

**Education in France****A new reckoning**

Oct 9th 2008 | PARIS

From The Economist print edition

**The purity of mathematics loses its prestige**

FRANCE may think of itself as a literary society, but real prestige is reserved for mathematics. Excellence in maths determines access to the elite, via ultra-selective *grandes écoles* such as the École Nationale d'Administration or the Polytechnique. More French mathematicians have won the Fields Medal, a top international prize, than those from any other European country. Top maths graduates working in French banks have pioneered some of the market's most complex equity derivatives. So there has been some head-scratching at the idea that Xavier Darcos, the education minister, is now considering an end to the pre-eminence of maths in the *baccalauréat* school-leaving exam.

The idea is part of a review of the French *lycée* system, due to be unveiled shortly. Currently, even the brightest literary minds are guided towards the maths-heavy *Baccalauréat Scientifique*, rather than towards other versions emphasising literature or social science. The "*Bac S*" has become the gold standard, regardless of what students intend to study later. Fully 19% of those who take the *Bac S* go on to prepare for the prestigious *grandes écoles* exams, compared with just 7% of those from other streams. Now Mr Darcos wants to end the supremacy of maths and introduce a modular *Bac*, based on a common core of subjects with optional "majors".

Why is maths losing its appeal? One answer could be that the maths-heavy system is no longer a guarantor of social mobility. The French often argue for the meritocratic nature of mathematics, because it is the purest discipline and the least likely to discriminate in favour of educated, bookish families. Yet the share of students at the elite schools from the top socioeconomic class has actually grown: from 57% of those who graduated in 1965-69 to 82% for the graduates of 1990-99, according to Pierre Veltz, a social scientist.

The financial crisis probably does not help. In the 1980s French banks developed sophisticated equity derivatives, based on the advanced mathematics taught by the French system. Even today, many top banking brains have graduated from the Polytechnique, an engineering school. These days, with regulators hovering, such wizardry is out of favour.

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