

The impact of performance measurement systems on career management in higher education

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The higher education field has always been of paramount importance for the social and economic development (Burlaud, 2007). Higher education institutions (HEIs) have assured the transfer of knowledge to the young population and they have uninterruptedly worked toward global progress. Yet, during the last decades, the higher education field has gone through numerous changes that have led to its fundamental transformation.

First, the demand for educational activities has exploded and the HEIs have opened their doors for anyone interested to gain new knowledge (Kogan et al., 1994). Still, the governments were not financially prepared to sustain the mass education (Teixeira et al., 2004). To cover this inability, they encourage HEIs to develop a business-like approach and attract funding from other interested parties (Amaral et al., 2003). As a result, the higher education field was flooded with commercial practices and has faster become a very competitive environment. In addition, this chain of changes have led to the development of a higher education market (Thornton and Ocasio, 1999), where successful institutions are defined by their ability to attract funding and customers.

In this global environment, the international university rankings and accreditation systems have emerged as tools for the evaluation of higher education performance. In particular, the international university rankings have gained a huge attention due to their ability to assure the control on the higher education field by employing simple measurements to create a social order (Ruef and Scott, 1998). Allegedly being able to reflect the reality of the higher education field, they became an emblem of legitimacy. Nowadays, HEIs used them to build up their reputation and increase their survival rate (Meyer and Rowan, 1991).

Until today, the topic of performance measurements is reported as an under-researched area in higher education (ter Bogt and Scapens, 2012). Most of the studies that focus on this subject emphasize the transformation of the field at large, without looking at how they impact

the individuals. Moreover, the few studies that tackle the individual level concentrate on understanding the role of classifications in forming the higher education field and do not cover the changes occurred in the career management of academics.

Hence, this study aims to fill the gap by providing an insight on *how performance measurements systems impact career management in higher education*. Conducted in the field of higher education, this thesis focuses on three interrelated research sub questions that aim to provide answer on how the academic career looks like in the present and where is it headed to:

What performance measurements the international rankings and accreditation systems use?

How are they impacting the actions performed by the higher education institutions?

How are performance evaluation systems shaping the career management of academics?

Up until this point, no study that covers the subject of career development through the lens of institutionalization of performance measurement systems was conducted. A few studies in human resources dealt with job attitudes and performance of individuals (Slocum and Cron, 1985) and the impact of human resource management on the organizational performance (Delaney and Huselid, 1996). Yet, I argue here that in the current global environment, attention should be given to accounting techniques and how they are used to control the career development of individuals in particular settings.

A few studies hint to the impact of performance measurements on organizations and individuals (ter Bogt and Scapens, 2012; Pelger and Grottke, 2015; Raineri, 2015), but do not associate these measurements with the international rankings and accreditation systems. These studies draw the attention to the development of doctoral programs and the curricula mistakes, yet do not go further in linking the doctoral training to the development of the academic career.

In France, a few researchers have advanced the topic of international rankings and their impact on the higher education environment (Burlaud, 2007; Courpasson and Guedri, 2007; Nioche, 2007; Lussier, 2014). Some discuss the shock of French institutions when confronted with massification, globalization and internationalization, as well as their difficulty to align to international standards of higher education and to develop programs that attract foreign students. Others studies emphasize that the emergence of international rankings have impacted the French academic field and suggest that the fundamental academic believes are

on the course of being transformed. One study in particular (Lussier, 2014) covered the topic of the changing nature of evaluation practices and the adjustment of academics behavior.

Nevertheless, none of these studies have looked at what the international university rankings and accreditation systems are measuring. If we ought to understand why the behavior of individuals is changing and how their careers are affected, the content analyses of the most known international performance measurement systems is a must. Their link to the internal evaluation systems have to be emphasized, as well as the pressure the HEIs put on their faculty members.

In addition, the perception of individuals changes through their interaction with others. The discovery and institutionalization of successful practices is rapidly achieved through information spread by word of mouth, where the younger generation of academics learn from more experienced individuals what being successful means and how it can be achieved. Yet, information cannot be fully transmitted, and thus a selection is naturally made based on what is considered important at a certain moment in time.

This is why interpretive perspective played an important role in the development of my research. The changes in the academic field cannot be completely explained through a quantitative research, as they can neither be through a qualitative one (Perret and Séville, 2003). Still, performing a study where the individual perception is taken into consideration is of paramount importance. The way actors understand and react to different stimuli is affecting the construction of the field. The social reality can be regarded through different lens, each of them adding to the existing knowledge on how reality is formed. Thus, aiming to add to the current knowledge, this research focused on individuals, how they understand their environment and what actions they take as a result of this understanding.

In this research context, the interpretive research permitted to build a reasoning that starts from the field. As I did not want to impose on the findings of my study, I let the data and the literature to guide my research. This is why the format of this dissertation does not fit the formal structure of a PhD thesis. As the research question has emerged from my own curiosity, I found that developing my research gradually, as it happened, was more appropriate than following the model.

The first inquiries on rankings, accreditation systems and career management were mere curiosities of a young PhD student. As I advanced with the literature review and I observed the activities performed by academics, the research question on *how performance measurements systems impact career management in higher education* grew on me. Thus, in answering the question I did not follow the standard research path, but mixed different stages

in order to develop the dissertation. The methodological choice was one of the most important decisions in my research advancement. The interview technique was the element I undoubtedly wanted to include in my methodological development, but in the same time I was aware this technique is not sufficient to validate the research. Thus, I relied on the literature to discover other complementary methods that would fit an interpretive approach and enrich the data collection. This is how observation of HEIs and the content analysis of international university rankings and accreditation systems have emerged and came to play an equal important role in the interpretation of the research findings.

The theoretical foundation followed the same logic. As I was performing the exploratory phase of the interviews, I let the data lead me to the appropriate theoretical concepts. The conceptual framework that enables an in-depth understanding of the research topic is built on a triple theoretical foundation. All over the world, institutions employ systems, such as university rankings and accreditation systems, to form and diffuse an abstract-model (Strang and Meyer, 1993) of international higher education institutions by setting criteria for how to evaluate organizations. Classifying and measuring are techniques that actively contribute to setting normative standards (Power, 1997) regarding the type of activities that are permitted and valued in academic institutions. To develop and legitimize an abstract-model, institutionalization of norms and values plays an important role (Strang and Meyer, 1993). By answering to normative pressure and perform according to the demands of an international market of higher education, academics have gradually adapted their career management. Thus, the performance measurement concepts were used to understand why university rankings and accreditation systems become a global custom.

The answer seems to come from their employment as accounting mechanisms. As all such tools, the performance measurements have the ability to transform complicated processes into simple ones. Moreover, through their institutionalization, they help governments to control the activities performed by HEIs. Thus, the institutional theory was necessary to understand how the performance evaluation practices spread globally and what the HEIs are looking to gain by following isomorphic practices.

