CHRISTINE MUSSELIN AND STÉPHANIE MIGNOT-GÉRARD

THE RECENT EVOLUTION OF FRENCH UNIVERSITIES

The French agency for the modernisation of universities[1] (*Agence de Modernisation des Universités et des Etablissements*, AMUE) was created in June 1997 as an expansion of a former structure called GIGUE (*Groupement pour l'Informatique de Gestion des Universités et des Etablissements*). It is in charge of diffusing management software dedicated to universities and offering services to universities in order to improve their management and internal practices. This agency engaged research aimed at developing knowledge on the situation of the French university system at the time when it was initiated. One of these research conventions was dealing with "university government" and our centre, the *Centre de Sociologie des Organisations* was chosen to conduct this endeavour. We thus organized two large field work projects. In 1998, a qualitative study based on 250 interviews was led in four universities with the help of graduate students of Sciences-Po Paris. A comparative report was written (Mignot-Gérard and Musselin 1999) for the AMUE. Drawing on the results of this first study, we built a questionnaire which was sent to 37 universities in 1999. We received 1660 answers (on 5000 questionnaires sent), about 1100 from academics and 560 from members of the administrative staff (see the methodological annexe at the end of the paper). A second report was written in 2000 and delivered to the AMUE (Mignot-Gérard and Musselin 2000).

This provides us with a large empirical corpus on French universities that we can compare with the narrower corpus E. Friedberg and C. Musselin (1989) accumulated on the same topic in the eighties. This comparison clearly reveals that one should not give too much weight to the overwhelming discourse on the "impossible reform" of French universities[2], on their endemic immobilism, and even on the conservative nature of the academic profession. Change has occurred and university government has evolved in France. This of course does not mean that all problems are solved, but that the potential ways to change, the relevant actors to mobilize, the existing margins of action and their realm are not the same as they were fifteen years ago. But before arriving to such conclusions and further argument on it, we first have to give evidence for change.

In this perspective, we will first quickly describe some of the main changes that affected French university system in the last decade. We will then be able to point out the more striking developments that can be observed on university government when comparing the results of the field research led by E. Friedberg and C. Musselin

in the eighties and the conclusions raised by the qualitative and quantitative studies we led by the end of the nineties for the AMUE. The main conclusion we will make is that the previous conception of French universities as a kind of administrative grouping of *facultés* has been modified in favour of a more, cohesive, collective, institutional conception. As in others countries, this strengthened the university leadership, allowed the elaboration of strategic plans, increased self-governance etc. But, let us state here that, contrary to other countries, this did not result from the implementation of New Public Management or of New Managerialism : there is for instance nothing like the Jaratt report in the United Kingdom, or like the Dutch reform of university structures to foster a more executive leadership. The whole process which we will study here through its outcomes is much more a transformation of rather anomic universities into institutions with their own identity, perspectives, dynamics[3]: from this point of view we can say that French universities gained more autonomy, even if the formal allocation of attributions and functions between them and the State did not change dramatically.

Nevertheless and even if we can observe important evolutions, we still can identify limits and problems that hinder this process and restrain the self-governance capacity of French universities: that is what we will show in a third and last section, pointing out some aspects that slow down or even impede the emergence of more cohesive universities.

1. THE CONTEXT : NO BIG INSTITUTIONAL REFORM BUT SOME RADICAL CHANGES

The aim of this article is less to explain why evolution is to be observed than to document their existence and their limits. We would like nevertheless to quickly mention three important changes that characterize the global evolution of French higher education within the two last decades and that favoured the existing change.

The first deals with what has been sometimes described as a "second massification" (the first one was related to the rising numbers of students that occurred in the sixties) that French universities experienced between 1988 and 1995, followed by decreasing numbers of entrants. There are about two million students presently in the French higher education system, 1.5 million of whom are attending the university. As shown by Kogan and Hanney (2000), student expansion is an important factor for change.

A second factor is the surprising increasing role of local actors. It became completely obvious with the University 2000 policy launched in the beginning of the nineties to improve the university patrimony and to plan new construction in each region : local authorities were associated and largely contributed to the realization of the plans. But in fact it had already began in the eighties (Filâtre1993), despite the fact that the decentralization law of 1982 attributed no competencies on higher education to the local authorities. Now, with perhaps the exception of the Parisian

region, universities can no longer ignore their local implantation and even search for interactions with and support from their local authorities[4].

A third and last factor to mention is that even if no important institutional reform was initiated after the 1984 Act, some limited (in scope and publicity given to them) decisions were made to increase the institutional autonomy of the universities. One of the more important of these has been the introduction of four-year contracts by the end of the eighties, which, albeit a subdued and not visible change, introduce some radical modifications in weakening the discipline-based logic of intervention of the ministry and promoting the recognition of universities as relevant actors within the French higher education system (see Musselin 2001 for a detailed argumentation of this thesis).

From our point of view these three developments set the global context within which the government of French universities developed within the last two decades.

2. THE MORE STRIKING CHANGES WITHIN UNIVERSITIES

Two conclusions can be drawn from the comparison of the description and analysis E. Friedberg and C. Musselin proposed of the French universities in the eighties with the results of our more recent field work. First of all, most of the characteristics stressed by the two authors can not be sustained anymore. In particular, the role of the presidents has evolved, the deliberative bodies no longer prefer to avoid decisions, universities are active in domains they previously ignored or considered as "taboos" and they more than ever before behave as collective actors able to develop collective strategies. Before developing these three aspects, we will first quickly describe the structure of French universities as it has been set by the 1984 act (the Savary Law).

2.1. The structures of French universities according to the 1984 act

From a broad perspective we can say that French are organized in *facultés* (called UFR for *Unité de formation et de recherche*) which can represent part of a discipline (for instance UFR of Modern History), a discipline (History) or a set of disciplines (UFR for Social Sciences).

