Are universities specific organisations ?

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Introduction

A few decades ago, highlighting the organisational specificity of universities was a common exercise. Most publications – from the Merton school of writings stressing the exceptional character of the academic profession to the decision-making analysis led by J. March and his colleagues (Cohen, March and Olsen 1972) that characterized universities as organized anarchies in which the garbage can model of decision making prevails – concluded that universities were not organisations "like others". While these authors outlined the organisational particularities of universities, others also stressed their diversity due to the original models which influenced them (humboldtian, Napoleonic, Anglo-Saxon…) and their national implementation. Thus universities were not only specific organisations: they moreover followed national patterns.

Since the 80s, two remarkable reverse trends developed that both contest the preceding assumptions. On the one hand, universities are expected to become like any other organisation. Their specificity is denied and managerial tools from the industrial sector (and in particular in firms) has been introduced in universities (Reed 2001 and 2003) which are supposed to become more entrepreneurial, more corporate, more accountable etc. Universities have been made less "sacred" ; they are denied their exceptional character and asked to go through "economic rationalisation" and an "organisational shift". On the other hand, this general trend should weaken the influence of the national models and therefore reduce the organizational variety among universities.

But how far does this trend go and how successful is it? Could it mean that the resistance encountered by many of the managerial reforms and reported in almost every case study show

that, even if less "special" than was thought some decades ago, universities nevertheless possess organisational characteristics that distinguish them from many other organisations? And if so, should we not better identify such characteristics?

This contribution intends to discuss such issues by once again raising some old and forsaken questions: how much do universities differ from firms or from other public services? How "universal" are those characteristics? What impact do they have on university governance? How have they been affected by the recent reforms and transformations?

To answer these questions, the paper will be structured into three parts. It will retrace the shift from specific university models to the more recent conception of universities as "ordinary organisations". Then some specific organisational characteristics of universities will be identified. Finally the impact of the latter on university governance will be explored.

1. The deconstruction of university as an organisational exception

In this section, a first part will be dedicated to a rapid presentation of the models which have been developed before the eighties to describe and analyse universities and which in most cases underlined university specificities. The second part will focus on the reverse trend that began in the eighties and required higher education institutions to renounce their organisational exception, that is to become "organisations" like others.

1.1. From models of university…

The interest of organisation theorists for universities as a research issue can be traced back to the sixties in the US. Until then, the prevailing viewpoint of the academic world focused on its members rather than on its institutions and was dominated by the Mertonian approach. These organisation sociologists developed four different models mostly aiming at characterising decision-making processes, each model being supposed to better describe the very nature of universities than the previous ones. Some of these fundamental models led to the elaboration of a more general organisation theory.

The first one is the collegial model. In its "original" version (Goodman 1962; Millett 1962), it relied on the assumption of the existence of an academic (scientific) community sharing the same norms and values and therefore able to come to consensual decision-making and to overcome individualistic and private antagonisms. B. R. Clark expanded this conception in his paper on 'organizational saga' (1971, 1972): in his view collegiality does not only refer to the academic professional norms and values, but more broadly to those shared by all the actors involved in the same institutional community – faculty members of course, but also administrators, students, trustees, etc. – and linked by the saga of its institution, its foundation and its history. It is easy to see how such an approach is narrowly correlated to the research field which developed in the 80s and focused on university 'cultures' (for instance Chaffee 1984; Tierney 1988) further encouraging the idea that more than any other organisation, universities are characterized by the influence of specific values.

This consensual values-based vision of universities was strongly contested by G. Baldridge (1971) who stressed the political nature of decision processes and concluded that neither academic nor institutional values were able to reduce the diverging interests at hand. For Baldridge, universities are filled with conflicts and power relationships that are to be taken into account in order to understand the negotiation and political exchanges that structure decision-making. When studying budget allocation in universities J. Pfeffer and G. Salancik (Pfeffer and Salancik 1974; Salancik and Pfeffer 1974) adopted a similar perspective and further emphasized the role of power in such organisations. They concluded that the more a department was able to get support from the environment, the stronger it was in the negotiation of resources. Their study on universities became the starting points of the well known 'resource dependence' theory they subsequently developed (Pfeffer and Salancik 1978) in which they expanded their previous work on universities to other organisations.

