



# Higher education and the public good in France

Vincent Carpentier<sup>1</sup> · Aline Courtois<sup>2</sup>

Accepted: 13 August 2024  
© The Author(s) 2024

## Abstract

The article examines the relationship between higher education and the public good in France. It draws on interviews conducted with staff across four French universities as part of a larger international comparative project. We argue that the ‘Republican model’ is strongly underpinned by the notion of ‘public service’ which is itself guided by the idea of ‘general interest’. The state is understood as playing a central role in the provision of the public service of higher education, guaranteeing fundamental research is funded and that all students, including the underprivileged, are catered for. At the same time, the state drives neoliberal reforms that threaten the model itself. We examine three recent reforms: *Parcoursup*, *Bienvenue en France* and the *Loi de Programmation Recherche* in light of these findings.

**Keywords** Higher education in France; Public good · Neoliberalism · Republican model

## Introduction

Understandings of what constitutes ‘a public good’ or ‘the public good’ vary widely. This greatly complicates the task of identifying how higher education might constitute or contribute to something called the ‘public good’. National socioeconomic conditions and cultural and political historical traditions bear heavily on this relationship (Marginson, 2016). In the context of a large, international comparative project, France offers an interesting case. From a tradition of ‘free access for all’ (or more precisely, quasi-free access to university courses for all who successfully completed their second-level education) and imbued with public service values, the French higher education system has been pushed towards a more competitive, selective and — for some — expensive model of higher education provision. While this process has been underway for several decades, it has recently accelerated with the implementation of several significant reforms which, we argue, unsettle some of the core values of what we termed elsewhere ‘the Republican model’ of French

---

✉ Vincent Carpentier  
v.carpentier@ucl.ac.uk

Aline Courtois  
ac2630@bath.ac.uk

<sup>1</sup> Department of Education, Practice and Society, UCL IOE, Bedford Way, WC1H 0AL London, UK

<sup>2</sup> Department of Education, University of Bath, Bath BA2 7AY, Somerset, UK

higher education (Carpentier & Courtois, 2022). In this article, we revisit this concept by focussing on three recent reforms (*Parcoursup* on the conditions of access to universities, introduced in 2018; ‘Bienvenue en France’ on international fees, introduced in 2019; and the *Loi de Programmation de la Recherche (LPR)* on research staffing, organisation, funding and evaluation, introduced in 2020) and examine how these challenge understandings and ideas of the relationship between higher education and the public good across the sector. While we previously identified tensions between the principles guiding the ‘public service’ mission of higher education and practice (Carpentier & Courtois, 2022), we argue that these reforms significantly challenge those principles as well.

This article draws on a larger comparative project examining how higher education managers, academics and policy makers understand the public good and the contribution of higher education to it across a range of national contexts. We use data collected through 41 interviews conducted with staff in four French universities in 2018, shortly before the time the reforms were implemented.

The first section discusses the public good in France and its translation into the higher education context, offering an overview of the Republican model of higher education and the debates regarding its future and reforms. The second section presents the study and methodology. Sections 3 to 6 draw on findings from our fieldwork to examine the principles underpinning the Republican model of higher education and its relationship with the public good and public service values. These findings are organised under four themes: definitions of the public good by participants, contributions of higher education to the public good, relationship between higher education and the state, and global public good in higher education. The final section discusses the recent reforms in higher education in light of our findings focusing on three areas tightly connected to understandings of the public good in higher education and challenged by these reforms, namely universal access, equality of provision and free access.

## The ‘public good’ and higher education in France

### Understandings of the public good in the French context

As is the case in many Anglo-Saxon contexts as well, French economic theory uses Samuelson’s (1954) and Hardin’s (1968) classic definitions of ‘public goods’, ‘common goods’ and ‘collective goods’. *Biens publics* are thus defined as non-excludable and non-rivalrous goods, namely goods that can be used by all and whose consumption does not affect supply. Thus, on the surface at least, there seems to be little difference between ‘public goods’ and the direct translation ‘biens publics’. However, an examination of how the terms ‘bien(s) public(s)’ (*bien public* being the singular form and *biens publics* the plural) are used in practice and of the scholarly debates over their meanings, reveals significant differences. Firstly, while the terms ‘biens publics’ appear frequently in debates about resources such as water, forests (as noted in the case of Finland, see Brewis, 2024, this volume) and health services, it rarely emerges in debates about higher education. Secondly, scholars have pointed to a strong association between the notion of ‘public’ and the state in the French context. For example, Beitone (2014) argued that the French ‘bien public’ concept was tied to the idea of state-funding or state intervention more generally, connected to the belief that the state must provide what the market cannot deliver. Examples of this link can be found in common language, with ‘pouvoirs publics’ (‘public powers’) referring to state

institutions such as the local or national government; or ‘service public’ (‘public service’) referring to the public sector (either to civil servants or more broadly to public services such as education and health). Following this, the question of what is ‘public’ is tied to that of state provision, and this political understanding tends to override purely economic definitions.

