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► **To cite this version:**

Christelle Manifet. University admission and selection processes in the conditions of the Hypermodernity: the case of French Universities. Proceedings of the 1st International Conference of the Journal Scuola Democratica “Education and postdemocracy, 2, Associazione “Per Scuola Democratica”, pp.34 - 39, 2019, Teaching, Learning, Evaluation and Technology. hal-02465171

HAL Id: hal-02465171

<https://hal.science/hal-02465171>

Submitted on 3 Feb 2020

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Références de la publication :

Manifet C., (2019). University Admission and Selection Processes in the Conditions of the Hypermodernity: the case of French Universities, in *Proceedings of the 1st International Conference of the Journal Scuola Democratica "Education and postdemocracy"*, VOL. 2, *Teaching, Learning, Evaluation and Technology*, pp34-pp.39. [digitally available at: <http://www.scuolademocratica-conference.net/>], ISBN 978-88-944888-1-4.

University admission and selection processes in the conditions of the Hypermodernity: the case of French Universities

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KEYWORDS: University admissions and selection, State and education, France, Hypermodernity, Institutional analysis.

French universities are widely known for their “non-selective” student enrolment (Deer, 2005: 230), the only official admission requirement being to have their *baccalauréat*, the exam which completes high school education.

Over the years, the French government has sought to increase the number of *baccalauréat* degree holders. Between 2009 and 2017, it rose again, from 65% to almost 80% (Table *Proportion of bacheliers in a generation*, in Ministry..., 2018 [available online]).

The other well-known characteristic of the French higher education system is its “duality”: there is an “open university sector” open to all holders of the *baccalauréat*, and a “closed sector” for which admission is selective (Eicher, 1997:185). There is more to this divide: it serves as a symbolical representation and reference framework opposing democratisation and elitism, or equity and excellence against which all 'higher education institutions' (HEI)¹ are perceived and measured, perceive and measure themselves on the educational market. (Table *Students in Higher Education, for fifty years*, in Ministry..., 2018).

This non-selective feature of French Universities, long taken for granted and almost non-negotiable since the 1968 student demonstrations and reinforced by the tragic end of the 1986 “Selection and Reform Project”², has once more been under review. Following a range of reforms, in February 2018, a new law on student orientation and success was passed, making pre-registration procedures compulsory (legal), based on an online platform *ParcoursSup*, introducing systematic admission control, through algorithmic processing.

¹ In English language, 'Higher education institution' is an equivalent of 'university' as an organization. In France, traditionally, the 'Higher education institution' refers more to a system, closed to the idea of a public sector. But, considering the changes, 'Higher education institution' (HEI) will be used in its English meaning, and 'institution' alone, in the perspective of a sociology of institution, i. e. a formal social structure that governs a field of action.

² During the student demonstrations against the Reform in Paris, one student died as a result of the confrontation with the police. The Minister of Higher Education stepped down and the Prime Minister halted the Reform.

High school students list their choices on an online platform. The Ministry, the national representatives of the disciplines, and the universities also list their criteria according to the number of places available and specific prerequisites: all the non-selective degrees have 'expectations', which are supposed to serve as warnings to applicants; in some cases, when demand exceeds supply, capacity limits are set, leading to extra selection criteria such as the place of residence.

What forms does selection take on, and what is new about them? (2)

Why has the issue of university admission (a cultural taboo for many) re-emerged into explicit policies? — **and what for?** Does it mean that the social functions of French universities are also changing? (3)

These are the three questions, which have guided this paper and the investigation (1).

1. Research question and methodology

This paper aims at contributing to the French current theoretical debate triggered by the new admission system. To this end, only the institutional factors will be highlighted: the internal operational functioning of the 'institution' which must be understood as an autonomous social system, including establishments, the higher education market and the State.

To grasp the institutional aspects of these new admission procedures:

- A Public Policy Analysis of the recent reforms, particularly the 'Plan for Success in *Licence* (Degree)' from 2007 to 2012, officially drawn to fight failure among undergraduate students. It was a key step in transforming the relationship to first-year applicants.

- A case study: The Toulouse (a French regional metropolis) University of Humanities, Languages and Social Sciences hosting 24 000 students annually (Interviews, Participant observation, Analysis of minutes of meetings, strategic documents, and statistical data).

- An analysis of the university archives since 1967 (reports and minutes of university councils) for information about admission, ranking, and management of undergraduate students.