The third model which was explored relies on the path opened by sociologists such as R. Merton (1940), A. Gouldner (1935) or P. Selznick (1949), who discussed the Weberian theory on bureaucratisation. Following a similar line of questioning, P. Blau (1973) deployed such an approach to universities. He showed that they are a decentralized type of bureaucracy, and more so for the organization of teaching than for research. This conception of higher education institutions as places where 'bureaucratic' features and rational logics are also to be found was then taken up by Mintzberg (1979), who defined universities as "professional bureaucracies".

The rational as well as the political nature of decision-making in universities was finally strongly contested by M. Cohen, J. March and J. Olsen (1972; see also Cohen and March 1974) who described universities as "organized anarchies", i.e. organisations characterized by multiple goals, unclear technology and fluid participation. They attached a specific model of decision-making to these organised anarchies: the garbage can model[1]. It refers to cases where decision-making results from the independent intersection of four 'streams': participants, problems, choice opportunities and solutions. Two main developments derived from this contribution. First the optimal rational model of decision-making as well as the procedural model defended by H. Simon (1955) (in which participants act according to their bounded rationality and cease looking for solutions once they meet one satisfying) were deeply destabilised. When the garbage can model prevails solutions are neither optimal nor satisfying because they often are disconnected from the problems to be solved, the linear process leading from problems to solutions becomes an exception (solutions may exist before problems); the hypothesis on the (absolute or bounded) rationality of agents is left aside and replaced by the attention potential of each participant. Second, possible expansion of this model to non academic situations has been discussed: see for instance Padgett (1980) for an extension to hierarchies and bureaucracy, Sproull et al. (1978) for an application on an educational department, or the well-known adjustment of this thesis to public policies led by J. Kingdon (1984).

From the mid-1970s upwards, no new models emerged, as if higher education observers abandoned the idea of finding a new challenging model. Rather they combined the four existing approaches in three ways. First, some researchers empirically compared various universities and concluded that each of the four models could be met and that each university could be qualified by one of them. Some institutions were thus collegial, while others were rational, or political, or organised anarchies (see for instance Hardy et al. 1983 and Hardy 1989 and 1992 on Canadian universities). Typologies could then be constructed, refined and become more complex (Hardy 1990: pages 38-39 in particular). Second, some authors looked at different decision-making processes within one single university and observed that they meet one or the other model according to the domain under study (funding, teaching, research, etc). These authors (for instance Davis and Morgan 1982; Taylor 1983; Ellström 1983;

[1] For a discussion of this model see Musselin (1996, 1997) and Friedberg (1993).

Birnbaum 1988) concluded that the specificity of universities was to shelter different models of decision-making. Third some dynamic hypothesis were proposed by authors like I. McNay (1995) or D. Braun and F.-X. Merrien (1999) who suggested that, collegiality and bureaucracy were two successive stages experienced by universities before they shifted more recently to the corporation and to the entrepreneurial models.

This last perspective already announces the reversal which developed in the eighties. Beforehand, sociologists used universities as extreme case studies allowing the identification of organisational models that, in some cases, were further developed and adapted to other organisational situations. Recent decades are characterized by a denial of the specificity of the universities and by the importation of non academic models (corporation model, entrepreneurial model, managerial model, etc.) in universities.

