QUALITY STRATEGIES: WHAT ARE FRENCH UNIVERSITIES LOOKING FOR?

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Abstract. *Using steps transposed from corporate quality strategies, French universities have entered a new stage of their modernization, illustrative of the current of New Public Management. These strategies, destined to combine missions of excellence and the transformation of thousands of young people into graduates, will be studied here with regard to different horizons which they suggest for French higher education. In change for the last 40 years, called into question over its costs, its production, and its management, university is at the crossroads of autonomy, clientelism and professionalisation. Our system of higher education must now combine savings, realignment, local governorship, partnerships and a geographical distribution of training opportunities, within the new European arena of degrees. However, it suffers from several handicaps (at once fiscal, legislative, administrative and social) aggravated by a specifically French fracture: how then can the quality strategies put in place, bring about the efficiency coveted by higher education ? This higher education system demonstrates several innovations and have begun to make surveys of the employability levels of its graduates. Thus, benchmarking is available on the condition that the criteria and indicators of the performance comparison are reached by consensus, and that's not the case: is it political arbitration (that rules over university as a public service) or market arbitration which determines the value of degrees? calibration and measurement could not be the same: who decides? which path opens to university to come out this dilemma?*

Keywords: efficiency, French higher education, Lisbon strategy, NMP, quality, standards.

1. Introduction

1.1. Context

Through the rationalisation of budgetary decisions, new public service management, the introduction of quality assessment, the encouragement of new institutional strategies and policies through funding under contract, the policy of France's various governments since the end of the 1970s, has been geared towards modernising the State in general and the public service in particular.

If certain sectors have thus far been more concerned than others by these modernisation policies (health, infrastructure, etc.), none will ultimately escape the implementation of recent and former laws (e.g. *LOLF, LRU*, decrees on staff's evaluation (see endnotes)). A parliamentary initiative, these institutional reforms are destined in particular to make State management „more democratic et more transparent in the interests of all citizens, public service users, taxpayers and agents of the State"[1] and are to be applied since 2006 or 2007 to all administrative sectors, and by extension to all main State operators.

Higher education, through all the public sector institutions which it embodies, is thus attributed a new functional strategy of „objectives/results" and no longer of „obligatory funding". This change in funding logic defined by the law is complemented, notably for universities, by several other texts (L.O.P.R.I., decree of April 2002, decree of November 2004), the device as a whole aiming to re-establish trust between the academic world and society at large, by proving that French research maintains its international position and thus contributes to reinforcing France's competitiveness and its academic and cultural impact worldwide.

The reforms in progress are intended to make French universities more accountable, merging multiple functions currently entrusted to disparate bodies, in order to reduce public spending which is undoubtedly mushrooming (Camdessus, 2004). This international vision of research and training necessarily implies the localised piloting of the partnership between universities and the business world, as well as a more attractive geographical distribution of training provision: since the Bologna process[2], it is also within the framework of the new European space that the new L/M/D (Licence or BA, Masters, Doctorate or MBA) degrees have been organised, encourage student and teaching staff mobility.
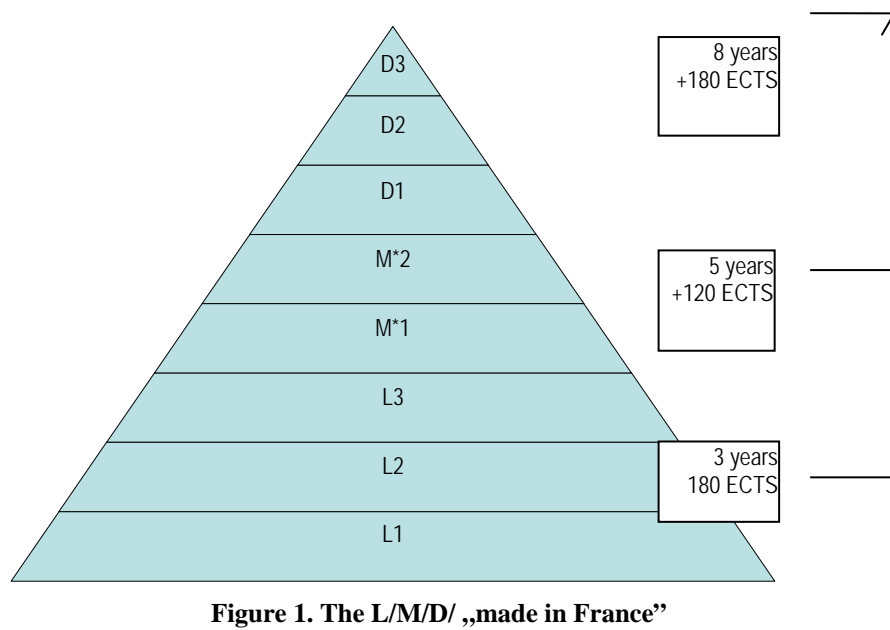

