The Impact of Recent Reforms on the Institutional Governance of French Universities

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It is usual to identify France as a latecomer in New Public Management (NPM). As stressed by P. Bezes (2003 and 2009), while the souci de soi of the French state has always been present and the reform of the management of French public administration has been a recurrent objective during the Fifth Republic, it is only in the late 1990s and the beginning of the 2000s that the NPM doctrine really diffused into the French public system. The important transformations experienced by the higher education system until then (Musselin 2001 [2004]) could therefore not be analysed as a consequence of NPM (Musselin and Paradeise 2009).

The introduction of NPM methods and solutions in French administration, now in place for a decade, first reached universities in mid-2000 when the new budgetary process that was introduced into French public administration (the LOLF, Loi organique sur les lois de finances) was also implemented in public higher education institutions. In order to negotiate their budget, they now have to set objectives and indicators that will then be used to measure the achievement of these objectives a year later, when they will write a report about the past year. Further major changes, which will be described below, were introduced after 2005. They not only brought in new instruments and devices to the management of French universities (more competitive processes, performance-based allocation of resources, empowerment of university leaders, etc.), but more broadly affected some of the principles on which the French university system was built and, in particular, the egalitarian principles that maintained a rather low differentiation among French academics and among French universities and the grades they delivered.

The aim of this chapter is, therefore, primarily to describe the governance of French universities after the introduction of the recent reforms and answer the following questions: did these changes affect the governance of French universities or did they resist the transformations that aimed at strengthening the
presidents, increasing project-based research and providing them with more autonomy and responsibility?

In order to answer these questions, we will draw on research carried out in France in 2011. It consists of two studies, one (Musselin 2012) based on interviews (around 100) in three French universities (ScienceUni, HSSUni and MultiUni1), and the other (Chatelain-Ponroy et al. 2012) resulting from a survey addressed to all universities: we received 2,600 answers, a response rate of around 22 per cent. In both cases, our sample included the presidents, vice-presidents, the registrars and their main collaborators, members of the councils, deans, heads of department and of research units and their main administrative support. The survey mostly consists of Likert scales from 1 to 7 (average at 4) that can be translated into percentage (the per cent of 'pro' is obtained by adding all those who chose 5, 6 or 7; the per cent of 'anti' by adding all those who chose 1, 2 or 3).

Because of the empirical emphasis these studies put on academic and administrative managers of French universities, our aim is not to say whether the reforms deeply and really affected academic activities. Our focus will be on changes in governance and on the reactions and behaviours of those in charge of implementing the reforms and managing universities.

In the first section, we will describe the main characteristics of the French higher education system and of universities within this system. We will then present the recent reforms and their main objectives. Three main evolutions will then be observed. First, it will be shown that the reforms were used by presidents but also by managers of the university administration to centralise decision-making and information processes. Second, reforms justified and favoured the collection and production of data and indicators, as well as the recruitment of internal auditors, but until now the use of this information remains rather limited. Finally, we will stress the role of the reforms in giving priority to research and research performance and how this increased the impact of external providers of evaluation on the governance of French universities.

**French Universities: a Recent Institutional Re-birth**

Each national university system is specific, strongly embedded in national institutional settings and results from a specific history. This is especially true for the French system because of the particularly disrupted trajectory of French universities (Renaut 1995). Their suppression by the French Revolution2 in 1793 had been a crucial step because Napoleon in 1806 re-created the discipline-based faculties (*Facultés*) but not the universities. He installed a unique Imperial University for all France, steered from Paris, and composed of the *lycées* and the faculties. This had far-reaching consequences for the French university system.
First, and despite the fact that the 1896 Act administratively re-formed universities about a century after their suppression, the discipline-based facultés have long been the main pillars of the French system and the natural interlocutors of the Ministry. This vertical discipline-based structure of the higher education system led to rather differentiated careers and status from one type of discipline to another, and to the early specialisation of students within a discipline. When universities were finally rebuilt in 1968 the aim of the reformers was to destroy the facultés and create multidisciplinary institutions organised around UER (Unités d’enseignement et de recherche) – large departments responsible for teaching and research. They also provided the new universities with administrative, budgetary and pedagogical autonomy and a stronger and more legitimate type of governance: they should be led by presidents who are elected by and from among academics; university bodies consisted of elected representatives from the academic staff, the administrative staff, and students but also from representatives of stakeholders (personnalités extérieures). While the Ministry in fact rapidly regained the autonomy granted by the law (Cohen 1978), the multidisciplinary project also failed in most big cities (Paris of course but also in Bordeaux, Grenoble, Lille, Lyon, Marseille, Strasbourg, Toulouse, etc.) where the former facultés engaged in negotiations that led to the creation of two or three new universities that each only covered a limited span of disciplines. In Paris, for instance, the former Sorbonne (that is the facultés of Law, Medicine, Science and Humanities) split into seven new universities (from Paris 1 to Paris 7), combining parts of two or three of the five main families of disciplines but never all of them. Thus, the new universities created from the former facultés remained often dominated by a prominent disciplinary orientation and only small metropolises have ‘complete’ universities.

