

# HOW TO REMAIN COLLEGIAL WHEN PRESSURE FOR CHANGE IS HIGH?

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## ABSTRACT

*The French higher education system has experienced reforms since the 2000s that gradually emphasized the executive power of universities and the centralization of decision-making. This culminated with the excellence initiatives (I dex) that concentrated 7.7 billion euros on only nine institutions to create “world-class” universities and made their leaders responsible for the local allocation of this substantial endowment. The universities’ executives had four years to complete changes in governance in order to see their institution permanently awarded the title and the funding of I dex. The hiring process is one of the elements that this policy impacted the most within these universities, enabling leaders to create new kinds of positions and control the hiring process. However, by looking at the hiring practices within three different I dex, we will show that collegiality did not disappear but rather it evolved: in the three cases, the closest colleagues have been marginalized but decision-making remained collective and in the hands of academics chosen by the university executives. Variations in the intensity of this evolution could be observed according to two dimensions. First, the scientific reputation of the university: the higher it is, the less collegiality is transformed. Second, the level of external pressures: the less*

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*collegial universities have relaxed their hiring practices after the evaluation that permanently granted them the label of Idex.*

**Keywords:** Top-down and bottom-up collegiality; France; universities; academic recruitment; policies of excellence; academic leaders

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Hiring new academics is a crucial decision in universities. While the renewal or creation of a position and the affiliated profile might, in many institutions, result from a negotiation between the hiring department or laboratory and university leaders,<sup>1</sup> the selection of the candidate generally remains a collegial decision in the hands of the closest colleagues. Therefore, peer review for promotion or hiring is often considered to be a fundamental characteristic of collegial governance (Gerhardt et al., 2023, Vol. 86; Sahlin & Eriksson-Zetterquist, 2016, p. 3).

The recent French excellence initiative offered the university leaders of the few institutions that have been selected as “excellent” and labeled “Idex” (Initiative d’excellence) the possibility to become much more involved in these processes and to challenge the role of their closest colleagues. In most of the Idex, specific positions (called “chairs<sup>2</sup>”) have been created and funded by the budget received from having this label of excellence. Even if the creation and management of these “chairs” are just one of the many aspects that Idex universities have announced in their applications, it is worth studying for the following two reasons. First, because hiring processes are often considered to be a central indicator for collegiality as mentioned above. Second, because these new positions have now been generalized to all institutions and the ministry has promised to create 2000 of them within the next 10 years, along with the traditional positions. The Idex thus paved the way for the introduction of new career paths (Musselin, in press). These positions differ from the usual academic positions at French universities – that are civil servant positions – and generally take the form of tenure track positions. Moreover, we often observed that their profiles have been imposed by the university leaders, who also set up the hiring committees. These new positions rely on dedicated hiring processes, and finally, they give access to better working conditions and to a research package.

This involvement of executive teams in such hiring decisions seems to challenge collegiality as the peers traditionally involved in these processes are frequently bypassed. This is the issue that will be addressed and investigated in this paper. Three main points will be discussed, building on the empirical work conducted on three institutions labeled Idex.

First, we will look at what remains of the traditional collegial hiring system with the implementation of the Idex. In the literature on universities as collegial organizations, two main positions prevail. Some authors consider collegial governance and hierarchical management to be contradictory and that it is an either/or situation, while others observe more hybrid forms when some aspects

of collegiality may coexist with more hierarchical forms of management. Do the new positions replace collegiality by hierarchy or combine both?

Second, research on university governance and reputation has shown that higher education institutions with a strong research reputation are more collegial (less managerial). In order to test this assumption in our case, we decided to study three IDEX with different statuses. One of them already had a strong international reputation and a large and constituted research sector. For the other two, the IDEX was an opportunity to become world-class, but they were not there yet. We compared how they introduced the new positions and managed them.

Finally, the IDEX are good empirical cases to address the reversibility of collegiality decrease. Most studies look at how collegiality can be weakened but very rarely question whether a reverse dynamic is possible. As will be explained below, the IDEX was first selected for a four-year period, at the end of which they had to pass an evaluation and convince the jury that they achieved what they planned in their applications. Some IDEX succeeded (two out of the three IDEX under study), some had their probation period extended and had to pass another evaluation (one in our case), while others failed entirely. From this, we could observe whether the management of the chairs has evolved after the IDEX successfully passed the evaluation.

Before developing these three points, we will briefly present the French university system and the call for IDEX, outline our theoretical framework and our methodology, and present our findings. In the last section, we will discuss these findings.

## **2. THE FRENCH HIGHER EDUCATION SYSTEM: RECENT TRENDS, THE INITIATIVE OF EXCELLENCE AND ACADEMIC RECRUITMENTS**

Since 2005, the French system is experiencing a vast movement of reforms aimed at increasing its performance and its visibility. We will highlight two that are particularly relevant to our study. We will present them before describing how academics are hired for civil servant positions.

### *2.1. More Institutional Autonomy But Still a Collegial Governance*

The autonomy of universities has increased with the 2007 act entitled Freedom and Responsibility for Universities. Academic leaders have been empowered (Chatelain-Ponroy et al., 2012; Mignot-Gérard, 2019; Musselin et al., 2012) and management tools have developed in French universities. Nevertheless, it is important to bear in mind that the governance of French universities still shares many of the characteristics that define collegial organizations. For instance, university presidents and deans are still elected and not appointed, and they take over leading positions for a limited period (two terms of a maximum of four years each for university presidents). They do not have a pure hierarchical position even if they have to make decisions, set priorities, and are seen primarily as leaders. It is also interesting to note that most French university presidents chose to have a large number of vice-presidents (frequently more than 10) who

are mostly academics expected to deal with a specific sector (for instance, human resources, research, internationalization, budget, digitalization, etc.). The vice-presidents must (or should) work hand in hand with the administrative office in charge of the same specific sector and are expected to defend academic perspectives in the domain they are in charge of and to relay information from the bottom to the top. Their role is even more important because in France the relationships between the deans and the president are traditionally difficult, the former rarely playing the role of intermediaries between the top and the bottom of the university (Chatelain-Ponroy et al., 2012; Mignot-Gérard, 2006). Finally, the role of the deliberative bodies remains important in French universities and their composition, even if narrower since the 2007 act, still aims to be largely representative.