The university is led by a president. S/he is a an academic of the university, elected for a five year none renewable mandate[5] by an assembly made of all the elected members of the three university deliberative bodies, that we will describe later on. The president works with a group (called *bureau*) whose composition can vary from one university from another because it is set by each university own statutes : s/he proposed the names of the people s/he would like to be elected at the bureau.

The UFR (*faculté*) are led by a dean who is elected by the UFR council for a five-year mandate that can be renewed once. S/he is an academic of the UFR. Very often the UFR are organized in sections or departments with department or section heads.

This academic leadership can (or has to) rely on two other devices which are also present at the university and at the *facultés* levels.

First an administrative apparatus which is led by the *secrétaire général*, an administrator who is a civil servant. At the university level, we find the central administrative units of the university (with standard functions : budget, personnel, pedagogical affairs…). In each UFR, there is a UFR administrator, who can be assisted by staff replicating the central structure (budget, pedagogical affairs …) and further administrative staff at the department or section level and within the research institutes.

Second a deliberative structure. At the university level, we find three bodies. Two of them (the *Conseil scientifique,* or Academic council, and the *Conseil des Etudes et de la Vie Universitaire*, called CEVU or Board of studies) prepare proposals that then have to be decided upon by the third one, the *Conseil d'administration* or Governing board. The CEVU has between 20 to 40 elected members[6], 75 to 80 % of them being academics or students representatives (each of these two categories having the same number of seats), 10 to 15 % being representative of the administrative staff and 10 to 15% being "external personalities". Its mostly elaborates proposals dealing with curricula and diverse aspects of the students life on the campus. The Academic council consists of 20 to 40 elected members, 60 to 80 % of them being representative of the university staff (with at least half of these seats for professors), 7.5 to 12.5 % of graduate students representatives and 10 to 30 % of "external personalities". This body elaborates proposals dealing with the research policy and budgets of the university. The Governing board counts 30 to 60 elected members[7], among them 40 to 45% of academics, 20 to 30 % of "external personalities", 20 to 25 % of students, 10 to 15 % of administrative staff. The law stipulates that the university statutes must foresee the representation of the disciplines present within the institution. It decides upon the proposals made by the two other bodies, but mostly deals with resources and especially with the budget and positions allocations. Each body elects a vice-president (generally proposed by the president, in order to constitute a cohesive presidential team).

At the faculty level, we also find a deliberative body : the *conseil d'UFR* or Faculté council, with no more than 40 elected members, 20 to 25 % of which are "external personalities", the rest of the seats being equally divided between the academics, the students and the administrative staff.

This above has described the formal structure: it is time now to come to the change that affected the way they are utilized by the actors, the way the latter are articulating the different components of these structures, the rules of the games characterizing the government of French universities, i.e. the specific mix that results from the role played by academic leaders, the nature of the relationships they have with one another and with the academics in general, the decisions made by the deliberative bodies and how they interfere in or adjust with the actions of the academic leadership.

2.2. From reactive to proactive presidents

When E. Friedberg and C. Musselin conducted organizational studies in the eighties, the Faure Law of 1968 was about to be replaced by the Savary law, adopted by the French Parliament in 1984. Even if it only remained in effect for 16 years the Faure law has been very important for French universities. Before 1968, the French "university" system in fact consisted of strong faculties that were led by powerful deans and that were the relevant levels of decision between the ministry and the academics. Universities were a weak administrative level, a territorial gathering of faculties, under the control of a high civil servant called the "*recteur*". The Faure law abolished the old faculties and favoured the creation of multidisciplinary universities led by an elected president, always an academic.

This rapid summary of the history of the universities first points out that the presidential function is quite new in France and second that it was created from scratch while the deans come from a long tradition. Most of the memoirs written by the early presidents (see for instance Rémond 1979 or Merlin 1980) underline the quite difficult time they experienced in the seventies. They simultaneously had to impose this new function while at the same time the Faure law no longer allowed decision-making by peers and obliged them to adopt participative decision-making including the full professors but also students, non professor faculty and administrative staff. The confusion and sometimes even the conflicts and the political opposition that characterized the seventies were no longer to be observed when E. Friedberg and C. Musselin led research in the mid eighties. But the decisive role the presidents were supposed to play following the Faure law, was not to be observed either. They remained close to the traditional style of academic leadership, i.e. mediators of internal conflicts and representatives of university interests outside the university, but not managers or leaders. They mostly prefer to stay in the background.

This is no more the case for most of the French presidents who are presently in office. First, the way they speak about their function, their conception of their role reveals that they feel more or less similar to managers who have to run projects, to define orientations and priorities, to intervene and make decisions. They do not present themselves as the exact reflection of their peers' preferences and adopt a rather interventionist conception of their task. The opinions of the (13) presidents who answered our questionnaire on questions dealing with the kinds of institutional autonomy they prefer are different from the majority of the answers we received : 31% of them are in favour of more organizational <u>and</u> more financial autonomy against 23% for the whole sample; 15% of them are against more organizational <u>and</u> more financial autonomy against 26% for the whole sample. Moreover, 24 of the presidents (65%) of the 37 universities concerned by our quantitative study were said to be influential or very influential on major decisions made within the university.

Second, they very much insist on the fact that they are not leading alone but working with a team, which is generally composed of the Vice-presidents, and very often of the leading administrators of the university. They insist on the fact that they

delegate the leadership of some activities and that they, at the same time, are involved in cooperative work. This collective feature of the university management is reflected by the distribution of the 1563 answers (academics and administrative staff) we received to the following question.