The reform of governance was more successful (in the sense that it has been implemented and maintained) but it took time to work out. During the first years, the new bodies had to learn how to work and in many places strong ideological conflicts arose. The French intellectual René Rémond, who served as the first president of the University of Nanterre, clearly described his experience (Rémond 1979) in a book where he showed how difficult and tumultuous the first years had been. Moreover, during the first decade, it was difficult for the new presidents to really exercise their new functions while the deans remained the main interlocutors of the Ministry and were behaving and recognised as primus inter pares in their new facultés (UER).

As a result, the new Act of 1984 and the more recent Act of 2007, both of which aimed at reforming university governance, were still strongly oriented towards the empowerment of the university president vis-à-vis the ‘new facultés’ (now called UFR, Unités de Formation et de Recherche) and their deans, in order to strengthen the university’s governance.

Nevertheless, since 1968, whatever the reforms, some principles have never been affected. First, the fact that deans and presidents are elected by their peers...
was never discussed, nor changed. Since 2007, all members of the university
councils, except the stakeholders, elect the president for a four-year period
that can be renewed once. The governance of French universities thus results
from three channels of coordination: the administrative, the ‘political’ and the
deliberative one (see Table 5.1). Second, the presence of stakeholders sitting in
university councils was also always maintained and even reinforced in 2007.
But it has never been very effective: university councils are very much involved
in micro-management and their meetings last so long that stakeholders are
quickly discouraged from attending. Thirdly, and because the president, the
vice-presidents and the deans are elected, they are not considered as part of the
administrative staff: they are first of all academics, even if they exercise leader-
ship functions. Therefore, they usually go back to their department after their
term. Their career is still run by academic bodies and they are, from this point
of view, clearly distinct from the administrative staff who have a different status
and different career paths within the French civil service. The latter are called
the administration or the central administration while the elected academic
leaders are often called ‘the policy-makers’ (les politiques).

A second consequence of the French Revolution and the Napoleonic Imperial University has to do with the weak differentiation between the secondary

Table 5.1 Hierarchical and functional relationships in French universities

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Administrative coordination</th>
<th>Political coordination</th>
<th>Deliberative coordination</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Registrar</td>
<td>President</td>
<td>University council</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Administrative directions</td>
<td>Vice-presidents</td>
<td>Council for training</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>of the university</td>
<td></td>
<td>Academic Council</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Administrative managers</td>
<td>Deans</td>
<td>Councils of facultés or UFR</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Administrative staff</td>
<td>Department heads</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Academics</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Hierarchical relations
Functional relations
and the higher education systems. Facultés in the nineteenth century first and foremost delivered grades but offered few classes. It changed with the reforms at the end of the nineteenth century, but many of the grandes écoles with the greatest prestige today were already created, were engaged in a more vocational style of training and some were already aimed at training the French elites. The steady increase in students attending classes at the university, which happened from the beginning of the twentieth century, did not change the main function of French universities which was the training professors and future academics but also preparing students for intermediary jobs in the public administration. This led to a curious, and French-specific, situation where universities were never the most prestigious higher education institutions.

A third consequence of the Napoleonic conception, in strong contrast with the Humboldtian one, is that it did not consider research as a core mission of universities. The reforms at the end of the nineteenth century aimed to promote research in universities but they failed. This led to the creation in 1936 of a new institution entirely dedicated to research, the CNRS (Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique), and many others (INRA for agricultural research, INSERM for life sciences, etc.) in the next decades. Nevertheless, in the mid-1960s the teaching-research divide installed by this institutional division of work was criticised and more interactions between universities and national research institutions were expected. The CNRS selected some high performing university research units that became associated both with their university and with the CNRS, and this provided them with funding and CNRS human resources. At the workshop level, almost 50 years later, the CNRS-university divide is therefore blurred but, at the institutional level, universities and the CNRS have remained separate institutions. It is only recently that they both entertain more cooperative relationships and co-determine the scientific policy of universities; previously the CNRS wanted to impose its views on universities.

The trajectory of French universities is thus marked by the recent creation of the contemporaneous universities, the more prestigious reputation of the grandes écoles and the institutional divide between teaching and research.

