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## **More leadership for French universities, but also more divergences between the presidents and the deans**

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Abstract : As in other European countries, public policies with the intention of increasing the institutional autonomy of universities have been launched in France. As a result, academic leaders are more and more expected to behave as managers, as deciders, as project developers, as team builders etc. The recent field work conducted on a large scale by the two researchers on French universities leads to the two following conclusions. On one hand findings show a rather broad adhesion of the presidents and their teams to new conceptions, as revealed by their discourse, their opinions on their functions, as well as the strategies which they are in the process of developing within their own universities. But, on the other hand, the research concludes that most deans do not follow their presidents and remain attached to a more traditional kind of leadership, close to the *primus inter pares* figure.

After describing these discrepancies, the authors question the implications of their findings on the government of French universities and try to explain why such cleavages seem more acute in France than in other European countries.

### **1. Introduction**

The history of French universities consists of discontinuities. Since their creation during the Middle Age, they experienced periods when they have flourished, but also critical phases and even two eclipses. For instance, because of the suppression of every kind of corporation during the French Revolution, universities were dismantled. A few years later, Napoléon recreated the faculties, but the latter, especially in Humanities and Science were no more than an extension of the high schools (*lycées*) and were first of all dedicated to the delivery of diplomas. First, various faculties located in the same place were not brought together in a university, that is to say in an institution able to federate them. Second a centralized and discipline-based structure was set up at that time in order to manage the faculty careers: as a consequence, it strengthened the role of the faculties and prevented the emergence of any kind of intermediary level between the Parisian central administration and the academics. The ambitious reforms engaged by the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Prost, 1968, Weisz, 1983, Charle, 1994, Renaut, 1995), fostered the development of the French higher education, but, even if they created an administrative level (called a “university”) above the faculties, they did not empower these new entities enough for them to become strong institutions: until the 60’s the French university system was a “Republic of faculties” (Musselin, 2001).

The 1968 Faure law finally recreated universities, but, as shown by E. Friedberg and C. Musselin (1989 and 1993), they were still weak institutions in the 80's: barely able to act as collective actors they were not recognized as relevant partners by a ministry that was still discipline-structured.

Today, we can draw quite a different picture. Recent studies<sup>1</sup> show two transformations. On the one hand, the introduction, by the end of the 80's, of four-year contracts between each university and the central agency led the latter to admit the universities, and more precisely their president, as relevant partners: as a consequence the state intervention, which was exclusively discipline-based tended to become more university-based. On the other hand, universities are more and more engaged in the definition and the implementation of their own strategies, they act more and more collectively, are managed by presidents who develop a more active conception of their role and who are assisted by what we will call a "president's team", made of vice-presidents, sometimes of some *chargés de mission* and very often of administrators too. Thus if many French analysts were right when they stated that there was no French University (Compagnon, 1998) or that it was "impossible" (Charle, 1994), today such assumptions can no longer be stated: French universities do exist.

Such evolutions seem very similar to those experienced by universities in other European countries: increased institutional autonomy and strengthened leadership appear to be a common trend. But, while the discourses and the general orientations look very alike and reveal the emergence of some convergences within Europe, the implementation of such policies may produce variations. Among them, we will focus on the following: the implication of a strengthened university government on the internal relationships. As a matter of fact, recent evolutions in Europe enhanced a stronger executive leadership as the result of statutory reforms redistributing power within the university (as in the Netherlands for instance<sup>2</sup>), or as a consequence of new behaviour from a university leadership that no more refrains from taking advantage and room to manoeuvre they had previously ignored. Many researchers observe discrepancies between the academics and the university leaders (the president, the deans and the administrators...) as a consequence for this change.

Nevertheless the situation seems to be slightly different in France: in this country the discrepancies seem to occur first of all between a group made of the president, his team and the administrators on the one hand, and the deans and the academics, as another group, on the other. While the former deliver a voluntaristic and interventionist discourse, the latter still promote the traditional role of *primus inter pares*. Thus, French university leadership seems less cohesive than in other European countries.

We will first present the empirical evidence on which such an assumption is based and compare the attitudes and behaviours of the president's team with those of the deans. Then we will describe the relationships between these two groups of actors and their discourse on their respective roles in the university government. Finally, coming back to the main conclusions of

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<sup>1</sup> This text relies on a qualitative study led in four universities in 1998 (250 interviews) and on a quantitative study led in 37 universities in 1999 (1660 questionnaires), both of them conducted for the *Agence de modernisation des universités*. These studies confirm and expand some of the results of previous empirical work on the preparation, negotiation and implementation of four-year contracts in three universities (Lipiansky et Musselin, 1995). The research we are presently conducting on the academic labour market also entails convergent conclusions and shows that university strategies are developing on human resources, which was not the case before.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. for instance H. de Boer and J. Huysman (1999), Buttet (1999) and F.-X Merrien, A.-C. Buttet, and F. Anselmo, (1998).

some research led in other countries, we will engage a discussion on the reason why the French situation seems different.

We will draw our description from the results of the quantitative study led on 37 French universities in 1999 as well as upon the results of the in-depth study led in four universities in 1998. The first study will allow us to quantify the importance of some opinions within the French university system, while we will use the second to give examples of what was said in some of the interviews we conducted.

## 2. Ambitious and voluntarist president's teams

One of the more striking points revealed by the empirical evidence (Mignot-Gérard and Musselin, 1998 and 1999) is the existing gap between the discourse and opinions of the president's team on the one hand and the deans and academics on the other, as will be shown in this first section.