Figure 1. The L/M/D/ „made in France"

Two paths are possible: vocational master (following which the student leaves higher education) and research master (preceding a doctorate)

Moreover, the Lisbon strategy adopted at the EC spring summit set a new strategic goal for the EU[3] to become, by 2010 „the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world capable of sustainable economic growth with more and better jobs and greater social cohesion". The Lisbon conclusions contained a number of benchmarks and guidelines (EGS[4]) in the area of education and training,

as well as in other policies areas[5]. The EC thereby made it clear that indicators play an important role in monitoring progress towards the achievement of agreed objectives. Furthermore, the structural indicators have the additional function of helping to identify member States which perform well, thereby making possible the identification of successful policy. In this sense, indicators might be used as instrument for stimulating the exchange of expertise, supporting good practice and inspiring new approaches.

Focused on multi-criteria self-assessment, greater integration and performance, the French system should gain in terms of quality (reduced costs, prestigious specialisations, new labels, polyvalence and staff mobility). The modernisation undertaken in universities is wide-ranging as it touches all personnel categories: new obligations of staff assessment and grading, specific measures concerning teaching staff built into the application of these official texts, new objectives for researchers (Esperet, 2001 and Belloc, 2003, reports…) and links to be made with industry (Beffa, 2005).

For nearly forty years, French university has been completing its modernization, through adaptations increasingly adjusted to demanding partners (students, employers, taxpayers...) as share- and stake-holders, in an environment at once local (regional planning) and international (minimum European requirements). Moreover, higher education, via all the state-owned institutions responsible for its deployment, has since 2001 been assigned a new operational logic orientated towards „objectives/results" and no longer „obligations of means". For universities, this recent strategy aims to restore a relation of confidence between academia and society as a whole, by proving that the production of French research can hold its international position and thus take part in the reinforcement of the France's competitiveness of and its scientific and cultural influence in the world[6]. The reforms in progress have the ambition of making the protagonists of French university accountable, by amalgamating multiple functions entrusted to disparate entities, in order to reduce public expenditure. There are 556 institutions disseminated in 84 universities, 244 and 228 schools of engineering and business respectively. This international vision of research and training necessarily implies a governorship of proximity in the university/business partnership, and a more attractive and more concentrated territorial grid of training opportunities: the project of regrouping campuses in UT cluster[7] is the illustration of this.

1.2. Methodology and field surveying

For five years we have been following the latest developments in French university change; we have undertaken an inductive and deductive research-action concerning our own employer, focused as much on the managerial aspects of the new budgetary architecture as on the human impact (Bouchardy, Darréon, 2006). Thanks to direct observation, meetings/training, semi-directive interviews and essential documentary analysis, this longitudinal study which started in 2005, will continue until 2010, when the next national assessments/adjustments are due. The grounded theory method which is our choice, is a qualitative approach applied to management

and organizational research, based on an in-depth analysis of one very personal case and a summary cross-checking with other management scholars using the method in similar conditions. Originally developed by Glaser and Strauss (1967), it's self-defined purpose is to ground or root theory in observations, within 6 main steps: „collecting data, taking notes, coding, memorizing, sorting and writing".

This theory is recommended where social interactions are complex and its emphasis is to let interpretations emerge from the actors in the field, by constantly comparing, fractioning and analyzing observational and interview data until saturation is reached.

This iterative process has been applied to one the most students populated area: the Cluster for Higher Education and Research, *Université de Toulouse*[8], in the South of France.

If we were to have an overview of the university region, the university pool consists of 6 establishments, that is to say 4 universities in the traditional sense of the term (publicly-owned scientific, cultural and professional institutions) founded several centuries ago as faculties, a regrouping of 4 engineering schools federated over the regional metropolis as a polytechnic institute, and a research and training centre (with the statute of a publicly-owned administrative institution) gathering together five sites in North-East of *Midi-Pyrénées*. These 6 institutions naturally have common goals relating to their principal vocation of awarding degrees and training researchers, but reveal several important particularities: the size factor, the history and the cultural homogeneity of the staff, the weight of trade unions and multisite dispersion are difficult to harmonize. Moreover, if the *Midi-Pyrénées* region (MiPy) accounts for 4,2% of the French population, its student weight is greater (4,5%), that is to say 114,410 students[9] distributed over 36 sites, of which ten are, or are affiliated to, universities. The State sector remains by far the regional leader, since it absorbs 88% of these students, including 65% in the pool of the 5 establishments. All traditional subject areas[10] are available, since business schools, and private faculties or institutes add to the table.