A Bouquet of Reforms Since 2006

This inherited institutional setting has been challenged by two major acts passed within the last seven years. The first one, called the LOPRI (Loi pour la recherche et l’innovation [Law for Research and Innovation]) was passed in 2006. Three major institutional transformations were introduced and some tasks, previously carried out by the Ministry, were delegated to new agencies. First, an agency was created to centralise the budgets dedicated to project-based research. The ANR (Agence Nationale de la Recherche) became responsible for launching calls for research proposals, for all disciplines, that are either thematic or ‘blue sky’. The centralisation of funding and the increase in budgets
from which this agency benefitted, made project-based research more central than it used to be, while the rather high selectivity of this agency (around 20 per cent) increased the prestige, the reputation and the material capacity of those who were successful.

Second, another agency, AERES (Agence d’évaluation de la Recherche et de l’Enseignement Supérieur) was created to centralise¹, formalise and standardise the evaluation of the French higher education system. It did not radically change the scope of evaluation in France but led to developing the same evaluation procedure for all kinds of research units (whatever their status), all types of teaching programmes, and all kinds of higher education and/or research institutions. Benchmarking became much easier as these evaluations are published on the Agency’s website and are therefore accessible to all: public actors, colleagues, media, students and their families. Furthermore, these results became more linked to the allocation of budgets than in the past.

A third major change has to be mentioned in relation to the LOPRI, even if this chapter will not describe it in detail. It built on the idea that the French university landscape was too complicated and unreadable, so that a larger university entity (called PRES, Pôle de recherche et d’enseignement supérieur) should be formed by joining together universities, or universities and grandes écoles located in the same region, in order to better coordinate their strategies and training and research activities, mutualise some of their tasks and possibly adopt the same institutional signature. In some places, these new collaborative synergies led to mergers: for example, the forthcoming merger of Mussolin and Dif Pradalière, Strasbourg since January 2009, Marseille and the University of Loraine since January 2012; and the New University of Bordeaux to be created in January 2014.

One year after the LOPRI and a few weeks after the election of Nicolas Sarkozy as the head of France in August 2007, another act, the LRU (Libertés et Responsabilités des Universités), was passed, which aimed to transform the internal governance of French universities. The main orientation of this act was to provide more formal power to university presidents, but the most revolutionary consequence was the devolution of the payroll to French universities (this is the RCE process, Responsabilités et Compétences Elargies). Before this, university presidents only managed the operating budget: positions were managed at the government level and universities were only in charge of the administrative management of their personnel. Now they manage the budget for payroll. As the payroll represented a significant proportion of university expenditure their overall budget often multiplied by three or four times.

As clearly shown by this brief summary of the main targets and contents of the 2006 and 2007 acts, the formal changes that were introduced were quite important. They were all the more so because, over the same period, two major ideological changes also occurred. First the, in principle¹, very egalitarian French system was challenged by the smooth but nevertheless real link that was introduced by linking of budgets with the results of evaluation. Inputs (numbers of students
for instance) are still very important in the formula calculating the budget of each university, but outputs are now playing a small role in SYMPA (the name of the new formula that was introduced after 2007). Some moves from equality to equity and merit happened. Second, the idea of a relatively equilibrial landscape across France, as well as the idea that when imbalances exist they should be reduced, were abandoned in favour of a much more differentiated orientation that was first reflected in the high selectivity of the ANR and then by the concentration of resources on some institutions and major scientific clusters that resulted from the calls for projects of excellence for the Investing for the Future policy\textsuperscript{10}.

Reforms as an Opportunity to Centralise Information and Decision-making

While the LRU focused on the presidents and provided them with more decision-making power, the two studies make it clear that they were not the only beneficiary of this measure: the LRU, and even more the RCE, have been used to fight against the decentralisation of French universities and the autonomy of the facultés. In the survey 72 per cent of the respondents disagreed with the idea that ‘over the last few years, their university experienced more decentralisation’.

A Reinforced Central Administration

In order to cope with the new functions, but also with the increase in responsibility in terms of budget and human resources, most universities either recruited new staff and did their best to attract new profiles or increased the level of competences and qualifications of their administrative staff by transforming low-skill positions into less numerous but more qualified positions. This led to a quantitative but initially to a qualitative strengthening of the central administration. New functions were also created in order to improve the systems of information, promote internal auditing, develop managerial practices and introduce new software.

A Clearer but also Stronger Relationship between the Presidential Team and the Central Administration

The divide between the elected university leaders (president and vice-presidents) and the administration that was a traditional issue in French universities before the reforms (Musselin 1987, Mignot-Gérard 2006) was also affected. As stressed by Stéphanie Mignot-Gérard (2006), building on the typology proposed by Stéphane Dion (1986) about the relationships between the administrative and technical services and the elected members in municipalities, three main cases prevailed. In the first, called the technocratic model, the central administration takes the lead in the university over the academic leaders. In
this case for most of the time: the presence of the president is not much felt; the vice-presidents are isolated from one another and responsible for their own domain (budget for one, human resources for the other, etc.); having less technical expertise than their administrative counterparts (the director for finance, the director for human resources, etc.), they follow the decisions suggested by the latter or resist and enter into conflicts. In the second case, called the functional politicisation, the presidential team is strong, cohesive and shares a political objective that they impose on the administration by bypassing the registrar and acting as managers of each specific administrative director. The first two models were the more common even if the third one, called ‘dual hierarchy’, (the president manages the vice-presidents, and the registrar manages the administration) was sometimes observed.