This transformation of the literature is linked to the evolution of the role of universities in our societies, but it is also a normative shift. Both orientation, pushing for the identification of university singularities or denying them, include some ideological and normative views from their authors. When describing universities as collegial entities, authors relied on their observations but at the same time were convinced that universities should be collegial. Notions like "organized anarchy", "garbage can model" (Cohen, March, and Olsen 1972) or "loosely coupled system" (Weick 1976), clearly – intentionally? – gave credence to the idea that such institutions are not ordinary ones and in a way intended to discourage the appointed presidents as well as public authorities to try to steer them. Reciprocally, the current credo about the necessity for universities to conform to models imposed on them is supported by rather objective factors (the transformation of higher education systems into mass education, the public finance crisis faced by developed countries…) but also includes more normative perspectives about the emergence of knowledge societies, the role of the university in such societies, the new public management rhetoric, etc.

1.2. …to universities as organisations

In order to avoid the laborious[2] description of the "new" models, I shall focus on the main mechanisms involved in the reforms aimed at transforming universities. In this perspective, N. Brunsson and K. Sahlin-Andersonn (2000) provides a useful analytical framework when they suggest considering these transformations as attempts at "constructing organisations".

For the two authors, this first implies the construction of identity and in particular the strengthening of autonomy: this has been one of the principal mottos of most higher education reforms, leading public authorities to delegate decisions they previously controlled and to incite universities to become less dependent on public funding. On the one hand, such an evolution goes along with the construction of boundaries: while faculty members traditionally feel much more committed to their discipline than to their university (Altbach 1996), various instruments worked at reinforcing the links between academics and their institution in the recent years. Among them, the development of internal labour markets (Musselin, 2005a) played a powerful role, but the introduction of accounting and management software tending to harmonize the individual practices also had an impact by "linking" university members by the same "tools" and by better defining who is inside and who is outside. On the other hand, such an evolution also encouraged "being special": each university should now reveal its difference, look for differentiation, put forward its specificities and advantages in strategic plans emphasizing their singularities and their "distinctiveness" (Musselin 2004).

For Brunsson and Sahlin-Andersonn "constructing organisations" also means building a hierarchy. This happened in universities through the emergence and implementation of more coherent institutional policies. Each institution being expected to develop a common project with shared priorities, it encourages more coordination as well as more control on individual behaviours in order to keep them coherent with the overall institutional project. This is achieved thanks to a strengthened executive leadership and a reduced influence of deliberative bodies (Kogan and Hanney 2000 for the United Kingdom, de Boer and Goedegebuure 2001, for the Netherlands). The role expectations towards academic leaders also changed. From *primus inter pares* intended to arbitrate between internal oppositions and to defend the interests of their community, academic leaders are asked to become managers with new competences: academic recognition is supplanted by management skills.

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[2] Laborious because those models are not as strongly characterized as the four "university" models described above. The distinction between the corporate model, the managerial model, the entrepreneurial model, the learning organisation model, the service university model (and probably some others) deals much more with nuances than with identified and well established differences.

The construction of rationality (setting objectives, measuring results and allocating responsibility), the last process considered by Brunsson and Sahlin-Andersonn in constructing organisations, finally also occurred in universities. While their inability to set objectives was previously described as one of their main feature and specificity – M. Cohen, J. March and J. Olsen (1972) spoke of "problematic preferences" – they are now expected to select among their always more numerous (Gueissaz 1999) and incompatible goals and to define their specific profile. Differentiation is a rationale for this objective but it is also a way to motivate universities to conform with the schemes of action prevailing in other organisations and to define objectives, set the means necessary to reach them, act, and evaluate the outcomes. This thus tends to rationalise the production process within universities and to promote notions such as responsibility, relevance, accountability etc.

Many features therefore document the existence of a trend transforming universities into organisations. Our argument is neither to contest this trend nor to criticise it but to observe that, surprisingly, this powerful evolution seems to have rather little impact on universities. As a matter of fact, many empirical studies analysing the concrete effects of these transformations come to question their "true" impact[3] at the institutional level but even more at the individual level (see for instance, Bauer et al. 1999, Bleiklie et al. 2000, de Boer 2001 and 2002, Henkel 2000, Kogan and Haney 2000, Mignot-Gérard and Musselin 1999, 2000 and 2002, Reed and Deem, 2002).

