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Public good in French universities: Principles and practice of the ‘republican’ model (0251)

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Abstract

This paper explores the French case examined as part of a CGHE comparative research project that seeks to understand the production of public good in higher education. We examine the historical and contemporary cultural, political, social and economic forces that may explain the ways in which public good(s) is (are) perceived, translated and debated within the French higher education context. Our methodology combines documentary analysis at government and institutional levels and fieldwork research, as part of which 60 semi-structured interviews were conducted in four public universities. Our first findings indicate that a variety of views of the public good of higher education co-exist, which reflect various conceptions of the ways in which the principles and practices driving the French ‘republican’ model work or should work.

Background and objectives – the public good within different national contexts

The question of the contribution of higher education (HE) to the public good has attracted renewed interest (Marginson, 2016). This follows three decades of policy trends of marketisation which have progressively framed HE as a private good. This is in line with the reduction of public funding in HE and the increasing share of private resources including the introduction of fees. This was justified in terms of increased employability and higher salary expectations, thus privileging the individual returns from HE over its collective and public contribution (Carpentier, 2012). The crisis of 2008 has not halted the dynamics that led to this domination of the private over the public. However, it has revealed some of its weaknesses such as the fragility of the foundation of economic growth and its connections with the increase in inequalities (Piketty, 2014), the alarming rise of private debt as well as the resurgence of social unrest and nationalistic sentiments. In the world of HE, this manifested in the form of issues such as student debt, lack of social mobility through HE, and increasing tensions regarding internationalisation. These developments pose the question of the contribution of HE to the public good at national and international levels. However they are variable across countries, contingent to their contemporary socioeconomic contexts as well as to their cultural and political historical traditions. The project this paper draws on seeks to compare and contrast how these characteristics impact the ways in which the question of the public good is defined, formulated and understood in different countries and the implications for institutions and their people.

The case of France

A key assumption we make is that the exploration of the connections and tensions between the principle and practice of the French Republican model offers a distinctive context to understand the question of the public good.

Institutional differentiation is key to understanding the republican model and its links to the public good. The French HE system is characterised by non-selective public universities (Musselin, 2017). These remain in the majority despite a decline in their share of total enrolment from 82% in the mid-1970s to 60% in 2016. This coincides with the growth of selective public and private institutions including the elite *Grandes Ecoles* (25% of enrolment) on the one hand and on the other, selective 2-year vocational provision (15%). Another interesting and perhaps surprising aspect of differentiation is that 20% of enrolment in French HE is in the private sector (Carpentier, 2018).

There is considerable evidence that this differentiation reflects social structures (Moreau, 2012). This is related to contemporary French debates about structural unemployment and lack in social mobility. Both access to HE and student attrition have been shown to be a class issue. This contradicts the republican ideal in practice and has led the government to introduce prerequisites for university admission. This has caused heated debates and a wave of protests. While the supporters of this reform denounced the student drop-out problem as a form of hidden social selection, many have interpreted the reform as a masked introduction of selection within the university. This is seen as a threat to the principle of the meritocratic model. In particular, it is argued that the mechanism of prerequisites will lead to a selection based on class differentiation. Many consider drop out as the reflection of the tensions between the key public service mission of the university related to democratisation and its lack in funding compared to the other segments of the HE system (Bodin and Orange, 2018; Carpentier, 2018 Frouillou, 2014).

This context is particularly important to understand the question of the public good within the French context and the various ways in which the mission of HE and its contribution to the public good are perceived. In this project, we focus on the ways in which higher education actors understand the public good and their contribution to it with key themes such as the role of the state, social justice and the meritocratic system and the question of internationalisation.

Methodology

Documentary analysis

This involves looking at key policy documents at the national levels with for example, legislative documents such as the *Code de l'Éducation*, ministerial documents as well as documents from key HE institutions, agencies, professional organisations and trade unions, with a focus on the question of translation and meanings of terms like *public*, *bien public*, *service public* in the French republican context.

Interviews in 4 public universities

We are interested to know how the public good is understood at the institutional level and implemented (differences of interpretation amongst institutions and people within those institutions). Therefore the sample includes two universities located in Paris and two others outside Paris. All are relatively well positioned in rankings, research active and multidisciplinary.

The interviewees include senior managers as well as colleagues at operational level, including professional and academic staff. The interview questions seek to elicit their views on the public good and how they see the national and institutional ways in which the public good is or might be achieved.

Expected findings

The notion of public good is still central to the way research participants understand their roles and the function of the university. In particular, the notion of ‘service public’ was recurring, whereby participants suggested that their role was to provide ‘a public service’ – one that is free at the point of entry and accessible to all. For many interviewees, this was extended to international students as well, which provides an interesting contrast with the UK case.

Given the context, the tension between this ideal, and the introduction of selection, was prominent in the interviews. Some participants voiced their opposition to the reform while others rationalised it as a necessity in order to continue providing a ‘public service’.

When the various practices of universities were detailed (including teaching, research and industry-related activities), further tensions emerged around intellectual property, ‘free-riders’ and competitiveness, suggesting that in many ways, the French HE system might be at a juncture.

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