In recent years, it seems that this last model has become more and more common. We observed it in the three universities where we carried out interviews. This does not seem to be just a question of chance in the choice of these universities because one of the questions asked in the quantitative survey indicates that most administrative staff do not have difficult relationships with their vice-presidents, even if they also recognise that when they disagree on a question, the vice-presidents have the final power of decision (Table 5.2).

In the three universities under examination the dual hierarchy model prevailed and worked on a similar basis. On the one hand, each of the leaders is managing his/her team. The president animates his/her team of vice-presidents and develops cohesive relationships with them, while the registrar is doing the same with the team of administrative directors. On the other hand, the president and the registrar work closely together and thus coordinate the elected and the administrative hierarchy.

Concretely, I work very closely with the President. We see each other at least two times a day, quite early in the morning at 7:45 to take stock of the current issues and then in the evening, when I bring him documents for signature. We see each other for a short or long time, but at least twice a day. Often more. We work quite a lot on the projects exchange information.

(Registrar, ScienceUni)
As a result, each administrative director is working with the vice-president in charge of the same domain (for instance, the vice-president for human resources with the administrative director for human resources) but not in a hierarchical way. The vice-presidents do not bypass the authority of the registrar.

My role as a vice-president is to work with the service in their mission for the management of human resources, and to facilitate things with the academic and administrative personnel in order to spread the message of the president and of the university council. My role is to be a facilitator at all levels: facilitator for all the decisions made and, before they are made, to accompany the decision-making process.

(Vice-president for Human Resources, MultiUni)

It seems as if the respective roles of the different actors were clear and easy to respect. This is reinforced by the fact that they all often stress that there is a clear divide between the roles of the decision-makers (the ‘politiques’ as the elected university leaders are called) and the administration. The former are supposed to define the orientations and the latter to implement them.

The vice-president didn’t know anything before he was chosen. It was a wish of the president. He wanted his vice-president for finance to play a political, not a technical role. The vice-president refuses to acquire a certain level of technics. For this, there are the director for finance, the accounting agency, internal auditors, etc. These people have competencies because it is their job. It is not his job. He does not have to recalculate after them. The president wanted him to be able to give orientations and to make others work.

(LettresUni)

Things are often more complex and many concrete examples show that the borderline between the political and the administrative roles is not that straightforward. But it is interesting to observe that the divide between strategy and execution, which is so often presented as a managerial rule for an efficient public management, is appropriated by the French senior managers.

The Dual Hierarchy is perceived as a Central Player in most Decision-making Processes

The role played by the central level of French universities not only relies on a strengthened central administration and the development of a dual, but cooperative, hierarchy. It is also perceived as central by those who answered our survey.

We identified six different domains of decisions (see Table 5.3) and, for each of them, we asked which levels played the more important role in the decisions...
made (academics, directors of labs, deans, university bodies, central administration, the presidential team, the PRES). Only two levels (the presidential team and the university bodies) are considered as being significantly influential over five domains (all but the teaching domain). The presidential team is even considered as the most influential on these five domains.

In the interviews, many respondents also stressed that the introduction of the RCE has been an occasion to redefine who is responsible for what and, in many cases, to relocate decisions and domains in the central administration that were previously left to the faculties. For instance, the management of the research budgets is now centralised in one central budget unit.

The introduction of new financial software accentuated this trend. Our interviewees from the university administrations argued that this software (SIFAC) was much more complex than the previous one and that training all the administrative staff would be first, expensive, and second, inefficient, as many would not use it very often (because it is only partly relevant to their job) and they would therefore forget how to use it. They therefore decided to give the possibility of access to SIFAC to a limited number of ‘qualified’ individuals, while others would only be able to consult the information posted on SIFAC.

The Traditional Divide between the Centre and the Periphery remains Strong and Marked

The strengthened relationships between the dual hierarchy at the top of the university, the centralisation of decisions, the transfer of competences and tasks from the faculties to the central administration, all speak in favour of more centralised and therefore also more governed universities. As a result, the traditional divide observed in French universities (Friedberg and Musselin 1989; Mignot-Gérard and Musselin 2002 and Mignot-Gérard 2006) between the centre and the periphery (the facultés or UFR) has been reinforced by the reforms.

