THE NEW ISSUES OF HIGHER EDUCATION AND RESEARCH TERITORIAL PUBLIC POLICIES

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ABSTRACT : In order to bring our contribution to those issues and to provide some answers, even partial ones, to the most complex question: « What part does French higher education play in present day society? », our argumentation is articulated around such axes as: higher education governance and its environmental constraints, and the autonomy limits of higher education. If the objective as regards public policy is to build a common higher education space, capable of encouraging cooperation and exchanges between institutions and the students' and professors' mobility, by seeking, even experimenting, new modes of harmonization, the universities seek to preserve their autonomy by identifying measures of social innovation and the mobilization of the social partners as well as both the individual and collective actors in the processes of transformation of higher education. However, the results show that some universities are being confronted with budget and financial difficulties and could, in a near future, be placed under tutorship, thus creating a new paradoxical situation, considering the political will to lead the universities towards a greater autonomy for the sake of their modernization and of international competition. The pressing necessity to change modes of governance is once more highlighted here with the incitement to encourage a real process of consultation and democratic mobilization

Keywords: : higher education; governance; autonomy

Introduction

Increasing unployment and the loss of competitiveness in certain sectors of economic activity have imposed in public debates the need to establish a long-term link between the training system and the production system, or a stronger one when it already exists. In a now globalized context, placing the national educational and training system within the perspective of economic and social development appears as a privileged route towards a long-term improvement of the living conditions and the perpetuation of the social link, though it may present various aspects. This holds as much for low income countries as for high income countries in which the gap between the wealthier and the poorer population is important. Thus, the interrogations as to higher education governance must be apprehended in consideration with its evolution, while considering the regional, national and even international contexts. However, the issue of knowledge - even though it is a major one – "does not appear as the sole objective when analyzing higher education collaborations, as institutional dimensions and action taking also need to be taken into account" (Pestre, 1995:513).

The French higher education's mission cannot be apprehended without situating it within its historical, social and political contexts. Indeed, since its origin, its actors have regularly been confronted with political injunctions which, depending on the period, proved to be either ideological or resulting from social pressures sometimes linked to the demographic evolution of the younger generations. A more democratic access to higher education must be considered in regard with the process of educational and social selection which leads several young people to enter post-high school two-year courses then competitive-entrance higher education establishments of commerce or engineering. When the Law on the Responsibilization of Universities[1] (LRU) was promulgated in August 2007, the political objective aimed at « arousing the universities that had been doing since 1968 » and at creating a new landscape of modern, dynamic and competitive institutions at international ranking level (Sarkozy, 2007). The debates concerning the higher education reforms then mostly focused on the issue of the autonomy of French Universities during the

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[1] Loi sur la Responsabilisation des Universités (LRU).

years 2007 and 2008 and staged harsh confrontations between the opponents and the supporters of the reform.

What emerges from all the debates and studies (Chatelain-Ponroy, Mignot-Gérard, Musselin & Sponem, 2014), some five years was enforced, is a tendency to a hyper-presidencialization which lessens the part played by the scientific and studies advisors and higher education life in general. Moreover, the fact that projects of such government prompted measures as « Excellence Initiatives » were elaborated without a systematic consultation appear to have harmed collegiality and higher education democracy. This was denounced by a great number of the higher education and scientific community members and even by university presidents. These observations call for a renewed interrogation on the real meaning of « higher education governance », not only gauged by the teaching researchers' experiments and research of various regions and countries, but also by local experts' experience - and this, despite a mode of action that seems to ignore territorial specificity. It is this crossing of views which, prepares a heuristic value, prefiguring the strengthening of this governance as much as it imposes it, and motivates its diffusion in a community who expresses their interest for individuals and higher education institutions.

1. Concept of governance

The diversity of the word « governance » somewhat lightens its embedding in a common international heritage, associated as it is to theoretical or/and ideological prejudices likely to appear under the features of a biased meaning, and even of an excessive use of the word. The definition given by the Brandt commission deserves full consideration because it compares global governance to « the sum of the ways and means through which individuals as well as public and private institutions manage their common business ». According to this acceptance, it is a continuous process thanks to which various conflicting interests can be arbitrated and a cooperative action achieved. This includes, the formal institutions and the regimes in charge of implementing decisions, as well as the arrangements that people or institutions have accepted or perceive as being their interest (Theys, 2003). The idea of an interactive process proves to be crucial, even if it echoes a plurality of authors and of institutional and individual actors on sometimes quite distant territorial

areas. For them, this interaction is most often conditioned by a common interest, without the issues of distinct interests appearing at various levels, despite the functions, positions, status and responsibilities that are theirs. They are all confronted with the same issue and they elaborate a representation of a social reality which calls for the implementation of the concept of governance. Thus, the actors fix objectives and act in favor of the development of a collectively shared solution, without anything being predetermined, and they focus on the pragmatic aspect of the application of such an approach.

