

Portugal: CRUP-EUA foresight initiative, 2012

To make recommendations (for presentation in final report and conference) designed to secure the continuing viability of Portuguese HE

10 theses on the sustainability of the Portuguese higher education System

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1. Portugal has too many universities and polytechnics! This assertion is commonly heard, even among academics but this does not appear to hold if a fair comparison is made with other European countries. A different point is whether the public budget should finance 15 universities and 15 polytechnics, all assumed “equal”, with similar governing structures and allowed to offer all degrees in all fields.
2. The slow growth. In terms of the number of students enrolled, the Portuguese higher education (HE) system is likely to grow only very slowly in the next few years. After an exponential growth for most of the 20th century, it came to a sudden stop by the year 2000.
 - a. The number of students transferring directly from secondary school to HE may grow very slowly from the balance of two opposing factors, the slow widening of participation and the demographic decline.
 - b. The number of non-traditional students may still grow considerably, when compared with other European countries.
3. Uncertainty of external factors. It is not possible to anticipate the effect on demand of HE of recent events, namely,
 - a. The economic downturn that implied a very large decline of the disposable income of the families;
 - b. The “scandals” coming to light in the press in the last few years related to degrees obtained with very little apparent effort.
4. The need for a quota system. The sustainability of HE institutions located outside the more densely populated areas depends on the quota system in place since 1976 but this means a considerable cost for the families. Many aspiring students from Lisbon and Porto are forced to decide between paying the cost of moving to another location and the relatively high fees of local private institutions.
5. The space for the private sector. The private HE institutions depend on non-traditional students and on the mismatch between supply and demand of HE in Lisbon and Porto. Among non-government institutions, only a few degree programs in the Catholic University and in some specialized HE institutions appear to be a first choice for students in their particular areas. The correction by the year 2000 was painful but most institutions appear to have adapted. However, new mergers and acquisitions may occur.
6. Need for further differentiation. The public understanding of HE is very unclear about the differentiation between universities and polytechnics and the transfer between the two subsystems is common and, surprisingly, no special preparation is normally required for transferring students. There is a marked difference between the 7 larger universities and the other 8 that have more difficulty in attracting students and have to deal with smaller and more heterogeneous courses. There is a visible difference between these two groups in their ability to attract competitive research

funding. In their struggle to survive by attracting new students to newly designed degree programs, they are left with the permanent cost of the staff associated with the closed programs. Similar comments might be made about polytechnics and the marked difference between the 3 or 4 larger ones and the other 11 or 12. This mismatch between staff and degree demand may require some sort of regional regulation of 1st cycle degree offer or agreements that may run up to fusions.

7. Clarification of the role of polytechnics. Successive governments (in the last 30 years) found it impossible to clarify the mission of the polytechnic HE and no public policies were ever set up to facilitate the development of a differentiated culture. The statutory differences in the description of the aims of their teaching are difficult to perceive and still more difficult to understand when the scientific areas pursued in universities and polytechnics are compared. Both are required to do research, applied (*orientada*) research in the case of the polytechnics. This was not taken seriously by public funding agencies that never created differentiated programs. Polytechnics academic staffs were required in 2009 to hold a PhD and this poses a new urgency in this clarification. The minute difference between the cost per student in (government) universities and in polytechnics is due to the relative seniority of staff and may converge in the future under current regulations. The cost of CET (*Cursos de Especialização Tecnológica*) appears to be much higher as they depend on the same type of staff as HE and require larger contact time.
8. Cost reduction. The HE costs per student have been under pressure for a number of years and this implied a reduction of the ratio of academic staff to student and a reduction of the contact time of students (with teaching staff). It is hard to imagine that this trend had no effect on the learning outcomes. Further cuts, as announced now, must be feared to have major effects on quality. Teaching hours of academic staff are already much higher than typical research universities worldwide. The alternative of replacing academic staff by temporary non tenured staff would have the effect of ageing fast an already aged academic staff. The only real alternative to government finance is an increase in fees that are already high in European benchmarking (but for England) and would create further stress to families and risk the exclusion of many students.
9. Research performance. The research performance of Portuguese universities grew at the fastest rate of all OECD in the last decade but this risks being wasted as the new PhDs (more than 1500 each year and many from recent promotions) have no hope of finding a job. The alternative most are taking is expatriation. In the short term, this may be seen as an increased mobility of researchers but it may become a permanent fixture. The tenured research community is still growing as the teaching staff of the polytechnics completes their PhD and it is not clear how a contracting research budget will deal with this growth. Should funds be allocated to the (internationally) more competitive research groups or should nationally relevant work be also funded? Should research funding induce a differentiation of the mission of universities and polytechnics? Should the label of “University” be kept by all institutions thus created or should it be tested against a set of criteria?
10. Evaluation of outcomes. Quality of the HE outcomes may have suffered from the deregulation started in the 1970s followed by the creation of a large and clearly uneven private sector in the 1980s and a ferocious competition for students from 2000 onwards among institutions, private and public, while the impact of the A3ES is not yet felt. The prestige of HE would benefit from the public understanding that being a student means hard work for all and that cases coming to light of very light criteria for the assessment of prior learning are not permitted.
11. The role of open HE. The Open University never attracted a number of students comparable to that of Spanish open universities and all residential universities struggle to be seen offering some sort of distance education. With ominous signs that Massive Open Online Courses are there to stay, this may need a deep rethinking.

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