

# Bringing universities to the center of the French higher education system? Almost but not yet...

Christine Musselin  
Sciences Po, Centre de Sociologie des Organisations, CNRS  
ORCID: [0000-0002-6720-0707](https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6720-0707)

Corresponding author  
Christine Musselin  
[christine.musselin@sciencespo.fr](mailto:christine.musselin@sciencespo.fr)

**Version auteur acceptée de : Christine Musselin (2021) “Bringing universities to the centre of the French higher education system? Almost but not yet ...” , *European Journal of Higher Education*, 11:3, 329-345, DOI: [10.1080/21568235.2021.1945474](https://doi.org/10.1080/21568235.2021.1945474)**

Abstract : This paper retraces the evolution of the relationships between higher education institutions, the state and the academic profession in France since the French Revolution on the one hand and the parallel evolution of the societal expectations for their roles and missions, on the other. It in particular highlights the divide between the universities and the *grandes écoles*, in charge of training the French economic, political, and administrative elites. Five phases are distinguished: the suppression of French universities during the French Revolution; the Republic of the Facultés from the end of the third Republic to 1968; the 1968 act and the rebirth of universities; the empowerment of universities and their extended missions during the last decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century; the recent reforms aimed at differentiating the French higher education system and bringing universities at its center.

Keywords : universities, grandes écoles, academic professions, elites, France, facultés



Universities seem to be a universal phenomenon and some of the most enduring institutions: they have existed for more than eight centuries and can be found all over the world. But this is an illusion. Their *modus operandi*, missions, activities, and relationships to their host environment and society, as well as their dependence vis-à-vis the State, religious authorities, and economic capital greatly differ from one country to another. They also significantly vary over time (Clark, 2006). Caution is therefore always warranted when speaking of universities in one place or another, or at one period of time or another. The close-sounding terms used to designate this institution (university, université, Universidad, universita, Universität, uniwersytet...) obscure the variety of situations, the complexity of the notion, and the diversity of missions. Universities like to claim that they were founded a long time ago, and to publish books on their own history showing how they developed over time, feeding into the idea that they are stable and indestructible institutions. This is often not true for individual institution, but in the case of France, this is not true for any of them. French universities, as individual institutions, and as local organizational umbrellas for various disciplines, disappeared from the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century to the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century. This paved the way for the emergence of the *grandes écoles*, the most reputable of which became the prestigious training institutions of the French economic, political, and administrative elites.

This profoundly reshaped the trajectory and development of the French higher education system, and it is almost impossible to understand what happened from the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century to today without considering the long period when higher education expanded without universities. I retraced this “Long march” in a book I previously published (Musselin, 2004 [2001]). In this paper, I will focus on two angles I did not develop enough in this book. The first

one concerns the relationship between the trajectory of French institutions on the one hand, and societal expectations for their role and missions, as well as the political context of reform, on the other. The second one covers the two post-WWII decades that I insufficiently explored in the book because no important reforms occurred then. However, I will show that reflections during this period informed the content of the reforms that occurred in 1968. Finally, I will complement the book by analyzing the deep transformation that has unfolded since its publication.

The paper is organized in five sections. The first one addresses the suppression of French universities during the French Revolution and the consequences of this decision through the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. In particular it covers the creation of the *grandes écoles* and their monopoly, to this day, over training French elites.

In the second section, I will focus on the six first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and in particular go over the main post-WWII reflections and movements that led to the creation of the universities as we know them today. Interestingly, and by contrast with the US, WWII did not immediately spur major reforms in French higher education, but the conference of Caen (*Colloque de Caen*) in 1956 and subsequently in 1966 were important postwar drivers for thinking of reforms and reorganizing the French higher education landscape.

In the third section, I will argue that these reflections influenced the content of the Faure Act passed in 1968 – a fundamental act, even though its implementation was truncated. As a result, French universities remained weak.

The fourth section covers the 1980-2005 period and describes the new missions assigned to universities and the policy that in the early 1990s empowered university governance, and recognized them as relevant intermediary levels in the French higher education system.

In a final section, I will describe the turning point of the mid-2000s. First, it saw challenges to the principles of national equivalence between French universities, the diplomas they award, and their staff, and promoted differentiation and performance by increasing the number of competitive mechanisms. It also led to a rather radical reorganization of the French higher education landscape around the idea that universities should be at the center of this system.

In analyzing this process I will draw on the analytical framework developed by Richard Whitley (2008), because it both provides a typology of the relationships between the state and universities, and outlines how these relationships determine what kind of organizations universities can be. Whitley distinguishes between hollow, state-chartered, and market-based universities. Hollow organizations have little “discretionary control over resources, employment policies and internal academic structures (...) while academic matters are usually decided by the professors.” He further distinguishes between two variants: fragmented and bifurcated hollow organizations. In the latter variant, academics have more autonomy over their research agenda and academic careers. State-chartered universities are accredited by the state. They have “their own governance structures and powers toward degrees, hire staff, organize activities and manage facilities [but they] have to do so within the general framework of the state higher education system”. For market-based universities, the state may deliver some forms of accreditation but “universities are

free to employ whom they like on whatever terms they wish, and their managers have the same powers to organize and direct research and teaching activities”.

But Whitley’s analytical framework misses one important component of the higher education system, and therefore I will also use the notion of “university configuration” (Musselin, 2004[2001]) that stresses the importance of the relationships between the state and academics: the stronger the relationship between the state and the academic profession, the less influence universities have on academic careers and the management of faculty staff, and the less universities are relevant interlocutors for the state.

