

French Higher Education Governance after Shanghai: More State, More Market, and More Humboldt

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This article¹ explores the recent higher education governance reforms in France, which can be viewed as the result of tensions between historical legacies and transnational competitive pressures. While most recent research on the internationalization or Europeanization of higher education focusses on the Bologna Process, I show that other factors such as international comparative rankings and domestic public sector reforms are crucial variables in explaining changing patterns governance. In a state of gradual change since the mid-1980s (Musselin 2001), French higher education has recently undergone extensive reforms, which were accelerated after the very poor performance of French universities in the Shanghai Ranking. Once considered to be the epitome of state-centeredness and educational *immobilisme*, French educational policy-makers have recently embarked on a quest for international legitimacy and increasingly aligned themselves with external models perceived as successful. While the ongoing reforms have most frequently been described as “marketization”, I show that the reality is more complex and that French higher education has also taken on numerous characteristics of Humboldtism (i.e., research-centered universities) while maintaining its traditionally strong degree of state design and intervention.

University Governance in France: A State-Centered Affair

Until the 1960s, French higher education was characterized by two seemingly paradoxical realities: state-centeredness and structural compartmentalization. Strong centralization was reflected in uniform legal framework, degrees and content (Aust and Crespy 2009), while fragmentation was reflected in the absence

of multi-disciplinary universities. Research activities were concentrated in the *grands établissements* and national research centers, while the compartmentalized *facultés* were overshadowed by the prestigious *grandes écoles*. Restored as overarching institutions with the *Faure Law* of 1968 (Musselin 2001), French universities have traditionally been subject to strong state steering (Kaiser 2007). Aside from the financially privileged *grandes écoles*, French higher education policy has remained strongly attached to the notion of equality (*égalité*) and resisted competition and differentiation among education providers. Numerous attempts to grant universities more autonomy have evoked strong resistance, while the tradition of institutional uniformity has been widely upheld. And although influential faculty members have traditionally also “co-administered” higher education policy with the ministry, the design of the institutional architecture, curricula, personnel policy, quality assurance and university-business relations has generally been a state-centered affair.

As a result, French universities previously lacked strong management institutions and had little capacity for strategic action (Musselin 2001). However, even before processes of internationalization set in, the state had begun to push the system in a more market-oriented direction. Particularly noteworthy is the public management instrument of *contractualisation*, which saw for four-year priority and performance-based contracts between universities and the state, while the state also provided new incentives for universities to engage more closely with regional public authorities and enterprises. Hence by the mid-to-late 1990s, French higher education policy had gradually shifted away from hierarchical steering to a new form of polycentric policy-making (Musselin and Paradeise 2009).

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Although France can be regarded as one of the main initiators of the Bologna Process (Hoareau 2011), its effects on governance were less substantial. Unlike in many other European countries, where Bologna generated a snowball effect and spilled over into diverse governance reforms (see Dobbins and Knill 2009; Martens et al. 2010), Bologna was primarily used in France to create more coherency and transparency, as reflected in the new diploma structure (*licence, master, doctorat*) and new transfer possibilities between different types of higher education (*passarelles*) (see Witte 2006). However, efforts to fundamentally transform and “marketize” higher education governance were swatted down by student unions and large parts of the academic community, who feared the disengagement of the state and the overzealous infiltration of businesses into higher education. For example, the Bologna-inspired *loi de modernisation universitaire* (2003), which saw for greater pedagogical and managerial autonomy for universities, was postponed, even though the foreseen self-management capacities for universities would have been smaller than elsewhere in Europe. Thus, Bologna and the Europeanization of higher education initially did not bring about a rupture with the pre-existing historical governance model. For example, in the early 2000s the state still had a heavy hand in university funding, accession conditions, curricular design and the regulation of personnel, while inter-university competition was hampered by uniform, itemized funding schemes, and a lacking institutional differentiation.

The “Shanghai Shock”

Despite a broader international trend towards educational “governance by comparison” (Martens et al. 2010), there is arguably no other country in which international rankings have greeted with greater mistrust than France. This was reflected in years of public critique of PISA secondary education rankings (Dobbins and Martens 2012). Therefore it is all the more surprising that higher education rankings—and most notably the Shanghai ranking—were crucial in transforming French higher education governance. Burgeoning processes of internationalization such as the Bologna and

Lisbon Processes² had already prompted French higher education policy-makers to view the system from a more competition-oriented perspective (McKenzie 2009, 9). Yet it was the very poor performance of French higher education institutions in the Academic Ranking of World Universities (the “Shanghai Ranking”) that provided the final impetus to revamping French higher education governance. In the first round (2003), higher education policy-makers were faced with the reality that only one French university (*Paris-Sud*) ranked among the top 100. The persistent doubts over the explanatory power of international rankings (Dalsheimer and Despréaux 2008) could not conceal the fact that French universities continued to perform poorly in all widely publicized rankings. For example, no French university ranked among the top 100 in the *Times Higher Education* list,³ while French universities lagged far behind their north-west European counterparts in the subsequent 2007 Shanghai Ranking.⁴

Rattled by increasing fears over its international standing, French higher education policy-makers subsequently underwent a complex “multi-directional” development, which could best be described as “state-driven marketization with a Humboldtian touch.” By promoting so-called *pôles de recherche et d’enseignement supérieur* (PRES) since 2006, the state has used its traditional interventionist approach to enforce cooperation and structural convergence between universities, *grandes écoles*, and research institutions. These arrangements enable local groups of higher education and research institutions to develop joint research and education offers together with enterprises and public authorities, and are thus symptomatic of the Ministry’s pushing for the reintegration of research into French universities (Aust and Crespy 2009; MESR 2010). Flanked by a massive increasing research funding, the “re-Humboldtization” of French universities has also been propelled by a state-driven market approach. While a new *Agence Nationale de la Recherche* (ANR) was established to administer research funds for higher education providers, another new agency—*Agence d’évaluation de la recherche et de l’enseignement supérieur* (AERES)—has instituted new bibliometric criteria (e.g., journal impact factors) for performance-based

research evaluation. Thus, the state has prompted universities to boost their research capacities and introduced market mechanisms to chip away at the principle of equal financial treatment of universities.

