

A Longitudinal Analysis of the Relationship Between Central Government and Universities in France: The Role of Performance Measurement Mechanisms¹

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1. Introduction

The goal of this chapter is to illustrate and discuss the evolution of the relationships between central government bodies and French universities in the last 30 years, with a particular focus on the role played by performance measurement mechanisms within them. First of all, the chapter will introduce the peculiarities of the French higher education system. In the second section, the significant changes that occurred at both a systemic (i.e. the entire higher education system) and corporate level (i.e. every university) of the governance in the last decades will be illustrated. The following will describe the functions they have assumed in the abovementioned evolution:

- Strengthening and centralizing the evaluation of academic activities.
- Contracts between the university (or aggregation of universities) and the ministry.
- Interventions to promote mergers between universities and aggregation of universities.
- Policies to promote excellence.

For each instrument, particular care will be taken to highlight the performance dimensions involved and the effects induced. The changes that have taken place in France and their effects are examined through documents and reports. The analysis of the documents was enhanced and completed by interviews conducted in Paris in 2019 with privileged observers, either because they had the opportunity to directly observe the processes involved, due to a significant position, or because they conducted in-depth and extended studies on the topics of this chapter.

2. A Heterogeneous System

The structure of higher education and research in France is marked by specific traits that are associated with the coexistence of institutions with different characteristics (horizontal differentiation). This is the effect of the historical legacy of double partition, i.e. universities and grandes écoles in higher education; organismes de recherche (Public research organizations—PROs) and university laboratories in research. This heterogeneity is also reflected in the system governance mechanisms, which are particularly articulated². The 75 French universities are directly funded by the government and are spread throughout the country and are attended by 62% of tertiary education students (HCERES, 2016). Thanks to the application of the directives of the 1999 Bologna Declaration, they have an educational offer similar to the other European countries, and are based on the ECTS (European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System). Besides universities there are the historical grandes écoles, which are relatively small and highly selective schools providing higher education for the nation's future elites—tomorrow's hauts fonctionnaires (senior civil servants), industry leaders, senior military officers, politicians, engineers and physicians. In fact, more than 500 public and private institutions are grouped under the name grandes écoles, including engineering schools, normal schools (ENS), commercial schools and veterinary schools. Hence there are not only the grandes écoles in the strict sense of the term (public and highly selective), but more generally the écoles (which may be both public and private and are distinct from universities because they are allowed to select their students). Alongside the universities, the French state has

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² The following paragraphs on the proportions of the French university system are taken with adaptations and updates from a study carried out on behalf of UNIRES by Antonietta Ciclista and Matteo Turri and published by Fondazione Crui: "How governance changes. Italian and European universities in comparison", eds. Capano and Regini (2015).

gradually created its own organismes de recherche in order to promote research. Nowadays, there are about 40 of them, specialised in various disciplines and subjects. Amongst the best known of these are the Centre national de la recherche scientifique (CNRS quantitatively the most important), the Institut national de la santé et de la recherche médicale (INSERM), the Institut national de la recherche agronomique (INRA) and the Institut national de recherche en informatique et en automatique (INRIA). The universities also have their own research units, called équipe d'accueil (EA) by the Ministry and based on the disciplinary logic. This duality of research units has been partially mitigated since the 1990s thanks to the creation of Unités mixtes de recherche (UMR), which links the CNRS units locally with other PROs. There are currently 830 UMRs (about 90% of CNRS units and about 95% of INSERM units are involved in a UMR). This chapter focuses on the changes that have affected the university sector; however, as we shall see, the double partition is a central element in influencing the reform processes.

