

**Coercive and Mimetic Isomorphism as outcomes of authority  
reconfigurations in French and Spanish Academic Career Systems**

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Reforms in higher education have been passed in many European countries in the last decades, mostly trying to adapt national systems to new European and global challenges. This study examines some consequences of such major reforms in France and Spain. Specifically, these reforms introduced new agencies whose remit was *inter alia* to provide evaluation of research and to make such assessments pivotal for academic career progression. The paper investigates empirically whether, and to what extent, these new forms of authority have been capable of engendering the expected change to the system of academic career evaluation. The respective policy approaches and policy implementation in France and Spain reveal that these reforms triggered a reconfiguration of powers at various levels of academic life – affecting strategies for successful career development. Policy-making implications are relevant when these two countries are compared, suggesting that more radical policy approaches (coercive isomorphism, the French case) do not result in more change to academic evaluation practices than mimetic ones (the Spanish case). It is also important to note that coercive isomorphism encountered more frictions in its implementation.

Keywords: reform, career, coercive and mimetic isomorphism, France, Spain.

## **1. Introduction: Career development change as a reform for the whole system**

Higher education systems in Europe have undergone radical changes in the last decades, mostly chasing the ideals of new rationales for higher education governance (Neave 2012). Research evaluation is one example (Whitley 2007). Especially for continental, centralised systems like the Napoleonic ones, reforms implied an overall change in ideological stances, undermining arguably the balance between types of capitals and respective academic powers (Bourdieu 1984:71-127). They also had organisational and ministerial implications, and therein entailed cultural changes to be promoted and implemented across the higher education sector (Paradeise, et al. 2009; Cruz-Castro & Sanz-Menéndez 2007). This paper looks at a specific aspect of policy reform, namely research evaluation, in two such European countries – France and Spain. Specifically, the policies examined here entail reforms to the national systems of research evaluation, the establishment of new agencies to carry out this evaluation activity, and concomitant changes to make such assessments pivotal for academic career progression. These two countries share a similar legacy, but they chose two different approaches to pursuing policy reform.

Examining the case of research evaluation reform – albeit only one element of a broader set of structural reforms – allows us to investigate the relationship (possibly having the tone of tensions) between governmental and professional or peer authority. Any agency, or body, entrusted with assessing university performance and framing careers will arguably

trigger some forms of reaction. An agency whose remit is to evaluate a fundamental dimension of staff performance (i.e. research productivity in this case) is unlikely to be entirely ineffective because people belonging to the higher education system inevitably aspire to have a career, and are therefore invested in the successful operation of the research evaluation agency. From this argument, one may deduce that such changes generate a dilemma for policy makers: from one side reforms can be subjected to pay lip service, a notorious phenomenon especially in education sector (DiMaggio & Powell 1983); on the other side, reforms might be disruptive and conflict-laden. Empirical research looking at the ‘black-box’ of academics’ multiple (primarily but not exclusively by discipline and cohorts) understandings of what ultimately matters is important to assess what actual changes occurred<sup>1</sup>.

Policy reform of research and academic career evaluation can be seen from another perspective too. If a general policymaker aims to bring about structural change in a particular sector, it is reasonable to assume that reforming its related career framework will form an essential part of the overarching reform. At the same time, and this is the intriguing aspect of looking at reforms in loosely coupled systems like academic ones, *authority* (Clark 1983) – the capacity to dictate who will have a (good) career and who won’t – is mostly a peer mechanism potentially distinct from a bureaucratic body.

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<sup>1</sup> From another angle, one may maintain that an individual career is *prima facie* an individual matter. Whilst it is a truism that a career is indeed an individual endeavour, the paper speculates that careers are nested in a web of opportunities and constraints that depends by achievements such as actual tutelage, affiliations and other collective behaviours occurring within a *field*. Hence, the paper assumes that reforms that are not necessarily aimed at affecting careers (careers in terms of how to specifically recruit and promote, for instance) may actually determine deep changes in how careers are developed.

Overall, in examining an empirical case of reforms that impact career progression, it is important for analysts to identify which type of change is more effective, viable, and frictionless. Here is where the comparison between the French and Spanish reforms to academic career development yields an interesting message.

The paper is organised in the following way (Table 1 provides a specular tabulation of the paper structure). First section describes the operationalisation of the empirical research question, tracing the specific changes to academic career progression and performance evaluation systems that have occurred in the French and Spanish higher education systems during last years. In this section, observable dimensions of Authority – cultural capital, social capital and tutelage – are provided. The following section describes the two national patterns of policy development, including their reforms related to research evaluation and academic performance evaluation. Section four presents the methodology and describes the empirical cases. Section five discusses the research findings based on the primary data. The discussion section analyses the main consequences for academic career progression in these two countries in terms of reconfigurations of power in establishing how authority is generated (Musselin 2013). In the conclusion, the paper outlines policy implications for other similar countries pursuing system-wide reforms to academic career evaluation as well as the policy implications for possible future reforms in Spain and France. In this final section, we propose the distinction between coercive and mimetic isomorphism (DiMaggio & Powell 1983), as an ex-post interpretation of policy reforms outcomes, drawing also from policy making that happened chronologically after primary data collection, a collation that confers insightful speculations.

Table 1 around here

## 2. Authority and how careers in academia may change

The higher education literature refers to reforms introducing steering-at-the-distance tools as a way to affect symbolic goods (Bourdieu 1984), and consequently career progression. New symbolic goods are the result of: *a*) tools to measure productivity (Schulze-Cleven et al. 2017); *b*) new empowerments to management (Popp Berman and Paradeise 2016); and *c*) the consequential *reconfiguration* of the academic profession as a whole (Musselin 2013, 2017). A common goal of these Europe-wide higher education reforms has been to encourage universities to become more ‘complete organisations’ (Seeber et al. 2016). These changes are assumed to influence the domain of career development in academia – a domain which is considered to be among the most resistant to change (Bourdieu 1984, 55-6). This research aims to establish if and how different policy tools can change the way scholars – both seniors (e.g. full professors), juniors (e.g. early mid-career researchers or young tenured) and their relationships – approach their career development.

