



Yves Lichtenberger, Marc-Olivier Padis

French universities: Outlook and resistance

An interview with Yves Lichtenberger

The decentralization of French Universities has forced individual faculties to cede control to the university management, and has met with opposition from teaching staff, says Yves Lichtenberger. The new culture of assessment has been particularly resisted by humanities departments, which object to being judged on the criteria of the physical sciences. Yet critics have suggested that this sense of having to defend a broad cultural education against business is somewhat exaggerated and unrealistic. Is it not the case that while centralized but remote state control favoured opaque compromises, local control challenges long laid-down university habits?

Esprit: To help us understand the strikes that have been taking place in French universities since the beginning of 2009 and the effects they will have in the future, could you start off by telling us about the context in which they are occurring?

Yves Lichtenberger: Universities are often disparaged but, in recent years, they have undergone and carried out radical changes. Even though they have been under-financed they have accepted additional numbers of new students on a massive scale and have thereby acted as an essential stimulus to social advancement. By implementing LMD (the reorganization of university programmes into *licence*, master and doctorate), they have achieved integration into the European higher education system. Following the law on research, they have increased their international attraction and visibility by committing themselves to new forms of cooperation among themselves, with neighbouring *grandes écoles* and with research bodies: almost two-thirds of universities are now involved in a PRES, a research and higher education centre or in a PRES project. In this way, a new model for our universities has gradually emerged, one that is closer to international standards, and one in which the establishment's strategy, multi-disciplinary approach and links with its geographical location have taken the place of the habits of what used to be the faculties.

These major changes were achieved without any major clashes but not without considerable tensions, which it proved possible to overcome because new, more professional forms of training and new goals — contribution to the economic and social development of the country and its regions, training in skills related to the eventual professional employability of students — were developed to complement existing goals and not in competition with them. Not all component parts of our universities experienced these developments in the same way nor did they all respond to them at the same rate. Areas that were ever more divergent found it possible to coexist peacefully within well-signposted territories and to rely on time and new generations to

harmonize the whole.

Seen in this way, the law on Liberty and Responsibility in Universities (LRU) is not a break but a stage in the process of development that is enabling universities to play a pivotal role in the reorganization of higher education and research. It puts them back in the driving seat by giving greater power to the institution as a whole rather than its component parts, faculties and UFRS (Teaching and Research Units), by setting up a system of strategic governance with a board and a chair elected to oversee a project, having an overall budget and procedures for recruitment that had previously been in the hands of individual disciplines. The LRU provides a blueprint for creating a kind of local multidisciplinary collegiality that will be corporate but not corporatist, that will bring it closer to international models and restore the link with the origins of the idea of the *universitas*. This does not mean the universal dissemination of knowledge but the bringing together of all disciplines into a single body. This idea is new to France since the time of the Revolution when universities were dissolved, as were all such institutions. This country has persistently mistrusted central government power over the autonomy of the community of learning, especially if that community was able to claim, in its universality, the right to deal simultaneously with nature, the individual and society. For a long time, universities amounted to nothing more than the boards of faculties and were only reconstituted on condition that they continued to be fragmented into autonomous institutions after May 1968: Paris-6 or Lyon-1 are what would elsewhere be called large science faculties, Paris-4 or Toulouse-2 would be considered large humanities and social science faculties.

This faculty model has reached its limits in two senses: these groupings have become too complex to be managed at a local level without any overall strategy, but neither can they develop as long as they are steered at a distance by the ministry or other organizations.

Delayed action mobilization against autonomy?

Esprit: Why is there a deadlock now, when the LRU law appeared, on the whole, to have been accepted or at least had met only with reservations that did not amount to complete rejection?

