The Implementation of the Bachelor-Master Study Structure in French Universities.

A European Reform in the Hands of Academic Tribes.

DRAFT¹, NOT FOR QUOTATION

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Introduction

The issue raised in this paper is to what extent French Universities have behaved as autonomous institutions while implementing the introduction of the Bachelor/Master study structures?

There are at least two good reasons for making a connection between the implementation of the Bologna Process and the institutional autonomy of universities.

Firstly, the increase of institutional autonomy of universities has been one of the major matters for the national reforms of higher education led in the past decades in several countries of Northern Europe (Kogan and ali 2000, Musselin 2001). Furthermore, it is among the core topics at stake in the Bologna Process: the more the intergovernmental process moves forward and expands, the more the actors involved in the debates at the European level underline that the success of the European Higher Education Area depends on strong Higher Education Institutions. In this respect, the last report that was published in order to prepare the Bergen summit is exemplary (Reicher and Tauch 2005).

Secondly, comparing with other signatory countries, France is quite in advance in the implementation of the “two-cycle” study structure². The first decrees of application to switch

¹ We would like to thank Christine Musselin for the invaluable advices she provided to us during the elaboration of this paper. We are also on debt to Marte Mangset and Pauline Ravinet for their comments on the first draft.
to the Bachelor-Master study structure were published in April 2002 and, at the present time, ¾ of the universities have already adopted the new scheme, and the whole universities will have implemented the reform in the academic year 2006, at least in 2007 (cf. the national report to be presented at the Bergen conference). Besides, most university presidents support the objectives of the European Reform and wish to implement it as quick as possible (some have even anticipated the movement and decided to shift to the Bachelor-Master study-structure a year before signing their four-year contract with the state).

One may thus make the assumption that the university presidents used the current reform as a leverage to strengthen their leadership on the disciplines on the one hand, and assert their institutional autonomy towards the State on the other. We decided to test the validity of this hypothesis throughout an analysis of the implementation of the Bachelor-Master scheme in three French universities. Along the following developments, the issue on institutional autonomy will be addressed through three empirical questions. 1) At the beginning of the implementation process, did the presidential teams define a collective and coherent strategy to frame the transformation of the curricula offerings produced by their disciplines? 2) Before sending the projects of Bachelor-Master to the ministry, did the governing bodies of universities make collective choices that went beyond the simple ratification (or aggregation) of the decisions made by the lower levels (academic groups, disciplines, faculties)? 3) Did the universities build their own curricula offerings regardless of the directives defined by the ministry?

**Framework of the paper**

We suggest to answer these questions through the following outline:
In the first part, we will describe the broad context of the increase of institutional autonomy for French Universities and show that such an evolution has concrete effects regarding the construction of the curricula offerings within universities: the presidential teams have begun to set up plans regarding both the development and the regulation of the curricula offerings provided by their disciplines.
In the second part, we will make a first diagnostic of the reform and reveal that it led to inflation and heterogeneity instead of rationalization and consistency.

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2 It is all the more remarkable that a changeover of political power between parties occurred in France in 2002. In spite of this change, the two successive Ministers of Education of the current Government (Luc Ferry and François Fillon) have continued the impulse given by Claude Allègre in 1998, with the organization of the Sorbonne Conference.
And in the third and final part, we will try to explain the latter results through a description of
the process of implementation, focusing on the role of three actors: the ministry, the
leadership teams of universities, and the “academic tribes” (Becher1989).

**Empirical fieldwork**

The paper relies on the analysis of semi-directive interviews led in three universities (the first
is a Parisian university -UNI 1- where the Bachelor-Master scheme was implemented in 2004;
the last two are universities located in Province and led the reform in 2003 –UNI 2 and UNI
3-). In each institution, around thirty interviews were conducted with academic leaders
(university president and members of their team, deans, department chairs) and with academic
and administrative staff within two different disciplines (Chemistry and Computer Science in
UNI 1, Biology and Languages in UNI 2, Law and Humanities in UNI 3). In the whole, ninety
interviews were led at the university level.

This fieldwork is at the time being completed by two other types of data:

- Documentary analysis (national laws and decrees, four-year contracts established by
  universities, meetings reports of university councils…).

- Interviews are realized at the national level with actors who were involved in the
  elaboration of the reform and the follow-up of its implementation process (members of
  the ministry of education and research, representatives of the national university
  presidents conference, etc.). In the whole, some fifteen interviews are planned for the
  national level.

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3 This research projects was originated and financed by Sciences-Po and the Ecole Supérieure de l’Education
Nationale (ESEN). The whole project is under the scientific supervision of Christine Musselin.
I – The development of curricula offerings: a matter recently handled by the university leadership

After a brief summary of the main evolutions that concerned the French Higher Education system (A), we will see that the strengthening of the institutional autonomy of French universities has led to a shift in the behavior of their presidential teams in the past ten years: from now on, they try to guide and regulate the development of the curricula offerings produced by their constituencies (B). We will point out however the remaining obstacles of this evolution (C). These two last sections lay out the outstanding results of a recent article (Musselin and Mignot-Gérard 1999).