## **1. A century with no universities: from suppression during the French Revolution to the 1896 act**

The suppression of universities enacted during the French Revolution in September 1793 has deeply shaped the French higher education system. This decision resulted from long and contentious debates on French education during the French Revolution (Thiaw-Po-Une, 2007), and from the Chapelier act of 1791 against all forms of guilds. On the one hand, the local guilds of doctors that universities were came under attack for their privileges because of their monopoly on teaching and on their staff. On the other hand, universities were accused of being unable to train the skilled workforce that the nation needed. The suppression of universities thus also reflected a change in the nation’s expectations on higher education, emphasizing their role in training the living forces of the nation.

It is therefore unsurprising that some higher education institutions with professional orientations were created to replace them (for instance Ecole Polytechnique to train military officers, and Ecole normale supérieure to train high-school teachers), added to the two existing ones (Ecole des Mines that trained engineers for the mining sector, and Ecole des Ponts et Chaussées that trained engineers for roads and bridges). This institutionalized the creation of the *grandes écoles* that further developed in the 19<sup>th</sup> century with the creation of business schools on top of engineering schools, and paved the way for the divide between the professional training of highly skilled workforce entrusted to the *grandes écoles*, except for lawyers and physicians, and academic training delivered by a university sector primarily seeking to reproduce itself and train mid-skilled workforce. Moreover, the creation of new institutions fulfilling the missions that universities did not achieve became a cornerstone in the development of the French higher education system.

Coming back to the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, in 1806, Napoleon reopened the local *facultés* but did not close the newly created *grandes écoles*. Moreover, instead of recreating the former pre-Revolution universities, he aggregated all the *facultés* into a single national institution: the Imperial university. The discipline-based *facultés* reappeared but were not hosted under a “common institutional roof” at the local level, and they locally operated independently from one another (Gerbod, 1966). Furthermore, and in contrast to the “new German universities” imagined by von Humboldt and a group of philosophers for the university of Berlin around the same period (Renaut, 1995), cast as a place for teaching and research, the French *facultés* were all devoted to teaching and distributing grades. This was particularly the case for the *facultés* of sciences and the *facultés* of humanities that remained very close to the *lycées* (high schools): the academic staff was about the same for both institutions and the number of students attending

classes in the *facultés* was very low. This remained unchanged throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century. At the central level, a national body (I refer to it as the national council for public education for the sake of simplicity, although its name varied) worked hand-in-hand with the ministry and controlled the management of academic careers and the content of the curricula for each discipline. Through this body the academic profession of the *facultés* was placed under the control of successive governments throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

The 1896 act strengthened this organ-pipe and *facultés*-based organization of the French university system despite aiming to deeply reform it. After France lost the 1870 war against Germany, the defeat was blamed on the poor quality of the French training system, compared to the efficiency attributed to German universities. In the last quarter of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, many French academics spent time in German universities and upon their return, as Christophe Charle (1994) thoroughly explored in his very fine book *La République des professeurs (The Republic of university professors)*, they wrote reports to the director for higher education at the ministry, the philosopher Louis Liard, extolling the merits of the German University. The advantages they highlighted included the German system's reliance on universities and not just on *facultés*. They also praised the autonomy of German universities and professors protected by the principle of freedom to teach and study (*Freiheit der Lehre und der Lerne*). Finally, they endorsed the model of chair professors at the helm of institutes with a remit including both teaching and research. These recommendations were heeded and traces of them appear in the succession of reforms implemented in the run-up to the law of 1896. It is interesting to observe that these reforms all aimed at transforming the university sector, not the *grandes écoles*, even the ones under the control of some ministers, and that new *grandes écoles* were created during the period of reforms, i.e. between 1875 and 1896.



The 1896 act was nonetheless ambitious. First, it aimed to recreate universities by regrouping various *facultés* in a city under one administration – called university – supervised by a senior civil servant appointed by the State to serve as rector. Second, it aimed to develop research activities in French universities. Interestingly, this act revealed an evolution in the conception of the role of universities that is apparent when reading the political and parliamentary debates at that time. The envisioned universities were to be research-based, linked to the industry and local public authorities with which they were encouraged to develop cooperative relationships. As stressed by Emily Levine (2016) on her study of transfers between Germany and the US at that time, knowledge transfer was not central to this process. Rather, the reforms focused on the organization and missions of universities, and these ideas spread from Germany to France, as well as from Germany to the US.

## **2. The Republic of Facultés, from the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century to 1968**

### ***2.1. The failure of the 1896 act***

The 1896 act led to an expansion of the French higher education system and an increase in the number of students (Prost 1968), but most of its ambitious objectives failed (Charle 1994, Renaut 1995). In most cases (with some exceptions, like Toulouse and Grenoble), university professors neither developed their research activities nor cooperated with industry or local authorities. They primarily continued to focus on teaching. Next, on paper, local universities were reconfigured and placed above the *facultés*, but they formed a simple and weak administrative level that never succeeded in gaining an upper hand vis-à-vis the *facultés* (Antoine and Passeron, 1966) or

becoming relevant for the minister. By contrast, at the same time, the university academic profession had strengthened under the late 19<sup>th</sup>-century reforms (Picard, 2020): the National council for public instruction had been maintained, the non-academic members added over time had been excluded, and the council had consolidated its role as a national corporatist body in charge of managing the academic profession. Over the following year, it even gradually succeeded in reducing state intervention on issues such as hiring. Thus, the vertical co-management of the university system between the ministry and representatives of the discipline remained unaffected and the deans of the *facultés* remained the primary interlocutors of the ministerial staff. As a result, while the new act recreated entities called universities, it did not change the former university configuration based on centralized, vertical and organ-pipe relationships between the central public authorities and the academic profession, thus preventing universities from becoming more credible and authoritative. Following Whitley's typology (Whitley, 2008), these universities were hollow fragmented organizations.