### 2.2. *The Search for Excellent Universities*

Second, since 2009 the French government has launched an excellence initiative (called Programme d'Investissement d'Avenir, PIA). Four waves of highly selective calls for proposals have been initiated between 2010 and 2022. The first wave focused on excellence in higher education and research. It entailed calls for research labs of excellence (Labex), research equipment of excellence (Equipex), and calls for excellent institutions (I dex). The later call has been organized to identify excellent universities (that are labeled “I dex”) and provide them with an important complementary budget. Up to €7.7 billion were allocated through the four rounds of this I dex call.<sup>3</sup>

Excellent scientific performance was a necessary condition for an institution to be qualified as an I dex but the transformation of governance was the real decisive factor. The I dex call served the on-going restructuring of the French university landscape. No individual institutions, but only consortia of institutions (universities and/or *grandes écoles*) located on the same territory were allowed to jointly apply for this call, and they were expected to propose a strong governance of the consortium. Until 2019,<sup>4</sup> this strong governance meant setting priorities and implementing them, adopting an integrated management of the consortium that most of the time resulted in a merger. However, it did not mean changing the statutes of the university, the mode of designation of the president and deans, or the role and composition of the deliberative bodies. The applying university leaders should convince the jury that the future institution will reach a “critical” size and will be a complete university with all the disciplines; while many French universities have a strong disciplinary orientation, either in humanities and social sciences or in experimental sciences and medicine. They also have to demonstrate how they will implement this strong governance and be able to identify priorities and make decisions. Currently, eight of the nine confirmed I dex are new institutions born from the merger of the member institutions from the former applying consortium. These double expectations have sometimes led to universities being labeled I dex which were not the most scientifically predominant within the French higher education system. Some were even selected over some of the most renowned Parisian establishments.

In order to secure the additional funding attached to this label the selected consortia had to prove, after four years, that a new integrated institution had been created and that it benefited from a strong governance. The scientific priorities announced in the IDEX project must have been set and specific devices developed in order to selectively allocate the IDEX budget to those considered to be the best researchers, or those proposing the best teaching programs. The labeling of some universities as IDEX is thus expected to increase the differentiation of the French system by the concentration of supplementary resources on a few institutions as well as the internal differentiation within each IDEX (Harroche, 2021).

Because the internal selective allocation of resources must reflect the IDEX strategic priorities, the leaders of these universities are expected to make top-down decisions. We therefore expect collegiality to be challenged and the range of decisions made by consensus among peers to be reduced. Especially in the case of hiring processes when new types of positions have been created.

### 2.3. Traditional Collegial Hiring Processes

Before describing what we observed in the three IDEX, it is necessary to detail the traditional processes that were used until recently to recruit academics at French universities. These processes concern civil servant positions as *maîtres de conférences* (first permanent stage in their career) or professors. They follow different steps.

First, there must be a decision to open or create a position and define its profile. Reopening an academic permanent position is a decision made at the departmental level most of the time, rarely discussed or changed when it is presented to the university council. Nevertheless, these positions have to be negotiated if the university leadership wants to reallocate a vacant position to a new department. It is also the case for creations that are negotiated at the dean or presidency levels (Musselin, 2005/2009, Chapter 1). These arbitrations are usually made based on the teaching needs of the faculties. The positions are advertised with information on the courses that need to be given and on the expectations of the research unit the new academic will join. The *maîtres de conférences* are selected if they fit with the teaching and research needs.

Then, an ad hoc hiring committee is set by the concerned department. This committee is made up of a 50/50 split between academics from the recruiting university and academics from other higher education institutions. This composition must be approved by the university council but it generally agrees. When the committee meets, it first selects some candidates on their applications and invites a few of them for an interview, before ranking them.

This ranking is submitted to a university council that in theory can refuse it but the conditions for doing so are so limited that it rarely happens. The first ranked candidate is invited to join the university and, if they accept, the process is over because there is no negotiation about the working conditions or the salary: the candidate is hired as a civil servant according to a national salary scale. We will show that the new positions created by the IDEX largely depart from this traditional process.

### 3. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

We will draw on two important contributions from the literature on collegiality. The first deals with vertical collegiality and the codes of governance (Sahlin & Eriksson-Zetterquist, 2023, Vol. 86). In the literature observing the decline of collegiality in academia, it is common to oppose collegial and hierarchical relationships (empowerment of academic leaders, bureaucratic rules replacing professional norms, etc.) or to point at the introduction of competition and market-based regulation (selective allocation of resources, rankings, etc.). Both hierarchy and market go hand in hand with an increase in managerial instruments and behaviors threatening collegial norms. Most of the time, collegiality is thus presented as distinct from hierarchy, market, or managerial governance. Some authors (for instance, Deem et al., 2007; Tapper & Palfreymann, 2010) consider that collegiality is incompatible with other forms of governance, that is, the more hierarchical/managerial, or market-based the governance is, the less collegial it becomes. But others (Mignot-Gérard et al., 2022; Whitley, 2008) observe that hybrid forms of governance emerge and that combinations – rather than oppositions – in modes of governance should be considered. Within this second group of authors, Lazega and Wattedled (2011) suggest introducing another possibility between hierarchical/managerial and collegial governance, which they call top-down collegiality in contrast with bottom-up collegiality, that is, when peers meet together and take decisions among equals. Top-down collegiality occurs in situations when leaders are entitled to make decisions on their own but seek legitimacy. In their study of a diocese, the two authors observed that the bishop, who also is a priest and therefore a peer but holds a hierarchical position, involves some priests he has chosen as counselors in the decision-making process. The recourse to selected peers is thus expected to legitimize the decisions vis-à-vis the peers at the bottom of the diocese. Looking at the specific case of academic hiring, we will explore whether traditional collegiality (or bottom-up collegiality in Lazega & Wattedled terms) has been reduced, and whether it has been replaced by hierarchical/managerial, or top-down collegial governance.

