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French university transformation: The perception of academics^{1*}

Nino Tandilashvili²

Abstract

Recent socio-technological evolutions have pushed French universities to engage themselves in a global process of reforms aiming at modernization of their management practices. Several studies have demonstrated a conflict between traditional academic values and new principals introduced with the university management reforms. The aim of this research is to highlight the changes experienced by French academics as a result of the transformation of university management. Neo-institutional theory is used as a framework for thematic analysis of the discourse of academics from three public universities. The results of this study show that coercive and mimetic isomorphism seems to be the main reason of the university transformation, which results in value conflicts and changes in academics' professional identity. However, contrary to the general opinion of French academics, who attribute all their misfortunes to managerialist reforms, the interviewed academics differentiate the sources of experienced evolutions.

Keywords: university, managerialism, institutional isomorphism, value conflict, academic profession.

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¹ The empirical data was collected between 2013 and 2016

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1. Introduction

A global academic upheaval has been going on for about thirty years and has also affected France. Higher education has become a central element of economic and socio-technological growth and has been given new objectives. Universities have found themselves facing new competitive and financial challenges. As a result, they have embarked on a global process of reforms and modernisation of their management.

Public management modernisation reforms, known as New Public Management (Hood, 1995), New Weberian State (Pollitt and Bouckaert, 2011) or Managerialism (Enteman, 1993; Deem and Brehony, 2005; Tandilashvili, 2016), were initiated in France from the 2000s. Affecting all public sectors, these reforms focus on transforming the traditional governance of public universities and the use of managerial skills, traditionally employed in the private sector (Hood, 1995; Pollitt, 2014). These reforms also introduce new values, such as efficiency and managerial modernity.

The principle of organisational empowerment is one of the main features of these reforms. Within the field of higher education, this principle implies that universities become more autonomous by strengthening their organisational and managerial dimensions. Major efforts in this direction have been undertaken in France by successive governments with these reforms: University 2000, University of the 3^{ème} Millennium, the Organic Law on Finance Laws, the General Review of Public Policies, the Research and Higher Education Poles, the Law on the Freedoms and Responsibilities of Universities, the Law on Higher Education and Research.

Apart from these imposed reforms, other non-normative factors also impact the French university. On the one hand, to keep up with technological and societal developments, universities have renewed their managerial practices and digitised their activities (Baumgartner and Solle, 2006; Bartoli and Ewango-Chatelet, 2016). On the other hand, some external factors, such as demography, international competition and technological progress have contributed to an evolution of the university (Boitier et al., 2015; Couston et al., 2018): internationalisation of research and teaching, modernisation of teaching methods, etc.

These developments and changes are often criticised by French academics. Scientific studies highlight a conflict between the traditional values of the academic world and the new values introduced by recent developments (Musselin, 2001; Fave-Bonnet 2002; Baumgartner and Solle, 2006; Chatelain-Ponroy et al, 2012; Petitjean et al, 2014; Tandilashvili, 2016; Bartoli and Ewango-Chatelet, 2016; Marini, 2021). Researchers consider these changes so important that they speak of the denaturation of the university (Amar and Berthier, 2007; Vinokur, 2008; Côme and Rouet, 2016). For them, the new notions of performance, efficiency and quality, brought by the reforms, seem to provoke an 'identity crisis' (Baumgartner and Solle, 2006).

The aim of this research is to explore the changes experienced by academics as a result of university reforms, grouped under the concept of managerialism in this research. Thus, it is part of an important public and scientific debates raised by the evolution of university governance in France and studies the actual effects of public management reforms onto the university. However, with the aim to contribute to the literature, it produces new knowledge, this research mobilises an innovative theoretical framework for the research question. The nature of isomorphism with the institutional field of French higher education will be analysed according to the neo-institutional theory.

The article proposes a case study of three French universities: a multidisciplinary university, a scientific university and a university of letters and social sciences. Thematic content analysis of the interviewed academics' discourse allows examining the academics' perception of evolutions they experience.

2. Theoretical framework

The starting point for research on the evolution of higher education in France is the feeling shared by academics that academic life is not the same as it used to be (Fave-Bonnet, 2002; Baumgartner and Solle, 2006; Chatelain-Ponroy et al., 2012; Drucker-Godard, et al., 2013; Petitjean et al., 2014; Tandilashvili, 2016; Côme and Rouet, 2016). As French universities are subject to common pressures, neo-institutional theory offers us an interesting reading grid to examine the evolution of university organisation through the various pressures that would coexist in the higher education system. Thus, the theoretical framework mobilised in this research is composed of two parts: first, we examine the academic works on the main management reforms impacting the French university; second, we expose the contributions of the neo-institutional theory to our research question.

2.1. The emergence of managerialism in the French university

Since the 2000s, several public management reforms modified the functioning of French universities. Originating in Anglo-Saxon countries, these reforms are part of a worldwide movement of modernisation of public organisations' management (Hood, 1995; Pollitt and Bouckaert, 2011; Amar and Berthier, 2007). They are known by different names: New Public Management (Hood, 1995), New Weberian State (Pollitt and Bouckaert, 2011), etc. and are presented in different forms: as a doctrine (Amar and Berthier, 2007; Pollitt and Bouckaert, 2011) or as an ideology (Enteman, 1993; Deem and Brehony, 2005). Despite their different affiliations, the diversity of forms and the spectrum of application, these reforms are based on a common objective of improving the quality of public services by guiding governments towards greater efficiency (Meek, 2002; Locke, 2009; Côme and Rouet, 2016). We propose to analyse these reforms under the concept of 'managerialism' in the sense of Deem and Brehony (2005).