Cartelier (1998) and Clam (1997) argue that the French idea of ‘bien public’ goes well beyond the economic sphere. They both draw attention to the notion of ‘intérêt général’ (literally ‘general interest’, close to the idea of ‘public interest’ in English) as fundamental to the principle of state provision. The notion of *intérêt général* emerged in the eighteenth century and gradually replaced the more religiously and morally connoted notion of ‘bien commun’ (literally ‘common good’) as the guiding principle of social life and is a core principle of Public Law in France. Thus, it is not market failure but ‘intérêt général’, and its implications of equity and solidarity that determines whether the arts, national defence or education should be provided and guaranteed by the state.

### Public good and French higher education

It is easy to see how the concept of ‘intérêt général’ has supported the idea of state provision and control of education — from its role in the construction of *intérêt général* of the nation to its more modern mission to support social mobility and equality of opportunity (Durkheim, 1997; Prost, 1968). This is also defined in law. The contributions and missions of French higher education are specified by laws in the code of education (last amended on 25 September 2023). The code calls French higher education ‘the public service of higher education’ and states explicitly that its role is to contribute ‘to the success of all students’, as well as to research and knowledge for the benefit of the nation, economic progress and employment, the fight against all discriminations, the construction of an inclusive society, the promotion of sustainability, the construction of a European space of higher education and research, the promotion of science and humanist culture, etc. (Article L123-1). Therefore, the missions of French higher education are clearly oriented towards supporting a ‘public good’ — namely, a better society, one that is prosperous, equitable, and inclusive rather than private benefits — even if some of these missions (such as employment) could also be expressed as private goods or the aggregation of private goods.

### Key features of the Republican model and recent trends

In theory, access to higher education in France is a right. This is because access to universities (but not the rest of the higher education system) is guaranteed to all upon completion of the secondary cycle (with the *Baccalauréat*) and fees are so low as to be considered ‘free’. Until recently, this was the case for international students also. The absence of selection in universities contrasts with the two other sectors of the tripartite French HE system formed by *Grandes Écoles* (highly selective, public or private) and 2-year vocational institutions (selective through limited capacity, often public but increasingly private).

French higher education experienced two key phases of massification in the 1960s and 1990s in line with the increase in numbers of *Baccalauréat* holders. France now has a high participation higher education system (Cantwell et al., 2018; Trow, 1973) with 49% of the 25–34-year-old age group holding a higher education award (MEN, 2023). Yet access is strongly stratified according to socioeconomic background (although less so in universities). Students from professional backgrounds (a category representing 21.7% of the whole

population) represent 35.5% of all higher education enrolment. They are underrepresented in 2-year vocational higher education courses (*Section de Techniciens Supérieur* [STS], 14.6%) but well represented in universities (33.8%) and even more so in highly selective tracks such as *Classes Préparatoires aux Grandes Ecoles* (CPGE, selective tracks to prepare entrance examinations to the elite schools, 54%) and business schools (49.2%). By contrast, students from working-class backgrounds (a category representing 19% of the population) remain underrepresented in higher education (10%) including in universities (10.5%), with variability across subjects and levels of studies. By contrast, they represent 22% of the students in STS, the more inclusive but restricted segment of French higher education, and only 6.5% of CPGE and 4.7% of business schools: the elite sectors continue to be out of their reach (MEN, 2023). Gender parity has been reached in higher education (55.6%) including in universities (59.3%), but women are still underrepresented in CPGE (40.9%) and engineering schools (29.6%). Regarding internationalisation, 11.5% of students are categorised as international students in higher education and 13% in universities (MEN, 2023).

Since we conducted our study in 2018, higher education enrolment has risen from 2.61 to 2.93 million in 2023 (9.5% growth) and has been characterised by the intensification of structural changes that were already in motion. For instance, the share of students enrolled in universities fell from 61 to 55% and the share of those enrolled in the private sector rose from 19.1 to 25%. In a context where the share of public funding fell from 81.2 to 75.2% from 2018 to 2021, resources have not followed expansion. As a result, funding per student in higher education dropped from 12,480 to 11,630 Euros from 2015 to 2021 (−6.8%) with universities typically underfunded compared to other segments. This unequal differentiation regarding financial resources is mirrored by higher staff-to-student ratios (SSR) in CPGE (6.54) and STS (7.31) compared to universities (5.13). Universities remain the sector in charge of absorbing massification. A new trend in differentiation is also driven by growing differentials in both SSR and funding per student between universities, as well as between disciplines (Carpentier & Picard, 2024).

So, in a sense, the Republican model is increasingly experiencing tensions between expansion on the one hand, and funding and social stratification on the other. A process of increasing private provision, and to a lesser extent, private funding, is also visible (Carpentier, 2018; Chauvel et al., 2015). What does this mean for the public good and public service and the mission expressed in the *Code de l'Éducation*?

