Mr President, Dear Colleague,

Subject: Education Reform

The CCE examined the text submitted for consultation on April 1st 2014 concerning the revision of the Ordinance on "contrôle des études menant au bachelor et au master à l'Ecole polytechnique fédérale de Lausanne".

1. Reform of the Foundation Year (1st BSc year):
The CCE agrees to the introduction of courses catching up to the level required for the foundation year and the approach which consists of redirecting, at the end of the first semester, the students too weak to continue the BSc curriculum.

The criterion of exclusion proposed, that is, an average grade below 3.50, identify the weakest students. It may, however, miss students who are weak in the « block 1 » (that encompasses all basic mathematic courses) but who compensate with section-specific courses. Even though these students sometimes succeed the Foundation year, their weakness in the basic math courses catch up with them in the 2nd year and may lead these students to fail definitely their BSc after 3 years. It is important to detect this group of students in the 1st year. Moreover, given that the courses proposed in the "catching up semester" cover primarily the topics of block 1’s courses, they benefit particularly students weak in these.

The CCE suggests, therefore, to include a criterion of exclusion based on a 3.5 average on block 1. This criterion can be either cumulative or exclusive. The article 21 would therefore be modified as follows:

Art. 21 (Option 1)
1. The candidates to the Foundation year exam who obtain at the end of the 1st semester an minimum average of 3.50 on all branches and minimum 3.50 on the branches of block 1, are admitted to follow the second semester.
Art. 21 (Option 2)

1. The candidates to the Foundation year exam who obtain at the end of the 1st semester an minimum average of 3.50 on the branches of block 1, are admitted to follow the second semester.

This modification of the article 21 requires a definition of block 1 in the regulation. While this puts additional constraints on study plans, it has the benefit to highlight the importance given to the basic mathematics courses and their acquisition, during the BSc.

Additionally, the CCE recommends to make sure that courses in the "catching up" promote autonomy in students' work, so as to better prepare these students to EPFL.

2. Courses passed in the Foundation year do not have, but can be retaken.

The flexibility proposed is relevant.

3. Suppression of bonus tests:

The CCE wishes to keep the possibility of giving a midterm evaluation during the Foundation year, particularly during the first semester. With the new reform, it becomes imperative to signal to weak students that they are at risk of failure before the winter exam session. This is all the more important because these students risk to find themselves in definitive failure at the end of the 1st year.

The transition from the gymnasiun system to the university system is arduous. It requires the acquisition of competencies of autonomy and time management. It is, often, accompanied by major changes in the personal life of the student (taking rental accommodation and moving outside of the family home, moving to another linguistic region). To better support students, a transitory system must be maintained during the 1st semester.

The tutoring system is a first step in this direction. Yet, at the current time, tutoring is offered to all students and does not particularly target weak students. Also, in certain courses, we have observed that more than a third of the students choose to not attend the exercise sessions in the middle of the semester (see statistics presented to the CDS the 26th April 2014) and, thus, stopped benefitting from tutoring from then on. Several of these students will not achieve an average grade of 3.5 in the first semester and will be sent to the "catching up" semester. Therefore, tutoring still does not reach the target students.

The tutoring system and the "catching up" courses are expensive. To optimize the impact of these two systems in the follow through and education of the students who have the most need for it, the CCE proposes to introduce the following system:

- Each course of block 1 proceeds to a midterm evaluation in the middle of the 1st semester of the Foundation year. The sections determine, in a consensual manner with all teachers concerned, the way this evaluation is performed. The EPFL Direction provides the sections with the necessary means (financial and other) to implement this evaluation.

- Students with a grade lower than 3.50 to the midterm evaluation receive an email informing them that they are at risk of failing and assigning them a tutor. Assigned tutors monitor students' attendance for the rest of the semester and contact students if they do not show up at tutoring sessions.
This assumes that tutors are made aware of their responsibilities and take a more proactive role than they do currently. The training of tutors, recently put in place by the CAPE, is a first step in this direction. Nevertheless, it is important to make sure that this training is effective through a follow-up on tutors after training. To not overload the teachers, the CCE asks that this follow-up be performed by the CAPE, in coordination with the teachers.

4. Notes to the quarter point:
The CCE approves the introduction of the notation to the quarter point.

Sincerely yours,

Aude Billard
President CCE