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# How did the French higher Education system respond to the Covid-19 pandemic?

Christelle Manifet

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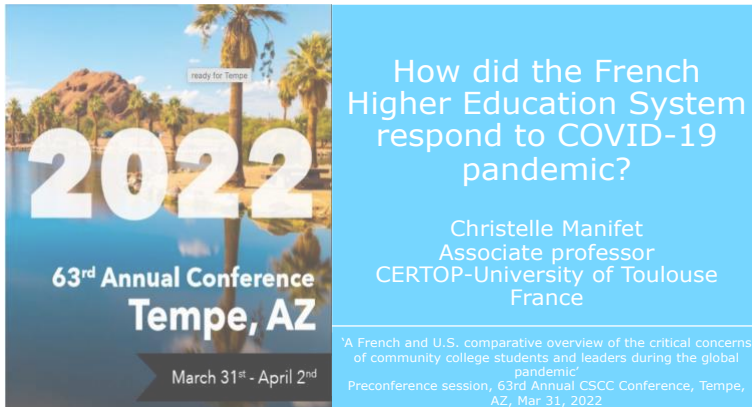
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**Formulation of the problem**

The Global Pandemic so far has disrupted four academic years in France: 2018-2019, 2019-20, 2020-21, 2021-22. France experienced three periods of general lockdown:

- March 16, 2020 to May 11, 2020: the strictest (2 months)
- October 30 to December 15, 2020 (1,5 months)
- April 3 to May 3, 2021 (28 days)

With the COVID crisis, the level of education disruption was unprecedented. The lockdown in particular was completely new for the French society as well as for the Educational sector and HEI.

It poses a problem of crisis management capacity for HEI and pushes the sociologists to cross their usual frames of analysis concerning HE with those of a sociology of risk society:

Even if the Coronavirus pandemic remains exceptional, Crisis has become a concept of the present time, it has become a hallmark of modern society (Freudenburg, 1992).

The presentation is structured by three main questions:

- What are the concerns of institutional actors, i.e. the agenda of the crisis and its temporality? (1)
- What are the characteristics of the French higher education governance in this crisis situation? (2)
- How does risk management differ according to the type of Higher education institutions and what were the weaknesses/strengths of each of these types in relation to the COVID risks? (3)

**Method**

The analysis carried out is essentially documentary and consisted in a thematic analysis of the French national and regional press. The search has been extended over the entire period of the crisis -from March 2020 to June 2021- and Concerned the perimeter of the HEI offering Undergraduate Diploma.

Universities (55%), University Institutes of Technology (UIT) (4%), Advanced Technician Programs in High Schools (10%), Preparatory classes for the *Grandes Ecoles* (3%), other public and private schools offering undergraduate programs (21%), Private institutions are mainly religious institutes (13), engineering schools and business schools (50), other technical schools, some of which may be financed to varying degrees by the public authorities. 18% of students are specifically enrolled in private higher education institutions.

The measures taken by the main actors of the system were also systematically identified in support of a consultation of the main institutional websites. Some reports that related directly or indirectly to this crisis management in HEI have been also consulted as much as possible.

Limits: Beyond the fact that this digital press review and analysis cannot suffice for the scientific validation of the observations, it also has other shortcomings: official documentation as well as the media had a rather global view of the problems faced by the entire educational sector in the face of the virus. And the preoccupations were turned towards the cycles that concerned the youngest: the elementary school in particular. Finally, what was happening in higher education as such was not documented with precision in the French Press. And, moreover, the Ministry of Higher Education did not keep a precise statement of the pandemic impact on its perimeter of competence, neither with regard to public nor private establishments.