In Napoleonic systems like France and Spain, the State establishes regulations and procedures concerning recruitment and promotions, yet at the same time, chairs and academics in collegial positions have had a determinant voice in these affairs (Clark 1983). To chair some committees in a department or school is proof of one’s influence. These roles are also considered the best way to express the typical protégé dynamic in a *concours*<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Meaning “competition” in French, *concour* refers to highly formalised competitions, typically via national regulations.

system. These recruitment and promotion systems have also developed institutionalised, formal structures for the representation of the academic professions (Ferlie, Musselin, and Andresani 2009, 6-7; Paradeise, Reale, and Goastellec 2009, 207). Although such regulations have been lawfully in force, *informal clusters of patrons* used to actually decide academic success (Clark 1973, 66-92).

This paper argues that new forms of symbolic goods are effective in changing academic career patterns, through the alteration of authority relationships between the academics themselves. The assumption is that new ‘symbolic goods’ are the driving force in achieving these changes in authority relationships, although these national systems remain substantially driven by national regulations. National regulations in turns imply uniformed competitions with possible specific differentiations just by discipline, and much less likely substantial differences by institution. In technical terms, academic labour markets in these countries were and remain “externally driven” (Musselin 2005).

France and Spain share several common patterns in the domain of academic career progression, thus serving as a useful comparison. An academic’s employment status is that of a civil servant, and a permanent position may be obtained relatively soon. Prior to the reforms, academic trajectories were typically a function of one’s patriarch’s ability to promote one’s ‘pupil’s’ career. Seniority substantially determined career progression (Bourdieu 1984, 144). Nowadays, both France and Spain are experiencing similar pressures, namely demands for more institutional autonomy, more precarious conditions for new cohorts, and new funding systems. Both countries, in other words, are undergoing a process of higher education reform initiated by a State that aims to reposition itself as the “evaluative State” (Neave 2012).

The implementation of specific national tools form the basis of changing academic symbolic goods. Although they vary by nation and take slightly different forms, policy tools such as evaluation agencies and/or evaluation exercises commonly allow for the rating and ranking of academics, individually or collectively. In practice, collective units of analysis refer to units such as Department; institutions or transversal affiliation such as CNRS laboratories for the French case – *Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique*; or single projects, especially large ones, may refer what academics understand as their “home”. This signaling activity draws attention and ‘stores’ some credentials in a supposedly ‘objective’ way, for instance via ‘top journal articles’ by impact factor, personal achievements, or any national classification to signal success typically in research-related activities. These new forms of credentials among academics could be defined, following Bourdieu, as *academic cultural capital*. On the other hand, the way scholars of different cohorts work together, (for instance by starting to collaborate, to co-author, and to co-supervise), or indeed the way in which they choose not to work together, – constitute potential new forms of relations, recognitions and, in one word, *academic social capital*.

Empirically, such an expected change triggered by external reform can be analysed by the following dimensions, which constitute an alternative analytical framework in comparison to the concept of *career capital* (Angervall and Gustafsson 2016):

- Cultural capital. Changes in scientific production are necessary; academics alter their strategies to achieve outputs and publications.



- Social Capital. To stay under the protection of a senior does not constitute anymore per se an assurance for career development; new forms of links between a junior and senior(s) are arguably needed.
- Tutelage. Changes in generational relations, as juniors and seniors alter the playing of their respective roles, mostly as the consequence of the above two patterns.

### **3. The legacy of national patterns: brief description of reforms in France and Spain**

France and Spain are home to some of the world's oldest universities. Their systems are profoundly shaped by the history of the academic "faculties" (in the continental sense of structures to deliver homogenous courses, often called schools in other countries) (Musselin 2004), and the influence of the 'chairs' (in American English, 'faculties') (Clark 1977). Both France and Spain trace the roots of their contemporary systems to centralised systems (Neave 2012), both countries' higher education systems having been strongly devised in a uniform and centralised way. Although each country does have its distinguishing features, a commonality is that institutions in France and Spain have not had much autonomy for almost two centuries. Only globalisation of higher education from one side (Espeland and Sauder 2007), and reforms in welfare states on the other side, paved the way for new approaches to higher education. Indeed, institutional autonomy has been a key feature of reforms in higher education in Europe (Estermann, Nokkala, and Steinel 2011).

Against this backdrop, academic careers have also been affected. In these Napoleonic countries, professional careers are based on the assumption that the State is the main funder and regulator of higher education, and that the academics are employed as civil servants. Previously, France and Spain applied different mechanisms for the recruitment and promotion of scholars, but in each country context, the intention was essentially that such systems would reward merit through public competition. The ‘massification’ of this process, led to a ‘tournament’ type of system (Musselin 2005). More recently, national policies have promoted greater autonomy in recruitment and promotion at institutional level, aiming at recognising and rewarding institutions (or other forms of units) according to designated achievements (Neave 2012).