Concept of governance, such as is generally evoked by the authors, echoes managerial perspectives associated to the management of the human resources of many institutions with regard to the socio-economic and socio-historical contexts in general and to socio-educational environments in particular. These calls for the use and mastership of instruments which are supposed to bring answers to the crisis that the democratic political regimes are going through - regimes whose tradition lies on the authority of the State. Yet, couldn't the specificity of certain circumstances question the universal character of the principles of governance implementation, in the sense of the tools and processes pertaining to a collective action? In other words, is it possible to give thought to governance without wondering how it can be built, applied, made efficient and acceptable, a question pertaining *de facto* less to governance than to governability? Many contributions testify to circumstances that, politically, cannot be managed without considerable hardships and efforts, pertaining to a « chaotic process » to which the actors of education, higher education and vocational training try to contribute more or less successfully. How else could it be, considering this exceptional experience and the pressing incentive for coordination between universities, a pressure coming from governments as well as European authorities? How is the higher education system organized in French higher education institutions? How do these institutions work? How have reforms been introduced in various institutional and political contexts? Finally, how can the State be regarded by higher education and vice versa?

1.1 Governance and methods of feasibility and applicability, effectiveness and acceptability

What are then the expected gains made possible by a decrease of the consequences relative to a low governability provoked by the nature of the issues, even by the anarchical plurality of opponent actors feeding « the reluctancy of certain institutions to have neither the will nor the power to conform to it », just like the incapacity of a major actor to ensure the application of collective resolutions, or the structural weakness of the institutional actors? This echoes a whole complexity of the structural environments and contexts that influence many individual and collective decision makings and that can indeed be decided into a « stabilized world » or into a « controversial world » (Godard,1993).

In a study on French universities, Musselin (2001) demonstrated what, in a state and corporative centralization, results in the « failure » of reforms instituted by the IIIrd Republic. The emergence of a new representation of what French universities and the part played by tutorship seems to come as a result of the four or five-year contracts linking each university and the Ministry representing the State, thus giving greater power to university governance. She proposes a framework for an analysis of higher education systems and their evolutions, leading her to consider contractualization as a « fragile solution », since it carries a contradiction between a « centralizing interventionist mode » and a « differenciating mode » which takes a better account of local diversities. She also considers future challenges, in particular, the possible modes of integration for the directors of Training and Research Units into the governance of universities, along with the positioning of a training offer, the management of personnel and teaching staff and, finally, the presidents of higher education decision-makers which imply, from her point of view, more independent forms of tutorship assessment. The mutations that have taken place over the years tend to show that they can be borne by the same institutional framework, as long as their actors are able to adapt. Beyond these considerations, a typology of the models of higher education management linked to the scientific markets seems to emerge. It must however be noted that they correspond to national logics whose characteristics result from a particular articulation between the logics of the disciplines, institutions and tutorship. This reveals that the German system – even if it is characterized by more asserted institutions than in France

– offers noticeable margins of action for the Ministries or the regions (« Länder »), contrary to the omnipresent French State, yet powerless in university matters. The multiplicity of the sectors, of their projects, their issues and their agendas creates major tensions in the piloting of the public system, and more specifically, in matters of education and higher education. As it is, « the situation is all the more complex when the new educational politics were promulgated under the guise of ideological assertions favoring decentralization / deconcentration in order to simplify the administrative apparatus and, hence, the improvement of the local functioning of academic administration… One must admit that these new politics make it possible to save money and favor greater capacities of piloting and arbitrating that often face local conflicts of a personalized nature » (Lusignan J. & Pelletier G., 2009).

In that sense, Demailly's (2008) interrogation on the territorial scattering of institutional reflexivity - a space through which social life builds itself through self-observation - offers an opportunity to show that « there can be deconnexions between reflexivity and concrete decision-makings », thus justifying the concept of fragmentary reflexivity, since « those decisions concentrate on isolated pockets and co-exist with bureaucratic regulations, the a-reflexive convictions rooted in habits, the a-reflexive skills borne by practical sense ». Therefore, one of the consequences of the obligation of reflexivity so much induced by the implementation of a « good governance » impacts on the govern- ability conditions which cause – in civil society and, more specifically, in higher education actors – expectancies in terms of improvement so that their participation could be taken into account as concerns their propositions on orientation, objectives and the values associated to governance.