Table 1

University characteristics

Historical origin (foundation)	From the 13th to the 18th century
Decree establishing the current form of the institution	From 1969 to 2002
Main subjects	All subject areas are represented: pure sciences, humanities, social sciences, engineering, health, sport…
Number of schools[11] (including departments and institutes)	From 6 to 15
Number of students	From 2,000 to 28,000
Number of teaching staff (including teachers/researchers)	From 32 to 2,000
Number of IATOS (including library staff)	From 77 to 1,300
Number of laboratories	Between 4 and 108

We further present some details of the geographical dispersion:
- the strong tropism of the regional metropolis, Toulouse, which alone absorbs 60% of students;
- two noteworthy communes of average size, one in the North-East, the other in the South-West: the strong evolution of Albi (+ 45%) and the continuing development of Tarbes.

This paper deals with the first tangible effects of the implementation of theses laws, governmental decisions and deep changes.The wide-ranging and profound transformation of French universities which began almost forty years ago is today entering a new phase (Guillon, 2004). The justification for the innovation of its recent strategies can be found in reforms introduced over the last six years: in conformity with an important outline law[12], all French public services, including higher education and research have been equipped with a new budgetary architecture geared towards results obtained with regard to previously-defined objectives. It is thus a definition of socio-organisational performance which we will analyze through this vast European movement of state deregulation (NPM[13]). It draws on methods already put to the test by managers: ex post control, increased productivity, innovation in proposed products, resource mobility, in a competitive international environment. After clarifying several characteristics of these French university quality strategies, we will discuss them in light of our own experience in an administrative district with six universities.

2. French higher education: a few points of reference

Three characteristics dominate in the French higher education system: structural diversity, non-selective entry to the first university cycle, exemption from fees in state higher education, a founding principle of the Republic, guaranteeing equal opportunity.

2.1. Institutional diversity and openness

In addition to the traditional dichotomy between the public and private sectors, French higher education makes diverse institutions cohabit, even in the Ministry for national education, higher education and research[14]: from secondary schools to universities, from schools or institutes outside of universities to schools or institutes internal to or attached to universities, not forgetting IUFMs[15], from major institutions to *écoles normales supérieures*, 1.797 million students in 2003-2004 were enrolled in 189 state-owned establishments (including 86 universities) placed under the supervision of this ministry and identified as the principal agents of the State in the preparation of the implementation of the LOLF[16]. In addition, several dozen institutions, either private or attached to other ministries, also took in some 0.563 million students, primarily future engineers, management executives or technicians in

industry or in social, paramedical and other services[17]. Let us specify that in this panorama, the university category has a dominant position in terms of student numbers: 59 % of students in higher education, or 1.3 million students in 2003-2004 (not counting IUTs) and 76 % of the students for which the ministry is responsible.

This structural diversity results initially in differences in the institutions' size and potential (of a factor of 1 to 12 for the criterion of student numbers, all cycles put together, within the university category). Coupled with the strong growth of student numbers in universities during the decade 1986-1995, this dispersion gave rise to doubts about the goals of the university institution: „Indeed, what is the point of so many universities, frequented by so many students, when, over the last two centuries, the recruitment of the elite has become increasingly distant from this structure?" wonders a specialist philosopher (Renaut, 2002). The Montaigne institute[18] published last January a report inciting *grandes écoles* to open more widely to the diversity of French society, which showed the limits of a „meritocracy no longer transcending social differences" and deplored that „university graduates are insufficiently present in company management and high-level administration"; what is necessary, then, for employers to come to see an equal value in certified (thus high quality) university training as in *grande école* graduates? For some, this original meritocracy has strayed into a "parentocracy" (Brown, 1990).

2.2. Non-selective university entry

This variety among institutions goes hand in hand with an unusual specificity in access to higher education: whatever the branch of teaching followed in secondary education, any baccalaureate holder has the guarantee that he will be admitted to a university, because the baccalaureate constitutes a necessary and sufficient condition to be registered at university. Housing prestigious branches of training in and by and research, universities also mop up in their first cycles students who are refused entry to preparatory classes for *grandes écoles* or to branches supposed to lead to professional insertion (IUT, STS), or re-integrate them two years later, after a vocational diploma, into the final year of their *Licence* cycle. The fact that the majority of these students in fact use vocationally orientated branches to sidestep the poverty of the first two years of the first university cycle should raise questions regarding the comparative efficience of these two devices. In this sense the implementation of the laws has rightly raised a question for university vice-chancellors: how can performance indicators take into account this function of adjustment variable and social shock-absorber which is linked to free access to initial university cycles, and, moreover, often related to territorial planning constraints?

