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MEHEM (Mapping European Higher Education Models)
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Performance Evaluation Regime: France
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Introduction

French evaluation regime has been recently deeply modified, in its procedures as well as in its principles. The core policy instrument for this change is the creation of the higher education and research evaluation agency (AERES) in 2006 which has very large prerogatives, as it evaluates all research units, teaching curricula and higher education and research institutions. The overall purpose of the reform is to integrate the evaluation of higher education and research into a coherent framework, putting thus an end to the fragmentation of the evaluation procedures and committees. The French ministry for higher education and research expects the AERES to rationalize the evaluation, to increase its relevance as all analogous entities will be evaluated according to the same criteria and procedures. An important part of the French scientific community has protested against the creation of this new agency, with many academics fearing that the AERES concretely sets an end to peer-review based evaluations, although their evaluations still officially rely on peer-review. These ongoing debates provide an interesting material for analysing the controversial new evaluation regime. As the first evaluations by the AERES were carried out in 2007, is it however too early to assess what could be its possible impacts on the structures and outcomes of French higher education and research.

1. The French evaluation system until the mid-2000s

1.1 Evaluation of researchers

- Evaluations of university academics
University academics were only evaluated once they were recruited as maîtres de conferences and once they applied to be promoted as full professors. The assessment procedure then followed a two-stage process: first, the national university board (CNU) granted a national qualification for the function of full professor, on the basis of a peer-review process, then applications for posts open in each university were examined by a local peer commission2.

- Evaluations of researchers (from public research organizations)
Permanent PRO researchers were evaluated every two or four years and once they applied to

2 See country report on France, section on recruitment and careers, pp. 27-31.
be promoted as senior researchers (directeurs de recherche). Assessment procedures were carried out within each PRO by national disciplinary evaluation committees with four-year mandate duration. For example, CNRS researchers were assessed by the CNRS National Committee (Comité National du CNRS) which was made up of elected and appointed members (from the scientific and economic community and from abroad).

Evaluation procedures differed for researchers from PRO with industrial and commercial status (EPIC, établissements publics à caractère industriel et commercial), which are also involved in commercial and industrial activities. In deed, researchers wrote an activity report which was evaluated by their hierarchy. This procedure had similarities with the ones in use in the private sector.

1.2 Evaluation of research units

-Evaluation of mixed units of research (UMR)

Mixed research units were evaluated by disciplinary evaluation committees from the PRO they are associated with, the same committees as the ones which evaluated the PRO researchers. Evaluations were mostly based on peer reviews: they took into account the scientific production, as well as how the research units’ projects fit into the global strategy of the PRO, and the quality of the internal management. Mixed research units were evaluated at least every four years.

-Evaluation of university research units

University research units which were not affiliated to any PRO were evaluated by an administrative body under the authority of the Minister for Higher Education and research (“Mission Scientifique Technique et Pédagogique”).

1.3 Evaluation of higher education and PRO

Universities and PRO were evaluated by a national evaluation committee (CNE or “Comité national d'évaluation des établissements publics à caractère scientifique, culturel et professionnel“3) which evaluated all research, cultural and vocational public institutions.

Since 1989 the CNE was an autonomous administrative entity which reported directly to the

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3 A detailed presentation in English is available on the CNE website http://www.cne-evaluation.fr/versions/anglais.htm
President of the Republic and thus was not under the authority of the Ministry for Higher Education. The CNE was financed by the state and had its own budget. The CNE consisted of a 25-members board and of a 24-strong administrative staff led by a general delegate. The members were named by the President of the Republic during a ministers’ meeting. They were selected from lists of names respectively put forward by the main higher education and research institutions or by central administration such as the State Council or the State Audit Office. The CNE evaluated how the institutions fulfilled the various missions of public higher education, i.e. initial and further education, students living conditions, scientific production, and links to the socio-economic world. The CNE also examined the institutions' governance and management. However, it was neither entitled to evaluate individuals, nor to authorize courses, nor to apportion state funds. The CNE developed a dialogue-based reflection on its methodology, in particular with the University Presidents’ Conference. Its evaluation led to conclusions and recommendations.

Evaluation of universities and PRO was also carried out by a national committee of research evaluation (Comité National d’Évaluation de la Recherche) which was in charge of the evaluation of all dimensions of the national research policy (e.g. funding, evaluation, science-industry relations, etc.).

Evaluation and self-evaluation of universities and PRO also took place on the occasion of the negotiation of their four-years contracts with the State. These contracts gained importance as a growing part of State funding relied on the institutions' ability to set up and follow strategies rather than solely on quantitative criteria (number and students and staff, etc.). Concerning universities, this contractual policy was introduced in the 1984 law on higher education. The four-year contracts (contrats d’établissement) were first limited to research and then extended to all activities in 1989. The launching of this contractual policy was in line with a broader expansion of contractual relations within the French government and a variety of public institutions (local authorities, public enterprises, public agencies…), to face the limits encountered by the central steering of the economy (Chevaillier, 1998).

