EVALUATION IN FRENCH HIGHER EDUCATION: HISTORY, POLICY AND DEBATES

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The French Higher Education System is presently undergoing one of the deepest transformations of its history. In the last few years, several major pieces of legislation, partly unconnected, have triggered a process of change that will alter the structure of the system, the relations among its various components as well as their internal organisation.

Parallel to these structural changes, the higher education and research system has been building up a comprehensive evaluation apparatus.

After a short account of the present state of higher education highlighting this paper will present the development of the methods and the institutions of evaluation over the last two decades.

The Institutional context of French higher education and research

The French system is characterized by a duality of research and teaching organisation and a duality of higher education institutions and programmes.

The major part of publicly funded research was conducted by about twenty national research agencies. These agencies are autonomous but funded by the state. The best known is the "national centre for scientific research" (*Centre national de la recherche scientifique - CNRS*). Founded in 1939, it employs about 34 000 researchers and support staff and covers most fields of research. Research agencies operate their own laboratories and, since the end of the 1960's, cooperate with universities by providing funds and staff to selected laboratories named "mixed research units" (UMR). University research centres are eager to get this prestigious "label" from research agencies.

The second distinctive feature of the French system is the duality of teaching institutions: Although the universities enrol about 60% of the higher education students, they are in competition with smaller independent institutions, often more prestigious, called "*grandes écoles*" or "*écoles supérieures"* enrolling from a few hundred to a few thousand student and specialising mostly in engineering and management. Since, unlike universities, they select their students through high-level competitive entrance examination, they attract the brightest students. They were traditionally not involved in research, with a few notable exceptions.

Most of these *écoles* are public, funded by the state budget and controlled by various government departments that appoint their directors, their permanent staff and allocate funding to them. A number of them are private and may apply for state accreditation and increasingly for recurrent funding from the state budget.

Evaluation before AERES: Multiple agencies and diversified processes

Before the creation of AERES (Higher Education and Research Evaluation Agency) in 2007, responsibility for evaluation of higher education and research was distributed among different agencies.

At the government level, evaluation appeared quite late compared to other countries: the first legislation providing for evaluation of public policy was published in the early 1990's. A major reform of the state budgetary process (LOLF 2001) that took almost ten years to produce its full effects, submitted the state administration and all the state "operators" (public or private bodies funded from the state budget) to evaluation of their actions through reports to the parliament on the achievement of detailed objectives stated to them. As far as higher education and research are concerned, targets and indicators were set to public operators, universities, *écoles* and national research agencies. Among such targets one can find degree completion, transition from on level to the other (bachelor, master and doctorate), transition to labour market (time from degree to employment, adequateness of employment…), productivity of research (publications and patents, income from grants and industrial contracts…).

At the level of the higher education and research sector, evaluation had been present for quite a long time, through the tradition of peer assessment used in selection and promotion of academics.

The Higher Education Act of 1984, devoted to restructuring of the internal organisation of universities, increased the relative autonomy of institutions to the detriment of individual academics and introduced a national committee for evaluation of higher education institutions (CNE - *comité national d'évaluation des établissements publics d'enseignement supérieur*). The committee, set up in 1985 as an independent authority, comprised members designated by different academic bodies and public agencies. His mission was to systematically evaluate universities and public higher education institutions and to report to the President of the Republic on the state of higher education. From 1986 to 2006 the CNE published some 240 evaluation reports: institutional reports on all public universities and a selection of *écoles*, thematic reports on specific fields of study and reports on the state of higher education at the national level.

Over its first years of existence, CNE developed its own methodology for institutional evaluation that differed substantially from what was done in the neighbouring countries that were most advanced on the field of higher education evaluation. In 2003, it produced a manual called "the book of reference", witness of the evolution of its evaluation practices in the perspective of the Bergen conference on evaluation in HER and the setting up of the new European quality assessment principles (European Standards and Guidelines - ESG) by ENQA.