In addition, the literature show that the link between the performance measurements and systems of incentives and opportunities lead to changes in individual behavior (Moya et al., 2014). Thus, in order to grasp the meaning behind the changes occurred at the individual level, it was important to apprehend what career management and career development are. As globalization took place, the career opportunities evolved and individuals found themselves in an international market of higher education. Along with the global transformation of higher

education field, their perception has changes as well. Being under institutional pressure affected the way they regard their social reality. The academic career choices have become diversified and individuals now have a choice between becoming pedagogues, researchers or a mix between the two.

As the literature review intertwined with the epistemological, methodological and theoretical parts, it was necessary to briefly explain the reasons for which in I made certain research choices. Thus, before plunging into a content analysis of international university rankings and accreditation systems it was crucial to discuss about the existence of a higher education marketplace and explain how it was formed, as well as describe the three core missions of HEIs. Moreover, since the third part of the dissertation focuses on the institutional image of academic organizations, it was not necessary to present the specificities of the French higher education environment and the accredited French evaluation institutions until I reached the fourth part of the dissertation.

When looking at the university rankings and accreditation systems I aimed to understand what they are measuring and the reasons behind their methodological choices. Thus, in order to find the answers, I pursued a content analysis of their methodologies and looked at the information provided on the official web pages of their organizations. I relied on the literature to enhance my understanding of rankings, accreditation systems and the indicators they employ. The result of this first analysis shows that the most popular performance measurements are research related, many rankings linking performance to solely research activities. On the other hand, accreditation systems focus more on pedagogical activities and they push the schools to pay attention to their contribution to society. Yet, the latest are seen as additional marketing tools, governments continuing to prefer the easy measurements employed by rankings to determine the order of the HEIs and as a result, these organizations see rankings as more relevant as well.

The same result can be observed at individual level, where academics have become research oriented. When asked to define themselves as pedagogues or researchers, my findings show that a different level of importance is given to each of these career choices. In addition, it emerged during the interviews that older academics always link research to teaching activities, while the younger ones have huge tendency to focus solely on research. Thus, two separate academic career choices have gradually emerged. The transition to independent, autonomous and competitive universities and the fast proliferation of rankings has created a discrepancy between the position of researcher and that of a pedagogue, altering the image of

the academic career. In what follows, I will present the thesis design presented above (Figure 1) and proceed with the presentation of the four parts of the dissertation.

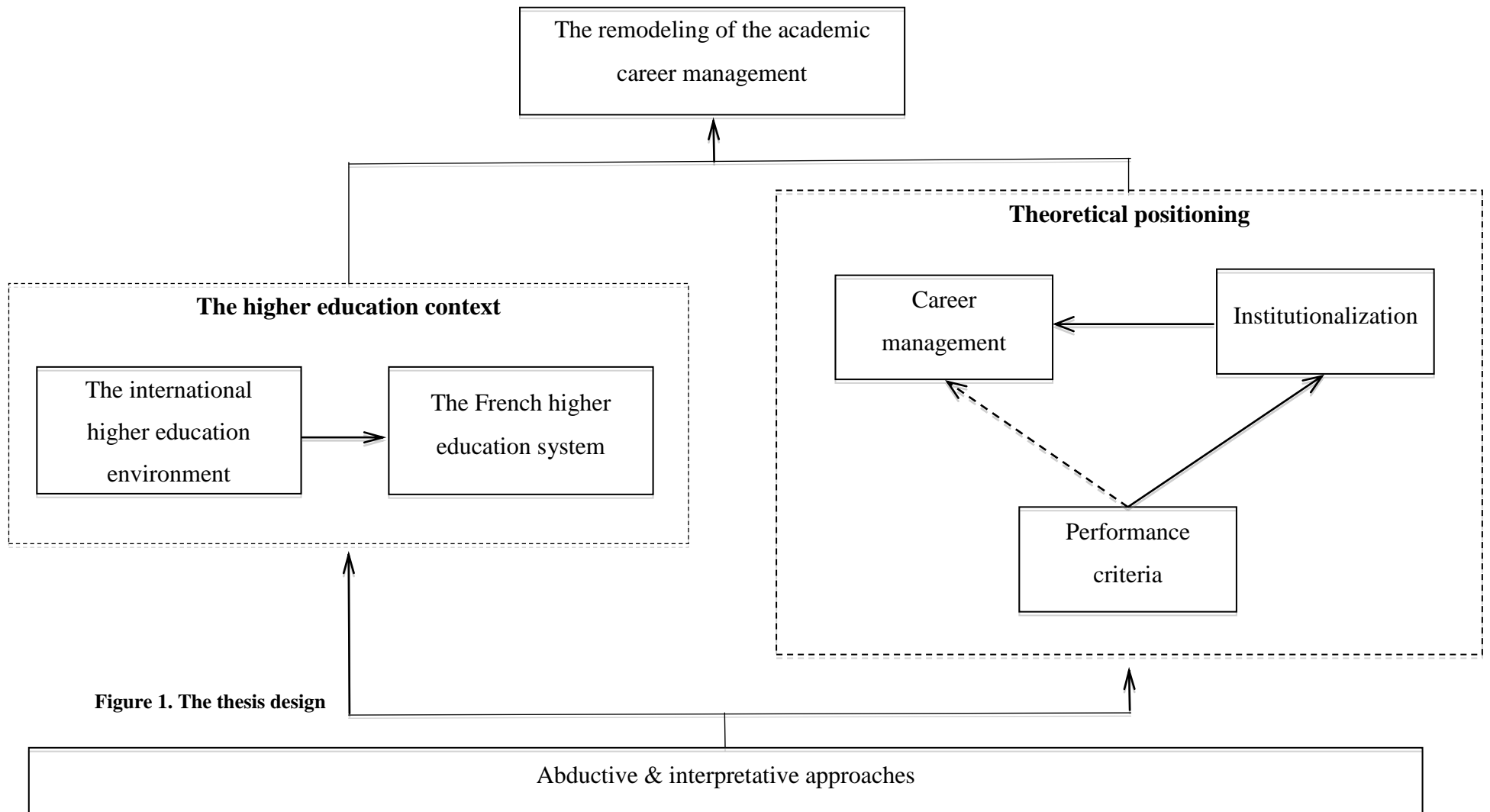


Figure 1. The thesis design

Source: Author's projection

Part one. Positioning the research

The first part of the dissertation has the purpose to discuss the epistemological choices and explain how the research design was put together. Thus, the two chapters included here describe the logical process that was followed: the research plan, selected hypothesis and the research methods. By combining different concepts from sociology (e.g. Giddens, Bourdieu), philosophy (e.g. Foucault, Super), and accounting (e.g. Power, Hopwood, Miller) I aimed to show how internationalization and the three way relationship between rankings, schools and academics has led to changes in the field of higher education. In my search for elements that help answer to *how performance measurements systems impact career management in higher education*, I look at the social conditions and believes that affect the actors' judgments (Baillie, 2003).