### Three recent neoliberal reforms of higher education

These changes are better understood as part of a long-term trend of neoliberal reforms affecting not only higher education but also health and other public service sectors (Cordilha, 2023). In higher education, this includes the development of policies seeking to increase the autonomy of finance and human resources (Musselin, 2021), often connected to a growing process of marketisation, despite criticisms of their detrimental impact on the principles of equality between students and between institutions at the core of the Republican model. This movement can be traced back to the implementation of project-based research funding with a new research agency (ANR) in 2005, followed by the creation of consortia of higher education institutions (pôles de recherche et d'enseignement supérieur (PRES)) in 2006. The 2007 *Loi relative aux libertés et responsabilités des universités* (LRU) transferred more financial power to presidents of universities and aimed to stratify

the higher education system through mergers in order to achieve a better representation of France in global rankings (Avouac & Harari Kermadec, 2021).

Three recent reforms have pushed these processes further. Firstly, *Parcoursup* has been criticised for introducing selection in the university sector by setting up prerequisites for admissions in 2018 (Frouillou et al., 2020). *Bienvenue en France* introduced fees for international students in 2019 (Highman & de Gayardon, 2022) questioning the principle of ‘nearly’ free access to universities at undergraduate level. The *Loi de Programmation de la Recherche* (LPR) of 2020 questioned the equality of higher education provision through increased and institutional and individual differentiation by reinforcing the competitive research funding and mechanisms of evaluation and introducing new academic contracts and temporary positions (Dakowska, 2023; Vergnaud, 2023).

These three reforms were opposed by large numbers of students and staff and caused heated debates. Indeed, as we will explore later, each challenges a specific aspect of the public good/service dimension of higher education.

## Research design

Forty-one semi-structured interviews were conducted with staff across four large and highly ranked public universities in France, two in Paris and two in other large cities. In line with the universities chosen for the other countries in the comparative project, all four universities were multidisciplinary and research-intensive. All four were in the top 15 for French universities according to THE 2019 (although this meant they were in very different brackets, from 150–200 to 450–500).

Participants (21 men and 20 women) included senior managers, academics and colleagues at operational level. A small number of international students were also interviewed specifically in relation to the topic of public good and internationalisation but we are not using this material here. Table 1 summarises the main roles of our participants. As in the other case study countries, academics (mainly professors but also some lecturers) were recruited from three disciplinary areas: history, engineering, economics. The choice of those disciplines reflected the assumption that they may potentially reveal different views on the public good. In some cases, we recruited participants from adjacent disciplines due to participant availability. We identified relevant individuals, such as senior central managers, heads of department, research centres or teaching programmes from university websites and contacted them directly to request interviews. We also invited individuals whose research and/or administrative responsibilities seemed relevant to questions

**Table 1** Summary of interview participants’ characteristics

	Senior managers	Middle managers/academics with middle management roles	Other academics
University 1, Paris	3	1	6
University 2, other city	4	3	4
University 3, Paris	4	4	1
University 4, other city	7	0	4
Total	18	8	15

of public good, public service, equality, etc. We contacted additional individuals following participants' suggestions. All of this ensured a very good response, with less than a quarter of those contacted declining to participate or ignoring our invitation. This was about the same across the three disciplines, although the combination of roles and relatively small numbers make it difficult to draw any conclusions from this. Arguably, there remains a selection bias, and it is not unlikely that our participants were more interested in debates about the public funding and public role of higher education than other colleagues.

The interview questions sought to elicit their views on the public good and how they saw the national and institutional ways in which the public good is or might be achieved. We conducted a thematic analysis which led us to identify different ideas and practices of the public good (for a full discussion of these please see Carpentier and Courtois (2022)). The interviews were conducted in French by the authors and excerpts translated into English by the authors also. The project received ethical clearance from UCL IOE, and all participants were anonymised. The term 'Academic' is used to designate lecturers and professors alike who did not hold managerial responsibilities. The discipline is indicated unless the participant is above all a senior manager, in which case we have assumed this role took precedence over their disciplinary background. Our assumption is not arbitrary: indeed we have not found the disciplinary background to have a significant impact on participants' views, apart from the fact that those with a background in economics were more prone to using and discussing economic definitions of the public good.

We do not seek to generalise and offer a common interpretation of the public good but rather attempt to identify, map out and contrast a variety of positions and conceptions of the public good within the HE sector and consider their relations with other key notions in the French context such as general interest or public service. We are also careful not to essentialise our interviewees and recognise that their common or distinctive positions might result from a combination of institutional, disciplinary, professional and individual factors. We acknowledge that this qualitative project does not allow us to find causal explanations for the range of perceptions or practices of the public good within French higher education but rather to contribute to identify and contextualise them.