A) The strengthening of institutional autonomy for French Universities: a short history

In the last decade, universities of different countries in Northern Europe have experienced the strengthening of the leadership at the institutional level (Bauer and al. 1999, Bleiklie and al. 2000, de Boer and al. 1999, Kogan and Hanney 2000). In France, university leadership has been strengthened too, although contrary to other countries, it did not result from the implementation of New Public Management (Mignot-Gérard and Musselin 2002). The transformation of French universities into “collective actors” is rather the result of a long and chaotic process. We suggest to make a brief presentation of its major features.

The loi Faure (1968) is the first that proclaimed the ‘institutional autonomy of universities’ and introduced two main changes in the internal structures of universities. First, the creation of the university president function and the definition of two collective bodies set at the university level (the university council and the academic council). The principle of the president election by the majority of the assembly of the elected councils was supposed to give a high degree of legitimacy and a strong capacity of action to the president (Jegouzo 1996). Second, the substitution of the traditional faculties by the Unités d’Enseignement et de Recherche was to provide the means to weaken the decisional power of the disciplines: for A. Prost (1992), the directeurs d’UER only received the power of coordinating the teaching activities. With the loi Savary (1984), these two tendencies were emphasized. The long description dedicated to the president’s prerogatives signals the legislator’s intention to

4 In fact, the idea of ‘institutional autonomy’ was launched in a reform carried out by the end of the 19th century, but the reform rapidly aborted (See Musselin 2001 for further explanations on this failure).

5 A formal description of the governing structures of French universities is provided at the end of this paper.

6 He (or she) is responsible for the whole administration of the university, his (or her) authority on the management of administrative staff, on the allocation of buildings, (s)he is responsible for the nomination of the
widen his authority. These two national reforms have definitely participated in reinforcing the idea of ‘institutional autonomy for universities’. Nevertheless, during the eighties, the reforms did not succeed in transforming the university level as an important decisional actor between the disciplines and the State (Friedberg et Musselin 1989). First, the university presidents still behave as *primus inter pares* rather than leaders or managers. Second, the elected bodies were unable to make decisions on their own, they very often passed on their responsibility to a higher level. For instance, the Senate refused to rank the new academic positions\(^7\); similarly, the projects for faculty new curricula were rarely rejected or modified by the university council: all of them were sent to the Ministry who finally took the decision. Finally until the end of the eighties, university leadership did not feel that they were allowed to intervene on academic matters.

For C. Musselin (2001), the real increase of institutional autonomy came into effect with the introduction of the four-year contracts between universities and the ministry in 1988. The underlying philosophy of this policy was to give more responsibility to the periphery *vis à vis* the State. Instead of leaving the State to make the decisions and the universities to implement them, universities are entitled to analyze their strengths and weaknesses, to develop their priorities for the future (the next four years), to analyze their financial or material needs to reach their objectives, and then negotiate both the priorities and the amount of the financial support with the Ministry\(^8\).

The recent empirical studies led on French universities leadership government at the end of the nineties (Mignot-Gérard and Musselin 1999) demonstrate that the description and analysis E. Friedberg and C. Musselin proposed of the French universities in the eighties cannot be sustained anymore. In particular, the role of the presidents has evolved, the deliberative bodies no longer prefer to avoid decisions, universities are active in domains they previously ignored or considered as “taboos” and they more than ever before behave as collective actors able to develop collective strategies. As a matter of fact, presidential teams now feel they may interfere on the projects addressed from the research teams to the ministry; they are more and more involved in policies of cost-cutting that cover many fields of the university.

\(^7\) In France, the allocation of academic positions is organised by the following process: every year, each discipline requests for a certain quantity of positions. These requests are hierarchized at the level of the faculties that have to make a list of their priorities. This list is then examined by the Senate of the university which is in charge of ranking the requests of all the faculties and establish the final list of positions requests to the Ministry.

\(^8\) The credits negotiated with the four-year contract do not exceed 10% of university working budget (salaries excluded) however.
management; they express a recent but growing attention to the management of human resources, and they intend to change the development dynamic of their curricula (Musselin and Mignot-Gérard 2003).

B) The constitution of curricula offerings in universities before the Bologna Process: from the realm of the disciplines to the rise of university policies

The studies led in the mid-eighties on the French university government showed that the creation of new curricula was always initiated by individual or small groups of academics, who created degrees for their own interests or research concerns. The ministry had of course the responsibility to evaluate the content of the course (and the renewal of the latter was examined every four years), but, in general, this evaluation would allow enough latitude to the academics in charge of the course to adapt it to their own objectives. The important fact is that the projects for faculty new curricula were never rejected nor modified by the university councils: all of them were sent to the ministry who finally took the decision. In other words, the creation of new courses was driven by the internal norms of the disciplines, and the influence of the university was very weak in the whole process (Friedberg and Musselin 1989).

