

Serial number 0278

Title Historical trajectories of expansion and institutional differentiation in higher education in the UK, USA and France

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Abstract

The 2008 crisis has reactivated crucial debates about the tension between wealth creation and its redistribution. Those debates coincide with a renewed interest in the understanding of the ways in which the expansion of higher education (HE) systems has led, sometimes simultaneously, to significant democratic advances and persistent inequalities. Those debates increasingly focus on the role of institutional differentiation. This paper presents the findings from a project hosted by the Centre for Global Higher Education which explores historical trajectories of expansion and institutional differentiation of HE systems in the UK, France and the USA since the 1920s. By comparing and contrasting historical series of funding and enrolment of the key types of institutions in each country with key socio-economic aggregates, the project examines the extent to which periods of economic prosperity and crisis might affect and be affected by the relationship between expansion and institutional differentiation in HE.

Introduction

This paper presents the findings from a project from the Centre for Global Higher Education exploring the historical connections and tensions between the processes of expansion and institutional differentiation in higher education (HE). The research compares and contrasts the historical trajectories of expansion and institutional differentiation of HE systems in the UK, France and the USA since the 1920s. By comparing and contrasting those historical series with key socio-economic aggregates, I propose to examine the extent to which periods of economic prosperity and crisis might affect and be affected by the trends in funding, access and institutional differentiation in HE.

Expansion and differentiation

The 2008 crisis has reactivated crucial debates about the relationship and tension between wealth creation and its redistribution. Those debates coincide with a renewed interest in the understanding of the ways in which the expansion of HE systems has led, sometimes simultaneously, to significant democratic advances and persistent inequalities. Those debates increasingly questions the role of institutional differentiation in that process.

The research on the dynamics between expansion and differentiation is worth looking at. Trow was himself well aware that the historical stages of elite (up to 15%), mass (16% to 49%) and universal (50%) (1974) HE he had identified were not only about the scale of a system but also, and perhaps more fundamentally, about the changes in its institutional structure. This is well summed up by Teichler who identifies “a growing number of sectors of the HE system: elite higher education is supplemented in the process of expansion by mass higher education and later additionally by universal higher education” (2008, p. 354).

The debates on the origins and effects of institutional differentiation increasingly question whether it responds to a process of diversity (vertical differentiation based on mission) or distribution of inequalities (horizontal differentiation based on quality or reputation) (Naidoo and Brennan, 2008; Archer and Leathwood, 2004; McCowan 2015) or both. This is well captured by Parry who argues

that “the debate has shifted to what kinds of higher education are accessed by what kind of students for what kind of outcomes” (Parry, 2015, p. 15). Arum et al. consider differentiation as a process of inclusion rather than diversion arguing that “while differentiation is commonly viewed as a consequence of expansion, it may also contribute to expansion, as new places become available in new segments of the education system” (2007, p. 4). Other interpretations are more critical linking differentiation to distribution of inequalities (Reay et al, 2005; Boliver, 2015). Bastedo and Gumport sum it up well arguing by referring to “shifts in the stratification of student opportunity” (2019. p.355). The link between institutional differentiation and social inequalities is acknowledged by Marginson who argues that “the tendency to stratification of institutions on the basis of unequal value is inevitable where there is inequality of wealth and status and social competition for a limited number of well paid professionals” (Marginson, 2006, 81).

This research seeks to explore whether those tensions between expansion and institutional differentiation might be historically contingent. My key question is how socioeconomic fluctuations might affect the relationship between the dynamics of expansion and differentiation of HE systems.

Methods

The research explores key historical trends and patterns in the expansion and differentiation of HE systems in the USA, UK and France since the 1920s.

The lenses of political economy and history of education

The research develops a reasoned approach of the study of the past seeking to explore changes and continuities to illuminate the current context (Aldrich, 2003). Institutional Differentiation has a very long history. HE institutions outside (India, China) and inside Europe (cathedral schools and stadium generale) existed well before the first mediaeval Universities were created in the 12th Century (Perkin, 2006). Since then, various competing or complementary rationales -such as feudal and religious competitions, nation state building, political and industrial revolutions- have led to the emergence or disappearance of institutions, periodically reshaping HE systems.

The project focuses on a more recent history looking back at the relationship between expansion and differentiation since the 1920s. This is an important era covering not only the historical construction of mass HE but also substantial socioeconomic transformations. The regulation theory offers a valuable political economy framework to reflect on the ways in which the historical links between expansion and institutional stratification might be articulated to social, economic and technological transformations (Boyer and Saillard 2002; Fontvieille and Michel 2002). The theory conceptualises the development of the post 1945 Fordist model as a result of the 1929 crisis and the Second World War. This model of growth was based on the translation of productivity gains into wages and productive social spending such as HE. The crisis of the mid-1970s ended that model leading to reduced taxation and the marketization of the social sphere including HE (Piketty, 2014). Those economic fluctuations strongly influenced the level and structure of funding of HE systems producing some tensions with the continuous expansion (Carpentier 2012). This paper extends the analysis by exploring how those developments affected the institutional differentiation in HE.

Quantitative history

The empirical side of the project is the construction of a historical dataset on the institutional differentiation of HE. In Britain, the series will distinguish the universities from the public sector of HE (Scott 2014). In France, the distribution will include the universities, Grandes Ecoles and 2-year vocational HE institutions. The USA will distinguish for private for profit and not for profit universities and public universities and community colleges (Douglass 2005). The historical series will include:

- The level and structure of enrolment according to the types of institution regarding students (gender, social class, nationality...), their mode of enrolment (Fulltime/part-time; Undergraduate/postgraduate...).
- The level and structure of funding within group of institutions.

The research uses the methodology of quantitative history which offers an exhaustive and coherent system of collecting and processing of data which provides homogenous statistical series comparable across time and space (Marczewski 1961). Data sources have been gathered from key governmental departments and statistical agencies of the three countries.

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