## Findings I: How do participants define the public good in general?

### Intérêt général: for the benefit of the collective

The participants clearly identified with the idea of *intérêt général* (Cartelier, 1998; Clam, 1997). They generally preferred the notions of common and collective good rather than public good, and insisted on the contribution of a Republican model of higher education to equity, as illustrated by the following excerpts:

Well, I would say that the public good is above all a collective good. Which means we can put under this notion anything that benefits society and citizens in an equitable manner. Some things are done in the interest of the many and I would say, by prioritising the needs of the most underprivileged in society. So, I would connect it to the notions of equity, the collective... (Senior manager, University outside Paris)

Well, the public good, for me, is what enables an improvement in the conditions of citizens, men and women. For me, that's what the public good is. It means that it is something that is essentially collective and that goes beyond the university environment (Academic, History, Parisian University)

One interviewee pointed to the importance of the principle of the Republican model while acknowledging the gap between the legal principles underpinning it and the reality on the ground:

I think that in France, we really place a lot of importance on the public good. We're a lot more – well, it's what underpins the whole system. I think that earlier on I spoke about the hypocrisies, the [arrangements] between reality and the law, and all of that, but at least, the explicit project, it's equality, fraternity, and a certain liberty (Senior manager, University outside Paris)

In other words, while in practice, the model does not quite achieve the republican ideals associated to *intérêt général* due to budget limitations, demographic pressure and neoliberal policies, it is nonetheless underpinned by these values, in a way that structures the actions of many who work for it.

### The state, taxation and the service public

Some interviewees distinguished the understanding of the term 'public' in 'public good' in terms of its use, from its understanding in terms of resources. The economists we interviewed tended to use their disciplinary knowledge as they engaged with the question. For example, one discussed the complexity of the notion of public good, and the distinction between something that is public from the perspective of funding, and something that is public from the perspective of use. We selected economists who were also researching the public good and were therefore not necessarily representative of the mainstream position of the discipline on the implications regarding fees, marketisation and selection.

In this sense, when funded with public resources, the public good is defined nationally. Interestingly, one participant extended the notion of the public good from the national to EU level:

First of all, public good is indeed the question of the state. A public good belongs to all of us and to no one in particular. So indeed, it must be organized at the level of the state. Being understood that we are in a somewhat particular context which is the European context, so indeed, in a certain way, we could conceive that this is also the European good (Senior Manager, University outside Paris)

An important distinction was made between *bien public* as something owned by the community and *service public* as something offered by the state, in line with Beitone (2014). This underlined the central role of taxation as a link between the two and a criticism of privatisation.

What is the difference between the public good, something that belongs to the whole community, and public service, something that is offered, maybe by state services? Well after that, what needs to be said is that those public goods, those public services have a cost and our tax covers that cost. Which is the point of taxation. From my point of view, I am in favour of more tax, better distributed, fairer, rather than lowering tax at all costs. Next, unlike what many assert, I am not convinced that privatising things makes them work better than when they were public. There are many examples that show it; in any case it doesn't necessarily benefit users. If we look at transportation, I don't think it works better now than it did 20 years ago (Academic, Engineering, Parisian University).



In the idea of the public good, I see... it's a bit like taxation, I see the principle of collective solidarity in it, meaning that if we go to the extreme of the private, when we have the means, we pay for it, and if we don't have the means, then too bad. So, for me the public is there to correct the distortions and social inequalities and there is this collective, common good dimension, knowing that we can have very valuable people who were not born in privileged families, who don't have this kind of family environment (Academic, Engineering, University outside Paris)

This goes back to Beitone's (2014) argument on the centrality of state intervention but also connects to what Cartelier (1998) and Clam (1997) argued about the 'general interest' and the role of the state in ensuring that it is protected. For these participants, state intervention, via tax collection and provision of public services, is the only way to ensure quality and equitable provision to all, including the more underprivileged in society.

## **Findings II: How does higher education contribute to the public good(s)?**

Similar ideas emerged when the conversations focused on higher education and the public good.

### **HE as a public service contributing to the public good**

While we proposed the term *bien public*, several participants volunteered the term *service public* instead, seeing it as a more appropriate term in a context of inadequate state funding given the tight connection between the term 'public good' and the idea of state provision. Thus, speaking of public service, this senior manager, echoing a participant cited in the previous section, noted the gap between principles and the reality of the funding environment:

Yes, I think that France is very attached to this notion of public service of education, not only higher education but education in general. Even if it is true that in a complicated economic context, state allocations are not necessarily there (Senior Manager, University outside Paris)

Another senior manager rejected the idea of the university as a public good (because they disliked the implication that anyone should feel entitled to its space and resources) but insisted on their attachment to its public service role:

When I say that it shocks me that the university is described as a public good, I am at the same time very attached, surely like many people, to the public service of the university and the services that we can provide (Senior Manager, Parisian University).

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

Several interviewees placed teaching and, more specifically teaching diverse students, at the centre of their understanding of the 'public service' of higher education, for example, this senior manager:



So, first I come back to this idea, I am a civil servant of the state and very attached to this idea. This means that I put public service first. Public service. My institution is a public institution. So it's very clear ... Am I comfortable with the idea that the university is a public service, for the public service etc.? Yes, I completely agree. So that's a completely personal position. First of all, I think that teaching, like research, is the first investment. This is sustainable investment (Senior manager, University outside Paris)

Several interviewees insisted on the specific role of the university in providing free and universal access. The university was seen as a space to promote gender equality and social mobility in a way that the more exclusionary *Grandes Ecoles* do not necessarily. Thus, one Professor of Engineering explained how engineering courses in universities allowed some underprivileged students and women to access well-paid jobs in engineering while the doors of elite engineering *Grandes Ecoles* remained closed to those students. Another participant spoke about how average students gradually became better and excelled once they were on the right course. These two participants, and others in our sample, clearly valued the role of universities as the non-elite, publicly funded segment of French higher education in promoting social mobility, as a real benefit for the community.