The second contribution deals with the relationships between the degree of collegiality in the hiring processes and the position and ambition of the different Idex within the higher education field. As mentioned above, although the strengthening of governance has played a major role in the selection of the Idex, they all have a strong scientific reputation, albeit some stronger than others. Some Idex are composed of institutions that have a long tradition of excellent academic reputation and were already well-ranked on the international rankings. Others only had a national reputation and thanks to the Idex aimed to become world-class: they consider their selection as an opportunity that they cannot miss.<sup>5</sup> According to different authors, collegiality should be more threatened in these less recognized institutions (Paradeise & Thoening, 2013; see Gumpert, 1993, for the USA; see Camerati Morrás, 2014, for the UK). One of the common explanations they provide for this is linked to the weight of research in more prestigious institutions and the power of negotiation of

reputed academics, the ones providing the institution with their reputation but also attracting third-party resources. Imposing decisions against their will could be detrimental to the university because they could try to leave for another organization and this would be detrimental to the reputation of the institution. In less reputed institutions, the power of the faculty staff is lower, and they are more dependent on the university leaders. We would therefore expect the less reputed of the Idex to exhibit less collegiality in their hiring decisions than the more reputed ones.

Building on [Camerati Morrás \(2014\)](#) who also stressed that collegiality is more at threat in institutions seeking a higher reputation, we will investigate whether the level of collegiality varies when reputation evolves. In studying the impact of the research assessment exercise (RAE) on four UK university departments, [Camerati Morrás \(2014\)](#) observed that the governance of these departments had become managerial in all cases but also noted variations. The heads of departments adopted a managerial-hierarchical governance when they aimed to improve their results in the RAE but they were managerial-collegial for the best-evaluated departments. He moreover observed that once a managerial-hierarchical department improved its RAE situation, it tended to become managerial-collegial. We thus expect that once an Idex aspiring to a higher status has been definitively labeled as an Idex and supplementary resources have been permanently attributed to it, the pressure for both the recognition of excellence and producing internal differentiation can reduce. At this point, more collegial governance may be again introduced.

#### 4. METHODOLOGY

Interviews have been conducted in three Idex. We will call them Middle-Range 1, Middle-Range 2 and High-Status. Middle-Range 1 has been studied by Audrey Harroche for her PhD ([Harroche, 2021](#)). One of her chapters precisely deals with these new positions and her results suggested to look at the same issue in two other Idex in order to compare with what she observed at Middle-Range 1. Therefore, interviews have been conducted at Middle-Range 2 and High-Status in 2022. The research lead at Middle-Range 1 helped to identify who should be interviewed in the two other Idex to address the questions we had on the introduction of chairs. They have been conducted with the university presidents, the Idex administrative staff, the human resources heads of department, research laboratory directors, excellence chair laureates, and for High-Status the directors of the *grandes écoles* of this university. In the three cases, the interviews have been complemented with various written sources (application calls, letters of acceptance or rejection, different council's reports etc.). It is important to note that the three universities are the product of a merger. It was clearly an objective in the applications that Middle-Range 1 and Middle-Range 2 submitted in response to the Idex call. High-Status applied with a less ambitious institutional transformation but when they went through the evaluation after four years, the international jury extended the probationary period until they went for a merger.

Middle-Range 1 has a solid research reputation but was ranked quite low in the Shanghai rankings. Even if its selection as Idex was not completely surprising, other more reputed institutions were more expected to be included than Middle-Range 1 on the final list but they finally failed or have not been confirmed after four years. At Middle-Range 1, the ambition of the presidents of the three universities that merged to create the new institution was crystal clear. They had been working together for quite a long time before the Idex call, and they were collectively pushing for the merger and the transformation of their institutions into one international research university. The team at the head of the merged university and in charge of the Idex project was particularly engaged in the project and couldn't envisage that their institution would not be confirmed four years later. To stack all the odds in their favor, they carefully followed the implementation of the project they had announced in their application.

Middle-Range 2 shows rather similar characteristics. The institutions that formed this university were on the verge of merging when they applied for the Idex call and the leaders also very carefully followed all the implementation processes of their project during the probationary period. As it was for Middle-Range 1, the merger was completed very quickly after the university was selected as Idex. This merger only involved three universities and that has probably facilitated the implementation of an integrated governance.

The situation is rather different for High-Status, the merger concerns a reputed university and some *grandes écoles*. It took quite a long time to conduct this process and this explains why High-Status was not among the first selected Idex, despite its very robust scientific reputation, and resulted in a longer probationary period. Some of the institutions of this Idex had been present among the 100 first institutions of the Shanghai ranking from its creation. Its scientific capacity is extremely strong. This Idex has finally been confirmed by the international jury.

The interviews were led chronologically in order to collect data starting from the conception of the human resources strategy within the Idex application call framework, up to how the positions were managed at the time of the interviews. In doing so, the introduction of new positions and their evolution over time was traced. The questions enquired about how the hiring process was designed in each project, how the first positions were filled once the universities obtained the Idex label and endowment, how the other positions followed and were managed, what role they played in the Idex evaluation and how these positions were managed after that. The interviews with the laureates of the chairs were also led chronologically asking about their perspective on the recruitment process from how they heard about the position, to their current occupation. The data mining was done according to what type of actors were involved in the hiring process and making the decisions, the type of processes put in place, the criteria applied to select the candidates, the evolution of these variables over time, and the presence of resistance.