Talking about management courses, we can see whereas universities admit baccalaureate holders directly, with nevertheless several selective-entry courses (IUT, IUP, IUFM...) *grandes écoles* recruit after 2 to 3 years of preparatory classes following the baccalaureate or with diplomas of L2 level and higher. University

student numbers have stabilized since 2000 at around 1,312,000 students, after a steady rise over 40 years; universities account for nearly 68% of the 2,268,423 students[19] registered in 2005, *grandes écoles* only 8%. Financially, the ratio is rather more advantageous, as 4% of students (preparatory classes and *grandes écoles*) enjoy 30% of the budgetary resources of higher education. This model, markedly inequalitarian and for a long time justified by its „social elevator" function in the reproduction of the elite, is today working as a closed circuit: 80% to 90% of engineering students at Polytechnique, Mines or of Normal sup. have parents who graduated from the same *grande école*, teachers, politicians, members of the liberal professions. One can thus understand that university vice-chancellors are consequently eager to set registration fees according to the value on the labour market of the qualification aimed for (while of course preserving the existing system of loans at reduced rates and grants).

Even if we are not considering in this paper the international dimension of current management courses, one can confirm that it is a criterion of hierarchisation in young people's choice; the race for quality labels and certification for higher education courses (Laurens and alii, 1998) in all fields aims today at training (interchangeable?) international managers. Mobility being the central axis of the LMD, the employability of graduates must become European. All well and good, but for whom? In a commercial context where economic resources play an eminent part (financing of studies and a stay abroad) and which still produces the technical and managerial cream of French company directors, will those denied access to prestigious courses really be able to benefit from it? While the reputation strategies of certain schools or establishments with particular statutes (universities of technology, very selective major institutions) calibrate the content of their courses according to graduate employability; the diktat of the market is expressed, oscillating between „tested and contextualized" and more „general and abstract" knowledge (Godelier, 2005); this delicate alchemy will however not suffice to transform non-selected input-students into first rate employees...

2.3. Non-fee-paying State education

Another major characteristic of public sector higher education is that the true cost of the service is inadequately perceived by users. Considered as one of the founding principles of the Republic, the free nature of state education (*i.e.* its funding by the taxpayer) is supposed to guarantee equal opportunities and the recognition of merit only in university achievement. However, this exemption from payment is not without perverse side-effects which are regularly criticised. The first, and doubtless the most penalising with regard to the objectives assigned to higher education and research as an element of France's worldwide competitiveness and influence, is to put it in an inferior position compared to other countries. Thus, home spending for higher

education (average amount per student as measured by the OECD) placed French higher education below the OECD average, and well behind the USA. It should also be said that within higher education, spending on universities (excepting IUTs) represented only 51 % of that of *grandes écoles* and 73% of that of IUTs.

Table 2

Average annual expenditure per student, US $, 2003 (excluding R&D activities)[20]

Country	Equivalent US $ 2003	Country	Equivalent US $ 2003
Italy	5060	Netherlands	8080
Spain	5950	UK	8100
Germany	6370	Sweden	8360
France	6960	Australia	9200
Finland	7060	Denmark	10770
OECD average	7200	USA	20100

A second perverse effect of exemption from fees, at least from a managerial point of view, is that the inadequate perception of the cost of the teaching service does not contribute to motivating users. Still in this perspective, an increase in the price of the service met by the user, in conditions guaranteeing or reinforcing social equality (student loans with 0% interest, increase in studentships based on social criteria, suppression of the automatic attribution of housing benefit) would reinforce his involvement in the training device and incite him to become more demanding. Such factors could contribute to improving institutions' performance… at the risk of the user becoming a client and the distance consubstantial to the relationship of knowledge transmission between learners and teachers disappearing[21] (Steiner, 2003).

2.4. The law of large numbers and the recent emergence of universities

The university of the masses which constitutes our object of analysis goes back to the end of the 1960s. On a purely comparative basis, we have gone from 4% of baccalaureate (the passport to higher education) holders in a generation in 1945, to 26% in 1984 and 50% in 1991, while aiming for 80% in 2010.