### **The public good/service of research: producing public/common knowledge**

Our participants associated the term 'public good' less equivocally with examples related to research and knowledge:

So, I think that there is a fairly intangible but very important for us aspect of the public good which is knowledge, which can be applied in its research aspect and in its training aspect. It is perhaps on this part of added value that universities are best positioned (Senior manager, University outside Paris)

We have a fairly large community of environmental researchers and it is clear that everything they do contributes to the public good, which I would say is largely opposed by a series of irresponsible policies at the international level, but their efforts exist (Senior manager, University outside Paris)

That's what a university is, it preserves knowledge. And transmission of knowledge. That is the public good, it is our common good. I am a strong advocate of open science (Senior manager, University outside Paris).

They chose examples such as 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. Some followed up with concrete examples from research their colleagues were involved in but were generally comfortable with linking the abstract concepts of research and public good.

### **Findings III: What is the relationship between higher education and the state in contributing to public good(s)?**

As seen in a previous section, state intervention, through taxation, is seen as central to the production of *public service* and *intérêt général*. This also applies to the realm of higher education according to our participants who see themselves as public servants, dedicated to

serving others (Chatelain-Ponroy et al., 2018, 1392). At the same time, paradoxically, the state is seen as favouring neoliberal policies, which contribute to or orchestrate the inability of higher education to provide a public good/service.

### **The state as key in enabling the public good through higher education institutions**

The state was considered by some as central in enabling higher education to produce public good in the form of fundamental research because the private sector was focused instead on profit. According to this senior manager:

The role of the State is also fundamental, if I may say so. Because it's pretty obvious that we're not going to ask private interests to defend fundamental research ... Very large companies sometimes know this, so they can sometimes help but in general they will rather finance research that can be directly translated into profit, it is the role of the company to make a profit ... (Senior Manager, University outside Paris)

According to this Professor of Engineering, some research is too costly and risky to be undertaken by the private sector. The state therefore needs to help kickstart some projects, even if the private sector may invest at a later stage:

That is to say, the private sector will never ultimately be able, on its own, to set up a new sector. I think the return on investment isn't there, there's a lot of risk. There you have it, so the idea of the public good is, indeed, at least in France, what is at stake, it is the state will try to start activities by providing money and this money, hopefully will create a leverage effect which will be able to be exerted and increase tenfold and attract the means to continue this research (Academic, Engineering, University outside Paris)

The role of the private sector in the teaching function of higher education was not discussed as such with participants, yet their views previously considering the (state-funded) university as a space for diversity and social mobility align with the idea that it is the responsibility of the state to fund higher education to allow it to fulfil its public service mission. One interviewee highlighted explicitly the key role of the state in maintaining free or cheap university education at the heart of the French higher education model:

We know the French model: university is almost free. Well, I think it's good ... Our economic model, if I had to mention our social security system, our economic model, it is a pay-as-you-go system, ultimately. Good. And that's fortunate, because if we, the university, increased registration fees... There are lots of young people, where would they go? So, we have a responsibility to welcome them (Senior manager, University outside Paris)

### **Decline of the 'public good'**

Several interviewees noted that sustained attacks on the public service of higher education were causing a decline of the public good. For example, for this economist, the push to make knowledge 'marketable' and the emphasis on 'employability' are problematic:

Well, I would say that we have the impression that we are strongly encouraged in fact to transform what could be universal knowledge which would have a public good

character into very specific, marketable knowledge... we use the term employability a lot... there are technical skills without precisely this dimension which previously characterised the university. I believe that there the notion of public good is greatly attenuated (Academic, Economics, Parisian University).

The prospect of advancing privatisation worried several participants. For one of them, privatisation means going back to a 'class system' where only those with money can access education (Senior Manager, Parisian University). Even the few who supported some forms of privatisation seemed anxious:

I see what is happening in Chile where everything has been privatised etc. So, I think that the French system is still unsustainable. So, for the moment in fact, we still had a private/public balance which was satisfactory. So, then the question is what would be the risk of it being more privatized? In any case, we know the risk of privatisation. In terms of inequality, access, I mean it's so classic (Academic, Social Sciences, University outside Paris).

Despite contrasting political and ideological views, respondents were broadly in agreement about the value of a 'Republican model' of higher education and publicly funded research.

## **Findings IV: How do participants define global public good(s) in higher education?**

Some interviewees distinguished national and global public goods with implications for funding and boundaries of social justice. 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?