Table 1. Q132 : "Who belongs to the president's team in your university":

President only	*President and deans*	*President, deans & vice-presidents*	*President and vice-presidents*	*President, vice-presidents and leading administrators*	*Do not know*
4.7 %	4.2 %	19.8 %	21.5 %	45.0 %	4.8 %

Third, they usually consider that this is a full time function[8] and stress the professionalization of the leadership. They may keep one or two courses to have contacts with students, but they are first of all presidents. They all stress that this function requires more competencies (technical, relational, managerial ones) than before. Not that they should do or know every thing but they can no more be an "enlightened amateur": many insist on the importance of having been a vice-president previously.

There is thus a general trend towards a more active and more committed leadership at the presidential level. There is also a general trend to request more responsibilities and autonomy as stated by the recent "orientation paper" produced by the French Conference of University Presidents entitled "University autonomy and responsibility" (Conférence des Présidents d'Université, 2001).

2.3. More decisional deliberative bodies

In the eighties the university deliberative bodies featured two main characteristics. First, they were described as "rubberstamp chambers" and had a pretty poor reputation among the university : elected academic members sitting in them were frequently qualified as "poor researchers who have nothing else to do". Second, their main style of making decision was "no decision", which meant either following decisions made by the ministry and replicating them[9] or making no choice between concurrent projects issued from the departments and leaving the decision to the ministry, or discussing for hours without coming to any final choice.

Here again, such conclusions do not fit the present situation anymore. About 70% of the persons who answered the quantitative study we led, and who are not elected members of deliberative bodies said that they think that the three councils work well. The Governing board more particularly is qualified as "a place where decisions are made" in 78% of the answers and "as an important body" in 82% of the cases.

Moreover, and perhaps also more important, "no decision" is no more the favourite response of deliberative bodies. This does not mean that decisions are now

built up by the bodies themselves : they contain too many members to be able to do so, thus preparatory work is led by small groups before the plenary meeting. Such groups set up proposals and advice that are then presented and discussed within the concerned body and that generally are agreed upon with a large majority. To go further in details on this specific aspect, we have to distinguish the situation of the Academic council and CEVU on one hand, and the Governing board on the other.

Most of the decisions made by the Academic council and the CEVU consist in evaluations, ranking or opinions on projects presented by academics. Two kinds of criteria are generally taken into account. First the support such projects received from their own faculty : if a dossier has been very controversial in the faculty or was accepted with a small majority of votes by the faculty council, the Academic council or the CEVU will be reluctant to accept it. They will probably send it back to the *faculté* and ask for a less problematic project. Second, we observed that the Academic council or the CEVU frequently have developed and explicated their own criteria[10] : they select the projects going to the ministry[11].

It is quite difficult to precisely tell which criteria are used because it first depends on the type of projects we look at, on whether we speak of the CEVU or of the Academic council, and on the preferences these two bodies have in each university. But we can say that clear and shared criteria are more likely to be found when the president has an explicit strategy : in such cases this strategy is accepted by the deliberative bodies and translated into criteria[12].

It is impossible to list precise criteria without considering specific cases, but we nevertheless can draw two general conclusions. First these criteria never deal with the scientific or pedagogical content of the project. Second, some items of our questionnaire give some indications on the aspects to which attention is given. We asked to rank the influence of five different criteria (from 1 for the most influential to 5 for the less influential) on decisions about the creation of a new curricula. Two items were mostly chosen: first, job possibilities for the diploma holders and second the expression of student demands. The ranking of the most influential criteria for the suppression of a curricula also stress two items: first diminishing numbers of students and second poor job possibilities.

The existence of criteria on which decisions are made is important because it helps the preparatory work accomplished by a small number of the Academic council or the CEVU in restrained committees: they know what should be considered, the points they have to stress in the reports they will present to the plenary session. But it also gives some possibility of interacting for the elected members who are not part of the restrained committee : they know on which basis the restrained committee has been working and questions may be asked, modifications may be required if they think some points were not taken into account, they can interfere during the hearings of the projects' leaders etc. Thus even if they most of the time follow the opinions proposed by the restrained group they feel they are part of the decision-making and that they play a role.

The situation is in many respects different for the Governing board. Not so much for the decisions based on the proposals made by the CEVU or the Academic

council. The Governing board members trust the opinions given by these bodies and follow them. But the Governing board also has to decide on other matters, and in particular on budget allocation and on the demands for new academic positions. On these issues, one can first observe that the Governing board makes decisions it did not make previously. In the eighties, most universities refused to rank the list of positions they requested, leaving the decision to the ministry. Now, ranking by priority is the norm. Moreover, each faculty provides its ranking and the Governing board is able to cross-rank and can even depart from the ranking order suggested by the *faculté*: positions qualified as "low priority" by a *faculté* may be considered has "high priority" by the Governing board.

These assumptions on the greater decisional capacity of the Governing board have somewhat to be moderated by the following observations. Elected members within this body are generally less satisfied than members of the CEVU or the Academic council. Only 65% of them chose the item "the preparation of the meeting is satisfying" (against 68% of the Academic council members about the Academic council meetings and 72% of the CEVU members about the CEVU meetings). Decisions are generally voted with a very large majority, but, at the same time, members of the Governing board often feel "dispossessed". As for the CEVU and the Academic council, decisions are prepared, but in many cases this preparatory work is done by the president's team and the administration, not by elected members of the Governing board. The latter have thus to discuss proposals they were not involved in, for which they do not have enough technical competencies to present counter-arguments and even less to prepare counter-proposals : they feel obliged to rubberstamp decision whose logics and finalities they do not completely control[13].

Thus, deliberative bodies make more decisions now than before, but this does not mean that they are a force for proposals. They much more legitimate the proposals on which they vote than participate in their elaboration (Mignot-Gérard, 2000).

2.4. Emerging strategies on issues previously ignored[14]

A third point to stress is the emergence of strategies at the university level on issues which were previously ignored. Four domains have been invested and lead to decisions influencing the functioning of the respective universities and leading to a set of internal decisions.