The 1896 act did not change the institutional and mission divide between *grandes écoles* and the university sector either. It is even reinforced. First, the university academic profession was rarely open to the introduction of new fields, resisting the creation of management training programs at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, for example, thus paving the way for business schools to further develop within the *grandes écoles* sector. Second, the process continued of creating new institutions to fill the gaps left by the *facultés*. 1872 for instance saw the opening of a private higher institution paradoxically dedicated to training skilled French civil servants and political staff: building on the same diagnosis about the causes of the 1870 defeat, Emile Boutmy decided to create a private entity called the *Ecole libre des sciences politiques* (Sciences Po today) for the sake of the nation and

the French public administration, to achieve what he considered the *facultés* had fallen short of. Finally, the national management described above did not affect the academic staff of the *grandes écoles*. Those working in public engineering schools had their own specific school-based public status, while in business schools the teaching staff depended on chambers of commerce and industry, and also had their own rules and status. A very diverse and reactive sector of professional higher education institutions expanded alongside the uniform, nationally based and rather traditional university sector.

The 1896 act was therefore a missed opportunity to redefine the mission role and place of the university in France, as well as a missed opportunity to redesign the French higher education system. The institutional divide between the *grandes écoles* and the university sector remained and the distinction in the missions of the two sectors became further entrenched. During the six first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, assemblies of the deans of each discipline in the university sector remained the main forums of coordination, exchange, and communication with the ministry. In parallel, career management remained national and discipline-based. The National council for public instruction became the National council of Universities – again a generic term for a body often renamed while its missions remained similar and primarily focused on the management of academic careers while its autonomy vis-à-vis the ministry grew (Picard, 2020). The *facultés*, rather than the universities remained the main pillars of the French university system, mainly devoted to teaching and self-reproduction, and the training of lawyers, physicians and mid-level professionals. What I call the Republic of the Facultés (Musselin 2004 [2001]) lasted until the 1968 movement.

## *2.2. When the American model surpassed the German and Soviet influences: from WWII to the 1968 act (Faure act)*

The 1896 act was followed seventy-two years later by the 1968 act. At the end of WWII, While many French sectors were affected by or experienced structural reforms after WWII – such as the public health insurance system, the railways and the power sector, among others – none of these reforms touched the higher education system. Its design and missions remained unchanged.

A big change had actually occurred just before the war. The Front Populaire and socialist government of Léon Blum created a secretary of state for scientific research for the first time. First entrusted to Irène Joliot-Curie, the role rapidly passed on to Jean Perrin, also a Nobel prizewinner in physics. Inspired by the Soviet model of the academies of science, he set the foundation of the CNRS (National Center for Scientific Research, created in 1939), a national and multidisciplinary research institution. The latter was to focus on developing fundamental research in all disciplines in order to close the gap with the paltry research of the universities and *grandes écoles*. This institutional creation and ensuing ones aligned with the development of the French higher education system: new institutions with new missions emerged outside of existing ones in order to fulfill unachieved missions. The CNRS was complemented by additional research organizations just after WWII: the CEA (National center for nuclear research) and the INED (National institute for demographical research) in 1945, and the INRA (National institute for agronomy) in 1946. But the development of a research sector did not transform the role and missions of higher education, the prevalence of the *facultés* as intermediary structures between academics and the state, or the way these *facultés* were run. Rather, it further entrenched the

teaching mission of French academics as research was expected to develop within national research institutions.

After WWII the monopolistic position of the *grandes écoles* in the training of the French economic, intellectual and administrative elites consolidated. This position went unchallenged at the end of the war, and the government even decided to create one more public professional school: the ENA (National school of government - *Ecole nationale d'administration*), dedicated to training senior civil servants. Independent of any other higher education institution, ENA had no relations whatsoever with universities, offering highly practical, technical and rarely research-based training programs. The school did not offer PhDs and the faculty consisted of professionals. This was also the case for the business and engineering schools. To this day, most *grandes écoles*, even the *Ecole Normale Supérieure*, do not offer PhDs, which is not required to attain the highest positions in the French private and public sectors. Having attended a *grande école*, and especially a prestigious one, is the best guarantor of access to the highest positions. The State and businesses do not expect their managers to be trained in research, and pressures to change are low since senior civil servants themselves attended the *grandes écoles*. As Pierre Bourdieu (1989) showed, these institutions help train, reproduce and legitimize the dominant classes and create what he called a nobility of state by occupying positions of power in the economic, public and intellectual realms.

The end of WWII did not lead to a redefinition of the missions of universities. Access to them remained limited to heirs (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1964), i.e. students from privileged classes who were not destined to the highest ranks, which remained reserved for graduates of the *grandes écoles*.

Nevertheless, ten years after WWII, a group of academics and politicians led a collective effort to produce a diagnosis and proposal for reform. Crucial momentum was reached with the organization of a conference under the aegis of Pierre Mendès-France (1907-1982), a member of the radical party (moderate left) who was convinced of the need to strengthen French research (Duclert, 2006). Pierre Mendès-France was already concerned with this issue when he led the government from 1954 to 1955. He created a national committee responsible for setting national research priorities and nominated a secretary of state in charge of public research in his government. After he left the helm of the government, he actively helped organize the Caen conference (Caen is a city located in Normandy, in Northwestern France). Over the conference's three days, scientists and politicians sharing a very pessimistic diagnosis of the French situation, and a fear of Soviet and American scientific supremacy, met to discuss the French situation and issue recommendations.