2. Regulation of first-year applicants in French Universities

2.1. *An international perspective*

Even if it is common to stress the divide 'selective'/'non-selective' within the French university system, it becomes irrelevant in terms of analysis. In the 1970's, Patterson qualified the French University system as an '*Open-Door*' Institution, but said that 'Selective' and 'Open-door' HE systems were not so different fundamentally, considering the twofold importance of the principle of equal and/or fair access with the process of selection and the assessment of academic ability (Patterson, 1976). In selective systems (USA), "*entry is limited by pre-enrollment selection on the basis of academic ability (...) socioeconomic status is purportedly eliminated as a barrier by free higher education, scholarships and subsidies (...)*". In the open-door system (France), entry "*is guaranteed to all who want it with, at most, nominal pre-enrollment selection*

[the high school diploma 'baccalaureat'.]". In the latter, "sorting becomes a major internal consideration and selection of students is made after entry, often covertly. The two major selection-after-entry mechanisms are failing out and "cooling out" students" (Patterson, 1976, p. 174-175).

In universities where there is no admission policy, because formal regulation of applicants is partially outsourced, studies have shown implicit or hidden forms of regulation. American sociologists have argued since the 1960s that community colleges (which offer a two-year higher education degree) have a specific place as open-door institutions within the American higher education system (Marginson, 2018). They help regulate demand for higher education in that they 'cool' the desire to pursue higher education (Beach, 2012; Clark, 1960).

Similarly, in France, even though the sociological research of the 60s did not explicitly uncover such "cooling out" strategy, it was actually implicitly the case under the disguise of some unexpected consequences of mass university. At the end of the 1980s, the prevailing paradigm of French universities was that of the 'floating' or 'indeterminate and anomic' university (students were on their own, without guidance, and their motivations and goals were vague or unknown). Yet this indeterminate nature can also be understood to serve the need to regulate admission for institutional drivers and professionals who cannot, either because of lack of resources or out of professional conviction, meet sharply rising student demand. Indeed, the massive number of first-year students generate organizational complexity and student confusion, which may contribute to their failure. French government policies from the 2000s to combat student failure at university and to provide incoming students with support and preparatory courses, were actually more ambivalent than at first sight: universities without formal admission policies support and undermine newcomers.

In France or elsewhere, there is a converging significant part played by the level of universities as organizations in the regulation of student's practices. Two further determining factors should be considered: the situation of each HEI in the system of HE providers (mostly nationally defined, but for a few, such as Cambridge or Harvard, internationally), and their relation to the State. The latter greatly varies depending on the nature of the State (strong or weak) and on its role either centralized and interfering in the social sphere or allowing the competition-oriented market. It means, in all cases, that the regulation of applicants more or less depends on external regulations and not only on the organizational capacity of each HEI.

2.2. French Universities: permanence and change

The analysis of the university archives has revealed three types of regulation: Allocation, Control and Sanction (or Assessment).

The **Allocation-regulation** lists the actions and tools to meet students' needs and improve orientation and support as well as information about degree programs, services and examination, diversification and professionalization of programs.

The **Sanction-Regulation** assesses students' academic level as well as their ability to enter the labor market, which guarantees the quality of their diplomas, and consequently, the quality and reputation of the professionals and of the institution awarding the diploma.

The **Control-regulation** manages the number of applicants to be selected. Even this function of limiting a large demand is generally not explicitly admitted by the government or university staff, trends to restrict admissions tend to increase during periods of increasing demand: the number of *bacheliers* applying increased in 1967-68, 1987-1995, and 2011-2017. Conversely, control tends to decrease in times of decreasing demand (1996-2005).

In the sixties, the Propaedeutic year, which was officially supposed to prepare students for higher education served as a second barrier after the *baccalauréat*. In 1966, a reform repealed the preparatory year. However, one of the suggestions made to the Minister when repealing that barrier was to set up another one: “*It would be disastrous for thousands of young people to come to university only to go astray on a path that they will abandon without any academic qualification, sometimes after several years*” (regional news, 6 October 1967, University of Toulouse archives). The May 1968 student protests partly originated from this threat of selective admission for Humanities (Prost, 1989: 63). In the 1980s, there was some support for selective admission, but it did not carry the day. If implicit, the stable dropout rates (those who dropped out before taking exams), which are included in failure rates, underscore the importance of ‘natural’ selection, indirect resulting from students’ choices, higher education and labor markets, and the very structure of mass university.

Not all policies have similar targets, some are oriented toward openness (University Plan 2000, 2001-2002 LMD reform), while others mean to close (the dominant anomy of the 60s and 70s, the 1997 reform, the Plan for Success in *Licence* from 2007 to 2012, pre-registration procedures introduced in 2018). But, the tools designed for better responding to student diversity and focusing on the needs of potentially weak students, generated ‘warming up’ (Belanger, 1986) as well as ‘cooling out’ effects. Creating a national computer application to guarantee a place for all the candidates promotes the development of a selection system (with capacity thresholds for each diploma and academic criteria to rank applicants). The diversification and professionalization of programs are another illustration of the ambiguities of the ‘warming up’ policies, generating at the same time, segmentation and hierarchy within the university.

Two main types of changes stand out in the latest period.

The Allocation regulation turned out to be negative, resulting in what can be summed up as the concept of ‘*propeadeutization*’ (Bodin and Orange, 2013).