With the introduction of the four-year contracts in the end of the eighties, this situation has changed. From now on, university presidents post collective orientations regarding the development of the curricula offerings. The recent qualitative and quantitative studies led on that topic show that the university policies pursue two different objectives. Firstly, the presidential teams incite the disciplines to give priority to the creation of professional (or vocational) degrees. These policies have a concrete impact on the criteria used by the university council in charge of the assessment of the projects of new curricula. When projects of new curricula are examined in the university councils, the ‘outlets on the labor market’ are the main element taken into account in the final decision. The preference for the development of job-training instead of academic courses thus reveals that the creation of new curricula in French universities is not only driven by the disciplines’ internal logics of

9 Of course, this evolution is also the result of an aggregation of several external factors rooted in a larger historical context: the incentives given by the ministry to develop vocational curricula in higher education (from the sixties’ on) has undoubtedly favored this evolution; the increasing interest of the politicians for their local universities led to bring closer the demands of the labor market and the offer of higher education on a given territory; the rise of unemployment has conducted higher education institutions to consider the problem of employability seriously.
expansion but that the external demand of the labour-market is more and more taken into account by the institutions.

Secondly, in some universities, the developments of new curricula are tightly regulated in a cost control perspective: when a new diploma is to be created, presidential teams ensure that the new diploma will not need supplementary resources, and that it will attract a sufficient number of students. In universities where this logic of rationalization is operating, the university councils have adopted criteria to enforce the presidential policy: their decision depends on the analysis of the financial data of the projects (ratio of incomes/expenses, prevision of the number of students).

Thus, in the past ten years, executive teams of French universities have undoubtedly increased their influence on the regulation of the curricula offer: by posting the purpose of professionnalization, they interfere into the content of the new curricula; simultaneously, by setting-up efforts to limit the expansion of the curricula offer, they show a growing concern for a better readability of the curricula offerings. Along this evolution, the power of the disciplines has been weakened in two different respects. Firstly, the preference for the development of job-training instead of academic courses, the introduction of financial criteria to assess the projects, mean that the creation of new curricula is not only driven by the disciplines’ internal logics of expansion. Secondly, the regulation of curricula offer is no longer the monopoly of the disciplines since they henceforth have to share their decision-making power with presidential teams and university councils.

C) Remaining obstacles…

However, two factors mitigate the evolution we come to describe: on the one hand, it is difficult to restrain the continuing inflation of professional courses; on the other, the efforts of rationalization of the curricula offerings have a limited spectrum and marginal effects. Let us briefly develop these two points.

A macro picture confirms that the concern for “professionnalization” (or employability) has grown within universities: in 2000, at the national level, 44% of the 1324 new curricula were professionnal diplomas (195 licences professionnelles and 380 DESS -equivalent of
“professional masters”-)\(^{10}\). The infatuation for professional degrees is nonetheless difficult to regulate. Indeed, academics are encouraged by the national and the university policies to create professional degrees but the actors in charge of the assessment of the new projects and responsible for the final decision (both at the ministry and at the university levels) face new problems.

At the ministry level, with the rise of the idea of institutional autonomy and the need to create professional degrees, the decision-making processes have become more complex. The evaluators cannot merely assess the intrinsic content of the projects; they also have to appreciate the position of the individual (or discipline) project within the collective strategy postponed by the university leadership. The final decision is based on a subtle balance between these different, sometimes conflicting criteria. Finally, it often comes to the acceptance of the projects: as the university autonomy is more and more valued within the ministry, if the project is mediocre according to the expert of the discipline, it may even so be accepted if it is in line with the university global policy. Moreover, professional projects often deal with new fields of research or correspond to small niches of the labour-market (new jobs) unknown by the disciplinary experts.

In the same token, at the university level, the professional dimension of the projects puts the university councils in trouble. As a matter of fact, they do not have the tools to check the existence, the relevance, or the durability of the external demand. Their decision is thus based on the declarations made by the academics in charge of the projects: the elected members of the councils are then obliged to trust the individuals.

The decision-processes regarding the creation of new curricula thus conduct to an inflationism of the production of new curricula in higher education.

This inflation of new curricula is all the more significant that simultaneously, the policies of rationalization that were mentioned previously have a reduced spectrum. First, the efforts to limit extra-costs are generally applied to university degrees, not to national degrees. Second, these efforts of rationalization are easier to apply to curricula that are to be created rather than to existing curricula. It is very rare for universities to decide to terminate a course offering, even when there are very few students. F. Kletz and F. Pallez (2001) describe the case of a deserted curricula: the faculty was almost ready to suppress it which means that no further

agreement (*habilitation*) would be asked for to the ministry. But just before the decisive vote, the academics teaching in this course of study proposed to modify it, submitted a new proposal, and asked for the renewal of their agreement: the university accepted it. This anecdote is not an isolated observation, on the contrary, it must be understood as an illustration of a more common phenomenon. As a matter of fact, the analysis of a questionnaire sent to thirty-seven universities in 1999 (1660 answers, 1100 from academics and 560 from members of the administrative staff) brings about a quantitative evidence of this empirical fact: 46.4% of the interviewees would declare that “...new curricula created in their faculty within the past two years” whereas only 7.3% said “a curricula abolished in their faculty within the past two years”. (total respondents = 1130). It seems thus much more difficult to suppress curricula than to create new ones. Moreover, we observed that universities which have the highest rate of creating new courses, do not have a high rate of suppression.