The first domain deals with the research strategic plan. The introduction of four-year research contracts[15] between the central authority and each university in 1983 fostered the definition of research priorities at the university level. Three different kinds of actions have been developed in this perspective: "discipline–based grouping of research centres in the same building (*Maison de l'Economie, Maison des Sciences sociales…*); constitution of interdisciplinary research centres (which are called *fédérations* or *instituts thématiques*, or *ensembles* etc.) aimed at giving more visibility and at enhancing relationships and cooperation among the concerned teams; finally the creation or the development of Research offices. The latter

generally follow two objectives: on one hand they are intended to bring some financial, technical and legal support to academics engaged in research contracts with firms, communities, the European commission etc ; on the other they should promote more transparency on research contracts within the university and encourage the academics to have their contracts managed by the university administration[16] and thus to pay overhead" (Mignot-Gérard and Musselin, forthcoming).

A second domain where institutional strategies are to be observed is what can be called "rationalization strategies". Two kinds of measures can be distinguished. First the development of instruments intending to improve the decision-making processes. The introduction of managerial software (Gueissaz, 1999)[17]and the construction of indicators reflect this first orientation : figures, harmonized information, comparative data are produced and used to support decisions[18]. Second, there is a general trend towards better control and more effective analysis on the expenditures, as well as diversifying resources. Most universities have developed strategies to reduce or adjust the budget for overtime (*heures complémentaires*[19]), some also try to enforce supply group purchases… A vast array of decisions have been made by the presidents and their teams in such directions.

Teaching is a third domain to be mentioned and a rather recent one. Some universities intend to change the development dynamic of their curricula: instead of adding new courses to a forever growing catalogue, they try to set priorities, to define which sectors or which diplomas should be expanded, to present a clearer offer... Moreover, teaching quality assessment and evaluation of teaching by the students are more and more implemented, not solely on the personal initiative of some isolated academics as was the case before, but more and more often as a university strategy, even if it is still rather rare as shown here.

Table 2. Q36. "Does some formalized teaching evaluation procedure exist in your faculty ?"

-	Yes	**22.9%**
-	No	43.9%
-	There exists no formalized procedure but some teachers developed an evaluation procedure for their own courses	26.7%
-	I do not know	4.8%

Finally, human resources are also becoming a matter for decisions. We already mentioned that the deliberative bodies consider they have to rank by priority the positions they each year ask the ministry to create[20]. We must add that redistributions of existing positions (administrative or academic ones) may occur within a university now while it seemed quasi impossible before[21].

A whole range of issues for which no decision were made before thus became part of the intervention realm of the university management.

2.5. Collective priorities orienting decision-making

A last point deals with the emergence of a more collective conception of universities. As in other countries (Altbach, 1996), French academics have a dual commitment, one to their discipline and one to their institution. The former has almost always existed; the second is more present than before now. The four-year contracts introduced by the central administration by the end of the eighties favoured this evolution (Chevaillier, 1998).

In order to sign a contract with the French ministry, each university must first prepare a kind of "strategic plan" which sets its priorities and main objectives for the four coming years. A first step in this process consists in an analysis of the strengths and weaknesses of the concerned institution from which a collective strategic orientation will be drawn. The main directive given by the central administration when it launched this new procedure was that the project should not be conceived as a juxtaposition of faculty projects. It should be an opportunity to enhance some collective reflection within each university, to go beyond the traditional faculty supremacy in French higher education (Musselin, 2001).

The impact of these contracts, and more precisely of the process that surrounds them rather than the contracts by themselves (one should not forget that they still represent only 5 to 10% of the running budget -which does not entail salaries- of French universities) is important. As shown by the following table, the contracts have a good image within the academic and administrative staff.

Table 3 (based on Q114 and Q115) Opinions on four-year contracts

Would you say that the four-year contracts	*Number of answers*	*Agree (%)*	*Disagree (%)*	*Do not know (%)*
1. are positive because universities have to project themselves in the future	1583	**78.9**	7.5	13.6
2. are positive because their preparation allows universities to better know themselves	1566	**72.2**	11.3	16.5
3. are positive because they help the deliberative bodies to make decisions	1565	**67.7**	15.4	16.9
4. serve as a reference to make decisions within the university	1621	**65.9**	7.1	27.0
5. enhance the university autonomy	1549	**60.5**	18.8	20.7

Contracts are seen as a way to improve the government of the university as shown by items 1, 2 and 5. But they are also perceived as a reference to make decisions. The general opinion reflected in items 3 and 4 of table 3 is confirmed by the answers to the following question

Table 4. Q92. In order to rank the needs for academic positions, what criteria does the Governing board first take into account[22] ?

1. the evolution of the student population or of the students per teacher ratio 90.1%
2. the priorities set by the four-year contract   **75.1%**
3. the research priorities   33.2%
4. each faculty is given its turn   17.3%

The impact of the contracts seems thus quite clear for the ranking of academic positions. It is nevertheless much weaker on the annual budget setting (it is quoted in 27,8% of the answers only). This suggests that contracts are more influential on the distribution of supplementary resources than on the redistribution of already existing resources.

But these are not the only consequences induced by the contracts. They also promote a more collective representation of the university. The projects that are part of the strategic plan are not only individual projects pushed by these or these academics: they have been recognized as projects of the whole university, relevant with the long term development of the latter, responding to the general objectives that have been set and defining the forthcoming orientation of the institution.

The four main changes I identified in this second section are particularly striking when we compare our recent findings with the conclusions E. Friedberg and C. Musselin raised in the eighties. Patterns of decision-making within French universities have evolved and reflect the emergence of universities as collective actors and their increasing institutional autonomy (Berdahl, 1990), not so much because the ministry delegated more responsibilities but because universities (i.e. their leadership and the deliberative bodies) intended to mobilize margins of action they previously ignored.