CNER, the national committee of evaluation of research (*comité national d'évaluation de la recherche* -), created soon after for evaluating public research programmes and policies, was much less visible partly because overlapping of other agencies. Having no role in the assessment of individual research centres, it could only conduct survey and write reports on the broad issues of research.

A third agency operated parallel to CNE and CNER, the *Mission scientifique, technique et pédagogique* (MSTP). **It** a task force of the Ministries for Higher Education and Research, drawing on a large number of experts appointed by the ministers among academic staff of the universities and the national research agencies. Its mandate was to evaluate the

laboratories entirely owned by the universities (since evaluation of UMR was conducted by the research agencies), the academic teaching programmes (for accreditation of university programmes and doctoral schools) and individual academics staff (for awarding bonuses and distinctions).

The individual evaluation of the academic staff of the universities is mainly devoted to the national council of universities (*conseil national des universités* - **CNU**). This consultative body, originally created in 1945 and organized in its present shape in 1987, advises the Minister in charge of Higher Education on matters relating to recruitment and promotion of the tenured academic staff of the universities. It is composed of members elected for two thirds by all tenured academics and appointed for a third by the Minister. Since tenured academics belong to the French national public service, they ought, by statute, to be recruited and promoted nationally. As this peculiar feature was somewhat conflicting with the increased autonomy of the universities in recruiting and rewarding their employees, a compromise was found in which recruitments and promotions procedures are shared between the CNU and the universities. For recruitments, the appropriate sections of the CNU first select a list of "qualified" candidates in which universities recruit their new staff. Half of the promotions are awarded first at the national level by CNU and then half locally by universities.

The **National Research Agencies** have their own evaluation bodies, initially set up to assess internally their own staff and the research programmes of their own laboratories. The development of UMR, the mixed research units set up in partnership with universities, led them to evaluate a growing number of such laboratories and their staff, including academic and research staff employed by the partner universities. Since the universities had no experience of evaluation at all, they let the research agencies assess their laboratories and, indirectly, shape their scientific policy.

CNRS, the largest and the more diversified of these national research agencies, relies on an elected body, the National Committee for Scientific Research (*Comité national de la recherche scientifique* – **CoNRS**) to advise the governing bodies on the agency's research strategy, on partnerships with universities (for creating or maintaining UMR) and on human resource management (recruitment and promotion of tenured researchers). Members of CoNRS are elected for two thirds and appointed for a third by the direction among tenured researcher of the agency and academic staff from the mixed research units.

Other national research agencies have more or less the same organization as CNRS with elected advisory committees. However, due to their smaller size compared to CNRS, the evaluations they conduct generally have less overall impact on university research.

With the development of competitive funding, research is increasingly dependent on evaluation. Research grants, at the national as well as at the European level, are allocated to projects after evaluation by panels of prominent researchers. A "national research agency" (*Agence nationale de la recherche* – **ANR**) was set up in 2005 as a funding agency awarding grants on projects submitted by research units in response to calls for proposals. The drift of funding towards project culminated in 2010 when the government launched a programme named "investing in the future" with a series of calls for very large "excellence" projects. Panels of international experts were set up to evaluate the projects and allocate endowments and grants to a small number of consortia of universities and research agencies.

At the level of universities, evaluation practices have been very limited. As they controlled a small share of research funding, their internal evaluation of research projects was negligible. Since universities decided on a share of the promotions of their staff, some of them devised procedures and criteria for assessing the applications but it never achieved general and systematic evaluation. Internal evaluation of teaching programmes, involving student surveys, that had been made compulsory by a legislation of 1996, remained more or less ignored until recently because of skepticism of many academics and the outright hostility of a strong minority who resent evaluation of their activity since they enjoy a considerable freedom in choosing contents and methods.

The recent reforms and the creation of AERES

Two major acts were voted by parliament in 2006 and 2007, bringing deep changes that have not yet produced all their effects.