To understand international university rankings as performance measurement systems and observe their role in the academic field, I chose to position my research in the interpretative sphere (Baker and Bettner, 1997; Llewellyn, 2007). Yet, the access to practice was mediated through several data sources: secondary data, direct observations and interviews. The triangulation of these different research methods provided an in-depth insight on the social meaning of academia and assured the stability of my findings. However, while giving credence to my respondents, I had to develop a critical attitude that helped me to conduct a comparison between what rankings are measuring, the subjective truth of actors and the reality of the field. As a result, the epistemological and methodological processes paved the way towards the following parts of my research.

Discovering and developing new knowledge has to start with the perspective through which researchers look at their field of study and the methods they put into practice in order to find the concepts that can predict the future or help understand, construct and explain the present reality (Martinet, 1990). Thus, reflecting upon the choices to study changes occurred in the higher education field and knowing that my research interest was to construct qualitative field studies in accounting with focus on performance management guided me to position my work into the interpretive paradigm. This approach permitted me to ask questions on the reasons that lead actors to behave in a certain way and that give power to their understanding of society (Perret and Séville, 2003). Rooted in hermeneutics (Llewellyn, 1993), interpretivism assumes that actors compare, contrast and redefine subjective realities to rationalize how their world is

constructed (Elharidy et al., 2008). As a result, this perspective adopts a relativist approach, where the researcher considers that “social reality is emergent, subjectively created, and objectified through human interaction” (Chua, 1986, p. 615).

According to the interpretive paradigm, reality can never be completely decipherable (Perret and Séville, 2003). There are no direct methods that can measure and explain it. Moreover, this approach is not concerned with the existence of ‘reality’ in self (von Glasersfeld, 1988). It neither rejects nor accepts the concept of ‘reality’, but instead focuses on how reality is built through actors’ comprehension (Perret and Séville, 2003). Therefore, the ‘reality’ is the reflected image of individual perception. Early research argued that interpretation implies the measurement of ‘*pure subjectivity*’ (Chua, 1986; Johnson et al., 2006; Lukka and Modell, 2010), while new research methods claim that seeking to understand reality objectively represents an idealistic view (Perret and Séville, 2003). Thus, ontologically, the social reality is claimed to be either *objective* or *subjective* (Johnson et al., 2006). However, recent studies have emphasized that the difference between subjective and objective paradigms might be smaller than previously assumed (Kakkuri-Knuuttila et al., 2010; Vaivio and Sirén, 2010). Llewellyn (2007) advocates that social reality has multiple facets and if one looks to understand the world we live in, he/she has to consider the existence of ‘*differentiated realities*’ (p. 55).

Although subjectivism is difficult to isolate when the researcher is part of the field (Baumard and Ibert, 2003), this perspective is necessary in order to understand the social, political and institutional contexts within which we situate ourselves. The respondents’ perceptions are a starting point in attaching meaning to data and they should not be ignored (Brewer, 2003b). Hence, the interpretive approach treats subjects as *rational objects* that can at any time transform the system in which they coexist (Lorino et al., 2011). As Berger and Luckmann highlight, social reality is defined through objective facts that are shaped by subjective actions (Berger and Luckmann, 1966). Actors play a major role in constructing social objective worlds (Perret and Séville, 2003). They accept the institutional pressures (Berger and Luckmann, 1966) and carry them out as *self-fulfilling prophecies* (Watzlawick, 1988). As a result, actors give birth to actions that lead to expected outcomes. However, “[t]he predictability of actors’ behavior does not relate on outside forces, but on

actors' willingness to imprison themselves in an endless game they have created"¹ (Watzlawick, 1988, p. 109).

In summary, the interpretive approach assured the richness of data and provided valuable insight (Baker and Bettner, 1997) into the field of higher education. Moreover, this perspective allowed to develop a research that attempts to "describe, understand and interpret the meanings that human actors apply to symbols and structure of the setting in which they find themselves" (Baker and Bettner, 1997, p. 293). At the same time, interpretivism permitted to depict perceptions and actions that lead to building new social realities, it helped to explain the construction and separation of higher education missions, and allowed me to take a critical approach, which implies that I wish to change something in the *status quo*, even if I'm not in the position to achieve the change (Laughlin, 1995).

The rules and procedures I build up over time to guide my study and the language I preferred in developing my work are also included in this part of the thesis. Devising the methodological approach helped to structure my enquiry and differentiate my results from other studies in the fields of performance management and higher education. The methodology provides tools to create new knowledge and puts emphasizes on techniques used to analyze data. However, it is also concerned with how general notions are conceptualized and emerge in theory development. Thus, methodology represents not only a way to organize ideas and observations, but also a form of communicating the research outcomes (Daly, 2003).

As the main goal was to search for meanings and understand how the field of higher education is gradually transformed, this research was developed as a qualitative one. However, some basic quantitative methods were employed in presenting the results of the content analysis, observations and interviews. Their purpose was solely to support and clarify certain aspects of my results, giving an overview on the research dimensions. The methods used in this dissertation were built up based on secondary sources analysis and my field observations. As both the interpretive perspective and institutional theory played a central role in my research development, abductive reasoning provided the appropriate tools to construct theories that are embedded in the daily life of my respondents (Ong, 2012). This strategy permitted to depict a large

¹ Original text: « *la prévisibilité du comportement ne serait pas liée à un déterminisme en dehors des acteurs mais à la soumission des acteurs à un emprisonnement dans un jeu sans fin qu'il ont eux-mêmes créé* »

array of meanings, arguments and activities from the field and identify what was hitherto been hidden behind the academic career choices.

My study does not attempt to go beyond the borders of current investigations, but seeks to understand the same phenomenon through a different perspective. As many before me, I consider that actors have the key to provide in-depth insights on how *social reality* is constructed and that their perceptions can complete the image of the field. Consequently, my research aims to add to the current literature by investigating the impact of classifications as performance measurements systems on the career management of academics.

Moreover, I let the object of my research and the literature to guide the development of the conceptual framework. This fact leads to the construction of a complex methodology that permits to determine the characteristics of the individuals and those of the field they live in. For these reasons, in order to assure that the data collection provides enough information to reach a valid conclusion, I triangulated the systematic reviews, direct observations and semi-structured interviews in a unitary research method.

