

**The dawn of a new academic professionalism in France?  
Facing the challenges of imposed reform**

## INTRODUCTION

In late 2011 the French National Research Agency (l'Agence nationale de recherche [ANR]) launched a funding initiative, *Initiatives d'excellence en formations innovantes* (IDEFI), for 'ambitious projects representing the highest standards of international excellence' designed to provide innovative, 'flagship', university-based training and teaching that would be focused on, *inter alia*, employability, equality of opportunity, internationalisation and interdisciplinarity. The ANR evidently has high hopes that those projects selected for funding will lead the way in transforming the nature and the status of French higher education. There is a reason for such hopes. They reflect a perceived need to make radical changes to the nature and, by extension, the quality, of teaching in French universities. Such change is considered necessary to deal with both increased admissions onto French university courses and reforms to the French higher education system that are generally perceived to have altered and to be in the process of altering the nature of the work of French academics. This paper is focused on these changes to academic working life: both what has occurred and what is anticipated. We examine the nature of the changes and, drawing on theoretical perspectives, address the question: is this the dawn of a new academic professionalism in France, and, if so, what is the nature of this new professionalism? We outline very briefly: what French higher education currently 'looks like'; how it has evolved, and what the consequences are for academics in French universities of this evolution and the consequent changes to their professionalism.

## THE FRENCH HIGHER EDUCATION SYSTEM: AN OVERVIEW OF ITS EVOLUTION

The French higher education system is defined by an ambiguous duality where democratic mass provision co-exists with selective elitism. Whilst university education is available to any holder of the *baccalauréat*, the *grandes écoles* - exclusive establishments that are probably best described as France's Oxbridge or Ivy League – remain impenetrable to all except the privileged minority. Yet the last few decades has seen a dramatic rise in the number of *baccaluréans* – a change that represents the transition from an elitist to a mass system of higher education in France.

Sweeping changes have come, too, in the form of government reforms. In the full conference paper we shall outline the nature of each of the key reforms, which add up to nothing less than a 'shake-up' of French higher education. These include the requirement for institutions (if they want to have a chance of securing funding) to come together and work together, and to align the foci of their research activity with specific topics that are determined and, subject to competitive tender in response to its specific initiatives, potentially funded by the newly created French National Research Agency. Added to this is the introduction of a form of research activity assessment on the part of the French Ministry of Education, requiring academics to produce a specified number of publications of the requisite quality. A new constituency of (potential) university students has also emerged, the defining features of which are that they are the first generation within their families to attend university, represent lower social classes than those from which French higher education has typically and historically populated its lecture halls and teaching rooms, and, as a result, generally have different kinds of learning and acculturation needs from those of what was hitherto the 'typical' French university student: one from a middle class, well-educated family, and comfortable with the norms and expectations prevalent within French higher education institutions.

The point is that this collection of changes to France's higher education system seems destined to impact, to varying degrees, upon the working lives of those who have to contend with them: most notably, academics. So have the changes effected an evident or a potential new professionalism for academics in France, and, if so, what does or might this new professionalism look like?

#### THE EMERGENCE OF A NEW PROFESSIONALISM IN THE FRENCH ACADEMY? SPECULATION ON ITS FORM, NATURE AND CAUSES

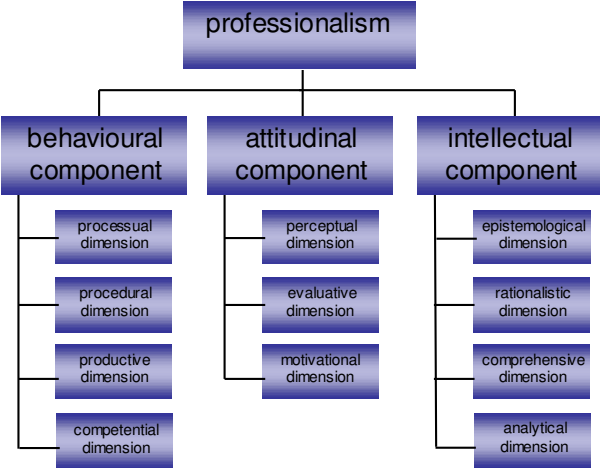
It would be remiss of us to try to address the above questions without first clarifying our interpretation of professionalism, for it is a term that is often glibly bandied about without adequate definition or conceptualisation. In the full conference we shall provide a fuller analysis of the concept, drawing on the work of key researchers in the field (e.g. Evetts, 2001; Freidson, 2001; Kolsaker, 2008; Nixon, 2001; Nooredgraaf, 2007). Here, for brevity, we present the conceptualisation of professionalism that we shall adopt in addressing whether or not a new professionalism is emerging in the French academy: that of Linda Evans (2008; 2011), who defines professionalism as:

work practice that is consistent with commonly-held consensual delineations of a specific profession or occupation and that both contributes to and reflects perceptions of the profession's or occupation's purpose and status and the specific nature, range and levels of service provided by, and expertise prevalent within, the profession or occupation, as well as the general ethical code underpinning this practice (Evans, 2011, p. 855).