### ***France***

Since the 1980s, policies for the academic French system have been oriented towards greater institutional autonomy (Neave 2012, 68-79). The 2007 *Loi Pécresse* stressed the assumption of institutional autonomy (Neave 2012, 101), awarding more power to the universities’ presidential offices. The Ministry assumed new forms of control over the higher education system, also awarding institutional contracts for a restricted period of five years (in place of the previous nine). The university managerial bodies have become more powerful in their functions, and they have more room for institutional strategy development (Musselin 2014; Paradeise and Thoenig 2013). In 2007, the state instituted the *Agence d’Évaluation de la Recherche et de l’Enseignement Supérieur* (AERES), an administrative authority designed to conduct research evaluation and quality assurance. Under this

development, French universities were forced to engage in the certified evaluation of teams and departments (Neave 2012, 88). AERES was also expected to push the universities towards entrepreneurial modes and improve overall attractiveness, particularly through the areas of institutional funding allocation and doctoral programs (Neave 2012, 82). AERES was dissolved in 2014. Some of the reasons for this decision are analysed further.

### *Spain*

In the late 1970s and 1980s, in the wake of the end of General Franco's dictatorship, the Spanish higher education system made rapid gains in terms of the share of the population enrolled and in the levels of scientific productivity. The first forms of teaching and research evaluation were also initiated in those years (Vázquez-Cupeiro and Elston 2006), aiming primarily to establish a minimal threshold of productivity. The award of *quinquennios* and *sexenios* salary increments (for teaching and research respectively, after five and six year periods as the terms suggest) was intended to reward seniority only if consistent productivity was recorded. In the early 1990s, the *sexenio* system became a tool applied even in career advancements (Cruz-Castro and Sanz-Menéndez 2007; Jiménez-Contreras, de Moya Anegón, and Delgado López-Cózar 2003; Marini 2018). At this point, CNEAI (*Comisión Nacional Evaluadora de la Actividad Investigadora* – National Committee for the Evaluation of Research) assumed a more relevant role. In 2001 the government enacted the Organic University Law (*Ley Orgánica 6/2001, de 21 de diciembre, de Universidades* – LOU), introducing university autonomy and stronger steering-at-a-distance tools (Vázquez-Cupeiro and Elston 2006), clearly inspired by new public management

principles. In 2002, a new agency for quality assurance known as ANECA (*Agencia Nacional de Evaluación de la Calidad y Acreditación*) was established. Individual-level accreditation of academics became a prerequisite for applications to any rank within the Spanish system (Zinovyeva and Bagues 2015). At the same time, a novel version of ‘tenure track’ was introduced. As in other areas of Spanish administration, the national agencies were in some cases flanked by regional entities for academic accreditation (Mora and Vidal 2007). In 2007, a new law amended some marginal aspects of LOU. In summary, Spanish policy developments sought to bring about higher education autonomy at an earlier date in comparison to the French case – assigning concrete powers to the tools of evaluation (Neave 2012, 112). The rationale was to award resources at the individual level, rather than at the department, faculty or institutional levels. Thus, the Spanish higher education reforms still retained an individual dimension to academic authority over career development.

#### **4. Methodology and institutional cases**

This paper examines qualitative interviews from two universities per country. Each university was chosen for variation in institutional age, size, concentration of disciplines, and geographical location.

The corpus of primary data comprises 43 in-depth interviews of 60 up to 120 minutes duration, conducted in French, Spanish or English. A gender balance in the sample was sought as far as possible (see Table 2). Interviewees were drawn from different hierarchical levels: from seniors (comprising rectors/presidents, vice-rectors/presidents, middle managers and other individuals chairing university bodies), down to more junior profiles (including staff without permanent positions). They represented three broad disciplinary areas: hard sciences; management and economics; other social sciences and humanities<sup>3</sup>. This categorisation reflects internationally agreed ways to organise disciplines, bibliometrics and rank publications (such as impact factor journals or the H index). In science subject areas, there are clearly-recognised ways to rank outputs. There are some agreements on how to do so in disciplines like economics or management. Seldom in the case of other social sciences, or even less frequently in the humanities, are there internationally-accepted methods to recognise the quality of publications. This often means that specific disciplinary methods to rank the quality of publications are used, and/or national generic methods – often also quite recent or still in development.

Table 2 around here

Given the potential for personal bias in academics' opinions about one's and other's career, it was appropriate to check their opinions against their position within a community.

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<sup>3</sup> For the sake of parsimony, the paper do not discuss disciplinary differences, as they do not result per se to be relevant, although representing considerably different publications traditions.

This was done by cross checking interviewees' observed academic standing as verified by their CVs, especially whenever they advanced critique against the evaluation system. Next section releases only a selection of excerpts.

Some information about institutions where data were collected are useful. FR1 is a Parisian university. The university president was one of the pioneers in adopting a new evaluation-driven culture, engaging top scholars in certain key disciplines. The implementation of this new vision has ensured that the university maintains a good level of research and competes well in enrolment of master's students. FR2 is a university that has only recently addressed the challenges of a merger whose patterns are similar to those discussed by Barrier and Musselin (2016). The academic affiliation and professional identity declared by the interviewees at this institution indicate that individuals still consider themselves part of their previous universities, or associated with the laboratory of the CNRS, in order to maintain the prestige of their affiliation.

ES1 is also a recently established institution (post-WWII), founded according to criteria intended to distinguish it from other Spanish universities. The national evaluation reports from CNEAI confirm a good positioning. Related to its success in evaluation, this university has recently adopted strategies for obtaining collateral sources of funding. The need for such an approach arises as both central and regional (*Comunidades*) government funding players faced increasing financial difficulties during the post-2008 crisis.

ES2 is a university that has traditionally tended to focus on applied research, in part due to its location within one of Spain's leading economic regions. As for ES1, the impacts of the global economic crisis reduced its ability to draw on commissions for applied

research funding, generating fluctuations in resource availability. However, unlike ES1, under CNEAI evaluation criteria, ES2 did not demonstrate relevant scientific productivity, and its position in national rankings was evidently poorer than expected if one had to rely on traditional reputation of that institution.