Through the study of new hiring practices in these three Idex universities, we'll see how this policy may affect collegiality bearing in mind their temporal aspects given the precise Idex timeframes.



## 5. THREE DIFFERENT WAYS OF IMPLEMENTING NEW POSITIONS

As mentioned above, all IDEX took the opportunity that arose from their success to create positions (called “chairs”) that are not ruled by the French civil servant status and do not follow the process described above. They took different names (chairs of excellence in some cases, “red carpet” chairs in others, etc.) and do not follow exactly the same rules in each IDEX although they all aim to attract “excellent” academics. The creation of these chairs and the new hiring processes were announced in the applications for the IDEX calls but had never been discussed in the universities’ collective bodies, even in institutions where the local culture was described as particularly collegial (Mignot-Gérard, 2012). This is because the university leaders were under pressure timewise to send applications<sup>6</sup> but also wanted to preserve the confidentiality of their ideas.

We will describe what we observed in each case, starting with the more extreme situations, those where the hiring decisions were the more centralized and controlled by university leaders.

### 5.1. Middle-Range 1: The Chairs of the University President

At Middle-Range 1, the three universities merged, and a foundation was created to receive and manage the IDEX funding. Only the university leaders and external partners of the Middle-Range 1 project were included in the foundation governing bodies. The deans are excluded as well as the representatives of staff and students. All the IDEX resources are allocated by the foundation through application calls: the Middle-Range 1 foundation activity is dedicated to the design, management, and evaluation of projects for funding.

This foundation has set up a new recruitment circuit. Two types of positions have been created: the chairs of excellence and the rising star chairs, leading to new hiring processes. The first ones aim to attract internationally recognized researchers by giving them resources to settle themselves and their team, within a local research center. These chairs are appointed for a period of two years and are renewable once. At the end of the contract, a permanent position is provided as long as the laureates reach the expected performances. The “rising stars” application calls are kept for more junior researchers with 5–10 years of experience after their PhD. These positions also come with resources dedicated to research activities for two years, renewable once. They are less well-endowed than the chairs of excellence and do not systematically lead to a proposal for tenure position, even if this possibility is mentioned in the application calls.

The Middle-Range 1 foundation board meeting design the application calls for chairs and advertise them in English in order to reach a foreign audience. Most of the time, these calls were completely open. However, because the executive teams had control over the positions’ profiles, they sometimes defined the disciplinary profiles according to the priorities set in the IDEX application in order to make sure that they would be able to deliver what they announced when the evaluation takes place after four years. Once they received the candidatures, a selection committee was set up. Half of the members were external, but they also included members

of the university governance. Some local academics were designated; however, they did not include the faculty deans and/or the laboratory directors systematically. Colleagues that the laureates were supposed to join were also excluded. The following extract from the Middle-Range 1 project shows that emphasis is put on the committee being external to the local community:

junior and/or senior fellows will be hired on the basis of an open and competitive procedure: implementation of a “headhunting committee,” job description and international advertising (calls for proposals), selection of candidates by selection committees composed of external academics and with an external chair, invitation of the preselected candidates to give an oral presentation within the university. The Steering Committee will ultimately decide on the allocation of such packages, on the basis of the recommendation of the selection committee, interesting salaries and work conditions can be negotiated in the framework of a temporary contract. After a result-orientated final contract period evaluation, these fellows may get permanent positions as lecturers, professors or researchers within the university or the other IdexF partners, after passing the public recruitment procedures in line with legal regulations. The position levels and salaries will be individually examined and adjusted with incentive and adjusted with incentive awards in order to retain the most promising talents. The university commits itself to offer every year at least 10 vacant permanent positions, reserved for this final recruitment.<sup>7</sup>

Fearing reactions from the unions and the academic community, attention has been paid to developing a selection process relying on application calls and systematically involving ad hoc committees of academics. But as shown in the following quote, the university leaders wanted to legitimize the quality of the process by inviting members coming from the European Union experts list to sit on hiring committees and avoiding internal interplay. This interviewee also explains that they put a lot of emphasis on the quality of the committees and their role in the jury in order to dissimulate the role of the university governance in the final decisions:

Application calls, therefore selection by the outside to say that it is not me who decides. That way, there is no possible criticism from the unions, nor from the researchers. Because the researchers can say: “yes, it’s because it comes from his laboratory.” That’s not true, it’s given to the outside world and they choose.

Question: Even when it’s an application for a recruitment? For a chair? It is examined by an ad hoc jury...

-Always. Any scientific decision in the framework of the Idex is made by committees of external evaluators, all the way, all the way down. In fact, I was inspired by, or even stole, the list of experts from Europe. We’ve put together a list of 500 international experts at Middle-Range 1. (Extract from an interview with a former Middle-Range 1 governance member)

In fact, the final say was in the hand of the foundation and its leaders who chose the person they wanted to hire among the ranked candidates. The marginalization of the deans led to tensions between the faculties and the university leaders, especially at the end of the chair contracts when the time came to offer permanent positions to the laureates. The decisions made by university leaders about these positions ignored the teaching needs and the human resource plans already in place. Nevertheless, the science faculty succeeded once to block some tenure decisions made by the Idex, using a legal argument,<sup>8</sup> that allowed them to preempt the faculty positions that were about to be taken away from them, making the chair laureates no longer eligible for tenure.

You know, we're a big university. Every year we have a lot of positions. At some point, we [the presidential team] just have to decide, "This is the way it is." So, either you like it or you don't, but that's the way it is. And you know when it doesn't please, it doesn't last long. If we pay attention whether everybody likes it or not, we'll be better off.

Question: Who dislike it, at which level?

-At the level of the faculties. After a while, we want to impose and that's it. You do what you want: you vote for, you vote against. We don't care, either way we'll take this person. (Extract from an interview with the president of Middle-Range 1)

But it was rather exceptional and, as shown in this quote, the university leaders considered themselves to be legitimate in imposing their decisions and did so each time they could.