3. REMAINING BLOCKAGES

The evolution which we described above should not hide that governing French universities and enhancing institutional autonomy remain a difficult task constrained by many limitations.

The latter are partly due to external factors, such as the slow and back and forth reforms of the ministry itself. On one hand, it more than before recognizes universities as pertinent actors but still remains under the control of the disciplines: the role of the academic experts is still important and the balance between the discipline-based logic and the university-based logic is always redefined and still not stabilized. The ministry is also always ready to deliver a discourse preaching for

more autonomy but at the same time it maintains narrow and constraining rules. One can for instance wonder how French universities can be described as autonomous while they lack most prerogatives dealing with personnel issues : they need the agreement of the ministry to create new positions or to replace vacant ones; they can not recruit when they need to but must wait for the next national procedure, the recruitment procedures involve national bodies or even depend on national *concours* (for instance the *agrégation du supérieur*) on which universities have no influence.

But the problems confronting French universities in becoming more cohesive and self-governed can not only be assigned to external factors. There exists also internal blockages.

3.1. An evolution that lacks legitimacy

In the second section of this text we pointed out some of the domains that are now invested by French universities, on which they make decisions and for which they define strategies. In particular, we stressed the development of research strategic plan, rationalization strategies, interventions on teaching, and emergence of human resource management. Such actions are largely supported by the president's team and the administrators but are not considered as legitimate by many other actors.

In the qualitative study on four universities, the only non controversial policy was the follow-up of the *heures supplémentaires*' budget. The intervention on all other matters (research policy, teaching offer, introduction of software, supply grouping, redistribution of positions…) were severely criticized by most of our interviewees.

This is confirmed by the quantitative study. Most of the time the intervention of the university is criticized. Here are for instance the answers to the following question

Table 5. Q79. What are the priorities for which the research strategy of your university should aim" (answers from academics only)

Constructing new buildings for the research institutes	39.1%
Offering some legal help for the management of research contracts	25.5%
Finding and negotiating new research contracts	20.3%
Defining research themes	**9.0%**
Others	6.1%

This demonstrates that most people expect technical support from the university but no intervention on the content. The answers are also very clear on the expected role of the university on recruitment's decisions: only 18.7% agreed that the search committees should be advisory bodies and that the university should decide on recruitments.

On many aspects a strengthened role of the university level is not desired. More institutional autonomy is not firmly expected either. We had some questions dealing

with expectations on the organizational autonomy of the universities : for instance we asked whether universities should be free to determine their own status or whether they should leave the public accounting for the private one. We also had questions on financial autonomy (need for a diversification of resources, for more partnerships, etc.). Crossing these two perspectives, we obtained four groups of individuals:

- a group opposed both to more organizational and to more financial autonomy: 26% of the answers
- a group opposed to more organizational autonomy but in favour of more financial autonomy: 28% of the answers
- a group in favour of more organizational autonomy and opposed to more financial autonomy: 23% of the answers
- a group in favour of both more organizational and more financial autonomy : 23% of the answers

Less than a quarter of the answering population expects a wide increase of institutional autonomy and a little more than a quarter wishes no change, while the rest of the population is in favour only of some kind of autonomy. Opinions are quite diversified on such issues and it is difficult for the university leaders to find consensus and to build legitimacy.

3.2. Decisions easier to make than to implement

A second problem to stress is that strategies are defined which obtain a large majority when they are discussed within the deliberative bodies, but they are nevertheless difficult to implement. Three main reasons may explain this discrepancy between the decisions made and their implementation.

A first one deals with a high degree of individual resistance. This individual autonomy is enhanced by the fact that universities are weakly coupled organizations (Cohen, March and Olsen 1972; Weick 1976): many activities can be continued as before at the individual level because nothing constrains to change and because lack of change at this level does not affect other levels (or can not be seen by the latter). It is also enhanced by the fact that there exists possibilities to circumvent directives: in the qualitative studies, some academics explained that they avoid group purchases by buying their furniture with the CNRS budgets which are not managed by the university.

A second reason deals with the presidents and their teams. They are pretty skilful at launching some participative processes that produce some collective choices, or at expressing some strategic views and setting priorities, but they do not give enough attention to the implementation itself. In the study S. Lipiansky and C. Musselin (1995) conducted on the preparation, the negotiation and the implementation of four-year contracts, it was clear that many projects were kept on stand-by because they lacked impetus from the university management which initiated them. For instance, a bureau for "industry-university relationships" was created, but the administrative staff who were assigned to it felt abandoned: they expected some

"political" orientation from the president and support when they were confronted with the uncooperative behaviours from the academics but had neither the former nor the latter.

A third reason is linked to the rather difficult relationships between the group composed of the president, his team and the administrators on one hand, and the deans (and the academic and administrative staff within the faculties) on the other. Strategies defined at the university level are thus poorly relayed within the university. The first group rarely includes the deans and most of the time the latter are not associated with the decisions they make : they are only informed afterwards or a previously built proposal is submitted in order to see how they react. Most of the time this group states that the deans demonstrate low solidarity but at the same time does not wish to associate them more to decision making (Table 5). The deans, from their point of view, often regret not being associated to the university government but they also express some contradictory opinions: they would like to participate more but they would not like to show more solidarity with the views of the presidents (Table 5).

Table 6. (based on Q130) : Opinions on the role and the behaviours deans should have

	Faculties' members	*Deans*	*Administrators*	*Presidents*
1. The deans should show solidarity to the president's team	45.6%	62.1%	**76.5%**	**76.9%**
2. The deans should systematically be members of the president's team"	**72.5%**	**86.0%**	66.7%	61.5%

These rather ambiguous situations and the poor cooperation between the president's teams and the deans is detrimental to the implementation of strategies.

3.3. Incremental decisions rather than radical ones

Another point to stress deals with the kind of decisions made by the university management and the deliberative bodies as well. The decisions are most of the time incremental, which means that they rarely modify the previous existing balance and pretty much respect it and that there is a strong inertia.