In this context, « we would face learning opportunities of a collective reflexivity that can be associated to a meta-governance » (Boyer M., 2000). Isn't the main purpose of the incentives elaborated by the European Commission - be it in the recognition of acquired experience or skills acquired in non-formal and informal learnings (as such was the case in the European governance's official report) – a new legitimation of its action, because of the technocratic representations so far from the social expectancies expressed by a majority of European citizens? If one refers to the typology proposed by Meny and Thoenig (1989), the crisscrossing between the agreement on the governance objectives and the assurance on the concrete means of the governance appears quite decisive;

and the result is four situations ranging from chaotic process to negociated, pragmatic and programmed process.

Two totally opposed trends of thought emerge : on the one hand, a functionalist perspective through which governance is defined in the context of a series of regulations enabling the political system to adapt to its environment and centrally implementing the capacity to broadcast, exchange and receive information (Deutsch K. in Theys, 2003) ; on the other hand, the historical and ideological vision of « governmentality » supported by Foucault M. (1989) which raises the problem of the justification of a neo-liberal model of government in a modern and globalized context. In any case, while the concepts of governance and regulation can be put to the credit of a political will to change the orientation of the educational practices and systems of higher education, they remain indissociable from an evolution of State organization in a post-modern context, confronted with social expectancies by proposing to implement collectively guaranteed individual rights. But how is equity inherent to « good governance », a substantial element of an economic and social performance, to be considered? Or is it only the reflection of intrinsic values relative to strategies of growth? Therefore, the idea according to which com- petition between the sphere of the State and the sphere of the market expresses itself at the expense of the social, economic and political interests of the people and the countries they belong to, is an underlying idea. What are then the demands in matters of redistribution and social equity established according to economic growth and the integration into a global market and not according to an analysis of the population's needs or alternative strategies of development that could be proposed in order to meet these scientifically proved necessities?

There is a great risk of an instrumentalization of the world of research and higher education with a view to legitimizing the orientations of political economy under the guise of a closer relationship between science and politics, a relationship already very much denounced in certain circumstances. Yet, what is principally at stake here is perhaps to look for possible modes of articulating individualism and liberalism in order to restore the credibility of public policies, to make individual and institutional actors feel more responsible and to integrate new and more reflexive and procedural forms of rationality, a more

open and participating conception of democracy (Giddens, 1994). The pressing necessity to change modes of governance is once more highlighted here with the incitement to encourage a real process of consultation and democratic mobilization.

By operating a shift from a classical conception of the government centered on the State to a much more open conception of collective action centered on a plurality of actors expressing a multiplicity of interests, the thoughts on governance best correspond to the realities of today's world, to the legitimation crisis of public authority and to the demands of democracy (Theys, 2002). Thus, governance appears as a series of devices, procedures and instruments whose implementation depends on the adequation with the interests the actors can share while benefiting from larger possibilities. And if the conditions of a « good governance » are not all present, it would be a good thing if they could be negociated with a view to a new balance of power for the benefit of the social groups on the margins of democratic life and society, provided the lines are adequately defined between a « participative governance » and a « representative government » in order to organize and, in a way, promote a new social contract between the higher education world, civil society and the political world.

2. What type of higher education governance in present day society?

Can the low governance of the higher education system in some countries result from its social and political environment or from the inner constraints of the sector itself? Within such a perspective, what part must be attributed to environmental factors and what part to higher education itself, then regarded as an « under-system » with a certain degree of autonomy? Can the present governance modes encourage the emergence of a higher education of quality? Despite the recent and fast expansion of the various mechanisms of an assurance of quality, how can these mechanisms remain relevant and efficient when confronted with such constraints as:
 . the necessity to adopt very broad definitions to account for the diversity of the institutions, the students and the social contexts, while keeping a high level of rigor,

. the necessity, in the governance modes, to integrate the culture of assessment, an essential condition to maintain an offer of quality despite all the challenges imposed by the massification and diversification of higher education,

. more and more tensions and conflicts of interest between the public and the private sectors of higher education and the consequently possible impact on the integrity of the accreditation systems,

. the articulation of the quality assurance mechanisms with such other instruments of public policies as the regulation framework, the financing mechanisms and the institutional support.