### *5.2. Middle-Range 2: The Project-based Chairs*

Middle-Range 2 developed similar procedures to Middle-Range 1. When the universities merged, a directorate dedicated to the IDEX project was created directly under the direction of the university leaders. It manages the IDEX funds mostly through application calls. Two of these calls are also dedicated to hiring: the junior and senior chairs. They provide access to what is called "red carpet" facility offering a "welcome package" to the laureates which covers their salaries and those of their research team for three years. They can be renewed on a case-by-case basis. The Middle-Range 2 project describes these new positions as follows:

The reinforcement of excellence in research at the University requires both attracting junior talents and replacing senior scholars as they retire, by offering "welcome packages" in a context of strong international competition. The so-called "red carpet" facility will be composed of chairs and post-doc fellowships meant to enable the university to offer internationally competitive salaries and thereby address one of the biggest obstacles to the international competitiveness of French universities. In order to be able not only to attract, but also retain excellent researchers, specific and complementary tools are foreseen in the instrument "A policy of talent management within the university."<sup>9</sup>

It is the Middle-Range 2 directorate that takes care of the design, the publication, and the management of these chairs. Like Middle-Range 1, the selection process puts a strong emphasis on having external members that should be "international" and chosen by the university leaders. The Middle-Range 2 project stipulates that

once the number of profile of chairs and post-docs is fixed, an international call will be issued and candidates will be selected based on reports by international experts and a defence of pre-selected researchers in an open seminar. A fast-track process will be exceptionally used to allow reactivity for retaining a promising talent or recruiting someone in a climate of particularly strong competition.<sup>10</sup>

The international attribute of these chairs comes from their involvement in European academia, and the chair selection process is partly subcontracted with a European institution. All the applications are sent to this organization that produces a first evaluation. Then the Middle-Range 2 university leaders set up a committee with internal and external members in charge of the final selection considering the reviews coming from the European institution.

The creation of these new positions is clearly a strategic decision with the objective of securing the achievement of the projects announced in the application for Idex. One of the Middle-Range 2 vice-presidents explains that the control they gain through these chairs is especially useful to better align recruitment with the priorities set by the governance for the Idex. In that sense, it strengthens the universities' executive power and allows top-down decisions, imposed on the departments and research labs:

It is in this type of position that the institutional strategy and priorities are best expressed. We try to do it for regular recruitments, we ask the faculties to send us job descriptions with points that refer to the institution's strategy. But behind this, we have very little control over the selection committees .... We have no guarantee that recruitment will be able to support what has been set for the university site strategy. On these chair devices we have a better ... I wouldn't say control ... but a guarantee that in the end the recruitment will go in the direction of the establishment strategy and will have an effect on the establishment strategy. (Extract from an interview with one of the Middle-Range 2 vice-presidents)

The university leaders control the process by opening positions without specifying any discipline. They set up a committee of peers, internal and external to the university, but this committee received applications from candidates in all disciplines and had to compare and rank them. One of the Middle-Range 2 faculty deans explained that under these conditions, collectively deciding upon the "best" application was not possible. Because the candidates to compare were coming from different disciplines, their projects were not comparable. In order to review and rank them, the only thing to do was to select those reflecting the priorities set in the Idex project. This is what he calls a "political" ranking of the candidates:

Everyone comes with interesting and valuable projects. So, then you have to choose between the projects. And, you know, it's very difficult to compare a project in the field of health, a project in aeronautics and a project in archaeology. All three projects are interesting but it's hard to compare them, you don't compare things that are of different nature. And ranking the candidates is mandatory, but the ranking... it is political ranking. (Extract from an interview with one of the Middle-Range 2 faculty deans)

As at Middle-Range 1, the introduction of these chairs goes hand in hand with a more centralized decision-making process, and the deans of the faculties are set aside from these new hiring circuits:

You will say to me: "how do we recruit through the Idex?" For years, even though I've been dean of the faculty since 2009, I don't know who sits on the Idex board. So, the Idex for me is a totally opaque thing. The president of the university at the time was a friend of 40 years, we were students together, we were interns together, we were heads of clinics together, we were hospital professors together, so if you want, he's not someone... I've always done all his election campaigns, I've done his meetings, I've put up his posters, so it's not a... but I've always told him that it was a joke.

Question: Yes, okay he's not an opponent.

So, the Idex is a rather opaque thing and the way Idex funds are distributed is not transparent, I don't know what my colleagues whom you have already interviewed have told you. That's my opinion on the Idex, I've been in an important position for 12 years and I don't know how the Idex works. (Extract from an interview with a dean at Middle-Range 2)

This also led to resistance and conflicts. One of the faculties preferred to lose staff positions rather than absorbing hires that they were not involved with from the start. Despite resistance, some decisions were again forced into the academic community.

### 5.3. High-Status: More Negotiated Hiring Decisions

High-Status is quite different from the two others. First, the confirmation of the Idex has taken more time. We noted above the expectations of the jury in terms of governance. In this case, the institutions composing the consortium did not merge during the four first years and this has been a major issue for the first Idex evaluation in 2016.<sup>11</sup> High-Status' project got a C, the worst score, in terms of human resource strategy. The jury reproached the university leaders for not using the Idex funds for salaries and regretted that the human resource policies of the different institutions in the consortium could not be completely homogenized as the merger was not completed.