3. Changes in Governance

The governance of French universities has undergone significant changes both at the systemic and at the institutional (corporate) levels in recent decades. At the systemic level, the main actor has traditionally been the Ministère de l'enseignement supérieur, de la recherche et de l'innovation (MESRI)³. The French university system has been historically characterised by a strong centralisation at the Ministry, extensive prerogatives granted to academic staff organised in faculties, whereas the role of the institutions was so weak that universities were re-established only in 1968, after being abolished during the French Revolution (Musselin, 2001). The 1968 Faure Law redefined the role of universities around three principles: autonomy, participation and a multidisciplinary approach, thus giving universities the title of public scientific, cultural or professional establishments (EPSC). In fact, the law represents a first attempt to strengthen the institutional identity of universities. After about 20 years, a contract was established between the Ministry and universities in 1989. The aim was to give real value to the autonomy of universities, and to allow the government to fully exercise its responsibilities for supporting and rationalising the university system. The contractual mechanism is designed to revise relations between the government and universities by making them less top-down and more equal, based on four-year negotiations that result in an agreement (the contract) between the government and every HEI with the subsequent definition of the operating budget allocated (Chevaillier, 1998; Musselin, 2001). A further element of change is represented by the loi d'orientation et de programmation pour la recherche (loi n° 2006-450 du 18 avril 2006, the so-called LOPR) which distinguishes the functions of strategic orientation from those of research programming. Consistent with this design is the establishment of the Agence nationale de la recherche (ANR), which is a public body under the authority of the MESRI in charge of funding research. The beneficiaries can be research institutions, universities or even private institutes. The law unifies the various existing evaluation bodies into a single agency called Agence d'évaluation de la recherche et de l'enseignement supérieur (AERES), which was reformed in 2013 and renamed Haut conseil de l'évaluation de la recherche et de l'enseignement supérieur (HCERES). Finally, in 2009, an important new player emerged in the governance of the French higher education and research system. This was the Commissariat général à l'investissement (CGI), which has since become the Secrétariat général pour l'investissement (SGPI), created to manage the Programmes d'Investissements d'Avenir (PIA), which were adopted in France in response to the 2008 financial and economic crisis. Unlike the institutional changes mentioned above, the role of this new player has not been formalised in a law that deals with universities and how they operate. The PIAs have not introduced statutory changes for universities, at least not initially and directly. They only introduced new funding instruments for universities.

At the university level, since the aforementioned 1968 Faure Law, a key point for the change in governance has been the 1984 Savary Law (Law 1984-52), which introduced the current governance structure. The law

³ Some institutions are not monitored by MESRI: 'Another 6 ministries are involved in supervising specific groups of higher education institutions: Ministry of Defence (supervises Ecole Polytechnique and other advanced technology institutions); Ministry of Health (supervises medical schools and other institutions offering health and social services programmes); Ministry of Agriculture (supervises Veterinary colleges and institutions offering Landscape, Agricultural engineering and Agrarian studies); Ministry of Environment (supervises Schools of civil engineering); Ministry of Culture and Communication (supervises Art schools and institutions teaching heritage and architecture); Ministry of Trade and Industry (Mining engineering schools)'. (ENQA, 2017).

specifies the structure of the universities, which consist of different components: schools, institutes, unités de formation et de recherche (UFR), departments and laboratories, research centres. In the spirit of the Faure and Savary laws both aimed at developing universities' autonomy, in 1989 the Ministry began, as mentioned above, to stipulate contracts with universities to strengthen the coordination between the components of the same university around the settlement strategies carried out by the presidential teams. In line with the principles of New Public Management (NPM), the 2007 loi relative aux libertés et responsabilités des universités (n 2007-1199 du 10 août 2007, known as the LRU law) redirected the promotion of institutional autonomy by establishing their budgetary responsibility. In a context characterised by the spread of international rankings, the general objective of this law was to encourage universities and academics to enhance their performance in relation to relevant publications and thus to increase the international competitiveness of the French higher education and research system (Hoareau, 2011). The LRU law has decisively strengthened the corporate governance of HEIs. With regard to the management bodies, the law introduced the following changes:

- The Board of Directors is reduced in number and its powers are strengthened.
- The Scientific Council and the Board of Education and University Life are redefined, thereby losing relevance to the Management Board.
- The university presidents' legitimacy is increased by the new electoral method and the functions assigned to them. Their term of office is renewable and they can be evaluated on the basis of the results achieved.