In qualitative research, interpretation plays a major role in creating new knowledge and the researchers “shared no canons, decision rules, algorithms, or even any agreed-upon heuristics to indicate whether findings were valid and procedures robust” (Miles and Huberman, 1994, p. 262). Thus, the reliability and the validity of the methodological choices rely mostly on the competences of the researcher (Drucker-Godard et al., 2003), who has to document and explain in detail the methodologies and techniques employed in the development of the study. Moreover, Drucker-Godard et al. (2003) state that another way to validate the qualitative research methodology is to compare the results obtained through different research techniques. They state that the researcher has to use different data sources, describe the research methods employed in the study and validate the results with the help of key actors. All these actions are meant to reinforce the fact that the methodology is appropriate for measuring the dimensions specified in the conceptual framework.

Thus, in the first part of the dissertation I described the research methods and the data sources. The study was initiated through a systematic review of the methodologies employed by university rankings, it continued with a direct observation of six HEIs, which was followed by interviews with forty academics and PhD candidates. Next, I used the results of the content analysis in order to develop the direct observations and

semi-structured interviews, as well as to recalibrate the interview guide. Furthermore, in order to validate the methodological choices and the preliminary results, I presented my study to some key actors from the field of higher education by developing an exploratory interview phase, where I interviewed experienced academics. Besides gathering the data, I also discussed with them about my initial findings and the future avenues to be pursued in my research. Hence, in my opinion I took all the necessary actions in order to validate and prove the reliability of my methodology and my results.

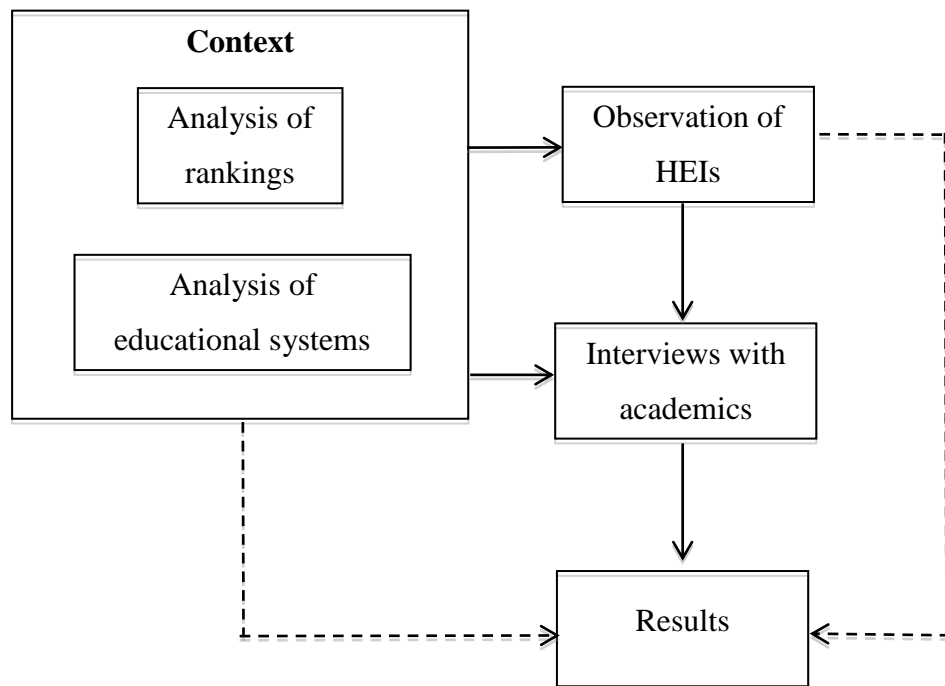


Figure 2. The flow of research methodology

Source: Author's projection

Part two. The conceptual framework

The second part of the dissertation is concerned with the theoretical and conceptual issues that work in close association with the interpretations emerging from the field. Concepts coming from various streams of research (e.g. accounting, organizational behavior, human resources) are presented here in the context of higher education. Following the field of study, three main research streams, namely institutionalism, career management and performance measurements, were selected for the crucial role they play in explaining the field. *Institutional theory* is primordial in creating and maintaining the believes that structure our environment (Lawrence et al., 2009). It

explains how patterns are established and the role they have in changing the individual and organizational behavior.

On the other hand, *career management* is concerned with the twists and turns that take place when developing an effective career strategy. The management process, the context of career development, personal and professional lives integration are all taken into consideration by individuals when choosing the career path they want to follow (Greenhaus et al., 2010). Yet, the connection between institutionalism and career management is not obvious. The link is mitigated through the use of *performance measurements*. These accounting tools are of paramount importance in molding, motivating and controlling organizations and individuals (Miller, 1994) and thus they are often employed to institutionalize certain behaviors.

Institutions and their interactions have been a topic of interest for many years. Early researchers focused on defining the social institutional forces and analyzing their impact on behavior (Scott, 2008), while later theorist looked at organizational issues from an institutional point of view (Lawrence et al., 2009). All these scientists perceived the *institutions* as being more than *organizations*. In addition to the organizational entity, they included the common behavioral patterns that are socially sanctified. The concept of *institutionalization* was introduced to define the process that takes place over time and that transfers the set of believes across several generations (Tolbert and Zucker, 1996).

In order to survive, organizations need not only the resources and the information, but also social acceptability and credibility (Scott et al., 2000). These conditions are assured by legitimacy, which is the “generalized perception or assumption that the actions of an entity are desirable, proper, or appropriate within some socially constructed systems or norms, values, beliefs, and definitions” (Suchman, 1995, p. 574), and institutionalism offers the mechanisms to legitimizing their behavior. The interplay of actors, agency and institutions has come to occupy a predominant research stream in institutional studies of organizations (Lawrence et al., 2009). Although many theorists put emphasis on how the institutional process affects organizational practices and structures (Meyer and Rowan, 1977), more recent work has focused on how actors change the institutional practices within which they operate (DiMaggio, 1988).

Thus, “[i]nstitutionalization constraints conduct in two main ways: by bringing it within a normative order, and by making it hostage to its own history” (Selznick,

1992, p. 232). It provides a framework where templates of action and the mechanisms that impose the actions are created and can be affected by the actions actors take as a response to these mechanism (Lawrence et al., 2009).

Yet, work is another determinant factor in the lives of many people (Greenhaus et al., 2010). It gives meaning to their existence and defines their identity (Baruch et al., 2014). As a result, studies related to workplace, vocation and career management have increased steadily over the last decades. Multiple theories on career choice and development emerged, some of them being embedded in psychology (Super, 1953; Holland, 1985), while others had sociological roots (Reissman, 1953; Musgrave, 1967). They cover a broad range of subjects, among which career counseling, career development and career success. As this thesis focuses on understanding how performance measurements affect the career management of academics, these theories were fundamental in the development of my research. Institutional factors, the organizational environment and personal background influences the career development of individuals. However, the actors are the ones that ultimately decide how to manage their professional lives.