Even though this merger was an explicit and ultimate goal of the High-Status project it has been a long and complicated process that was only recently completed. While Middle-Range 1 and Middle-Range 2 only involved the merger of universities, High-Status included *grandes écoles* as well as a university. The former agreed to merge if they could keep their legal identity which became possible in December 2018 after the French Ministry created a new category of institutions, the Public Experimental Establishment (EPE). Within High-Status, the *grandes écoles* are thus guaranteed control over their employment decisions. The university president cannot decide by themselves: an important point for the directors of the *grandes écoles*:

It has taken us a number of years to develop a legal framework where we are both in and out of it. So, I don't say that it is simple, but it is like that. So, you have to understand it or you won't understand anything about High-Status. So High-Status is an EPE that chains together autonomous employment perimeters, but to answer your question, this does not mean that we do not have a common HR strategy. To the Idex jury, and even to ourselves, we say that the overlapping of employer perimeters does not prevent coordination and even makes it necessary to have places where the needs are collegially expressed. (Extract from an interview with the president of a High-Status Grande Ecole)

This also impacted the governance of the Idex project. For High-Status, no specific structure has been created to manage Idex funds. They are handled by collective bodies, representing numerous different stakeholders, that coordinate the project and monitor its advancement. The decisions regarding the chairs are the result of discussions in a collegial council where the leaders of the different entities of High-Status meet.

I think it's collegial, frankly. No, but just imagine! I am a small director of an IUT (university institute of technology) and I am at the same table as X (a director of a *grande école*) and we talk to each other and we can converge. (...) The steering committee, or the Idex, is a space where everyone expresses themselves and we defend our positions and then if there are convergences we work together and it's not each of us have our own staff. (Extract from an interview with an IUT director at High-Status)

Table 1. Comparative Table.

	Traditional Civil Servant Positions	Chairs at Middle-Range 1	Chairs at Middle-Range 2	Chairs at High-Status
Decision to reopen or create a position	Negotiation between the department head, the dean and the university leaders for creations	University leaders	University leaders	University leaders, deans, directors of labs
Profile of the position	Departments and research centers	University leaders	No profile	University leaders, deans, directors of labs
Composition of the hiring committees	Departments and research centers with a rubberstamp validation by a university council	University leaders invite international academics and internal academics they trust	University leaders subcontracted the first evaluation of the candidate with a European institution, then set an interdisciplinary committee of international academics and internal academics to review candidatures coming from different disciplines	Departments and research centers
Who is recruited or obtain a chair	The first candidate ranked by the committee after a rubberstamp validation by a university council	The candidate validated by the presidential team	The candidate validated by the presidential team	Some candidates chosen by the executive board of High-Status among those who have been ranked first by the hiring committees and validated by the university council
Status of the position	Civil servant position according to national scale	Tenure track position with some possibility to negotiate tenure	Tenure track position with some possibility to negotiate tenure	Civil servant position according to national scale and extra funding package
Negotiation	None	Yes	Yes	Yes

They decided that the chairs should not be completely new positions, but should be allocated to some of the civil servant academics the university has hired according to the traditional processes. They thus defined the profiles of the positions to be opened or created, in agreement with the deans and the research labs, set-up ad hoc committees at the department level and recruited *maitres de conférences* or professors. But, they then opened the possibility for the hired candidates to apply for a “chair” that will provide them with supplementary resources, including the possibility of hiring doctoral and post-doctoral researchers. These candidates are thus tenured straight away but have better working conditions, extra funding and time away from teaching. The decision about which positions will be turned into chairs is nevertheless not left to the departments. As mentioned in the following extract from the High-Status end of probation period evaluation report, the final call is made by the High-Status leaders after consultation with peers such as directors of labs and representatives of the concerned *grandes écoles* when one of their new recruits is proposed as chair:

in the case of the Excellence research chair program, jobs provided by the ministry to the ComUE, or jobs directly related to the management of the IDEX project, the IDEX steering committee is directly in charge, with help of a special workgroup gathering all Research Directors or VP of the Members when their human resources are involved.<sup>12</sup>

The differences between the three cases are summed up in [Table 1](#), in which we summarize the different processes and compare them with the traditional ones.

## 6. DISCUSSION

Our findings show a common trend in the three cases, that is, a stronger involvement of the university leaders in hiring decision-making. But we also observe rather important differences between the three cases that merit explanation.

### *6.1. From Bottom-Up to Top-Down Collegiality*

In the three cases, the new hiring processes leading to the allocation of a “chair” challenge the bottom-up traditional collegiality. The close colleagues are much less involved compared to the usual processes in both the definition of the profile and in the choice of the candidates, while university leaders have a strong say in these decisions. More emphasis is put on the research needs than on teaching, which is still rather unusual in most French universities.

Nevertheless, in the three cases, the choice of the candidates is not a pure hierarchical decision made by the president. None of the new procedures implemented in the three IDEX completely differ from the usual ones: in each case a profile is defined, the expected requirements in research and teaching are widely published, and a committee of academics is set-up that examines the applications and ranks the candidates. The whole process is managed by the leaders of the university rather than by the closest future colleagues. Elaborated procedures have been designed in order to try and preempt resistance to this change. For instance, at Middle-Range 1 and Middle-Range 2, university leaders have the final word

about the composition of the hiring committees, and they defend the legitimacy of these committee members by emphasizing their academic reputation and their internationality. University leaders also legitimize their role in these processes by arguing that they are themselves academics and thus peers even if they are also leaders (i.e., ex-peers if we follow Aust et al., 2021). In the three cases, they could rely on their scientific credibility: even if they are not the most renowned in their field, they benefited from a reliable scientific reputation. They control the decision-making processes, but they argue that it remains in the hands of academics: themselves and the solicited colleagues sitting in the committees, even if they are not the same as for traditional processes. They can also claim that the quality is guaranteed as it is opened up to international applicants and reviewers.