The LRU law also requires universities to take on new responsibilities and competencies: they are allocated a global university budget, which includes the payroll (which used to be a ministerial responsibility); the possibility of using diverse sources of funding; more responsive management of the recruitment of professors, researchers and lecturers. In addition, the President can assign bonuses and tailor the service obligations of professors and researchers. Finally, the government may transfer full ownership of the movable and immovable property to universities. In 2013, the loi relative à l'enseignement supérieur et à la recherche (Law No. 2013-660, known as the ESR Law), reconsidered and partly mitigated some of the indications contained in the LRU. The new law increased the number of members of the Board of Directors (previously up to 30 members), leading to an increase in the representation of all groups with the exception of external members, whose number remains similar to that of 2007. Among the changes introduced by the law, it can be highlighted that all board members can now participate in the election of the chairperson. From an organisational point of view, the ESR Law has changed the division of responsibilities between the governing bodies of the universities. The Board of Directors, which retains responsibility for strategy, management and human resources, has been supplemented by two more consultative bodies, the conseil scientifique (CS) and the conseil des études et de la vie universitaire (CEVU). The ESR law has in fact introduced a change in competences by focusing the board's activities on strategic issues and transforming the other two bodies into two committees (one for research and one for teaching), which together form the conseil académique. The Academic Board includes representatives of academic and administrative staff, as well as students and a minority of external members: in total the conseil académique consists of 40 to 80 members. In accordance with the structure of the LRU, the conseil académique brings participation and academic representation bodies back into corporate governance, thus limiting the weight of the Board of Directors (Conseil d'Administration). However, it is significant that on the basis of the strategy established by the law, the Board of Directors can veto the recruitment decisions of the conseil académique. The trajectory of development of corporate governance in recent decades, albeit with an uneven trend and some resistance, shows the progressive strengthening of internal governing bodies in at least partial harmony with the greater autonomy granted by the Ministry to universities.

4. Description of the 4 Policy Tools

The process of change outlined above can be better understood and examined with specific reference to some coordination mechanisms between the government and universities specifically introduced and inspired by the issue of performance both in terms of measurement and enhancement:

- Strengthening and centralizing the evaluation of academic activities.
- Contracts between the university (or aggregation of universities) and the ministry.
- Interventions to promote mergers between universities and aggregation of universities.
- Policies to promote excellence.

The combined action of these mechanisms, as we shall see, has influenced the relationships between central government bodies and French universities.

4.1 Evaluation

In the 1980s, France launched a series of evaluation initiatives promoted by a variety of bodies (Larédo, 1997; Chevaillier, 1998, 2004):

- The Comité National d'évaluation (CNE), created in 1984 with financial and administrative autonomy, carried out evaluations of academic activities and management of universities through peer review and site visits until 2006. The result of the evaluation procedure was the publication of a final evaluation report.
- The Comité national d'évaluation de la recherche (CNER), established in 1989, had as its main focus the evaluation of research activities at supra-institutional level.
- At the Ministry, another evaluation body called Mission scientifique, technique et pédagogique (MSTP) evaluated the curricula also for accreditation purposes and managed the evaluation procedure to award individual academics with prizes and awards.
- Finally, the Conseil national des universités (CNU), a consultative body set up in 1945, was reorganised in 1987 so to deal with questions relating to the recruitment and promotion of academic staff in universities, in collaboration with the Ministry.

The 2006 LOPR law unified the various evaluation bodies into a single agency called Agence d'évaluation de la recherche et de l'enseignement supérieur (AERES). The adoption of the LOPR fits in the context of the application of the Loi organique pour les lois de finances (LOLF), which is the French translation of the rationale of the NPM. From this point of view, the creation of AERES is linked to the intention to refocus the government on strategic functions, leaving to the universities the tasks of management and the adoption of measurement performance tools to support the relationship between the ministry and universities. The creation of AERES is also consistent with the requirements of the Bologna process and in particular with the Standards and guidelines for quality assurance in the European Higher Education Area adopted in 2005, which recommend the creation of an independent national agency to promote and coordinate national quality assurance systems. There are three main lines of assessment advocated by AERES:

- The evaluation of the institutions (60–80 evaluations per year) aimed at assessing the consistency of the strategic direction taken, managerial skills (also in view of the recent financial autonomy), international openness and self-assessment capacity. This evaluation takes into account the diversity between institutions, is based on a self-evaluation report followed by an external visit, and results in the publication of a final report. The evaluation report is published together with a letter from the university in response to AERES' comments and recommendations.
- The evaluation of teaching takes into consideration the scientific and professional relevance of the educational offer. This includes a self-evaluation document to be drawn up by the university, an evaluation by the committee of experts appointed by AERES, and finally a validation phase that ends with the publication of the report. No site visit is required. The procedure is fully consistent with the guidelines issued by ENQA, and AERES is part of the European Quality Assurance Register (EQAR).
- Lastly, the evaluation of the research units (about 700 research groups per year) consists of a self-evaluation phase followed by a visit by a panel of experts appointed by the agency. The evaluation results in a report that takes into account the quality of the scientific production and other aspects such as the contribution to industrial research, the connection with the local socio-economic context and the involvement in the international academic community.

The creation of AERES introduced a major change in the French higher education and research landscape (Capano & Turri, 2016). Firstly, the evaluations of AERES highlighted the level of performance produced by universities, especially with regard to research. This formalisation of performance is accompanied, promoted and enhanced by the process of institutional consolidation of the universities, thus favouring a relaxation of academic autonomy in favour of stronger institutions that, being accountable for the performance produced, implement and support internal governance mechanisms. Secondly, a debate was opened on the use of evaluation in funding mechanisms (Musselin & Paradeise, 2009). Since 2009, the Ministry has developed a new method of calculating the *dotation globale de fonctionnement* of universities⁴ called *Système de répartition des moyens à la performance et à l'activité* (SYMPA). It is not only a question of direct connection between performance and funding, which is in fact minimal and merely transient, since the results of the evaluation published on the AERES website affect the ability of the universities to attract external resources, as non-governmental bodies link funding to the achievement of an excellent evaluation in the AERES evaluation procedure. The link between performance and funding has thus sparked a strong debate that has led to the agency being called into question. Criticism has focused in particular on the creation of equalisations between universities and geographical areas, leading to the 2013 ESR law, which replaced AERES with the *Haut conseil de l'évaluation de la recherche et de l'enseignement supérieur* (HCERES)⁵. HCERES is an independent agency whose chairman is appointed by the President of the Republic after consultation with the parliamentary committees. HCERES reports directly to the Parliament from which it receives its operational funds (€17M in 2015). Evaluation procedures are carried out by external experts (around 4500 academics are involved annually) and 115 scientific delegates (researchers and part-time professors in charge of organising evaluations from a scientific point of view). It is organised in 4 activities: evaluation of institutions, evaluation of teaching (including doctoral teaching), evaluation of research units and territorial coordination. The new evaluation body retains in principle the competencies and operating procedures of its predecessor, with some variants associated with greater guarantees of competence of the experts involved in the evaluation procedures and the possibility for research units (often in collaboration with public research institutes) to request the evaluation from other evaluation bodies. A further novelty is that HCERES is required to evaluate not only universities but also sites representing geographical groupings of research, innovation and education institutions, companies and other stakeholder organisations. In essence, however, the main change is precisely the loosening of the link between evaluation and funding, which become independent mechanisms once again (Capano & Turri, 2016).

4.2 Contracts

Contracts are defined as a programme agreement between the Ministry and universities following negotiations. Contracts are in fact a policy instrument commonly used throughout the French public administration and are not specific to universities. Initially limited to research, the contractual policy was extended in 1989 to all aspects of universities, including the management of funding and human resources⁶. The central phase of the contract is its preliminary negotiation, whereas its ex post evaluation has traditionally had little relevance. In this sense, therefore, although the political instrument of the contract is consistent with NPM narratives, it is not fully aligned with this movement. Initially linked to a specific allocation of ministerial resources, the instrument has lost its financial nature over time and has increased its symbolic value, providing support for all institutional, ordinary and recurring relations between the Ministry and the universities. In particular, following the improvement of the mechanism of contracts, since 2014 the accreditation of universities has also been linked to their entitlement to award degrees. Despite the fact that it was created as an instrument to regulate relations between the Ministry and universities, the effects are significant above all on the institutional identity of the universities. In this regard, Paradeise wrote 'the groundwork of writing reports and preparing negotiations fostered conversation between co-located faculties, which had previously ignored each other. It

⁴ The '*dotation globale de fonctionnement*' corresponds to the main part of the university funding from the government. In addition, there is a contractual allocation negotiated every 4 years, which represents about 20% of the allocations, and other specific allocations (contracts between the government and regions, Plan Campus, PIA etc.).