The high number of studies showing the limits of change processes is certainly not typical for universities. In all organisations, implementing change is challenging and encounters resistance. Universities do not escape this organisational trend. Nevertheless, it will be argued in the next section that some specific characteristics of universities further complicate the change processes pushed by the reforms and consequently affect the management (or governance) of such institutions. It is important to identify them, not to say that universities are so specific that one should not even think of transforming them, but to better understand why the current reforms are facing problems and the kinds of difficulties they encounter.

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[3] They also stress that the apparent convergence among the reforms launched, in fact results in national developments and implementations, often strengthening the individual characteristics of each national systems and increasing the organisational divergences between universities located in different countries while at the same time accentuating the differentiation within a single country (Kogan *et al*., Musselin 2000).

2. Organisational specificities of universities

It will be argued that two characteristics (that can hardly be simultaneously observed in other industrial activities) are specific to universities. First, academic tasks are functionally loosely coupled. Second, teaching and research are unclear technologies.

2.1. Functional loose coupling characterises both teaching and research activities

Functional loose coupling refers to the low level of cooperation and coordination required by teaching and research activities within higher education institutions (Weick 1976). In few other work places, if any, is it as frequent to ignore what colleagues seated next door are doing and observe so little influence of the activities of those colleagues on one's own tasks. For instance, academics know very little about what is taught by their colleagues in the curricula in which they are involved: thus it has little influence in the preparation of their own teaching. Some disciplines are of course less affected than others by this. In a study recently led on French academics[4] (Becquet and Musselin, 2004), we observed that physicists constitute small teaching groups (around five persons) among which one is responsible for the lecture courses, while others prepare the related discussion groups with the physicist giving the lecture. But they do not work with the other groups in charge of the other lecture courses. Furthermore, such an embryonic collaborative work is completely absent in some other disciplines under study, such as management or history.

This distinction also works for research activities. Team work is rare and when it exists (as in experimental physics or biology for instance) it is limited to small groups within which cooperation is intensive. But between these groups cooperation remains vastly poor. More frequent and more developed cooperation generally occurs with groups/individuals in other universities, within national or international networks.

As shown by the recurrent complaints about the lack of multi-disciplinarity, interactions between entities belonging to different disciplines or located in different units (department,

[4] It concerns four disciplines: physics, biology, management and history.

faculties…) are not "natural" and hardly binding. The interdisciplinary research entities which were recently created in French universities (often called *Institut fédératif de recherche*) perfectly illustrate the limits of such initiatives: their introduction (often associated with the dedication of one single building to house the different teams) hardly encourage more contacts and co-team work (Mignot-Gérard 2003).

The very nature of teaching and research activities explains such observations: they can be developed in rather strong isolation and share characteristics with craft activities[5] as defined by M. Granovetter and C. Tilly (1988). But it should not be forgotten that this specific character is also socially constructed, i.e. reinforced by academics themselves. They do all they can to keep cooperation and coordination among them to a minimum thanks to three main strategies. First, they coordinate only when it can not be avoided: for instance when courses have to be allocated, or when a collective activity report has to be written and submitted to some assessment procedures. But even such compelling devices may be diverted and managed in a way that limits collective work to a minimum (Henkel 2000). Analysing the teaching assessment led by the British Quality Assurance Agency (QAA), B. Cret (2003) observed that within the concerned academic departments, the preparation of the report to be sent to the QAA could be left to one single faculty member and that no common reflection or work was led. A second strategy to avoid cooperation consists in being reluctant to provide detailed information about the content of one's activity. Thirdly, the best way to avoid others' intrusion is to respect others' autonomy (intimacy), i.e. not to look at or to discuss course content, not to interfere with research programmes, etc.