Should then the mode of insertion of higher education in international alliances be regarded as a factor weighing, one way or the other, on the governance system of educational institutions? In France, the organization and functioning of higher education systems are heterogeneous. While the ultimate motive is not to make them similar, the objective is to build a common higher education space, capable of encouraging cooperation and exchanges between institutions and the students' and professors' mobility, by seeking, even experimenting, new modes of harmonization.

2.1 What are the effects at territorial level for what efficiency issues?

In France, developing territorial policies of higher education training and research calls for many questions about the great disparity between the twenty-two metropolitan regions concerning the present field of activities. The study of Daniel Filâtre's team (2004) shows that the distribution of the metropolitan regions is based on three combined indicators: the students, the post-graduate students, the researchers and teaching researchers for each region. It is organized around four major groups : 1) the leading region, the Ile-de-France, concentrating 30 % of this wealth ; 2) four very large regions : Rhône-Alpes, PACA (Provence-Alpes-Côte d'Azur), Nord-Pas-de-Calais and Midi-Pyrénées, concentrating about the same amount (28,7 %) ; 3) five more large regions : Aquitaine, Languedoc-Roussillon, Bretagne, Pays de Loire, Alsace-Lorraine with about one fourth of the whole ; 4) finally, the 13 other regions which totalize 17 % of this « higher education and research » capacity. Thus the territorial system appears to be particularly hierarchized and unequal, also

quite close to the typology identified by the DATAR[1] services on the ranking of the European regions. This hierarchized state of the French regional system of higher education and research results from demographic, economic and social data, but it is also a product of history - more specifically political and cultural - the development of a regional system of higher education and research that cannot be considered without integrating these factors[2].

Independently from those hierarchies, scientific and productive dynamics must be considered on the one hand, and on the other, means to relate them together. The scientific and technological potentials of the French regions show that their relative positioning is strongly correlated to each region's number of researchers and to their research and development expenses. The disparities between the regions' positioning should prevent us from too mechanistic an apprehension of the regions' scientific and technological dynamics. Thus, tripartite project contracts (State + Region + Universities) appear as a new regulating tool of higher education and research public action.

If political action is based on an agreement between the central and regional state, each region and the scientific institutions, the conditions of production and use of research and innovation data and indicators can only result from a collective and reflexive social activity and an organizational work of each territory. The learning and teaching capacity of a region is subjected to several such conditions as a consensus, a network of actors and practices of management and identification of the needs. However, the economic credibility of French universities is being denounced, and more particularly the economists, the spokesmen of an Anglo-Saxon « efficiency culture » praising efficiency and performance in the name of « an economy of the most competitive and dynamic knowledge in the world ».

As it is, economic science happens to be not only a deeply formative discipline, as Emile Durkheim has demonstrated, but also « performative », in the philosopher John Austin's terms. Which means that it partly creates the market it is supposed to describe, and totally transforms the State whose modes of interference it studies.

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[1] Délégation interministérielle à l'Aménagement du Territoire rattachée auprès du Premier Ministre.
[2] When scientific development is taken as indicator, this disparity is even more patent.

In France, as in many other countries, the main reformers of higher education often tend to refer to the declarations of economists, managers or even political decision-makers. Yet, while those points of view are not to be denied, they do not preclude the possibility of getting involved in a process of collective construction in which each actor will can make propositions of change considering not only the economic and political environment, but also the social and cultural environment at various levels – local, regional, national and international – the real essential finality of all cooperation and support for a social change.

As a conclusion, the conception of the educational system, as well as that of the higher education system, depends on the political choices - or lack of choices – on the part of the States concerning education, higher educational, professional and techno- logical training, as well as research. Yet, whatever the political orientations regarding higher education and research, the desire to offer a performing and quality system to individuals and collectivities, to society in general in a globalized perspective, is asserted as much as social expectancies, whatever the countries' economic, social and cultural context.

2.2 What form of autonomy for higher education?

The question of the autonomy of universities is particularly acute as the political choices regarding higher education governance could very well lead to the implementation, even the increase, of a hierarchy between higher education institutions (Lafont & Pariat, 2011). While, at first sight, two conceptions may be identified, highlighting a national higher education public policy on the one hand, and a liberal policy on the other, a closer look reveals many more subtler subdivisions.
Historically, education is public in France; however, for the past decade, it has become somewhat partly more liberal, at least at higher education level. New political choices have caused an autonomization of higher education governing, even if, owing to political tradition, a strong national orientation remains concerning education and higher education.