First, the deans¹² feel that their situation worsened over the last years. As argued in the first part of the paper, this situation is not new and has to be linked to the very specific history of French universities. After the re-creation of universities in 1968, the deans were progressively deprived of some of their prerogatives. First, they always competed with the directors of labs on the definition of the research priorities and the latter, especially when they run a lab associated with one of the national research institutions (CNRS or INSERM for instance), receive enough resources from outside in order not to feel dependent on the dean. Second, in the 1990s the decision was made to create graduate schools. This deprived the deans of their responsibility for doctoral level study. Third, the implementation of the Bologna process sometimes led to the creation of trans-faculty masters programmes, thus blurring the responsibilities of individual deans and often producing tensions between the deans.
Table 5.3 The relative influence of decision-makers

For each of the following domains, which are the actors (more than one answer is possible) who according to you have a significant or very significant influence in your university? (N = 2252 – 2328)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Domain</th>
<th>Academics</th>
<th>Director of labs</th>
<th>Directors of schools or dept.</th>
<th>Councils at the university level</th>
<th>Admin directors</th>
<th>Team of the President</th>
<th>The PRES</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Identifying the research priorities.</td>
<td>28%</td>
<td>68%</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>45%</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>71%</td>
<td>23%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constructing the training offer.</td>
<td>47%</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>66%</td>
<td>54%</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>58%</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Allocating the budget for research.</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>35%</td>
<td>19%</td>
<td>55%</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>80%</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Allocating other kinds of budgets.</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>39%</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>35%</td>
<td>85%</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Allocating academic positions.</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>44%</td>
<td>55%</td>
<td>45%</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>73%</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Allocating administrative positions.</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>38%</td>
<td>22%</td>
<td>58%</td>
<td>77%</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Today, the centralisation of decision-making and information processes have further accentuated the trend and increased deans’ unease.

(Question: Do you mean the famous centralised budget unit for research?)
Yes, indeed. It means I do not have the signature for these expenses. At the level of the faculté, I am only responsible for the training programmes and the day-to-day management. Now, the directors of labs are signing. I cannot be responsible for this money anymore. All research contracts are managed by the university. (…) We still have a local scientific council but if we want to develop our research, it is the role of the university. Of course the faculté is associated, but we are no more… While before, I was in charge… With the agreement of the president of course.

(Dean, ScienceUni)

Therefore they are more and more confined to the management of the bachelor level and the day-to-day micro-management tasks (grating doors, water leaks…, etc.). They feel they cannot exercise strategic influence and that their mission is increasingly similar to the mission of their administrative head.

This should be a more political function as we are elected. But for the moment, I do not see which political ambition I could have, except renewing this building… or very concrete services to my colleagues. But, if we speak of university policy, of training programmes, or research policy, the dean is no longer a central actor (…). I feel like a link in the university chain.

(Dean, HSSUni)

More broadly than the deans, there is a feeling of disconnection between the top of the university, its strategy and its decisions and the rest of the university. As if the head was thinking by itself while the rest of the body would just follow. By contrast with those working in the central administration, most of those working in the periphery do not agree that the top of the university listens to them, and they think there is some decoupling between the discourse of the top and its actions. They are also more often convinced than those in the central administration that the top makes decisions without informing staff and that it is cut off from the rest of the university (see Figure 5.1).

As in many other countries where the institutional autonomy and the strategic span of universities has been increased, French higher education institutions experienced an increase in the centralisation of the power of decision and of the information processes (Braun and Merrien 1999; Kehm and Lanzendorf 2006; Deem et al. 2007; de Boer et al. 2007). But, unlike the other countries, this was not accompanied by more responsibilities and decision-making powers being delegated to the intermediary levels (the deans in France). On the
contrary, the already existing gap and the rather suspicious relationships that prevailed in French universities were maintained, if not strengthened, by the recent reforms, thus increasing the distance between the administrative and academic managers of these universities and those they are supposed to manage.

The Development of Internal Auditors and their Impact

Another important trend concerns the development of systems of auditing and the recruitment of auditors, but also the increased production of data.

The Development of Internal Auditing

It would be misleading to think that the development of auditing is a completely recent trend (Solle 2001). By the beginning of the 1990s, when four-year contracts were introduced between the Ministry and each French university and when the first strategic plans had to be written, many universities discovered and became conscious that they had no information about themselves and that they needed to produce data. Some auditing services started to flourish in order to prepare the four-year contracts but some disappeared or were put aside by the president after the contractual exercise was over. Nevertheless, some auditing services developed over time. By the beginning of the 2000s, the introduction of the LOLF, the new budgetary system for the French public
sector (to which French universities belong), made such services more necessary to meet data needs, particularly as they are now annual and not every four years. In a survey they undertook in 2006 Stéphanie Chatelain-Ponroy and Samuel Sponem (2007) concluded that about 65 per cent of French universities have such a service. In our 2011 survey, the response reached 86 per cent and everybody concluded that this trend was expanding (Carassus et al. 2011).