The term managerialism is often used to describe public management reforms in higher education (Deem and Brehony, 2005; Dupuis, 2008). Unlike other terms used in the same context, managerialism reveals the desire of reformers to increase the organisational dimensions of universities in parallel to strengthening their economic and managerial rationalities (Brunsson and Sahlin-Andersson, 2000; Tandilashvili, 2016). Organisational strengthening involves the transformation of universities into real organisations, which, according to Brunsson and Sahlin-Andersson's (2000) theory, must have three characteristics: own identity, a well-defined line of authority and a managerial rationality (three elements that are often central to university reforms, as we will see in this section).

Another difference with other similar names is that social scientists favour the term managerialism to show their negative opinion on the adoption of private sector managerial practices and tools in the management of public universities (Dupuis, 2008). According to Meek (2002), for example, the 'ism' of managerialism becomes pejorative when it refers to a control over the academic product by those, who are not directly involved in its creation.

The analysis of French public management reforms allows us to observe the rise of managerialism within the French university from the 2000s. Following developments in higher education, the modernisation of universities became an issue at government level (Côme, 2013). Reformers proposed introduction of private sector managerial tools in the management of public universities as a promise of university modernisation and increased productivity (Fely, 2001; Gillet and Gillet, 2013; Côme and Rouet, 2016; Chatelin and Kaddouri, 2017).

The literature review allows identifying the ideology of managerialism in several French reforms. An important reform in this regard is the enactment of the Organic Law on Finance Laws (LOLF) in 2001³. As a visible manifestation of managerialism (Baumgartner and Solle, 2006; Chatelin

³ The low LOLF is not limited to academic institutions and applies to the entire public sector.

and Kaddouri, 2017), the law puts at the heart of administrative functioning the triptych 'relevance - effectiveness - efficiency' by introduction of management control and accountability (Gibert and Benzerafa Alilat, 2012). The law LOLF sets up the system for allocating resources based on contractual policy and the notion of performance. State budget appropriations are presented in the form of national programmes that define university missions and actions. The law also presents objectives and indicators that allow the performance of universities to be measured.

Later, the Prime Minister launched the work of the General Review of Public Policies (RGPP⁴), designed to enhance the performance of public organisations with more effectiveness and efficiency (Gibert, 2015). The reform affects universities through the adoption of new managerial skills. The aim of the reform is to introduce a culture of results into universities by setting up management charts for the reforms undertaken and budgetary financing of universities based on performance. Although technical in appearance, these renovations of the State's budgetary and financial procedures also introduce novel concepts, such as accountability for achieving public policy objectives (socio-economic effectiveness) and user satisfaction (quality of service) at the lowest cost (efficiency) (Bartoli and Chomienne, 2011).

The Law on Universities of 2007 - LRU law – was designated as "the decisive factor in the modernisation of university management"⁵. The law modifies several aspects of the university's functioning: governance, management, structure, mission, relationship with the supervisory authority. Among other things, the LRU law sets the objective of giving the university real organisational autonomy. In terms of governance, the law changes the power distribution. The university president becomes an autonomous leader who manages his institution with the help of a reinforced Board of Directors. In terms of management, the law decentralises some management tasks from the ministry to the universities under the concept of Extended Responsibilities and Competences - RCE. From now on, universities locally manage their budgets, human resources and, in some cases, their real estate.

In 2009, the 'grand emprunt' project and the Programme d'Investissement d'Avenir (PIA) were launched with the aim to create world-class university complexes capable of strengthening France's international competitiveness. Unintendedly, this reform also restructured the competitive environment of national higher education (Chatelin and Kaddouri, 2017) and reinforced the result-oriented culture with performance-based budgeting practices. The Law of education and scientific research (ESR) of 2013 is part of the same ideology and revolves around the structural modification of the university. Internally, it reduces the number of central councils. Externally it creates communities of universities and other HEIs which further redefine the landscape of higher education.

The latest law, which is part of the same triptych of relevance, effectiveness and efficiency of university organisations, is the 2020 law on research programming for 2021-2030 horizon. Among others, the law aims to 'increase the influence' of French research. It also aims to enhance the job status and career in research and higher education by introducing new indicators, based on financial needs and budgetary resources.

2.2. The contributions of neo-institutional theory to the field of French higher education

According to neo-institutional theory, operating within the same environment encourages organisations to adopt similar processes that enable them to gain legitimacy in their institutional field. This approach, defined as 'institutional isomorphism' by DiMaggio and Powell (1983), shows a process of increasing homogenisation of organisations, which aims above all 'to bring the organisation in line with the expectations of public authorities and socio-economic environment, dominated by the cult of reason' (Boiral, 2007, p.105).

⁴ The RGPP was replaced by the MAP (Modernisation de l'Action Publique) in 2012.

⁵ Court of Auditors, "L'autonomie financière des universités : une réforme à poursuivre", June 2015, p. 10

The quest for legitimacy is the main driver of institutional isomorphism. It implies certain approval and acceptability from society, resulting in 'legitimacy, which may be more important than economic performance' (Pfeffer and Salancik, 1978). Legitimation is a complex process, 'symbolic, cognitive and identity-based at the same time' (Buisson, 2006, p.157). Often the symbolic and identity elements are as important as the institutional and legal elements. As Scott (1995) points out, an institution rests on three important pillars: a regulatory pillar (the laws and formal rules ordained by the state); a normative pillar (the norms, standards and values); and a cognitive pillar (the frame of reference shared by the members of the institution).

The processes of isomorphism can be a result of external pressure. This occurs when, for example, formal and informal pressures on an organisation from the state cause them to engage in a process of isomorphism (Greenwood et al., 2012). This process is known as 'coercive' isomorphism. In other cases, institutional isomorphism is initiated by the organisation itself. This is known as 'mimetic' isomorphism and can occur, for example, as a standardised response to uncertainty (Deephouse, 1999). In a third case, an isomorphism is initiated by the members of a profession in order, for example, to legitimise their professional autonomy. This so-called 'normative' isomorphism occurs when members of a profession want to establish a cognitive basis for their profession in order, for example, to define the conditions and methods of work and to control the output of producers (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983, p.152).