This redefinition of collegiality is therefore very similar to what Lazega and Wattedled (2011) describe as top-down collegiality, that is, a management tool creating “collegial pockets” where members of the “committees assisting the official leader are chosen with an eye to gaining support for policies that can be decided autocratically as well as through discussion” (Lazega & Wattedled, 2011, e72). The decisions made are not purely hierarchical, they involve peers and as such are deemed to be collegial, but they do not involve the closest colleagues. Despite the fact that in the three IDEX universities under study the university leaders chose those who will get these exceptional positions, they do not make the decisions alone. New arenas for collective discussion among selected peers are created in order to advise the university governance, hence the strengthening of the universities’ executive power regarding academic recruitment goes along with the implementation of top-down collegiality. This need for legitimization can probably be related to the fact that in France university leaders are elected rather than appointed and have less scope than in other countries to develop a hierarchical management. Top-down collegiality allows them to make decisions under the cover of the peers they select.

### *6.2. Explaining the Differences Among the Three Cases by Status*

While the executive teams are more involved in the hiring process overall and all rely on top-down collegiality, we observed differences between the three cases. More specifically, Middle-Range 1 and Middle-Range 2 have developed very similar processes that excluded the deans from the decision-making process and allowed the hiring of academics under a new status. A parallel hiring process has been implemented from scratch creating two different recruitment pathways and types of position. At High-Status, however, the transformation is less drastic. Deans were not put aside and academics are still recruited as civil servants. An extra step has been added to the usual recruitment procedure where extra resources and time away from teaching are offered to some of the new *Maitres de Conférences* or professors elected by their closest peers. In other words, High-Status offers privileged working conditions to some academics without creating a two-tier system like Middle-Range 1 and Middle-Range 2.

Thus, High-Status on the one hand and Middle-Range 1 and Middle-Range 2 on the other, differ in the role given to the deans and department heads and in



the degree of difference between the new chairs and the traditional positions. On both dimensions, High-Status remains closer to the usual governance model than the two other institutions. This confirms the conclusions of many authors (Camerati Morrás, 2014; Gumport, 1993; Paradeise & Thoenig, 2013) who have observed that universities seeking a higher reputation are more prompt to adopt new strategies to cope with environmental pressures and tend to adopt more vertical governance. By contrast, highly reputed universities are more resistant to change and tend to remain collegial.

The observed variations are thus related to the different statuses of these universities. Middle-Range 1 and Middle-Range 2 are striving for a higher scientific reputation. They are not internationally renowned and were not very high in the Shanghai ranking in 2011 when the Idex policy was launched. For them, this application call was an opportunity that cannot be missed, especially as excellence will not be evaluated on scientific performance alone. The priority given to the governance criterion is an advantage for Middle-Range 2 and Middle-Range 1, which aspire to improve their position and can more easily comply with what is required by the Idex jury because they only involve universities. Once labeled Idex, they have implemented brand new hiring circuits excluding deans' faculty and built around top-down decisions that have mostly been imposed despite resistance.

High-Status, by contrast, gathers some of the most renowned French institutions and therefore many famous scientists and among them Nobel prize winners. This makes High-Status a bottom-heavy establishment in which many academics have negotiation power. The large and reputed research labs in physics and biology are central actors and they cannot be as easily bypassed. Their members are particularly involved in international networks and collaborations. The High-Status leaders do not have the legitimacy to choose and impose future colleagues on some of the most respected scientists in the world. With the latter being civil servants and having a rather low income, it was also not simple to introduce positions with a different statute. Finally, obtaining the label "Idex" was important for High-Status but not as vital as for Middle-Range 1 and Middle-Range 2: the Idex resources have to be related to the level of grants individual High-Status academics collect at the national and European level. The Idex endowment and label were not important enough incentives for High-Status leaders to risk a strong internal resistance. The chair system has thus been introduced but the modalities are less vertical, result from more negotiations and do not exclude the deans. In accordance with the authors mentioned above, the collegiality at High-Status has been preserved by this already excellent reputation and the weight of research activities. The structural specificity of High-Status involving a university and some *grandes écoles* further accentuated this moderated implementation of the chairs and made the evolution of hiring practices more gradual.

### 6.3. Variations of Collegiality Over Time and External Pressures

The effects of the universities' status on collegiality must also be considered over time, especially regarding the specific Idex timeframe. As our study was carried out some years after the three Idex have been granted, we were able to ask questions

about the evolution of the chair system after the positive four-year evaluation at Middle-Range 1 and Middle-Range 2.

In both cases, we observed that once the evaluation was passed with success and the label of Idex definitively obtained, both partly relaxed the central control over hiring decisions. It is as if the confirmation allowed university leaders to reduce the pressure, temper the centralization of decisions, and favor more inclusive exchanges.

In particular, the role of the deans at Middle-Range 1 and Middle-Range 2 evolved since the evaluation. Initially marginalized, they resisted the implementation of the project and asked to be considered as actors of the new projects instead of just having to absorb their effects. They made some claims, sometimes in open disputes, but their place only evolved after the Idex has been confirmed. Immediately after the positive evaluation, the process leading to the creation of chairs better took into account the human resource plan of the faculties and their teaching needs. Most of the new positions are now orientated toward a subject or a discipline and the deans are looped into the decision-making processes from the start. This also applies to the tenure-track positions the French ministry has recently opened in France for all universities volunteering for them. Middle-Range 2 has asked for some of these positions, and this time they do not ask for a first review of the candidatures by a European institution. The human resources department handles these recruitments, not only the directorate in charge of the Idex budget:

So the junior chairs have evolved since last year to pre-recruitment chairs, so we are .... So we don't say it because it's not very nice ... Well ... the community doesn't like it, but basically it's a kind of tenure track. They're supposed to lead to professorships here. (...) The first calls for applications for these chairs were launched last year.

Question: Okay, so the call for projects is not discipline oriented?