While the Soviet model had inspired the creation of the CNRS in 1936 to compensate for the research weakness of French universities, the American model was the reference during the conference of 1956. This influence, with American research universities held up as a model, was new in France, and not limited to universities: the Marshall plan has strengthened transatlantic relationships, facilitating the exportation of the American model to many sectors of activity (Djelic, 1998). As mentioned above, the German model inspired previous university reforms, at the end of the 19th century. But in 1956, the American technological and military superiority demonstrated during WWII (and its concretization via mastery of the atomic bomb) revealed to the whole world the success of its research universities. This influence had actually started

emerging before 1945 and, between the two wars, young French researchers were already visiting American universities. Among them was Jacques Monod, co-author with André Lichnérowicz and Edmond Bauer of the final report on fundamental research and higher education for the 1956 Caen conference. Monod had been awarded a Rockefeller grant to go to CalTech in 1937. He came back full of enthusiasm and admiration for the American university system. Edmond Bauer had contacts with the US before WWII, and André Lichnerowicz showed a similar fascination in statements following the Caen conference.

The authors of the report for the Caen Conference of 1956

- Jacques Monod (1910-1976), a biologist and biochemist who won the Nobel Prize of Medecine (with François Jacob and André Lwof) in 1965.

- André Lichnérowicz (1915-1998), a mathematician and professor at the University of Strasbourg, the University of Paris, and finally at the Collège de France. He was the scientific counselor of the state secretary for research and technical progress of the Mendes-France government in 1954.

- Edmond Bauer (1980-1963), a physicist who was the assistant-director of Paul Langevin at the Collège de France.

This American influence clearly transpired in their 1956 report. They asserted that research is the business of universities, and that they must be able to really do research. Although they didn't explicitly say so, they were thus defending the research university model and questioning the existence and role of French national research institutions. They called for the election of university presidents, and for moral, financial and administrative autonomy for universities, which they believed should determine the internal allocation of the budgets they received from the

ministry. They also recommended removing the divides between faculties, if not their dissolution. And they suggested breaking up the chair system in order to increase the autonomy of laboratories. Finally, they emphasized the importance of university-industry relations. Meanwhile, during the conference Pierre Mendès France deplored the divide between the universities and the *grandes écoles* (Rizzo, 2002).

Nevertheless, the 1956 Caen conference had little impact on the higher education system itself because the proposals for university reform – quickly summarized in the paragraph above – did not play a central role in the discussions. This first Caen conference, and the meetings that followed, primarily focused on the governance of science (Duclert, 1998; Duclert and Chatriot, 2005). But as Jérôme Aust observed (forthcoming), the Caen conference resulted from a common enterprise between politicians and scientists: these relationships further expanded in the 1950s and pushed for reforms of the French research system at the beginning of the 1960s. Charles de Gaulle, president of France from 1958 to 1969, immediately appointed a general delegate for scientific and technical research in 1958. This led to the creation of a research funding body that provided project-based funding for emerging research topics at the beginning of the 1960s.

University reform became much more central during the second Caen conference organized in 1966. All the elements mentioned in 1956 were taken up and developed again in the conclusions that Marc Zamansky and Robert Lattès drafted, drawing heavily from the preliminary report written by André Lichnerowicz (1966) and entitled “For universities”.



The authors of the report for the Caen Conference of 1966

- Marc Zamansky (1916-1996), a mathematician, was a member of the French resistance and a deportee during WWII. He was the dean of the faculty of science of Paris from 1961 to 1968 and actively participated in the creation of the University of Paris 6 in 1968.

- Robert Lattès was a mathematician and computer scientist who started an academic career before he worked in the banking industry and venture capital.

In this preliminary report, Lichnérowicz lauded the strength of American universities and called for "universities sufficiently autonomous and competitive with each other, both in terms of human training and scientific exploration (my translation)". He bemoaned the crumbling chairs and compartmentalized faculties, and proposed structuring them into higher education institutes and departments – an idea that had previously been floated during the Grenoble conference in 1957 – with a department council that would also include students. He suggested that a president be elected for 3 years, and that a university assembly be created and include all the professors as well as representatives of the non-professor academic staff and students. He also advocated for what he called a senate that would bring together the department chairs. Finally, he recommended that half of the university board consist of external personalities, akin to the American board of trustees.

### **3. The Faure act of 1968, an innovative act but a truncated implementation (1968 to the 1980s)**

Again, the second Caen conference did not produce immediate changes for French universities, and it would probably have remained wishful thinking without the 1968 students' movements. The second Caen conference took place after access to the *lycées* has broadened (end of the 1950s) and Charles de Gaulle failed to impose a revision of the rules determining access to universities and selection processes. As a result, in 1966, the *baccalauréat* was still the first university requirement, and anyone who had passed it – still only 20% of a cohort at the time – could attend university. The increase in the number of students in *lycées* almost automatically led to a dramatic increase in the number of university students, while the *grandes écoles* remained rather protected from this wave of massification.

< TABLE 1 >

A contested reform of the training programs of 1966, and the overpopulation of university campuses paved the way for the 1968 May students' movements. After the end of the demonstrations, Charles de Gaulle nominated the Couve de Murville government, which prepared a new university act in order to address the situation and respond to some of the university community's requests. Obviously, Lichnerowicz's report and recommendations and the from the Caen conference, inspired Minister Edgard Faure when he prepared the law that was promulgated in November 1968, in record time.

The Faure law eliminated the former *facultés* and established a multi-disciplinary approach as the organizing principle of future universities. The latter were to benefit from budgetary autonomy, i.e. being able to allocate their budgets internally, and be subject to a posteriori rather than a

priori financial control; from pedagogical autonomy, i.e. determine their teaching activities and their research agendas; and from administrative autonomy, i.e. determine their statutes and internal structures.

From an organizational perspective, the law replaced faculties with UERs (*Unités d'enseignement et de recherche* - Teaching and Research Units), which were supposed to resemble American departments and clearly indicate that dual teaching and research goals for universities. This scientific mission had already been emphasized since the mid-1960s with the CNRS policy of labeling some research labs to which it provided staff and budget – a practice that expanded over time (more than 80% of today's CNRS researchers are located in university labs) and was adopted by some of the other national research institutions.