Keeping cooperation among faculty members of the same university to a minimum is furthermore facilitated by the diversification of resources. The less faculty members are dependant on the resources provided by their institution, the less cooperative they can be and the less obliged they are to get involved in the internal "political" games for resources.

2.2. Unclear technologies

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[5] "In craft industry (…), either one worker makes the whole object or supervisors coordinate the work of specialists who have complementary skills" (Granovetter and Tilly, 1988: 184).

The second specific character of academic work relies in the fact that teaching and research are rather unclear technologies. This partly results from the capacity of academics to resist and argue against rationalisation attempts but is also linked to the intrinsic nature of such activities. Two dimensions participate to this unclear character.

a) Teaching and research are complex processes which are difficult to grasp

As for functional loose coupling, this characteristic is partly "constructed" and partly "intrinsic" to these activities. It is partly constructed because academics maintain opacity and because academic work has rarely been studied. It is only recently that teaching and learning in higher education institutions became a research theme. And there is probably a lot that could be done to better investigate what is involved in teaching. The reluctance of academics to open their lectures to researchers, the belief in teaching as a "private" autonomous activity, the quasi sacred character that was often attributed to such activities, prevented them from pedagogical and didactical research for a long time and still can discredit the relevance of studies that would look at such activities as sociologists considered workers on the shop-floor

Research activities have been less protected from investigation than teaching. The anthropology of science (Latour and Woolgar 1979, Latour 1987) and the "strong programme" (Bloor 1976) in particular paved the way to more concrete approaches of research activity and made scientists less "sacred". Nevertheless, even if they deconstructed the heroic figure of the scientist, the latter remains the principal actor, the network-builder (Callon 1989) and these approaches still contribute to pointing at the irreducible specific character of science (while denying it at the same time). They also do not completely open the "black box" and research is still an obscure process, even when wonderful descriptions have been written (cf. Knorr-Cetina 1996 for instance). Furthermore, such approaches only focus on one aspect of academic activities (research), ignoring the others and to do not explain how faculty members arbitrate among them.

If we definitively lack studies on teaching and research, these activities also bear intrinsic characteristics that make them difficult to grasp.

First, research and teaching are simply difficult to describe. Sociologists can certainly improve their methodological tools to better succeed in describing them but a large part of such activities can not be "studied" such as other tasks.

Second, because they are not described, they can hardly be prescribed. Up to now, competencies in such activities are mostly acquired through doing by one's self, observing others, submitting results to senior colleagues, having them discuss in seminar, etc. It still remains informal, person-based, unstructured. Books entitled "how to prepare a thesis" provide fine tricks but they can not explain how to write a thesis in the way technical notices tell us how to use a mobile phone. Again this specificity should not be overestimated: some aspects or some advice can indeed be "taught" and formalised about writing papers, preparing a lecture, behaving with students etc. Therefore training young academics for their future activities, personal development courses, support to teachers confronted with difficult class situations, etc. should be expanded. Nevertheless, many aspects escape prescription and set limits to in-depth rationalisation processes.

Third, because teaching and research are difficult to describe and difficult to prescribe, they are also difficult to reproduce. One can relate how Cricks and Watson (Watson, 1998) discovered the double helix structure of the ADN and thus how they win a Nobel prize but it is impossible to reproduce the same process for another scientific enigma and to prescribe how to become a Nobel prize winner. The same is true for teaching.