## **5. The effects of reforms to research evaluation on career development**

### ***Cultural capital: changes in scientific productivity toward a model driven by evaluation of research***

In both examined countries, there were widespread concerns over the effects of different tools of research evaluation on academics' publishing practices and the 'uses' of their evaluation, particularly in the disciplinary areas of the social sciences and humanities. Overall, it was implicit that changes brought about by research evaluation affect careers, and that concerns for one's reputation and future are prominent stimuli in changing how much, under which forms, and where to publish.

In France and Spain there was a frequent reaction concerning the changing mode of output: from books and book chapters towards articles, but also from single-author articles towards co-authored works, provided publications happen all in indexed journals. Respondent FR1\_5, active in the humanities, reported:

*I play by the rules. If I have to publish articles, or articles in some specific places, I do. The problem lies with the national management [epistemic] community, as we*

*must decide which journals are relevant. Meanwhile, they haven't indexed any journals in our field yet. However, I don't blame evaluation.*

Further evidence of this response was the academics' realisation of the need to change, meaning to increase their publications, in order to be considered 'research active', even to the potential detriment of their personal interests [ES1\_4]. Going further, a number of informants commented that 'in order to survive', and 'to cope with current times', they had to artificially 'multiply' their outputs. This type of comment was most explicitly expressed by respondents ES1\_6, ES2\_2 and FR1\_12, who reported that many academics now pursue this kind of novel strategy, especially in the social sciences, even though people would generally not be eager to admit to doing so.

Research evaluation reforms appear to have stimulated a shift from individual towards group work. This change is observed as being both real and effective (starting to work together in a horizontal way) and fictitious, or gamesmanship (artificially multiplying output, for instance by signing one another's work, for payback of the 'courtesy' on another occasion). Respondent ES2\_3 was among those who reported effective change:

*We hold regular, once or twice a year meetings to identify target journals and assess progress. We share data and work to rationalise and have more publications. We've been doing this since 2011 [...] For people like me, publishing became a matter of changing in order to develop one's career. [...] This [change] has destroyed the way prestige was accumulated in the previous generation. Now if you can't stay in a PhD committee, you're no-one. And you must have the sexenio [to chair a PhD committees]. All that [new evaluation*



*system] allowed for the emergence of people who caused conflicts, who could be cocky and loners. They can't work in teams.*

This interviewee also showed printed charts with deadlines hung in her shared office. This clearly refers to a 'partner mode' of research publication (Louven 2010), a strategy, which was not present in the group before 2011. The importance of accruing cultural capital via indexed publications has induced these academics to focus on strategies of rationalisation, effectiveness and efficiency. As reported, this change is not immune from some undesirable consequences, but previously such pattern of team behavior would not have been detected at all.

In France, this type of academic cultural capital is manifest via scientific affiliations and respective multiple co-authorships. Individuals may not see marginal individual advantages because one's prestige derives from the projects they are in, which in turn determine critically the opportunity of publications. For this reason, some heads of department are applying reward mechanisms linked to publications, as described by FR1\_15, FR2\_2.

Reforms in France and Spain have minted a new form of cultural capital. Participants from these two countries elaborated different versions of what is commonly called the 'publish or perish' scenario. This game is, overall, perceived as compulsory and unavoidable. In both countries, junior staff tend to flexibly adopt various changes to their publication strategies, also with more emphasis on collaborations, usually defined as co-authorships. In any case, the effects of research evaluation on the careers of junior staff depend on the relationships they are able to establish with senior staff. There are also

‘window-dressing’ strategies such as publishing chapters in books, permitting the multiplication of outputs. Some publications in journals, and certainly chapters in edited books, are still submitted in response to traditional invitation from personal contacts, rather than open transparent calls. Collectively, the findings related to junior staff in both countries reveal a new attention to quantity of outputs at the expense of quality, as has already been reported elsewhere in the literature (Woelert 2015).

Senior academics in France and Spain were particularly likely to complain that juniors are socialised to recognise ‘numbers’, rather than quality of research or intellectual influence. The younger generation is now more attentive to the need to show they are ‘research active’, while some older interviewees define in a way that we could fairly summarize as ‘fallacious hyperactivity’. For such junior staff, the quality of publications is not always the key to amassing scientific authority. In the observations of this research, it is difficult to disentangle unsubstantiated complaints about the reform effects from demonstrable effects. However, as Ochsner, Hug & Hans-Dieter (2013) found, that achievement of publications as a prerequisite for career advancement is substantially recognised as fair by younger interviewees. Compared to other studies (Hammarfelt and Rijcke 2015) data from this study do indicate that reforms to research evaluation have more successfully effectuated changes to academics’ practices. In particular, the introduction of evaluation tools appears to push younger scholars to ‘play the game’, since their entire future is at stake. Among newer generations, gender is not a particularly sensitive issue as it was found in another study (Danell and Hjerm 2013).

*Social capital: from all professors are patrons into an élite within professors*

One of the aims of research evaluation is to award capital in the form of prestige. In both France and Spain, accruing such capital can be used to achieve specific career advancements, due to ‘external’ pattern of both the French and Spanish academic labor markets (Musselin 2005). In both national cases, what discerns the strong professor from the weak one is not the shop floor dynamic within the guild (Clark 1983). It is nowadays a matter of having one’s research outputs acknowledged by agencies like ANECA or AERES. The effects of research evaluation on academics’ careers are thus indirect, though tangible examples exist. In Spain, the fact that chairing committees is contingent on possession of a *sexenio* reveals how academic authority is shaped. In France, one’s unit may be allowed to hire more staff if partnerships with colleagues with a prestigious affiliations are secured. Prestige of networks is predominant and may even override institutional affiliations.