As to summarize, the analysis of the decision-making processes both at the university and the ministry levels related to the creation of new curricula shows that the construction of the curricula offerings (especially the vocational courses) in the French Higher Education is favourable to an inflation of the degrees provided by universities. Moreover, the efforts of rationalization often encounter high resistances from the academic community: academics or disciplines representatives still show a great ability to bypass or even refuse to enforce the university policies. In the end, the landscape of higher education study programmes in France is far from readable (Enafaa and Lefebvre 2001).

II – A first diagnostic of the reform: inflation and heterogeneity instead of rationalization and coherence

Hence, in such a context, the implementation of the Bachelor-Master scheme poses one question: did the universities use the European reform to rationalize the structure of their curricula offerings? In other words, did the governing bodies of universities try to regulate the proposals of Masters and Bachelors coming from their disciplines, as well as set up a coherent organization of the courses for these new degrees?

A – The new structure of graduate studies: cost-cutting? readability?
One may assume that the creation of the Master degree was an opportunity to “rationalize” the curricula offerings. Here, we use the notion of “rationalization” in the broad common sense, that is to refer to a better readability and a decrease of costs through the suppression of courses. Why the elaboration of the Master degree could have led to a rationalization of the graduate studies within French universities?

Before the implementation of the Bachelor-Master study structure, the structure of graduate studies was crumbled into numerous degrees: at a level of 4 years of study the Maîtrise that would come in a variety of vocational maîtrises\textsuperscript{11} and at a level of five years of study, the DEA (the equivalent of a master of research) and the DESS (the equivalent of a professional master). The Master degree, as a single structure, should normally lead to a better readability of the system. Moreover, as stated above, the process of creation of new degrees was inflationist. The merger of the previous degrees into a single Master could thus have been an opportunity to suppress some of the older degrees that would attract too few students or that were managed by too small groups of academics, indeed by individuals. As a consequence of the latter, one may expect a limitation of extra-costs for universities.

The comparison of the implementation of the Bachelor-Master Scheme in our three universities shows that none of these expectations are met. First of all, regarding the suppression of courses or degrees that would prevail in the old system, the results are mitigated. The number of Masters per university is generally lower than was the number of graduate degrees. However, the notion of “Master degree” includes sub-categories : “the ‘mention’, the specialty, the course”, so that most often, the older graduate degrees (DEA, DESS) were transformed into ‘specialties’ of the Master. As a consequence, most of them are still alive after the reform, even those that would experience a decrease of their number of students. Not only the most fragile degrees were not suppressed, but in many cases, the reform has entailed an inflation of graduate courses. Thus, in one university (UNI 2), one even finds 110 specialties instead of 65 graduate degrees in the older system. In our sample, there was only one discipline out of six (in UNI 1) where the definition of the Master degree had conducted to suppressions: 15 graduate degrees were restricted into 7 specialties for the new master. However, even in that particular case, the hours of courses given within the specialties had proliferated (300 hours in the new system \textit{versus} 120 in the

\textsuperscript{11} Maîtrises de Sciences et Techniques (MST), Maîtrises de Sciences de Gestion (MSG), Maîtrises d'Informatique Appliquée à la Gestion des Entreprises (MIAGE), Maîtrises de Sciences Biologiques et Médicales (MSBM).
previous one). In the last university, the vice-president in charge of the finances had estimated that the implementation of the BM study structure had given rise to 10 thousands supplementary teaching hours (UNI 3).

Thus, whatever the efforts of rationalization, a common trend that holds true for all the universities studied is the significant increase of teaching hours. This inflation is caused by several factors: the development of new academic courses, the diversification of the learning paths for students (that conducts to the dissemination of courses opened for very small groups of students), and the emergence of new courses (teaching of foreign languages for instance). The logical consequence of this inflation is the great increase of the expenses in the teaching budgets in the majority of the universities. This is certainly a counter-result of a reform that was to be implemented without further spending.

Till now, one may also be sceptical about the improvement of the readability of the new system of graduate studies in France. Not only does the master include sub-categories (‘mention’, ‘specialty’, ‘course’), but it is also embedded in a larger unit, called the ‘domain’, which roughly corresponds to disciplinary fields. With the definition of the “domains”, each university was indeed expected to post its core competencies. However, as we will develop it below, this multiplicity of notions produces a confusion both across the universities within them.

Firstly, because of the absence of a national nomenclature of the ‘domains’, the names given to the latter are surprisingly diverse across universities. Yet, other factor of mix-up is related to the overlap between the notion of ‘domain’ and the one of ‘master’: while some institutions have set up a single master for the whole institution, others deliver several masters. A quick look at some web sites of universities reveals that the situation is even more complex. Four different cases can indeed be identified: “1 domain = 1 master”; “n domains = n masters”; “1 domain = n masters”; “n domain = xn masters”.