## **Part I: HEI in Pandemic conditions: Emergency and Contingency... but Continuity**

### ***Emergency and Contingency...***

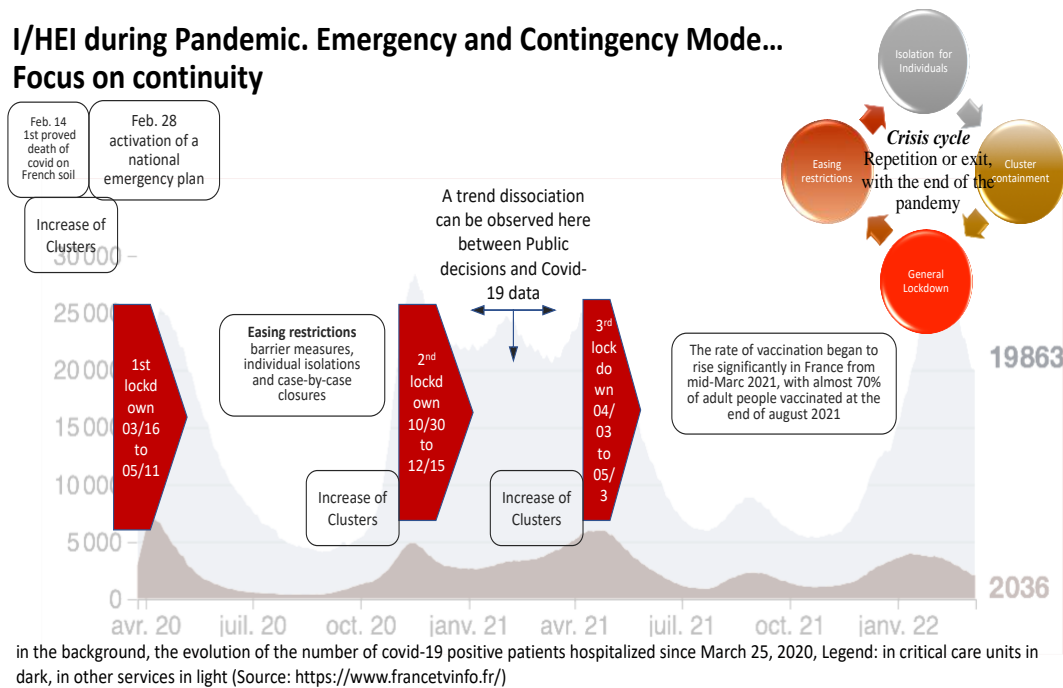
Scientific publications on crisis management point out the importance of temporality in a crisis. They demonstrate that, spontaneously, social actors are seized by the emergency and trapped by it.

Reaction to events, unpreparedness and instability of official decisions then dominate rather than prevention and planification, and resilience and recovery.

In this case, the pandemic management was closely dependent on the incidence rates of the virus, the number of hospitalizations compared with the hospital reception capacities.

The Graph represents the temporality of the crisis in French soil with its main events and public decisions. In the background of the slide, one can see the evolution of the number of covid-19 patients hospitalized since March 25, 2020. In critical care units in dark, in other services in light.

## I/HEI during Pandemic. Emergency and Contingency Mode... Focus on continuity



The crisis circle repeated three times...

The three periods of Lockdown are closely caused by the COVID data in Hospitals, but what it is observed in the third period in particular, between the second and the third lockdown, is a trend of dissociation..

This dissociation illustrates the conflict during the whole crisis between the necessity to fight against this virus and the desire, this impulsive movement to continue to act as if it was almost normal.

### ***Emergency and Contingency BUT Continuity...***

What the actors of the higher education system -and it was the same elsewhere- were constantly trying to do during the whole COVID crisis was to ensure the continuity of the teaching service even under degraded conditions.

This concern manifested itself in the priority given to face-to-face teaching, or, in any case, to any device allowing to be as close as possible to the situation of normality. Then, if the face-to-face teaching became too complicated to implement, the institutions best pre-familiarized with digital tools easily switched to all-distance teaching, which most often consisted in reproducing classic classroom teaching but with the means of teleconferences.

And this movement for continuity was as strong as that to counter the spread of the virus.

Four National and General scenarios have been elaborated to manage the pandemic.

**First**, individualized isolation and quarantine for those infected or closed-contacts, and shutdown of institutions on a case-by-case basis.

**Second**, containment of the outbreaks or risk of outbreaks, called 'clusters'.

**Third**, the general Lockdown aimed to restrict as much as possible the movements, the circulations and the opportunities of meeting which has had the effect of slowing down all non-essential activities and has led to the closure of all institutions receiving the public, apart from Educational Institutions which have been managed specifically: closure had not been systematic.