In France, personal prestige is a matter of one’s institutional affiliation. The French context of academic career progression still appears to follow the rules of a guild system, although personal patriarchal leadership as the crucial locus of power seems to have weakened or even disappeared. A senior member of staff is not necessarily a patron, although the game is still – *à la Bourdieu* – a “conflict of the Faculties”.

*“Evaluation [...] is triggering conflicts among people sharing the same territory.... Ultimately [...] the affiliation to a specific Groupement d’intérêt scientifique [GIS]<sup>4</sup> is one of the ways to detect who is ‘in’ and who is ‘out’ of the*

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<sup>4</sup> GISs are temporary scientific networks formed in relation with the CNRS, for cooperation and synergies towards common research projects.

*circles that really matter in research. [...] If you want to join the club, you have to adjust yourself.” [FR1\_16].*

The GIS networks are substantial transversal “groups of groups” which usually – but not necessarily – share common past prestige. They also share a vision for the maintenance or development of such prestige – this vision being a requisite for the establishing of a GIS. The formation of these networks is part of a competitive procedure for applying for large grants.

In university FR\_2, such official networks, as well as the evaluation scores awarded by AERES, were seen as the basis for the legitimization of the research groups in the hard sciences. To this regard, respondent FR2\_2 stressed the significance of distinguishing oneself from the ‘neighbors’ within the campus in competing for higher prestige, through “*good or at least respectable affiliations with [other] universities and CNRS labs.*” In contrast, the extent to which research evaluation reforms have influenced the opening of professorial positions and funding for PhD studies is less clear. As FR2\_2 reported:

*The creation of PhD vacancies is not yet related to evaluation. For instance, we have a weak research centre around here, not tied with CNRS, and still they find resources to fund PhD scholarships. In the long term it [evaluation] could... it should have some role in [denying] PhDs. [...] The prestige of a lab is more important in hard sciences, however.*

Given these kinds of observations, it appears that evaluation may not always succeed in altering the direct mechanisms of recruitment and promotion as a pathway for achieving tangible changes toward research productivity. However, evaluation can affect

careers by altering the possibilities for the creation of new positions. In France, in contradiction with traditional patriarchal dynamics, a senior academic can now gain personal access to recruitment of younger staff (or be denied this opportunity) based on the assessment of their research. This is especially the case in the potential recruitment of post-doc and assistant professor positions. FR1\_8 says:

*Reputation is awarded by evaluation ... you are almost destroyed if you get a bad evaluation. To get new positions for assistant professorship, individuals have to stay in, or look for a good lab ... Individuals have no choice.*

The French cases thus indicate that research evaluation can affect career development through affiliation with a research group or department, as well as through the prestige signaled for that unit by institutional evaluation, both *ex post* (AERES) and *ex ante* (GIS). In France, where research evaluation scores and outputs are visible for the collective structures (institutions, faculties, departments, teams and networks), affiliations are becoming increasingly important in shaping one's career.

In the Spanish context, both of the institutional cases demonstrate that prestige has now become a form of social capital officially awarded mostly by the *sexenios*. Individual research evaluation apparently has taken more time to achieve changes in the way academics decide if and how to publish – according to what many older interviewees in Spain reported their and other colleagues' experiences. However, at the time of interviews, the common interpretation by interviewees is that an ambitious senior academic must obtain positive results. In particular, the *sexenio* is considered a prerequisite for committee chair appointments, and so to exercise influence therein. *“There are people who are labeled*

*for life. It is like a death of a son [if you don't get the sexenio]" [ES1\_6].* In effect, evaluation is seen as a process that filters out academics by denying prestige for some, despite accruing seniority in a high rank like that of *catedrático* (full professor). Interestingly, like in France, this process affects senior academics more directly. It only affects the opportunities of junior academics indirectly, in that they need to ensure they select a 'powerful professor' who is able to advance their career. Although still a chaired system, the Spanish context demonstrates that prestige and influence in the academe are informed by the national agency formed for the purpose of research evaluation. Academic social capital has become a function of academic cultural capital, which is in turn informed by the research evaluation system. In addition, especially for junior researchers, participation in certain prestigious programs for early career researchers like *Ramón y Cajal* may play a determining role in one's future academic career. Such status may grant a crucial advantage not easily lost at quite an early stage of their career (for instance when in their thirties). Conversely, for non-grant recipients, this lack of status can be a crucial delay hard to recover from. This observation is consistent with the literature on this topic (Cañibano, Otamendi, and Andújar 2009), and indeed confirms the so-called Saint Matthew effect described in the field of sociology of science.

In the experience of the interviewed individuals, evaluation shapes prestige to a significant extent. Not being a win-win game, evaluation pushes some individuals higher while pushing others towards the bottom of a brand new league. A senior academic is no longer a patron as such, as academic career progression is less likely to be down to their influence alone. He/she is no longer the only person a junior academic is supposed to stay in touch with. Senior academics' performance (especially in Spain) and affiliation

(especially in France) create a certain degree of stratification analogous to the stratification under construction at the institutional level (Popp Berman and Paradeise 2016). The manner in which this stratification happens, however, varies according to specific country contexts.

Overall, the personage of the patron appears to have been reconfigured, more than overcome. In Spain, ‘personal influence’ remains the basic model of authority, but the reconfiguration of powers and credentials – the new symbolic goods in academia – are more open from those of the junior-senior dyad. Similarly, in France the authority of a full professor is not attributed to their rank or seniority, although this may vary depending on the professor’s participation in particular projects. Professorial authority is a matter of periodical measurements of performance and positioning in networks. In Spain, a full professor who ‘fails’ in achieving *sexenios* is left in a chair without a desk, or as an officer without troops – resulting in a situation not so different from a professor in France with poor links with other scientific teams. This may confirm the general assumption that new forms of symbolic goods are effective in career development. In particular, one’s optimal academic social capital ought to look at *larger* clusters – implicitly confirming the institution of peer judgement. However, the social capital effect takes place within the context, as recent studies demonstrate (Godechot 2016; Zinovyeva and Bagues 2015). In any case, when it comes to talk about recruitment and promotions, social capital stems in part from relations between junior (those aspiring to career development) and senior academics (peers in the position to take decisions upon this). Evidence from this analysis also appears consistent with previous studies in Spain (López-Piñeiro and Hicks 2015).