### A. *Who belongs to the president's team ?*

A first step before describing the actions and discourses of the president's team is to explain who belongs to these teams. The 1984 law (art. 27) only states that the « president is assisted by an elected bureau. The members qualifications are defined by university status but their names are suggested by the president ». But it would be wrong to limit the definition of the president's team to only the vice-presidents or to the elected bureau. The quantitative study led in 1999 enables us to better define the « team ». The 1563 answers (academics and administrative staff) we received to the question “who belongs to the president's team in your university » gave the following picture:

President only	President and deans	President, deans & vice-presidents	President and vice-presidents	President, vice-presidents and leading administrators	Do not know
4.7 %	4.2 %	<b>19.8 %</b>	<b>21.5 %</b>	<b>45.0 %</b>	4.8 %

In almost 73% of the cases, the vice-presidents are associated to the president's team, while the leading administrators are quoted in 45% of the cases<sup>3</sup>. On the contrary, it is rarer to mention the deans as part of the president's team (24% only).

If we more precisely look at the answers given by the 92 presidents or vice-presidents represented in this study, we can observe that they more often quote the leading administrators as part of their team (53%) and less often the deans (21%). Moreover they generally are more positive towards the university administrators than the whole sampling is.

	Agree	Disagree	No opinion
« The president's team depends too much on the administrators » Whole sampling	22 %	60 %	18 %
Presidents and Vice-presidents	12 %	<b>88 %</b>	0 %
« The president's team defines the missions the administrators have to execute » Whole sampling	75 %	11 %	14 %

<sup>3</sup> This evolution and the emergence of president's team (which includes administrators as well) were previously stressed by P. Leroy (1992).

Presidents and Vice-presidents	96 %	3 %	1%
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They also more often<sup>4</sup> describe the chief administrators (*secrétaires généraux*) as “cooperative” (52% against 37% for the whole sampling) and more often consider the administrative staff as “a help in their day to day activity”:

Consider the following administrative offices as a help in their day to day activity	Whole sampling	Presidents and Vice-presidents
Logistics	53 %	66 %
Scolarity	79 %	81 %
Human ressources	74 %	76 %
Accountability and budget	61 %	72 %

We came to the same conclusions in the in-depth study led in four universities in 1998: in only one of the four cases was the administration in competition and on rather bad terms with the president’s team, while in the three others we observe rather cooperative and supportive relationships.

### **B. The emergence of university strategies in different domains**

The existence of president’s teams is, as such, a first empirical result that has to be described because it is rather recent. A second point to stress is the emergence of strategies at the university level that deal with issues that were not invested by the university leaders before.

On this last point, considerable variations can be observed from one university to the other: some are engaged in a large number of very different strategies while others concentrate on a limited array of issues, and still others (rather a minority) remain quite passive. It is thus impossible to draw a general panorama, or even to quote the issues with which most universities are concerned. We will only mention the main issues for which strategies are to be seen and give some examples of concrete practices.

Let us start with the strategic planning dealing with research. It is one of the oldest issue because of the introduction of the four-year research contracts between the central authority and each university which began in 1983: this policy fostered the definition of research priorities at the university level. Even if this process remains a very centralised one because the evaluation procedure is in the hands of the national ministry and leaves very little autonomy to the university in the allocation of the research resources, it nevertheless promoted the emergence of research strategies of three different kinds: discipline-based groupings of research centres in the same building (*Maison de l’Economie, Maison des Sciences sociales...*); constitution of interdisciplinary research centres (which are called *fédérations* or *instituts thématiques*, or *ensembles* etc.) aiming at giving more visibility and at enhancing relationships and cooperation among the concerned teams; finally the creation or the development of “research missions”. The latter generally follow two objectives: on one hand they should bring some financial, technical and juridical support to academics engaged in research contracts with firms, communities, the European commission etc ; on the other they should promote more transparency on research contracts within the university and

<sup>4</sup> All the figures in this paragraph and in the following table are calculated without the “no opinion” answers because of the variation of the percentage of “no opinion” for the presidents and for the deans.

encourage the academics to have their contracts managed by the university administration<sup>5</sup> and thus to pay overhead costs.

A second issue with which French universities have come to grips within the last decade is what can be called "rationalization strategies", i.e. implementation of managerial software<sup>6</sup>, improved follow-up of the overtime hours (*heures complémentaires*<sup>7</sup>), construction of indicators, better conformity with the national budgeting rules, grouping supply commands etc. Such measures generally aim at improved control and analysis of expenditures, as well as diversification of resources.

A third issue which has emerged as a policy matter recently is teaching. Two kinds of actions have taken place. First, certain universities are more and more sensitive to the management of their curricula offerings: presidents' teams more and more set priorities on this issue, explicitly defining which sectors or which diplomas should be expanded; new procedures or structures are implemented in order to improve the assessment of demands for the "réhabilitations"<sup>8</sup> or the creation of curricula and thus to better prepare such dossiers before they are sent to the Ministry. Second, some universities are beginning to develop some teaching quality assessment or to generalize the evaluation on teaching by the students<sup>9</sup>.

A last issue to be mentioned is human resources management. It is only very recently that voluntarist university strategies appeared in this domain. A first step occurred when French universities accepted to rank by priority the positions they each year request the ministry to create<sup>10</sup>: in the eighties they generally refused to rank their demands leaving the decision to the Ministry ! This no longer holds true. Moreover, internal redistributions of existing positions (administrative or academic) may occur presently while it seemed quasi impossible before. The way it works may be quite different from one place to the other. In one university we observed that the chief administrator utilized the opportunity of vacant administrative positions to reallocate them and was completely responsible for such decisions. In another one, the president had explicitly claimed that the university central administration was too small and that he would use every opportunity (vacant administrative positions within the faculties or creation of new positions) to staff them. One can also observe that universities develop strategies towards the development of the administrators' competence and promote

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<sup>5</sup> Academics sometimes try to escape this constraint and develop alternative solutions for the management of their research contracts, solutions about which the university is unaware or unable to avoid.

<sup>6</sup> In particular those developed by the GIGUE (*Groupement pour l'Informatisation de la Gestion des Universités et Etablissements*) which became the *Agence de Modernisation des Universités et des Etablissements* in 1997: Nabuco for finance and budget, Apogée for the management of the students (inscriptions, diplomas, statistics...), Harpège for human resources management...