**Four**, relaxation periods when easing of restrictions implies a battery of barrier measures to avoid another containment.

These scenarios were neither specific to the higher education sector.

Articulated to this pandemic management plan, HEI have deployed their own plan of continuity, with three main scenarios, ranging from "face-to-face teaching with barrier gestures and measures, and special measures for cases in isolation" to the "entirely distance learning" including "hybrid teaching" with a reduced- capacity reception. Then, the "total closure" of institutions, when it happened, did not mean that teaching and learning activities ceased. They were taking a digital turn.

These three scenarios could coexist or overlap and could fit in variable ways with COVID's threat management plan.

For example, Lockdown did not necessarily mean "total remote learning. Educational Institutions were uniformly closed during the first Lockdown and invited to put in place online solutions, whereas during the second, Hybrid Teaching could have been the norm. It is the same during the easing restrictions periods where a large part of universities finally decided to stay in quasi-entirely remote learning conditions.

## **Part II. Scenarios of Continuity in Pandemic conditions**

### **A first scenario of "Isolation of infected persons, contact tracing and individualized quarantine, and shutdown of institutions on a case-by-case basis"**

When a case is positive to Covid, the "contact tracing" is set up to identify the persons staff and/or students who could be symptomatic and/or ill and to recommend to all of them to remain in isolation at home for fourteen days, then 7 days.

At the beginning of the epidemic's spread, the rule of principle was that three cases of Covid-19 theoretically led to the closure of a class. Actually, the decisions made may have varied based on a case-by-case basis and then, relaxed as the pandemic took hold over time rather than being quickly evacuated.

The management of students in isolation has been progressively formalized, protocols have been put in place in the largest institutions: course materials by email, relying on the pre-existing digital work environment to continue studying, relying on their peers who could still attend class. There were no distance learning courses organized for those in isolation.

The most formal arrangements made for them, however, were for replacement tests when they missed exam periods.

The **second scenario** consisted in managing epidemic outbreaks concentrated in specific places, so called 'clusters'.

Thus, the arrival of the virus on the French territory has manifested itself in this form.

High-risk areas have been identified, as of the end of February 2020. In an article in the Montreal press on 10/03/20, travel returners from high-risk areas in France, in particular students, were invited to stay at home for fourteen days before returning to school. The same day (6 days before the First general Lockdown), the University of South Brittany announced the confinement of 300 students out of its 1900 enrolled, because they were living in cluster municipalities.

Gradually, cluster management shifted from reaction to prevention. Decreed on the 23th of March 2020: “any gathering, meeting or activity of more than 100 people, in closed or open environments” were prohibited.

Whereas others institutions receiving public were required to close, educational institutions were not, but had to find ways to avoid excessive groupings. Actually, in the first period of the outbreak characterized by unpreparedness, the focus was essentially on closing campuses, online teaching and testing.

It was not until the start of the academic year in September 2020 that institutions, to a large extent, tried to put in place an organization for Hybrid teaching.

But, according to Le Monde of October 26, 2020, each day the list of universities and other HEI affected by contamination grew longer, and some of them closed their doors for two weeks and switched to distance learning. *Centrale Lyon, Sciences Po or Polytechnique* were quoted as having to close their doors. Then, the intensity of the incidence of the virus forced a lot to waive and switch to an-all online learning.

The same article in Le Monde reported that one third of the clusters were due to schools and universities, and the sector had even overtaken the business sector for the first time in terms of the number of clusters reached (285 versus 195 as of 26/10/20, *Le Monde* website). More than ten clusters were identified in universities, as of September 13, 2020, according to the Ministry of Higher Education, but the latter did not carry out an ongoing survey of the clusters and closure.

**A third scenario of General Lockdown** has imposed itself on the French public authorities, more than they would have liked.

Educational Institutions were uniformly closed for the first time between March 16 and May 3, 2020, that is to say 3 weeks of school at home and 2 weeks of confined spring vacations.