### ***Tutelage: changes in relations between the generations***

It is expected that the way in which senior and junior staff interact will change, as loyal affiliation under the protection of a senior academic is no longer a guarantee of career advancement. Hard evidence of cultural capital should be key to academic success – if one followed a meritocratic framework. Things are nevertheless more complex.

The case of FR1 highlights the contrasts between traditional patterns of career advancement and changes brought about since higher education reforms were introduced. In particular, interviewee FR1\_11 described how his supervisor would not permit him to publish before obtaining his PhD. His perception instead was that he should be active in publication, like PhD candidates in hard sciences do, “*in order to be prepared once the PhD [studentship] is finished*”. The argument presented by a senior academic in the same institution [FR1\_16] was that a junior scholar could be ‘*wasted*’ by early immature work, which represents a more traditional way of understanding entry into the scientific community.

However, the inter-generational contrasts were even more apparent and more openly debated in Spain, where evaluation-based tools have hindered the traditional patriarchal pattern. The comments of the respondents exposed different views over the advantages and disadvantages of both the traditional and the new ‘brave’ context. Comments from two of the respondents exemplify these contrasting factions:



*They [junior academics] are like those novelists who get paid according to the gross number of written pages.... The university is based on endogamous relations, namely pupil-maestro relations. Now this system is broken. People only try to obtain credits, points to be accrued. For this, maestros aren't necessary, they [juniors] think. We get lonely and arrogant junior staff, and they handle the power just like old seniors used to do. [ES1\_16].*

In contrast, a junior academic describes their position in the following way:

*My supervisor treated me as a peer, and I love him as an uncle. But I have to say that around me this is not the normal relationship. Generally, the culture is that of the catedrático [full professor] who manages his/her power [...]. With ANECA something has changed. You could have some [individual, personal] influence, but [under ANECA] not so much. [ES1\_5]*

As these passages suggest, the relative influence of one's 'patriarch' versus 'objective' evaluation is blamed for being unfair, in Spain. More interestingly, different people report different reasons. A junior academic who got a steeped career due to a particular publication strategy blamed the patriarchal patterns for having been non-productive. The senior academic are inclined to simply maintain the opposite, reasoning that experience teaches him that some forms of intellectual relations (labeled as one may prefer) between junior and senior academics ought to exist anyway. In general, it seems that the two powers coexist, and depending on the particular context, one may overturn the other. One scholar in her 40s [ES2\_04] highlighted the problems of initiating the new 'partnership' model, which is that of being advised to publish.

*I've been here for 18 years and nobody has ever told us to publish [in indexed journals].*

*This is one of the problems. In our field few journals are ISI [indexed in highly*

*established international repositories], and they have been so only for a short time, so we are behind in comparison with other fields [present in ES2].*

Across differences by national contexts and disciplines, many of the younger cohorts saw their seniors as ‘lazy’, and benefitting from easier career progression due to the different times they enjoyed decades earlier. On the other hand, seniors were more likely to describe the ineffectiveness of policies, reporting “perverse” or unintended outcomes, such as poor quality of publications (especially in terms of degree of innovation), or arrogant young scholars who can advance their careers rapidly and act like *self-made persons*. Both junior and senior academics can make allegations about lack of transparency:

*All the CNEAI system is managed by the same kind of dynamics that destroyed the university. They are not external, or different. The system continues to be that of clientele and patrons. .... To me the Spanish higher education system has always been a market of resources: not intellectual ones - resources for friends, and for friends of friends. [ES1\_10]*

Overall, it seems clear that the changes in accruing cultural and social capital have broken the traditional power relations, reshuffling and reconfiguring power within the academic community. More specifically, loyalty to a single senior academic (if seen from a junior academic’s perspective) or cultivating a restricted circle of junior academics (if seen from the perspective of a senior academic), does not represent the best strategy of career advancement anymore. The consequences in the relations between junior and senior academics, and the eventual patterns in developing a career, are present and more important than simple concerns about the practical details of evaluation procedures. There is not

enough ground to support the claim that certain opportunistic behaviors are more a matter of subject discipline than differences between national research evaluation systems.

The relationships between junior and senior academics (Bourdieu 1984, 53-62) are and continue to be after these reforms at the root of university life and academic career trajectories. According to the findings of this study, senior academics had been socialised to expect power from rank and seniority. Now they report decreasing respect, or respect conditional also on other performative prerequisites. On the other hand, given their observation of increasing difficulties in obtaining permanent positions, and new demands for publications, junior academics still observe senior academics as inheriting the benefits of the 'good times'. The harsher conditions for junior staff were particularly evident in Spain, and were reported much less explicitly in France. In response, the emergence of new symbolic goods has induced the junior academics to contest traditions, claiming formal equality with their seniors based on their publication history, even at the stage of just completing their PhD.

As an observer of these interview extracts may glimpse, complaints (and respective arguments) reflect broader attitudes to changing definitions of authority. This is in essence an academic dispute among peers about how a person may become a peer, with the role of novel agencies in measuring worthiness notable in this process.