One could argue that such heterogeneity across universities is revealing the autonomy of the institutions. We discovered however that the structure of the master degrees would also differ within each institution (which holds true for the three universities studied). For universities that deliver several masters, the number of ‘mentions’ and ‘specialties’ vary a lot across the different masters. The lack of legibility entailed by this heterogeneous arborescence is increased by the fact that the academics currently use to call “Master” the specialty they are in charge of. Most of the time, this confusion is involuntary, but it is sometimes a deliberate
strategy led by academics who try to increase the visibility and the notoriety of their own specialty.

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These results thus challenge the idea that the implementation of the Bologna Process resulted in a rationalization of the offer of graduate studies in France. As shown previously, it seems that it did not lead to the suppression of older degrees\textsuperscript{12}; it even entailed an inflation of the teaching hours and a growth in the expenses of the teaching budgets of universities. Furthermore, because of the confusion between the notions of ‘domain’, ‘master’, ‘mention’ and ‘specialty’ and the strategic games (Crozier and Friedberg 1977) allowed by this wooliness, the reform has -up to now- failed to improve the readability of the offer of graduate degrees provided by French universities.

**B) The organization of the studies at the Bachelor and Master levels: an heterogeneous landscape within universities**

As stressed previously, some universities seek to frame the developments of the courses delivered by their disciplines (part I). The institutional policies enounced by the presidential teams in the field of teaching are not merely rationalization plans, they also aim at orienting the contents of the offer by setting-up common rules (this observation is illustrated with the stronger attention paid to the existence of job possibilities for the graduate students, which is a criteria applied for all the disciplines wishing to create a new degree).

The implementation of the Bachelor-Master study structure was obviously an opportunity for university leadership to set up common norms to be shared by the different disciplines operating in the institution, aiming at giving a better coherence of the curricula offerings issued by their disciplines.

Again, opposite conclusions emerge from the analysis of our empirical fieldwork.

\textsuperscript{12} It would be of course valuable to bring quantitative evidence of that qualitative observation. When all the French universities will have implemented the reform, it will be interesting to compare the numbers of DEA or DESS that would exist in the older system with the number of specialties of Masters that were created after the reform.
Many examples illustrate the multiple patterns of organization of the studies within a given institution. We have selected the most striking examples to illustrate this internal heterogeneity.

The first example relates to the possibilities offered to the students to diversify their learning paths. At the Bachelor level, this diversification is more open in Humanities than in Sciences. Thus, the free courses proposed to the students at the entrance of the Bachelor are more numerous in Humanities than in Sciences. In the latter moreover, the academics often meet the students individually to advise them on what courses to follow, so that the final choice is made by the professor and not by the student himself. The range of choices for the students is again more or less open during the master courses. While some disciplines have defined a large set of courses in the first year of the master (M1), others require the students to take a specialization from the beginning of the first year, and this specialty that has to be carried out all through the second and last year of the master degree. In the case of the master, the variations in the organization of the studies do not correspond to a cleavage between Sciences and Humanities: as a matter of fact, among our universities, there was one university specialized in “Sciences” (UNI 1) and these two pathways were existing: the Chemistry had chosen the first one and the Computer Science had opted for the second.

The second example is all the more important to mention that it is strongly criticized by the left-side trade-unions of students (Unef 2005). It relates to the modes of assessment of the degrees and the rules of selection of the students. On that particular topic, very diverse rules prevail among the different disciplines. While some require the students to obtain a mark of 10 out 20 in the core subjects to get through the next semester, some allow the students to compensate for their low marks in core subjects when they obtained high marks for their training (or optional) course. By the same token, some disciplines give the possibility to the students to obtain their master degree thanks to a compensation among the four semesters of the curriculum, while others do not allow the students to go through the next semester until they do not pass the exams of the given semester.

The same holds true for rules of selection for students. While some disciplines have decided to maintain the older system, that is a selection at the entrance of the second year of the master, others have implemented an unofficial selection at the end of the Bachelor degree: concretely, they persuade the students not to follow a given specialty of the master, by arguing that they will inevitably fail the ending exam.
At the end of the implementation process of the Bachelor-Master scheme, it is clear that no common norms have been applied in our three universities; instead, the courses Bachelors and Masters are structured according a variety of local rules. May we infer from this observation that nor the ministry or the universities have defined any rules all through the implementation process of the BM scheme? This question will be answered in the next and final section.

III – The implementation process of the reform

As previously shown, the BM reform led to heterogeneity and confusion and one may assume that such a phenomenon can be understood through an analysis of the process of implementation of the reform. Though the BM scheme was adopted in short delays, its implementation results from the conjunction of different interactions between three main actors (the ministry, the presidential teams and the academics), from the launching of the reform up to the final national assessment of the degrees and even after. The subject of this part is to establish the role of each of these three actors: we will try to understand if such a top-down reform did not turn into a bottom-up process, which led to heterogeneity and confusion.