The beginning of the 2020 school year started under the instruction of opened institutions, but as the incidence rate (nb of cases/100,000 inhabitants) increased in September and October, the French government decided to decree a second containment from October 30, which however was translated into very different declinations according to the cycles and years of study, as well as according to the status (public/private) and size characteristics of the institutions. Thus, all universities were subject to distance learning, while elementary school remained open. Colleges were open, although some colleges may have been affected by half-capacity rule and hybrid teaching, i.e., half-group attendance, every second day/or week. Half-capacity and hybrid teaching had been imposed on all high schools, which were required to give priority attendance to students in their senior year in preparation for the baccalaureate diploma exams. All schools that remained open were subject to a stricter sanitary protocol, mainly, the wearing of masks, which became mandatory in November 2020 for those over 6 years old.

At the announcement of the third lockdown, the government resolved, as in the first lockdown, to close primary schools and high schools from April 6, 2021 and for three or four weeks.

Then, the conditions of Lockdown clearly varied between the three periods, since while the first period was the strictest and the most homogeneous, the second was the most heterogeneous of the three. Not all educational institutions were necessarily closed, and differences in treatment as well as differences in the application of the instructions became apparent over time.

The whole period of this COVID-19's crisis has been favorable to the deployment of online teaching tools, especially during the lockdown phases. The private market for distance learning has been boosted and institutions and public authorities have engaged in public-private partnerships to ensure the continuity of their missions. Tools on the scale of the French Ministry of Education were also put in place, notably the resources of the *Centre National de l'Enseignement à Distance* (CNED), which were made accessible to all pupils and students and their families, covering primarily primary and secondary school programs but also offering certain short programs of higher education (Advanced Technician Programs). French universities and others Higher Education institutions that also do research were already using the WEB for academic research and for distance learning. Technological equipment required was already in place, which also explains why in these higher education institutions, priority has been given to distance learning methods, based on online lectures or asynchronous learning activities, video or audio lessons, online examinations, etc.

The **Fourth scenario** features the interstitial periods between the lockdown phases when relaxation measures were put in place but the viral threat was still present and still imposed restrictions.

Then the barrier measures were put in place. The wearing of masks became mandatory in November 2020 until March 2022. Evening and night curfew were put in place, then vaccination strongly recommended, self-isolation and self-tests in case of symptoms...

In these periods, lockdown measures were lifted, vigilance continues in an effort to avoid another lockdown.

In higher education, as well as in upper secondary education, the two main tools used to keep institutions open were the lowering of the reception capacity on campuses and hybrid teaching, mixing face-to-face and distance learning.

Half-capacity attendance every second day/or week, face-to-face classes one day a week, Priority attendance given to First year's students, training courses...

Behind the seemingly simple principle of dividing group sizes by two or more, the implementation proved to be much more complex in campuses with large numbers of students and where the opportunities for mixing were endless.

The media reported that teams had been working for weeks between July and September 2020 to ensure that students would be able to return to school, creating COVID cells and continuity plans, reorganizing and desynchronizing timetables, reorganizing traffic in shared spaces, and establishing rules for differentiated presence not only by training group, but also by level of study and type of training... A large number of articles were dedicated to this 'logistical headache of the university facing the covid-19'.

### **Part III: Three main features of the HE governance in pandemic conditions**

#### **Firstly, Complexification and high Dependency**

The crisis introduced an unprecedented decision-making circuit due to the fact that the crisis factor was a foreign body to the educational system and that the main system of risk management was controlled by an exogenous system of action. The HE system was forced to acculturate to a new culture of health security and sanitary protocols: incidence and mortality rates, capacity of hospitals, barrier actions, scrupulous cleaning of work spaces, containment and curfew, closure, isolation of contact cases, tests, vaccination, etc. A set of devices had to be known and used, a set of recommendations had to be integrated to HE plans, a lot of new protocols have been put in place in the organizations.



The agenda in higher education was also largely determined by advances in scientific knowledge about the virus, as well as by the state of industrial production of protective devices (masks, tests, hydro alcoholic gels, air purifiers, vaccines...).

For example, the race to develop vaccines began in early 2020. Concretely, the rate of vaccination began to rise significantly on the French territory one year later, from mid-March 2021 with a rate of vaccinated people of almost 70% at the end of August 2021. This helped the country to take control of the virus: even though neither the vaccine, nor the 'Health Pass' were made mandatory in higher education, the actors counted on the large-scale vaccination of their staff and clientele to organize a quasi-normal start to the 2021-22 academic year, "in person, without restrictive capacities, without a mandatory health pass but with mandatory masks and barrier gestures".