The French university, with its structure, mode of operation and context, represents a case that can be easily influenced by all three forms of isomorphic pressures. According to the theory, coercive isomorphism would be more important in an organisation which is strongly dependent on other organisation(s) and that interacts strongly with state entities. At the same time, an organisation with a strong centralisation of resources would easily become similar to its resource provider (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983, p.154). Despite an administrative autonomy granted by the Faure law in 1968, and reinforced by the LRU law in 2007, French universities remain highly dependent on the state, financially, with state subsidies and with a national framework of administrative and academic functioning (Côme, 2013). As Goy explains, despite the implementation of contractual relation with the supervising ministry, the French university has not succeeded in developing an individual strategy, as contractualisation has taken place as a process of institutional isomorphism aimed mainly at meeting the expectations of the supervisory authority (Goy, 2015).

As for mimetic isomorphism, it would be more important in organisations with an uncertain relationship between means and ends and which are characterised by ambiguous goals (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983). These two attributes are often associated with university. Weick's (1976) theory of 'loosely coupled systems', for example, explains the complexity of the university organisation by the ambiguity of the technologies deployed. This ambiguity makes it impossible to study the university organisation only in terms of its formal structure, activities and objectives; the informal, often chaotic part is equally important.

The process of mimetic isomorphism would also be more accelerated in an institutional field where there are a limited number of alternative organisational models. According to Mintzberg's theory of professional bureaucracy, the organisational model of the university is very particular because of its dual character. Its governance mixes the collegial forms typical of the scientific institution, where the decision-making power is held by the scientists, and the institutional steering modes, specific to each organisation. This makes the university's organisational model unique (Mintzberg, 1979).

According to neo-institutional theory, the degree of normative isomorphism would depend on the degree of professionalisation within the institutional field and the degree of participation of the leaders of organisations in professional associations. The leadership of the French university is carried out by academic and administrative staff. A very large majority of administrative staff are civil servants, recruited through internal and external competitions in a centralised manner at the level of

the supervising⁶ ministry, which manages their careers and salaries. Academics follow a common path: doctoral studies followed by qualification to the corps of *Maîtres de conférences* and *Professeur des universités*. The representatives of each discipline are trained according to the common standards of the CNU sections (*Conseil National des Universités*). Despite a significant cultural separation between the different disciplines, especially for recruitment, universal values, such as academic freedom, collegiality, independence, public service, create a common framework of identification of academics, shared by all (Drucker-Godard, et al. 2013).

Neo-institutional theory provides a framework for analysing different pressures on the French university. Firstly, the managerialist reforms, mentioned above, are likely to initiate coercive isomorphism by imposing a common management reference framework on universities. In parallel, universities engaged in self-modernisation processes, as recalled in the introduction to this article, can initiate managerial changes to cope with socio-economic challenges and keep up with technological change. Finally, university managers can establish a cognitive basis for their work in order to legitimise the new professional power granted by the LRU law.

Previous studies have shown that the university faces institutional pressures, especially due to managerialist reforms (Chatelin and Kaddouri, 2017). For example, Seifried et.al, (2019) showed that isomorphic pressures pushed German universities to adopt quality management systems. Coercive isomorphism was the main force in this process, but its perceived effectiveness by academics was lower, compared to changes initiated by the universities themselves. Marini's (2021) study showed isomorphism in French and Spanish universities. In France, strong political implications in the modification of the higher education system prompted a coercive isomorphism with the imposition of common evaluation standards, among other changes. This isomorphism was strongly contested by academics. In Spain, the author observes a mimetic isomorphism initiated by the universities that has resulted in more significant changes in academic life. Fay and Zavatarro's (2016) study showed that US higher education institutions have adopted and implemented business practices, including branding and marketing as a response to isomorphic pressures (response to national trends and efforts to capitalise on their own strong performance). A review of the literature by Zapp and Ramirez (2019) showed strong isomorphism in different national contexts as a response to the internationalisation of higher education with international initiatives, accreditation agencies and qualification frameworks.

With the aim of exploring the changes experienced by French academics as a result of managerialist reforms, the case study detailed below allows us to highlight the nature of isomorphisms within the French university.

3. Research methodology and results of data analysis

Studying the evolution of the French university implies understanding the university institution as a whole. A qualitative research based on semi-structured interviews was conducted in this study as it aims to understand a current and relatively unknown process which is situated in a complex social framework (Romelaer, 2005). A multiple case study method was chosen (Yin, 2014), which allowed us to combine direct observations and various documentary sources relating to the practices and discourses of three French universities.

⁶ The possession of a degree varies according to the category of the job and does not require any administrative education. In addition, there is an increasing number of contractual administrative staff recruited by universities.

3.1. Research methodology

To study cases were selected with criteria: we needed to have the possibility of examining, institutions already engaged in a management reform on the one hand, and institutions with a diversified profile in order to observe different functioning: size, disciplinary field, international recognition, on the other hand. To meet the first criterion, we chose two institutions that switched to the new management methods during the first phase of the LRU law (2009) and one later in 2011. As the research was carried out between 2013 and 2016, this allowed us to study changes that had been in place for four years. For the second criterion, we chose three universities with clearly different academic perimeters: a scientific university, a multidisciplinary university and a university of humanities and social sciences. The three institutions studied can be qualified as large or very large institutions according to the French scale (student numbers). Finally, the three institutions hold different places in international university rankings, the information used as a criterion for analysing international visibility. To preserve anonymity, we will refer to them as University A (UA), University B (UB) and University C (UC). Their main characteristics are illustrated in Table 1.