The organizational design of universities answered demands for the increased participation expected from the students, but also the principle of participation dear to Charles de Gaulle, who passed an ordinance promoting the participation of employees in the benefits and management of firms in 1967. The Faure law followed this approach and allowed representatives of academics, administrative staff and students to sit on the university council, whereas the deliberative bodies had previously been restricted to professors. The university council also opened to some external stakeholders. Even if this was far from the 50% share of external members that Lichnerowicz had called for, it was a significant European innovation at the time. Finally, the university council was responsible for electing one of its members as president of the university for five years, putting an end to the appointment of administrative rectors to the helm of universities.

The transformative potential of the Faure act was high, and it came as a surprise, since such a rupture with the pre-1968 situation was not expected from a right-wing government. Nevertheless the reformers' ambitions fell short because the implementation of this act was truncated in many ways.

First, in the large metropolises the multidisciplinary universities that the law anticipated did not see the light of day. Political and epistemological cleavages led to deep divisions among the members of the former *facultés* who then refused to be part of the same institutions. Therefore, in large cities like Paris but also Toulouse, Rennes, Lille, Lyon, Marseille,... more than one university was born of the Faure act, but instead of being multidisciplinary they often remained predominantly medical, scientific, social science, or humanities establishments (Aust, 2016). In Paris for instance, in an extreme case, the former Sorbonne exploded into seven universities, some of them with no science (like Paris 1, Paris 3 or Paris 4), while others combined science and medicine (Paris 6), sometimes with law (Paris 5), or focused on law (Paris 2); only one was conceived as a multidisciplinary institution (Paris 7).

Moreover, as Habiba Cohen (1978) has shown, the ministry quickly neutralized the three autonomies (administrative, pedagogical and financial) that the law granted. In fact the ministry did not change the way it steered the whole university system before the Faure act: budgets remained controlled a priori rather than a posteriori; the central administration remained organized according to the disciplines (i.e. the former *facultés*); decisions (accreditation of training programs, negotiation of positions, management of academic careers, etc.) remained discipline-based, and the deans remained the interlocutors of the ministry. As a matter of fact, the

university configuration characterized by corporatist co-management between representatives of the academic profession and the ministry, as well as by a central management of academic careers, did not change, thus maintaining the newly created universities as a weak institution. This was all the more the case that in the 1970s, the new university presidents were mobilized by the rather contentious situations they had to manage in their own institution (Rémond, 1979). It took some time for the newly created institutions to make decision in the newly elected and participatory bodies, and for the university presidents to invent their functions.

As a result the faculty's influence remained strong and the autonomy of the new universities was restricted in two ways: the ministry did not respect the autonomies promised by the Faure Law and the university level struggled to exist between the new UER and the ministry (Musselin, 1987; Friedberg and Musselin 1989). According to Whitley's typology (2008), French universities became bifurcated<sup>1</sup> hollow organizations, not only because of the nature of the relationships between the universities and the State, but also because of the co-management between the state and the academic profession.

As in 1896, the reforms only concerned the university sector but not the *grandes écoles* that still expanded in numbers and in attractiveness. Meanwhile, the missions of the two sectors and their expected contributions to the nation remained mostly unchanged.

---

<sup>1</sup> Although Whitley classified French universities of that period as fragmented hollow organizations, but I believe he underestimated the importance of the French academic profession.

#### 4. New missions for empowered universities (1981 – beginning of the 2000s)

The Savary act of 1984 passed by the socialists when they won the presidential elections of 1981 did not introduce major changes in the internal government of French universities. It also did not modify the situation of French universities within the French higher education landscape, as it affected individual universities but not the discipline-based governance of the higher education system in the ministry, or the divide between the university and the *grandes écoles* sector. Furthermore, the implementation of this new act slowed down as the first cohabitation (a socialist president with a right-wing parliament and a right-wing prime minister therefore) of the fifth Republic occurred in 1986.

The Savary act, and a decree also passed in 1984 on managing the public academic profession, nevertheless clearly specified that research is a central mission of universities. The official name of university academics become “enseignants-chercheurs” (researcher professors), and they were expected to spend half of their time on each activity.

The role of universities in the production of “employable staff” for the nation was also reconfigured. The creation of job-oriented training programs within universities had started in the mid-60s with the introduction of the IUT (University Institutes of Technology) delivering two-year training programs, and it expanded in the mid-70s with the creation of university “professionalized training programs”. This evolution continued into the 1980s and next decade. The development of university-industry relationships and of professional trainings (Le Cozanet, 2019) was in the Savary act of 1984. Interestingly, while universities introduced job-oriented

curricula, the *grandes écoles*, and especially the business schools, steeped in a more international context, began to be more academic, hiring academic staff with PhDs and developing incentives in order to encourage research activities and publications. But these parallel evolutions did not affect the monopoly of the *grandes écoles* in training the different elites, while universities still prepared their students for academic positions with mid-level responsibilities.