YL: First of all, it is, by definition, difficult to make an institution develop when it is organized in such a way as to keep reproducing itself and not to innovate. Everyone has their clearly-defined place in it as a result of habits that have become certainties. Any change is seen as a challenge and a source of blame: "We're going to change you because you were incapable of changing yourselves", even when no one actually asked you to do any such thing! The ground had not been prepared: everybody knew there had been some changes, but very few people thought they were greatly involved. Change, professionalization, links with the local area... these things all concerned other people! It is hardly surprising in such a context that the fact that essential decisions were henceforth being taken in the management committees of establishments that were most aware of what was now at stake, should have caused a serious identity crisis in entire sectors, especially those that were most concerned with academic training. The feeling that you were being judged, blamed in advance without having played a part in discussions that had been going on for several years, goes a long way towards explaining the irrationality and emotional intensity that have been expressed in the current protests.

Next, the LRU is a law about decentralization and has the characteristics of all processes of decentralization that are steered from above: its success depends on a change of role by the central administration and on the ability of those active locally to take charge of it. None of that was ready. That would not matter if the logic were that of a project or an experiment: after all, the universities had not been any better prepared for implementation of the LMD, but they learned and are continuing to learn on the move. However, it is a major handicap where the process is one of rationalization, which in sociology is called "bureaucratic", and which lays down substantial rules and regulations (who is entitled to what?), rather than procedural rules (how can that be discussed and how should it be decided?). In the name of equality on a national scale, that no one actually recognizes or is really demanding (it would imply that new funding should be given, as a priority, to the less able), we are seeing once again a reduction in the possibility of decisions being taken at local level, decisions that might admittedly be imperfect but that would at least have some chance of bringing about progressive improvements.

Councils and local stakeholders who might have been tempted to follow such a route were held back by the ministry's determination to announce the publication of decrees that would sort everything out upstream. For almost two years after the law was passed, everybody just stood there expectantly, with one eye on the ministry's plans and the other on the Internet, which was buzzing with alarmist warnings; exchanges with their opposite numbers were taking place but hardly at all with those closest to them, stressing their sectional identities and weakening their feeling of belonging to an establishment. Not only were local stakeholders on whom the law was relying for its success becoming discouraged, but the most traditional stakeholders felt themselves vindicated once the national and media aspects of the debate became more important than its professional and local dimensions.

Esprit: Do you find that the different ways in which people have reacted to the question of reorganization of control in universities corresponds to the disciplines within which they work? If a university is to be more autonomous, that means that it is going to move from being under the remote guidance of the ministry to a tighter form of control, or even to a more effective form of compulsion exerted through the principal of the university.

YL: It is, indeed, the case that not all disciplines reacted in the same way. Strangely enough, arts departments have been more militant than sociology and, within the sciences, maths more than physics. Probably given that the careers for which they are preparing students are still more likely to involve the CAPES (Certificate of Aptitude for Teaching at Secondary Level) and the teaching profession, these disciplines have retained a special relationship with employment and professional qualifications: their aim is to achieve the desired level of training and to pass the competitive examination, actually learning how to teach comes later. In addition, arts, like law, have a particular kind of relationship with research: excellence is expressed first and foremost through the quality of teaching not through the volume of publications. Hence their unhappiness at seeing themselves judged on the basis of criteria that are used by the physical sciences or so-called professional training but that are not appropriate for them.

This is what is being expressed, sometimes in a way that is excessive and ill-informed, when the idea of competition is rejected, when people fear that a concern for financial viability is going to affect everything... It causes an identity crisis that is all the more severe because these disciplines find

themselves being interrogated about questions they have never had to put to themselves before. Because they have never been brought face to face with others who have already had to go down this path, they see themselves as having to defend a broad cultural education against business, even at a time when business itself is trying to diversify the kind of people that it recruits because it needs managers who are more open, more questioning, more imaginative, in short, less standardized than those that the average schools have to offer them. In management and in sociology, which have long had to be concerned with diversifying the training they offer in response to more diverse students and employment prospects, such questions cause less alarm.