Table 1: Characteristics of the universities studied

	University A	University B	University C
Subject area	Hard sciences	Multidisciplinary	Humanities and social sciences
Number of students	32 000	26 000	33 000
Transition to Autonomous management	1 ^{er} wave (2009)	1 ^{er} wave (2009)	3 ^{ème} wave (2011)
Position in the international university rankings	Among the top 5 French universities	Among the top 20 French universities	Not included in most rankings
Number of interviewees	21	23	6

As our unit of observation was limited to three universities, we preferred to maximise the diversification of the respondents' professional universes: hierarchical level (position held with or without managerial responsibilities), seniority, disciplinary field and body. Our final sample is composed of 50 individuals distributed as follows: four university presidents (PR), six vice-presidents (VP), thirteen heads of administrative services (Chef), fifteen directors of the component - UFR or research laboratory (Dir), four academics who are members of the board of directors (Mem) and eight academics without any administrative or managerial responsibilities (Acad).

Fifty semi-structured interviews were tape-recorded and fully transcribed. The average length of the interviews was 61 minutes. An interview guide was developed and tested beforehand. It contained common themes for questioning, leaving room for questions that were not initially planned. The interviews were individual and mostly took place in the offices of the interviewees in 2013. The interviews were conducted as follows:

- Presentation of the study framework and the purpose of the interview; putting the person at ease and guaranteeing the anonymity of the interview;
- Opening questions on the functions held, the body to which they belong and their seniority;
- More personal questions about the daily work, the changes observed, the respondent's attitude towards it, etc.;
- Regular requests for clarification during the interview in order to better understand ambiguous points or to cross-check certain answers with those of other interviewees;

- A final question inviting the interviewee to complete the interview.

The transcripts of the interviews amount to more than 300 pages⁷, which form the basis for the thematic content analysis with the Nvivo software. Our empirical data also includes internal and external institutional documents and online publications, as well as observations and notes taken by the researcher at meetings. We collected 53 internal documents from three universities between 2013 and 2016, among which the most important documents include four-year contracts with the state, activity reports, meeting minutes, AERES evaluation reports, the RCE transition report, budgets, institutional organisation charts, university presidents' discourses, minutes of central council meetings, etc.

3.2. Data analysis

Since we wanted to maintain certain objectivity when analysing the discourse, one of the preferred approaches was to respect the discourse as it was presented, without judging the volume of the personal interpretation of the author of the discourse (Bardin, 2003). The coding of empirical data was carried out using NVivo software. The first step in coding was to break down the data into units of analysis and place them into broader thematic categories (Miles and Huberman, 2014). Following the theory of Glaser and Strauss (1967), categorisation in our research involved interpreting the data in an abductive way, following a predefined coding grid from the literature review on the one hand, but also leaving room for the creation of new categories emerging from the empirical data.

In total, five categories of analysis were generated using the principle of "dimensionalisation", i.e. identifying the dimensions of categories in order to examine their nature, dimensions and relations between them (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). The category "*Identity*" groups the units of analysis dealing with the identity dimensions of the French university: university identity, the profession of academics, academic freedom, etc. It is composed of two sub-categories derived from the literature review: organisational identity of French universities and the professional identity of academics. The '*Management*' category brings together every aspect of management mentioned by the interviewees. The "*Governance*" category concerns the distribution and exercise of power within universities, as well as election practices. The '*Strategy*' category includes the guidelines and objectives of the institutions, as well as relevant documents. This category emerged inductively during the coding of the empirical data. A final category groups *different factors identified as sources of change by the interviewees*.

With the objective of going beyond a simple description, in the second stage of coding, we interpreted and gave meaning to the data by reorganising them in order to find relationships between the categories of analysis (Point and Voynnet-Fourboul, 2006). This approach allowed us the perspective of abstracting the data in view of a theoretical construction.

3.3. Main findings

3.3.1. The changes experienced by academics

The analysis of the empirical data allows us to observe an important evolution of the university in France. As underlined by the interviewees, "*the university of today has nothing to do with the one of yesterday*". The documents studied confirm the introduction of several changes in the functioning of universities and in the exercise of the academic profession. On the one hand,

⁷ Here we only count the interviewees' speech, without the questions asked by the interviewer.

these changes were initiated by the universities themselves. On the other hand, they have been imposed by the reforms. (Annex 1 details the main results).

The first change mentioned by the interviewees concerns local funds. In a difficult financial context, universities have tried to **diversify their sources of funding**. Our analysis shows the involvement of university leaders in the search for additional financial sources. In order to meet the new requirements of the supervisory authorities, university presidents are invested in the collection of local resources, even if this jeopardises the practices accepted and shared by academics. Financial concerns have also manifested in the development of project-based research. The search for external funding in the form of research contracts and/or training and consultancy services for external clients seems to be a sensitive issue. Most of the interviewees consider that the introduction of local resources may affect the core of their business, namely academic freedom. For them, a university, being a public organisation, should not be influenced by private powers. Academics are particularly cautious of 'new' types of funding, such as naming a room or building after a sponsor, or renting facilities. They are more tolerant of traditional funding, such as apprenticeship fees and the provision of continuing and sandwich courses.

The second change felt by the interviewees is that **research has become more important** than teaching. Their poor position in international rankings has pushed French universities to implement specific measures in this regard (despite general criticism of rankings). The analysis shows that the institutions studied favour the activities favoured by the ranking algorithms: number of Nobel prizes; number of researchers cited, number of publications, etc.⁸ As a consequence, the bonus and evaluation systems of the three institutions studied are based on research work and there is pressure on research staff to publish more. In addition, the universities confirmed that they favour the profile of 'researcher' when recruiting, as summarised by one department director:

First, they recruit for research and then it is up to the professor to find the teaching workload. Teaching is not a selection criterion. It's research and that's it (AU_16_Dir).

Another measure undertaken that favours French universities in international rankings is the **merger between universities**. This was initiated by the PRES reform (Research and Higher Education Poles) and reinforced by the ESR law. In 2014, the three universities studied formed university communities (ESR law). Later, the UA (in 2018) and the UB (in 2019) were even merged with other universities and ceased to exist as independent institutions. Among the objectives of the merger stated by the two institutions, international visibility remains at the top. A statement from the UB in 2020 clearly shows pride in having risen in the rankings by almost 50 places thanks to this merger.