The evolution in the missions expected from universities was complemented by measures strengthening universities as institutions. At the end of the 1980s, after a reform of the *baccalauréat* that led to a rapid increase in the number of graduates, the French higher education system entered a second massification wave that primarily affected the universities because of their non-selective access. In 1988, a few months after the reelection of Mitterrand as President of France, and the constitution of a new socialist government, Minister of education (including higher education) Lionel Jospin announced that in order to assist overpopulated universities, four-year contracts would be awarded to each university in order to allocate additional resources. The organizational reform of the ministry that took place at the same time facilitated the implementation of this measure. Alongside the allocation of an operating budget<sup>2</sup> based on the number of students attending the training programs that were accredited by the discipline-based bureaus of ministry, and on the lobbying regularly conducted by most deans (Allègre, 2000), the implementation and the negotiation of the four-year contracts was therefore entrusted to a new body (the DPDU) that completely reinvented the contractual process. As a geographer in charge of regional planning, the new director Armand Frémont decided to implement the contracts in four regional waves. The first regions to be served were the North and West of France because

---

<sup>2</sup> It is only after 2007 and the Pécresse act that French universities became responsible for their payroll.

their universities were among the youngest and least endowed. But Fremont and his team were personally convinced that French universities were too weak and they required that universities, in order to negotiate their contracts, develop an institutional project for the next four years that went beyond the juxtaposition of their UFR<sup>3</sup> projects to form a collective project for the whole university. They furthermore decided that the university presidents, rather than the deans, would be their interlocutors.

This was the starting point for a major transformation since Napoleonic times, as the corporatist co-management that had prevailed between the disciplines and the ministry was disrupted, and universities became partners of the ministry as well as recognized intermediary levels between academics and the ministry. The reform of the national council of universities in 1992 further weakened the national importance of the disciplines as this central academic body was no longer allowed to intervene in the recruitment decisions made by the universities, thus leaving the responsibility for hiring academics to the local level.

This loosening of the central discipline-based co-management thus modified the former university configuration: university-ministry relationships became more central and universities had more direct control over the management of their faculty. This facilitated the emergence of stronger presidential teams at the university level. Being a president became a fulltime occupation that required management skills. The exercise of preparing a collective four-year project became – at least for some – an important moment to define priorities, create a plan, and develop a

---

<sup>3</sup> After the Savary act, the UER (Unités d'Enseignement et de Recherche – Teaching and research units) became UFR (Unités de Formation et de recherche – Training and research units).



collective vision. This did not solve all the issues inherent to the governance of universities regardless of the countries in which they were located in (Musselin, 2006), or the governance issues specific to French universities (Mignot-Gérard 2006; Chatelain et al. 2012), but at least universities came to be recognized as the main pillars of the university system.

## **5. Towards a diversified higher education landscape, with universities as central actors? (2005-to now)**

The contractual policy was also the starting point for the recognition – and in some respect the promotion – of differentiation among French universities. Because it was primarily introduced to help more needy universities catch up, it cannot be presented as a first intrusion of New Public Management in French higher education. But it also aimed to strengthen the university level and clarify what made each university different or special, and what its priorities and strategy were, thus “constructing them as organizations” (Brunsson and Sahlin-Andersson 2000). The idea that they should not all have the same objectives and that they might differently weigh the importance of their different missions, despite falling under the same national framework – the Savary act at the time – started to enter the official discourses. Three main reform streams further developed this trend and deeply impacted the French higher education system over the past two decades (Musselin 2017 and 2018).

The first reform stream consists of the increasing autonomy that the 2007 university act, known as the LRU for university freedom and responsibility, provided to university presidents. In particular, it granted them a global budget that included for the first time the payroll of their

academic and administrative staff. This first stream facilitated the implementation of the second one, and the increased differentiation of the university system.

In the 1990s, the principles driving the university system – at least in theory as it has never been completely the case in practice – remained in place and official discourses still relied on the idea that a given professor was equivalent to another, a degree at university X was equivalent to a degree at university Y, and all French universities were equivalent to one another. This changed in the mid-2000s when the ministers in charge of higher education introduced the idea of performance, started to integrate the evaluation results in the formula used to determine the distribution of budgets among universities, and developed a wide range of highly selective calls for proposals. The biggest one consisted of four successive Programs for investment in the future (*Programme d'Investissements d'avenir*) between 2009 and 2021, through which more than 30 billion euros were allocated to higher education and research. These new competitive instruments were enhanced by the creation in 2005 of a national research council that generalized project-based research funding. Furthermore, in 2006 various existing evaluation bodies were centralized in a unique agency in charge of evaluating teaching programs, research labs, and all higher education institutions every five years. In contrast to previous practices, this new agency publicized the results of the evaluations (and from 2006 to 2014 even published the ratings on its website) and partly used them to determine university budgets. The multiple calls for projects, the limited success rates of the research council (more than 20% when it started, but 13% in mid-2010, and 16% in 2019), and the publicized evaluations, all contributed to increased competition between academics, labs, and – in a new development (Musselin, 2018) – higher education institutions, at least in Europe. Eleven of them qualified for IDEX (excellence

initiative), among which 6 passed a successful evaluation at the end of a probationary period, 3 are still to be confirmed, and 2 failed. The confirmed IDEX are granted an endowment of 750 to 900 million euros.

This increased competition has been massive, accentuating differentiation in the French university system between the haves (receiving more funding) and the have nots. This policy was launched by rightwing governments, but continued (albeit to a lesser extent) during the socialist period (2012-2017), and under President Macron. This competitive stream is inseparable from narratives affirming that “universities should be at the center of the system” and promoting the development of what is presented as the international model: multidisciplinary universities integrating research and teaching, training employable students, and participating in innovation, technology transfers, and the knowledge economy. Despite this proactive discourse, the difference between the public spending for a student attending a university and a student preparing for the selective exams to enter a *grande école* is still high (10,120 euros per year for the former versus 15,890 for the latter in 2018) and the divide in the training of elites has not changed: narratives do not always cohere with concrete facts and behaviors. Nevertheless, this discourse and the objective of redesigning the higher education landscape with visible universities, as well as the goal of making the French system more readable, led to policies aiming to overcome the traditional divide between the university sector, the *grandes écoles*, and the national research institutions, and to bring all of them together in local collaborative consortia first called PRES (poles for research and higher education) and now COMUE (community of universities and higher education institutions). The creation of PRES was enabled by a 2006 research act, but in 2013 it became compulsory with the Fioraso act. The transfer of competencies and budget

from the members of each consortium to the PRES/COMUE has actually fallen far short of goals, and the vast majority of these meta-structures are evolving into light local coordination spaces whose future I believe is compromised, despite the ministry's attempts to promote them.