Universities ranked their priorities in a strategic plan (projet d’établissement), on the basis of which the ministry provided a “project grant” where universities had to define precisely how they would spend the money. Even though these financial resources were linked to notions of “performance” regarding teaching and research, performance assessments did not have any consequences on the next budget allocations. However, the contractual policy brought structural changes in the relationships between the universities and the ministry. As shown by
C. Musselin, it gave new tools and more space for universities to be involved in negotiation procedures with the state, implementing a new policy framework, going from a centralized and bureaucratic model to more autonomy and negotiation (Musselin, 2000).

1.4 Evaluation of teaching curricula

In the 1980s and 1990s, the steering of higher education by the ministry presented most of the characteristics of “bureaucratic centralism” (Chevaillier, 1998) and it followed a “standardized, centralizing, egalitarian model” (Musselin, 2004). Standards and uniform rules were the main instruments for this bureaucratic regulation, as shown by the national procedures organizing the accreditation of higher education curricula. Most higher education degrees are “national”, which means that they are recognized or accredited by the ministry (in addition, higher education institutions can also offer “university degrees” under their own responsibility). For a long time, the curricula leading to national degrees were defined centrally (number of teaching hours, proportion of lectures, seminars, etc….). The accreditation system, which was the only assessment procedure of teaching curricula, used to be mostly bureaucratic: the ministry controlled the ex-ante conformity of the curricula to nationally defined quantitative and procedural criteria, but there was no ex-post evaluation of the quality of the programs.

The implementation of the Bologna process which started in 1999 has not put an end to the national accreditation of degrees. However it introduced a more quality-based conception into this accreditation procedure. Curricula are evaluated by experts and validated by the national council of higher education and research (CNESER) (Kletz and Pallez, 2001). The introduction of the LMD structure was meant to introduce performance-based evaluation of new and current curricula and to “rationalize” higher education while reducing the number of degrees. However, several studies show that these expectations haven’t been met yet as “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” (Barraud and Mignot-Gérard, 2005).

1.5 Evaluation of the national research policy

The National committee for the evaluation of research (CNER), which was an autonomous administrative entity like the CNE, was in charge of the evaluation of the national research
policy decided by the French government. It evaluated: universities and PRO (in collaboration with the CNE); national research programs; and the management of public research (funding, management of academic careers, etc.). It was made up of 10 members named by the government: four academics, four representatives from the private sector and the public administration; two members from the State Council and the State Audit Office. Like the CNE, the CNER only made recommendations concerning research priorities and the national policies to implement them.

1.6 Evaluation of project-based research programs

In addition to this national framework, it is worth mentioning the growing importance of the ex-ante evaluation of research projects in order to get project-based funding. Project-based funding increased from 11% of the public funding for research in 1982 to 22% in 2002 (Thèves et al., 2007). Other providers of project-based funding also gained importance during the same period: EU, intermediary agencies (ANVAR which focuses on small and medium enterprises, CNES or the French space agency, ADEME for environment technologies…), regional governments, etc. Funding from all these providers was conditional on an *ex-ante* peer review.

1.7. French specificities until the mid-2000s

1. Once recruited and apart from applications for promotions, university academics were not evaluated, neither for their teaching activities nor for their research performance. However, the research activities of most of them were indirectly evaluated, as 82% of university academics were affiliated to a research unit (CNER 2003) which was subjected every four-year to evaluation. Moreover, those who published articles or worked with project-based funding came regularly across peer-review assessment procedures. However, university academics never applying for a promotion and orienting their activities towards teaching or administrative tasks could spend their whole career without being confronted to any evaluation. As university academics are civil servants of the French State, this very “privileged” situation rose strong controversies in France.

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4 cf. MEHEM country report on France to further developments on this issue.
5 chap. 1, p.14 and chap.2, p. 31
6 And exceptional, the university academics being the only civil servants of the French State who were not regularly evaluated.
2. Teaching curricula and higher education and research institutions were mostly evaluated on the basis of their conformity to administrative rules. This lack of strategic goals and of ex-post measures of performance or quality has been an important driver of the recent reforms of the French evaluation system. However this criticism did not apply to research units whose management and performance was regularly evaluated.

3. Finally, evaluation procedures were fragmented between individuals, research units, PRO, teaching curricula. This caused the evaluation to be sometimes unreadable or redundant. This fragmentation also created inequalities between, for example, PRO researchers (who were evaluated as individuals, and as members of a research unit), and university academics (who were only evaluated as members of a research unit).

The French government created the AERES in order to reunify this fragmented picture and to get an overview of the performance of French higher education and research. However, such an evaluation agency with almost “universal” prerogatives appears quite unique in the international context, so that some observers interpret it as a resurgence of French well-known tendencies to Jacobinism (Méla, 2008)…
2. An integrated evaluation system (since the mid-2000s)

2.1 Evaluation of individual researchers

April 2009, university academics are evaluated every four years. Their evaluation is conducted by the disciplinary national commissions of the National University Board (CNU), which are already in charge of the first stage of their recruitment and promotion procedures (see above). The general framework for the evaluation of PRO researchers has not been modified and is still carried out every four years by the disciplinary evaluation committees set up by each PRO. However, the evaluation procedures have now to be approved by the newly created higher education and research evaluation agency (AERES). The agency also provides some guidelines for the evaluation of individual researchers, such as disciplinary lists of journals where PRO researchers and university academics have to publish in order to be considered as “actively publishing researchers” (see below). The AERES presents these guidelines as a way to create some coherence between the evaluation of individuals (which are done by other evaluation committees) and the evaluation of collective entities which falls under its mission.