This holds particularly true for budget allocation: it most of the time reproduces the previous ones.

Table 7. Q50. Upon which criteria is the annual budget for your
faculty established ? (see note 12)

-	the evolution of students numbers	93.5%
-	the previous year budget	**65.8%**
-	the criteria used by the ministry (Sanremo criteria)	48.9%
-	the priorities developed in the four-year contracts	27.8%
-	projects developed by the faculties	10.9%

There are of course "good" reasons for this and one of them is to be found in the fact that once you have affected the budget for energy, maintenance, etc. there is little room left. But this is too easy an explanation. It is very hard indeed to introduce change, even when the situation of the various faculties is changing : increasing (or decreasing) numbers of students for instance do not automatically provoke a reconsideration of the budget allocation strategy[23]. What is difficult to obtain when "objective criteria" could be used to promote change is all the more uncertain if a president's team wants to develop priorities and intends to reallocate resources in order to reach certain goals. In fact change seems to be able to occur only through the aggregation of minor transformations : the only way to assess this would be to conduct a longitudinal study of budget allocation within some universities in order to evaluate the scope of evolution and whether the marginal change introduced each year finally produce some new balance in the long run.

The inertia assumption means furthermore that suppressions are almost impossible. A good example for this is the development of the curricula offer. It is very rare to terminate a course offering even when there are very few students. In their study F. Kletz and F. Pallez (2001 and forthcoming) describe the case of a deserted curricula : the faculty was almost ready to suppress it which means that no further agreement (*habilitation*) would be asked for to the ministry. But just before the decisive vote, the academics teaching in this course of study proposed to modify it, submitted a new proposal, and asked for the renewal of their agreement: the university accepted it. This is not simply an anecdote. Two pieces of quantitative evidence confirm this. On one hand, the statistical study led by R. Enaafa and F. Lefebvre (2001) concludes that most renewals for agreement are accepted (over 85% of them and the authors explain that it is probably understated). On the other hand, our questionnaire came to the following results :

Table 8. On creations and suppressions of curricula (based on Q11 and Q16

As far as you know, were…	…new curricula created in your faculty within the past two years	… curricula abolished in your faculty within the past two years
First cycle	29.4 %	4.5%
Second Cycle	43.7%	4.2%
Graduate studies	43.7%	3.8%

It seems thus much more difficult to suppress curricula than to create new ones and moreover, we observed that universities which have the highest rate of creating new courses, do not have a high rate of suppression.

This leads us to a second remark: a more radical evolution is to be observed for decisions dealing with the allocation of supplementary resources than for the redistribution of existing resources. The creation of curricula for instance reveals a preference towards the development of job-oriented training and towards the second cycle and graduate studies. This should affect the balance between traditional curricula and other kinds of curricula in the middle term.

The same holds true with the creation of new academic positions. We saw above that the priorities set in the contract play a rather important role in ranking the needed positions and that the rule "each faculty its turn" is rarely followed.

A last example can be found with the four-year contracts. They set priorities, they propose orientations and are not a simple replication of what already exists. The impetus they give are also important to the introduction of change.

Nevertheless, on the whole the decisions hardly change previous internal balance and produce only incremental change.

3.4. Restricted access to decision-making process

The last point we would like to mention deals with the actors involved in decision-making. They are first of all administrators and academics of the concerned university. The relative indifference of the students elected in the deliberative bodies (as shown by their high absenteeism rates and by their rather weak influence on the decision process), but also the low participation of the so-called "outside personalities" (*personnalités extérieures*) who are supposed to represent the university environment and its demands both explain how closed decision-making processes remains.

This should be tempered by the increasing interactions between the universities and their local environment: they are indeed obliged to more and more cooperate with their external world (all the more as it provides resources, essentially for research and for buildings) but if universities are ready to develop partnerships with their environment, they are not ready to associate them more closely to their internal decisions. For instance, 75.4% of the individuals agree with the following item (Q87) : "It's alright to develop partnerships with our socio-economic and

institutional environment in order to improve the financial settings of universities" but we obtain the following answers to question Q 134:

Table 9. Q134 : Political and economic leaders should be more involved in university government ?

Agree	29.0%
Disagree	64.0%
Do not know	7.0%

Thus more partnership is expected as far as these partners do not interfere within internal affairs.

CONCLUSIONS

The picture we draw of French universities in this article is thus contrasted. On the one hand, many factors plead for a conclusion outlining important change, or at least more change than is usually stated (probably because most studies are focused on higher education reforms in France rather than on in-depth studies of universities). On the other hand, we show that, simply looking at internal factors, many obstacles and difficulties are still to be mentioned and could attack or slow down further steps towards more institutional cohesiveness.

Some consequences can be raised from this evolution and we would like to focus on two of them. A first one deals with the increasing diversity of the French university system. It had already began by the sixties when the increasing numbers of students allowed the development of new curricula and the emergence of the so-called "professionnalized" programmes. But this evolution was hidden in a way and remained so due to the national rules, national procedures, national diplomas, etc. that were supposed to guarantee a uniform national model. Diversity is now encouraged (universities are asked to develop their priorities, to show their institutional identity by the ministry) and recognized. This trend is not overwhelming because there still exists some acting forces towards uniformity (for instance the implementation of similar software, the fact that some university strategies are more a translation of the Ministry's national injunctions than "personal" ones, the routinization of the management of the contractual procedure within the central administration…). Nevertheless, these "national" forces are not sufficient to prevent more differentiation than before

A second consequence deals with the pertinent level for change and for policy making. The role of the ministry is still very important and we can probably say that the latter has less been affected by change than the universities but it can no more be described as the principal motor for change and for elaborating policies. Again, the recent proposals for more institutional autonomy stemming from the University Presidents Conference confirmed the emergence of the latter as a proposal arena while the difference between the scope of the strategic plan of a university and the

scope of the contract with the ministry (i.e. the aspects of the strategic plan that will receive financial funding from the ministry) shows that universities have room to define their own priorities and policies.