Therefore, even if we have to recognize that there long has been an overestimation of the mysterious individual part of talent and "personal touch" in teaching and research, it would be misleading to completely deny that the production technology involved in teaching and research has nothing specific. The inaccuracy of those two extreme positions has clearly been stressed by the development of on-line curricula. On the one hand they proved that some teaching can partly be rationalised, formalised, reproduced and be supported by technologies. But on the other hand they often reveal the limits of such processes: in most cases, these technologies can not work without an impressive personal work from tutors and the maintenance of presential teaching (Miladi 2005a and 2005b).

b) Ambiguous causal relationships between tasks and results

The second dimension justifying the consideration of teaching and research as unclear technologies is linked to the ambiguous link between the way they are led and what they "produce". What is the influence of what is taught and how it is taught, on the students? How does it affect the acquired competencies? What is the efficiency of a teaching situation compared with another? According to the signalling theory (Spence 1974) or the human capital theory for instance (Becker 1962), the reward gained by attending an elite university (for the first) or by studying one more year (for the second) is not linked to the content of what has been taught but to the fact of having been selected by the elite university (and the positive signal this represents) or of being able to attend one more year. There is for instance no evidence that French students attending the highly selective business schools are better trained that the university students attending the management programmes: but the former get higher salaries and better job positions and this can be explained either by the fact that they passed a selective process or by the teaching they received. We miss the correct instruments to measure which explanation is relevant and therefore often rely on highly speculative interpretations.

The causal link between the way research is led and its results is all the more complex as there is no fixed definition of what constitutes "good" research. For some, it means relevant to society while for others it first has to conform with academic norms, and still for others to respect both aims. But there is also no agreement on the way research should be led to reach one objective or another.

In many ways, research and teaching thus possess certain characteristics that are not shared by other work activities. This specificity should not be overestimated (as it often was the case in the past) and the recent trends in rationalising, measuring, assessing academic activities showed that they indeed can partially be affected by these processes. Nevertheless they also strongly resist such changes and this is due to their special features. The last part of the paper will be dedicated to the implications this has on university governance and change.

3. Implications for change within universities

This specificity of academic work has a direct impact on university governance, and as a consequence, on change processes. It affects the efficiency of the tools that may be used to

transform universities as well as the exercise of leadership in higher education institutions. On the first aspect it weakens the possibility to use formal structures as a levier to reinforce coordination and cooperation. On the second it modifies the exercise of leadership and the management of change within universities.

3.1. The limits of formal structures and rules in universities

Many of the reforms introduced in universities in order to transform them into organisations led to the introduction of more rules, more procedures, new structures, new management techniques (including management software, reporting methods etc.).

In organisation theory, from the Taylorist "scientific organisation of work", to structural contingencies or to the recent "rediscovery" of institution, among many others[6], such instruments are often presented as powerful means to improve organisations. Even if very different in many respects, these perspectives all consider, to a different degree[7], that formal rules and structures design, foster and organise coordination and cooperation. The hierarchical structure and the borders of productive units specify who is in charge of what and how interdependent tasks are to be managed. Formal procedures moreover describe part of the productive process: which tasks come first, which follow and how, etc.

But in universities, formal structures and procedures, even if numerous, rarely favour cooperation and coordination. They hardly define what to do and how to do it because of the specific characteristics of teaching and research described above. Formal rules and structures may impose constraints, increase the bureaucratic burden, slow down the production process, etc. but they have little effect on content and even less on cooperation. To put it crudely: being part of the same unit, being managed by the same rules and having the same status does not increase the level of cooperation among the members of the unit. As a result, changing the formal structures most of the time has no effect. One of the French universities S. Mignot-

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6 Perspectives as historical neo-institutionalism and economic neo-institutionalism (Hall and Taylor, 1996) in a way "rediscover" the importance of (formal) structures on human behaviours.

7 The degree to which formal rules and structures succeed in limiting the actors autonomy may of course be discussed. For instance, in the research tradition in which I was trained (Crozier 1964; Crozier and Friedberg 1977; Friedberg 1993), the capacity of rules and structures in strongly determining behaviours is put into question. It much more focuses on the way actors play with formal structures and rules and looks at how the latter in some cases act as constrains, while in other situations they became resources for the same actors.

Gérard and I studied (Mignot-Gérard and Musselin, 1999) provides a good example. Up to 1992, it was composed of 17 faculties. The president decided to merge many of them and they were reduced to only 5. But six years later, the new faculties were still empty shells ignored and by-passed by the departments which were still operating as before.