Yet, it cannot be compared with the asserted objectives of other countries where planning is a solid rampart against all desire to create new branches of teaching that would not have been approved by the State. As for more liberal systems, several sub-categories can be identified since, in certain countries, there are public as well as private universities. So, do higher education institutions seek their autonomy toward the State or toward the private sector? What is the issue of autonomy in a country where the State has a low rate of legitimacy? And how does autonomy seeking affect the financing of higher education?

3. Higher education between autonomy and dependence

3.1 The context of the autonomy of universities

The autonomy of universities is linked to a whole series of changes implemented within the context of the creation of the LMD grades, of the RPL (Recognition of Prior Learning) and the LOLF (the Organic Law relative to the financial laws) which deeply modify the State's analytical budgets. On the whole, these reforms are set in a European context which asserts the necessity of a raise of the accreditation and qualification level impulsed by the Lisbon 2000 strategy. This stresses the need to meet the challenges of a French higher education which does not appear very satisfying in such aspects as : public financing which is inferior to the needs, thus creating dependence ; the drastic number of students failing in the first year ; the persistant inadequation of many diplomas on the labour market ; the more or less admitted incapacity to attract students and professors in the context of globalization ; the relative inefficiency of research in terms of licences and publications.

The debates on the « inter-institutional regroupings or coordinations between universities are taking place in several European countries » (Benninghoff, Joyce-Cagnard, Leresche, Ramuz, 2012: 9). And the links between the « European spaces » of research and higher education were initiated by the Bologna follow-up conference in Berlin in 2003, and even more so by the one in Bergen in 2005 (Beerkens, 2008). These incentives to a closer relationship and

cooperation between higher education institutions were in fact impulsed at European level, notably on the basis of three reforms, relative to:

- the implementation of the Bologna Process (1999) with the perspective of the comparability of accreditations, of the structuration of Bachelor's Degree, Master's Degree and Doctorate curricula (LMD), and of Europe-wide mobility and quality assessment,
- the formulation of the Lisbon strategy (2000) aiming at making the European Union « the most dynamic and competitive knowledge economy in the world »
- the construction of the European space of research, so as to go into a synergy with the European space of higher education.

So « higher education governance » must be apprehended by considering the higher education accreditation and assessment system as a strategy of governance improvement in various contexts, more particularly in reference to the issues, but also to the subsequent constraints inherent to territorial public policies concerning higher education and research. The purpose is to lay the stress on measures aiming at getting better results and performances, while reducing inequalities and increasing the schooling rate. This must be done by identifying measures of social innovation and the mobilization of the social partners as well as both the individual and collective actors in the processes of transformation of higher education. Indeed, the autonomy of higher education needs to be analyzed in regard with political choices concerning higher education governance; this perspective encourages the focusing on a dichotomy which tends to appear between institutions and the regions, even though nuances can be detected. Thus, reflexion can be built around possible and relevant modes of the governance of higher education institutions and, more particularly, of universities. Indeed « thinking the State, thinking the University » (Lafont & Pariat, 2011) implies identifying not only higher education objectives but those resulting from the responsibilization of institutional and higher education actors, a likely source for a space of negociation between State representatives and those in charge of higher education governance.

The autonomy of universities could very well establish a hierarchy between higher education institutions, even increase it when it already exists, which is perhaps an understated objective of the reforms. In various political

declarations, public authorities say they wish to see some universities of a worldwide importance emerge, with a high research potential, whereas other institutions would serve to adapt to a local labour market while keeping in tune with environmental planning. The ultimate finality could very well be that of an academic elitism – denounced by some and approved by others (certain university presidents), without really asserting that this is an innovating strategy, since our « best » pupils have always had institutional paths ready for them (two-year post-high school courses, then competitive entrance higher education establishments).

But the law could also encourage a new balance that would benefit universities. The Poles of Research and Teaching (PRES/Universitary Community of establishments: 2013) were created after the enforcement of the 2006 law as well as the incitation to participate in the Poles of Competitiveness may prove paradoxical in so far as those universities will from now on collaborate while several faculties of those very institutions are still often in competition. In a more achieved form, while the perspective of a possible fusion between institutions is likely to make a new powerful actor appear, doesn't it support the competition with other PRES? Yet, is it imaginable that the State could totally abandon all control on the teaching contents within the framework of the autonomy of universities?

So the objective is to « liberate » local initiatives in public service, in terms of human resources management. But this does not imply that the State is backing out, since universities still receive public funds; the financing and use of public money are now closely surveyed, thanks to the analytical method of the LOLF. As for estimating State financing, it goes on according to the usual modes of distribution: a fixed amount (the Functioning Global Dotation) and a contractual part (a University-State-Region four/five-year project).

