

## Submissions Abstract Book - All Papers (Included Submissions)

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Internationalisation and the Contested Spaces of the Public Good in French Universities

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**Research Domain:** International contexts and perspectives (ICP)

**Abstract: Abstract**

In 2019, despite strong opposition, the French government implemented differential fees for non-EU higher education (HE) students. This was meant to effect a radical change in the approach to international student recruitment, potentially in conflict with the values traditionally defining the sector in France. This study, conducted as part of a CGHE comparative project on the Internationalisation of HE as a public good, draws on 60 semi-structured interviews with senior management and academics of four public universities, conducted shortly before the reform. Using the theoretical lens of the public good, our findings suggest that the changes are at odds with participants' understandings of who should benefit from free or low-fee HE. These views are tied to the 'republican model' of HE as a public service extended to non-nationals. Further, based on our findings, we reflect on how the public good is conceptualised in relation to borders, national space, and different configurations of the international space.

**Paper: Background**

In 2019, despite strong opposition, the French government implemented a steep increase in fees for non-EU students, who, until then, were charged the same modest fees as their French counterparts (Geisser 2018). This measure was part of the new 'Bienvenue en France' (Welcome to France) HE internationalisation strategy, alongside a shift away from ex-colonies in favour of more lucrative markets, and a renewed focus on recruiting postgraduate STEM students instead of the traditional arts and humanities, undergraduate international student profile. Those measures were explicitly designed to push French universities towards the Anglo-Saxon model of international student recruitment as a way to generate revenue and to serve the knowledge economy by mimicking the two-step migration process in place elsewhere. Repeated attempts on the part of the government to shift the HE system towards a high-fee system for international students and to draw the same students as international education giants such as the UK and US can be interpreted as a willingness to further neoliberalise the sector. These changes and others are sometimes difficult to reconcile with the traditional 'Republican' principles that set the French system apart from more neoliberalised HE systems (Authors 2020).

Previous governments had attempted to implement a similar shift but were forced to relent due to strong resistance from academics and students' right groups alike. This poses a number of questions. Why is the French approach so different from other countries like the UK? How can the notion of public good help understand the dynamics of internationalisation in French HE?

## **Approach**

### *Theoretical lens*

We use the theoretical lens of the public good (Marginson, 2016; Marginson and Yang 2021) to analyse institutional strategies and individual academics' views in relation to international student recruitment in this specific context. Using the concept of the public good in relation to student recruitment helps complicate conversations otherwise dominated by economic rationality, connecting to debates on equality and nationhood. We also draw on the broader literature on HE internationalisation and inequality (Author 2 2018; Başak and Van Mol 2017; Brooks and Waters 2013; de Wit and Altbach 2021; Garneau and Bouchard 2013; Lomer 2018; Rivzi 2011; Tannock 2013; Turner and Robson 2009).

### *Empirical work*

We conducted documentary research and 60 semi-structured interviews with senior management and academics of four public, multidisciplinary and research-intensive universities (two in Paris and two outside), shortly before the announcement of the new fee regime. The interviews focused on how the public good is understood at the institutional level and implemented in relation to internationalisation. We sought to understand the differences in interpretation amongst institutions and people within those institutions.

## **First Findings**

### *Public good, republican model of HE and internationalisation*

We suggest that the changes enforced 'from above' are largely at odds with participants' understandings of who should benefit from free or low-fee higher education in France. These views, we argue, are very much tied to the 'republican model' of higher education as a public service (Authors, 2020); and one that – unlike what has become normalised in the UK - should not stop at the border (Tannock 2013) but instead be extended to non-nationals.

Respondents tended to identify the public good in French universities as a public service associated to the republican model of HE. Although there was a clear consensus acknowledging the tensions faced by the public service especially due to constraints in funding, the solutions proposed by our interviewees to overcome them contrasted sharply generating significant variations regarding the impact of HE internationalisation. Some participants proposed to save the public good by renationalising it (with higher fees for international students and a national reframing of research). Others insisted on the mission of the HE republican model to drive both [the national and global public good](#) but indicated that this necessitated a reversal of recent reforms and funding trends . A range of solutions was proposed between these two polar scenarios offering various balances between global and national public goods. This led us reflect on how the public good is

conceptualised in relation to borders, the national space, and different configurations of the international space.

### *The contested spaces of the public good*

We identified three spaces of the public good. The traditional space is connected to various historical forces and rationales such as internationalism, soft power, colonial and post-colonial contexts and Francophonie. The emerging global space was seen as a combination of a shift beyond the French sphere of influence and a commercial approach. The regional space is associated to a more structured, strategic, safe alignment of internationalisation around the political, economic, social, cultural and geopolitical dimensions of the European project. The conceptualisation of the public good is shaped by the connections and clashes producing different strategic configurations of the international space.

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