Studies have shown that actors aim to maximize their success by following institutional goals (Palmer et al., 2011). According to Greenhaus et al. (2010) they manage their careers either by transforming their environment or by changing their expectations, values, or goals. With this in mind, they develop a career management process, where they explore themselves and their working environment, set career goals, develop career strategies and perform activities that help them progress professionally. In addition, they continue exploring the professional world by exchanging with their peers. They pay close attention to the behavior of their colleagues, the reaction of their managers and the expectations of their organization. Thus, they collect feedback and put together the information that helps them to understand the changes they have to make in their career plans in order to achieve their goals. As they fight to fit the professional and personal environments (Mirvis and Hall, 1996), they respond to institutionalized procedures, such and performance measurements and evaluations.

During the last several decades, a profound transformation took place in the accounting research. Instead of being seen as a secondary constituent of social relations, accounting is now perceived as an activity deeply embedded in the development of the social environment (Miller, 1994). Defined as a practice that

transforms individuals, organizations and processes, accounting affects the way personal and professional lives are managed, influences the construction and structuring of organizational activities and directs the ‘writing [of] the world’ (p. 21). From the accounting mechanisms studied by contemporary scientists, performance measurement represent the most common organizational practice (ter Bogt and Scapens, 2012). Many institutions use them to improve their own performance, but also to compensate their employees for their good results (Meyer, 2007) or penalize them on the bad ones. However, as the French thinker, Michel Foucault, emphasizes, we have to pay attention to “the most boring practices [as they] often play an unacknowledged but fundamental role in the social life” (cited by Power, 1997, p. xi). The topic of performance measurements has become of high interest for the academic community (Neely, 2002), contemporary researchers discussing their multiple roles and their implications on the organizational and individual behavior. Moreover, even if attention was drawn to huge problems brought by the use of performance measurement systems (McGowan and Poister, 1985; Smith, 1995; Lapsley, 1996; Berman, 2002), the topic continued to grow and the implementation of such systems continued to spread (ter Bogt and Scapens, 2012). As a result, the performance measurements represents a very diverse topic that covers subject from multiple fields: accounting, marketing, operations, management and so on (Neely et al., 2002).

Up until this point, little research has advanced questioning on the nature and consequences of using performance measurements in the higher education environment (ter Bogt and Scapens, 2012). Moreover, authors that followed this path addressed the issues of research assessment (Ashton et al., 2009), journal rankings (Dill and Soo, 2005) and the impact of rankings on governmental resource allocation (Martin and Whitley, 2010), without looking at the consequences of such practices on the individual behavior and career development.

To cover this gap, my thesis deals with the changes occurred in higher education, looking at how the evaluation of the academic activities affects the individuals and their professions. The increasing competition among HEIs had led to mergers and internal reorganization of these institutions. In addition, the academic jobs were restructured and a large number of temporary workers were employed to perform certain activities of the higher education system. As a consequence, the level of job security has declined significantly and the academic career path is undergoing major changes.

The starting point of this transformation has been the institutionalization of performance measurements. Due to the birth of an academic market of higher education, organizations discovered they can increase their legitimacy and their survival prospect by developing institutional isomorphic practices (Meyer and Rowan, 1991). On the contrary, organizations that failed to do so left themselves vulnerable to the outcomes of a high competitive environment (Townley, 1997). This coercive isomorphism is likely to occur when organizations are financial dependent on others and they have an ambiguous goal (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983). Although HEIs are autonomous, a high proportion of their activity is financed through public funds (Croham, 1987) and thus, they are trapped in an institutional bubble where they have to obey rules and prove they are acting on collective values.

Some studies have emphasized that career theories provide the tools to study the effect of organizational change on individual behavior (Lips-Wiersma and Hall, 2007) and that the concept of career can be employed to explore the influence of institutional factors on the roles and identity construction of individuals (Arthur et al., 2005). However, actors are not mere puppets that comply without questioning the practices. They interpret and reinterpret their the result of their actions and respond to the social pressure (Van Maanen, 1977). The acceptance of measurement systems by the academic community and the ordering of the activities performed in the higher education environment have led to the transformation of the academic career. Thus, this dissertation targets to provide answers on how performance measurements are used to align the behavior and career of individuals. A double impact of performance measurements was depicted in the theoretical flow. As soon as the performance criterion changes, individuals react to the new requirements. Yet, these changes occur at the organizational level. The effect of such transformation at a large scale is obtained through a process of institutionalization, which represents a slower process, but has a stronger impact on the career management of individuals.

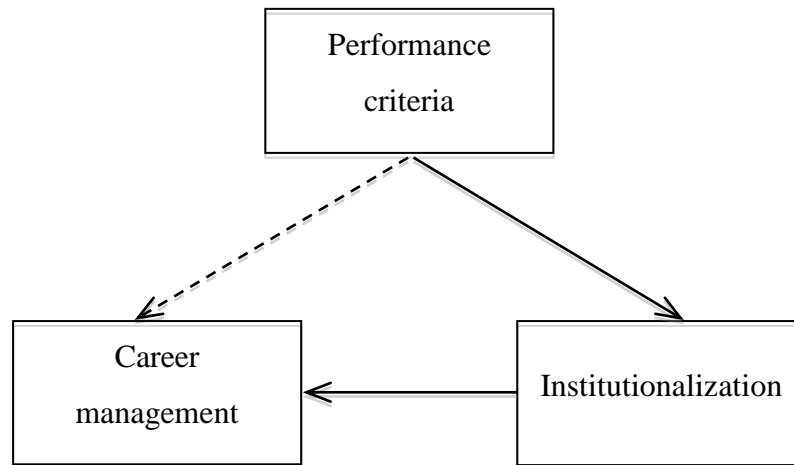


Figure 3. The theoretical flow of performance measurements

Source: Author's projection

As a result of the changes occurred in the higher education environment, the academic profession was compelled to evolve. Due to a sustained effort of some external organizations, such as governments and media, along with the isomorphic actions of HEIs, the academic career management and the recruitment process in higher education institutions has changed tremendously. Thus, a research on the individuals' perception can depict the transformation that occurred in the academic landscape. As actors impact the development of their environment through their actions, they help define the reality through the understanding they have on the field. They desire to succeed and use intuition to build their goals, as well as apprehend that their actions are only valued if they are reflected in their performance. As a result, actors learn to act based on what the evaluation systems are measuring.

Part three. The evaluation of higher education activities

What society accepts today as normal and obvious was not always so (Power, 1997). Similar with the audit activity, the evaluation of HEIs raises doubts for many individuals involved with these practices. In the recent years, international university rankings and accreditation systems have become of paramount importance for higher education (Wedlin, 2006; Nigsch and Schenker-Wicki, 2013). With the intention to objectively assessing the quality of HEIs (Lukman et al., 2010), these performance measurement systems have become irresistible to governments and helpful to future students. However, many authors claim that using these evaluation systems in the

form they are now is damaging the academic environment (Rousseau, 2008; EUA, 2011; Kuan et al., 2011). Yet, *playing a rankings' game* (Watzlawick, 1988; North, 1990) is extremely tempting. As the famous Earl Nightingale says, “[e]xcellence always sells”, and these performance measurement systems advertise their ability to depict the HEIs with the best quality services and outstanding reputation.