3.2 The governing modes of French universities

On the basis of the results of a qualitative study on the governing modes of four French universities (Mignot-Gérard & Musselin, 2000), authors have highlighted the pluralist dimension of university leadership. They have noted that even before the implementation of the LRU and beyond the homogeneous

status originated in the 1984 law, each university had developed a very personal governing style, each being specific according to the relation- ship of powers established in each institution. Adding to the political state dimension, « a university government » appears as « the product of this complex relational combination: the relationship of cooperation between the various leaders, the relationship between the leaders and public authorities, and the inter-dependence between the various authorities » (Mignot-Gérard, 2003b:38). In the last two decades there have appeared new forms of organization and decision-making structures inside the universities, in which leadership and decision making no longer really belong to independent collegial structures controled by the academic bodies, but where the republic of « *scholars* » gives place to what can be called « *stakeholder organizations* » in which powerful managerial infrastructures tend to counterbalance - or even replace - the academic structures traditionally controled by the deans, heads of departments and professors. This goes along with a certain form of the professionalization of management, where the relations that were traditionally based on trust have given place to new forms of relationship based on criteria of transparence, quality-assurance processes, mechanisms of peer-appreciation, external assessments and drills of performance indicators, in order to assess research, training and vocational teaching.

Little by little, the model of the democratic representation of various groups of actors (students, professors, administrative staff) tends to fade away before new « *corporate* » organization models based on more vertical decisional processes. The resort to orientation or administration councils mobilizes new types of actors (the business sector, representatives of the political world or of civil society). This changes our vision of our traditional university, of the way it fits into society, replaced by the image of an enterprising and « *corporate* » university which cannot remain neutral before the issues of the society it belongs to. Therefore, through new forms of social commitment with the State, the university must mobilize its scientific expertise as well as its technological and management know-how so as to participate in solving some of the country's strategic issues and thus take part in the construction of a prosperous and supportive society, respectful of the environment.

For such is the essential mission of the political world: clarifying the part it intends to have and see the University play in French society, since the enforcement of the LRU appears partly homogeneous and partly heterogeneous. Indeed, the contexts inherent to the people in charge of the implementation of higher education authorities very much influence the modes in which institutions are governed as well as the action of both the institutional and the environmental actors and are situated in a by-essence highly complex game of internal and external inter-dependences and interactions.

To that purpose, they wish that the University Presidents' Conference could be recognized as an actor with real propositions in order to encourage a democratic functioning ; they also ask for a break with the logics founding the research pact, more specifically, with the Research and Higher Education Assessment Agency, so as to renew the links with the principles of a well-understood assessment ; they also assert that an adequate balance for a national regulation of higher education and research needs a more democratic functioning than the one instituted by the LRU. Finally, they deem that the national status plays a major part and that it is necessary to maintain such a status in so far as it preserves independence towards economic or political pressures. Far from rejecting the principles of assessment, they refuse any of its aspects whose finality could lead to hierarchize the institutions, one in relationship with the others, and could place them in a competitive position; such is the reason why, most likely, they agree on the pressing necessity to restore the true meaning and value of public service in higher education and research. Concerning the evaluation, Pons (2010) questions the motives of the implementation of a real assessment policy as well as the logics which are supposed to guide it. He draws our attention on the uncertain- ties characterizing the expectancies of the educational system's decision-makers and actors, as well as on the official « fuzziness » pertaining to the concept of assessment. It therefore necessarily follows an interrogation on the motives behind the implementation of the accreditation and assessment systems of higher education. Is the purpose a strategic improvement of university governance? The issue of the autonomy of higher education is then considered in the light of various experiments highlighting the distinction between autonomy and dependence towards the form of a more favored state governance.

The orientations defined by the newly elected President of the Republic (2012) did not contemplate abrogating the LRU. The President's recent declarations rather consider re- arranging the national text. It therefore seems that, at higher education and research level, all the actors concerned are unanimous on the necessity to restore the meaning and value of public service in higher education and research, and to give new life to democratic collegial cooperation. However, there are diverging points of view on the means to reach these objectives, mainly on the principle of whether or not abrogating the LRU. From that point of view, the above-mentioned newly elected presidents confirm the diagnosis that had been made by Musselin (2001) long before the promulgation of the LRU, the law being for them « more democratic and less inegalitarian than a contract or an arrangement »[1].

