

21106 At Elite French Universities, Students Demand Environmental Action

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At schools known for ambition, not activism, students are calling for climate change to be at the heart of the curriculum, and telling the companies that recruit them to change their ways.

When oil and gas giant Total announced last year that it would establish a research centre on the campus of one of the world's finest engineering schools, École Polytechnique, it sparked an uproar. Hundreds of students voted against the centre. At a time when engineers and scientists should be leading the way to a newly sustainable world, they argued, the project gave undue influence to a company that remains a world leader in fossil fuels.

The clash was the latest of many at France's elite campuses. Students alarmed by a warming planet are challenging the corporations that see them as potential future employees and are pressuring universities to put climate change and other environmental issues at the core of their curriculums.

The environment has become a primary concern in France, where climate change protests drew thousands of teenagers to the streets in 2019 and where President Emmanuel Macron recently announced a referendum to add environmental protection to the Constitution.

The growing environmental movement at France's most prestigious universities, has profound implications for the next generation of the country's elite. The conflict has pitted students against consumerism and against what they consider to be the profit-driven nature of some of France's largest corporations, including L'Oréal.

"Our education," read a recent letter signed by 2,000 students and alumni of HEC Paris, "does not sufficiently integrate ecological and social issues, reducing them at best to 'negative externalities' and at worst to marketing opportunities."

In 2018, a "Manifesto for an ecological awakening," written by students at top universities, called for placing "the ecological transition at the core of our social project," and collected some 30,000 student signatures in just a few weeks.

Central to their demands was a stark reality: environmental issues remain largely under-taught in higher education and they have called on universities to rethink their teaching from top to bottom.

Critics, however, say that the questioning hasn't gone far enough.

Cécile Renouard, who teaches at several universities, said that courses on the environment in higher education "are not always radical enough and not systemic enough."

The students behind the 2018 manifesto have formed an organization that regularly challenges major French companies by publishing reports tracing their environmental footprints, and urging their peers not to work for businesses that fail to change.

410 words