2.2 Evaluation of research units, teaching curricula, and higher education and research institutions: the creation of the higher education and research evaluation agency (AERES) in 2006.

2.2.1 Mission

The higher education and research evaluation agency (AERES) was created by law in 2006 as an independent administrative entity. It replaces the previous evaluation agencies such as the CNE and the CNER. Its mission is thus to evaluate all public structures of higher education and research (research units, teaching curricula, universities and other higher education institutions, PRO, and the newly created funding agency ANR – National Research Agency). The purpose of its “universal prerogatives” is to bring a strong coherence into an evaluation system which was previously fragmented, redundant, and often decoupled from decision-making. Furthermore, the AERES aims at diffusing a “culture of evaluation” among French higher education and research. It thus encourages research units and PRO to introduce quality

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7 Promulgation of a decree modifying the status of French university academics, 25th of April 2009
approach and self-evaluation. The AERES itself has just launched its own quality approach in order to meet European standards and to be part of the European association for quality insurance in higher education (ENQA).

2.2.2 Composition and organisation

- **Governing board**

  The 25 members of the governing board are named by the Ministry of higher education and research for four years. They can come from France or from abroad. The head of the AERES is chosen and named by the Ministry of higher education and research among members of the governing board.

  The governing board is made of:

  - 9 representatives from the private sector and the public administration (with at least 3 of them from the private R&D sector), chosen by the Ministry of higher education and research.
  - 7 academics from universities and PRO, from names put forward by heads of higher education and research institutions.
  - 7 academics from universities and PRO, from names put forward by evaluation committees (such as CNU, CNRS National Committee, etc.)
  - 2 members of parliament who are also members of the Parliamentary Office for the Evaluation of Scientific and Technological Choices (OPECST).

- **Three departments**

  The AERES is divided into three departments, which correspond to the three entities it has to evaluate: higher education and research institutions; research units; and teaching curricula. Each department is managed by a director and by scientific delegates. They are named for four years after names put forward by evaluation committees (CNU and PRO evaluation committees). The scientific delegates do not carry out the evaluation themselves but they define and monitor the procedures.

- **Assessment panels (comités d’experts)**

  Scientific delegates set up ad hoc (that is, for each evaluation) assessment panels. Experts are chosen among a list of 4000 academics. This list of potential experts is established by the AERES governing board, the heads of higher education and research institutions, and the
heads of the evaluation committees.

- **Time-frame of the evaluations**
The time-frame of the evaluations serves the general purpose of integrating all evaluations into a coherent policy. The AERES wants the evaluations of research units and teaching curricula to contribute to the final evaluation of the overall strategy of higher education and research institutions. The agency's clear intention is to rationalize the evaluation procedures, in order to increase the coherence and the readability of the evaluation outcomes, and thus their relevance for policy makers.

**Chart 1: time-frame of the AERES evaluations**

- **“Transparency”**
Finally, the AERES has a legal obligation to publicize all evaluation reports, the names of the scientific delegates and of the 4000 potential experts, the composition of the assessment panels, and its evaluation procedures and criteria (all information being available on its website). This concern for transparency is relatively new in the French evaluation system.

**2.2.3 Procedures and criteria**

Evaluation systems are usually divided into peer review-based systems and indicator-based systems (Gläser et al., forthcoming). According to this division, the AERES clearly does not stray from the peer review-based system which was in use before its creation. However, the new procedures introduce radical – and highly criticized among the French scientific community – changes. Consequently, one needs to have a closer look, beyond the broad
category of “peer-review evaluation”, at the procedures and criteria through which the evaluation is conducted.

- **Evaluation of research units**

The AERES now evaluates all research units (mixed research units as well as university or PRO research units). The evaluative criteria are the same for all research units, and they explicitly refer to international standards: “the evaluation of research units, whatever their institutional affiliation, will be carried out within the framework of international standards and with regard to the diversity of their subjects and purposes, after similar methods and principles” (AERES, our translation).

A visiting committee visits each research unit (for a one-day or two-day visit, depending on the size of the research unit) and produces a report. It is made up of experts chosen among a list of 4000 academics (see above) and of experts put forward by the evaluation committees of the PRO or universities the research unit is affiliated to. For example, a research unit composed of 60 university academics and CNRS researchers will be evaluated by a 7-members visiting committee: six experts named by the AERES, among whom the president of the visiting committee, and one representative put forward by the CNU and the PRO evaluation committees. The evaluation follows the guidelines and criteria provided by the AERES.