Two laws have shaped the modern university: that of November 1968 which accompanied the first wave of mass university education at the end of the 1960s, and that of January 1984, which accompanied the second wave (1988-1995). The first law disturbed the secular order of university organization founded on peer power, by promoting three founding principles of modern universities: participation, multidisciplinarity, autonomy. The second, still in force, consolidated these principles, while conferring on the universities missions of public utility in various fields (initial and continuing education, research, diffusion of academic culture). Universities thus

became publicly-owned academic, cultural and professional institutions with a moral entity and greater management autonomy (through the suppression in particular of *a priori* financial control).

This movement towards autonomy was further accentuated at the end of the 1980s by the introduction of contractual policy. Initially applied to research, the contractual approach quickly spread to all spheres of university activity, from training to student life via all the paths towards management modernisation: infrastructure, equipment, buildings, IT, human resources, piloting and information systems. The contractual approach thus provides the occasion to appreciate the coherence of qualifications offered and research activity on an institutional level. The financial stakes of the contract and the leeway given by negotiation encourage vice-chancellors to mobilise staff teams around the definition of a strategic project for the institution.

At the end of the 1990s, the new role of local government in financing the development of universities completed this new space of autonomy and negotiation opened by the contract between the State and the institutions. Thus, in the negotiation of the "universities 2000" and "universities of the 3rd millennium" projects, universities saw new possibilities open to them through strategies of institutional territorialisation.

This evolution of universities is not unconnected with the evolution of their management. The "first among equals" vice-chancellor is tending to be replaced by a new generation of vice-chancellors with more managerial culture and approaches, seeking to work with more professional management teams and to develop new piloting tools. In 1997, this new impulse lead to the creation of the agency of university modernization whose principal function is to develop and mutualise new university management and piloting tools.

3. University modernisation: a contrasting picture

As we have seen above, universities occupy a preponderant position in terms of student numbers. It is thus on universities that we have focused our study, endeavouring to highlight the main characteristics and stages of „their long walk" (Musselin, 2001) towards modernisation.

3.1. A persistent ambivalence

For as much, the movement towards university modernization does not go without resistance. The assertion of the university as an organization seeking to optimise its resources to serve a collective strategy encounters two stumbling blocks. On the one hand, the establishment as a whole resists institutions' innovative drives, by re-affirming the values of the Republic (free access to university, exemption from payment and national unity of the public service, secularity, equal opportunity, civic education...) and in preserving authority over key fields through governing bodies and

constrictive bureaucracy: direct management of the major part of the resources necessary to institutions' operation (State employees' budgets, ownership of buildings...), setting enrolment fees, job creation. On the other hand, the university profession adapts always badly to institutional logic: it would rather see the role of the institution limited to the logistical and accounting functions associated with its mission, the latter being directly assigned by the State and completely defined by statute. Individually invested of a mission of public utility in place of the institution, the academic, whose function can thus take on the attributes of a liberal profession, can behave as the "entrepreneur" of his own career, while having to account to the peers in his discipline.

3.2. The latest metamorphoses

With the institutional contract, the foundations are laid of a system of control based on financial incentives connected engagements negotiated at the start of the contract then assessed at the time of its renewal. Consequently, the need for performance indicators becomes made more and more evident, in particular as regards graduates' success in examinations professional insertion. But these indicators lead more to formatting results than to a utilisation in the appreciation of the effectiveness of the organisation.

Because the analysis which one can make of these tables, even if they are in colour, is limited. Indeed, Possible spatial comparisons between establishments do not give information about the conditions and means deployed to obtain these results: what costs were involved? What are the key factors of success? Do they reside in the value added by the institution in the strict sense of the term - which would justify the comparative approach - or rather in the select capital which the institution might have built up because of its statute, its history, its fame or its environment? On the other hand, temporal comparisons are likely to reveal variations, but their interpretations are only really meaningful in the long term, through the tendencies which they show.

In the short term, they cannot really be exploited for piloting the performance processes analysed. In general, these indicators, because they are not based on contracts of objectives negotiated directly with the protagonists of a given process of performances (e.g. what rates of success are aimed for?), do not allow the interpretation of possible differences noted at the time of the assessment between objectives and results. They thus do not make it possible to propose corrective solutions. Blind spots continue to exist and the organization learns only a limited number of lessons.

It is precisely this piloting strategy, using indicators based on contracts of objectives, that the recent laws intend to launch, in all State administration and services. By considering that no resource is an acquired right but must initially be justified by a commitment to results which will in return, undergo a later evaluation.

This change of perspective is still badly perceived in universities. The management teams endeavour to respond with all due haste: by making the budgetary

architecture of the establishment compatible with that imposed by the „higher education and university research" programme [22]; by locating, distributing, and allocating costs to the programme's various actions. This preliminary step in the calculation of the complete costs, which prepares the ground for a management audit worthy of the name, is in itself a „revolution" in university management. And still often contributes to an impasse in reflection concerning the changes induced by this logic: objectives-results-evaluation-corrective actions, as we will see below with the results of our work on job profile sheets.