The **"Act on freedom and responsibility of universities"** passed in August 2007 provided essentially for a new governance and a larger financial autonomy of universities: Within five years they were to be devolved full responsibility for managing their personnel and their buildings and get funding through a block grant.

The "**programme act for research**" of April 2006 contained three main provisions:
- The creation of a new evaluation agency for research and higher education, AERES
- The extension to the research agencies of medium term funding contracts signed by the ministry in charge of research on the basis of the their strategic plan
- The definition of a new institutional setting to foster increased cooperation between research agencies, universities and *grandes écoles* to build centres of excellence, create strong thematic research networks, raise funds from private donors and build regional "higher education and research pole" (PRES).

The new evaluation agency, **AERES**, was conceived as a unified evaluation agency responsible for all fields of evaluation for higher education and research. CNE, CNER and MSTP were actually merged into AERES but a few specialized bodies remained outside.

AERES was given four missions :
- Evaluate higher education institutions (universities, *écoles*) and research agencies
- Evaluate operation and outcomes of research units
- Evaluate teaching programmes and degrees
- Validate the procedures for individual evaluation of academic and research personnel.

As far as **institutional evaluation** is concerned, AERES started by taking over most of the CNE principles and methodology: Production by the evaluated entity of a self-evaluation report, visit of the entity by a panel of experts and production of an evaluation report published on the web site of the agency. The span of evaluation however is wider since it can draw on the outcomes of research units' evaluation and teaching programme evaluation previously conducted. In his first five years of operation, AERES was able to produce institutional evaluation reports on all universities, all research agencies and a large number of public and private *écoles*. Each year a group of institutions is selected for evaluation, with a periodicity of five years.

Concerning **evaluation of research units**, AERES has taken over activities that were conducted by the research agencies for their own units or for the mixed units they were involved in and by the MSTP of the Ministry for the others. Evaluation procedure is similar to that of institutional evaluation: Self-evaluation report, visit of a panel of

experts and publication of a report. The panel of expert has to include at least a foreign expert and, for UMR, a representative of the research agency to which the unit is attached.

For **evaluation of programmes and degrees**, AERES took over from MSTP and various expert groups set up by the Ministry for advising the Minister on accreditation of universities to award national degrees. The bodies responsible for accreditation in engineering and in business and administration studies, the committee for accreditation of the "title of engineer" (*commission du titre d'ingénieur* – CTI) and the committee for evaluation of business and management programmes and degrees (*Commission d'évaluation des programmes et des diplômes de gestion* – CEFDG) were not merged into AERES on the grounds that many programmes concerned were operated by private institutions or by institutions controlled and funded by ministries other than the Ministry for Higher Education.

CTI had been created in 1934 and comprised representatives from industry and from engineering schools and programmes. Its role was to accredit programmes leading to engineering degrees protected by the exclusive use of the "title" of engineer. These selective programmes, operated by mostly small independent *écoles*, are considered as the elite sector of French higher Education. In the 1980's, when universities started offering engineering programmes, they had to apply to CTI for accreditation. Until now, CTI has successfully resisted demands from AERES to cooperate through joint evaluations. For engineering schools controlled by the ministry of education, AERES conducts institutional evaluation and evaluate the research units but has no say in programme evaluation.

CEFDG, created in 2001, had about the same missions as CTI. It was concerned with independent *écoles* but not with university programmes in management. CEFDG has agreed with AERES to coordinate procedures and methodology for institutional evaluation of the few public *écoles*.

AERES was less successful in its fourth mission, the **validation of individual evaluation procedures**. This mission itself is challenged by CNU and by the corresponding committees of the research agencies. There is little debate on the need for evaluation in general but for individual evaluation the principle itself is questioned on the basis of the collective nature of research and teaching activities in universities and in research organisations. Academics, in particular, criticize the notion of "productive researcher", as it is used by AERES in building indicators for the evaluation of research units. Those who accept individual evaluation of research performance question the almost exclusive use of publications and bibliometrics since it does not apply similarly to all fields of research.

