Spaces, shapes and rationales of the expansion of higher education though a historical lens (0171)

Vincent Carpentier
UC Institute of Education, UK

Introduction

The paper proposes to explore the historical expansion of higher education (HE) in Europe by looking at three key intersected areas: the links and frictions between the global, national and local spaces of HE; the shapes of the HE system in terms of access, participation and institutional differentiation; the connections and tensions between the cultural, political, social, economic rationales driving its expansion. These themes and their interfaces constitute the thread of historical analysis to reflect on contemporary debates on the connections between funding, equity and quality.

Background and lens: Spaces, shapes and rationales

The first dimension examines the expansion of HE at the interface of its global, national and local contexts. The connections (and tensions) between those spaces of HE have always existed but they have evolved across time (Marginson and Rhoades, 2002).

The second lens examines the shapes of HE expansion by looking at the alignments and disjunctions between processes of access, participation and institutional differentiation. Differences between expansion and democratisation have been revealed by substantial inequalities in terms of access, participation and outcomes for different social groups (class, gender, ethnicity…). Institutional differentiation might reflect functional diversity in the system or a more problematic process of accommodating inequalities between these groups (Reay et al, 2005). Arguably, the links between the university and other HE institutions have differed by country and time period, resulting in patterns of expansion ranging from highly differentiated to highly unified systems (Teichler, 2008; Trow, 1974).

A third dimension concerns the evolving tensions and connections between rationales (cultural, political, religious, social, economic, political) reflecting a rapport de force concerning HE expansion with substantial implications for funding, equity and quality (Carpentier, 2012).

The paper examines how the interactions between rationales, spaces and shapes of expansion contributed to the development of successive historical regimes of HE in Europe. Some lessons might be drawn from historical changes and continuities (Aldrich, 2006) to offer some reflections on the possibilities of HE (Barnett, 2011). Clearly, the expansion has been massive and provoked substantial transformations since the Middle-Ages. This makes the historical comparison of HE systems across time difficult although the long view reveals recurrent trends, questions and mechanisms worth considering.

5 historical regimes

Building on existing interpretations and chronologies of HE development (Perkin 2006; Watson, 2014), I have identified 5 historical regimes of expansion based on the articulation of spaces, shapes and rationales.

The first regime (12th to mid-16th century) covers the spontaneous creation in the 12th century of the early archetypical local medieval universities closely connected to the professions and a shift after the 15th century to a more controlled and territorialised expansion of the late medieval universities along the (political) feudal and religious lines.

The second regime covers the early modern period (mid-16th to late 18th century) when the political rationale for universities was strengthened as they became key drivers of the construction of Nation States and increasingly involved in dynastic and religious wars of the time.

The third regime covers the late modern era (late 18th century to WW1) when political and industrial revolutions shifted the political rationale and boosted a socio-economic agenda which threatened and transformed universities and initiated a revival of other forms of HE.

Finally, the fifth era covers the post-1914 era. Two World wars and the Great depression led to a paradigm shift based on the alignment of the cultural, economic, social and political rationales of HE. This created the conditions for a post-1945 massification and diversification of HE under the united agendas of the welfare state, the knowledge economy and the cold war. The funding crisis of the 1980s interrupted this development and clashed with the second phase of massification of the 1990s (Charle and Verger, 2012) raising key (unsolved) tensions between the shapes, rationales and spaces of HE expansion.

Some implications

The historical perspective shows that the political, cultural, social and economic rationales have always been present and identifies shifts in their connections and hierarchy. The economic rationale can be traced back to the beginning of the university with the idea of professionalization. It then took a back seat in the more humanistic model before taking a new dimension during the second Industrial Revolution and becoming a key driver of the postwar WW2 HE policy. Rationales have always been in competition but remained aligned to reflect the multidimensionality of HE. The increasing dominance of the economic rationale and the weakening the cultural, political and social ones are problematic. The resolution of political, socioeconomic and environmental crises might depend on rebalancing these rationales (Unterhalter and Carpentier, 2010).

A second insight is that HE has always been transformed by the articulations and tensions between the global, national and local dimensions. Universities were from the beginning local institutions with international reach before being increasingly part of nation-building. Today's strengthened internationalisation and new global practices question the balance between the spaces of HE. The global space might be a chance for HE if it transcends the economic focus of the current form of globalisation. The global space has not always been dominated by the economic rationale. This is key as local and national interrelated challenges in terms of economy, equity, democracy, health and environment requires global responses.

Thirdly, the historical transformations of the shape of HE reflect the connections and potential tensions between expansion and democratisation. Political and financial commitments were determinant in ensuring that institutional differentiation was driving diversity rather than channelling inequalities. This is intimately connected to the questions of inequalities at the core of the current crisis (Piketty, 2014).

Conclusion

Overall, the articulations between rationales, shapes and spaces of HE have changed regularly across history. This suggests a possibility for a realignment of the economic and non-economic rationales, a rebalanced space for HE looking jointly at the global, national and local dimensions and a institutional reshaping of HE systems where differentiation is driven by joint imperatives of sustainability, equity and quality. Such a shift may only be possible if combined with broader socio-economic transformations part of a renewed social contract.

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