie Pécresse took the reins of the Paris region, Ile de France, three years ago. What have been some of the main undertakings and achievements under her presidency?

The two compulsory mandates of the region are to overhaul the transport and high school systems. In the area of transportation, President of the Paris Region Valérie Pécresse has invested all the necessary financial and human resources in order to renew the regional train, subway and bus systems and digitalize the transportation pass. Regarding high schools, several education staff and students were suffering from outdated facilities which were causing safety concerns. In order to fix the situation, important renovation projects were launched. Moreover, new international high schools were created in Vincennes and Palaiseau. Apart from providing high-quality education to French students, we hope these institutions will act as an incentive for qualified foreigners and international companies to come and establish themselves here.

When it comes to higher education and research, the President pays particularly close attention to this area. We have implemented a regional plan based on three main objectives:

The first objective is to make university campuses more attractive. In order to further this goal, EUR 50 (USD 56) million has been invested annually to build and restore facilities. For instance, the Condorcet campus under construction will be the largest human and social sciences university campus in France and it will include one of the most extensive libraries in Europe. We also finance the construction of the Saclay campus in the South of Paris, a research-intensive scientific and business cluster. This cluster groups together the most prestigious business and engineering schools in France including HEC and Polytechnique, research institutions like the CNRS and the French Alternative Energies and Atomic Energy Commission (CEA), as well as R&D centres of multinational companies such as Renault and Hewlett-Packard. The goal is to strengthen the cluster in order to build an international scientific and technological hub that can compete with the likes of MIT and Cambridge. Saclay clearly is the jewel of the region. It is not only an educational and research centre but also a living space. Prestigious universities around the world, especially in Asia, are interested in forming partnerships with it.

Ms Péresse is particularly involved in these two projects as she was one of the originators as Minister of Higher Education and Research under the Sarkozy administration. Recently, we have started financing two other campuses, one in the Val d'Oise and another in Seine-et-Marne, that both received the I-Site government certification unlocking additional funding. With these programs, our goal is to build a network of world-renowned academic and business clusters all over the territory.

The second axis of the plan is to make higher education accessible to students from poor families and difficult neighbourhoods. We have implemented a program based on merit whereby high school students who graduate *summa cum laude* receive a scholarship of a thousand euros. Moreover, we are facilitating the process of returning to studies by also providing a grant to people who pass the baccalaureate equivalency test. Another of our endeavours, called *Cordées de la réussite*, is designed to lift the psychological, social and cultural barriers that may prevent talented high schoolers from modest backgrounds of entering top universities, business and engineering schools.

In addition, we also want to foster student entrepreneurship. Our program student-entrepreneur (*étudiant-entrepreneur*) has contributed to tripling the number of students who have created their own business in the span of only two years.

Could you tell us more about the programs designed to foster academic research, especially in the field of life sciences?

We have put in place a new, more international scientific commission. This scientific commission has redefined the *Domaines d'Intérêt Majeur* (Domains of Major Interests). The DMIs are the main vehicle through which research is financed. Different labs federate themselves around a common research project which they present to the commission in order to access funding that totals EUR 16 (USD 18) million. 11 fully-licensed DMIs have been selected and two other so-called emergent DMIs for which the project has been deemed interesting but needs more structure. Among these 13 DMIs, four revolve around health: gene therapy, infectiology, innovative biological techniques and longevity (emergent).

In addition to this program, Ms Péresse has gone out of her way to help research focused on health. She received the representatives of medical bodies in oncology, cardiology and neurology. After this fruitful meeting, 30 additional doctoral grants were financed, totalling several million euros.

What is the strategic significance of academic research, and especially life sciences research, for the Paris region?

Research efforts in the Paris region represent 40 percent of all French research. Among all research areas, we have decided to prioritize life sciences and health research. As I mentioned, we have funded 30 additional PhD grants. In addition, we finance semi-heavy laboratory equipment. For instance, we have bought a centre of electronic microscopic imagery and a unique configuration irradiator for the Institute Curie.

Research efforts obviously have a positive impact on the economy, but not as much as we would like. While the Paris region is the European leader in terms of patent filings, it is only in 7th place in terms of job creation. Our ambition is to leverage this incredible resource for the benefit of the local and national economy. In order to do so, we try to bridge the gap between academic and industrial research through a number of initiatives. For instance, the laboratories that work on the MDIs are required to collaborate with incubators and competitiveness clusters. They do not have to be asked twice since they already are craving to work hand in hand with small innovative companies and larger groups.

Another way we boost links between academic research and the industry is by revalorizing and professionalizing the doctorate. Compared to Anglo-Saxon countries, PhDs are not as highly valued in France, and PhD students are still seen as isolated researchers, disconnected from the real world of enterprise. This, of course, does not hold true in France today. We have recently voted an initiative, budgeted at EUR 3.5 (USD 3.95) million, for the creation of new regional scholarships for PhDs working in SMEs.

What are the programs put in place in order to collaborate with European research institutions?

In 2015, we realized that the Paris region is underrepresented in European institutions and does not receive its fair share of research credits. Based on this observation, we have endeavoured to be more present, for instance by creating the position of Vice President of European Affairs, currently occupied by Stéphanie Von Euw. Research is increasingly conducted at the European level with European research programs. Our role is to federate the actors, act as a pivotal platform between them, as well as help them submit applications to the different programs and get access to funds. This year we would like to participate in the Horizon 2020, the biggest EU *Research* and Innovation program ever with nearly EUR 80 (USD 90) billion of funding available over 7 years.

A few words to conclude?

The Paris region opens its doors to anyone who wants to set up shop here. We are doing everything in our power to create the best conditions for economic and social development by improving ease of transportation, enhancing access to high-quality education and strengthening the link between academic and industrial research.

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