<sup>7</sup> Because in France each person who succeeds to the *baccalauréat* can go to the university, it is quite difficult to adjust the needed volume of teaching hours (based on students inscriptions) and the existing volume (depending on the number of teaching positions). The adjustment is made each year through the allocation of extra-funds dedicated to the payment of the supplementary hours (called *heures complémentaires* or HC) taught by faculty members who have a tenured position (but who should not teach more than twice their official teaching duties) or by teachers on time-limited contracts (*vacataires*).

<sup>8</sup> In France the curricula leading to a national diploma are evaluated and agreed upon by the Ministry every four years. This procedure is called *habilitation*.

<sup>9</sup> Evaluation by the students sometimes existed thanks to local initiatives of some academics but remained very rare.

<sup>10</sup> In France, universities are not free to create or reallocate positions as they wish. The ministry is responsible for such decisions. Each year the faculties are asked about their needs and they provide the ministry with a list of positions ranked by priority. Then the university cross-ranks the demands and produces a list of priorities for the whole university, which is sent to the Ministry. If the latter decides to create four new positions in a university, the first four ranked positions are created.

professional training plans, while some others aim at developing employers' strategies and try to create incentives in order to attract reputed academic candidates<sup>11</sup>.

In this section we pointed out the existence of emerging university strategies within French universities. This and the fact that they are initiated by the president's teams in itself reveal an on-going evolution and demonstrate that issues previously ignored or left to external actors (in particular the Ministry) are now considered as legitimate spheres of intervention by the presidents and their team. This can clearly be attested by the discourses of the latter on their roles: they say that they must work on such issues and that it is part of their function.

### **C. The voluntarist discourse of the presidents and their teams**

The analysis of the discourse of the members of the presidential teams is very revealing. Instead of defining their role as mediators of competing interests and representatives of these interests outside the university, they clearly and strongly express that they have ambitions for their campus, that they want to act, that they expect to provoke changes, that they intend to implement projects etc. Even if this expression is still used with reluctance within the French academic world, we would say that they speak as "managers", even if they also recognize that it is sometimes difficult to transform their ambitions into acts<sup>12</sup>... Here are some interview quotations in order to illustrate our statement.

"The president was very active two years ago in order to impose that new administrative positions be allocated to the university central administration. He wanted the university level to be stronger. He argued this was the programme on which he was elected, that the university had no sufficient means to analyse its own way of functioning, that *chargés de mission* were needed to create an office dedicated to the observation of student life and orientations, to lead an audit of the budget etc. Top administrators were recruited to help him in making decisions for the university."

"Priorities are defined by the team (...). Then proposals are made to the deliberative bodies. I am involved in every creation of a new position and the team makes the final decision: there is no opposition because the decision made is in conformity with the university strategy."

"Vacant positions are very problematic. I do not want a position any more to be linked to a specific faculty: it has to be allocated on the basis of the university needs. This means that when someone retires in a faculty, it is no longer certain that the vacant position will remain in that department. The allocation of positions has to meet the needs: vacancies do not have to be replaced."

"Academics can no longer send whatever they want to the ministry. They could before: there was no way to stop them. Now, we say to a research team: we refuse to send this dossier."

Such statements clearly have a voluntarist, active dimension. They express ambitions and expectations on the strategies the presidents and their teams intend to promote. One should not underestimate the difficulties met in the implementation of such strategies first because such projects are not easy to pilot but also because they receive strong opposition from the

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<sup>11</sup> This may sound curious to a non-French reader, but French academics are recruited through a national *concours* based on the scientific evaluation of their dossier and there is no negotiation about their salary or their working conditions as it exists in Germany, the United Kingdom or the United States. If two or more universities rank a candidate as their first choice, he will decide where he wants to go "by him/herself", i.e. with no negotiation with the recruiting universities. In this case, he/she chooses more than he is chosen.

<sup>12</sup> The actors who develop this rather voluntarist discourse also often are more moderate when they describe what they concretely do. For instance, the presidents of the four universities under study in 1998 have an interventionist discourse of the reduction of the *heures complémentaires* budget but they also explain that they have to remain "comprehensive" when the budget is not respected.

individuals they are targeting<sup>13</sup>. The effective transformations may sometimes seem rather limited, compared to the accompanying discourse. This gap between the ambitions and their implementation has to be related to the divergences we observed between the discourses, representations and conceptions of the presidents' teams on the one hand and of the deans on the other.

### 3. Less enthusiastic deans

As stated above, presidents develop an active conception of their function: they formulate strategies for their university and they adopt a quite voluntarist discourse about their margin of action. By comparison, deans appear much more moderate if we consider their perception of their own role and the way they describe their own practices. This gap was perceived by the individuals who answered our questionnaire in 1999: only 12.6% of them qualified the deans as "very interventionist", while 29.7% chose this term for the presidents, and this percentage reached 75% of the answers about the president in some universities while it never reached more than 28% of the answers about the deans in a single university.

In most cases indeed, deans are described as cooperative leaders. We will see now that they still behave as *primus inter pares* (2.1), and that this fits the expectations of the members of their faculties (2.2).

#### A. The deans perceive themselves as *primus inter pares*

The figure of *primus inter pares* has long been dominant in most French universities and can be defined as a style of leadership that favours the representation of the faculty's interests outside and a function of consensual mediation inside.

This conception still prevails among the French deans<sup>14</sup> as shown by their discourses. On the one hand they describe themselves as animators and tensions solvers and believe that they have to stay in the background.

"I try as much as I can not to intervene into interpersonal relationships. My role is to animate the faculty and to try to promote collegiality." (Dean, Uni Ouest)

In the management of their faculty, they are reluctant to intervene directly, except in cases of important conflicts or difficulties. That is at least the way they behave for the annual allocation of teaching duties for instance.