As yet, it is still too early to interpret the „weak" enthusiasm of universities with regard to this new device. The inertia of a bureaucratic system? Resistance to change? Or doubts as for the capacity of a management device, directly transposed from private business, to seize all the complexity of university governorship, whose performance is subject to contradictory appreciations linked to the market, the political sphere and the university profession?

4. Innovations beyond quality strategies

4.1. What of the quality/efficiency drive?

Efficiency is commonly defined as the capacity to produce the most results with the least means (Silem, Albertini, 2004) and is often synonymous with output, profitability. Quality is considered by certain universities as a factor of excellence to aim for, in the fields of staff skill and training of the elite (Goastellec, 2004). To aim towards this excellence, the specialists who have proposed reforms have all articulated them around a tripartite core (Larédo et al., 1989; Larédo, 2003):

- abandoning centralised piloting in favour of subsidiarity coupled with means of action and priorities (to prevent the ministry from having the final say within an institution);
- a true autonomy of universities which makes the less isolated, bringing them to forge local bonds and address fields of research forsaken by the private sector while proposing simple solutions;
- framing audits and evaluations with regard to a multiple reality, in order to extricate peers whose functions overlap and to interview students on their preferences.

One can share these noble intentions, even in France, but at the same time remain conscious of the difficulties and strong contradictions of our situation. In our UT cluster, very selective establishments cohabit with „university dumping grounds" which must absorb more than 80% of a generation of Baccalaureate holders. The political economists also remind us that public action „is not only in efficiency of management but also in mediating/integrating various often contradictory social demands" (Laidi, 2004); what a challenge then to take on such a project!

On the other hand, universities no longer have the option to remain static, a form of NPM is necessary, able to go beyond the focus on mere cost and manpower reduction[23], although this is important in France. This new management initially comes through delegating to ground managers (philosophy of many laws) in order to make management more supple to obtain from the „directors of public expenditure" a different form of responsibility. Four basic contradictions remain to be attenuated, according to Piraux (2005):

- Why can't ground managers entirely control inward and outward manpower flows in the structure they run and on the management of which they themselves are evaluated?
- Why is remuneration not clearly centred on individual work but dependent on a statute, a title, or to seniority?
- How can the individualization of performance and career be combined with the promotion of team work (multicompetency, wide schedules of opening...)?
- How can the generally overlooked increase in precarious employment (+25% in our „Famous Five") be reconciled with the ambitions of this NPM?

Naturally, none of the texts analysed answers these questions; only practical experience can do so... Moreover, the introduction of a quality programme sometimes has perverse effects (De Rozario, 2005), they can weaken or deconstruct existing national or regional professional regulations: the preoccupation with economy and efficiency does not inevitably increase the employability of agents because it is based on skills which sometimes are not recognized. This is exactly what was expressed in some job profile sheets, through a sometimes inflationary strategy in terms of missions. What the new device brings in terms of flexibility (multicompetency), it can lose in terms of legibility, in particular for the hierarchy; this is all the more disconcerting as the hierarchy who does the grading. How then should we conjugate an economy of variety in this university context which chooses quality centred on outcomes (process indicators) rather than on inputs (entry indicators) or on outputs (follow-up indicators)? The first information gathered from our base is not encouraging. It is not rare that French universities show themselves to be fully oblivious to the Law, but that brings us back to peculiar running practices: one can at least agree that the promise of renewed PM and incipient previsional job and skill management were not kept, which recalls many „risks not confronted" (Darréon, 2003). In terms of methods and tools, little advantage was taken overall of the opportunities for dialogue and for structural clarification/visualisation (flow chart). This is a pity because exchange is essential to the quality of professional reports/ratios since it enables everyone „to believe in the economic value of the statutory values" (Sellier, 2002). But one can however wonder about a French structure, not among the least important in term of goals socio-economic weight in the European landscape, which bends Laws and acts „against" its non-teaching staff.

What resource consumption and service rendered? It is premature to want to measure an impact today, since it will be necessary to make NPM and management control aspects advance together in order to overcome stumbling blocks (ideology, fear of the change, dislocation of the public service). On a local level, we will follow with interest whether this attempt at regional mutualisation in our RTRP, driven by a principle of efficiency, will be able to overcome given the strong disparities of the 6 institutions, whatever the will and support of the general secretaries. Primarily for civic, human and technical reasons, education is a major asset of a nation's future. In France, as in many other G8 or emerging countries, the economy of knowledge structures a race towards fundamental discoveries and innovative applications. Its sectoral weight comprises 2.3 million students and 140.000 employees of which 80.000 are teaching staff. Although research is one of university's flagship missions, we will set this very particular aspect aside in this paper, in order to concentrate on the educational functions of university. We will address the delicate question of defining the quality of university service before looking at some of the effects of its measurement.