In universities, formal rules and structures weakly support hierarchical power. Being appointed (or elected) as an academic leader does not allow for much influence on work orientation. Even in American universities, in which the department chairs and the deans are more powerful than in most European universities (they negotiate different teaching loads, decide on differentiated salary increases, etc.), they are not directly involved in the daily allocation of work or in defining the precise content of tasks. Academics remain autonomous in shaping their own activity and the way they prefer to develop them[8].

The role of formal structures and rules in universities is therefore limited by the nature of academic activities and the unclear technology incorporated in them. They nevertheless are numerous and one can wonder why, if they are not efficient? Neo-institutionalism provides us with some clues in explaining this phenomena. According to J. Meyer and B. Rowan (1977), formal structures and rules can not increase cooperation and coordination (even on the contrary[9]) but are a way for organisations to appear as rational, to conform with the institutional environment and to gain legitimacy. This helps understanding why universities are organised in colleges or faculties, and then in departments. Once a organisation presents this kind of characteristics, it is identified as a higher education institution. Still following this research perspective, this convergence may be explained by the fact that leading higher education institutions are organised that way and regarded as models to imitate (DiMaggio and Powell 1983). But this also helps understanding why more and more formal structures and rules are introduced within universities: it is a way to comply with the environment pressures for being more organisations alike.

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[8] In their paper on biologists and how they conceive and manage their relationships to industry, J. Owen-Smith and W. Powell (2002) for instance always present the positioning adopted by each of the faculty members they describe as a product of their personal preferences. There is no reference to their institutional situation, or to negotiations with their department or university.

[9] A further interesting point for our discussion in Meyer and Rowan's paper is that they argue that conforming with environmental myths in fact increases loose coupling within organisations. In this paper I argue that loose coupling reciprocally weakens the capacity of formal rules and structures to promote cooperation and coordination. We could then conclude that this increases their role as myths which further increases loose coupling, installing thus a kind of vicious circle.

But such an explanation does not highlight why strong resistance and severe conflicts arise when one attempts to change the structures. If formal structures and rules only existed to conform with institutional environments, it should be easy to merge the department of philosophy with the department of linguistics (Bleiklie et al. 2000: 197-205). Why do academics fight with eagerness against the transformation of formal structures while they always state that their department does not matter much? Because rules and structures nevertheless count! Not in fostering and prescribing cooperation but in defining territories and borders and in protecting insiders. In universities, instead of coordinating, rules and structure first have a defensive role and create protected territories (Musselin 1990). Attempts to suppress, to merge, to redesign such structures reveal this potential strength. Rules and structures build frontiers that few, if any, feel they may transgress. They do not favour cooperation but allow for defensive solidarity.

This defensive capacity provided by rules and structures in universities further explains the limited effects of the newly introduced formal devices on the institutional and on the individual levels: while trying to increase cooperation and coordination, they generally exacerbate the defensive potential of the already existing rules and structures. They strengthen the previous solidarities and generally fail to create new ones.

3.2. The delicate management of change within universities

The issue raised in the preceding section is a significant example of the governance problem faced by leaders in universities. Most of the management tools and devices they are today expected to introduce have been deployed for organisations where functional coupling prevails and where technologies are clearer. This is not the case in universities. The two intrinsic characteristics of such activities first preclude the efficiency of top-down, hierarchical leadership. Second they complicate the diffusion of change and innovation: as stressed by K. Weick (1982), loose coupling allows for important transformation to happen in one part of the system without disturbing the other parts, but at the same time it impedes the diffusion of change from one part to another.