A) A process favourable to the expression of institutional autonomy?

1) An incentive to implement the reform but a concrete disengagement of the ministry

As soon as the laws of application were adopted (in April 2002), the universities were invited to set up the reform at the time of the renewal of their four-year contract with the ministry. But except the mere order to adopt the BM scheme in short delays and without further spending, the ministry did not give the presidential teams any directive on what they were expected to do. This appears through our interviews insofar as many members of presidential teams as well as academics described the ministerial instructions as “woolly”.

2) Contradictory guidelines

Not only were the first ministerial instructions woolly, but afterwards, the few guidelines that the universities got to know even became contradictory. Indeed, because they were quite confused by the lack of directives, lots of people contacted the ministry in order to get some
pieces of information. And according to our interlocutors, the responses they were given were always different from a call to another. This was particularly striking regarding what a master was expected to be (some were told that there must be a single master inside each domain, while others have heard it said that it depended on the number of students or that a master had to be congruent with graduate schools…). And none of these assertions was more than an interpretation of unofficial indications coming from different members of the ministry.

3) **An incontestable role of censor**

In the academics’ eyes, the wooliness of the ministry might be seen as a strategic way to make them work and pick up their ideas and they almost understood such an attitude. But they were also aware that the ministry would have the last word by accepting or not their proposals, which they considered as unfair. According to them, the least the ministry should have done was giving them clear criteria of selection before judging the new curricula supply.

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Unlike a lot of previous French reforms of higher education\(^{13}\), the implementation of the BM scheme was weakly supervised by the ministry, who stood in the backgrounds, leaving the local actors a large space of action and remaining a mere ex-post censor. It leads one to suppose the reform was a decentralized process. Consequently, we will try to understand how the presidential teams handled the reform and if they took advantage of the reform to assert their leaderships on the disciplines.

**B) The presidential teams facing the lack of directives**

1) **A common wish to implement the new system**

Admittedly the ministry gave very few orders but it clearly asked the universities to implement the reform. Apparently, it did it successfully for our three universities accepted to catch the train of the reform when they were asked to (one of them even anticipated the movement by enforcing the reform one year before the signature of its four-year contract). Certainly some of them waited for a while in order to see what was going to happen to pioneer universities, but they finally realized they would loose a lot by waiting too much.

\(^{13}\) As for instance the ‘Bayrou reform’ led in 1997, that, among other targets, aimed at transforming the calendars of exams into semesters.
Save this common point, the presidential teams opted for quite different modes of management of the reform. And what is striking is that whatever their policies, the presidential teams always justified them by referring to the attitude of the ministry.

2) **Three modes of guidance**

In the first case (UNI 2), the presidential team played a very small part in the implementation of the reform and let the academics do all the job, remaining, like the ministry, as a mere censor. Completely lost, this presidential team argued that the ministry had not given instructions to justify its attitude of “laissez faire”. Hence a totally “bottom-up” process.

In the second university (UNI 3), the presidential team decided to take advantage of the reform to impose changes, asserting that they were those of the ministry. It did not intervene so much in the elaboration of the formal structure (definition of the domains, of the masters and so on) but in pedagogical decisions. Thus, using the wooliness of the ministry as an excuse, the presidential team declared that its role was to interpret the official texts and tried to have its own measures (free courses, harmonisation of the calendars) taken for a reading of the reform.

In the last university (UNI 1), the presidential team was also a bit managerial, but in a different way from the previous one. Indeed, unlike the two other universities, the presidential team did not map out the new curricula supply from the proposals by the academics but imposed the definition of the new formal structure (domain, master and mentions) and appointed a person in charge for every degree. In a similar way as the second presidential team, this team argued that interventionism was the best solution to fulfil the requirement of the ministry for it claimed to know what they were expected to do (a large and single domain and a limited number of specialties within the ‘mentions’ within the masters ). On the other hand, it did not intervene much in pedagogical aspects, as the second presidential team did.

Thus, one may partly explain the heterogeneity previously shown by the different policies of the university leaderships. But we must underline that even if some presidential teams tried to impose a few measures, the latter never constituted a global policy but they were restricted directives. All in all, the academics were those who had to do the largest part of the job and
the final heterogeneity may rather be seen as the result of the defence of their own interests, even when the presidential teams tried to supervise them.

C) The handling of the reform by the “academic tribes”

1) The emergence of “academic tribes”

Whether the presidential team (had) appointed or not the heads of the degrees, the academics had to take counsel together so as to build the content of the bachelor and master courses. Making reference to Becher’s concept (Becher 1989), we will speak about “academic tribes” since not only were the administration and the students scarcely associated to the deliberation, but the new curricula were developed by small groups (generally research teams), apart from institutional governing structures (deans, faculty or university councils). As a reform, the implementation of the BM scheme gave rise to the shift of the balances of power. Whether they perceived the reform as a threat or as an opportunity, the academic tribes attempted to defend their own interests. This defence of local territories took place in two different ways: during the first stage of the implementation (the constitution of the domains), the academics explicitly expressed their wish to protect their disciplines even if it did mean fighting among themselves; afterwards, when pedagogical aspects were discussed, the academics defended their disciplinary specificity by struggling more or less strongly against their presidential team and its possible harmonisation attempts.