"Each year, we change the allocation of the teaching duties. Some seminars are nevertheless taught by the same teachers each year. I would have to intervene and to arbitrate if inequities were too important. But I do not have to if it works and if there is no anomaly." (Dean, Uni Centre)

"We did not have any trouble with the allocation of teaching duties in the past two years. Officially, the dean is responsible for that by delegation of the president. In

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<sup>13</sup> It would be too long to develop this here. Cf. Mignot-Gérard and Musselin (1999 and 2000).

<sup>14</sup> Variations may occur from one university to the others. Some deans may also develop a more active conception of their role: they have a less moderate discourse, they more directly intervene in the management of their faculty. Nevertheless: this is not very frequent and they also never interfere on the contents of teaching or research.



reality, the faculty members decide by themselves within the departments. These are non coercive, collegial arrangements.” (Dean, Uni Ouest)

Finally, they recognize that the faculty members are autonomous in the definition of their teaching and research activities and admit that they would not interfere on such issues: either they do not feel free to intervene, or they say that their decision would have no impact on the faculty practices. If we just look at their answers about teaching evaluation, the deans are much more sceptical than the faculty members on whether they could induce the academics to undergo such an evaluation.

*“Deans could not constrain the faculty members to undergo teaching assessment”*

	<b>Agree</b>	disagree	Do not know
faculty (teaching and administrative staff) (1113 answers)	<b>56.4%</b>	34.7%	8.9%
Directeurs d’UFR (90 répondants)	<b>61.1%</b>	35.6%	3.3%

They also feel that they can not interfere on research issues: only the research institutes and the researchers are responsible for defining the research programmes and for managing them.

“It is a matter of principle: research institutes are autonomous about their orientations. The dean does not have to interfere in the research priorities or to define them, even if, as a researcher he can be part of the negotiation and of the reflection! Research enjoys quasi-total autonomy: research institutes develop around common themes and need to be left free to define their own strategy. A dean can not ask this institute to write this or this report.” (Dean, Uni Est)

Deans appear as quite moderate leaders and do not express a very active conception of their role<sup>15</sup>. This in fact meets faculty expectations.

### ***B. A conception in conformity with the faculty expectations***

The members of the faculty, and above all the academic staff, do not expect the deans to be more interventionist. For them, research and teaching have to be managed on the “shop floor” (i.e. the departments for the teaching duties and the institutes for the research) and the deanship is not a legitimate management level.

Dealing with the allocation of the teaching duties, more than half of the teachers say that this issue and the eventual conflicts that may arise should be left to the professor in charge of the concerned sub-discipline. Moreover, 71.8% of the faculty express that the dean do not have to intervene about this.

*“Concerning the intervention of the deans in the allocation of teaching duties, would you rather say that:  
(1038 answers, academics only)*

- **He/she should not intervene because it is the role of the professor in charge of the concerned sub-discipline** **53.2%**
- **He/she should not intervene because academics should chose their seminars freely** **18.6%**
- He should intervene because it is part of his/her function 19.9%
- No opinion 8.3%

We observe the same result about the research activity: the dean should not intervene, neither on the research agenda, nor in the management of the research contracts (he is only allowed to

<sup>15</sup> As a matter of fact deanship is not very sought after. There are very few struggles around the elections of the deans. It is very much a function every one has to accept once, much more as an obligation than as an honour.

put his/her signature on them). Attempts of intervention are fiercely criticised as shown by the second interview's quotation.

“The dean may intervene for teaching: he decides on my teaching duties. But the CNRS contracts are none of his business. All he has to do is to sign if I want to recruit someone, otherwise the president would refuse to sign either.” (Professor in economics, Uni Est)

“The university should have a better strategy for the research. We should have a commission dealing with a theme common to all the institutes of the “Science and technique” domain. But the deans are opposed to this. They create a research commission in each faculty. We suffer from the deans' initiatives. (...) Of course they have to contribute to the discussion on the research programme. But the deans should not get a too important role in the university government. ” (Professor in Science, Uni Sud)

The only domains on which the deans are allowed to intervene are technical issues as controlling teaching duties or the number of *heures complémentaires* per teacher, in order to prevent abuses.

*“The deans should remind of their duty the faculty members who teach too many heures complémentaires”*

	<b>Agree</b>	Disagree	Do not know
Academic staff (1042)	<b>72.9%</b>	17.5%	9.5%
faculty administrative staff (253)	<b>80.2%</b>	4.8%	15%

Academics agree with some stricter controls to be made at the faculty level. But even this should not go to far. They certainly do not agree with a dean that will act as a “manager”. Most of the faculty administrative and academic staff (as well as most deans) refuse the evolution of the deanship towards a managerial function.

*Deans should first of all be managers ”*

	Agree	<b>Disagree</b>	Do not know
All answers (1551)	33.8%	<b>60.1%</b>	6.1%
Deans (94 answers)	22.3%	<b>75.5%</b>	2.1%

As a matter of fact a stronger leadership of the dean is accepted only if it deals with administrative or technical issues that aim at controlling the conformity between the uses and the rules: on other issues, nobody expects a more interventionist behaviour from the deans. Their present style of leadership, which is very moderate as expected by the members of the faculty, is not perceived as a big constraint.

#### **4. A difficult cooperation between the presidents' teams and the deans**

Not surprisingly, the discrepancies on the conception of roles between the deans and the president's teams reflect tensions between the faculties and the university management (president's team and administrators). In this section, we will show that the opinions expressed by the deans and the members of their faculty are very close, and that they are divergent from the opinions expressed by the university management on the same topics. We will thus state that the deans experience different, sometimes even contradictory, expectations depending on the level we look at, the university leaders on the one hand and the members of the faculty on the other (3.1). We will focus more particularly on the existing fracture between

the presidents and the deans (as it appears in their respective opinions on the same items) and on the complexity of their relationships for the university government (3.2).