We, of course, are not able to predict what will happen in the future and what the forthcoming evolution will be, but French universities will probably go further towards institutional autonomy in the coming years. Three reasons speak in favour of this hypothesis. First, in order to reverse the present trend, the ministry must regain the legitimacy and find the budgets that would allow it to return to the centralized steering of such a large system. Second, the university management enjoys its increasing autonomy and calls for more. Third the recent emergence of European agreements on higher education seems in contradiction with highly centralized systems.

This evolution of French universities is of course important for the French higher education system: while universities were a rather weak structure, they now are relevant actors within this system while they increased their self governance capacity.

Furthermore this specific experience has further implications. As a matter of fact, it speaks for a renewal of the models and theories we use to characterize and explain this kind of organizations. As stated by E. El-Khawas in a recent paper, we still have to learn from previous works and we should not too quickly abandon them because "the old theories still have something to offer" (2001: 10). But if we need to revisit them, we also need to extend them in order to be able to theoretically analyse the nature and functioning of the new organizational forms that are emerging as an alternative original way to manage a profession. They challenge our conception of collegial organisations.

Centre de Sociologie des Organisations – FNSP – CNRS
19 rue Amélie 75 007 Paris – France
c.musselin@cso.cnrs.fr or s.mignot-gerard@cso.cnrs.fr

NOTES

[1] This agency depends on the French Conference of University presidents.

[2] This discourse is heavily diffused by the media which always describe the French University as "in crisis" and which are an open scene for the publication of French intellectuals' critical opinions on the dramatic situation or evolution of French universities (see for instance the paper published by P. Bourdieu and C. Charle in April 2000 after the resignation of Claude Allègre, minister of education). But is also a recurrent diagnosis that is to be found in many publications in the past (Caullery 1920, Colloque de Caen 1956) but also more recently (for instance Lucas 1987, Charle 1994, Renaut 1995, Areser 1997, Compagnon 1998…). The main explanation given by most of these authors is that French academics never succeeded in sharing a common idea (or ideal) of the University and in forming a cohesive academic community.

[3] This is very close to the "constructing organization" process described by N. Brunsson and K. Sahlin-Andersson (2000).

[4] We do not have enough room here to develop this point but it led to an increasing financial participation of local authorities in the university budget, as well as more normative consequences:

for instance some regions are very active in proposing research funding that are allocated through "call for proposals". They are thus having an influence on the research programmes.

5   This could change in the future: French presidents could be elected for a four year mandate that could be renewed one time.

6   They are elected by all the members of the university belonging to the same category : for instance students vote for the students representatives, administrative staff members for administrative representatives…

7   The elections of the bodies and the election of the president do not occur at the same time. It means that a president can be elected by bodies in t, and that the bodies' elections can occur for instance in t+2 leading to constitution of new bodies that may be hostile to the president !

8   Recently a president who just left his office after a five year period (1996-2001), told us that he worked full time as president , that his predecessor (1991-1996) spent 3 days and a half each week in the presidential function, and the predecessor of the latter (1986-1991) one to two days a week.

9   This mainly concerned budget allocation that mostly respected the ministry criteria not because they were obliged to, but because it is easier to use them rather than defining new ones.

10   They generally pay attention to the relevance of the project in terms of the employment possibilities for the students. As this is also encouraged by the ministry, an expansion of ob-oriented curricula is to be observed. In fact, two evolutions are to be observed about the development of curricula in France: first, two levels of regulation (one at the university level and one at the ministry level) instead of one (the ministry); second, a development less led by the supply (what academics think it is interesting to propose) and thus more demand driven (that is needed by the students, the society, the job-matket…).

11   They do not refuse a lot of them either and this can be explained by two reasons. On one hand, they generally prefer asking for modifications than just saying "no". On the other hand, they are also most of the time dealing with projects that have a good chance to be accepted because project leaders mostly engage pre-discussions within their faculty and the university to "estimate" the viability of the project, but also because the criteria of the CEVU are known and there exists a kind of auto-censure: one does not lose time preparing a project that has no chance to meet the required criteria

12   For instance, in one of the three universities studied by S. Simonet (1999) in her study on curricula decision-making, the president clearly expressed that job-oriented curricula related to the Bologna declaration would be preferred and this defined the preferences of the CEVU.

13   H. de Boer (2001) also observed this "dispossession" feeling within Dutch bodies: they not only experienced a loss in their attributions but also are more and more confronted to ready-made proposals.

14   This point is based on the section 1.2. of a contribution to be published (cf. Mignot-Gérard and Musselin, forthcoming).

15   These four-year contracts are hardly to be compared with the four-year contracts introduced in 1988 and that deal with the running budget. The main reason for that is that the former remain a centralised discipline-based procedure leaving little autonomy to the university level, while the latter is a university-based procedure intending to and succeeding in fostering university autonomy. For the last few years now, the two procedures were supposed to be held simultaneously, but they are not really coordinated.

16   Academics sometimes try to escape this constraint and develop alternative solutions for the management of their research contracts, solutions that the university does not know about or is unable to avoid.

17   In particular those developed by the GIGUE and then the AMUE: Nabuco for finance and budget, Apogée for the management of students (inscriptions, diplomas, statistics…), Harpège for human resources management…

18   Such instruments had two pragmatic consequences. First it formalized the fact of belonging to the university: the different parts of the institution are not only linked by the same heating system, but also by the same software, the same way of calculating, counting,… Second, it produced information (previously unavailable) that on the one hand have been used to express priorities and to legitimate them, but that on the other hand are also a kind of reference for accepting or refusing demands.