Thus, the third part of the dissertation focuses on the topic of external evaluation systems used in the higher education sector and analyzes the most known international university rankings and accreditation systems. The multiple roles of HEIs are discussed: education, research and commitment to society, as well as the existence of a higher education market. Moreover, the measurements used by the external evaluation systems are compared and a conclusion is drawn on the type of activities measured and marketed in the higher education field. This third part is of primary importance as it sets the ground for the observations and the interviews collected from the field. As ter Bogt and Scapens (2012) emphasize, university rankings and accreditation systems may have serious impact on the future academics. Higher education institutions have always been the core engine for economic and social development (Burlaud, 2007) and their primordial role was to transfer knowledge and innovative practices to students (Paulré, 2001). Yet, starting the last century, the educational process has gone through tremendous transformations (Romainville, 2006). As the informational society emerged (Castells, 1996), the demand for higher education increased significantly and HEIs were no longer expected to nurture the elite of the society (Romainville, 2006), but to fuel the economic competitiveness and organizational survival. This fact led to the massification of higher education (Kogan et al., 1994), which meant that HEIs opened their doors for everyone interested to pursue higher education studies (Altbach, 2013). The transformation of the higher education environment took the form of global policies and international exchanges between HEIs. Nowadays, we see students and faculty members freely moving between countries in search for higher intellectual challenges (Mitchell and Nielsen, 2012). Thus, a market of higher education slowly emerged (Marginson, 2004) and HEIs entered in a consumer society (Rhoades, 1987). They were forced to make strategic changes and reconfigure their objectives in accordance with the market demands. They differentiated their activities and their missions evolved, going from education transfer to research and interactions with the socio-economic environment.

Media, governments and the public started to become more and more interested in the activity performed by HEIs (Propper and Wilson, 2003; Pugés, 2012). As a result, the rivalry among these institutions appeared, HEIs competing for reputation, funds and customers. In an effort to establish a credible market for higher education, the use of performance measurement systems flourished (Wedlin, 2006). Their purpose was to offer a reliable proof on the quality of HEIs' activities (Townley, 1997) and to build up a reputation chart (Bok, 2004). Best-known for their ability to set evaluation criteria (Charle, 2009) and their aptitude to order HEIs based on their performance results (Wedlin, 2006), university rankings in particular are often used as management or political decision-making mechanisms.

Governments use them to allocate funds, while students employ them to select the most appropriate school for their needs (Thakur, 2007). Yet, the proliferation of university rankings has reached a point where it strongly influences the behavior of HEIs and their employees. In their struggle to create a powerful image, HEIs have aligned their activities to rankings demand by adapting their internal evaluation systems to the performance measurements used by university rankings. Thus, analyzing the most popular international university rankings can provide some answers on how the role of HEIs has been altered. The results are expected to assess the level of importance given to each of these three major activities and explain the current perception of academics on higher education, career management and their future expectations. The content analysis provides a perfect tool of research as it shows the performance measurements used and the importance assigned to each of them, while permitting the link with the object of their measurements, namely the HEIs three core missions.

In addition to university rankings, the accreditation process aims to determine the commitment to quality and continuous improvement of educational activities. Defined as a series of actions undertaken by organizations or agencies to recognize a higher education institution or a program to have met the set of predetermined standards (Hedmo, 2002), the accreditation systems bring a qualitative perspective to the evaluation of HEIs performance. They look at several criteria, such as internationalization, corporate connection, ethics, responsibility and sustainability, and put emphasis on the pedagogical activities and HEIs contribution to society. Yet, even if benefits can be gained from going through an accreditation process, the

perception of European HEIs is that international accreditation systems are mere strategic tools (Scherer et al., 2005).

In highly competitive markets, such as higher education, institutions are forced to quickly respond to continuous changes and as a result, they often focus on boosting their reputation (D'Aveni et al., 2010). Even if the importance of accreditation systems has increased significantly during the last three decades (Nioche, 2007), that does not mean the interest for pedagogical quality had done the same. As reported by several authors, HEIs use the accreditation systems as an additional tool to gain advantage in face of their rivals and to increase their international prestige and outlook (Temponi, 2005). Thus, in this dissertation, I analyze the evaluation methods of two most popular accreditation systems in order to find if they influence the behavior of academics and those of HEIs. As the accreditation organizations are seen as competitors of governments in what concerns the evaluation of higher education (Nioche, 2007), the content analysis of accreditation systems methodologies allowed for an in-depth understanding of why governments prefer university rankings for the allocation of funds.

As the technological progress has imposed the massification of higher education and increased the demand for a higher level of knowledge for the worldwide population, the socio-economic environment has put pressure on HEIs to prove their role in the development of a better society. When the global market of higher education emerged, students wished to base their decisions on a simple system that could provide information on HEIs abilities to improve their personal knowledge. Moreover, the increase in students' number has lead governments to question their fund allocation, as it was impossible to sustain a massive educational development at a national level. Thus, they had to find a mechanism that permitted a rational distribution of public money and, in the same time, to assure a transparent allocation process.

In this context, the rise of university rankings was viewed as a possible solution to the social and economic expectations. Benefiting from the powerful advantage of numbers, they had a large success to the public and become extremely influential at a global level (Charle, 2009). The outputs of their evaluation processes were considered a perfect accountability tool, creating the label of 'excellence models of HEIs' and legitimizing the measured higher education activities. Yet, as proven by the content analysis, rankings focus on measuring the schools performance in a quantitative

manner. Aiming to create an international model of HEIs, they determine the outcomes of educational activities by using the same set of indicators for all the schools included in their analysis, without taking into consideration the specificity of each higher education institution. Nevertheless, evaluation methods should also focus on quality issues, as not everything that counts can be counted. University rankings have attempted to add measurement of quality, by collecting for example surveys from either faculty members or students. Still, they have failed in measuring quality, as the number of surveys collected was extremely low compared to the number of worldwide faculty members and students. Some funding organizations of international university rankings (e.g. THE) have even acknowledged that measuring the quality of HEIs activities is a very difficult task and they are far from accomplishing this target.

Unlike international university rankings, which employ presumed indicators to determine the quality of HEIs activities, the accreditation bodies have aimed to assure the existence of a high quality higher education system and the continuous improvement of educational activities. Their objective is to improve the transfer of knowledge, develop better research and the HEIs involvement in the social and economic local environments. Thus, they have built their evaluation procedures around the specific mission of HEIs, paying close attention to what each school is targeting, the method through which they link the strategy and the activities they perform to the mission of each HEI.