Individual evaluation of academics must bear on all their functions and duties but it is difficult to assess teaching performance since there is no satisfactory measure of outcomes. The evaluation of teaching by students is unanimously rejected as a tool for assessing the teaching process.

Whatever individual evaluation results CNU may produce, they will be seen by universities as infringing on their newly acquired autonomy: it limits their responsibility in the management of their human resource and put a strain on their resources if their financial impacts are not properly compensated.

CNU still debates the opportunity of such an evaluation of academics, despite the publication in 2009 of a government decree on academic staff statute providing in particular for periodic compulsory individual evaluation of all academics as a base for deciding on promotions.

The influence of the Bologna process

CNE, as one of the oldest evaluation agencies in Europe, was associated with the construction of the European Standards and Guidelines, the quality assurance framework proposed by ENQA and adopted by the European Higher Education Ministers at the Bergen conference in May 2005.

ENQA required that evaluation agencies be evaluated in the view of their entry on the European Quality Assurance Register (EQAR). In 2010 AERES asked ANECA, the Spanish agency, to conduct its external evaluation. ENQA renewed AERES full membership and AERES was admitted on EQAR in May 2011. The evaluation report of ANECA confirmed compliance of AERES with ESG and highlighted a few points on which AERES took corrective action. AERES has a policy of quality assurance and has been constantly adjusting its procedures and criteria, drawing on a variety of external assessments of its operations.

The current debate on evaluation of HER

Many issues feed the current debate on evaluation in France, inside the agencies, among them and in the scientific and academics community. A sizeable part of this community, resented evaluation they see as an element of the managerial approach to the governance of higher education and research. The debate centres on four broad issues: The purpose of evaluation, the adequateness of criteria and references, the legitimacy of the evaluators, and the degree of specificity of the evaluation processes.

The purpose of evaluation

Evaluation may have different purposes according to the different stakeholders of the Higher Education and Research system:

-Provide reliable information for decision making to prospective students, to employers wishing to assess programmes and degrees of their future employees, to accreditation and funding agencies, presently the HER ministry.

-Assess consistency and performance of the HER system for accountability towards society at large.

-Help the evaluated entities, support them in building capacity for self-evaluation, provide them with comparisons an references they may use to best fulfil their missions and ground their strategies.

There may be conflicts between purposes as the tools used by evaluation differ from one to the other. Providing comparative information on programmes or structures may amount to setting standards that reduce diversity and destroy specificity. Institutions frequently complain such standard ignore their specificity and distort the perception of their performance. As a result, they demand that comparison be limited to similar counterparts, which might explain the proliferation of distinct evaluation processes and agencies.

When detailed information is provided, it is often taken out of is context and methodological warnings are ignored. Some, arguing that it triggers irrational behaviour, challenge the publication of extensive evaluation reports and advocate that only evaluated institutions could have access to complete reports.

Criteria, references and rating

If the choice of criteria on which to assess and of references on which to ground judgement is controversial, the way in which judgements are expressed has also been discussed. AERES has chosen, like CNE, not to grade the outcomes of institutional evaluation. Evaluation reports conclude on a statement of strengths and weaknesses and on some advice. This qualitative approach makes it impossible to compare and rank institutions.

A different choice was made for evaluation of teaching programmes and research units. Evaluation reports rate the evaluated entity on each of the evaluation criteria with grades A+, A, B and C (excellent, good, satisfactory and below standard). From the "grades" for individual criteria is derived an overall grade, summing up the whole evaluation process. This grade assigned to a research unit or to a teaching programme was published and used by decision makers for accreditation and funding purposes. Such grades were compiled by the press and turned into quality rankings of institutions. This was deeply resented by universities because grades remained for five years whatever the actions taken and the corrections achieved.

Consequently, AERES decided to increase the number of criteria and to drop the overall grade for research units and replace it by a written statement less amenable to rankings. It also specified the criteria by stating what was to be observed and what were the signs of quality in what was observed.