Most notably, the “Shanghai shock” also spilled over into internal university governance structures. Here, President Sarkozy explicitly drew on international rankings to legitimize his “reform hypothesis” that university output and success correlate directly with their degree of autonomy.⁵ Although it refrained from introducing study fees and selective university admissions (see McKenzie 2009, 56), the resulting *Law on the Liberties and Responsibilities of Universities (LRU)*⁶ substantially boosted the degree of university autonomy, so that French universities now essentially operate global budgets with little state interference over funding allocation. Moreover, their “personnel autonomy” has also been significantly enhanced, as universities may now negotiate employee contracts and salaries without state approval.⁷ Along these lines, the government has also imposed new “entrepreneurialized” governance structures on French universities, the centerpiece of which is the *conseil d’administration*. This governance body was significantly downsized from previously 60 to some 20 to 30 members including not only teaching and research staff, but also external business and regional stakeholders. In line, with more market-oriented systems, the LRU also strengthened the powers of university presidents, who preside over the implementation of the four-year contracts and monitor income and expenditure from governmental and private sources, while also holding substantial powers regarding employment contracts and awarding performance bonuses.⁸ However, the composition of the *conseil d’administration* is also unusual by international standards, as it merges both academic representation and management structures into one institution. This shift in power towards university management, and in particular, university presidents, has been viewed by large parts of the academic community as “academic feudalism” and as potentially detrimental to their professional autonomy (Jourde 2008).

Conclusions: Market-Based Governance by State Design

As demonstrated above, French higher education policy is currently in a state of profound and dynamic change. Altogether, I have aimed to show that the new mode of governance is much more complicated than often assumed and can be classified neither as “pure academic capitalism” (as argued by French leftists) nor as an incrementally reformed, still state-centered model. On the one hand, the France has upheld its historical tradition of state interventionism into education. The state still undeniably has a heavy hand in university governance and has essentially functioned as a “governance designer” during the reform process. This is reflected in the state-enforced convergence of *grandes écoles* and universities and the creation of *PRES*. Moreover, the transfer of greater administrative capacities and new internal governance structures to universities also were not the result of an academic “grassroots” movement, rather targeted state design. The state thus still functions as the “pilot” of an increasingly market- and competition-oriented system (Aust and Crespy 2009), which has been further enhanced by the expansion of state research performance evaluation. On the other hand, the top-down mode of governance has receded with the recent wave of reforms, which force universities to develop their own strategies to boost their international competitiveness and visibility. French universities have thus indeed taken on numerous symptoms of market-based governance such as deregulated personnel recruitment, global performance-based budgeting, entrepreneurial management, and *ex post* quality assurance. Finally, France has also visibly converged on the Humboldtian higher education model of its north-eastern neighbor, as universities have become increasingly research-oriented and researching lecturers (*enseignants-chercheurs*) have also taken on an important role in shaping university profiles.

Altogether, keeping up with the international competition has at least temporarily overtaken “educational equality” as the leading “leitmotiv” of French higher education. Plagued with fears over the competitiveness and viability of French higher education, the state has

visibly engaged in the emulation of what it perceives as international best practice (e.g., selective performance-based funding, qualitative differentiation, entrepreneurial university governance). In contrast to other incremental governance reformers (e.g., Germany, see Schimank and Lange 2009; the Czech Republic, see Dobbins 2011; Italy, see Capano 2008), the state was able to draw on its historically privileged position as a “pilot” or “designer” of the higher education system to uproot entrenched policies and structures. At the moment, France is unlikely to return to its previous governance structures, as the new socialist government has no stated intention to fundamentally uproot the recent reforms (see *Le Monde* 2012). It remains to be seen whether the pursued strategy will have the intended effect and bring France back to the forefront of academic research innovation and reinvigorating its struggling economy.

Notes

1. For a longer and more thorough analysis of the French higher education reforms, see Dobbins (2012).
2. The Lisbon Process was agreed on by the European Council in March 2000 and aimed to make Europe the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world by 2010.
3. Only one *grande école* (*École Polytechnique*) was ranked among the top 100.
4. The CHE Excellence Ranking also reaffirmed the poor performance of French universities in the natural sciences and mathematics, as France was far outperformed than other western European systems with much smaller higher education landscapes such as Sweden, Switzerland, and the Netherlands.
5. Specifically, Sarkozy called for at least two French higher education institutions to rank among the best 20 in the world and at least 10 among the top 100 (Protocol cadre 2007; Sarkozy 2007).
6. *Loi relative aux libertés et responsabilités des universités*; also known as *Loi Pécresse* (2007).
7. The employment of public servants, who partially account for university staff, is still regulated by the state (Schraeder 2008, 7-8).
8. Schraeder (2008, 7) emphasizes that the composition of the *conseil d'administration* is unique by international comparison, because it merges academic representatives and management structures into one institution. In the case of Germany, for example, this would coincide with a merger of academic senate with the newly established administrative councils (*Hochschulräte*), which is not planned anywhere.

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