### **The global public good as boundaryless knowledge**

When the global public good was discussed, most participants extended the notion of knowledge as a public good to the global level, talking about how certain forms of knowledge could benefit humankind. For example:

As I said, I think that our university, like others, contributes to the development of knowledge. And from this perspective, we take part in the global development of all of humankind. And that's absolutely normal, it's part of our missions, our interests, it's an innate activity of the university ... which is why I became a researcher (Senior Manager, University outside Paris).

About a particular project related to space exploration, this participant spoke of 'quasi-universal knowledge', noting the common root between the terms universal and university.

Yet, 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:

I think it's complicated because indeed it sounds like we are saying today it's open access science, everything must be [openly accessible] but that doesn't mean we

shouldn't have a national policy, a European policy. Is it our duty to boost research in another country through our work? (Senior manager, Parisian university).

### **International students and the limits of the Global Public Good**

Views diverged more markedly than they did about research and knowledge when it came to the issue of international students and whether teaching them contributed to the global public good. Many interviewees were against any fees including for international students as a principle: universities should not discriminate against foreign nationals. But in our sample, we also found more ambiguous ideas. For one participant, rather than being of a humanist or egalitarian nature, the justification was soft power investment:

So indeed, a lot of French public money is invested in foreign students for whom we hope that if they return to their country, they will shine in a French-speaking world, which could have repercussions on French industrialists. (Senior manager, University outside Paris).

Two interviewees anticipated the case made by the government for international fees, one by talking about improved services and the other about EU tax money:

Today, it does not seem actually now totally out of touch to say that yes it will be necessary to charge registration fees of another amount, why? Because behind internationalisation come additional services. This is to improve the reception, visibility, promotion, mission, language courses, health coverage etc. (Senior Manager, Parisian University)

It does not seem absurd to charge a little more students outside the European Union who come to take courses at home because here ... well it's public money, so it's also the French, European taxpayers who go pay the budgets of the European Commission etc. We cannot finance all international students. (Academic, Politics, Parisian University)

Thus, as noted by Tannock (2018) in the UK context, egalitarian principles and, here, the public service do not necessarily extend to international students.

### **Discussion: selectivity, differentiation, free access and universalism**

The views from our interviewees about the public good/service resonate with the debates surrounding the recent reforms of the French higher education model which are currently testing the Republican model on three issues: selection; differentiation; free access and universalism.

#### **Universal Access and *Parcoursup*: selection or orientation?**

The prerequisites for university admission introduced by the reform *Parcoursup* in 2018 generated heated debates and a wave of protests. The government justified the reform by pointing to student attrition figures as evidence that the system was not working. It presented the reform supported by a national online platform as a process of orientation rather than selection designed to improve public service. However, many have highlighted that

mechanisms of selection and choice would make access to higher education even more socially unjust as their effect is heavily associated to social backgrounds (Frouillou et al., 2020). Others have pointed to the lack of funding as the main reason for attrition figures (Bodin & Orange, 2018).

In the main, our respondents were not supportive of restricting access to university courses. Those who discussed selection with us highlighted, as mentioned above, that students sometimes flourished at university in a way that was perhaps not predictable based on their results in secondary education. *Parcoursup* questions whether such transformational effort may happen anymore. The lack of selectivity and, therefore, social selectivity was also valued as an engine for social mobility by many of our respondents. Lastly, while they deplored the lack of funding and of state support more generally, they also spoke eloquently about their and their colleagues' ability to offer students quality education thanks to being resourceful, creative and above all, dedicated to the public service mission of the university.

### **Equality of provision and the LPR: differentiation between staff and institutions**

Although not mentioning explicitly the public good, the 2020 LPR set its goal as disseminating research to the economy and society by intensifying the links with business and strengthening the relationship between scientists and citizens (MESR, 2021, 15). This corresponds to what some interviewees identified as a public good of higher education facilitated by the state. However, the ways in which the LPR reform proposed to do this by creating more incentive for competition between researchers and between institutions contrast with our interviewees who, despite being based in elite universities, seemed to favour collaboration over competition. Our respondents seemed to point to tensions already identified by Cremonini et al. (2013) who attributed the failure to develop world-class universities to the lack in framing within the idea of public service.

### **Free access and universalism: *Bienvenue en France***

Previous attempts to increase international fees were all defeated as associations mounted legal challenges and managed to re-assert the principle of nearly free access for all, as embedded in law. However, in April 2019, *Bienvenue en France* imposed a 15-fold rise in fees for non-EU students, presented as an additional resource necessary to raise quality. The shift was widely considered to exclude international students from modest backgrounds and poor countries. It was also denounced as a discriminatory policy that excluded non-nationals from what had been a right, despite the colonial past of France, and as an extension of selective immigration policies (Bréant & Jamid, 2019; Kabbanji et al., 2020; Tissier-Raffin, 2021). *Bienvenue en France* is not only a deliberate attempt to steer the French approach to internationalisation towards a more commercial model but it also contradicts some of the core principles of the Republican model, and in particular, the idea that it should apply to all students equally, irrespective of their origins and identification as 'home' or 'international' students. The reform also went much further than the alternatives envisaged by our interviewees, including those who were in favour of a moderate rise in international fees and those who also advocated for generous scholarships.