Nevertheless, some successful reorganizations occurred because alongside this national policy, in 2009 the three universities located in Strasbourg decided to merge, precipitating a bottom-up movement to merge: 12 mergers involving 29 universities occurred. In two recent cases, these mergers also involved engineering *grandes écoles*: this is exceptional and it will be interesting to see whether the merger holds.

Over the past few decades, the French landscape has quite substantially evolved because of these mergers, the differentiation introduced by IDEX, other selective and competitive processes, and a general increase in autonomy.

## **6. Conclusion**

The nature of the relationships that states develop with universities is central to understanding the governance and the institutional heft of universities. As stressed by Richard Whitley (2008), it impacts the governance capacity and autonomy of universities. But another important component is also the nature of the relationships between public authorities and the academic profession (Musselin, 2004 [2001]). These two components play a role in the definition of the missions expected from the different sectors of higher education.

In France, the relationships between public authorities and the academic profession took the form of a corporatist co-management which started with the Napoleonic Imperial university and further strengthened as the discipline-based *facultés* became the pillars of the French university system. It institutionalized the divide that characterized the French system, with public universities primarily dedicated to teaching and training skilled workforce, lawyers, physicians, and future academics, while the *grandes écoles* that developed during the French revolution focused on professional training and gradually acquired a monopolistic position in the training of French elites.

WWII did not change this configuration. While the higher education model pushed by reformers in the 1950s and 1960s shifted from German universities to American research universities, reformers were not able to translate the proposals of the two Caen conferences into policies.

The Faure act, passed after the students movement of 1968, finally developed these proposals, but its implementation was limited with regard to both the ministry and the way new universities were created. It left the career management completely unchanged, made it hard for universities to emerge, and maintained their weak governance. Nevertheless, research has gradually become a mission for universities, and even a primary one for the different national research institutions created since WWII. Meanwhile, the *grandes écoles* remain the most prestigious higher education institutions and train the elites.

The introduction of four-year contracts between the ministry and each university weakened the corporatist co-management with the disciplines and enabled the emergence of more autonomous

and strategy-oriented universities, thus creating a new university configuration. This also happened at a time of broadening missions for French universities: they are still expected to train students but should produce an employable workforce while actively pursuing research and participating in the development of innovation in knowledge economies.

The past two decades have seen the acceleration of this process. The university and *grandes écoles* sectors still exist and the latter still trains the French elites, but their missions are increasingly similar: *grandes écoles* are expected to do research, and universities, to offer professional programs, while both are supposed to pursue innovation and technology transfers. The competitive mechanisms introduced by the government and the reshaping of the higher education landscape may lead to the emergence of some world-class universities, but the two sectors remain separated, with universities still lagging behind the *grandes écoles* in terms of attractiveness, reputation within the French society, and social image.

### **Acknowledgments**

I acknowledge and thank Ekatarina Shibanova and Mitchell Stevens for their wonderful work as co-editors of this special issue, and I am particularly indebted to Carolyn Avery for a relevant and valued editing of my French English.

### **Declaration of interest statement**

The author is not aware of any affiliations, memberships, funding, or financial holdings that might be perceived as affecting the objectivity of this paper

Short biographical note : Christine Musselin is a researcher of the Centre for the Sociology of Organizations (CSO), a Sciences Po and CNRS research unit. She leads comparative studies on university governance, higher education policies, and academic labour markets. She has been a DAAD fellow in 1984-85 and a Fulbright and Harvard fellow in 1998-99. She has led the CSO from 2007 to 2013 and has been the Vice-president for Research of Sciences Po from June 2013 to November 2018.

She is the author of *The long March of French Universities*, New York, Routledge (2005) and *The markets for academics*, New York, Routledge (2009).  
One of her last books *La grande course des universités* has been published by the Presses de Sciences Po in 2017.

## References

- Allègre, C. 2000. *Toute vérité est bonne à dire. Entretiens avec Laurent Joffrin*. Paris: Laffont.
- Antoine, G. and J.-C. Passeron 1966. *La réforme de l'Université. Conservatisme et novation à l'Université*. Paris: Calmann-Lévy.
- Aust, J. 2016. "Des facultés aux universités: Appliquer la loi Faure à Lyon (1968-1973)." In *La loi Edgar Faure* edited by B. Poucet and D. Valence, 167 – 176. Rennes: Presses Universitaires de Rennes.
- Aust, J. (forthcoming). *Le gouvernement de la science* (provisory title), Habilitation à diriger des recherches. Paris: Sciences Po.
- Bourdieu, P. 1989. *La noblesse d'Etat. Grandes écoles et esprit de corps*. Paris: Editions de Minuit.
- Bourdieu, P. and J.-C. Passeron 1964. *Les Héritiers, Les étudiants et la culture*. Paris: Editions de Minuit.
- Brunsson, N and K. Sahlin-Andersson. 2000. "Constructing Organizations: The Example of Public Sector Reform." *Organization Studies* 21(4): 721-746.
- Charle, C. 1994. *La République des universitaires*. Paris: Le Seuil.
- Chatelain-Ponroy, S., S. Mignot-Gérard, C. Musselin and S. Sponem. 2012. *La gouvernance des universités françaises. Pouvoir, évaluation et identités*. Paris: Cnam, Sciences Po-CSO-CNRS, UPEC, HEC Montréal,  
[http://cso.edu/upload/dossiers/Rapport\\_GouvernanceUniversitesFrance\\_2012.pdf](http://cso.edu/upload/dossiers/Rapport_GouvernanceUniversitesFrance_2012.pdf)