**Chart 2: AERES evaluation criteria for research units**
# Quantitative assessment

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Members on October 15, 2008</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Observations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Researchers with a tenure position</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Researchers with teaching duties (Professor, MCF...)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Full time researchers (CNRS, INSERM, INRA...)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Others</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Senior scientists : PR/DR</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Junior scientists : MCF/CR</td>
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<tr>
<td>Scientists with a HDR</td>
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<tr>
<td>Scientists who have been granted a PEDR</td>
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<tr>
<td>IUF Members</td>
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<tr>
<td>Others</td>
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<tr>
<td>Researchers who do not have a tenure position</td>
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<tr>
<td>Invited scientists</td>
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<tr>
<td>Post-doctoral fellows</td>
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<tr>
<td>PhD students</td>
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<tr>
<td>Engineers, Technicians and administrative staff</td>
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<tr>
<td>Administrative assistants</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Technicians</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Engineers</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Others</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scientific productivity from October 2004 to October 2008</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Rank A publications</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reviews</td>
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<tr>
<td>Conferences</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Books</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Others</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>2. Technical accomplishments</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Registered softwares</td>
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<tr>
<td>Patents and licences</td>
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<tr>
<td>Equipments</td>
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<tr>
<td>Grants with industrial partners</td>
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<td>Others</td>
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<tr>
<td>Quantitative assessments</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Publishing lab members among researchers with a tenure position</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students who have been granted a PhD during the past 4 years</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Researchers who have been granted a PEDR during the past 4 years</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Evaluation of teaching curricula

The AERES does not evaluate teaching curricula after their ex-ante conformity to administrative criteria. It evaluates their pedagogical strategy and its results. For example, doctoral schools are evaluated after the following criteria: performance of the research units providing doctoral training (as a follow-up of the evaluation of research units, see chart 1); links with the private sector; strategy and internal governance; professional integration of PhD holders; international relations; number of PhD defences, rate of student attrition, etc...

Evaluation of higher education and research institutions

The AERES also evaluates the overall strategies of higher education and research institutions, besides evaluating the research units and/or teaching departments they are made of. The strategies refer to several domains: research, training, research valorisation, international relations, etc. Its evaluation relies on the institutions’ self-evaluations, as well as on the evaluation of visiting committees.

- **Evaluation of the National Agency for Research (ANR)**

Finally, the AERES evaluates the National Agency for Research (ANR) which is a large funding agency created in 2005. The evaluation is focused on the ANR calls for tenders, the selection procedures of research projects, the coherence between the allocation of budgets and the scientific policy, etc.

- **What is new? Use of indicators**

There are still some uncertainties regarding the evaluation criteria which will lead the evaluations by the AERES. More specifically the balance between the use of quantitative and qualitative indicators by the assessment panels is still unclear. Although the AERES clearly states the equal weight of all indicators, there is a widespread fear that the evaluations will excessively rely on quantitative indicators: “All grades are given after assessing a certain number of qualitative and quantitative facts. No one will follow from the mechanical application of a formula, be it a very complex one, because the grades require experts to integrate several facts taking into account the scientific evolution of each field, how it is established, and what are its specificities. Grades will be given on the basis of the components of assessment provided by the assessment panels: a detailed report highlighting the main strength and weakness and providing recommendations; evaluation guidelines (available on the AERES website); comments from the research unit’s director and the heads of higher education and research institutions. The various components taken into account for each grade are listed in the appendix. At this stage some subjectivity is attached to how peers assess the interest of the research. This limit to objectivity which is linked to peer-review has moreover been identified and accepted by the ENQA (European association for quality insurance in higher education). It justifies contradictory panel discussions.” (AERES, our translation).

Thus, although the AERES does not prohibit the use of quantitative indicators (notably the indicators defining “actively publishing researchers” in each discipline, and bibliometric indicators in some natural sciences), it strictly monitors and limits their importance in the
evaluation process. Notably, publication indicators are only established for research groups and not for individuals: for example, they are used to calculate the percentage of "actively publishing researchers" among a research unit composed of 30 to 100 members. Moreover, the AERES always resorts to contextualized indicators, that is to indicators which are in use in specific sub disciplines. Finally, assessment panels are well informed about the possible bias and about the constant need to interpret the results of the quantitative evaluations.

- **What is new? Attribution of grades**

The AERES assigns grades to the research units, teaching curricula and higher education and research institutions assessed. The grades are not attributed by the assessment panels, but by disciplinary “grading committees” (Comités de notation) composed of presidents of assessment panels and of the AERES scientific delegate. The grading committees’ mission is to examine all evaluation reports, to “harmonize” them and to attribute grades on the basis on this comparative evaluation: “this collegial procedure allows presidents of assessment panels to be confronted to other panels’ visions. Participants must come to an agreement on the grades” (president of the AERES department for the evaluation of research units).