⁵ The suppression of the SYMPA mechanism was also significant

⁶ Circulaire n. 89-079 du 24 mars 1989.

favoured cohesiveness of universities as organisations. It became increasingly difficult for scholars to bypass their president by using their own scientific and social relationships with Parisian ministerial departments' (Paradeise, 2017, p. 6). Contracts have triggered a process that has gradually transformed universities into 'full organisations' (Krücken & Meier, 2006). This tool has in fact made it necessary for universities to analyse their situation and to develop greater self-awareness: in order to develop a strategy, universities need to know their strengths and weaknesses, and to understand how they intend to be in the future, in line with their vision, they have to decide how to organise their resources. The preparation and monitoring of contracts worked as actual learning mechanisms of university autonomy established by the LRU in 2007. With the progression of the negotiation cycles, policymakers have realized that their value does not concern the economic sphere (as only a limited amount of financial resources are actually transferred), but is linked to the strengthening of the institutional identity of universities. Through contracts, the top management of universities have improved and reinforced their governance capabilities. Currently, five-year contracts (the initial length being 4 years, instead) are designed to promote a strategic dialogue between the Ministry and the universities. The contract negotiation is led by the Direction générale à l'enseignement supérieur et à l'insertion professionnelle (DGESIP), which coordinates the action of the associated central administrative directorates. As of 2013, contracts have gone from individual universities to 'sites'. In practice, contracts are signed by the Communautés d'universités (COMUE—cf. infra). Every contract consists of two separate sections:

- A section common to all universities, describing the development policies for education, research and transfer shared at site level. The section includes the identification of some performance indicators with corresponding targets. Finally, there is a summary plan of the public resources that COMUE will receive in the five-year period.
- A specific component for each individual university, which describes in specific chapters the contribution of this institution to the policy of the site. Each chapter includes indicators and targets, a financial annex and a list of the accredited educational offer.

The transition from university contracts to COMUE contracts was aimed at facilitating the joint management of curricula and research centres through the creation of new territorial umbrella organisations (Paradeise, 2017, p. 6). However, whilst the transition to site contracts has facilitated the work of the Ministry, it has been perceived as a new obligation for universities, especially because, as we will see, universities have had to operate with a double level of governance, i.e. the university itself and the COMUE.

4.3 Mergers

The origins of aggregation policies lie in the idea of building university poles using geographical proximity to solve the problem of double partition. This idea was incorporated in the 2006 LOPR with the aim of improving the attractiveness of France. This law created Pôles de recherche et d'enseignement supérieur (PRES) to give universities, grandes écoles and research institutions the possibility to coordinate and pool their activities and resources. PRES was merely an opportunity: no institution was required to create or join a PRES. With this instrument, the government's intention was to encourage aggregations to enable France to have national champions in international rankings, overcoming 'double partition' and moving to multidisciplinary universities through PRES (Aust & Crespy, 2009). The launch of the PRES symbolises the collective awareness that the peculiarities of the structure of higher education and research in France make it difficult to gain visibility from abroad, to the detriment of the country's competitive capabilities. However, the PRES experience was considered disappointing: it showed the reluctance of universities to really give up their expertise and independence (IGENIGAENR, 2015, pp. 59–60). In fact, the 2009 Programme d'investissements d'avenir (PIA), which will be examined in detail in the following paragraph, represented the financial instrument whereby the government intervened to support and incentivise the policy of territorial aggregations by linking access to some PIA schemes to the aggregations. The 2013 law, also as a result of the existing difficulties, has transformed PRES. By providing for the definition of a Stratégie nationale pour l'enseignement supérieur (StraNES), it established, among other things: a) the principle of territorial coordination of training provision and research strategy, based on a project shared by all public institutions that depend on the MESRI; b) the implementation of the Schéma régional de l'enseignement supérieur, de la recherche et de l'innovation

(SRESI), whereby the regions are involved in the preparation of site contracts. As a result of the law, there are three possibilities for cooperation or aggregation:

- Merger of two or more universities.
- Aggregation in the form of participation in a community of universities and institutes (COMUE).
- Aggregation in the form of an association of public or private institutions or bodies contributing to the missions of the public service of education and research.