- Clark, W. 2006. *Academic Charisma and the Origins of the Research University*. Chicago: Chicago University Press.
- Cohen, H. 1978. *Elusive Reform. The French Universities, 1968-1978*. Boulder: Westview Press.
- Djelic, M.-L. 1998. *Exporting the American Model. The postwar transformation of European Business*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Drori, G.S., D. Delmestri and A. Oberg 2013. "Branding the university: Relational strategy of identity construction in a competitive field". In *Trust in Higher Education Institutions*, edited by L. Engwall and P. Scott, 134-147. London: Portland Press.
- Duclert, V. and A. Chatriot 2005. "Fonder une politique de recherche: les débuts de la DGRST." In *L'État à l'épreuve des sciences sociales. La fonction recherche dans les administrations sous la Ve République*, edited by P. Bezes et al. 23-36, Paris: La Découverte.
- Duclert, V. 1998. "Le colloque de Caen - 1956. La IVe République et la mobilisation scientifique." *Historiens & Géographes* 361: 337-360.
- Duclert, V. 2006. "Le colloque de Caen, second temps de l'engagement mendésiste." In *Le gouvernement de la recherche. Histoire d'un engagement politique, de Pierre Mendès France au général de Gaulle (1953-1969)*, edited by A. Chatriot, 81-100. Paris: La Découverte.
- Friedberg, E. and C. Musselin. 1989. *En quête d'universités*. Paris: l'Harmattan.
- Gerbod, P. 1966. *La condition universitaire en France au XIXème siècle en France*. Paris: PUF.
- Le Cozanet, L. 2019. *La professionnalisation des études. Quand l'Université (s')adapte à l'économie*, PHD, Paris: Dauphine University.
- Lichnerowicz, A. 1966. "Pour des Universités." *Revue de l'Enseignement Supérieur* 4: 60-69.
- Mignot-Gérard, S. 2006. *Echanger et argumenter: les dimensions politiques du gouvernement des universités françaises*, PhD of the Institut d'Etudes Politiques de Paris, Paris.



- Musselin, C. 2004[2001]. *The long March of French Universities*. New York: Routledge. (*La longue marche des universités françaises*. Paris: Presses Universitaires de France).
- Musselin, C. 1987. *Système de gouvernement ou cohésion universitaire: les capacités d'action collective de deux universités allemandes et de deux universités françaises*, PhD at the Institut d'Etudes Politiques de Paris, Paris.
- Musselin, C. 2006. "Are Universities specific organisations?." In *Towards a Multiversity? Universities between Global Trends and national Traditions*, edited by G. Krücken, A. Kosmützky and M. Torca, 63-84. Bielefeld: Transcript Verlag.
- Musselin, C. 2017. *La grande course des universités*. Paris: Les Presses de Sciences Po.
- Musselin, C. 2018. "New forms of competition in higher education." *Socio-Economic Review*. 16 (3): 657–683.
- Pallier, D. 1992. "Les Bibliothèques universitaires de 1945 à 1975." *BBF*. 3: 58-73.
- Picard, E. 2020. *La profession introuvable? Les universitaires français de l'Université impériale aux universités contemporaines*. Habilitation à diriger des recherches, Université Paris 1 - Panthéon Sorbonne.
- Prost, A. 1968. *Histoire de l'enseignement en France, 1800-1967*. Paris: Armand Colin.
- Rémond, R. 1979. *La Règle et le consentement. Gouverner une société*. Paris: Fayard.
- Renaut, A. 1995. *Les révolutions de l'Université, Essai sur la modernization de la culture*. Paris: Calmann-Levy.
- Rizzo, J.-L. 2002. "Pierre Mendès France et la recherche scientifique et technique." *La revue pour l'histoire du CNRS*. URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/histoire-cnrs/3651> 1
- Thiaw-Po-Une, L. 2007. *L'état démocratique et ses dilemmes. Le cas des universités*. Paris: Hermann.

Whitley, R. 2008. "Universities as strategic actors: limitations and variations." In *The University in the Market*, edited by L Engwall and D Weaire, 23-37. London: Portland Press.

*Evolution in the number of students in thousands (1950 to 2019)*

	1950	1960	1970	1980	1990	2000	2010	2015	2019
Universities	137	215	661	858	1.160	1.397	1.437	1.593	1.635
including IUT	-	-	24	54	74	119	117	116	121
<i>% increase</i>		<i>57%</i>	<i>207%</i>	<i>30%</i>	<i>35%</i>	<i>20%</i>	<i>3%</i>	<i>11%</i>	<i>3%</i>
STS	-	8	27	68	199	239	242	256	262
CPGE	?	21	33	40	64	70	80	86	85
Others	?	66	130	215	293	454	560	616	742
Total		310	851	1 181	1 717	2.160	2.319	2.551	2.724

From Palier (1992) and

[https://publication.enseignementsup-recherche.gouv.fr/eesr/10/EESR10\\_ES\\_09-les\\_etudiants\\_dans\\_les\\_filières\\_de\\_formation\\_depuis\\_50\\_ans.php](https://publication.enseignementsup-recherche.gouv.fr/eesr/10/EESR10_ES_09-les_etudiants_dans_les_filières_de_formation_depuis_50_ans.php) and

[https://cache.media.enseignementsup-recherche.gouv.fr/file/2020/64/9/NF\\_synthese2019\\_2020\\_1312649.pdf](https://cache.media.enseignementsup-recherche.gouv.fr/file/2020/64/9/NF_synthese2019_2020_1312649.pdf)