Changes to tutelage have also interfered with expected forms of inbreeding and its apparent opposite phenomenon, mobility. Academics who have advanced their careers via inbreeding are allegedly less productive (Vázquez-Cupeiro and Elston 2006; Hargens and Farr 1973; Mora 2015; Cruz-Castro and Sanz-Menéndez 2010) because mobility is

expected to nurture researchers at the early stage of their careers. Spanish-affiliated interviewees in particular reported this apparent trade-off between loyalty to a place and skills or network acquisition. The condition of being a grant recipient (Cañibano, Otamendi, and Andújar 2009) may exempt some junior academics from the dilemma of becoming mobile or not. To have one's early career stage funded by prestigious programs is also an alternative way to gain authority that interviewees, especially the younger ones, see more distinctively.

## **6. Discussion: reforms as reconfiguration of authority**

The discussion of this empirical study can be summarised under three points.

Firstly, despite the different policy models adopted in France and Spain, academics in both countries recognise that the transmission of prestige is currently following new pathways. This is true also in the social sciences and humanities. Nevertheless, this qualitative study does not provide evidence that new 'symbolic goods' can completely overturn some entrenched patterns like the patriarchal one. The reason is that the partnership mode ought not to be understood as necessarily levelling hierarchies between ranks. The essence of the argument is that these reforms triggered clashes of opinions where authority is at stake. Furthermore, it is not clear whether differences in academic practices in the two countries are due to a greater openness in discussing such a sensitive issue as career advancement in Spain, or if indeed it is the national framework which has

effectuated more change in the Spanish context. At the very least, it can be surmised that these symbolic goods can indeed bring about: *i*) changes in the composition of some appointment committees; *ii*) alterations to the degree of prestige of the positions at stake; *iii*) differentials in developing groups via appointments in a zero-sum game.

Secondly, the national systems and contexts show similarities in producing changes in the three discussed dimensions (Cultural capital; Social Capital; Tutelage) although national frameworks, disciplines and institutions all represent important features. In this sense, findings might be valid for other similar countries, namely those externally-led (Musselin 2005).

Thirdly, the study finds that new symbolic goods have triggered a zero-sum game, which implies that these changes to patterns in academic career progression are probably also due to the general context. Policy reforms that take place in higher education systems which have become more competitive and which are under financial pressures (Popp Berman and Paradeise 2016) tend to incur outspoken criticism during their implementation.

Overall, new evaluation-induced practices are more effective at meeting the goals of change towards higher research productivity and higher quality of research under the new, albeit differently shaped, “evaluative state” (Neave 2012). Any change engendered by reforms upon what good research is belies the more general theoretical assumption that: *“capitals breeds capital, and holding positions conferring social influence determines and justifies holding new positions”* (Bourdieu 1984, 85). Nevertheless, three caveats are to be kept in mind. Firstly, more horizontal and collegial teamwork does not necessarily eradicate any patriarchal pattern: clusters as defined by Terry Clark (1973) can be seen as

a manifestation in a larger scale of a culture pivoted on peers' management of authority. Secondly, the competition among senior academics (or groups of senior academics) does not nullify academic hierarchies. On the contrary, the locus of power (authority) changes position as justification and legitimation change, highlighting a dynamic that escapes a mere logic of homeostatic power between formal hierarchical levels (Marini & Reale 2016). Thirdly, the difference between a patriarch who accepts new forms of working and a team where a senior acts in the interests of his/her junior members of staff can be very tricky.

In other words, the cultural aspect of academic life is changing, and it is potentially conflict-laden at the same time. The micro-level changes to academic career progression practices analysed in this study suggest more conflicting consequences of reforms in Spain, although an overall look at national policies revealed more problems in policy implementation in France.

This paper has some limitations in accounting empirically how reforms may change academic authority. First, an argumentation based on the assumption that reconfiguration of powers is a by-product of reforms should consider some actors here neglected, such as agencies' officials. Although some interviewees were part of the policy-making at national level or part of evaluation processes with different roles in different moment in time, this sort of analysis in the future might include their voices not only sampling from academics, but interviewing also professionals who are officially members of such agencies. Second, future research designs in the topic could better, and with more originality, contribute by means of accounting more widely by disciplines, institutional affiliations, stage at one's career and other factors. Possibly mixed methods could optimize what respectively qualitative and quantitative approaches are more likely to collect.

## 7. Conclusions

In this conclusion section, insights about this complex phenomenon drawing on the concept of isomorphism are developed. At individual level, both French and Spanish academics conformed to the game of competition and performativity, exemplified clearly by rankings and bibliometric indicators. At national level, both countries devised ways to increase the way the academic system, especially in their research components, may perform better – assuming that internalization of a performance rhetoric by academics is per se a manifestation of isomorphism. Although both countries have patterns in common in terms of their overall academic systems, including academic careers and recognition of academic authority, national policy tools put in place by higher education reforms were different in several regards. The French reform insisted on collective measures of research productivity, thus challenging the peer-led system of awarding academic worth. The Spanish reform retained evaluation of research productivity at the level of the individual academic, seemingly effecting no change to the type of actors entrusted with minting credentials. There are some notable differences in academics' respective reactions, and the lessons that might be learned from this.

This paper analyses the changes to academic career advancement practices in these two systems, assuming that empirical evidence about these academics' experiences is essential to understand the actual implementation of steer-at-the-distance tools retrospectively. In analyzing reactions to changes affecting careers, the paper firstly

identifies any actual changes effected, and secondly, it discusses the extent to which such changes have revealed to be viable.

The policy-making contribution of this analysis is ultimately that evaluative tools can be effective in changing behaviors – although some evaluation avoidance or some perverse outcomes may always happen – without necessarily reshuffling the roles of the academic players that were active in the pre-reform era that much. Reconfiguration, defined as the attribution of different roles to actors (Musselin 2017), to this regard appears to be a cogent conceptualisation to describe changes in the relationships among players, including those changes brought about via new research evaluation agencies. A new player like an agency imposes changes in the way the pre-existing actors have to play a competitive game – academic recognition and authority being the precious resource at stake here. This policy experiments to reconfigure academic power in France and Spain make an interesting comparison.