The grading procedure has been recently modified in order to increase the relevance of the grades attributed. When the first evaluations were carried out in 2007, research units and teaching curricula were attributed a single grade (A+, A, B, C), a procedure which was meant to maximize the comparability of the evaluation outcomes. However, researchers themselves and policy-makers had difficulties interpreting this unique grade, so that the outcomes of further evaluations were several grades (A+, A, B, C), still synthesised at the end by a single grade.

**Chart 3 Grades as guidelines**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>In addition to its reports, the AERES attributes grades (A+, A, B, C) to research units and teaching curricula.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>‣ Research units and their teams: grades are attributed for the following dimensions: scientific production, attractiveness, strategy, and project. These four grades come with a global grade, from A+ to C.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‣ Teaching curricula: grades are attributed for the following dimensions: management, objectives and means, areas of training, quality of the diploma.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‣ Doctoral schools: grades are attributed for the following dimensions: quality of the research units associated; management; quality of doctoral supervision; professional integration of PhD holders.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
“Grades never replace the evaluation report and in particular its conclusive section. This section provides information about the strong and weak points, and some recommendations. Grades should also be interpreted with regard to the discipline”.

Source: AERES web site

2.2.4 Criticism against the AERES

- **Practical difficulties**
  From a pragmatic point of view, many observers fear that the AERES will face practical difficulties in accomplishing its widespread missions. Obviously, assessment panels do not have enough time to read publications, or to deeply interview members of the entities under assessment. The problem of lacking deep knowledge about the assessed research units is accentuated by the fact that the assessment panels are set up for each evaluation, whereas the previous assessment committees were mandated for four years. Consequently, the members of these committees knew each other well, and they also had a detailed knowledge of the history of the research unit and about the strategies of the university and PRO it was affiliated to. On the contrary, the AERES *ad hoc* panels may have a very limited understanding of the context of the assessed research unit. However, the AERES argues that self-evaluation and quality-approach should mitigate these difficulties, in the sense that the assessors will benefit from the knowledge of the assessed. One can also add that a few members of the assessment panels are put forward by the evaluation committees of the PRO or universities the research unit is affiliated to, which brings continuity as well as a certain organisational memory into the evaluation procedures.

- **New grey areas within the evaluation system**
  As mentioned before, the AERES communicates openly about its procedures and insists on their transparency. This declared policy stands in explicit opposition to the previous evaluation procedures which suffered supposedly from opacity (they were rarely formalized; they did not follow standard guidelines so that their results could not easily be compared and interpreted, etc.). However, some authors argue that the organisation of the AERES generates other grey areas within the evaluation system (Dodier, 2009). First, although the composition of the assessment committees, and more precisely the name of their president, has a decisive influence on the outcomes of the evaluation, the criteria which guide their nomination are not explicit. N. Dodier gives the example of the evaluation of the
National Institute for Health and Medical Research (Inserm) in 2008: the president of the assessment panel was the head of the U.S. NIH, and in its report the committee recommended that Inserm took example on the NIH. Second, although the grading committees play a crucial role, the way they attribute grades to the evaluated units may appear as a “black box”: there is a lot of anecdotic evidence of a considerable discrepancy between the evaluative reports (which may stress the outstanding achievements of a research unit) and the final grade (which may be a B instead of the expected A or A+). Even though the AERES emphasizes that grades should be interpreted together with the extensive reports, there is a risk that policy-makers from universities and PRO will base their decisions (notably, their allocation of budgets and of human resources) on this simplified picture. Finally, the scientific community questions the independence of the AERES from the government. The assessment panels benefit from a clear legitimacy, even though they work under strong time constraints and even though they are nominated by the scientific delegate. The scientific community is much more concerned about the guidelines that the direction of the AERES will give to the panels and to the scientific delegates. In deed, as all members of the governing board are named by the ministry for higher education and research, the board and the government certainly share the same political orientations. In deed, it appears that the evaluation criteria of the AERES serve the broad policy of the current French government (notably, the growing competition for State funding, as a way to increase the international competitiveness and visibility of the French public science system). As stated by the professional association “Let’s save research” (Sauvons la recherche) which is opposed to the AERES: “No matter how serious the work done by the experts may be, their reports then go through opaque series of filters and reformulations. What comes out has often astonished and even shocked the ones involved.”

(Let’s save research, 2008)

- The standardisation of excellence

The AERES does not see any contradiction between organizing all evaluations according to a limited set of common standards and guidelines, and openly defending the diversity of research outcomes. However, many observers point out a strong risk of a standardisation of scientific excellence, which may come from the importation into the world of public research of principles from the quality management and evidence-based medicine (Dodier, 2009). This standardisation pertains notably to the use of the same criteria for all disciplines (made possible by the definition of equivalences, see below), to the predominance of quantity (number of articles published, etc.) over quality, to the general concern for research
valorisation (at the detriment of scientific excellence in some disciplines, etc.).

2.3 Evaluation of national research policy

The evaluation of the national policy for research and innovation is now carried out in close cooperation by two administrative entities created in 2006: the High Council for Science and Technology (HCST, Haut Conseil de la Science et de la Technologie) is composed of 20 members named by the President of the Republic; and the High Council for Research and Technology (CSRT, Conseil Supérieur de la Recherche et de la Technologie), composed of two bodies of 22 members each, named by decree, and chaired by the minister of higher education and research. Both are advisory bodies.