Much more information is now available

In this more recent survey, we also tried to identify what data was available and looked more precisely at data on teaching and research.

If we consider teaching, the more easily available data are the rates of success of students (75 per cent of universities) and the drop-out rates (70 per cent) while data on the average salary for the students' first job is available for only 53 per cent of universities and data on the evaluation of teaching by the students for only 51 per cent. Those working in the central administration are far less well informed about this latter data and they also deplore having very little information about the number of teaching hours required from academics. On the other hand, faculty members are not well informed about the jobs found by their students. Therefore, there are not only differences in terms of the data that are collected, but also discrepancies in access to the collected data according to the functions that are performed.

We came to similar conclusions about the data available on research but, as a whole, these data are less accessible than those on teaching. Only 54 per cent of universities say they have data on scientific publications, only 42 per cent on research contracts and on their income and expenditure. On each of the five items we identified for data on research, it is remarkable that the presidential team usually declared themselves to be better informed than the others say they are.

The use of Information and Data remains Limited

Attention paid to data seems rather different according to who is concerned. The presidential team (president, vice-presidents, registrar and directors of the administration) pay more attention to data on budgets but less to those on teaching. Attention paid to research is higher by academics and the presidential team. But what is the information used for?

In the literature on the use of indicators, some authors like Simons (1995) distinguished between diagnosis and interaction/learning processes while others like Cavalluzzo and Ittner (2004) distinguished between reporting and steering or making decisions. Building on this literature, we proposed items in our survey aimed at measuring whether data were used for reporting, that is, producing data and distributing it in order to provide information to others.
(Ministry, regions, etc.) and thus obtain legitimacy by being accountable or whether these data were used in order to encourage interaction and debate within the university, whether they are a basis for evaluating and making diagnoses and, finally, whether they are used in order to act, make decisions or define strategies.

We therefore asked groups of questions aimed at discovering whether the data on teaching, research and the budget were used for reporting, evaluation or making decisions. We observed that data on teaching are considered first as a method of accountability and to dialogue with other partners. They may be used also to evaluate the teaching offer of the whole university or negotiate with the faculties, but they are rarely seen as a way of steering the university, assigning objectives to the different units or discussing training programmes. This is also the case for data about budgets. They are used for accountability and to interact with the main partners of the university. They are rarely considered as a way to set objectives.

It is quite different if one looks at the use of data about research. They are first of all used in order to evaluate research production at the university level, but also at the level of the units and of individuals. They allow for comparison among units, for allocating budgets and for identifying research priorities. Of course they are also used for reporting but their evaluative role is nevertheless stronger.

With the introduction of new budget processes like the LOLF, but also the devolution of more competencies and responsibilities to universities, more information is produced and internal auditors have been recruited to meet the demands of university managers. But, until now, these data are more often used to meet external requirements than to introduce change within universities. Nevertheless, a more strategic use of these data seems unavoidable, as can be expected from the central role attributed to internal auditing by university presidents.

From Higher Education Institutions to ‘Research Operators’ Organisations?

The attention paid to data on research is highly compatible with and relevant to the fact that research has become a major factor in French universities. This might be related to the discourse held by Valérie Pécresse, the Minister for Higher Education from 2007 to 2011. She steadily repeated that she wanted to ‘bring universities back to the centre of the higher education and research system’ and thus to end the divide between national institutions of research (CNRS, INSERM, etc.) and universities. This recognition of universities as central research providers was encouraged by policy instruments (Hood 1991; Le Galès and Lascoumes 2004) that pushed universities to develop their research activity. Two policies were particularly mobilising; the assessment of research
units by the AERES and the fact that grades were made public on the one side
and the multiplication of highly selective calls for proposals on the other side.

The Importance of Research Performance

Research performance has become a major objective for all universities. The
main reason for this is the level of resource which research generates, while
the ANR accentuated project-based research and lump sum budgets decreased
(Barrier 2011). Large budgets were also involved in the highly selective calls
launched through a public bond and the Investment for the Future policy. Universi-
ties therefore pushed their academics to answer calls for research propos-
als; the administration in charge of research distributes information about the
calls and is expected to help those answering them. But beyond these invita-
tions to apply for grants, university managers have themselves been very active
in positioning their institutions within the highly selective calls that have been
launched at the national level. They decide which they will support and provide
extra services to increase the chance of success. For instance, one of the ‘excel-
lent labs’ put forward by MultiUni benefitted from the help of a consulting
firm in order to prepare its project.