### **Secondly, Uncertainty, Controversy and Lack of Trust**

A main characteristic of the Higher Education governance in this crisis was that decisions were made in a context of high uncertainty. Procedures were unprecedented and decisions were ephemeral. The high uncertainty particularly tested individuals and organizations, "their ability to apprehend the unexpected, their capacity to make effective decisions, their resilience to resume normal activity and continue their operations (Combalber, 2012, p. 42).

This high uncertainty notably manifested itself by a constant balance between health security and the provision of education. This search for balance prevailed, although everyone knew that no option was ideal. Then, uncertainty was the ground for controversy.

Controversy was strong on several issues without it always being possible to know whether a majority was emerging in one direction or another:

- Did HEI were nests of clusters or not?
- To confine or not to confine?
- To close or to keep open?
- To make vaccines compulsory or not?
- To maintain in-person or online exams?
- To favor complete remote learning or hybrid teaching?

Social media and Streets hosted these debates. Often, the measures taken were responses to categorical grumbling, from teachers, students, parents, companies.

A decision made the day before could be reversed the next day.

The organization of the 2020-21 academic year, which have been extended from July until the end of October, was exemplary in this respect. While the Minister of Higher Education had advocated during the summer the

vague principle of a 'quasi-normal' start for the new academic year, a new instruction followed, this time from the Prime Minister, to limit the reception capacity between 50% and 20%, whereas at the end of October, the President announced that the universities would be switching to a complete distance learning. At the local level, this uninterrupted series of contradictory instructions was not without explaining the fatigue of staff and users alike, as well as the rise in attitudes of mistrust towards the authorities.

An other illustration is in the side-effects of the all-online learning considering the risks of dropping out and isolation. As the measures taken were particularly restrictive, distance learning proved to be the appropriate solution, which made it possible to save the most important, knowledge transfer. Then, came the concern for correcting its side-effects on students' mental health, their resource, motivation, perseverance and performance.

The press multiplied the testimonies of students: "I didn't want anything. It was as if my life was on pause. It's hard to hang on", or "10 universities ask to reopen their doors as of January with a reception capacity of 50%" or "They're fed up with courses on Zoom: for the students, the 'college' is a nightmare". On January 20, 2021, a demonstration was organized by students to demand the reopening of the campuses. On January 27, 2021, the president announced that "the students had the right to return to the campus, respecting a maximum capacity of 20%".

It is a bill published in *Le Monde* on 17/03/21 by doctors and a university professor that acted as a warning to the French government. These academics warned that the psychological consequences on young people of measures such as isolation and screen work would have to be repaired. Immediately afterwards, the government launched a psychological support campaign in Higher education institutions based on the communication device of 'three psychology vouchers'.

### **Thirdly, Equivocal governance. Centralization and Dispersion**

*The governance of the French higher education system, known as centralized, is it really that centralized in the light of the crisis?*

The equivocal governance of this crisis concerned the relative concomitance but contradiction between **Emergency and Uncertainty**.

Emergency implies a relative centralization of the decision. And the French president took the lead without too much hesitation, even reshaping the way in which the Health system would take on this crisis. The state of health emergency, decreed on 17/10/20 and prolonged by laws until the one of 31 May 2021, granted greater margins of maneuver to the executive power, and installed an ad hoc task force around the president, in this case a scientific committee and a restricted council of national defense and security.

In contrast, uncertainty implies decentralization. Now, the decision-making system found it difficult to settle down completely to a crisis management, which implied relying less on hierarchy and formal procedures than on a common frame of reference for a decentralized system, supported by the agility of teams and students in the institutions.

Most of the time, the central authority has sinned for having said too much, or not enough. Too much, because its instructions greatly restricted local capacities for self-organization according to specific situations, and not enough, because local actors had to make do with these instructions, which remained abstract and did not provide them with the steps to follow.

Governance was also contradictory in that this Covid-risk has generated solidarity and fraternity feelings, with the idea that everyone was on the same boat, fueled by a continuous stream of presidential and ministerial announcements. But, as the crisis dragged on, it was clear that this was not the case and that working and studying conditions were not the same everywhere.