The third important change results from the first two. It is an **increased pressure** in the academic profession, induced by the pressure to increase scientific production (the most important) and to work in project mode. The respondents attribute the deterioration of working conditions and the decline in the quality of scientific work to this general increase in pressure. The value of academic freedom is also affected: pedagogical interest is neglected because of a concern for scientific production, as several interviewees pointed out. For example:

"It's true that the research we did before had a certain freedom: "I'm going to do this because it's interesting". Now we say to ourselves: "It's interesting, because it's going to bring me that much money" (UA_12_Dir).

The increase of evaluations also contributes to this enhanced pressure. Constantly evaluated and asked to justify their productivity, French academics no longer feel free in their profession, even though they consider freedom to be a necessary condition "to carry out the missions of higher education" (UB_28_Dir).

⁸ The methodology of national evaluations also values research more than teaching in line with the methodology of international rankings.

The fourth change impacting the way universities function is **the increase in administrative tasks**. Due to project-based research, constant evaluations, as well as the introduction of new management tools, the interviewed academics claim to "*spend their time filling in paperwork for local and external bodies*" (UB_33_Dir). Some administrative work is taken into account financially, but this does not cover the entire volume of administrative work done by the academics. As a result, they find themselves overburdened.

These developments are taking place in parallel with major managerial reforms, out of which the LRU law is the one most one as mentioned by the interviewees. With the objective of giving universities real autonomy, the law intervenes mainly in two areas: the centralisation of power around the management team and the professionalisation of the management function. The new distribution of power proposed by the LRU law changes the democratic functioning of universities. Important decisions concerning scientific and administrative work must be taken, or at least validated, by universities' central administrations. Indeed, with the LRU law, **power becomes centralised around the university president**, who becomes the sole leader of the institution, somewhat similar to a chief executive that we know in the private sector.

This centralisation of power and the introduction of the notion of the 'chief executive' are seen as a '*degradation of traditional democracy*' because they contradict '*the basic principle of the university: government by peers*' (UC_2_PR). The interviewees regret this new distribution of power which poses several problems. The power concentrated around one person "*reduces the transparency of management*". Decisions are taken at the level of the central administration without considering the opinions of the academic units. When the different departments want to give their opinion during the discussions of the Board of directors, "*they are often not listened to*" (UA_16_Dir).

Another axis of managerialist reforms that has had a significant impact according to the interviewed academics is the reformers' desire to **professionalise the management function** within the university. With this objective in mind, the LRU law allows management autonomy with the decentralisation of certain functions from the supervisory authority to the universities. This decentralisation called 'Extended Responsibilities and Competences', allows universities to adopt new management tools, such as SYMPA - the budget allocation system used by the Ministry to calculate the subsidies granted to universities, and the Siham software for human resources management.

Most of the interviewed academics with managerial responsibilities confirm that the university management has been 'improved' with these tools, which are based on private management methods. Private enterprise is seen as the example of administrative success and thus 'legitimises' this isomorphism. The non-managers academics do not consider that management has been 'improved' despite these efforts. The new tools bring technical difficulties and additional administrative burdens, and sometimes are even perceived as unsuited to the public organisation and to the notion of public service. For example, an administrative head of a research laboratory explains that the management tool is unsuited to the functioning of research, forcing them to have "*double accounting in Excel to know exactly where we are because it is an IT jungle in which we cannot find our way*" (UA_14_Chef).

Another change felt by the interviewees is **the rise of accountability**. In addition to a gap between the reality of the implementation of information systems and the announced objectives, our research shows the inconsistency between the new management methods and the notion of public service. For example, the SYMPA software proposes to allocate resources not based on projected needs but based on activity and performance. The notion of performance, in line with the ideology of managerialism, is becoming central to the university management. Indeed, another managerialist reform, the law LOLF, has set up a new framework for the relationship between the state and the university, based on the principle of accountability. With this reform, universities are required to account for the efficiency of the use of the credits allocated to them.

3.3.2. The limits of managerial reforms

Despite above analysed efforts to professionalise university management, this study observes some limits. First, the administrative function has not been transformed into a managerial function, as it was the stated intention of the reformers. Several things can explain this French peculiarity, in particular the lack of the necessary training and of a recruitment not targeted at management professionals:

"If I need to understand how software works, the university offers a training. But it is another thing to do management. It's not a little three-day course that will teach us that" (UB_32_Chef).

Second, managerial **autonomy**, the key axis of managerialist reform ideology, also reveals its limits in the context of university reforms in France. According to our research, it can be seen as a 'disengagement' of the state in certain tasks, rather than a true organisational independence. After the LRU and LOLF laws the tasks of financial, HR and real estate management (in some cases) are 'executed' by the universities. However, they remain constrained by the national framework in their work with financial dependence on the state and the existence of national standards which are common for all French universities.

In our research, financial autonomy (a central point in the LRU law) appears to be reduced by a strong exposure to decisions on the wage bill which are not controlled by the institutions. Universities are heavily dependent on state subsidies, which represent on average 80% of operating income of the three cases of this study. This corresponds to the national average of 82.3% for operating income and 80.2% for the wage bill⁹. Despite a genuine desire on the part of management to introduce new types of funding as we have seen above, local resources are growing, but they represent only a small share of the university budget (around 10%). At the end of 2016, the local resources of the three institutions came mainly from French or European public bodies.

The autonomy of universities in these conditions can be seen as an autonomy of using means. This form of autonomy has led to a high rate of freezing and deletion of posts and a mechanical distribution of resources instead of allocating the budget to long or medium-term strategies. A director of one academic unit explains this point: *"The problem is that the autonomy of universities has been accompanied by the maintenance of the state allocation, even though expenditure is increasing, particularly the wage bill, which is roughly 85% of our budget"* (UB_21_Dir).

