

## Education and the French mindset

## Bangalore-sur-Seine?

PARIS

## A new school breaks old rules

WHEN French entrepreneurs decided in March to launch a swanky new school for software developers, they thought they were on to something. But even they were startled by its popularity. For 1,000 student places starting this autumn on a three-year course, they have fully 50,000 applications.

France has a skills mismatch. Joblessness has reached 10.6%, a 14-year high. For the under-25s, it is 26%. Yet, according to a poll by the French Association of Software Publishers and Internet Solutions, 72% of software firms are having trouble recruiting—and 91% of those are seeking software engineers and developers.

Such frustrations spurred Xavier Niel, the billionaire founder of Iliad, a broadband firm, and his business pals to set up the new school—which is wilfully disruptive of France's highly centralised, state-dominated education system. It is privately financed—Mr Niel is investing €70m (\$92m)—but will be free for students. It will lead to no state-recognised diploma and applicants need no formal qualifications, although the admissions literature warns would-be students that they “will have to work hard”.

The school will have Google-style premises in the heart of Paris, in a building still under construction that is known as “Heart of Code”, open all day and night. Its name, “42”, is the “answer to the ultimate question of life, the universe, and everything” in the (English) science-fiction classic, “The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy”. When the new school was unveiled, to great fanfare, *Le Monde* politely described it as “strange”.

France already trains some 16,000 computer engineers every year. So why the fuss about 42? In part, it is about novelty: of the entrepreneurial philanthropy as well as of Mr Niel's celebrity (he took on France's established telecoms giants to supply cheaper mobile services). Yet two other elements matter, too.

First, 42 aims to unearth talent in the

*banlieues*, or poor suburbs, and other places that do not fit into the French academic mould. Even though France's school system is designed to be meritocratic, the country is experiencing a worrying fall in social mobility. According to the OECD, a rich-country think-tank, socio-economic background has a greater impact on educational performance in France than in most other countries.

Second, teaching methods will be based not on rote-learning but on self-learning. Nicolas Sadirac, 42's Stanford-trained director, who wears the standard geek uniform of jeans and t-shirt, says the French school system instils knowledge, but not the right state of mind: it “trains people to be disciplined, but afraid of risk...yet tomorrow's economy will all be about creativity.” Claudia Senik, of the Paris School of Economics, argues that French pessimism is “at least partly acquired in school”, where grading and selection reinforce it. High time for a healthy dose of what the French call *la positive attitude*. ■





Is 42 the answer to France's prayers?

