Introduction

France began to set up its first real evaluation system of public universities during the 1980s. It was the first time that the issue of quality and evaluation had become an important aim for policymakers. This is why we can talk about a new institutional practice and a turning point in the institutional culture in French higher education. The French government implemented the Comité national d’évaluation (CNE, or National Evaluation Committee) in 1984. Its task was to evaluate public institutions of an academic, cultural or vocational nature which has been the responsibility of the Minister of Higher Education. In the 2000s, the evaluation and quality assurance got more prominence in public policy regarding higher education. A major innovation of this period was establishing
an independent agency to centralise, formalise and standardise the evaluation of French higher education system. After three decades of experience that has not been without tension, France seems to have achieved the institutionalisation stage in its approach to Quality Assurance.

In this chapter, after the presentation of the characteristics of French higher system, the various stages of the implementation of quality assurance since 1980 will be discussed.

**French Higher Education Context**

The development of French higher education followed a very different path as compared to other European or North American universities. French higher education is marked by its historical fragmentation and the coexistence of two competing sectors since the 18th century. The French higher education system includes the Public University sector, the non-university sector composed of elite institutions (preparatory classes and Grandes Ecoles) and Vocational Training’s Institutions (2 or 3 years). The presence of an elite sector outside of the university epitomized a state-directed meritocratic society, where professionals with a particular education are viewed as exquisite elites. These institutions are intellectually and socially highly selective (Husén 1991: 176). The symbolic and real effects of the duality of the Public University and non-University sector are affecting the organisation and the effective functioning of higher institutions in France. According to Merrien and Musselin (1999), a striking feature of the fragmented French system is that Public Universities have never been deemed as credible by the upper class.

The Public University is the largest sector receiving nearly 56 per cent of all students (DEPP 2015a). French public universities have a legal obligation to accept all candidates who hold a baccalauréat (high school diploma). The proportion of students enrolled in University has declined over the last three decades: 70 per cent in 1980, 66 per cent in 2000 and 56 per cent in 2015. According to the same source, only 46 per cent of those students entering higher education after completing high school enroll in University. This is an important quantitative change since the 1980s because the share of the university in higher education in France has been steadily declining during the past three decades. Students and their families seem to prefer the non-university sector that imposes a selective entry, a pedagogical model similar to secondary education and a training that is essentially focused on professional fields (Table 9.1).

Several reforms have greatly changed the functioning and organisation of French higher education since the 1960s. The most recent reforms (2000s) were carried out within the framework of the European Union and as part of the European harmonisation program, important reforms have been implemented since 2000.
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universities in order to harmonize study norms in terms of content, curriculum, syllabus and course credits.

4 Registration fees in the public sector of higher education are very low (often less than $500 US).

5 The Law of July 22nd 2013 on Higher Education and Research substituted the High Council for the Evaluation of Research and Higher Education (HCERES) to the AERES. Property, rights and obligations of the AERES were transferred to the HCERES.

6 In France, associations of universities and higher education institutions (Communautés d’Universités et Établissements, COMUE) is a new form of university networks has been authorised by the Law on Higher Education and Research (France) of July 22, 2013. A COMUE is a grouping of higher education and research institutions.

References