2.4 Evaluation of research programs

The creation of the National Agency for Research (ANR) in 2005 is considered as a step towards a European standard model where large funding agencies play a major role. The 2010 objective of the ANR is to finance academic research projects at the level reached by all PRO for fundamental research. However, as far as the evaluation of research projects is concerned, the procedures remain quite similar to the ones previously in use. Projects are evaluated by peer committees set up for each call for project. The evaluation committees assign three (national and international) reviewers to each project. They then select on the basis of the evaluation outcomes the projects that will receive funding from the ANR.

2.5. The LOLF and the rise of self-evaluation

Finally, the enactment in 2006 of new public budget procedures (LOLF or “loi organique sur la loi de finances”) in higher education and research, as well as the law on university autonomy (2007), have also encouraged the development of self-evaluation procedures within universities and PRO. The purpose of the LOLF is to implement performance-based management in the public services in general and in higher education in particular. The State budget is now broken down in missions corresponding to the State’s major public policies. Each mission comprises a set of programmes (150 programmes altogether) which are then broken down into sub-programmes (called “actions”). This structure gives the public agencies that work on those actions more insight on the contribution they are expected to deliver.
The LOLF lists performance indicators for higher education and research which are quite similar to the ones found in international rankings (Vinokur, 2008): number of patents, number of publications, honor awards, number of foreign students and of foreign researchers, participation to EU sponsored programs, quality of student placement, minimum size of higher education curricula, share of private funding, share of own resources, etc. This context leads universities and PRO to introduce self-evaluation procedures relying on these indicators. Moreover, higher education institutions are encouraged to implement quality-insurance procedures, in order to be awarded international quality-labels (such as the ISO 9000 certification).

2.6. Reactions

The empirical observations on the new evaluation procedures and on their effects on the structures and outcomes of higher education and research are still very limited. However, the accounts given by the academics involved in these evaluations (as members of evaluated entities or as members of assessment panels) enable to draw some hypotheses about how research units and higher education institutions may adapt their strategies to the new constraints they are subjected to, and about what could be the possible effects of this new evaluation regime on the overall structure of French higher education and research.

2.6.1 Symbolic compliance (Leisyte et al. forthcoming)

Insofar as the ability of higher education and research organisations to define a strategy has now a decisive influence on the outcomes of their evaluation by the AERES, these organisations are encouraged to write such strategic plans, without changing their organisation or practices. This reaction may be called “symbolic compliance” (ibid.) as social actors symbolically adhere to the imposed rules in order to meet the evaluation criteria of the AERES. There is already a lot of anecdotic evidence around such practices.

2.6.2 “Proactive manipulation” (ibid.)

Some entities also take into account the new evaluation criteria when designing their structures or programs. Their reaction may be called “proactive manipulation” (ibid.) as the higher education and research organisations actively try to control and shape their new
environment. For example, some research units identified their “non-actively publishing” PRO researchers and university academics after the AERES definition, before being evaluated by the AERES. Some of these researchers were asked to leave the research unit so that it could reach a high percentage of “actively publishing researchers”. Other research units reorganized their structures and modified their research programs (with concrete consequences on budget allocations, priorities for position openings, etc.) in order to fit into the strategic orientations of the university or the PRO they are affiliated to, as they know that the AERES will positively evaluate this alignment of strategies.

2.6.3. Researchers’ strategic adaptation to quantitative indicators

There is already some anecdotic evidence that research units and individuals will adapt their research activities and their publication strategies to the quantitative criteria defining who are the “actively publishing researchers”. Even though the AERES does not evaluate individuals, the agency gives the competent assessment committees (the CNU for university academics, PRO evaluation committees for PRO researchers) standardized guidelines for deciding who can be considered as “actively publishing” (see chart 4).

Some of the “tricks” are already well-known and widespread in the scientific community, even though researchers are well aware of their drawback for the quality of research: publishing 10 small papers instead of a single synthetic one; co-signing papers without having actively taken part to the research project, etc. Some authors have even published, not without a strong sense of humour, guidelines for academics who would like to improve their publication score (Chamayou, 2009).

Chart 4. Who are the “actively publishing” researchers after the AERES?
The AERES considers as “actively publishing” the PRO researchers and university academics who publish at least the following number of “rank A” publications within four years:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Field of Science</th>
<th>PRO researchers</th>
<th>University academics</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mathematics</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physics, chemistry, earth sciences</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Engineering sciences, information and communication technologies</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Life sciences</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Humanities and social sciences</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

“Rank A” publications include:
- Publications in leading journals with peer-review evaluation. In the life-sciences, one publication in Nature, Cell or Science, or one publication as first author in a leading journal such as J. Biol. Chem., Nature, Science, EMBO J. etc., is equivalent to three publications in journals with an “average impact”.
- Book chapters or books
- In the information and communication technologies, as well as in the humanities and social sciences, conference papers with peer-review evaluation and presented at conferences which the community considers as selective
- For the humanities and social sciences, data-bases, critical editions
- An international patent

This quantitative measure of scientific production is assessed with regards to other criteria: scientific visibility (bibliometric indicators when available; participation to national and international research networks and programs; interdisciplinary research; administrative responsibilities; editing responsibilities; investment in technological transfer or expertise).