### **A. A fracture between the university and the faculty levels**

The quantitative study reveals a significant gap between the university and its faculties as shown when comparing the answers of the academic and administrative staff of the faculties with the answers of the university management on items for which these two groups of actors have a lot of concerns. As a matter of fact the diverging conceptions between the deans and the presidents are the emergent part of larger discrepancies between the faculties and the university. We will look at the answers given on the missions of the central administration and then on the roles of the elected leaders (deans especially) and see that significant gaps are to be observed between the answers of the faculties and the answers of the university management.

#### **a) Diverging conceptions on the central administration**

The opinions of the members of the faculties and of the central administrative staff on the missions of the latter are very different. While the central administrative staff think that their most important mission is to prepare decisions for the deliberative bodies, this seems quite secondary to the members of the faculties. But the former also give priority to budget rationalisation and to the centralisation of the resources, while these two items obtain low scores (under 50%) in the faculties. The latter's first expectation from the central administration is to receive help in their day to day work and that the problems met by the faculty will be relayed to the ministry.

<b>"The central administration first have...</b>	Answers from the faculties <sup>16</sup> (1300)	Answers from the central administration (285)
"...to relay the difficulties met by the faculty to the ministry"	<b>57.7%</b>	38.5%
"...to serve the faculties by helping them in the concrete aspects of their day to day activity"	<b>57.9%</b>	48.8%
"...to centralise the management of the university key resources"	32%	<b>60.4%</b>
"...to prepare the decisions made by the deliberative bodies"	43%	<b>68.8%</b>

More generally, we observed that the central administration considers it has to promote the rationalisation and the modernisation of the university management, while the faculties expect more help from the former and are very reluctant to any kind of control and intend to keep as much flexibility as possible in the management of their own resources.

A similar cleavage is to be found on what the role of the deans is and should be.

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<sup>16</sup> The answers from the administrative staff and the academics who belong to a faculty are very close and are aggregated under the term "faculty".

## b) Diverging conceptions about the role of the deans in the university government

We will first stress the existing cleavages between the faculties and the university management before focusing on the answers of the presidents and of the deans.

“agree” in %		Answers from the faculties		Answers from the university management	
		faculty academic and adm. staff	Deans	Central administration	Presidents
<b>1</b>	“Deans behave as representatives of the interests of their faculty”	87%	94.6%	93.8%	100%
<b>2</b>	“Deans should defend the interests of their faculty in the university strategies”	<b>75.4%</b>	<b>77.3%</b>	48.2%	46.2%
<b>3</b>	“Deans should show solidarity for the president’s team”	45.6%	62.1%	<b>76.5%</b>	<b>76.9%</b>
<b>4</b>	“Deans should belong to the president’s team”	<b>72.5%</b>	<b>86%</b>	66.7%	61.5%

Almost everybody agrees that deans behave as representatives of the interests of their faculty (item n°1), and even 100% of the presidents who answered this questionnaire agree with this.

But answers are less unanimous on items 2, 3 and 4 that deal with the expected role of the deans. On these items the opinions of the deans and of the members of the faculty are rather convergent and quite different from the opinions expressed by the university management. While three fourth of the members of the faculty think that the deans should defend the interests of their faculty (item 2), three fourth of the university management express that the deans should show solidarity with the president’s team (item 3).

Thus, the analysis of the perceptions and expectations towards the deans reveals that the defence of the interests of the faculty is considered as quite incompatible with the participation of the deans to the university government.

If we focus now on the respective answers of the deans and of the president, the cleavage is completely confirmed because these two groups of actors share quite divergent conceptions. The deans, more than every other actor intend to defend the interests of their faculty. This has to be linked to the fact that they, more than every other actors are reluctant to see themselves play a more managerial role (cf. 2.2). But, they are more ambiguous than it seems because they simultaneously frequently ask for more participation to the university government **and** nevertheless frequently refuse to show solidarity to the president’s team. We could thus say that they perceived themselves as “opponent leaders”.

From their point of view, presidents expect the deans to strengthen their leadership in their faculty (100% of the presidents agree with the following sentence “the deans should take the leadership in their faculty”), and to relay the president’s team policies. But their opinion is not less ambiguous that the deans’: they would like the latter to show fidelity and solidarity but they do not always agree with having the deans as members of the president’s team.

The distance between the presidents and the deans is not limited to the expected roles of each others. It is also to be seen when we ask them on the evolution of the university. While the presidents generally agree with an evolution towards a more “entrepreneurial” model where

the university would have more diversified resources and a larger institutional autonomy, the deans generally are more conservative, i.e. rather in favour of the present situation and globally opposed to the diversification of resources, to the abandonment of the public accountability rules, or to the possibility of adopting autonomous status. (cf. graph 1: Factorial analysis “Different conceptions on institutional autonomy”<sup>17</sup>).

Consequently, French deans experience a quite difficult situation because they are in the middle of two contradictory expectations. On the own hand, the academics still expect the deans to behave as *primus inter pares*, able to defend the interests of the faculty and resistant to their transformation into relays of university strategies that overwhelm the interests of the faculty. On the other hand, the presidents expect the deans to relay their policies without interfering too much into the university government. Facing this choice, most of the deans, until now prefer to meet the expectations of their electors and develop a very moderate discourse on their capacity to behave more as leaders.

### ***B. Unbalanced relationships between the deans and the presidents’ team***

Not only have the deans and the president divergent conceptions of their role: their cooperation is also rare and based on fragile compromises. We will see that in most cases the deans are not associated to the university government and that, even if they are, they experience rather difficult relationships.

#### **a) Presidents generally do not associate the deans to the university government**

Less than half of the answers to the questionnaire describe the deans as actors having some influence on the university government, while at the same time their role in the management of their faculty is recognized.