These emerge as top-down reforms that potentially threaten some of the main pillars of the Republican model of higher education, already seriously undermined by chronic underfunding. Values of competition (institutions and academic staff competing with

one another for funding and prestige; students competing with one another for university places); national preference and commercial interests (international students excluded from free access; prioritisation of certain countries over others, especially to the detriment of African students) are imposed to a system where many agents still value universal access, equality, free or affordable access.

## Conclusion

Our qualitative findings point to a consensus on some key principles and issues as well as to an array of opinions on the public good in higher education. These differentiated views might be shaped by institutional, disciplinary and individual factors (see also Chatelain-Ponroy et al. (2018)); however, our findings suggest that the differences between individuals might be political rather than disciplinary.

Our findings echo the literature that identifies the public good in a French context as driven by a public service ethos and the principle of serving the ‘general interest’ rather than as a mechanism limited to the role of correcting occasional market failure. In this worldview, also expressed, with some variation, in the Finnish and Polish contexts (Brewis, 2024; Szadkowski, 2024), only the state can ensure good quality and equitable provision to all through taxation-based public services.

Our respondents clearly applied this understanding to what they understood as the mission of the sector, in terms not dissimilar to the legal terms expressed in the *Code de l’Education*. The public good of teaching was seen as a central tenet of the French Republican model in promoting social mobility. The public good of research was also recognised through the production of public/common knowledge. The state was seen as the key enabler of the public good in higher education (understood as the public service of higher education), through investment in research that the private sector would not fund and through maintaining an affordable nonselective university education at the heart of the French Republican higher education model. At the same time, several interviewees noted that sustained attacks on the public service of higher education (and particularly on universities) were causing a marked decline in the ability of the sector to fulfil its public good mission.

Interviewees connected and distinguished national and global public goods. Most participants extended the notion of public good to the global level and the idea of benefiting humankind, while others identified boundaries regarding the circulation of knowledge outside the EU which they related to funding and economic competition. Views diverged more markedly when it came to teaching international students, but many opposed international fees as a republican principle applying at home and abroad, with some in favour of fees for non-EU students.

Our interviewees clearly identified some of the tensions between the principles and the practices in the Republican model of higher education. While the state plays a central role in the relationship between higher education and the public good, it also threatens it through the imposition of neoliberal reforms which, based on our findings, emerge as top-down, and as sitting uneasily with participants’ principles. As in other sectors of the public service, neoliberal reform is experienced by civil servants as one hand of the state attacking the other (Bourdieu, 1998). Other models are experiencing those tensions with for instance Marginson and Yang (2023) recently documenting a vicious circle in the UK between declining views on public good and retreating public funding. This explains the intensity of the French debates on whether the recent reforms affecting the three pillars of the public

service of higher education (selection, uniform provision and free higher education) might redefine its contribution to the public good. This contribution depends on addressing some key tensions affecting the missions of the public service of higher education which are the transformations of the practices of the university sector towards selection and commercialisation, the reduction of its relative size (compared to an especially fast-growing private provision) and its underfunding and understaffing compared to other sectors of the higher education system.

**Funding** The research was conducted in the ESRC/RE Centre for Global Higher Education, supported by the UK Economic and Social Research Council (awards ES/M010082/1, ES/ M010082/2 and ES/T014768/1).

## Declarations

**Conflict of interest** The authors declare no competing interests.

**Open Access** This article is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License, which permits use, sharing, adaptation, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons licence, and indicate if changes were made. The images or other third party material in this article are included in the article's Creative Commons licence, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. If material is not included in the article's Creative Commons licence and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder. To view a copy of this licence, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.

## References

- Avouac, R., & Harari-Kermadec, H. (2021). French universities: A melting pot or a hotbed of social segregation? A measure of polarisation within the French university system (2007–2015). *Economie et Statistique/Economics and Statistics. Institut National De La Statistique Et Des Etudes Economiques (INSEE)*, 528–529, 63–83.
- Beitone, A. (2014). Biens publics, biens collectifs, Pour tenter d'en finir avec une confusion de vocabulaire. *Revue du MAUSS permanente*, 22 avril 2014 [online]. <http://www.journaldumauss.net/?Biens-publics-biens-collectifs>
- Bodin, R., & Orange, S. (2018). Access and retention in French higher education: Student drop-out as a form of regulation. *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 39(1), 126–143.
- Bourdieu, P. (1998). The left hand and the right hand of the state. In P. Bourdieu (Ed.), *Acts of Resistance: Against the New Myths of Our Time* (pp. 1–10). Polity Press.
- Bréant, H., & Jamid, H. (2019). “Bienvenue en France”... aux riches étudiants étrangers. *Plein droit*, 123(4), 11–14.
- Brewis, E. (2024). Higher education and the public good in Finland. *Higher Education*. This volume.
- Cantwell, B., Marginson, S. & Smolentseva, A. (Eds.). (2018). *High participation systems of higher education*. Oxford University Press.
- Carpentier V. (2018). Expansion and differentiation in higher education: The historical trajectories of the UK, the USA and France. Centre for Global Higher Education Working Papers, 33, London: UCL IoE.
- Carpentier, V., & Courtois, A. (2022). Public good in French universities: Principles and practice of the ‘Republican’ model’. *Compare: A Journal of Comparative and International Education*, 52(1), 1–18.
- Carpentier, V., & Picard, E. (2024). Academic workforce in France and the UK in historical perspectives. *Comparative Education*, 60(2), 217–238.
- Cartelier, L. (1998). Existe-t-il un fondement économique à la notion de service public? *Sociétés Contemporaines*, 32(1), 25–35.
- Chatelain-Ponroy, S., Mignot-Gérard, S., Musselin, C., & Spone, S. (2018). Is commitment to performance-based management compatible with commitment to university ‘publicness’? Academics’ values in French universities. *Organization Studies*, 39(10), 1377–1401.