In other words, rankings represent the image of the academic field at a certain moment in time, while the accreditation systems aim to assure a better future for the society and the economical growth through a constant implication and improvement of HEIs activities within their local and national context. Thus, rankings focus on the past activities and the results obtained by HEIs, while accreditation system focus on the present activities, methods and functions and project the constant improvement of their results into the future.

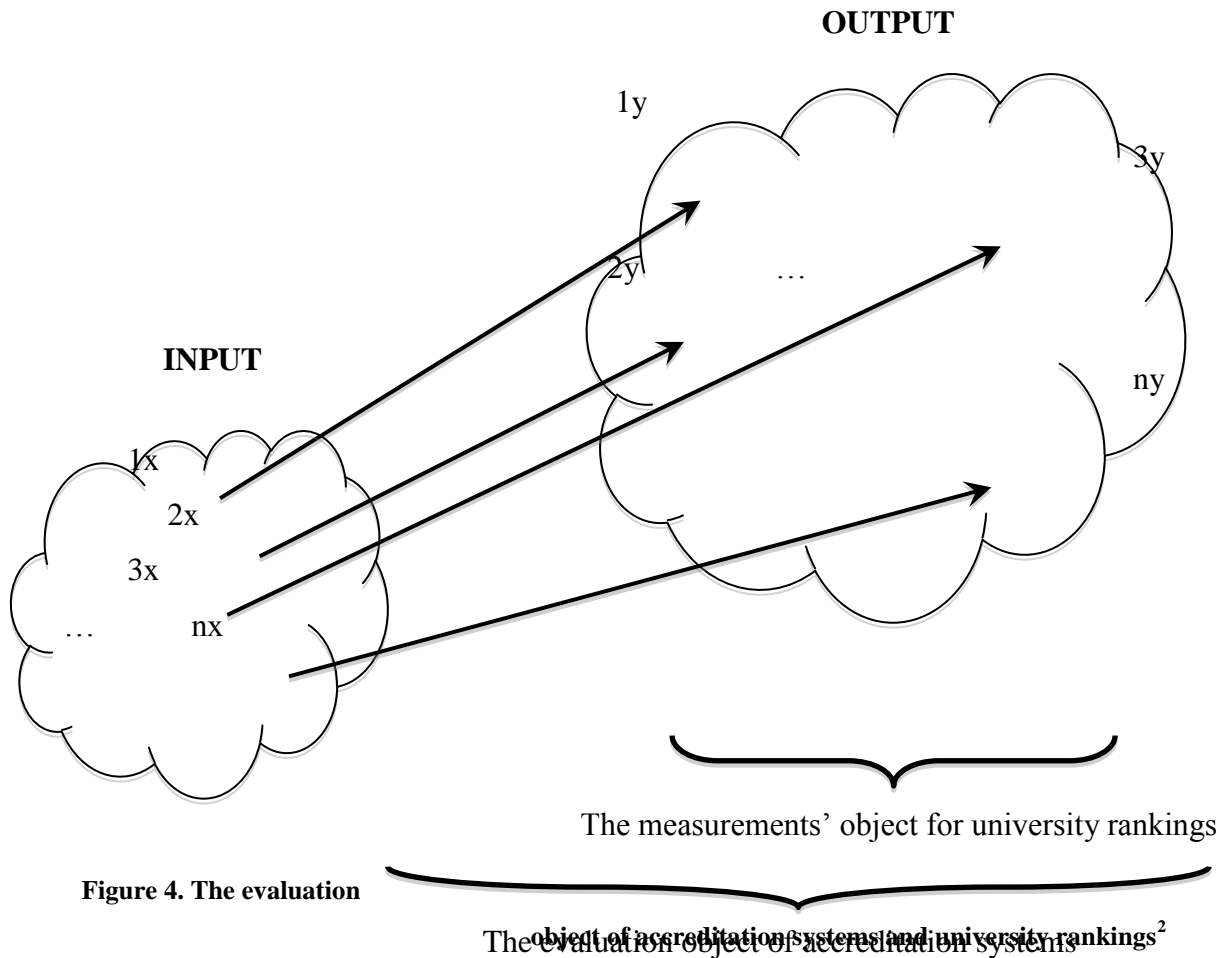


Figure 4. The evaluation

Source: Author's projection

Charle (2009) claims rankings are more successful than any other evaluation mechanism due to their “dominant ideology”. They are easy to use and can benchmark the institutions in the competitive higher education world. In addition, as any other performance measurement system, they help HEIs managers and directors to recognize on which activities they should focus and which can be dropped or paid less attention to. Nevertheless, Merchant (2010) stresses that he sees “a dark cloud [...] on the [academic] horizon, in the form of rankings and league tables” (p. 119). Due to the way they are constructed and their intensive global use for funds allocation, rankings are employed as primordial mechanism of evaluation in the higher education field, while the accreditation system only add to the schools visibility and reputation. Thus, rankings have the power to transform the educational system, to change the mindset of academics. As a result, although the purpose of HEIs

² x stands for the resources and effort provided by the school and y expresses the results of HEIs specific activities. The x and y are linked through a function that represents the method selected by schools to achieve the output they desire.

is to prepare “students for meaningful, professional, societal and personal lives” (AACSB International, 2015, p. 2), more and more top HEIs directed their mission toward research activities.

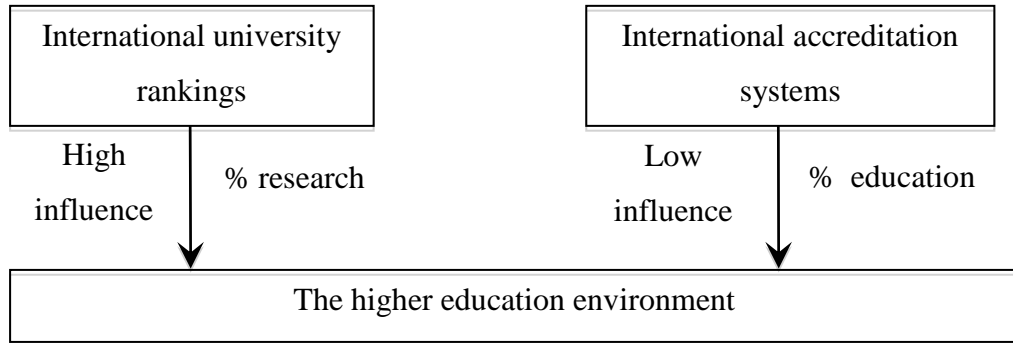


Figure 5. The influence of rankings and accreditations systems on the higher education environment

Source: Author’s projection

The findings show that cognition, rationality and strategic choice of HEIs are inextricably intertwined with one another in the self-desire to survive on the market. This fact provides an indication of the process by which successful HEIs are able to sustain their competitive advantage: by giving a relative greater emphasis to performance measurements employed by external measurement systems, such as university rankings. During the period within which this field study was undertaken, reputable (successful) HEIs invested massively in research activities and preponderantly hired faculty staff that is able to undertake research activities. Thus, the ranking and accreditations system analysis along with HEIs observations show that the successful HEIs are able to protect their image by acting according to the external evaluation pressure, fact that enhances the academics awareness about the high value of research activities and the importance they play in their career advancement.