The strength of a discipline and, alongside that, the strength of organization into faculties, lies in the structuring of knowledge that it carries out by establishing accepted truths, by validating methods that make it possible to determine whether one is dealing with certain knowledge, mere hypothesis or opinion pure and simple. Its weakness lies in the danger of becoming self-referential, of isolating science from society, the more so since this kind of circular logic is reproduced in a fragmented way through sub-disciplines that can become sealed off from one another to the point where they isolate networks and individuals from each other. What opportunities does a specialist in constitutional law have for scientific debate with a specialist in civil law, an employment lawyer with a commercial lawyer? Their academic training alone provides but a poor preparation for the prospect of devising training programmes together. For that they need some kind of external stimulus that will allow them to express their respective bodies of knowledge but not merely by juxtaposing these, an approach that is educationally questionable. If you do not, then you leave it to the student to do so and this, in part, explains the failure rates that occur when they do not already have a structured professional plan.

This is why it was the academic disciplines that felt they were most threatened by the transfer of power from the faculty to the establishment. They still have an essential place in the university but can no longer play the structuring role that they had in a university that nowadays is required to prepare 40 per cent of a cohort for a higher qualification. You will notice that the reactions of medical faculties, which have always been multidisciplinary and "patient oriented", have not been characterized by the same fears because they have more certainty about what really defines their task. Similarly, the movement was less strong in provincial multidisciplinary universities that had established synergies between their development and that of the population and the companies in their environment.

Fears about "localism"

Esprit: But isn't it true that the main thing that has upset people is the fact that the old pyramid where power was centralized but remote, favoured rather opaque compromises, whereas local control challenges long laid-down habits?

YL: Of course, against a background of general under-financing, poverty even, a few "little arrangements" had evolved but also, by the same token, a lot of waste. At a time when it is finally making additional funds available with, for the first time, a commitment spread over a number of years, the state is asking for greater transparency in management and requiring that a link be made between objectives, success and resources. As a result, a university principal, who was previously, above all, just the person who kept the peace in the institution and didn't carry much weight, as opposed to the faculty dean

with direct access to the ministry, now has responsibility for the growth or the impoverishment of his institution. In order to do this he has to establish transparency and across-the-board regulation. He is elected to ensure that a plan is pursued and he becomes, in relation to his colleagues, the person who guarantees that the effort required from each of them is equitably assigned.

Instead of the idea that, as a government employee, everyone is sufficiently high-minded to know what is required of him, we now have some embarrassing questions that it becomes difficult to avoid: why does a teacher with an *agrégation*, who also carries out research, have to teach 382 hours whereas a senior lecturer who admits that he no longer does any research only has to do 192 hours? Why is someone who invests much time and effort in constructing external partnerships and new training programmes penalized in his career by comparison with someone else who does high-level research, and penalized again in terms of his income by comparison with someone who carries out consultancy work somewhere else? These are all questions that can be resolved in a reasonable fashion if they are discussed in confidence, as close as possible to the reality of the situations concerned but which, if too strictly defined at national level, risk continuing the present mess or reducing higher education to a secondary level whereby activity is sliced up into prescribed, costed tasks, a process that would wreck the very basis of the profession.

Esprit: But doesn't the power given to principals amount to an attack on "academic freedoms"?

YL: Academic freedom is not at issue: it guarantees, for every academic, complete responsibility for the content of the teaching that is entrusted to him. In that respect, universities are protected by their status and they have the means to defend it. As regards the way that timetables are worked out, I would doubt whether a university principal would be able to impose any particular assignment by force, still less if the staff as a whole were opposed to it. In order to act, especially in the age of the Internet, he has to have legitimacy. The basis of the debate has often focused on the matter of so-called additional hours and on the threshold at which they ought to begin to attract additional payment, because those who are most virulently opposed to modulation also often do more than 192 hours.

The draft decrees resolved the question the wrong way round: while it is perfectly right that the hours should be paid for, it is absurd automatically to compensate insufficient quality of research with teaching time and, most of all, it is absurd to try to impose a uniform rule at national level. Rather than imposing a framework *a priori*, the universities should have been allowed to act as they saw fit, to even out any excesses and, after a proper assessment, decide on the necessary national framework. Similarly, tasking the National Council for Universities (CNU) with quality assessment of teachers is an aberration that would be found in no other country in the world: for research, it is possible to devise objective criteria and make a judgment at a distance, and even then it is useful also to do the same locally, to assess it in context; but for teaching, which requires very qualitative assessment, it can only be the outcome of discussion within teams and between close colleagues.