Evans's conceptualisation essentially deconstructs professionalism into key constituent parts, labelled concisely and generically. It is represented pictorially in Figure 1 as a conceptual model or taxonomy.

As indicated in Figure 1, Evans’s taxonomy or model identifies three main constituent components of professionalism: behavioural, attitudinal, and intellectual. These – and the further dimensions identified within each - will be fully explained in the full conference paper. We adopt Evans’s conceptualisation not only in the interests of conceptual clarity but also because of its potential to serve as an analytical framework for our consideration, in the next section, of whether or not a new professionalism for academics is emerging in France.

Figure 1: the componential structure of professionalism



It is not enough simply to claim that a professionalism is, to a greater or lesser extent, ‘new’; meaningful analyses go beyond such vagaries and approximations; they identify the precise nature, and indicate the extent, of the ‘newness’. To build such specificity and precision into our analysis we apply Evans’s conceptual model or taxonomy of professionalism as an analytical tool, using it to examine which specific elements or dimensions of academic professionalism in France are likely to change. Our examination is informed, in part, by evidence of parallel changes in other, related contexts.

Table 1, in the Appendix presents an overview of the anticipated nature of any new academic professionalism likely to emerge in France, identifying specific changes in relation both to Evans’s taxonomy of professionalism, and to the specific reforms or changes to the

sector that we shall examine in more detail in the full conference paper. It will be seen that quite considerable changes to academic professionalism could potentially evolve over the coming years – and have already, in some cases, begun to be evident. However, we also observe that that such potential change may, in the final analysis, turn out to be less intense and less widespread than theory- and policy analysis-informed reasoning suggests; for recent history has shown that, in the Anglo-Saxon world, ‘demanded’ or ‘required’ professionalism – that which governments, for example, through reform initiatives, try to impose upon workforces – is often diluted when it becomes translated into ‘enacted’ professionalism (Evans, 2011), and when members of those workforces (in the context of this paper: academics in France) bring their own values-and priorities-influenced agency to bear. Whether this is likely to occur in the case of French academics, in the context of French academic and wider societal culture, will be discussed.

## **Références**

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## Appendix: Table 1

*Table 1: Conjectured changes to academic professionalism in France, by dimension (as identified by Evans, 2011), in relation to specific policy reforms or changes*

	French higher education policy or practice shift or initiative				
	<i>PRES</i>	<i>AERES</i>	<i>ANR</i>	governance	<i>nouveaux lycéens</i>
<b>dimension of academic professionalism conjectured to change</b>					
<b>behavioural</b>					
procedural	adoption of new procedures relating to funding applications & administration	adoption of new procedures that are integral to the evaluation mechanisms	adoption of new procedures relating to funding applications & administration	adoption of or compliance with new governance-related procedures	
productive	increased collaborative/ co-authored output	increased research output; increased time/attention on course provision		increased administrative activity	increased time on teaching planning
processual	wider collaborative interaction & work practices	greater focus on research activity that corresponds with the new evaluation system; increased focus on documentation that will be evaluated	increased focus on funding priorities identified by the <i>ANR</i>	greater proportion of academic practice devoted to administrative processes	adoption of new teaching approaches
competential	widening of skills / competences required for: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• collaborative working</li> <li>• strategy development</li> <li>• strategic working</li> </ul>	enhancement of skills required to produce work of the required standard (e.g. analysis, writing) & for coping with the evaluation mechanism	enhancement of skills required to prepare successful funding applications	enhancement of skills required to carry out administrative tasks	enhancement of skills required to teach in a manner that engages students and caters for differentiated needs
<b>attitudinal</b>					
perceptual	changed perceptions of different sector (e.g. university academics of <i>grandes école</i> sector and vice versa); changed perceptions of the	changed perception of academic practice and of its components; changed perception of evaluation systems and procedures			changed perceptions of the typical French HE student

	nature, process & purpose of research; changed perceptions of different methodologies and disciplinary traditions and knowledge bases; changed perceptions of institutional/ organisational affiliation and of the unit of affiliation				
(e)valuative	altered valuing of collaborative & inter-institutional work	changes to the value placed on research as a component of academic practice; re-prioritisation of practice that is required for the evaluation process			changes to the value placed on issues related to the democratisation of HE (e.g. social justice; equality of opportunity; access to HE)
motivational	altered motivation levels; changes to factors that influence motivation	altered motivation levels; changes to factors that influence motivation	altered motivation levels; changes to factors that influence motivation	altered motivation levels; changes to factors that influence motivation	altered motivation levels; changes to factors that influence motivation
<b>intellectual</b>					
epistemological	widening of the knowledge bases drawn upon/utilised		changes to the knowledge bases drawn upon/utilised		widening of the knowledge bases underpinning teaching practice
rationalistic	increased need to rationalise decision-making		increased need to rationalise decisions/ proposals		
comprehensive	increased understanding of other institutions / sectors/ disciplinary traditions, etc.; increased methodological and substantive understanding	increased understanding of what needs to be done to satisfy the requirements imposed by the evaluation system	increased understanding of what needs to be done to secure research funding		increased understanding of students' differentiated needs; increased understanding of the principles and practice of teaching that engages
analytical	increased capacity for analysis through development of analytical skills				