4.2. Standardised and polysemic quality

Without aspiring to close an old debate, it seems practical to us to define quality according to 4 poles, broadly comparable with the contents of ISO[24] 2000 standards, because they promote:

- organisational transversality,
- increased orientation towards the client,
- renewed HRM[25],
- quasi-permanent improvement.

The strategies adopted by French universities are also based on ambitious requirements relating to skills, co-operation, collaborative work (Durand, 2000), together with redistributed autonomy and auditing (Reynaud, 1991). We also note that greater communication and thus more active participation in the decision-making processes, has spread in accordance with structured participative management, with a view to improving public service performance: from now on, the question will be how better to serve the customer-consumer-citizen-student.

Elite branches excepted (mostly Parisian *grandes écoles*), very selective establishments cohabit within the state university domain alongside universities of the masses which will have to absorb more than 80% of a generation of high school graduates within the next 3 years[26]. Inertia is no longer an option for universities: new HRM is necessary, and must be able to do more than focus on cost and manpower reduction, which is not in keeping with management through quality: flexibility, responsibility and audit combine to constitute the essential spearheads. The introduction of steps towards quality can sometimes have perverse effects (de Rozario, 2005) because they can weaken or deconstruct existing national or regional professional regulations.

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Attached to several schools of practice, it is difficult to reach a consensus on this unique quality of service, although the majority of researchers agree on a complex intrinsic trilogy:

- The efficiency of HE supposes an economic evaluation of the value of its activity; however, the difficulties increase when it is necessary to calculate and interpret this value.
- The mass of funds mobilized (a €15,8bn annual budget in France) imposes national and regional regulation, but the comparative cost[27] of a student in French HE ($6,960 US) compared to his American counterpart ($20,100 US) or a secondary school pupil makes university the champion of dumping!
- Rationalization by the norm makes it possible to clarify, compare, redeploy; but what product are we manufacturing, with what resources and for what efficiency?

Objectivation, proceduralisation, evaluation are at the heart of any industrial process and thus do not offend, but the will to put labels on university training reveals new drifts: the „finished product" (graduate) is of high quality, but this is difficult to verify, because the mass of rules and procedures checked were defined *a priori* and may or may not have been respected (Mispelblom, 1995). Moreover, the qualification „chain" (Triby, 2005) implies 6 types of protagonists (Bouchardy, Darréon, 2006) whose result remains dubious, given the strong contextualisation student performance mediated by socio-techniques; one could even conclude that individuation (Hottois, 1993) is reinforced, notably in the example of the use of e-learning or self-access electronic HE platforms and remote HE: it highlights levels of competency which are difficult to predict, which will however transform little by little the student and the teacher and their relation (modification of the asymmetry of information, for example).

5. A nebulous and disharmonious horizon

The goal of legibility through the L/M/D, chosen by more than 40 countries to date[28], rejoins the notion of interoperability dear to computer scientists, or that of the points driving license, familiar to motorists: the 180/300/480 ECTS[29] constitute a sort of „points training" which determines access to degrees and confers borderless equivalence... The theory is tempting, but reality shows that student mobility remains marginal, even within the EU, not to mention lecturers' chronic immobilism. The absence of gateways at national level is a recurrent obstacle of the French public service; this reform was the opportunity to introduce cooperation between branches of training which are unaware of each other although close: in the same institution, the same place, in the same HSS disciplines in particular[30]. This initial and laudable path thus did not succeed, and the absence of human, financial, and technical resource mutualisation is still deplored; this tends to prove that the partitioning and proliferation of degrees are beneficial to some, the degrees remaining the „property"

of physical or moral entities, of institutions or lecturers. In short, baronets and means dispersal are legion, in the name of an economy variety where supply determines demand without real piloting with regard to the labour market. Although atomized, the choice is no less plethoric (100 specialised masters degrees at a university with 7,000 students, 352 others at a university with 28,000 students), which hardly makes for legibility. Training is becoming professionalised without core competencies being reinforced to guarantee solid and precise knowledge which students can contextualise through specialisation (Lunel, 2007).

The results are thus mitigated: level D graduates in human sciences have few prospects other than teaching[31], and L3 graduates are forced to continue their studies to aspire to the prospects of Anglo-Saxon Bachelors' degree holders (starting salaries do not justify this lengthening at all).