Neither is academic freedom placed in jeopardy by the new approaches to recruitment. Appointments will still fall within the brief of the ministry, which will be the judge of whether they have been carried out in accordance with the rules; principals have no discretionary powers in this sphere. What is changing is that power has been withdrawn from disciplines that chose their new

colleagues by using appointment committees of specialists that they have elected. From now on, it will be the institution, through its elected council, which will lay down the procedures and appoint, after considering the profile of appointee required, an *ad hoc* committee, of which half will be made up of outsiders: depending on whether what is required is simply a replacement, a change in subject area or the recruitment of a person of international status, it will choose its experts from within the discipline and will add representatives of other disciplines, or it will follow the example of recruitment procedures in other countries and set up a proper search committee that is able to work over a period of several months.

Another worry was expressed by the University Institutes of Technology (IUTS), which, ever since they were first set up, had had posts and budgets that had been flagged up as important because of the specific mission assigned to them. Some of them are afraid that universities will budget for a share of funding that will disadvantage IUTS. This would be a counter-strategy. LRU or no LRU, no university has ever tried to make the resources of its science faculty equivalent to those of its law faculty, still less its schools of engineering, of which half are situated within universities and receive no special flagging up by the ministry. Here again, one may guess that these fears have got more to do with the requirement for transparency and accountability that is nowadays being imposed on everyone. Finally, everyone has agreed to ensure that, at local level, they set down in writing a contract between the university and the IUT that will stretch over several years. This is the voice of reason and of a progressive adjustment to autonomy.

Esprit: But why did the question of reforming the status of teacher-researchers get mixed up with this matter?

YL: For a long time, there has been broad agreement that the 1984 decree is no longer fit for purpose but it has never proved possible to produce a redraft. Its view on the requirement for "service" amounting to 192 hours of teaching in seminars (or 128 hours of lectures) took no account of research activities and, what was worse, of any distance learning or continuing education activities, which could only be counted as additional hours. This view no longer holds good. So the question arises of finding a new system that includes all activities that form part of teaching, research and the integration of students into the world of work. Up to now, everyone has been more or less in agreement. Where views diverge, however, is with regard to the extent to which determining these services should be individualized and, above all, how they are to be determined. Should this task be left to institutions, which are in a better position to understand the scope of the task and the precise part that they play in relation to the development of the university? Or should they be more or less rigidly codified at national level? Views vary widely. The most surprising thing of all about this is the strength of the very French belief that this whole question can be resolved from above without any trial and error, without any experimental stage, by virtue of a form of negotiation that, over a period of more than 10 years, has several times failed because everyone has had in mind differing specific realities and, consequently, nobody is actually talking about the same thing. And so this is why the debate goes on focusing on the desired result rather than on the way to achieve it. That's France for you! The damage we do in the name of the unquestioned ideal of unity!

Esprit: Why is it so difficult, if we go along with your analysis of the situation, to move from a deregulated system that causes lots of tensions, to fair rules that could be beneficial for all academics?

YL: The fundamental problem is that we are dealing with worlds that have for too long had to take no responsibility and that have been profoundly de-professionalized. The lack of local discussion compared with the abundance, but also with the poor quality, of national discussion is clear evidence of this. The discussions that did take place despite everything, for example on the subject of professionalizing training, left out whole disciplines. New rules were drawn up, new identities were constructed, accepted by the traditional disciplines, always provided that they were not affected by them: they only affected students that they did not want to have anything to do with anyway. One section thus had no part in the most important developments.