The persons I mentioned before were helped by a consulting firm, XXX.
We funded… The university and the pole for competitiveness YYY funded
the input of this consulting firm that very much helped us preparing the
dossier. We were able to show our strengths, where we wanted to go (…).
On formal aspects, they helped us a lot.

(A lab director, MultiUni)

In parallel, the level of performance-based budgets has increased. Not only is
publicity given to the results of the AERES evaluations but the results are used
in the new formula for budget allocation introduced by the Ministry. There-
fore, winning good grades from the AERES has become a major goal. Some
universities try to be better prepared for this review by organising mock evalu-
ations before the AERES comes.

We did our best to meet the expectations of the evaluation led by the
AERES. We had a two-step process. My university, MultiUni, imposed a
mock evaluation led by their own… what they called in English a ‘visiting
committee’ with a former expert of the AERES.

(A lab director, MultiUni)

Incentives aimed at improving the number of publications and decreasing
the share of research-passive faculty members were introduced. Some labs
asked research-passive academics to become only affiliated (to no longer be
permanent members of their lab). Others those who do not publish sufficiently to become co-authors of more research-active colleagues, while in one of the three universities specific budgets were allocated to research-passive academics to incentivise them to come back to research and prepare publications. Many also see a marketing issue in AERES evaluations. The grades and the evaluation reports are available on the AERES website, as well as the response of the evaluated units. Some universities pay a lot of attention to these responses, less to contest the reviews than to promote their image by emphasising their plus or to announce new objectives or reforms. Finally, one can read the impact of research through the decisions made to reward those who are doing well or to modify the weakest structures. Since the introduction of the RCE, universities are in charge of allocating the research budget attributed by the Ministry among the research labs. In the three universities being studied, the results achieved by the labs in the AERES evaluation were taken into account to weight the distribution. The previous budgets of research units were multiplied by a coefficient that varied according to the grades achieved and was different from one university to another. These evaluations are also used when decisions are made about the filling of staff vacancies.

(Question: What are the best arguments to get a position? Rather teaching or rather research?) Both of course. But you are right to say ‘rather’. Everybody knows that we miss positions for teaching. So it does not help to say it again and, since the new act [2007], research is more important. (…) There will be no position for a lab that is not well evaluated. It is evident. That is what we say to defend the labs that got an A+.

(Dean, ScienceUni)

Research results are also used to justify restructuring, such as closing a lab, merging research teams or transferring a research team to another lab. Research is therefore a major goal but it is also used to introduce change and justify new orientations.

External Evaluations are Simultaneously Criticised and used as a Management Tool

The choice of the scientific projects to support and present for the national calls for proposals, the identification of the labs to reward with an increased budget or the resolutions to merge or suppress research units are, most of the time, legitimised by the evaluation or decisions made by the new national agencies created by the LOPRI. It is therefore obvious that the increase of interest in research has increased the role of funding and evaluation agencies such as the ANR and the AERES in different ways. First of all, because the reviews produced by these agencies are peer-review based, the academics participating in
the evaluation processes play a very important role and constitute a power-
ful academic elite. Secondly, their role is not only central because they pro-
duce advice that has an impact on university resources, but also because they
define the norms about what is ‘good’ research, a ‘good’ project, or a ‘good’
publication.

Although peer-review based, this increasing role for external evaluation
has provoked many critics because it increases competition among academics,
increases differentiation between colleagues and between institutions, but also
weaks the role of unions’ representatives who were previously members of
the former evaluation bodies. The new norms that are introduced and the
fact that they are more formalised, rather standardised and organised into tem-
plates are also often criticised by those who denounce the idea of evaluation as
well as the recourse to a selective allocation of resources.

At the institutional level, an important consequence of this evolution is the
combination of, rather than opposition between, managerial and academic
control. The external peer-reviews produced by the AERES and the ANR reinf-
force the institutional leadership of French universities by providing them
with evaluations that are used by university managers as a management tool
to introduce change, to selectively allocate funding, and to legitimate decisions
(Musselin 2013).