In the light of this atypical example, Musselin proposes a study of the functioning modes of the most important institutional changes in French higher education in the past recent years. This makes it possible to anticipate the way - considering the new political context in France - the coming years should provide new elements of analysis and reflection on the evolution of the higher education and research system.

Furthermore, at the completion of a report on the governance of French universities, its authors (Chatelain-Ponroy S., Mignot-Gérard S., Musselin C., Sponem S., 2014) highlight the fact that the managing teams of the universities work in a cohesive manner and in agreement with the central services, whereas the « component » directors are seldom associated to the decision-making and bring very little support to the institution's policies. In parallel, the authors note a certain centralization of the decisions, as the influence of the managing teams (and sometimes of the central services) is deemed important in all the considered fields of decision. However, the universities' ability to make decisions to re-deal out the ressources remains more limited than their ability to identify the priority fields. Finally, the decision criteria seem more often linked to research priorities than to teaching priorities. As for the measure devices, a frequent division can be noted between the members of the managing teams, ever more laudatory and less critical on the use of tools and

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[1] Mensuel d'information du SNESUP, n° 606, juin 2012, p. 14.

the availability of information than the other people interviewed. And in relationship with the use of the gathered data, those on teaching and budgets are seen as a means of giving the tutors an account of them, whereas the data relative to research are more often presented as tools of performance assessment. However, in spite of the numerous measure devices, the professors and / or researchers who were interviewed say they feel more autonomous in their field of work. Finally, on analyzing all the answers, it seems that the professors and / or researchers, the administrative staff and the members of the managing teams are strongly attached to their institution, as well as to their unit and their discipline, even if they feel most attached to the latter. Even if their conceptions of the universitiy vary according to the categories of those who were tnterviewed, and yet without the same groups always being opposed to the other groups, these conceptions on the whole remain more scientific than managerial, and more favorable to public than to private management. The people interviewed agree to a differenciated treatment of the professors and / or researchers (or of the administrative staff), or between the institutions; and they also adhere to forms of collective management rather than of individualized management. The recent reforms and evolutions often provoke rather split opinions, which, in the end, reveals a somewhat divided higher education community. Indeed the professors and / or researchers' answers are often distinct from those of the other categor- ies : the administration and managing teams.

Thus, another report on « the freedom, responsibility… and centralization of universities » (Musselin, Barrier, Boubal & Soubiron, 2012) conclude to numerous transformations. The study is based on an approach of a monographic type led in three institutions. In these three institutions, it appears that the transformations that were observed do not seem linked only to the LRU, but seem to result from a combination of constraints and factors due to the new « Enlarged Responsibilities and Competences » (RCE : Responsabilités et Compétences Elargies), to the HCERES (Higher Comity for Assessment Research and Higher teaching) assessments and, beyond that, to the stress laid on performance and « excellence », in recent policies. However, in order to qualify the authors' point of view, it must be said that those constraints and factors are inherent to the LRU. Moreover, according to the authors, strong convergences appear between the three institutions under

study, though their characteristics may appear very different at first sight (in their localizations, their sizes, their scientific orientations, and so on). Thus, while nuances must be taken into account, what can be noticed is a very distinct evolution towards a centralization of the decisions and processes inducing a stronger « institution » level, a governing style where political and administrative authorities cooperate in order to pilot from the top and to normalize the practices and procedures, finally, a special attention to the results and, more specifically, to scientific production.

Quite radical changes can be noticed. The « administrative » style, that had prevailed in the past, dominated by the head secretary and his/her administration, has been replaced by a more political model associating the « component » directors to the implementation of managerial logics carried by the administration and the presidential team. As for the « presidential, faculty » style, it has evolved towards a « presidential, centralized » model. Indeed, though there is no questioning the possible impact of the recent reforms on these evolutions, a « president effect » cannot be denied, since, in the three universities under study, the conceptions they carry appear as being highly significant. In the 1990s, the most obvious differences between the institutions under study were the relational variations, i.e. the more or less conflictual or cooperative nature of the relationship linking the president and the « component » directors, the president and the central administration, the members of the presidential team one with the other, but also the part played by the authorities, as had been shown by S. Mignot-Gérard (2003a). In 2011, these various relations are globally identical in all the institutions. What makes the universities differ are the presidential orientations: a negociated « managerialization » in one case, a new structuration of the university around research in another, and the re-strengthening of the university through rationalization in yet another case.