The fact of establishing local responsibility changes the situation: everyone is required to define his or her activities in relation to the institution as a whole. The way in which this activity is justified is undergoing radical change and asking some hard questions about professional identity. How are you going to agree to be assessed in relation to the rate of employability of your students when training has never been deemed to lead to employment or when the employment market is currently in such a parlous state? It is easy to see the kind of upset that that will cause. Many people are ready to change if the new requirements are explained to them, if they are helped to do so, but the mechanisms for doing that do not exist. They are in a world that is de-professionalized because there is no longer any discussion between colleagues on practices and developments in the profession. Everyone is left standing alone in front of their students, who themselves have changed enormously and who make increasing demands. As long as we were just asking everybody to cope with this as best they could, then it could work, but if we introduce performance indicators without providing any instructions about how to apply them, then people become seriously worried.

But the increasing difficulty of the profession could be a reason for developing good practice: if it is becoming impossible to cope with it alone then a collective response becomes possible once more; indeed, it becomes a necessity. The present movement sometimes gives the impression of the opposite, as if it were better to remain attached to ways of working which, whilst imperfect and often unfair, were familiar, rather than taking the risk of agreeing to a new system of responsibility.

Development of working practices cannot evolve naturally from previous methods; it can only come about if we commit to an explicit and progressive learning process that will take place between institutions and the ministry, and within institutions. No one is as yet actually playing the game: it is as if it were enough just to pass the new rules and apply them, but it may come. From one institution to another and from one discipline to another the changes that have taken place have been very uneven, and it was possible to hope that some were preparing the way for others who would find it more difficult to adapt to the new social demands and challenges of the modern world. Nobody was refusing point-blank to take them into account even if not everybody could see how they were going to go about it. What we have been seeing over recent months has been a hardening of positions in those disciplines that, up to now, had stood aloof. The situation was difficult but an explosion was not inevitable.

The mechanism of resistance

Esprit: But what were the factors that sparked the action?

YL: There were two factors in particular that sparked it off: the reform involving the master's qualification and Nicolas Sarkozy's speech on 22 January 2009. The minister of education, Xavier Darcos, first of all sent the paper dealing with teacher training to the minister responsible for higher education but glossed over the matter of the annual payment for on-the-job training that the students have to complete. This announcement, of course, affected students but also teachers, who considered that the "contract to educate" that they had with the ministry had been broken.

And then the President's speech, of which chosen passages were broadcast on a continuous Internet loop, in a style that was reminiscent of the provocative approximations and excessive generalizations of Claude Allègre, was seen as insulting by researchers and teacher-researchers. It was all the more provocative because it was, of course, addressed to those who were the least to blame for any view that French research was inadequate and who shared the wish to develop. This speech consolidated all the concerns that the minister, Valérie Pécresse, had been trying for months to steer her way through and had been listening to for months, tirelessly and with firmness of purpose: it turned these concerns into a solid wall.

Esprit: But weren't there just too many reforms that just made the tension worse and, in the end, would militate against the LRU law?

YL: It's really the other way round. The ministry has transferred responsibility to the councils and principals while retaining control of the methods for local regulation. It's a disastrous contradiction. The logic of a law on decentralization would have involved getting rid of the 1984 decree at the same time as the law while specifying that it was for universities to draw up the framework within which the new rule, which would have national application, would be decided. That did not mean that a provision could not have been put in place to prevent any excesses. What was worse was that the ministry constantly made it known that it would itself lay down the essential rules but delayed making clear the model it was to use for allocating resources, which had been the subject of fierce discussions with the finance ministry. Cross-departmental joint action could not take place within institutions as long as there were more and more exchanges within departments, and this caused those involved to harden their positions. Where the identity of the institution was strong, mobilization against the reforms was correspondingly weaker.

Esprit: Has the position of university principals elected immediately following the LRU reform not now been weakened?