The form of aggregation more generally adopted has been the COMUE. In the year 2015–2016 there were 5 associations and 20 COMUEs. As we will see below, mergers have instead taken place on impulse and in connection with specific PIA programmes. COMUEs are a different process from PRES because the voluntary dimension is missing: every university and public school is obliged to be a member of an aggregation in order to access PIA funds. The COMUEs have more formalised governance structures which in fact replicate but do not replace those already present at university level. Moreover, the establishment of COMUEs leads to the identification of the competences transferred from the pre-existing institutions to the new entity, and in the contracts (mentioned in the previous paragraph) universities are considered within COMUEs. In this sense, the drive towards COMUE effectively limits institutional autonomy by introducing a contradiction with pre-existing policies (Paradeise, 2017). However, as with the PRES, the overall evaluation of COMUE is negative: most of the COMUE statutes provide only some transfer of competencies or the attribution of strong competencies to COMUE, reproducing the criticism against PRES (IGEN-IGAENR, 2015). The requirements for participation in the PIA have led to the creation of weak, poorly integrated aggregations with limited competences. In fact, some COMUEs have broken up or changed their boundaries. In response to these limitations, the aggregation ordinance of 2018⁷ establishes a less restrictive framework for aggregations, which gives universities the power to customise COMUE statutes and internal organisation (without necessarily duplicating that of universities).

4.4 Excellence-Driven Policies

This section deals with a different dimension from the previous three: whereas the first three concern legislative or regulatory changes regarding the institutional architecture, this section deals with financial instruments, in particular, the Initiatives d'excellence (IDEX) call launched in 2010 by the government in the frame of the PIA. The PIA was launched with the amending budget law of 9 March 2010 based on the recommendations of the committee chaired by Juppé and Rocard (two former prime ministers) with the aim of improving the long-term growth potential of the French economy. Its aim is to increase investment in four priority areas: higher education and research, industry and SMEs, sustainable development and the digital economy. This is a very important measure that will condition the development of existing measures, including those examined in the previous pages. The PIA is based on competitive calls to finance research and innovation projects, which are judged by a panel of international academics. The PIA has had three rounds with a total budget of 57 billion euros:

- Round 1 in 2010 (PIA 1) with a budget of 35 billion euros
- Round 2 in 2013 (PIA2) with a budget of 12 billion euros
- Round 3 in 2017 (PIA3) with a budget of 10 billion euros

Funding measures⁸ for universities and research amounted to a total of approximately 25 billion euros. The funds actually received by the universities are not the total budget. The total allocation constitutes the total provisioning of the fund, the annual interest earned on this fund constitutes the amount of funds actually allocated to the universities on a year-by-year basis. Among the various initiatives of the PIA, one of the most representative is the IDEX which aims (Ravinet, 2012) to establish 5 to 10 multidisciplinary centres of excellence in university education and world-class research in France. In practice, the measure promotes the

⁷ Ordonnance n 2018-1131 du 12 décembre 2018 relative à l'expérimentation de nouvelles formes de rapprochement, de regroupement ou de fusion des établissements d'enseignement supérieur et de recherche.