Part four. Career management in academia

The last part of the dissertation covers the subject of career management in academia. The changes that occurred in the higher education sector have affected not only the institutions, but also their employees. When the university rankings and accreditation systems expanded internationally, the HEIs rebuilt their internal evaluation systems according to the new international demands. Thus, the focus of these institutions shifted from a development role to a judgmental one (ter Bogt and Scapens, 2012), where quantitative measurements became of paramount importance in the evaluation of academic activities.

Used as mechanisms of motivation and control, the performance measurement systems aims to direct and align the actions of faculty members towards a global standard of excellence. Yet, the importance given to certain types of activities has changed the strategy of individuals as well as their career choices. The university rankings became a powerful tool in the evaluation process of HEIs, although they focus mostly on the performance of research activities. As a result, the use of their measurements on individual performance pressured present and future faculty members to develop a higher interest for research activities.

The harmonization of European higher education has been on the governments agenda for a long time (Crêt, 2011). Since 1999, a series of meetings and agreement between European countries were scheduled and empathizes was put on the common desire of several countries to achieve a greater comparability and compatibility between the European higher education systems (European Higher Education Area, 1999). Today, these efforts are widely known as the *Bologna process*.

Yet, although the implicated countries made major adjustments to align themselves to the European requirements, each higher education system has its own particularities. AS a consequence, the education ministries have adopted the changes imposed by the Bologna declaration by adjusting them to their cultural background and academic traditions (Mottis, 2008). This means that the European educational systems are not identical and cross-country differences exist among them.

The observations and semi-structured interviews collected for the development of this dissertation were performed in European institutions, most particularly in French ones. Hence, even if the results of the study might be applied to other European or non-European institutions, it is necessary to describe the background and the particularities of the French higher education environment. Thus, the last part of the

dissertation includes a brief history of the French higher education system, two models of career development, as well as the reality of the field constructed through the lens of the academics perceptions. Although the research unfolds around the particularities of the French higher education institutions, the results are applicable at a global level. This fact was confirmed through several interviews with academics that have worked in different European and non-European countries. Although the validation of a similar worldwide career management transformation was not a condition for my study advancement, I performed this research phase out of mere curiosity for future research development.

Previously, it was mentioned that the current performance measurement systems have impacted the HEIs, their missions and their strategies. Yet, the institutionalization of these systems has not only transformed the academic field, but they also affect the perception of faculty members and created a culture of mimicked behavior. Before entering the higher education field, individuals build a projection of how their professional life will be, what activities they will be performing and what professional relations they will develop with different stakeholders of the educational system. Still, immediately after being introduced to the field, individuals enter in contact with other academics and realize there is a contradiction between their expectations and the reality. The conversations they have with others bring to life a different context than the one they envisioned. As a result, they had to adapt to this new discovered environment in order to continue their academic careers.

Thus, the academics functions have changed significantly. Starting from a pedagogical approach, meant to assure the transfer of knowledge, academics have ended up in primarily focusing on research activities regardless of the type of academic institution they work for. The discrepancy between the image of the field and the perceived reality comes primordially from the use performance measurement systems. These types of control mechanisms have helped businesses to assure that their objectives and plans are achieved. By being adopted in the higher education environment, governments and evaluation institutions have aimed to ensure the good functioning of the higher education environment. Yet, they forgot that these management tools have to be constantly corrected and improved in order to achieve the initial objective and not completely change the field.

All human beings aspire to build a successful career. Yet, the strategy they develop and implement is based on institutional requirements. Many studies show how individuals adapt to new roles and “how their organizations teach them the ropes by putting them through formal and informal socialization experiences” (Ibarra, 2003, p. 173). Contemporary literature describes the elements that count for the development and advancement of career paths. Moreover, some studies show the influence of the social environment on career decision taken by individuals (Brousseau et al., 1996) and the role external performance measurement systems play in the construction of reputation (Wedlin, 2006).

Despite the impact media and rankings play in redefining the role of organization, precious little is known about how careers are affected by these external tools. This research breaks new ground by simply focusing on how one manages careers based on what the society he lives in defines as being “successful”. The corollary of external performance measurements is analyzed and the conditions that enable taking the leap into a different individual career within the same profession are discussed. In addition, this research distinguishes itself from the previous ones by focusing on how performance measurement systems act as a tool, influencing the choices individuals make in their working lives and remodeling their career management. The demands and aspirations for accountability and control (Power, 1997) led to the separation of the academic career. Thus, although the French legislation permits the existence of pedagogues and research-pedagogues within the HEIs, the increasing tendency is to manage academic careers toward forming researchers as the research career is perceived as having a higher social status than the pedagogical one. The direction HEIs have headed to, seem to be the elimination of the traditional lecturer job position and teaching activities from the schedule of full time employees. However, it might be that this is not the outcome external organization expected and neither the desire of HEIs. All of them could be just an unexpected result of the snowball effect that university rankings have created. Yet, the changes are not limited to attitudes and behavior of individuals, but also entail a rather drastic reorganization of the academics priorities in such a way that it contradicts the traditional mission and role of HEIs.

As a result, although university rankings state they focus equally on both pedagogical and research activities, research seemed to continually gain importance worldwide, at both organizational and individual level. The result of the interviews strongly emphasized this huge change that occurred in the academics mindset. During the last

years, their behavior was more and more article oriented, freedom of thought being constraint to a scientific standard. Some participants even claim that what misses from the picture of research activities is the intellectual unscientific work. In other words, they emphasize the scarcity of real thinkers by distinguishing between them and intellectuals that focus on article publications.

The results on the qualitative analysis of indicators combined with the literature review on rankings and performance measurement systems shows that education is fading out from HEIs mission, as the whole existence of rankings has redistributed the balance between pedagogical and research activities. One reason for my findings might be that research indicators are easily measurable and are globally available, which is in stark opposition with the educational indicators. It is agreed upon that the current evaluation systems have errors (Charle, 2009), but they cannot be abandoned completely. Rather, international best practices can be improved through observations collected from the field. In order to avoid the separation of research and pedagogical careers in higher education, academics must actively take part in the elaboration of evaluation proposals. Instead of only using abstract numbers to explain the academic performance, qualitative factors should be added to the evaluation systems. In-depth analysis and context should be a priority and effort should be put into understanding the link between measurements and outcomes. Such practices can assure that the prior has the desired effect on the latter. As Charle (2009) emphasizes, “this is the time to act”.