[19] The *heures complémentaires* is a specific budget that allow adjustment between the needed volume of teaching hours (based on student inscriptions) and the existing volume (depending on the number of teaching positions). This budget is dedicated to the payment of the supplementary hours (called *heures complémentaires*) given by faculty members who have a fixed position (but who should not teach more than twice their official teaching duties) or by teachers on time-limited contracts (*vacataires*).

[20] In France, universities are not free to create or reallocate positions as they wish. The ministry is responsible for such decisions. Each year the faculties are asked about their needs and they provide the ministry with a list of positions ranked by priority. Then the university cross-ranks the demands and produces a list of priorities for the whole university, which is sent to the Ministry. If the latter decides to create four new positions in a university, the first four ranked positions are created.

[21] The point here is of course not to plea for redistribution per se, but to outline that it is no more considered to be the responsibility of the ministry and that universities can make such decisions by their own, but also that is much more difficult than before to maintain very unbalanced situations when the university is able to produce figures that openly show unbalances.

[22] Four possibilities were offered and they were to be ranked from 1 to 4, 1 for the most important criteria and 4 for the least important one. The percentage expresses the number of times the item received a "1" compared to the number of times the item was chosen as the more important plus the number of time it was chosen as least important.

[23] It follows the number of students but does not lead to a redefinition of the allocation criteria or to decision such as maintaining the faculty budget even if numbers decrease because it is a priority domain for the university. Nevertheless, in the case of sharp and abrupt increase (as it recently occurred in the training of gym teachers), the budget does not strictly follow the number of students in order not to unbalance the global equilibrium among the faculties.

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METHODOLOGICAL ANNEXE

The qualitative study was led in four French universities, one in Paris and the three others in the Province. There were chosen in order to display contrasted situations regarding their geographical location, their size, their spectrum of disciplines (in France, universities are rarely complete : some are monodisciplinary, including for instance only disciplines from the humanities; others are pluridisciplinary and can for instance entail a Law and a Medecine Faculty but no Science; some are omnidisciplinary or complete). In each case we led semi-directive interviews with members of the presidential team, the deans, faculty members, administrative members of the university central administration, administrative members at the faculty level and elected members of the university deliberative bodies (Governing board, Academic council and CEVU). The interviews last about two hours. The interviewed are asked about their activity (what it consists of, what is important for them, what is of interest for them, the problems they meet), about their relationships with other actors (who are their principal interlocutors, why do they have to do with these persons, are these relationships good, difficult, conflictual….), and finally about their representations of the current situation (are they satisfied about it, what could be improved, their wishes…). In each university, we also chose three faculties in which we led more interviews and that we investigated more in depth. Within the university central administration we also more heavily looked at four services : accounting, pedagogical affairs, human resources, budget.

Table A. Global sample

	Uni Centre	*Uni Ouest*	*Uni Est*	*Uni Sud*
Professors	15	26	14	23
Maîtres de conférences (assistant and associate professors)	9	16	4	10
Other teachers	2	1	1	2
Research staff	0	0	8	1
Administrative staff at the faculty level	12	12	14	13
Administrative staff at the university level	16	20	15	16
Total	**54**	**75**	**56**	**64**

Table B. Among the global sample, people holding management and/or elected responsabilities

	Uni Centre	*Uni Ouest*	*Uni Est*	*Uni Sud*
Presidential team	7	11	7	6
Deans	7	5	6	8
Directors of research institutes	1	5	8	4
Elected members at the Governing Board	5	9	7	6
Elected members at the Academic council	7	5	5	6
Elected members at the CEVU	5	6	8	5
Total	**32**	**41**	**41**	**35**

An intermediary monograph has been written for each university and a comparative report was then elaborated. We used these results to prepare a questionnaire (including 185 questions with common questions but also specific questions for the administrative staff, for the academic staff and for elected members of the deliberative bodies), organized in three parts: one on the *facultés*, one on the university level, and one on deliberative bodies. It was sent to 5000 persons belonging to 37 universities. The institutions were chosen thank to the quotas methodology, using the following criteria : geographical location, number of students, students per teachers ratio, number of *facultés*, date of creation, discipline structure (mono, pluri and omni disciplinary). We sent between 110 and 150 questionnaires per institution and the questionnaires were allocated according to the following principle : 10% to members of the presidential team, 13% to administrative staff at the university level, 42% in three selected faculties (2/3 of them to academics – 1/3 to administrative members), 15% to elected members of the Governing board, 10% to elected members of the Academic Council and 10% to elected members of the CEVU.

We received 1660 answers (with a return rate going from 20% to 51% and a medium rate of 34%) which were exploited with SPSS. The answers quite well respect the national distribution of the scientific disciplines as shown here

Table C. Repartion of the academic staff along disciplines

	Repartition of the academic staff by disciplines in France (1999)	Repartition of the academic staff by disciplines for the received answers
Sciences	42.1 %	38.7%
Humanities	28.8 %	32.6%
Law and economics	13.3%	16.7%
Medecine	15.8%	12.0%

But, the sample suffers from three problems :

- a slightly over-representation of the administrative staff (especially those at the university level)
- the discipline proportion, which is respected for the global sample, is not respected at the level of each institution
- in some institutions, we observed a large discrepancy between the number of answers received from the administrative staff compared to the number of answers received from the academic staff.

Furthermore, the way we constituted the sample favoured university members that have elective or management responsibilities in their institution: 76.8% of the people who sent the questionnaire back were either members of the presidential team, or deans, or directors of department /research institutes, or elected members of the university deliberative bodies. Such an orientation was voluntary as a large part of the questions concerned the way decisions are made, the role of the different levels, of the bodies… The aim of the questionnaire was not primarily to reflect the opinions of academic and administrative staff but first of all to elaborate a typology of university government in France.