*“How do you perceive the effective role of the deans in your university?”*

	“ agree ” in %
“The deans have a determining role in their faculty”	80.7%
“The deans have a lot of influence on the university government”	48.8%

The deans are not associated to the university government and do not participate a great deal to the preparation of the decisions made. Their role in the “bureau” (entity with restricted access where the university strategies generally are defined) is mostly perceived as “non important”. In comparison, the president and its vice-presidents are perceived as the key

<sup>17</sup> The factorial analysis was elaborated with the following items:

- “Do you agree with an increasing part of diversified resources in the budget of your university?”
- “We should engage in more partnerships, it is the only way to get more autonomy”
- “Universities should be submitted to external evaluations from which their level of resources should be determined”
- “Universities should be free to define their own status”
- “Local political leaders should be more involved in the university government”
- “Universities should no more be submitted to the rules of public accountability”

members of the bureau (they are said “important” in 80 to 90% of the answers, while only 56%<sup>18</sup> of the answers define the role of the deans as “important”).

	Important	non important	Do not know
The president	89.5%	0.4%	10.1%
The vice-presidents	78.8%	9%	12.2%
The deans	56.2	28%	15.8%
The administrator in chief	55.1%	28.4%	16.5%
The accountability administrator	45.8%	35.5%	18.6%

### **b) A complex cooperation, mostly reflecting a zero-sum game**

If we look at the nature and content of the presidents-deans relationships, we see that they rarely are cooperative. We can draw here on the evidence we have for the four universities of the qualitative study led in 1998. Only in one of the four cases were the deans part of the president’s team ; in the three others they were not associated to the decision made for the university.

In two cases, the deans were only consulted on the decisions made by the president and the vice-presidents in the bureau. But these consultations are irregular or come too late in the decision process: the deans do not have a chance to discuss or influence the decisions. To compensate this weak participation, the deans attend the University council because, even if they can not vote (unless they are an elected member of it) they can hear what is said and obtain information or express their views and defend the interests of their faculty. The president’s team in these universities is not very positive about the meeting they have with the deans. In Uni Est, they say that the deans are just able to defend their “own backyard” and can not engage in a constructive collective discussion. For the president of Uni Ouest, the deans’ meeting is a deception. It only prevents the emergence of conflicts but certainly does not help in efficiently relaying his strategies within the university.

In a third university, consultations were led by the president and the persons involved depended on the decision to be discussed at the *conseil d’administration*. Among them the deans did not enjoy a privileged position: they are consulted as are other members (students, administrative staff) concerned with the decisions to be made. In this university there exists no « deans’ meeting. The relationships between the president and the deans vary with the attitude of the latter toward the curricula development strategy led by the president<sup>19</sup>. Depending on whether the dean and his/her faculty feel threatened by this strategy or not, they have good or difficult relationships to the president and the central administration. In this university, the deans that are in favour of the president’s project and see how they could benefit from him are associated to the government, while the others are not.

The fourth university is quite different from these non cooperative cases. The management team is composed of the president and the deans and they frequently meet in the bureau in order to prepare the decisions that will be presented to the deliberative bodies. Being part of

<sup>18</sup> Moreover the decisional capacity of the bureau is larger when the deans do not play an important role in it. Conversely, when they are important in the bureau, the latter is more often described as a consultation arena than as a decision-making body.

<sup>19</sup> This policy is based on the development of more job oriented curricula and aim at better managing the curricula catalogue.

the bureau, the deans can control the decisions made (in particular the decisions on the budget), but they also are constrained to show solidarity with such decisions. As a matter of fact, the bureau is not the right place to defend one's own interests because it has to elaborate collective strategies for the university. The deans thus may be obliged to participate to the definition of strategies that may not be in favour of their own faculty and in such a case they of course receive grievances from their faculty colleagues. As such, to be member of the bureau is as much a strength as a weakness for the deans. For the president, sharing power with the deans is also a constraint: he sometimes has to accept compromises that respect the existing balance among the faculties. Thus, in this university, the deans are associated to the decision-making process, but this is nevertheless a kind of obliged-alliance in which none of the partners can completely trust the others.

Whether the deans are excluded or associated to the university government, we always observe a tension between the faculty interests and the university strategies, which infuses the president-deans relationships. On the whole, Presidents rarely consider their deans as partners in the university government: they see them more as actors to enrol or to avoid and in both cases they much more represent a constraint than a help in the implementation of the university strategies. Excluding the deans or associating them, the presidents also aim at enforcing a university policy and this always put the deans in an uncomfortable situation because their electors within the faculties never expect them to adopt such a collective view.

## 5. How to explain faculty/ university cleavages ?

As shown in the previous sections, a large majority of the French presidents and their team agree with the idea of a strengthened institutional autonomy for their university. This pushes them to adopt more active, more interventionist and more voluntarist government style and practices. Such a conception is generally not shared by the deans (neither by the academic and administrative staff in the faculties) and the latter still behave as *primus inter pares*, meeting thus the expectations of those who elected them.

As stressed in a recent publication (Musselin, 2001) this result should be taken into account because if such a cleavage was to remain, it could strongly affect the development of French universities as more autonomous institutions. Moreover, this result raises questions if we compare it to the conclusions developed in research led on European universities which also experienced a strengthening in their leadership. In recent studies dealing with the United Kingdom (Henkel, 2000, Kogan, *et al.* 2000), Norway (Bleiklie, *et al.* 2000), Sweden (Bauer, *et al.* 1999) or the Nederland (Merrien, *et al.* 1998, Buttet, 1999), the university leadership (including the academic leaders and the administrators) is generally considered as a rather cohesive group<sup>20</sup> and if a cleavage is to be mentioned about role conceptions or behaviours, it is located between the university leadership and the academics. As stated for instance by I. Bleiklie *et al.* (2000, chapter 10) "There were hardly any differences in opinion between administrative and academic leaders on matters of importance [...] Nevertheless, there are important differences between those engaged in the management of a university unit and the

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<sup>20</sup> C. Brisset-Sillion's research (1997) on the State University of New York converges with our own field work on recruitment and careers in the History and Mathematics departments of three private research universities. The relationships between the chairs, the deans, the president and the vice-presidents are not always excellent but they never are as distant as observed in France.