- Chauvel, S., Clément, P., Flacher, D., Harari-Kermadec, H., Issehnane, S., Moulin, L., & Palheta, U. (2015). *Arrêtons les frais! Pour un enseignement supérieur gratuit et émancipateur*. Editions Raisons d'agir.
- Clam, J. (1997). Qu'est-ce qu'un bien public? Une enquête sur le sens et l'ampleur de la socialisation à l'utilité dans les sociétés complexes. *Archives De Philosophie Du Droit*, 41, 215–265.
- Cordilha, A. C. (2023). Public health systems in the age of financialization: Lessons from the French case. *Review of Social Economy*, 81(2), 246–273.
- Cremonini, L., Benneworth, P., Dauncey, H., & Wesyerheijde, D. (2013). Reconciling republican 'égalité' and global excellence values in French higher education. In J. C. Shin & B. M. Kehm (Eds.), *Institutionalization of world-class university in global competition* (pp. 99–123). Springer.
- Dakowska, D. (2023). Highlighting systemic inequalities: The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on French higher education. In R. Pinheiro, E. Balbachevsky, P. Pillay, & A. Yonezawa (Eds.), *The impact of COVID-19 on the Institutional Fabric of Higher Education* (pp. 89–115). Palgrave Macmillan.
- Durkheim, É. (1997). *L'évolution pédagogique en France*. Quadrige (original work published in 1938). English version: The evolution of educational thought: Lectures on the formation and development of secondary education in France. Routledge and Keegan Paul (1977).
- Frouillou, L., Pin, C., & van Zanten, A. (2020). Have the APB and Parcoursup platforms promoted equal opportunity? The evolution of standards and procedures for access to higher education in France. *L'année Sociologique*, 70(2), 337–363.
- Hardin, G. (1968). The tragedy of the commons. *Science*, 162, 1243–1248.
- Highman, L., & de Gayardon, A. (2022). Destination France: Repositioning French higher education in a globalized world' In H. de Wit, E. Minaeva & L. Wang (Eds.), *International student recruitment and mobility in non-anglophone countries: Theories, themes, and patterns* (pp. 51–69). Routledge.
- Kabbanji, L., & Toma, S. (2020). Politiques migratoires et sélectivité des migrations étudiantes en France: Une approche sociodémographique. *Migrations Société*, 180(2), 37–64.
- Marginson, S. (2016). *Higher education and the common good*. Melbourne University Publishing.
- Marginson, S., & Yang, L. (2023). Has the public good of higher education been emptied out? The case of England. *Higher Education*. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-023-01117-6>
- MEN (2007–2023). *L'état de l'enseignement supérieur et de la recherche*. Ministère de l'Éducation Nationale.
- MESR (2021) *Les principales dispositions de la loi de programmation de la recherche pour les années 2021 à 2030*. Ministère de l'Enseignement Supérieur et de la Recherche.
- Musselin, C. (2021). Bringing universities to the centre of the French higher education system? Almost but not yet... *European Journal of Higher Education*, 11(3), 329–345.
- Prost, A. (1968). *Histoire de L'Enseignement en France 1800–1967*. Armand Colin.
- Samuelson, P. (1954). The pure theory of public expenditure. *Review of Economics and Statistics*, 36(4), 387–389.
- Szadkowski, K. (2024). For the society as a whole: Higher education and the public good in Poland. *Higher Education*. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-024-01278-y>
- Tannock, S. (2018). *Educational equality and international students: Justice across borders?* Springer.
- Tissier-Raffin, M. (2021). "Bienvenue en France": Attirer... ou trier? *Plein Droit*, 130(3), 7–10. <https://doi.org/10.3917/pld.130.0009>
- Trow, M. (1973). *Problems in the transition from elite to mass higher education*. Carnegie Commission on Higher Education.
- Vergnaud, C. (2023). Privatization trends in French public universities: Challenging the geographies of a public service. In K. Mary, N. Nafaa, & D. Giband (Eds.), *Geographies of Globalized Education Privatization* (pp. 85–107). Springer.