Source: AERES Website

2.7 Possible effects

2.7.1. Sources of inertia and status quo

The purpose of the AERES evaluations is to give decision-makers at different levels (Ministry of higher education and research, university presidents, heads of PRO, etc.) new management tools that will help them allocating their budgets, deciding upon training and research priorities, etc. However, there are already several indications showing that the use of the
evaluations, and consequently their impact on the structure of French higher education and research, will vary greatly across institutions. In deed, although the university presidents’ benefit from large prerogatives on the allocation of budgets since the law on university autonomy (2007), they are not obliged to take into account the evaluations’ outcomes in their decisions. Some university presidents who proclaimed their opposition against the AERES (and against other ongoing reforms of higher education) also declared that they would not follow the AERES recommendations regarding their teaching departments and their research units. However, these presidents run the risk of their university’s strategy being badly evaluated by the AERES, and then of financial cuts from the ministry.

A second source of inertia is that the allocation of budgets is still very much constrained and that there is not much room left for modulating it according to performance indicators. This is particularly true for undergraduate teaching curricula, in a context characterized by very low tuition fees and by free access to the first year program to all baccalauréat holders. In this context, the funding of these curricula will still rely mostly on quantitative indicators and predominantly on the number of students enrolled. However, links between evaluation and funding will be more developed at the level of master and doctoral programs (see below).

Finally, one may presume that there will be no mechanical links between the outcomes of the evaluations and the decision-making processes concerning the funding of higher education and research. Persistent diversity across institutions and over time may be explained by variations in the balance of power, but also in the local cultures, the strategic views, etc.

2.7.2 Towards a two-tiered system

**Between institutions.** The standardisation of evaluation procedures, together with the increased autonomy of universities, and with the selection of a limited number of “centres of excellence”\(^9\), will surely introduce competition between French universities. This competition conflicts with the core values of the “French model of higher education”, based on the free access to university and on the equal treatment of all students (meaning notably that each university covers almost all disciplines and curricula and receives the same funding per student). The recent reforms will certainly lead to a differentiation of universities, with on the one hand “centres of excellence” achieving critical mass, hosting leading research, open to international exchanges, and being entitled on the basis of these criteria to run large doctoral schools providing them the talent pool they need to further develop their research; on the

\(^9\) See country report on France, p. 8
other hand small universities, with isolated researchers, an important part of undergraduate training, and not being allowed to open master degrees or doctoral schools according to the AERES evaluation criteria. These universities would then turn into colleges, delivering only undergraduate training, what is denounced in France as a form of “secondarisation” of higher education.

**Between individuals.** One can also assume that these new evaluation procedures will have consequences on the management of academic careers and generate some inequalities between academics. First, it may be more difficult for certain disciplines to fulfil the AERES criteria, although the agency stresses its determination to be pragmatic and to adapt to each field’s specificity. This is the reason why most researchers in the humanities and social sciences are sharply opposed to these criteria, but other disciplines may also be disadvantaged: for example, mathematicians do not necessarily publish many journal articles, however some of them perform cutting-edge research (Laurent Laforgue was awarded the Field medal without having published many papers during 10 years). Second, these evaluations may have an impact on the determination of the university academics’ teaching duties. Under the decree adopted in April 2009, the university president (or the head of the higher education institution) can modulate the teaching duties of university academics, notably with regards to their research activities as evaluated by the CNU. In the first versions of the decree, this decision could be imposed on university academics. The strong mobilization among the scientific community let the government to modify this project so that teaching duties can now only be modulated with their agreement. However, the decree also states that the determination of teaching duties must always stay compatible with the university’s training obligations (as stated in the four-year contracts with the State): there is thus a fear that, in a context where the number of position openings will stagnate or increase rather slowly, some university academics will have no choice but taking on more teaching duties. This would then lead to a differentiation between university academics who will benefit from the modulation opportunities offered by the new decree (because they have been early recognized as “actively publishing”, or because they are appointed by well-funded centres of excellence) and other university academics who will be overloaded with teaching duties (because they do not meet the evaluation criteria defined by the AERES or are appointed by small, teaching-oriented universities).
2.7.3. The breakdown of scientific communities