Conclusion

Although France has long been rather impermeable to the implementation
of NPM devices, the recent reforms (the LOPRI in 2006 and the LRU in
2007), without putting to the forefront the reference to NPM, silently intro-
duced some of its instruments; a reinforcement of the role of the managers,
the creation of agencies responsible for competencies previously exercised
by the Ministry, the increase in competition and the development of selec-
tive funding and performance-based budgets. Two main consequences in
the governance of French universities were stressed by our interviewees and
in the survey. First, this created an opportunity for the presidential teams
and the central administration to push for more centralisation and further
construct universities into organisations (Brunsson and Sahlin-Andersson
2000; Musselin 2006; Krücken and Meier 2006; Whitley 2008). Second, more
emphasis was put on research and research performance, which became a
major goal as well as a tool for steering. The increasing production of data
and information could be seen as a third consequence but we observed that,
until now, these data are not often used to make decisions affecting uni-
versities. University managers rely much more on the peer-review-based
decisions made by evaluation and funding agencies than on internal data to
introduce change, modify the allocation of funding or suggest new forms of
organisation.
Part of the academic profession, even if critical of this evolution, coped with it and ‘played the game’, that is accepted the need to compete for funding, answered calls for proposals, tried to get good evaluations from the AERES; others were more reluctant and critical. Nevertheless the LOPRI and the LRU did not put students and academics on the street, until the end of 2008 when the Ministry launched a reform of university training programmes for teachers and high school teachers and a reform of academic duties and careers. Between the autumn of 2008 to the end of the first semester of 2009 demonstrations and protests developed but did not succeed in obtaining major changes.

After the election of François Hollande, a national consultation of the members and stakeholders of the French higher education system was organised (Assises Nationales de l’enseignement Supérieur et de la Recherche) as a catharsis exercise (allowing the public and recognised expression of criticism of the past reforms), but also as a diagnosis of the problems they raised in order to prepare a new act. It was passed in July 2013 and amended rather than withdrew the former reforms. The main change introduced probably concerns the formalisation of about 30 main higher education poles in France and thus a further push into the development of formal coordination among the higher education institutions, including the grandes écoles located in the same region, through the constitution of ‘university community’ (communautés d’universités) that can take different forms (from a confederation of institutions to a merger) and replace the PRES.

If these communautés d’universités become, as expected by this new law, the central actors of the French higher education system, their governance will become a major issue. It will also become a major issue for higher education analysts.

Notes
1 We chose one university with a dominant orientation in science (ScienceUni), one with a dominant orientation in Humanities and social sciences (HSSUni) and one with all disciplines (MultiUni).
2 At that time, universities were corporations and the Convention during the French Revolution suppressed all corporations.
3 In a few cases, like in Marseille, some disciplines were present in the three universities that were created after the suppression of the University of Marseille. Most of the time, the distribution of academics among the different universities of the same city followed political preferences rather than pure intellectual or scientific logic.
4 With the stakeholders, and the elected representatives of students, administrative staff and academics, the university councils – conseil d’administration in French – could reach up to 30 members. A scientific council and a council for training and student affairs are also elected at the university level and make decisions that are afterwards confirmed or rejected by the university council.
5 It is so called because it is made up of academics who have been elected.
6 This is less true for the presidents. Many of them engaged in administrative careers after their term, either at the ministry or as rector of academy.
They were previously in the hands of the CNRS and other national research institutions, but also the Ministry for Higher Education, etc.

Before the evaluation of universities was led by the CNE (National Committee for the Evaluation of universities), research units were evaluated by the scientific council of a national research institution if they were recognised by one, or by the academic experts designated by the Ministry. Training programmes were evaluated by academics designated by the Ministry.

The French higher education system was already more differentiated than one would expect according to French egalitarian principles: the reputation of French universities varied from place to place.

The French government launched a government bond that was largely used to fund research and innovation. Different calls were launched to allocate these funds selectively. Some were very close to the calls launched in Germany by the Exzellenzinitiative and aimed at identifying excellent labs (LABEX), excellent scientific equipment (EQUIPEX) and excellent institutional projects (IDEX).

We calculated how many times (X) each level has been cited as significant or highly significant for an item N and divided X by N. We highlighted in pale blue the levels reaching between 40 and 50 per cent, in blue those reaching 50 to 70 per cent and in dark blue those over 70 per cent.

In France, the departments do not always exist and are not a strongly recognised structure, therefore the main intermediary interlocutors are the deans, not the head of departments.

This shows that the evaluation of teaching by the students is still not very developed, although since 1997 it was supposed to be compulsory when the then minister, François Bayrou, imposed it.

Before the RCE, the ministry directly allocated these budgets to the labs. The university could withdraw up to 15 per cent of the total amount of the allocated resources in order to fund their own research policy, which they usually did. This withdrawal, often called BQR (Bonus Quality Research), was used to fund seminars, conferences or seed money for new projects. New universities receive the whole research budget and can allocate it.

In the new act that should be promulgated in July or August 2013, the AERES was suppressed. But it is a kind of symbolic tribute paid to the more critical academics because it will be replaced by a Haut Conseil de l’Evaluation de l’Enseignement Supérieur et de la Recherche whose tasks, responsibilities and operating processes are very close to those of the AERES.

Another notable change concerns the elections of university presidents: all members (including the stakeholders) of the university council, that is now a little bit larger than previously, elect the president.

References