3.3 Accreditation and assessment system in higher education

Consequently, a new questioning arises here on the accreditation and assessment issues, the somehow corollaries of governance, at the level of the institutions themselves as well as that of society as a whole, forcing the State to play the part of a quality coach. Nevertheless, it is feared that the State could little by little disengage itself from universities whose teaching or research are

not considered as priorities, with the apparition of universities who, public moral entities though they are, could, one day, become largely dependent on private financing and registration fees. Yet, such an evolution could not be achieved without the agreement - spoken or not - of public authorities, although it is a reform of the governance of French universities. Anyway, such a reform of the higher education system could not possibly associate the transmission of universal knowledge with the necessary autonomy of institutions and their students, and that of the construction of social integration to the dependence on the labour market.

Alternating between training path and vocational route makes it necessary, on the one hand, to reconsider access to university in order to register in a professionalizing or general training at any time of a life cycle and, on the other hand, to assimilate training to a right and to a process meeting numerous requirements - knowing all the while that the French system sometimes makes individuals undergo a lifelong orientation, a failure or a « wrong » choice and that that system is socially selective and can generate strong tensions and dissatisfactions. All these elements are likely to impulse a policy of continuous training which partakes in doing away with the partitions of higher education routes. The vocational path is thus progressively given more value through the creation of new L- and M-level diplomas. But won't the creation of new ways of access to certification encourage the creation of bridges between the labor world and higher education, through clearer rules relative to competence referentials[1]?

The evolution of the labor market itself is heading in that direction, with ever more changing jobs and constantly evolving techniques, showing new paths of orientation as the vector of change and innovation in a country that has great difficulty in recognizing the diversity of forms of excellence and where the weight of academic ranking is often very decisive on a professional and social future. The university implements measures of a « social promotion » type in so far as it makes it possible for certain people to register in training

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[1] It is the lowest degrees in the educational ladder which can be converted into competitive referentials; as soon as the degrees are of a higher level, they are better defined as knowledge programmes. These competence and knowledge referentials, whose use is unknown, serve as revealing indicators of effective competences, modeled by practice.

with a view to getting degrees outside the traditional recruiting procedures based on files linked to tests of knowledge passed in the previous years. This can reach the very core of the French social system, founded on republican elitism, in other words, on a hierarchy of social functions according to academic merit, i.e. diplomas (Maurin, 2004). But it is also presented as a device aiming at fluidifying the labor market by recognizing the skills of people who already have certain functions without having the required degrees, and by allowing the promotion of those among them who could have access to higher functions (vertical mobility) or other functions altogether (horizontal mobility). However, the fact that it is a measure of affirmative action[1] which counters the traditions of French society cultivating republican elitism under the cover of formal equality is not really brought to light. And yet the RPL device marks a breaking-off with the traditional mode of degree delivering by encouraging new strategies that it can induce in individuals who are - or are likely to be - concerned, as well as in the administrations, the firms or the organizations employing them - or likely to do so. Therefore, the accreditation and assessment systems of higher education appear to us as capable of revealing the improvement strategies of higher education governance, of higher education and of the constraints relative to its environment and to the limits to its autonomy.

Conclusion

In a context of globalization being accelerated by the mechanisms of homogeneization and contamination, the reforms in education and higher education that are being applied in several countries present strong similitudes, despite sometimes very contrasted contexts and levels of development. Thus, in a society which is today characterized by an « advanced modernity » (Giddens, 1994), following an organization based on processes of bureaucracy and rationalization (Weber, 1971), isn't governance, in its turn, becoming the stimulant of a societal evolution, the vector of a transformation of knowledge? Therefore, isn't the challenge to be up to a joint construction that must be freed from the contradictions inherent to the mode of decision-making

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[1] It is supposed to aim at correcting the most discriminating dysfunctionings of a society who has not managed to adapt in a more reactive and supple way to the ups and downs of its evolution and has been incapable of tackling the problems undermining it.

represented by the governance associated to a democratic political regime? While the foundations of democracy rest on the people's sovereign expression, governance refers to such entities as the State, the Universities, the networks… Sovereignty is then defined by an equal power of each individual, though governance favors those groups which generally benefit from attributes that the others do not possess. The stress laid on the issues of territorial spaces and long-term international cooperation makes it possible to question the processes of individual and collective interactions in infra-territorial and extra-territorial contexts. Thus, in time, the regions' involvement associated to the universities' responsibilization - sometimes called « the third act of decentralization in France » - appears more and more as a complementary element of public policies and national and international strategies, making a public management model emerge with a view to strategically planning regional development and to giving a global approach to the issues. In the same line, the development of international cooperations in a perspective of long-term development emerges as a vector likely to make counter-balances possible in a globalized environment.

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