Policy reform in France necessitated a strong redefinition of players, giving *actorhood* to ‘Universities out of universities’, creating a new oligarchy of power (the top-management, or senior managers) (Musselin 2017) and problematic discussions (Aust and Gozlan 2018). Drawing from documental analysis of policy reforms, some formal cooperation in France brought consequently to *re-politicise* such an arena like AERES. This happened proposing a top-down communication. Instead of academics creating new work practices as a means to implement the reform, AERES became the place to pursue a meta-dialogue about what the reform should have established in concrete terms. The confrontation developed within AERES proved to make it impossible to overcome a stalemate, especially when trying to import the concept of *impact* (Gozlan 2015) – a clear



isomorphic force of Anglo-Saxon derivation. This phase of national debate about the same role of AERES exacerbated the clash between the goals of policy-makers and academic peers. Public discussions in France, which took on a political nature, compelled the State at a certain point to dissolve AERES. AERES was replaced via “*loi Fioraso*” (*loi relative à l’enseignement supérieur et à la recherche* – Law regarding higher education and research) with HÉCERES (*Haut Conseil de l’évaluation de la recherche et de l’enseignement supérieur* – High Council for the Evaluation of research and tertiary education) in 2013. The fact that a stalemate was overcome also manifested an actual change in academic life was (Aust and Gozlan 2018). As a matter of fact, the French higher education system has chosen to change the actors who decide who is going to prevail in the career race. An academic career in France has moved on from a single patron system towards system where what counts is the research outcome of the group (or group of groups). New patrons are being established (if the term ‘patron’ can still be used), under the middle management roles and in peers’ discretion in pursuing evaluations, being this in line with some wider European trends (Reale & Marini 2017). These two actors (middle managers and agency’s reviewers), plus the respective ‘winners’ of resources, have increased their power, at the expense of those who remain without material and symbolic resources (Musselin 2017, 247). In this sense, the French case has been a case of coercive isomorphism.

The Spanish case of policy reform, on the other hand, entailed no fewer controversies among academics. Yet, the Spanish case differs from the French one in a way that is not to be underestimated. The role of the individual chair, the *catedrático*, has remained untouched and unchallenged. The authoritative functions of a full professor in

Spain are no longer ascribed to their rank as such, but their authority is now subject to achievements and performance in research as certified by an external agency. Within this frame of performance indicators, and also accounting for scarce resources in comparison to previous decades, the presence of other actors such as evaluation agencies do not suggest a reconfiguration of power in the Spanish case – or at least not with the same significance as the French case. Although reforms in Spain triggered complaints, the root of authority remained unquestioned and based on individual merit. Recent empirical research on the issue (Sanz-Menéndez and Cruz-Castro 2019) confirms substantial support expressed by academics for steer-at-the-distance tools to determine career progression. As far as the rationale of a reform pivoted in evaluation of research is to find the best way to recognise what is individual merit, reforms are remarkably less problematic – the Spanish case instructs. A zero-sum game in terms of reshuffling of powers, or reconfiguration of power, happened to a much lesser extent in comparison with the French reform. In fact, the Spanish system did not substantially change the players who convey authority, leaving the competition for career advancement a primarily individual endeavor.

Thus, under the theoretical framework of the neo-institutional perspective, France pursued a *coercive isomorphism* in relation to global pressures (Musselin 2017). The Spanish case, in turn, could arguably be considered an example of *mimetic isomorphism*. In Spain, the clear defining of ‘desirable academic behavior’ in terms of bibliometric publications is in a sense more straightforward. The way academic authority is exercised can be changed. The combination of funding rationales, career trajectories and ways to signal prestige are all relevant in achieving these changes.

This study has also revealed some interesting differences between Spain and France in terms of unintended consequences of policy reform. The way a system as a whole may react to certain imposed changes can help to explain why two seemingly similar higher education systems encountered such different trajectories in terms of the feasibility of policy implementation. Bearing a non-normative stance in mind, a cautionary tale can be advanced for policy-makers: to not anticipating unintended outcomes of inner mechanisms of authority (meaning career mechanisms of the system at stake, albeit other features might be equally relevant) is not a viable practice especially when striving for system-wide changes. Otherwise, policy-makers will have to accept the prospect of adjusting their own lawmaking afterwards.

The lesson for future policy-makers might be that to pursue system-wide change to academic practices via external policy tools (one of the main ways isomorphism may occur, though not the only one) is somehow inevitable. Nevertheless, there are alternative ways to effectuate change which aim at concrete change with minimal frictions among policy actors and which minimise undesired consequences such as *game playing*. The policy approach to seek deep change where new actors are assigned policy power does not necessarily foster a greater extent of change or more rapidly adopted change than incremental change based only on imitating bibliometric practices. The former, i.e. the French approach, is more likely to lead to a rejection crisis and hence further need by policy makers to listen to the voice of the academic world. The French case also appears more likely to lead to the necessity to recalibrate the agencies operating in the system. The Spanish case, (a case of incremental change based mostly on importing bibliometrics practices), is a slower and progressive approach to reform, and just in this sense it may be

less demanding in terms of policy *re*-making (with the exclusion of marginal incremental adjustments). Yet, the Spanish case is not necessarily characterized by less conflict in policy implementation. It is interesting to note that such conflicts more likely happened just at the level where changes were supposed to happen (e.g. individuals' and small teams' behaviors) in the Spanish case. Whether one type of isomorphism (assuming optimistically that any type of isomorphism can really be forecasted by policy-makers beforehand) is to be preferred over another is probably dependent on the specific circumstances of a given context and policy-making preferences.

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