What is then left to leadership in such organisations? A lot, providing that leaders accept to act in ways that would look unusual in other organisations. Relying on some of the

conclusions of S. Mignot-Gérard in her thesis on French universities, three strategies seem rather efficient to manage change for a presidential team.

a) Have a project and stick to it

What I call "project" here is not the "rationally elaborated plan consistent with well defined goals" denounced by J. March (1974) but refers to setting a direction, focusing on some orientations, providing a certain vision[10] and giving an idea of the missions the university should focus on. The project itself may be centred on a specific domain or on a rather concrete application but it is always presented within a broader rhetoric arguing that such an evolution is inevitable, that everything pushes in this direction, that it is a priority for the future, etc.

S. Mignot-Gérard furthermore observed that academic leaders who manage change not only have a project aimed in a clear direction but also keep it wide enough to preserve a sense of community. They avoid excluding and sanctioning but try to bring together and find ways to convince those who are opposed.

Such projects then work like narratives that academic leaders repeat each time an opportunity is given to them. Repetition of the same visions, the same arguments, the same interpretations play a fundamental role. Keeping to them finally produces long term effects and may provide a collective framework enhancing cooperation more efficiently than formal structures..

b) Facilitate and incite and then reframe, rather than impose

In universities giving orders and imposing decisions happen to be more unproductive than anywhere else. First because the weakness of the hierarchical lines (due to loose coupling) alters the diffusion of directives. Second because the efficiency of universities relies on the capacity for innovation at the bottom level. And third because it generates resistance from the "defensive territories".

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[10] It is therefore closer to the conception of leadership put forward by I. Bleiklie (2004) when he applies P. Selznick's (1958) conclusions to universities.

Therefore the management of change not so much relies on decisions from the top than on the selective promotion of actions coming from the base. It requires a lot of attention to initiatives, demands and projects expressed at the bottom level, incentives for those initiatives to develop, a capacity to negotiate and reword or reframe the demands in a way compatible with the global project of the university.

c) Prefer formal to academic criteria

An important issue for leaders is to succeed in having influence on the protective territories defined by the formal structures and rules without provoking defensive solidarities. Introducing criteria as disconnected as possible from academic norms and automatic, often appears to be a way to avoid resistance and epistemic argumentation. It is for instance easier to find an agreement on the fact that classes with less than six students should not be continued than on assessing that this or that curricula is not acceptable.

Academic leaders may have an important role in developing such criteria and in diffusing them. It can be a way for them to implement their global project and to implement it into more concrete actions and decisions.

As shown through these few examples, the exercise of leadership in universities requires adapting to the specificities of academic work and finding adequate instruments and style rather than "simply" transferring managerial tools. In other ways transforming universities into organisations is possible at the same time one creates appropriate ways to do it.

Conclusion

Our main question at the beginning of this paper was: Are universities specific organisations? My answer is "Yes". I argued that it is linked to the characteristics of teaching and research activities but also that this explains the limited effects of the recent reforms aimed at constructing universities into organisations by imposing non academic models on them.

Such a conclusion is not intended to disqualify the introduction of managerial tools and practices within universities. It simply stresses that the specificity of universities should not be ignored and that change should build on their specificities. Rather than being considered as obstacles for change and rather than fighting against them, they should be used as strengths and as resources.

At a less pragmatic level this lessens the potential influence of the global model of organising that developed within the last decades. It is most of the time absorbed by the national characteristics of each university system: the twenty years of converging national reforms experienced by the European higher education systems sometimes produced radical changes but they were never paradigmatic (Hall 1993): they led to evolutions rather than to "revolution", so that the new solutions and tools were aggregated to those existed and did not replace them (Musselin 2005b and 2005c). As a result, despite convergences in the objectives and rationales of the reforms, they often increased the scope of divergences among those countries[11]. The organizational characteristics of universities furthermore create an obstacle to the transformation of the institutional environments into concrete practices. Increasing loose coupling between the overarching global model for higher education and the universities seems rather plausible in the near future.

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[11] Just to take an example : the distance between the French and the English higher education systems is bigger today than by the end of the seventies.

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