⁸ Typically competitive financing of significant scale (approximately 1 billion euros for an average IDEX project, and from 5 to 25 million euros for a LABEX or EQUIPEX).

process of territorial aggregation of universities, colleges, research institutes and partnerships with businesses. The aim is to achieve significant dimensions that can be internationally recognised, and be attractive on the basis of international parameters and criteria. The keywords of this call, one of the most generously funded in the PIA, are excellence, multidisciplinary and internationalisation. The initiative follows in the footsteps of NPM: it focuses on a limited number of institutions, concentrating resources on them and drawing inspiration from successful models abroad in a benchmark perspective (Aust et al., 2018). This measure boosts competition within the French university system and overcomes the principles of equivalence and uniformity prevailing until then (Musselin, 2013) in order to concentrate resources on a limited number of selected candidates. The aim is to promote and enhance the performance of the French university system. It should be stressed that in France the largest part of the university funding is based on recurrent budgetary funding (dotation globale de financement). Over time, in addition to these recurrent resources, new non-recurring sources of state funding have gradually been added, based on competitive calls (initially on research projects, with the ANR, then real estate investments, with the Campus Plan launched in 2007). The PIA is a continuation of this dynamic, focusing on investments of various kinds such as research and institution enhancement. At the level of the university system it is necessary to underline some discontinuities that the PIA introduces:

- The initiator is the government and not the Ministry of Education. In particular, management is entrusted to an SGPI (Secrétariat général pour l'investissement) under the authority of the Prime Minister.
- The allocation of resources takes place through competitive procedures involving international experts deliberately chosen outside the French academy to promote high levels of competition.
- The IDEX call is intended for PRES, then COMUE, and not for individual institutions (including academics or faculties/departments), thereby acknowledging and consolidating the institutional identity of the bodies receiving funding.

These measures show the desire to introduce a marked discontinuity by overcoming the pre-existing structure based on the relationship between academia and ministry. This discontinuity based on international criteria goes beyond the management logic of the ministry (replaced by the Prime Minister), which is somehow considered too contiguous to the status quo of the existing university system. This approach allows for the interpretation of the autonomous decision of some universities to merge fully (e.g. Strasbourg, Lorraine and Aix-Marseille) or partially (e.g. Bordeaux and Montpellier). This phenomenon started in 2007 in the wake of the reforms on territorial aggregation which, however, were focused on the resources provided by the PIA programme. These mergers (well supported for the PIA) have created new larger players. However, with the exception of the University of Lorraine, the mergers have in fact only concerned universities, leaving aside the grandes écoles, thus not fully meeting the objective of bringing grandes écoles and universities closer together.

5 Conclusion

There is no doubt that the relationship between central government bodies and French universities has changed significantly over the last 30 to 40 years. Other studies have examined this evolution highlighting the changes in university governance (Chatelain-Ponroy et al., 2013; Musselin 2014) and the transformation of the role of academics (Chevaillier, 2001; Pezzoni et al., 2012; Musselin, 2013). In this chapter, we have attempted to highlight the function of some operational tools (see Table 1) related to management and performance measurement, which differ from those of the previous administrative tradition, for the management of interinstitutional relations between Ministry and universities. The first operating system is the evaluation of the activities of universities, which represents a qualitative leap forward in the creation of AERES. A third party is responsible for producing evaluations in all its fields in order to provide reliable performance measurements through which to regulate the relationship between the Ministry and universities and to make universities more accountable. The contracts between the university (or aggregation of universities) and the Ministry have two features. First, they introduce contractual mechanisms in the relationship between the government and the universities by going beyond the use of legal and regulatory provisions. Secondly, many observers acknowledge that they represent a remarkable tool for legitimising and empowering the top management of universities and their institutional leadership (Paradeise, 2017). For the first time universities are called upon to view themselves as a unit in terms of performance and to approach the external world as a