'lay' academic" (2000, p. 264-265). As finely shown by M. Henkel (2000), academic leaders who behave more as "managers" rather than as "*primus inter pares*" do not always feel comfortable with this situation and try to combine the two styles, or at least to keep some of the characteristics of a peer in their more managerial practices. She adds that their situation is made difficult by the ambiguity and uncertainty of the goals and objectives they have to adopt, their lack of technical and relational competencies to assume their role, the kind of decisions they have to make and to enforce to their peers. Nevertheless, none of the works we quoted above stresses strong divergences in the conceptions or behaviours among the individuals called « *academic leadership* ». Nothing comparable with what we describe for France or as strong as it is in France. How to explain this? Why is the French university leadership less cohesive ? We would like to suggest four explanations.

### **A. The weight of the past**

The history of French universities, as quickly summarized at the beginning of this paper is a first determinant factor, even if an indirect one, to explain the existing discrepancies between the president and the deans.

As a matter of fact the deans, from the 19<sup>th</sup> century reforms, remained central actors in French universities. They were at the same time respected and recognized peers within their faculty and privileged partners for the ministry. On the contrary the high civil servants, called "rectors", that were at the head of the administrative entities called "universities" since the 1896 law, enjoyed neither the same recognition, nor the same elective legitimacy, nor as important attributions and prerogatives that the deans supposed to be below them (Prost, 1992). Worse: the rector was often perceived as the executor of the ministry decisions. G. Antoine, who was a rector, wrote (translated by us): "for a rector appointed by the ministry, the university government is an ambiguous and uneasy task. In fact, what sense does it make to have him as 'president' of a university council,... while he doesn't come from the academic world? He can be nothing but an intruder, or, to say it more respectfully, a superimposed piece coming from outside" (Antoine and Passeron, 1966, p. 33).

The 1968 law introduced some change because it suppressed the old faculties and intended to avoid compartmentalization and to favour the emergence of pluridisciplinarity. It thus created new universities governed by an elected president and deliberative bodies. But it did not change as much as it intended to. A first reason for that is that the territories of the new faculties that were created and called UER (*Unités d'Enseignement et de Recherche*<sup>21</sup>) were not so different from the old ones. A second reason is that the presidential function was to be completely invented, while the role of the deans, because of the past, was already well established even if the context was no more the same (for instance they had to manage with deliberative bodies open to students and administration representatives, which was not the case previously). In the 1968 law, as well as in the 1984 law which followed, the need to create and to impose the presidential function is revealed by the length of the text of the law which is dedicated to the definition of the president's attributions compared with the few lines relating to the deans.

While in other European countries, the deans have to cooperate with a university president for years (or even centuries), the latter being a kind of *primus* among other *primus inter pares*,

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<sup>21</sup> They became UFR (*Unités de Formation et de Recherche*) with the Savary law in 1984.



the creation of “presidents” in France arose to the detriment of, and not in complementarity with, the deans’ previous situation. This still remains true within French universities: in six of the 37 institutions of the quantitative study, the presidents were qualified as poorly influential and their deans as pretty influential.

### ***B. The contractual policy***

The strength and the resistance of the faculty model were still to be observed within French universities even after the 1968 law, as shown by studies led on university government in the eighties<sup>22</sup> and by the influence of the disciplines in the ministerial decision-making process (Friedberg and Musselin, 1993). This model nevertheless strongly regressed after the introduction of the four-year contracts between the ministry and each university since 1988. The various documents the state authorities published about this policy, the discourses of its promoters and the way it was implemented (Musselin, 1995) reveal that this policy was meant to encourage the French universities to become more collective and cohesive entities rather than juxtapositions of faculties. For the civil servant of the DPDU (Direction for the University Planning and Development) in charge of the signature of the first contracts, a good university project was a document setting priorities and strategies for the whole institution rather than a collection of faculty projects. Moreover and in order to indicate this orientation even more clearly, the state authorities very broadly and strongly announced that the presidents will be their sole partners and that the deans should no more go the Parisian administration to defend their own interests.

From 1988 to 1993 in particular, the promoters of the contractual policy enjoyed a stronger position than ever and during this time, the emergence of French universities as relevant intermediary actors between the ministry and the academics relied on the development of the presidential role, encouraging the presidents to transform their function, to lead collective reflection within their university, to promote the definition of strategic priorities, to use their margin of action in order to modify their university.

The studies we led on the preparation, the negotiation and the implementation of the contracts in three universities showed that some presidents developed a very participative approach and associated their deans in this process, but that the latter did not always answer positively. Some of the deans clearly refused to take part in the preparation of the contract but we also observed that the dean-president relationships could even worsen during the implementation of the contract (Lipiansky and Musselin, 1995).

In a way the contractual policy, because it favoured strengthened presidential functions, provoked defensive reactions from some deans and encouraged the president to govern without them.

### ***C. Status***

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<sup>22</sup> Not because the deans were very offensive at that time (they already adopted a more moderate role quite different from the role previous deans had), but because the presidents themselves remain mostly on a low profile.

Another explanation for the difficult relationships between the deans and the presidents in France may be found in the fact that deans are academics elected by their faculty council for a five year renewable period of time.

One can wonder whether one is not less ready to adopt the behaviour and the discourses of a manager when one knows that he/she will be again an academic in a while<sup>23</sup>. When the deans are appointed (with or without consultation of the concerned academics) as in the English or the American universities they have more room to chose their own style of leadership, even if they come from the Faculty they lead (which is not always the case). When they are appointed by the president they may develop a close relationship with the latter, while when they are elected (as in France) they may have been elected precisely because they are known for their opposition to the president and his team, or at least for their ability to resist them.

One can also wonder whether it is not more difficult to adopt strong leadership when one is in contact every day with his colleagues (i.e. electors). This hypothesis could be verified by checking whether the deans of small faculties (a frequent situation in France) more than others adopt a *primus inter pares* style of leadership and put more distance between themselves and the president's team.

