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The Challenge of Equity in French Higher Education

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In education, equity refers to the equal opportunity to learn. Therefore, the idea that individual merit and effort in different educational contexts must be recognized and rewarded is widely accepted. It is unreasonable to impose the same fate or even the same educational outcome on everyone for the sake of equality; moreover, to claim a perfect equality, there has to be a sufficient consideration of the effort and work of each learner. It is necessary and quite legitimate to provide everyone with the same "opportunity" from school to university. According to Gale, the definition of equity emphasizes the issues of access and opportunity; participation and retention rates; students' expectations and experiences; graduations and outcomes (Gale 2011b). The issue of equity in higher education questions the system about the opportunities offered to individuals according to their gender, social background, ethnicity, age groups, etc.

Access to higher education, choice of field of study, quality learning experience, achievement and success are all important factors that determine equity. Do both youths and adults have the same opportunity to access higher education and achieve quality learning? How is the post-secondary orientation influenced by individual characteristics and living conditions of students? Are the trajectories of students in higher education influenced by their individualities?

From Elite to Mass Higher Education

Higher education was affected as the democratization of the education system in France,

accelerated sharply after World War II. The number of students enrolled in higher education in France increased essentially between 1960 and 1995 (from 300,000 to almost 2.2 million students). Referred to as the "The Inheritors," by Bourdieu and Passeron, the student population prior to the 1950s was a rather small minority group mostly homogeneous and predominantly male. In that era, higher education recruited almost exclusively from the upper class and once graduated, those students were guaranteed positions with higher level of responsibilities in their society.

Since the 1960s, higher education in France has deeply changed. The student population has significantly increased in number with higher female enrolments, a more diversified social origins and fields of study. To better meet the social demands, higher education had to change and adapt its curriculum and multiply professional programs for "new students".

Nevertheless, the rapid development of higher education and the diversification of its curriculum, including the development of short vocational training programs, invite to a critical analysis of the issue of the reduction of social inequalities in the education system. How can we interpret this democratization? Do the candidates, no matter their social and ethnic origin, have the same opportunity to access higher education, advancement and success in their path? Do we observe equity between men and women?

The Organization of French Higher Education

Compared to other OECD (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development) countries, France has a fairly a typical system of higher education. First of all, French higher education is characterized by its historical fragmentation and the coexistence of two competing sectors since the 18th century. These are the Public University sector, the non-University sector composed of elite institutions (preparatory classes and *Grandes Ecoles*) and Vocational Training's Institutions (2 or 3 years). The presence of an elite sector outside of the university epitomized a state-directed meritocratic society, where professionals with a particular education are viewed as exquisite elites. These institutions (where no research is conducted) are intellectually and socially highly selective (Husén 1991:176). The symbolic and real effects of the duality of the Public University and non-University sector are affecting the image and the effective functioning of higher institutions in France. According to Merrien and Musselin (1999), a striking feature of the fragmented French system is that Public Universities have never been institutions that were recognized by the upper class.

The Public University is the largest sector receiving nearly 56% of all students (DEPP¹, 2015a). French public universities have a legal obligation to accept all candidates who hold a *baccalauréat*² (high school degree). The proportion of students enrolled in University has declined over the last three decades: 70% in 1980, 66% in 2000 and 60% today. According to the same source, only 46% of those students entering

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⁵ The concept of social reproduction was first developed by the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu and Jean-Claude Passeron in the early 1970s in their book *Cultural Reproduction and Social Reproduction*. According to them, despite its appearance of neutrality, the education system was used solely to 'reproduce' the culture of the dominant class and participates in the structural reproduction of disadvantages and inequalities that are caused by cultural reproduction. Upper social classes, familiarity with the legitimate culture and knowledge and skills determined one's life chances.

⁶ The priority education zones (ZEP) are in the French education system, areas where schools (schools and middle schools) have additional resources and more autonomy to deal with academic and social difficulties of their students. PTA is a significant political break with the traditional egalitarian philosophy that has dominated the French education system since the 19th century.

⁷ Statistics published on the CROUS (Public Centre in Ministry of higher education whose mission is to improve the material lives of students) website. <http://www.cnous.fr/cnous/crous-cest-quoi/chiffres-cle/>

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