Some observers argue that the new evaluation regime will cause the anomy of scientific communities (Dodier, 2009). The previous evaluation procedures favoured scientific exchanges as well as the construction of common frames of reference across scientific specialties: in deed, the assessment panels were mandated for four years, a time-span that gave them time to build common knowledge. In this sense, the previous evaluation regime had an important role in the constitution of scientific communities, a process that may be particularly fragile in disciplines – such as the humanities and the social sciences – where knowledge is highly contextualized. By contrast, the new evaluation regime does not allow for this slow and cumulative emergence of scientific communities and could even favour the breakdown of already established communities. The ad hoc evaluation committees to not have enough time to, and are not encouraged to by the AERES, gain a deep understanding of their colleagues' scientific knowledge as they are mostly asked to fill in the forms provided by the agency. In this context, the periodicity of the evaluations (every four years) appears as too short: in deed, in the absence of deep knowledge about research units and scientific fields, evaluation committees could be inclined to “give a bonus” to established research units while it would be particularly difficult for newcomers to demonstrate the relevance of their project. Finally, the potential threat on scientific communities depends on how decision-makers will interpret the standardized outcomes of the evaluation, and particularly the global grade attributed to research units. If these grades are directly used to sanction some research units, one may assume that it will have serious consequences for some scientific communities.

Conclusion

Evaluation procedures have been at the core of the recent reforms of French higher education and research. The new evaluation regime has become a central element in the national and local strategies which aim at reconfiguring research units and teaching curricula in order to keep pace with international competition. Although the systematic use of quantitative indicators has been considered by the French scientific community as well as by the French Medias as a “revolution”, the French evaluation regime has not shifted from a peer-review evaluation based system to an indicator-based one. Evaluations carried out by the AERES rely mainly on in situ observations by peer committees and they take into account a large set of
qualitative and quantitative criteria. The most important change, and maybe the most controversial one, has thus taken place within a peer-review evaluation based system. In deed, some authors argue that the previous peer-review evaluation regime relied totally on “collegiality” (Dodier, 2009) with peer committees carrying out the whole evaluation process: the setting of a common reference framework, the definition of evaluation criteria, the evaluation itself, and the production of appreciations which were interpreted by the scientific communities and the decision-makers. In the new peer-review evaluation regime, “experts in evaluation” (here the AERES scientific delegates), who do not belong to the peer committees, are now entrusted with some parts of the evaluation procedures (ibid.): the definition of a standardized set of criteria, and the harmonization of the outcomes of the evaluation (with the attribution of grades). These experts in evaluation may be (or may have been) academics, however their specialisation in evaluation, as well as the imperatives of standardisation they are subjected to, tend to situate them outside the scientific communities. Finally, there are still some questions left about the actual political independence of this formally independent agency as the governing board is named by the French ministry. Whatever the quality of the evaluations conducted by the assessment committees, whatever also the relevance of the grades attributed to research units and teaching curricula, the AERES obviously suffers from a lack of legitimacy as the scientific community fears State collusion.

Finally, one can try to situate the new French evaluation regime with regards to some of the trades-offs that all evaluation regimes inevitably face (Gläser et al., forthcoming):

* Validity versus cost of the procedures. The French system enables the assessors to gather rich information and to validate them with the scientific community. In that sense the validity of the procedures appears as rather high although it generates high costs.

* Legitimacy of the information produced. The final outcome of the evaluations, that is the grades attributed to the assessed entities, benefits from a very low level of legitimacy among the scientific community, for two reasons: the grades are too synthetic to reflect the complex information contained in the qualitative reports, they are not attributed by the evaluation panels but by a grading committee where AERES scientific delegates have a say.

* Comparison versus richness. The new evaluation regime tries to combine several evaluation outcomes which have various degrees of richness, and thus make comparison more or less easy: the extended qualitative reports, the four-dimensional grades, and finally the one-dimensional grade. However, whether decision-makers will favour rich information or comparable indicators is still an open question.
References


GLÄSER, LANGE, LAUDEL, SCHIMANK, (forthcoming) External evaluations as management guidance systems


Glossary

<p>| AERES | Agence d’évaluation de la recherche et de l’enseignement supérieur | Higher Education and Research Evaluation Agency |
| ANR | Agence nationale de la recherche | National Research Agency |
| CNE | Comité national d’évaluation | National Evaluation Board |
| CNER | Comité national d’évaluation de la recherche | National Evaluation Board for Research |
| CNESER | Conseil National de l’enseignement supérieur et de la recherche | National council of higher education and research |
| CNRS | Centre national de la recherche scientifique | National centre for scientific research |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Acronym</th>
<th>Full Name</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>CSRT</td>
<td>Conseil supérieur de la recherche et de la technologie</td>
<td>High council for research and technology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CNU</td>
<td>Conseil national des universités</td>
<td>National University Board</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ENQA</td>
<td>Etablissement public à caractère industriel et commercial</td>
<td>European association for quality insurance in higher education</td>
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<tr>
<td>EPIC</td>
<td>Institut national pour la recherche médicale</td>
<td>National Institute for Health and Medical Research</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LOLF</td>
<td>Loi organique sur la loi de finances</td>
<td>Parliamentary Office for the Evaluation of Scientific and Technological Choices</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OPECST</td>
<td>Office parlementaire pour l’évaluation des choix scientifiques et technologiques</td>
<td>Parliamentary Office for the Evaluation of Scientific and Technological Choices</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PRO</td>
<td>Organismes publics de recherche</td>
<td>Public Research Organizations</td>
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