The ability of the French presidents to find internal relays to support their strategies and policies is finally limited by what is called the "articles 33" of the 1984 law, i.e. the faculties that enjoy a derogatory status. The dean of this type of faculty is not elected, but appointed... by the Minister. Moreover the "articles 33" enjoy more autonomy on their budget and decision-making and can more easily resist the university strategies. They generally at the same time define themselves as part of the university and distinct from it, as insiders and outsiders as well. The IUT (*Instituts Universitaires de Technologie*) are very representative of this ambiguous belonging: there is for instance a conference of the IUT deans (as there is a University presidents conference) and the question whether the IUT should contract independently with the Ministry or be part of the university contract is frequently discussed.

All these aspects (the growth of the faculty, the derogatory status of some faculties, the principal of designation of the deans) do not *a priori* help the emergence of more cooperative relationships between the presidents and the deans in French universities.

#### **D. Managing deliberative bodies is easier than managing deans**

A last explanatory factor lies in the government structure of French universities which mixes two kinds of coordination. One of them is the leadership line which goes from the chairs, to the deans, to the vice-presidents and to the president. The other is made of deliberative bodies which delimitate the action of the elected leaders: the faculty councils, the board of studies<sup>24</sup> (*Conseil des Etudes et de la Vie Universitaire* or CEVU), the academic council (*Conseil Scientifique*) and the governing board (*Conseil d'Administration*). This dual structure of leaders and bodies is not specific to France, but the manner on which they intervene is different.

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<sup>23</sup> The presidents are in the same situation but some of them never become academic afterwards.

<sup>24</sup> The CEVU deals with pedagogical issues, the *conseil scientifique* with the research, and the *Conseil d'administration* votes the propositions made by the two others and is in charge of the budget.

First, following the Savary law, the president's team is not supposed to govern with the deans but with the three deliberative bodies (CEVU, scientific council and university council). One of the aim of this law was to reinforce the consultation mechanisms and to foster decision-making by collective deliberation: this is why it created a supplementary body (CEVU) to the two created by the 1968 law, increased the size of the bodies and modified their composition to the detriment of the full professors and to the benefit of all other representatives. This law does not foresee any arena of consultation and decision-making open to the president and the deans. The 1984 law neither states that the deans should be elected members of the university council nor that they should at least be invited to attend the deliberations without voting.

Generally this is corrected by the specific status of each university. Meetings of the deans are quite frequent and they are often invited to attend the university council. It is nevertheless not sufficient to associate the deans to the university government and the president's teams generally prefer governing with the bureau and the deliberative bodies.

When some presidents include the deans in their bureau (as seen in 3.2.), this option appears to be complicated. First of all this solution is difficult to imagine when there are a large number of deans (which is often the case) because the bureau would be too heavy to manage. Second, there is no reason for the deans to feel close to the president (as the vice-presidents can be for instance, because their candidatures are generally suggested by the president). Thus, when the deans are members of the bureau, it becomes a room for negotiations, with a lot of time dedicated to the construction of acceptable compromises because there are *a priori* no given convergences: they have to be constructed

For this reason it is more frequent to find presidential teams that are made of individuals chosen for their proximity with the president and that play a key-role in the preparation of the decisions that would be voted and thus legitimated by the deliberative bodies (Mignot-Gérard, 2000). But this of course *in fine* provokes a weak commitment of the deans, a restricted adhesion and loyalty from them to the university strategies, a limited good will to act as relays between the president and the academics.

In French universities, the deliberative bodies often prevails on a rather non cohesive executive line of leadership.

## 6. Conclusion

In this chapter we tried to describe the existing discrepancies between the presidential teams and the deans within French universities or the French university. While the former are evolving towards a more managerial kind of leadership and are mostly in favour of more institutional autonomy, the latter remain very close to a traditional conception of their role and thus respect the expectations of those by whom they were elected.

We also tried to explain that these divergences seem stronger in the case of France than in other countries which experienced the same trend towards more autonomous universities as well as a stronger academic leadership. The situation in France is mostly due to four different causes: the recent emergence of universities in France; the promotion of the presidential function by the contractual policy; the status; the possibility for the university president to manage with the deliberative bodies rather than with the deans.

If the demands for more institutional autonomy recently expressed by the Conference of the University Presidents were satisfied, the situation we described could become even more problematic. The gap between the intentions and decisions of the presidential teams and those of the deans and their respective faculties could increase and lead to blockages. Such difficulties are already to be observed when strategic plans, rationalization policies or teaching evaluation procedures are implemented. Even decisions that are well accepted and are perceived as legitimate by a large number of academics and members of the administrative staff can be problematic to implement into action. For instance, almost everybody agrees that the *heures complémentaires* (overtime) budget should be better managed and thus provisional budgets have been prepared. But very often the deans have been asked to insure that these budgets are respected and most of the time they feel uncomfortable with this responsibility and with the decisions that should be made to limit the numbers of hours paid.

How is this to be avoided ? How can the relationships between the deans and the university leaders be improved? How can the deans be encouraged to become better relays for presidential orientations and policies? It seems to us that some of the explanatory causes we identified suggest some interesting clues. The first deals with the contractual policy. We said that it is most of the time difficult for the president to include the deans as members of the “bureau”, but the preparation of the strategic plan that supports the contract negotiations is certainly a period during which the involvement of the deans could be favoured. A second deals with the status; the presence of the deans during the meeting of the governing board and regular meetings of the deans should be systematic. A last item deals with the balance between the deans and the deliberative bodies: it could be improved (i.e. rebalanced) if the meeting of the deans became a source for proposals (that then could be worked out by the “bureau”) rather than an information meeting.

These three clues are neither sufficient in themselves self nor a guaranteed solution. But they probably could help for the construction of a more cohesive academic leadership within French universities and for the transformation of the latter into more collective actors.

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