

Submissions Abstract Book - All Papers (All Submissions)

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The historical dynamics between international students and the expansion and differentiation of higher education systems in France and the UK

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Research Domain: Higher education policy (HEP)

Abstract:

The Great recession of 2008 has generated intense debates on inequalities, austerity and migration leading to question the level and form of internationalisation of societies and economies (Piketty, 2014). Those debates have had substantial repercussions on higher education (HE) questioning its historical engagement with internationalisation and particularly student mobility. HE has always been international and student mobility recurrently challenged by tensions between economic, social, political (geo)political and cultural rationales (Carpentier, 2010; King et al., 2011; Lomer, 2017; Teichler, 2017; Bamberger et al., 2019). This paper proposes to reflect historically on those tensions by exploring the trends and patterns of entrant international students, their origins and implications. This research draws on new historical datasets to explore the long-term dynamics between student mobility and the expansion of HE systems in the UK and France, two countries with HE systems comparable in size although driven by distinctive models of expansion and differentiation.

Paper:

Introduction

The Great recession of 2008 has generated intense debates on inequalities, austerity and migration leading to question the level and form of internationalisation of societies and economies (Piketty, 2014). Those debates have had substantial repercussions on the higher education (HE) sphere questioning its historical engagement with internationalisation and particularly student mobility. HE has always been international and student mobility recurrently challenged by tensions between economic, social, political (geo)political and cultural rationales (Carpentier, 2010; King et al., 2011; Lomer, 2017; Teichler, 2017; Bamberger et al., 2019). This paper proposes to reflect historically on those tensions by exploring the trends and patterns of entrant international students, their origins and implications. This research draws on new historical datasets in order to explore the long-term dynamics between student mobility and the expansion of HE systems in the UK and France, two

countries with HE systems comparable in size although driven by distinctive models of expansion and differentiation.

Background

Debates on student mobility in the UK have a long history (Perraton, 2014). The introduction of fees in 1967 to international students and full-cost fees for non-EU International student in 1981 were the first forms of cost-sharing before the introduction of fees for British and EU students in 1998. The debates at the time (also a period of crisis) focused on how the share between fees and state subsidies might reflect the balance between (geo)political (commonwealth) and financial rationales (Harris, 1995). Those dilemmas are still present and were exacerbated by the 2008 crisis producing notable policy tensions. On the one hand, the retreat of public funding has made the recruitment of international students more important than ever for institutions. On the other hand, political pressure on immigration has restricted visas and post-study work for international students. The 2016 Referendum and the end of the distinction between EU and non-EU students will add a new dimension. This rapid overview suggests that questions of student mobility are not peripheral but at the heart of the dilemmas regarding the expansion of the UK HE system. They are also important in a highly differentiated system characterised by substantial variations in the level of internationalisation between post-92 and pre-92 institutions, especially those from the Russell Group..

Debates on student mobility in France are also characterised by tensions between rationales. The traditional view of free and non-selective access to universities at the heart of the republican model of HE is increasingly challenged by economic and political pressures. The recent decision to introduce fees for non-EU international students marks a departure from the French historical model which was justified on the same line as the introduction of the cost-sharing model in the UK. Critics of the reform invoke a variety of rationales. Many consider fees for international students as a threat to the French republican model of free access to universities at home and abroad. A key concern is the impact on global social justice due to insufficient scholarships. A growing proportion of international students has already joined the selective and fee-paying institutions and the introduction of fees in the university sector is feared as a generalisation of a shift in the socio-economic (and geographical) origin of international students across the whole system. This concern about the weakening of the contribution of the French system to global democratisation of HE connects to concerns about the impact on the French influence abroad especially in the francophone world. Domestically, the introduction of fees for international students in universities has been interpreted as a first step towards the introduction of the cost-sharing agenda for domestic students as observed in the UK.

Debates in both countries show that the question of student mobility is closely connected to wider policy debates on the expansion and differentiation of HE systems and their institutional differentiation. The following proposes to explore those connections by examining the historical dynamics between the trends of expansion of HE systems and their internationalisation in both countries. The key questions guiding the research are: What are the historical connections and tensions between student mobility and the expansion of HE systems? What is the historical relationship between student mobility and institutional differentiation?

Approach and Methods

This interdisciplinary study combines history of education and political economy. It follows a

reasoned approach of the use of the past considering that although history does not repeat itself, lessons can be drawn from changes and continuities to illuminate the current context (Aldrich, 2003). The political economy approach draws on long economic cycles exploring the historical trajectories of student mobility and expansion of HE systems in relation to economic fluctuations with a specific focus on the key economic crises of the 1930s, 1970s and post-2008.

The empirical dimension of the research is based on the construction of historical series of entrant student mobility in each country since the 1920s. This is based on the methodology of quantitative history (Marczewski 1961) which offers a system of collecting and processing of data which provides homogenous statistical series comparable across time and space. The dataset includes the numbers of international students disaggregated according to their origins (countries; EU/non-EU), mode and level of studies (full/part time; undergraduate/postgraduate; disciplines), and institutions (Universities/Grandes Ecoles/IUT-BTS in France and polytechnics and post-92/pre-92 Universities in the UK).

The analysis of those new datasets maps out similarities and differences between the historical trajectories of student mobility in both countries and their connections with those of the funding and developments of their HE systems. Those historical trends and patterns are then compared to key socioeconomic data.

Preliminary findings

The preliminary findings point to significant fluctuations in the number and proportion of international students in both systems since the 1920s. Those variations reflect changes in the hierarchy between the rationales behind internationalisation. The increasing influence of economic fluctuations is revealed by the growing impact of the successive economic crises during which the dynamics of mobility is transformed in several ways including significant changes in the origins of international students, in their mode and level of enrolment and the types of institutions they attend.

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