- Yes it is, that's the difference with the junior chairs, where it was really the people who came with a complete project. Here we are looking for specific profiles (...) according to the needs of the university, according to the research fields that are more or less supported by the Idex to make them emerge and according to what we anticipate in the next five to six years in terms of retirements and potential publication of lecturer positions. The idea is really to achieve this, that is to say that we recruit people during a three-year contract, then there is an evaluation after three years to see how things are going and after two years or more, if everything is going well, we open a position for a lecturer. (Extract from an interview with the human resource head of department at Middle-Range 2)

This loosening of the previously centralized processes is only true to a certain extent. At Middle-Range 1, the foundation still manages the chairs and, each year, one of the chairs is not discipline oriented. At Middle-Range 2, the governance gave up control over the junior chair, but the senior chairs are still completely managed by the directorate of Middle-Range 2 and follow the former procedures.

These relative but noticeable evolutions shed some light on the processual aspect of collegiality, an aspect which is not often mentioned in the literature. It confirms Camerati Morras' (2014) work on UK university departments that became managerial-collegial instead of managerial-hierarchical after they improved their RAE evaluation. With the Idex, several practices regarding hiring

have been done and then undone. These changes are directly related to the Idex instrument's timeframe: the pressure to obtain results was quite high before the evaluation for the institutions who saw this policy as an unmissable opportunity to secure more resources, increase their reputation, and be on the road toward being a world-class organization. When the pressure came down, university leaders relaxed the vertical intervention on hiring decisions.

## 7. CONCLUSION

As in many other countries, the recent reforms in France have affected some of the collegial characteristics of universities. Their administration has developed and professionalized while academic leaders have been empowered and are expected to act as managers. The call for Idex is one of the most recent illustrations of this dynamic. It strengthened the university's executive power and expected Idex leaders to selectively allocate supplementary resources in a concentrated and unequal way (Harroche, 2021). They could, for instance, use the Idex funding to hire new staff and this was an important evolution in the French system where university leaders were never directly involved in the selection of the candidates but rather validated the choices made by ad hoc hiring committees within the faculties.

By studying the hiring practices in three universities labeled Idex we saw that all their leaders have used the new opportunities given by this policy, although they did not all enact it in the same way. We especially observed variations depending on the universities' status. When institutions, such as Middle-Range 2 and Middle-Range 1, had a lot to win from being labeled as Idex, they tended to extensively resort to these new resources and created completely new hiring processes, mostly under their control. For them, the Idex is the opportunity to step up in the hierarchy and to climb up the ladder of reputation dominated by long-time prestigious Parisian establishments. Succeeding is a must, and university leaders have coped with the external pressure by changing practices quickly (cf. Paradeise & Thoenig, 2013) and implementing new devices without much consideration to the claims coming from their academic community. However, once the excellence label and endowment have been secured and the university's reputation has increased, the pressure could decrease. As a consequence, the new recruitment procedures are amended to better include the academic community, especially the deans of the faculties. In doing so, these two Idex tend to adopt characteristics that we observed at High-Status, the university already very visible on the international scene. Its leaders maintained most of the hiring procedures already in place and did not set aside the faculty's needs in order to implement a new recruitment process. High-Status's reputation is so outstanding that they have less to win through the Idex: radical modifications of their practices were not worth it and would create a lot of tension given the scientific legitimacy of many of their academics. Nevertheless, High-Status has introduced the possibility to provide more resources for research activities and time away from teaching to the

new civil servant academics they recruited, when university leaders considered they were among the best new recruits.

As a whole, the Idex calls has succeeded in increasing the internal differentiation within the Idex, while scientific merit has been used by university leaders to legitimize these inequalities in recognition. By empowering university leaders, the call for Idex also encroached on the decision-making power of lay academics and thus threatened bottom-up collegiality. Nevertheless, we observed that it transformed the nature of collegiality rather than replaced it by hierarchical/managerial relationships. The chairs that have been introduced in the three Idex first of all aim to increase the academic reputation and the attractiveness of the universities. The new hiring processes do not strongly rely on the local academics and their preferences but they all involve academics and are driven by scientific objectives. Thus, the intervention of university leaders in the hiring processes can be described as a switch from “bottom up” to “top down” collegiality, as described by Lazega and Wattedled (2011). In order to implement these changes, all Idex university leaders had to sustain academics’ professional norms and practices to a certain extent. To do so, they developed top-down collegiality: they nominated international academics, outlined the scientific reputation of these individuals in order to legitimize their appointments, and maintained the collective character of hiring decision-making processes. However, the more the universities had to prove their reputation and conform to external pressures, the more they departed from bottom-up collegiality and shifted toward top-down collegiality. Universities that were already highly reputed could, and had to, stick to more traditional hiring processes given the scientific importance of their academic staff. Hence, we demonstrated that, facing external pressures, it is easier for some universities to remain collegial than others.

## NOTES

1. Universities in France are led by presidents who are academics elected by the university members. By university leaders, we mean the university president and their team of vice-presidents, who also are academics for the most part.

2. Such a name may seem curious as the “chair system” that prevailed in France until most of the 20th century was always described as problematic and bureaucratic.

3. <https://uk.ambafrance.org/Investments-for-the-Future-Programme>

4. In December 2018, an ordinance introduced the possibility to design new status, different from those prescribed by the University Act. The three Idex under study have used this possibility in order to change the designation of the president or the deans by election or to reduce the size or the role of the new deliberative bodies (cf. ordinance no. 2018-1131, December 12, 2018).

5. In the typology of institutions developed by Catherine Paradeise and Jean-Claude Thoëny (2013) the first ones could be described as “top of the pile” while the others would be “wannabes,” aspiring for the top of the pile category.

6. They only had a year to put together and submit the Idex projects.

7. Extract from the Middle-Range 1 project, 2012, p. 97.

8. Based on the article 46.3 of decree no. 84-431 of June 6, 1984.

9. Extract from Middle-Range 2 project, 2012, p. 31.

10. Extract from Middle-Range 2 project, 2012, p. 33.

11. The Idex international jury decided to postpone the confirmation of the Idex and extended the probationary period. After the merger decision had been taken, the jury finally confirmed High-Status.

12. High-Status End of probation period Evaluation Report, 2015, p. 19.

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