

Convergence in the English and French Education Systems: Vive La Difference!

Peter Wolstencroft, Elizabeth Whitfield, Track Dinning

Liverpool John Moores University

General de Gaulle looked at his watch and nodded confidently "Il est 14 h. En France, on a cours d'histoire"

The story might be dubious, but the message behind it is clear. The French education system is based around a number of key principles, the first one being conformity of experience for those who study within it. An illustration of this is that, whilst in England there are a multitude of examination bodies, all offering slightly different options, in France *le bac*, the test of a student's ability is set centrally and rigidly controlled by *le Ministère de l'Éducation nationale, de la Jeunesse et des Sports*.

Linked into this focus on conformity is *La Laïcité*, literally 'secularism' in English. Religious interference in education is not just discouraged but actively legislated against. Religious symbols are banned from education buildings and the system is always framed by the needs of *L'État*, the State.

There are multiple other examples of how conformity and a belief in the homogeneity of the educational experience are vital in France. Teachers apply to *le Ministère* for a job and are sent to where they are needed, rather than where they necessarily want to go. In universities, first year lectures are often overcrowded due to the fact that anyone passing *le bac* has the right to a place at a university. For context, in 2020, 97.5% of students were awarded *le bac*. Pastoral support for students is minimal and core subjects such as French and Mathematics make up the majority of the centrally controlled curriculum.

A generalisation of the French system would indicate that it is prescribed and assumes commonality of students.

At first glance, the English system shares little with that on the other side of the Channel. The market based approach adopted by much of the sector promises individual solutions to local issues, the 'alphabet soup' of qualifications gives plenty of choice of pathways for those attending (Kingston, 2003) and universities have guarded their independence from their initial formation. However, digging below the surface reveals that a change has been occurring that suggests that the gap between the two systems is not as wide as first thought.

The advent of the national curriculum (DfES 1985) represented a first step towards conformity of experience within the compulsory sector, but it was the intervention of then Secretary of State for Education, Michael Gove, that turned what was a broad spectrum of subjects into a much more prescribed curriculum. As in France, creative subjects were removed to be replaced by a much narrower core and the success of schools and colleges were judged via league tables which recorded the percentage of students who successfully achieved the required standard of passing assessments.

This tightening of control of the curriculum was accompanied by a move towards education establishments having more control of their running (a process known as academisation in compulsory education and incorporation in post-compulsory education). Whilst one of the stated

purposes of this movement was to allow schools and colleges more freedom to address issues that affected their students (Courtney 2015), the reality is that a narrow national curriculum, coupled with an inspection body that looks at prescribed outcomes has meant that students' experience of education has become an increasingly homogenous process in the last two decades.

Within English Higher Education the drive towards conformity of experience has been a slower, more incremental process. The recent assurance by the Office for Students that the most important factor for students in their education is 'value for money' (OfS 2022) along with their regular checks on consistency across students through the 'B3' criteria has meant that the focus of many English universities has been on ensuring consistency of experience. VLE sites, personal tutoring, the assessment faced are all being checked and given this search for consistency, the danger is the potential narrowing of the curriculum as universities try to control the experience as much as possible.

Our assertion is that this focus on value for money and conformity is based on a false preconception. Whilst a conformity based approach has been embedded in France from the start, any attempt to homogenise the English system neglects that fact that you have to scroll past seven British universities in the ranking of world universities before coming to *Paris Science et Lettres* in position 47 (THES, 2023), the top ranked French university. Viewing all students through the same lens means that you are assuming commonality of needs of students coming from a wide variety of backgrounds and the danger is that the outcome based approach could potentially narrow the curriculum and experience of students attending English Higher Education. In addition you are stifling the creativity of the academics who work within English university and running the risk that what is being taught becomes a uniform product that neglects the rich diversity of the sector in England.

Vive la difference indeed.

References

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