2) An explicit defence of disciplinary boundaries

Except in the third university, where the presidential team imposed the structure of the new supply, the delimitation of the domains bred struggles and resulted from them. Actually, at the beginning of the implementation, nearly all the people in charge of an ex graduate degree wanted to create their own master (or at least their own “mention”). Most frequently, the presidential teams tried to make it quite clear to them that it would not be possible because of the presumed requirements of the ministry. This entailed three different “strategies” from the academic tribes.

A few of them attempted to resist in order to keep their degree out of big new structures. As an example, some biologists in the first university managed to create a very small “mention”, arguing that they had nothing to do with the other biologists because of the specificity of their researches. But they probably succeeded more easily than other academic tribes, because their leader was a vice-president of the university.
Others envisaged mergers, which often caused hard conflicts. For instance, in the first university, there were two competing degrees in communication and on the occasion of the reform, one of the two heads proposed merging them. The other one feared he might lose control on his degree and rejected the suggestion. Hence a long fight between the two. Their relationship turned very strained and the plan for a merger failed.

At last, many of the academic tribes finally accepted to make compromises by sharing a master/“mention” with others while being careful to maintain frontiers with who they despised. Many of the academics declared that even if they had been quite disappointed when they had been told they would not have their master/“mention”, they finally did not care about sharing it with others since it did not imply further cooperation among them.

3) An implicit defence of disciplinary interests

Apart from the explicit defence of disciplinary boundaries at the time of the definition of the new degrees, the academic tribes underlined the specificity of their disciplines by using it as a justification of the way they dealt with some pedagogical aspects of the reform.

As an example, we can focus on the introduction of free courses as promoted by the presidential team of the second university. Some academic tribes accepted to send their students out of their discipline and to receive students from other degrees while defending the necessary open-mindedness, whereas others justified their reject of this measure by their will to give their students a strong formation in a single discipline. But the resistance to this presidential measure was also a way, particularly for scientists or law professors, to bring to the fore their disciplinary specificity, which the presidential team had trouble denying. In sum, a lot of academic tribes rejected any attempt of harmonization from the university leadership, except when it served their own interests like in the case of the linguists who knew that the free courses would bring them many new students.

Regarding the recruitment between M1 and M2, that is left to the academics’ judgement, most of them justify their policy with pedagogical arguments: those who keep their students for two years and do not recruit much students from abroad underline the beneficial effects of a longer study program, whereas those who practice a selection between M1 and M2 and recruit some students coming from other universities assert that the melting of students enriches the training. Regardless of these arguments, there is no doubt that attractive degrees are more likely than declining ones to make a selection between M1 and M2 because of the great numbers of candidates and because their elitist purposes imply their try to hire the best
students. Thus, pedagogical arguments often hide strategies to get enough students and, if possible, the best. Hence a certain heterogeneity which is even greater if we take into account the case of the academics of excellent degrees, who exert an unofficial selection between L and M by requiring the validation of some courses that they claimed essential.

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Finally, the heterogeneity seems to result from the different strategies of the academic tribes to defend their disciplinary interests. And this is all the most true since whatever the threats worded by the presidential teams, the academics who resisted almost always succeeded in maintaining their specificities since the ministry accepted nearly all the proposals.

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As a conclusion, let’s remind that this part was expected to account for the heterogeneity and the illegibility of the new education supply through two intermediate questions: wasn’t the implementation of the BM scheme a bottom-up process? And, can we correlate this possible bottom-up process and the final heterogeneity?

Regarding the management of the reform, there is no doubt that the ministry amply decentralized the process by giving the university leaderships a free hand to act. One may have assumed that the presidential teams would take advantage of the reform to assert themselves. Actually, even though some of them tried to have some precise measures adopted, they often let the reform in the hand of the academics and only succeeded in imposing their views when they could credibly refer to the threat of a ministerial reject of their proposals. As a result, the reform was above all the fact of the academic tribes.

At last, is the bottom-up process a necessary and sufficient condition of the heterogeneity so that a causal link may be established between the two? In theory, a top-down process could have led to a similar heterogeneity since it is always possible for the local actors to mould the general rules they are entitled to respect (Friedberg 1993). Moreover, always in theory and to a lesser extent, a bottom-up process might have entailed a homogeneous result, through a process of imitation of the leading institutions for instance (Powell and DiMaggio 1991). But the fact is that the lack of directives coming from the ministry and the weakness of the university leaderships were what allowed the academic tribes to substitute so much the defense of their own interests for the initial objectives of the reform. Considering the great diversity of the local interests and of the balances of power, the heterogeneity was so to speak inevitable.
Conclusions

In this conclusive part, we will firstly come back to the issue addressed in the introduction of the paper. We will then stress the atypical character of this reform and raise some questions about the on-going Bologna Process and its national translations.