Among the quality standards measured, what is the place for professionalisation, how are partnerships with companies evaluated? What about resource consumption services rendered? Does one measure more accurately the efficiency of each university by measuring that of each branch of training? How does one balance out the funds to be distributed? Over the years, the system has accumulated an unwieldy quantity of degrees, reforms, legal texts which could usefully be slimmed down; the quantity/quality/timespan conjunction in HE is an issue which nobody can neglect, with the proviso of reaching agreement on the assigned objective of success: the future of the country, financial equilibrium, professional insertion (employability), a fulfilling career, proximity of courses offered (85 universities spread over 175 sites) and of career opportunities... all suggest not centralized governorship, but rather *ad hoc* strategies in response to local opportunities. Higher Education in France thus take two forms: on the one hand, the elitist, ultra-selective path, on the other, the mass of students, with, in the university system, a lesser barrier to entry, but which has proven itself in terms of vocational training and professional insertion (IUTs in particular). All these elements suggest not centralized governorship, but rather *ad hoc* strategies in response to local opportunities, which outlines a horizon more evocative of a constellation than of a galaxy.

Notes

[1] www.minefi.gouv.fr (French government).
[2] In June 1999, in Bologna, 29 countries signed a common text supporting university exchanges and making their systems converge towards common levels of reference (3, 5 and 8 years); since then, 40 States have undertaken this process.
[3] European council, 2000, European Union.
[4] European standards & guidelines.
[5] http://europa.eu.int/comm/eurostat.
[6] The famous ranking published by the University of Shangaï in 2005 placed the 1st French university in 46th position (UPMC Paris VI) and the 1st *grande école* in 93rd (Normale Sup. Paris).

[7] Regional teaching and research pole named University of Toulouse ordered by decree, on the 21st March 2007.

[8] 6 founder members and 10 associate members.

[9] www.menesr.gouv.fr

[10] dedicated school of journalism for example.

[11] UFR, unité de formation et de recherche.

[12] LOLF Organic Law concerning Finance Laws (*Loi organique relative aux lois de finance* n°2001-692) passed on the 21st of August 2001.

[13] New Public Management.

[14] Menesr: Ministry of High Education and Research.

[15] Teacher training colleges.

[16] Source www.education.gouv.fr

[17] The Convention of 1793 created, alongside great royal manufactures, schools like Normale Sup., Polytechnique in 1794, the CNAM... Les Ponts, les Mines and Centrale were created between 1747 and 1829; they all are thus more recent than the first universities, founded under religious auspices during the middle ages.

[18] Interview with its directeur, P. Manière in *L'Express* (3/03/2006).

[19] Source *Les Echos*, Enjeux special feature "Que valent encore nos universités?", April 2006.

[20] Source OECD: Science, technology and industry, scoreboard, Paris.

[21] Moreover, in democratic societies founded on values of freedom, equality, valorisation of the individual and broadly open to a culture of negotiation and contract, this distance is tolerated less and less, because it is felt to be a form of domination.

[22] The „research and higher education" mission breaks down into two programmes: „higher education and university research" on the one hand, and „student life" on the other hand. The higher education and university research programme, to which universities contribute, comprises 15 actions which integrate the various contributions, thus delimited, of the institutions (e.g. initial and continuing training from the Baccalaureate to the *Licence*, research in one of the 7 fields identified, library and documentation, piloting and support of the programme, etc). The mission, which can be interministerial (this is the case for the higher education), defines a Parliamentiary voting unity while identifying a public policy. The programme specifies the means of the mission put to the service of a strategy coordinated by the programme director (here the director of higher education). The action constitutes a division of the programme and identifies the means and the contributions of the programme's various protagonists. At all levels, means are subject to results. The installation and the operational follow-up of the device are the object of a contract of commitment (annual performance programme or equivalent) and an evaluation (annual performance report or equivalent), to which performance indicators are articulated.

[23] As an example, a merger between Customs and Inland Revenue would constitute an economy of 40.000 posts.

[24] International Standard Organization.

[25] Human resource management.

[26] Currently 65%.

[27] OECD (annual average expenditure per student exclusive of R&D activity).

[28] The Bologna Declaration in June 1999 launched the process for the 29 signatory countries.

[29] European Credit Transfer System.

[30] Human and Social Sciences (e.g. L2 University Diploma in Technology (DUT) in Commercialization techniques (TC), Company and Administration Management (GEA) Administrative and Commercial Management (GACO).

[31] On average, 12 times more candidates than posts.

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