unified entity in an institutional logic, and no longer in terms of disciplines and individual academic groups (Krücken & Meier, 2006). The initiatives to stimulate the creation of PRES and COMUE are explicitly inspired by the desire to overcome the double partition of the French university and research system (Aust & Crespy, 2009) in an effort that is above all a benchmark in relation to the outside world. This policy gained momentum under the Sarkozy presidency with the desire to improve the positioning of French universities in international rankings. The overview presented in this chapter places France in line with other countries in the commitment to reshape its systemic governance system by adopting a managerial approach where the keywords are performance measurement, evaluation, empowerment of institutions and their decision-making capacity, and where assonance with the principles of New Public Management (NPM) is certainly marked (Pollitt, 2007). There is thus a convergence towards the 'steering at a distance' where the government is oriented towards regulatory functions overcoming the pre-existing model based on direct interventions in university activities (van Vught, 1989; Capano, 2011; Shattock, 2014; Capano & Turri, 2016; Capano et al., 2016). This concept, although expressed in the legislation and related declarations, shows more than one sign of subsidence in its application. In reality, the steering at a distance template is applied only partially and with apparent discontinuity. In fact, evaluation, contracts and policies to promote aggregations have proved to be an ambivalent tool that is used more as a means to pressure universities than as an instrument of systemic steering. The lack of relation with funding allocation, along with the vicissitudes of the national evaluation agency, is the most evident expression of this tendency. Since its inception, AERES, while adopting an ambitious programme, autonomously limited its competences by excluding the assessment of individual performances of academics. AERES always operated in the absence of direct links between the outcome of the assessment and government funding. As it was based upon the initiative of external bodies, this link was among the main reasons why AERES was phased out and replaced by HCERES. The new agency has had as a pivotal element the absence of connection between the results of the evaluation and performance (Capano & Turri, 2016). Similarly, as illustrated, contracts with the ministry lost their economic value over time, while reinforcing their important role in the process of empowering the top management of universities and their institutional identity, and more recently in the establishment of the COMUE.

Moreover, the emphasis is always on the initial moment of negotiation of the contract and much less on ex post verification of their achievement. Even the path that characterised the creation of the PRES and then the COMUE is not linear and the legislator's intention, which was to favour consolidated unions and aggregations, is vulnerable to the opportunistic behaviour of the universities that constitute these unions more with the aim of attracting resources than to create permanent unions by reducing double partition. Moreover, the drive for aggregations on a territorial basis in fact contradicts the drive towards greater institutional autonomy that has inspired the governance reforms mentioned in paragraph 2 (Paradeise, 2017). The fourth instrument under consideration introduces, at least potentially, a discontinuity to this disconnection between legislative intention and actual implementation. The marked link with economic resources and the replacement of the Ministry of Education by the Presidency of the Council of Ministers are certainly a novelty, although a judgement on the effectiveness of the instrument is probably premature. An overall and conclusive look can identify, more than the radical replacement of a pre-existing model with a new model inspired by the logic of the NPM, a stratification of several models and logics in which pre-existing and new actors operate in order to favour or contrast the reforms. At least in part, the use of tools and mechanisms inspired by managerial logic has contributed to a progressive focusing on the performance of universities in a way that is partially connected to their greater institutional autonomy. However, the EUA report (2017), which places the French universities among the most backward in terms of institutional autonomy, confirms that this process is still in progress and has a bumpy ride. As Paradeise (2017) effectively sums up Yet, conflict after conflict, adjustment after adjustment, the perception of the missions of universities and academics is transformed, a culture of performance is slowly taking hold.

Table 1. Coordination mechanisms between the government and universities

	Evaluation	Contracts	Mergers	Excellence-driven policies
National institution in charge	AERES—formally independent agency (later named HCERES)	Ministry of University and Research (MESRI)	Ministry of University and Research (MESRI)	SGPI (agency under the authority of the Prime Minister)
Objective	Receive coordinated evaluations of university activities at the university level. Own an independent evaluation agency in line with the requirements of the Bologna process	Regulate relations between the Ministry and universities	Building university poles using geographical proximity to solve the problem of double partition	Establish 5 to 10 multidisciplinary centres of excellence in university education and world-class research in France
Main measures	Evaluation of –Institutions (universities and écoles) –Teaching –Research units (of university and <i>organismes de recherche</i>)	Five-year contracts describing the development policies for education, research and transfer shared at site level	PRES—Pôles de recherche et d’enseignement supérieur (2006—On a voluntary basis) COMUE—community of universities and institutes (2013—mandatory)	PIA, especially IDEX Promotion of aggregations on a territorial basis through the allocation of substantial conditional funding assigned through competitive procedures involving international experts
Consequences on the university system	Dissemination of evaluation-related information and greater emphasis on research results. No direct connection with ministerial funding	Gradually strengthened the institutional identity of universities	Limits institutional autonomy by introducing a contradiction with pre-existing policies. The aim is to strengthen universities’ corporate governance	Institutionalised competition between universities to access financial resources

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