To what extent French universities have demonstrated they were « autonomous institutions » during this implementation process ? As we attempted to demonstrate it along this paper, the answer is clearly “no” in three different respects.

1) Regarding the relationship with the ministry, whatever the strategy adopted by the universities, the main preoccupation of the presidential team was to develop an institutional strategy convergent with the attempts of the ministry. For the two universities where an embryonic institutional strategy of implementation was identified, the presidents had to argue that the collective rules defined at the university level were made compulsory by the ministry. In other words, the French universities still have to rely on the national authorities to exert an internal constraint on their disciplines, it is a first symptom of their weak autonomy.

In a way, the university presidents had two correlative obsessions: on the one hand, to implement the reform in the line of the preferences of the ministry; on the other, to overcome the possible resistances of the “academic tribes”. This short-sightedness may explain why the implementation process was led in an autarky: none of these presidential teams had any long-term strategy, or examined the offer and demand of higher education on their local or national territory; few tried to anticipated the peripheral problems that the reform would entail (the extra-costs or the reorganisation of the internal structures).

2) Another striking observation which reveals the weakness of the government of the French universities relates to the lack of involvement of the internal governing structures in the whole process: the academic leaders (deans, department chairs), the administration (the registrar and his /her central administrative staff), as well as the university councils (board of studies, senate, board of research) were all skipped over during the whole process. The implementation of the BM scheme is an additional illustration of the complex and conflicting relationship between the presidents and their deans in French universities (Musselin and Mignot-Gérard 2000); and it is perhaps a symptom of a more general pattern of the government of French universities: the deans, the councils, the administration heads have to be considered as “rival-associates” (Bourricaud 1969) rather than “natural allies” of the
university presidents (Mignot-Gérard forthcoming) and the latter by-passes the former whenever he has the opportunity to do so (in the current case, we make the assumption that the ‘emergency’ was a favourable circumstance to avoid the cooperation with the other actors of the university government).

3) At last, for the universities that posted explicit policies, did the leadership succeed to strengthen their authority on the ‘academic tribes’? Here again, the answer is “no”. We showed indeed that their efforts had mitigated effects: the one who tried to rationalize the curricula offerings by suppressing older graduate degrees and limiting the number of specialties within the master, only succeeded for one discipline (UNI 1). The one who tried to implement common rules to the disciplines have only partially achieved, since the only disciplines that adopted these constraints did it either because it was serving their own interests, or because they abandoned the fight, believing that the common rules were coming from the directives of the Ministry (UNI 3).

Such results may then lead to two conflicting interpretations. As we attempted to demonstrate it, it is not legitimate for the university leadership to interfere into academic matters; furthermore, it is very difficult to win the battle against the arguments put forth by the disciplinary experts… Is it a fatality for knowledge organizations or is it a specificity of the French universities, in which the leadership experiences special difficulties to strengthen its authority? The comparison of the French case with the patterns of implementation in other signatory countries of the Bologna Process will certainly help us to find out the right track of interpretation.

Hence, up to now, French universities did not show a capacity to regulate the production of new degrees; then, in the long term, how the development of the curricula offerings will be regulated and accordingly, how their ‘quality’ will be guaranteed? The issue of “regulation” is all the more relevant considering two surprising observations that arose in the French case. The first unexpected result is the following: usually, the academic community opposes high resistances to national reforms that deal with teaching matters (for instance, the reform led in 1997 on the introduction of teaching assessment procedures in French universities is still not enforced in the majority of universities, see Mignot-Gérard and Musselin 1999). Unlike these previous reforms, and although it was hardly involved into the debates at the European level, the French academic profession showed a great concern for the implementation of the
Bachelor-Master study structure… The way some of them seized the opportunity of the reform to enlarge their territories definitely shows their pro-activeness.

The second remarkable observation is that the ministry stood in the backgrounds in the implementation process, as to deliberately leave the decentralized actors to invent their local rules\(^{14}\) (all the more that the previous national procedure of evaluation of the content of the curricula offerings (the *habilitation*) has been abolished throughout the BP reform).

Anyhow, the lack of regulation both at the university and at the ministry levels combined to the pro-active strategies showed by the ‘academic tribes’ have led to the inflation of the curricula offerings and its resulting unreadability. Even if we have to keep in mind that the description presented here concerns the very beginning of the process, it seems relevant to underline the gap between the observations made in France and the purposes that are posted into the successive declarations of the Bologna Process, i.e. the harmonization of the study structure and the readability of the system of degrees to improve the attractiveness of the European higher education. What kind of scenarios for the future? If the French national authorities carry on their current strategy of ‘*laisser-faire*’, one can imagine two possible alternatives for the future: one may expect an apprenticeship from the universities leaderships; otherwise, the demand of the students could be the ultimate tool of regulation…

References


\(^{14}\) The analysis of the interviews we are leading at the present time with the “national actors” will hopefully conduct to elucidate their underlying strategy.


