

The public good in French higher education

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The research

- 45 interviews with senior management and academics
- Four public, multidisciplinary and research-intensive universities (two in Paris and two outside)
- 2018 - Shortly before the announcement of reforms including the new fee regime for international students

Main concepts of 'public good'

Service public - 'Public service'

- Strong association between the notion of 'public' and the state in the French context - the state must provide what the market cannot deliver.
- '*service public*' ('public service') = public sector (civil servants / public services).
- Question of what is 'public' tied to question of state provision - political understanding overrides purely economic definitions.

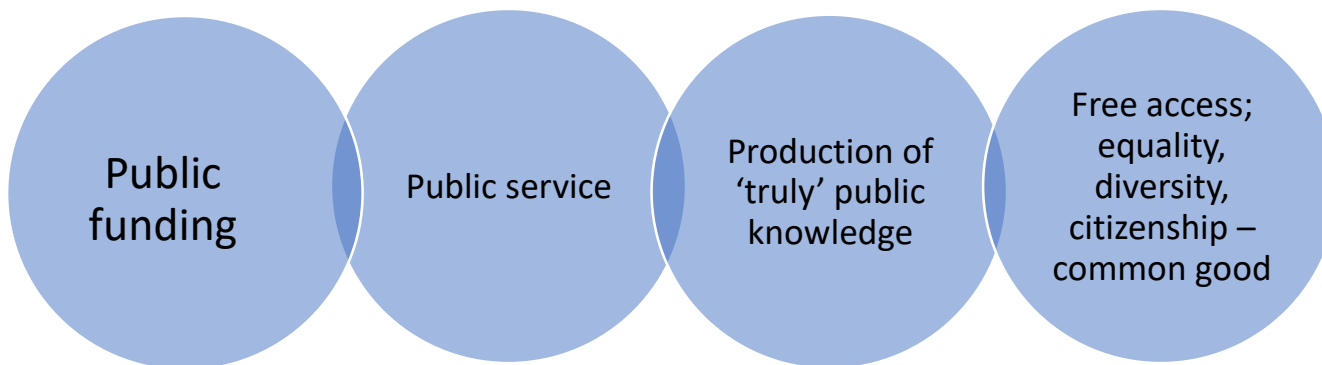
Intérêt général – 'General interest'

- Guiding principle of social life and a core principle of Public Law
- Implications of equity and solidarity
- 'intérêt général' rather than market failure determines whether the arts, national defence or education, should be provided and guaranteed by the state.



Public good in HE

- ‘Intérêt general’ and ‘service public’ used in discussions of HE and public good - connected to ideas of justice, equality, self-realisation, shared resources and benefits.
- View that state services/agents are better able to provide teaching and research for the ‘general interest’
- The contributions and missions of “the public service of HE” are defined **legally** in the code of education (last amended on 25 September 2023).



How did participants understand the public good and HE?

The public good/service of teaching: Promoting diversity, citizenship and social mobility

- Teaching, and more specifically teaching diverse students, at the centre of their understanding of the 'public service' of HE
- Specific role of the university in providing free and universal access.
- A space to promote gender equality and social mobility in a way that the more exclusionary *Grandes Ecoles* do not.
- Universities as the non-elite, publicly funded segment of French HE that promotes social mobility, as a real benefit for the community.

The public good/service of research: Producing public/common knowledge

- Research on climate change and open science to illustrate the production of forms of knowledge that are either shared with the public or that might benefit humanity as a whole
- State responsible for funding fundamental research – private sector too profit-oriented to share findings

Decline of the public good

But differences between principles and practice (underfunding etc.)

How did participants understand the global public good and HE?

The global public good as boundaryless knowledge

Most participants extended the notion of knowledge as public good to the global level

International students and the limits of the Global Public Good

- Many interviewees were against any fees including for international students as a principle: universities should not discriminate against foreign nationals.
- More ambiguous ideas: soft power investment; need to improve services; distinction EU/rest of the world

Renationalisation of the public good?

- Different views were expressed on the appropriateness and feasibility of identical Republican model principles at home and abroad. Where does the boundary of the public stop and start in the public service?
- A few interviewees expressed some discomfort with the idea of boundaryless knowledge, pointing to the economic benefits of some forms of research, and asking whether it should be shared unreservedly

Three reforms



- Rise of fees for non-EU international students



- Further push towards competition and project-based funding



Selection - Prerequisites for university admission

Implications for the public good

- Strong attachment to values of public service – but competing values are gaining ground against a background of (a) chronic underfunding and understaffing; (b) reforms aimed at increasing marketization, competition between institutions and global competitiveness
- Attempts to reconcile both – reconfigurations of public good and decline in the centrality of intérêt general:
- Ambiguous positioning and hybrid discourses: Employability as public good; diminishing the public good to save the public service (and/or the public good); enclosing/re-nationalising the public good