Selection before entry became explicit widely: some universities changed their legal status, all universities developed selective programs, some degree programs introduced drawing lots to avoid ranking candidates, others set up quotas or shortened their registration periods, most universities took advantage of the national pre-registration tools introduced after 2009.

3 Economic and political parameters of university admission and selection

3.1. Economy

Economically speaking, there is an apparent paradox in the recent trends: students are the primary resource for higher education institutions, not because they pay for the educational service they get, but because they represent a monetary value in a state funding system. Thus, fluctuations in enrolment either increase or decrease universities’ funding while undergraduates are a financial

boon: 60% of students throughout France are undergraduates and first-years alone represent 21% of the Toulouse university student population.

How can the paradox be solved?

First, the student demand is, up to now, stable and partly 'artificially' maintained. This situation of a 'reserve army' reduces the importance of the student demand as such - students are considered as an input (resource) in a competitive race-, and encourages the institutional focus on the market of providers in a relatively self-centered competition.

Secondly, the supply market has expanded, diversified, and stratified. In Weberian terms, French universities now form a *social class* of institutions that share the same economic situation, and claim to be a *status group*, deserving special consideration and deference in the society. "Mass university" which conveys the idea of a mass influx of students is increasingly seen as negative, a synonym of a 'downgraded' or 'broom wagon' university, sweeping up all those not wanted elsewhere. In a context of a '*market of quality*', universities are worrying about their competitors, and the applicant profile determines the quality of the provider (Felouzis and Perroton, 2007: 713). It is a market of inherited quality rather than conquered.

As a consequence, universities are developing proactive policies towards incoming students.

3.2. *The State*

Politically speaking, there is also a paradox: because they are state-funded and run, universities are closely linked to the Social-Democratic values of the French society. In Weberian terms, this integration ensures *legitimacy*, which is a different form of relationship from 'reputation' in a quality market.

Yet, the contemporary French state corresponds to a model of a 'market-making state' (King and Le Gales, 2017): it withdraws from production processes and creates the conditions for developing internal markets in the public sector through increased budgetary control, incentives to find resources, and result assessment. The country's needs for higher education qualifications are translated into objectives, programmes and indicators, such as the percentage of undergraduates completing their degree within three years (the standard timeframe), the percentage of those graduating in their first-year university, the percentage of university professors teaching first-year classes; the percentage of first-year dropouts, the percentage of graduates finding a job.

These indicators have to be "efficient", or accountable, which actually means: "*to rationalise the use of buildings and classrooms, for the university to find its own funding, to reduce the number of degree programs with few students enrolled, and to reduce the time it takes to complete the degree*" (French government, 2009: 23). If legitimacy is still important - under the conditions of a market-state, reputation may be more important-, student success is now coupled with '*equality of opportunity*' whereas '*equality of place*' has completely disappeared (Dubet, 2011). Through a kind of domino effect, in turn, this demand for accountability is passed on their students by public service providers. In doing so, universities are definitely excluding some of their actual users, whose expectations are different, suggesting that the university is no longer a social institution with general missions of socialization (Musselin, 2014) but a strictly academic establishment, only accountable once the enrolled

student accepts the minimum rules of the academic game—in this case, academic prerequisites.

The paper underscores the move from a mass HE economy to a competitive one, for which the competition between providers is more important than the capacity to answer to a social demand. These economic changes are largely fueled by the reconfiguration from a social-democrat State to a market-making one and a result-based culture. Finally, these results show how the universities-clientele relationship is determined by sectoral factors, more than by the proper characteristics of this relationship or by the needs of the clientele.

Max Weber wrote that modern societies are engaged in irresistible rationalization, as the organization of all sectors is result-oriented. This rationalization tends to produce refractive phenomena, according to which any organization responding to specific social needs keeps growing and complexifying to end up with an indirect representation of the demand. It leads to reversal phenomena between ends and means – organizations having their own, if not independent, goals, distant from those for which they were created. Niklas Luhmann (1995) extended the Weberian theory. He did this to the point of pushing the hypothesis of 'hypermodernity', and introducing the concepts of 'self-referential subsystems', running by 'autopoiesis'.

Jean-Marie Vincent adds a crucial idea in confronting Max Weber's rationalization theory to Karl Marx's theory of value, thus highlighting that current rationalisation processes are closer to merchandization than to bureaucratisation (JM Vincent, 2009: 116). François Dubet formulated the idea of the end of the 'meta-institutions' (Touraine, 2013). The 'travail sur autrui' (socialization of the Subject) has been replaced by the confusing 'culture of demand' that emerged in the end of the twentieth century (Dubet, 2010).

Universities have been turned into 'organizations'. This new status does not refer firstly to their governing capacity or their corporate or class identity but that they have become the 'iron cages' of valuation rationality, with its' positive and negative face for their staff and clientele.

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