*Quoting the French poet, Jean de La Fontaine, « Not all died but all were affected » (Animals sick with plague, Fables, 1678-1679).*

The central instructions did not explicitly enroll, in a common framework, the entire sector of higher education (Universities, University Institutes of Technology, Advanced Technician Programs and Preparatory classes, Public and Private engineering schools, nor *a fortiori* the other private Institutions (18% of the French students).

Universities for higher education, and public high schools for secondary education, were the main targets of the restrictions, while other types of education, minorities in number and with limited capacity, either fell between the cracks of the public sector (public and selective institutions) or considered themselves as not concerned (the Private sector).

In an Instagram story, the government spokesman, Gabriel Attal, stated on October 30, 2020, in the wake of a press conference by the Prime Minister, Jean Castex: "Since the subject of Advanced technician Programs, University Institutes of Technology and Preparatory Classes was not finally addressed in the press conference, I would like to inform you that classes will continue to be held in person". (Remarks taken up by the journalist Olivier Esteves in a retrospective analysis article, *Le Monde*, January 14, 2021).

The press reported on this 'double standard', or this 'variable geometry sense of justice'.

In *Le Monde* (website, 3/11/20), a university professor was indignant about the inequality created in higher education by the difference in treatment between university students and future students of "grandes écoles".

In the regional newspaper *Ouest France* of February 3, 20, one noted 'the great difference between public and private schools' with a rule of 50% in class in public schools, and a rule of 100% in private schools.

In *Le Monde* on March 29, 2021, three days before the third lockdown, an article quoted the number 2 of the general secretariat of Catholic education (1200 high schools in the network, 26400 students) announcing that the status quo would be privileged in the network, with rules of distancing and strict barrier gestures.

Many private secondary and higher education institutions took the opportunity to communicate that their activity was 100% face-to-face. Under these conditions of partial instructions, some public sector institutions also played the game to remain as much as possible in face-to-face conditions.

***Small is beautiful or further threats for Mass-oriented Higher Education Institutions in Risk Societies?***

Contingency determination? What seems to have acted most in favour of maintaining a face-to-face activity rather than moving to hybrid or totally distance formats was the size of the institution and/or the groups of students gathered in campuses and/or classes rather than the place and status of institutions in the public higher education order or in relation to the public/private or non selective/selective distinction. The size was a decisive variable, that made it possible or not to respect the rules of social distancing and to control the social tightness of the groups.

However, the only fact that this contingency was a so determining factor in the actor's behaviours shows French political leaders as well as French society as a whole give value to the differentiation of the French higher education system. No one had much of a problem with the fact that the restrictions were not the same for every provider of HE.

The management of this particular crisis shows once again that Differentiation, Market-driven, Competition and elitism are the new motto of the French HE system. As it is said in the website of The Ministry of Higher Education '*Higher education is free*'.

**The size of institutions and student's groups, a risk in the face of the COVID-19 threat**

Type of Higher education	Actual enrollment in 2019-20	Share in % of total enrollment in HE	Number of institutions by type	Average number of students per institution and/or class (Average, formula = $\frac{\text{Total Enrollment}}{\text{Nb. of Institutions}}$ )
Universities (excluding UIT)	1 514 800	55	74 (perimeter of the <i>Conférence des présidents d'université</i> , CPU)	20 470/institution and campus
Advanced Technician Programs (in High Schools)	262 500	10	2722 (data.education.gouv)	96/Two years STS's cycle 48/class
Business and Management Schools (private)	199 200	7	334 (SIES, 2020)	596/institution
Engineering Schools (excluded those integrated in the universities)	135 800	5	150	905/institution and campus
Uni. Institutes of Technology (UIT)	120 600	4	112 (including French Overseas Territories)(SIES, 2017-18)	1076/institution and campus
Preparatory Classes for the Grandes Ecoles (in High Schools)	85 100	3	1167 (Wikipedia, number of CPGE second year) (supposedly as much for the first year)	73/Two years CPGE cycle 36/class
<b>All</b>	<b>2 725 000</b>			
Private HE	562 700	21		