

# 239 Looking back at the funding and development of higher education systems in France, UK, USA and Canada: prospects and challenges

Vincent Carpentier

IOE, UCL's Faculty of Education, University College London, London, United Kingdom

## Research Domains

Higher Education policy (HEP)

## Abstract

Key concerns are expressed regarding the capacity of the current level and structure of HE funding to drive a sustainable and fair system. This paper explores this question by examining the historical connections and tensions between the funding, student enrolment and staff recruitment of HE systems in France, the UK, the USA and Canada since the 1920s. The study shows that as a result of public underfunding, the four systems are all (differently) challenged by tensions between their meritocratic ideal, lacks in effective social mobility and differentials in resources between institutions. A countercyclical revival of public funding is necessary to reverse the process of public private/substitution and ensure that a reduction of inequalities within HE systems and a rebalancing of the rationales driving them in order to contribute to wider socio-economic transformations necessary in hard times.

## Full paper

Objectives and debates

Covid-19 revealed and reinforced unsustainable levels of inequalities -already exposed by the 2008 crisis (Piketty 2014) and left unaddressed since- which combined with struggling underfunded public services have underlined the vulnerability of socio-economic systems and questioned their capacity to cope with the perfect storm of political, economic, social, geopolitical and environmental threats currently brewing. This reactivated longstanding debates on the social sphere including on the past, present and future of public higher education (HE) systems.

Key concerns relate to the capacity of the current level and structure of funding to drive a sustainable and fair HE system. The slowdown in public funding and the rise in private resources including fees have raised concerns related to student access, precarity and private debt in a context of replacement of grants by loans (Callender and Davis 2023). Declining public resources also raised growing concerns on quality including student support, working condition of staff and tensions between teaching and research. Underfunding also questioned HE as a system with an increasingly competitive institutional differentiation considered by some as a necessary concentration of resources within institutions to compete internationally and by others as a further source of inequalities strengthening social stratification (Boliver 2011). Finally, the 2008 crisis can be seen as a crisis of globalisation with a neonationalist backlash (Douglass 2021) affecting the glonocal balance of HE (Marginson 2022) and its internationalisation under pressure from income generation, geopolitical and immigration rationales.

This paper proposes to look back at these issues by exploring the historical connections and tensions between funding, expansion of enrolment and staff and institutional differentiation within HE systems. The study examines the cases of France, the UK, the USA and Canada which have systems with distinctive historical traditions and different political economy of education regarding levels of public/private funding (Eastman et al. 2022; Geiger, Musselin 2021; Scott 2021)

Methodology

The analysis is based on an original dataset on HE funding, enrolment and staff since the 1920s. It follows the methodology of quantitative history which offers a system of collecting and processing of data providing homogenous statistical series comparable across time and space. Data sources come from governmental publications. Data on funding includes public and private resources. Data on enrolment are disaggregated by geographical origins, gender, social class and types, modes and subjects of studies. Staff data on academic staff are distributed according to

gender, activities, position, and types and mode of employment. All data were when possible disaggregated by types of institutions shaping the HE systems.

### Summary of the findings

The first finding reveals the influence of economic fluctuations (Kondratiev cycles) on the level and structure of HE resources driving periodic tensions between funding and expansion of the system. Economic crises were turning points with policies of reduction of public funding and promotion of marketisation implemented after 1973 and intensified after 2008 in all countries. This produced underfunding in the mainly public funded French system. In the other countries which had already experienced marketisation since 1973, the 2008 crisis produced a shift towards public/private substitution by which private funding increasingly played a role of substitutive rather than additional resources as initially designed by reforms promoting cost-sharing. This shift has strong implications for equity, quality and sustainability of HE systems with underfunding raising significant tensions between the historical trajectories of student enrolment and the recruitment of the academic workforce which tends to be increasingly segmented and casualised.

The data also shows that Kondratiev cycles have influenced and reshaped the historical processes of institutional differentiation with private or/and selective HE sector/s rising during crises. Importantly, the well-established link between institutional differentiation and social stratification is historically contingent. The crises of 1970s and 2008 led institutional differentiation to slowly shift away from social inclusion towards diversion in most countries. Finally, the effect of differentiation on inequalities is strengthened by increasing differential of resources (including staff) between elite and non-elite institutions, especially during economic crises.

### Conclusion

2008 has intensified rather than reversed the HE policies adopted since 1973. As a result of public underfunding, the four systems are all strongly challenged by tensions between their meritocratic ideal, lacks in effective social mobility and differentials in resources between institutions. Changes in funding is not sufficient but necessary to initiate a countercyclical revival of public funding reversing the process of public private/substitution and ensure that the reduction of inequalities within HE systems and a rebalancing of the rationales behind HE contribute to initiate the wider socio-economic transformations necessary in hard times.

## References

Boliver, V. 2015. "Are There Distinctive Clusters of Higher and Lower Status Universities in the UK?" *Oxford Review of Education* 41(5): 608–627.

Callender, C. S. Davis (2023) "Graduates' response to student loan debt in England: 'Sort of like and acceptance but with anxiety attached'" *Higher education*

Carpentier, V. (2021). Three stories of institutional differentiation: Resource, mission and social inequalities in higher education. *Policy Reviews in Higher Education* 5(2), 197-241.

Carpentier, V., & Courtois, A. (2022). "Public good in French universities: Principles and practice of the 'Republican' model". *Compare*, 52(1), 1-18.

Douglass, J.A. (2021). *Neo-Nationalism and universities: Populists, autocrats and the future of higher education*. John Hopkins University Press.

Eastman, J., Jones, G. A., Trottier, C., & Bégin-Caouette, O. (2022). *University Governance in Canada: Navigating Complexity*. McGill-Queen's University Press.

Fontvieille, L., and Michel, S. (2002) "Analysis of the Transition between two Successive Social Orders: Application to the relation between education and growth", *Review*, 1, 23–46.

Geiger, R. L. (2019) *American Higher Education Since World War II: A History*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Marginson, S. (2022) "What is global HE?" *Oxford Review of Education*, 48(4), 492-517.

Mitchell L. Stevens & Ekaterina Shibanova (2021) Varieties of state commitment to higher education since 1945: toward a comparative-historical social science of postsecondary expansion, *European Journal of Higher Education*, 11:3, 219-238, DOI: 10.1080/21568235.2021.1944252

Musselin, C. (2021) "Bringing universities to the centre of the French higher education system? Almost but not yet..." *European Journal of Higher Education* 11(3), 329-345.

Piketty, T. (2014) *Capital in the 21st Century*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Scott, P. (2021) *Retreat or resolution? Tackling the crisis of mass higher education*. Policy Press