Moreover, the weight of the national framework is still very imposing. Certain decisions that are taken at the national level, are imposed on universities and academics, with imperative effects on universities' budgets and strategies. In line with the scientific literature, we argue that French universities do not have sufficient autonomy to develop their own strategies. Indeed, in the selected institutions, the strategies are understood as simple reference to documents on the objectives to achieve, such as official strategic planning documents, institutional projects, five-year contracts, communication material, etc., documents which are created based on national framework.

4. Results discussions

4.1. The nature of isomorphism within the French university

The changes identified in this study seem to be initiated by two complementary sources: by socio-economic and technological developments and by university reforms. In line with neo-institutional theory, these sources can be grouped into two types of pressure causing institutional isomorphism (see Table 2). On the one hand, French universities have sought standardised responses

⁹ Court of Auditors 2015 report on the financial autonomy of universities, p. 12

in an uncertain situation by engaging in a process of modernisation themselves, thus demonstrating mimetic isomorphism. On the other hand, higher education and public management reforms have disrupted the French university framework in a way that can be considered as coercive isomorphism.

Table 2. **Institutional isomorphism in the French university**

Coercive isomorphism	Mimetic isomorphism
LRU law, LOLF law, BMD reform, PRES reform, ANR	Financial difficulties, International rankings, ANR, Hcéres
Increasing the power of university president	Rise of research
Functional decentralisation under the empowerment discourse	Increasing pressure to publish
Merger between universities	Increase in assessments
Rise of Accountability	Diversification of funding sources
Introduction of new management tools	Increase in administrative tasks

The coercive isomorphism within the French university is mainly due to the imposed national framework. While one could imagine flexible frameworks (e.g. according to size, region, disciplinary profile), national and international reforms create common reference standards for all French universities: The bachelor-master-doctorate (BMD) reform, for example, shapes the higher education system to comply with European rules; The LRU law decentralises part of the legal competence of the State to the universities and redistributes power within the university itself; The PRES reform and ESR law redefine the higher education landscape mainly with HEIs' mergers; The LOLF law imposes a new relationship with a supervising authority, based on the notion of accountability, as a result of which the State takes on the role of strategist and the universities become State operators.

Mimetic isomorphism is due to the upheaval of the higher education field. Our research highlights several sources of pressure that have initiated this type of isomorphism: financial difficulties, digitisation of work, changes in the expectations of higher education stakeholders, the emergence of international rankings, the rise of evaluations and project-based research... The rise of project-based funding, especially with the ANR (National Agency of Research), makes universities increasingly dependent on this new force of the state and therefore makes them more sensitive to isomorphic pressures (Couston et al., 2018). To cope with these developments, universities have undertaken measures of varying degrees, emulating the success models. The model of academic success for the studied universities seems to be foreign universities, which have a higher international profile (better position in international rankings). The study cases confirm that they have used benchmarking to learn from the practices of universities, which are well placed in international rankings.

As for the normative isomorphism, our research does not confirm the existence of this process initiated by university administrators and managers. The non-professionalization of the administrative profession observed above, explains this result. Management is always carried out by the same administrative and academic staff who claim not to have received in-depth training in management. Training has been limited to learning how to use new management tools.

By mobilising neo-institutional theory, Buisson (2006) argues that in order to justify a new management practice, it is necessary to designate a certain 'legitimitor', whose function will be promoting and legitimising the new practices. The legitimitor can mobilise different resources and act on tangible aspects of organisations, but also on intangible aspects such as symbols, beliefs, ideologies, rites and myths (Pettigrew, 1979).

Previous research has shown that reformers used the concept of autonomy to replace traditional external dependencies with new ones instead of bringing true independence to public

universities (Clark, 2001; Côme, 2011; Musselin, et al., 2011; Goy, 2015). For example, Chatelain-Ponroy, et al. (2012, p.81) point out that 'despite the stated aim of the LRU to provide more autonomy to academic institutions, the prevailing feeling is one of increased dependence on ministry requirements'. Similarly, Goy (2015) argues that it is not possible to talk about organisational autonomy without organisational strategy. Our research corroborates previous studies on university autonomy, leaving some doubt as to whether a university can develop its own policy in the case of limited autonomy. Indeed, the LRU law seems to be limited to a functional decentralisation instead of 'true decentralisation', i.e. the power to have their own policy (Gibert, 2012; Côme, 2013; Boitier et al., 2015; Goy, 2015).

The French reformers therefore use intangible aspects in the quest for legitimisation of public action. Their discourse focuses on the notion of organisational autonomy which is presented as the answer to the concerns of the academic world. Thus, the reforms appeal to a 'universal' value that cannot be 'criticised'. It is thus a strong lever to legitimise a coercive isomorphism in the university institution in France. But, despite the centrality of autonomy in university reforms in France, our study reveals that organisational autonomy remains relatively limited due to budgetary restrictions and the common national framework imposed by the state. The concept of autonomy, as our analysis has shown, must be understood as a discursive and ideological 'instrument' of public policy to gain acceptance for certain changes (Parsons, 2003).

4.2. The rise of real organisations

Despite the limits of the implementation of university autonomy, the managerialist reforms undertaken in this sense have reinforced certain organisational dimensions within the French university (Goy, 2015; Normand and Villani, 2019). Our study finds that universities are more similar to 'real organisations' in the sense of Brunsson and Sahlin-Andersson (2000). The LRU law establishes the rise of organisational dimensions: it modifies the distribution of power by centralising it around the university president; it grants universities management autonomy and accompanies them in the professionalisation of management which is understood as a rise of the managers' power to the detriment of academics' power.