The legitimacy of evaluators

There is a general agreement in HER that evaluation should be based on peer review but peers are not necessarily experts and the selection of the adequate people raises several issues. The two essential criteria in the selection of the evaluators are expertise and independence. Selection itself may proceed from appointment or election. When experts are appointed, there is a suspicion that they are not independent from the appointing authority. When they are elected, the electoral process does not ensure competency and proper representation of the community whatever the definition of constituencies. This dilemma may be overcome by having a mixed selection process whereby some of the experts are elected and some appointed: This is the case for CNU and CoNRS, the two bodies in charge of individual evaluation of academics and researchers, where the minister appoint one third of the members, officially to redress imbalances that may result from elections. This method, providing a better balance when properly implemented, does not safeguard against dysfunctions, witness recent outrage on cases of self-promotion by members of CNU.

AERES, as an independent agency, insists on appointing all its experts in order to ensure competency and representativeness. The principles on which experts are chosen are published on the web site and as well as the CV of all experts. Possible conflicts of interests are taken seriously. This is also the case of ANR, the main agency for funding research projects. For this reason, unions and other interest groups detract these agencies for being undemocratic in the conduct of their evaluation activities since they do not hold elections. Visiting committees are also often blamed for not including experts on every matter they have to deal with.

AERES, after a first complete round of evaluation, has decided to give priority to self-evaluation and to help institutions and research units to produce better report. External

evaluation reports would only have to give an overall assessment of the realisations and the strategic plans of the institutions.

Comprehensive or specialised evaluation

AERES strongly supports an integrated evaluation of the higher educational research sector and therefore considers the multiplicity of agencies as a hindrance to this. It discusses with the specialised agencies and bodies in order to unify methodology and coordinate procedures. It also diversifies its own approach to take into account disciplinary specificities in research and teaching that are used as a justification for separate evaluation agencies.

In the face of the deep structural changes French HER is undergoing, AERES had to deal with the emerging new structures and extended its integrated approach over the boundaries of individual institutions by looking at the various consortia they were getting involved in. Such extension created a need for new criteria and new methodology.

The future of evaluation in French higher education and research

The negative views that prevailed at the time of the creation of AERES, ranging from scepticism to outright opposition, had somewhat receded since a large number of researchers and academics who had been appointed as experts in various evaluation agencies had become familiar with concepts and practices that they once looked suspiciously. Nevertheless various groups opposing evaluation procedures developed by AERES had an opportunity to voice their criticisms when the newly appointed Minister convened in the summer of 2012 the National Conference on Higher Education and Research that was part of the political platform of François Hollande, elected President of the Republic in may 2012.

After a wide consultation of all individuals and groups concerned, the Conference produced 135 proposals to reform the higher education and research sector among which two dealt with evaluation and AERES. One of them advocated replacing grades assigned by AERES to research centres and to teaching programmes by explicit statements. AERES had already decided to do this for research centres. The other proposal was more ambitious and, while clearly stating the need for comprehensive evaluation of all actors and activities of the ESR sector, recommended that the role of the independent body responsible for such an evaluation would be to simplify the processes and to validate the methodology of the various institutions involved.

In the green paper that was published soon after to draft the content of the higher education and research bill to be discussed in Parliament before the summer of 2013, AERES is to be replaced by a new authority with a mission of coordinating all evaluation activities of the sector. It would retain a role of evaluation agency for the purposes of the Ministry or the institutions. Far from abolishing altogether AERES, as was demanded by the most vocal of its opponents, the future ESR Act seems rather to aim at extending its functions under a new name.

This is consistent with the wider objectives of the Act that aims at simplifying a system that has grown by constantly adding new types of institutions and new strata of administration, which brought it to a point of extreme confusion.

The restructuring of the ESR sector will need a long time before it settles to a simpler and more stable organisation and, in the meanwhile, the organisation of evaluation will certainly adjust to the changes.

References

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