YL: They have been weakened in the sense that responsibility has been transferred to them but without, as yet, the power, along with their councils, to debate and decide on new regulations. They have also been weakened because they were often reappointed rather than elected for a project, chosen for their ability to maintain a consensus between component elements rather than for their ability to bring about progress for their institution. But this is just a phase: in four years, things will have changed: the next elections, which will be carried out on the basis of competing projects, will have taken place. And, finally, they have been weakened because real steering of their institution will continue to be difficult as long as the ministry has not clarified the rules of the game with regard to the attribution of their resources. Each university knows how much it is receiving but not how it can make progress with its budget, not what it might have to fear.

Esprit: What are the prospects for finding a way out of this crisis?

YL: As opposition has developed demands have become wider in scope, with the result that it is hard to know how we can satisfy demands or restore calm. The budgets for higher education and research have been increased and it is difficult to imagine that that is not going to involve certain demands in exchange. There are lots of other things at work in the protests: the expression of professional malaise, the desire to oppose the government and the President, the hope, for some, of stepping back, more or less explicitly, from the new role given to universities in their relationship with research bodies. The movement is becoming progressively fragmented as new assurances are made, but at the same time it is becoming more radical and sometimes expresses itself more violently. It may gradually get bogged down and rumble away for months or it may, on the other hand, suddenly make a move that will restore a framework for more productive discussions. Or we could go back to the old refrain about ungovernable universities that will be left to their fate by once more favouring the extension of public and private schools.

Esprit: A large proportion of students, especially those for whom it is difficult to find their way through the world of the university, just drop out when this kind of long-term protest happens and, in the end, go off, never to be seen again. Isn't there a danger of this happening this year too?

YL: The fact that student drop-out has not become a central point for discussion in universities is not something we can be proud of. The indications that we received after the CPE (recruitment examination for educational counsellors) would lead one to believe that there will be significant numbers of the most vulnerable students who will abandon their studies and that others will avoid universities by being directed towards preparatory classes for the *grandes écoles*, BTS (higher diploma in technical subjects) or yet others who will escape to the private sector.

Some arts and social sciences departments, which had been able to make up for the fall in their numbers by recruiting foreign students, in particular through the Erasmus programme, are now seeing these sources dry up and that can only get worse. The question of the power to attract students cannot be ignored: there are 8 per cent of foreign students at *licence* level; essentially these are people who are already domiciled in France; at master's level there are 20 per cent, of whom half have come specifically to follow these courses; and at doctorate level there are more than 50 per cent. The vitality of an institution depends more and more on its ability to attract students. These figures also disguise the fact that the large scientific universities are still managing to grow, whereas the humanities are slowing down more and more.

Esprit: But if present trends continue, where will this leave these disciplines?

YL: There are really two points here. First of all there is the question of the excellence of knowledge production in these disciplines: they gained enormous benefit from the demographic trends of the previous period and may experience a relative drop in numbers without any loss of quality: they have sufficient internal resources not to lose their worldwide reputation. The second point concerns overstaffing: what is to become of the teachers if they turn out to be too many in relation to the number of students? Some teachers will be able to devote more time to their research, others will be urged to work in teams on new projects that fit in with the plans of their institution and their environment, and many will discover that there is nothing dramatic about all

this. In foreign countries we have seen the humanities playing a part in training managers in a wide range of sectors; that has scarcely been explored in France where tertiary employment, in companies as well as in associations and local government is, however, one of the greatest challenges for tomorrow.

We might have cause, at present, to fear a break up and unregulated differentiation between universities. Centrifugal forces are growing ever stronger between laboratory sciences and social sciences, between academics and professionals, between large and small universities. I hope that the regulated autonomy of institutions and the setting up of regional centres of higher education will restore the bonds between these elements. In a crisis situation everyone tends to look inwards. Will feelings of local solidarity manage to survive? It may be that the regions will be able to help to support them. It is also possible that some universities really will be downgraded or will gradually disappear. In that case, we really will have created a two-tier system and done so in a manner that will be irreversible.

Published 2010-07-01

Original in French

Translation by Mike Routledge

Contribution by Esprit

First published in *Esprit* 5/2009 (French version)

© Yves Lichtenberger, Marc-Olivier Padis / Esprit

© Eurozine