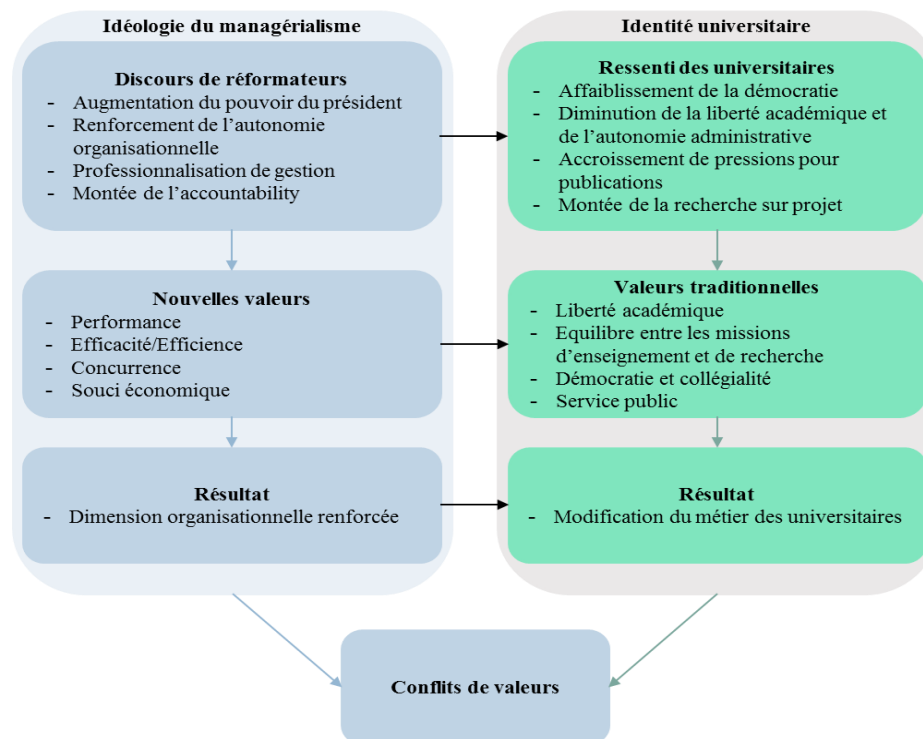
In addition to the LRU law, our research argues that the LOLF law also plays an important role in this direction: it equips universities with management tools and methods based on managerial and economic rationality, aiming at producing standardised and comparable data. It encourages universities to define strategic plans by specifying priorities and objectives (Gibert and Benzerafa Alilat, 2012).

The strengthening of the organisational dimension within the university is done at the expense of its usual functioning. Traditionally, power is distributed among three main types of actors in the French university world: the state, the university (organisation) and academic staff. The traditional governance of the university institution is described as democratic and collegial (Clark, 1983; Mintzberg, 1979; Musselin, 2001). These concepts, both ideological and practical, refer to the collective and democratic set of decision-making practices (Kogan, 1999). In this 'bottom-heavy' form of governance (Lechuga, 2006), academics have decision-making and oppositional power without necessarily having formal functions and titles. Their power is guaranteed because of their expertise (Mintzberg, 1979). Peer governance is considered to be the strength of the French university, which can be seen, for example, in the recruitment procedures. The hierarchical line, which is often very underdeveloped or even non-existent, is supported by 'soft steering', legitimacy and prestige, rather than the strong instruments of steering and control (Clark, 1983; Chatelain-Ponroy, et al., 2012; Normand and Villani, 2019). The strengthening of organisational dimensions with managerialist reforms, which centralise power around a 'head of the company', revises this democratic functioning in favour of a functioning based on managerial rationality.

4.3. The conflict of values

Managerialist reforms, being ideologic in nature (Enteman, 1993; Parsons, 2003; Deem and Brehony, 2005), bring both, new practices and new values, such as performance, competition, and efficiency. Academics feel that the new practices diminish democratic governance and academic freedom, as well as some fundamental values, such as public service mission. As a result, they feel their profession is being affected. The impacts of the changes are felt at two levels. At the individual level, academics have experienced a decrease in academic freedom with, in particular, increased pressure to publish. At the organisational level, the main feeling is the decrease in democracy and collegiality, traditional attributes of an academic institution. Through this evolution, academics affirm a transformation of their profession. For them, the academic world is characterised by values such as freedom, democracy, public mission, etc., whereas the changes introduced by the managerialist reforms go against these values. The gap between the discourse of the reformers and the reality of the changes and the outcome of these changes is illustrated in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Value conflicts following managerialist reforms



This gap between discourse and reality leads to a conflict of values experienced by all the interviewed academics. If a value is "what is considered as such by a group" (Bernoux, 2004, p.113), the values of the university are those accepted by the academics themselves. For French academics, values are grounded into and constitute the source of orientation of their behaviour. "They constitute one of the bases of which could explain what is legitimate or not for the actors" (Baumgartner and Solle, 2006, p. 132). For this reason, whenever a new rule or procedure tends to change them, academics tend to resist this change (Baumgartner and Solle, 2006; Marini, 2021).

Our research also confirms the observations of previous studies showing a conflict of values within the academic world (Fave-Bonnet, 2002; Baumgartner and Solle, 2008; Chatelain-Ponroy, et al. 2012; Drucker-Godard, et al. 2013; Côme and Rouet, 2016; Marini, 2021). According to our study, academics experience this conflict as a profound transformation of what constitutes the basis of the academic institution. But, unlike the public debates, the interviewed academics distinguish the sources of the changes they experience, as illustrated above in Table 2.

5. Conclusion

The modernisation of higher education has created institutional pressures on organisations and individuals. Our research highlights a strong institutional isomorphism within the French university. Coercive and mimetic pressures have been increased by managerialist reforms on the one hand, and by socio-economic and technological developments in the institutional field of higher education on the other, leading to a homogenisation of universities. The levers of change have resulted in an organisational strengthening of the university and have been accompanied by the introduction of new values.

By modifying the university governance and granting them new missions, the LRU law is the one that has had the greatest impact on the functioning of universities in France. Nevertheless, contrary to a general public opinion, our study shows a tendency among the interviewed academics to make a great distinction between what is attributable to managerialist reforms, and to their exogenous factors. The results thus contrast with the general discourse of the public debate, according to which managerialist reforms, such as the LOLF and the LRU, are presented either as the source or, on the contrary, as the solution to the university's problems.

Our research points to a major gap between the reformers' discourse on the purpose of the reforms and the academics' perception. The developments promised and promoted to legitimise the reforms seem to be realised in such a way that they lead to a disappointment among academics for two reasons: firstly, because of the limits in the realisation of the reforms' stated objectives as it is the case for the objective of professionalising the management function or granting real autonomy to universities; secondly, because of the new practices and values introduced by these reforms, which are considered unsuitable, or even dangerous, for the university institution, as is the case for the new values of performance and accountability.

Institutional isomorphism is observed in parallel with a conflict of values. Our analysis shows that in the academic world French academics show strong opposition to the changes that have brought new institutional pressures. Our study shows a conflict between traditional values, such as academic freedom, independence, public service and the emergence of new values resulting from recent reforms of the university system: scientific productivity, efficiency, individualisation of careers, increasing competition.

From this assessment, some directions of future research emerge. Firstly, by analysing the impact of institutional isomorphism on the professional identity of academics, we have observed new practices adopted by academics to adapt to new pressures. In this respect, a promising line of research could focus on the impact of these transformations, notably with the emergence of efficiency and performance values, on the ethics of research activities. Several studies seem to suggest that the pressure on results experienced by academics can encourage unethical research practices such as plagiarism, conflicts of interest, data fraud, etc. (Bell and Bryman, 2007; Bergada, 2011; Frechtling and Boo, 2011; Macfarlane, 2019).

In addition, it might be interesting to compare the experiences of academics working in small universities in the regions with those in large Parisian institutions, to see if the same isomorphism effects are observed in different contexts. Similarly, a comparative study between the French situation and a foreign country could enrich the literature on the evolution of the academic world.

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Annex 1: Thematic analysis result table: the major changes identified by the interviewees

Theme	Sub themes	Number of references	Some examples from the interviewees' discourse
Diversification of funding sources	Own resources; Call for tenders; Foundation; Local funds; Funded research; Research credit.	27	<p>We will launch actions to improve the current situation [own resources]; the risk will be that we will find ourselves with an inequality of funding between universities. UB_6_Chef</p> <p>For the moment the famous foundation does not bring much; the companies give the money to the labs, because they have an interest that something is developed. As a result, the research is very oriented. UA_50_Mem</p> <p>We rent out the swimming pool, rooms for different occasions such as congresses, etc. This brings in very little money. UC_7_PR</p> <p>Private capital is being sought to bring in services that are sometimes not compatible with university's main missions. UC_3_EC</p>
Rise of research	ANR; Recruitment of 'researchers'; Individual publication targets; Project-based research.	65	<p>What is changing in the business is more pressure to publish. This is very clearly stated in our objectives. UA_16_Dir</p> <p>What is valued with the evaluation is the research. UB_19_Dir</p> <p>Academic freedom is decreasing overall. UA_16_Dir</p>
Increasing pressure (publication, evaluation)	Performance; Evaluation; Publication; Quantification of research; "Initiatives of excellence"; ANR; Calls for tenders; Decrease in academic freedom; Performance indicators; AERES.	55	<p>Today, we operate at a pace that is sanctioned by projects of the ANR, European or other type, for much shorter periods. The teams do not wait to finish one project before going out to find another. UA_21_Dir</p> <p>We evaluate, evaluate, evaluate, and we have no time to work. UB_22_Dir</p> <p>At present we have been introduced to what is called the "observatory of student life" which carries out systematic teaching evaluations; we are much more evaluated and judged. UC_3_EC</p> <p>I think there's more pressure on us and we're being asked to explain and justify more and more. UA_25_Dir</p>
Increased administrative tasks	Lack of management skills in administration; Pedagogical responsibilities; Calls for tender;	34	<p>Dematerialised so that there is no longer any invoice processing at the central services but all the bureaucratic work falls back on the source, on the ground. UA_14_Chief</p> <p>In general, all teacher-researchers are much more involved in administrative tasks and teaching</p>

	Application files; Reports.		responsibilities. UB_22_Dir There are very few competent people [Biatss]. We are forced to do all the administrative or technical tasks. UA_18_EC
Increasing the power of the president	Chief executive; Distribution of power; Board elections; Strategy; Objectives; Representative; Veto right.	86	The president develops strategy and represents the institution; he/she seeks external resources. UA_20_Dir The president of the university manages the university budget and wage bill like a company director; today he spends his time doing management and "saving" to be more efficient and is less on the pedagogical level. UC_3_EC The president sets the direction; He/she becomes more active and becomes the representative of the university; The president is more like a company executive. UA_13_Dir
Introduction of new management tools	SIFAC; Siham; Management dematerialization; Management methods; Reporting; Excel; Management.	18	We use all these management tools. There is a real political will to modernise administrative management. UA_11_Chef This Human Resource policy uses several tools. UC_46_Del With the logic of research with the project, we are increasingly forced to put in place information system tools and instruments, such as management methods that allow us to better think about reporting and internal investments. UB_5_VP
Rise of Accountability	Reporting; Qualification of procedures; Accountability of actors; External control; Evaluation indicators; Ex-post evaluation.	30	We are asked for more and more reports of what we do. UC_3_EC It [University] is evaluated by several bodies and is asked about its strategy, its objectives, its major axes. UB_33_Dir It [reporting] made us aware of taking on more responsibility. UA_11_Chef
Functional decentralisation under the empowerment discourse	National framework; Room for manoeuvre; Autonomy of means.	67	The employment ceiling and the various national frameworks must be respected. UA_41_Chief Budgetary competence is limited by the contractual framework. UC_45_VP We are still constrained by the national framework for many actions. UA_17_Dir "The state still retains its influence, and this creates the ambiguity of university autonomy. I would say that the autonomy of universities is an autonomy to use means. We are still far from the idea that a university would have the possibility of defining a strategy based on the resources it obtains" (UC_2_PR).