

# RECENT DEVELOPMENTS IN THE PORTUGUESE HIGHER EDUCATION SYSTEM

BELMIRO CABRITO

**I**n the past decades the Portuguese higher education system has gone through some important developments. Following in the footsteps of trends that have been evident in western European countries, Portugal's tertiary education level has been marked by three main trends, namely democratisation, diversification, and privatisation. Each of these is considered briefly in this short report.

## The democratisation of the system

As in most other developed countries, the social demand for higher education in Portugal has grown exponentially, and at a very rapid pace, over the last thirty years. Up to the sixties, the higher education system was an élite one, frequented mostly by the higher classes. University attendance in a sense provided a guarantee to the political and powerful classes that social reproduction would go on unhindered. Besides university studies, there was also the possibility of attending post-secondary schools in engineering and accounting. These post-secondary schools, only to be found in Lisbon, Coimbra and Oporto, were relatively small institutions, attended by some middle class students and a small number of students from working class backgrounds.

The democratisation of the political regime in the seventies led to the transformation of Portugal's higher education system from an enclave of the élite to one that allowed mass access. However, it would be correct to say that truly radical changes in this educational sector only came about in the late eighties. Student numbers exploded from 24149 in 1960/1961, to 344 868, in 1997/1998 (see Table 1).

At the same time that the number of students enrolled in higher education increased, one can also note a widening of representation of students from different social backgrounds, indicating a trend towards democratisation in access to higher education. Indeed, this tendency becomes quite obvious when one compares the background of higher university students nowadays, with that of thirty years ago (see Table 2).

This tendency in the democratisation of access can also be observed when we compare the academic background of students' fathers over the years (see Table 3).

TABLE 1: Number of students enrolled on higher education

Year	Number	Year	Number	Year	Number
1960/61	24149	1987/88	124444	1993/94	270022
1965/66	33972	1988/89	136563	1994/95	290353
1970/71	49461	1989/90	157869	1995/96	313495
1975/76	70912	1990/91	186780	1996/97	334125
1980/81	82428	1991/92	218317	1997/98	344868
1986/87	116291	1992/93	242082		

Source: Ministry of Education, Department of Statistics

TABLE 2: Academic level of resident population (in % of total Portuguese population)

Academic level	1960	1990
4 years of school attendance	83.9	61.5
Higher education attendance	0.9	6.3
Others	15.2	32.2

Source: INE – National Institute of Statistics

TABLE 3: Academic level of higher education student fathers (in %)

Academic level	1963/64	1994/1995
4 years of school attendance	35.3	40.2
Higher education attendance	36.2	26.2
Others	28.5	33.6

Source: 1963/1964: Vieira, M. (1995) 'Transformação recente no campo do ensino superior', *Análise Social*, 30 (131-132).

1994/1995: Data from a survey carried out by Cabrito in 1995, with a national sample of the students enrolled in Portuguese universities.

As with most western European countries (see, *inter alia*, Williams, 1996; Neave, 1996), the present Portuguese higher education system can be said to be characterised by a massive demand on the part of students from both wealthy and less wealthy classes. However, this is not to say that equity in access and equal representation of students from different social backgrounds - across the board and in different types of courses - has been achieved. That is in fact far from being the case. Had we to compare the social structure of the Portuguese population and that of the social backgrounds of higher education students, it would be possible to argue that the Portuguese higher education system is still marked by élitism, despite the recent tendency towards democratisation (see Table 4).

*TABLE 4: Social Structure of Portuguese population, in 1991, and social structure of students enrolled in universities, in 1994*

Class	Portuguese population	University students
Lower classes	38.0	12.5
Middle classes	52.2	69.9
Higher classes	9.8	17.6

*Source:* Portuguese Population – National Institute of Statistics. University students: data from a survey by Cabrito, carried out in 1995, with a national sample of the students enrolled on Portuguese universities.

### **Diversification of the system**

The answer of the tertiary level education sector to the increasing social demand for studies at that level has been to diversify the supply of higher education. Such diversification occurs, firstly, in the higher education system itself. From the mid-eighties we have seen the one track system being replaced by a dual higher education one. The old system offered only one path, the university one. Here, most courses took five years to complete - with the exception of medical degrees which took six or seven years - and all led to good jobs, in state departments, banks or firms.

Over the past decade, a non-university sector of higher education has been created – the Polytechnics System. This track offers three years courses in such vocational subjects as engineering, accounting, business and administration, as well as basic teacher education. It is a higher education system that is linked more closely to the job market. This system, placed between secondary and university.

studies, nevertheless leads to a bachelor's degree, and is expected to produce higher qualified workers, particularly for the sectors of industry and services.

The diversification of the higher education system is also related to another important feature: decentralisation. Prior to the mid-eighties, there were only four universities in three cities, namely the University of Coimbra, that of Oporto, and of Lisbon. There was also a Technical University in the capital city. By the late eighties, the number of public universities had grown to ten. These were located in eight different cities, and each institution having very high student enrollment rates.

At the very same time, Polytechnics sprung up all over the country, in order to attempt to cater for students who did not succeed in their attempt to enter the Universities. In the academic year 1998/99, more than 25% of applicants to the higher education are to be found on the polytechnic track.

### **Privatisation of the system**

As has happened in most countries - where some quasi-markets appeared in order to satisfy the social demand for such public services as education, housing, social assistance or health (see *inter alia* Le Grand et al., 1993; Whitty et al., 1998) - the higher education sector in Portugal has, since the mid-eighties, been marked by a tendency towards privatisation.

This tendency can be observed at two levels: in the provision of higher education, given that a number of private universities were established; and, in the funding of public higher education, given that students must pay a fee to attend tertiary level institutions.

Up to the last decade, higher education was almost exclusively supplied by the State. In line with the European tradition, and following the democratic Revolution of 1974, higher education has been considered by the Portuguese state as a 'public good'. The fee that students had to pay to attend state universities during the seventies was very low. In addition to this, there was only one non-state institution at this level, namely the Catholic University. The latter offered some courses in social sciences, law and business and administration.

Despite the diversification of the higher education system noted earlier, state institutions did not succeed in satisfying the increasing demand for education that marked the eighties and nineties. In other words, public supply (of university and polytechnic places) did not match social demand. Given the policy of liberalism that has marked the last decade, the state has allowed private entrepreneurs to offer higher education, both with regards to the university and the polytechnic paths (see Table 5).

*TABLE 5: Access to higher education*

Academic Year	Applicants to public education	Admission in public education	Admission in private education	Total admission
1986/87	31873	15266	6407	21673
1990/91	58867	24446	20475	44921
1994/95	66871	31891	25007	56898
1995/96	80576	33473	29617	63090
1996/97	68798	32873	26750	59623
1997/98	54950	35452	21614	57066

Source: Ministry of Education, Higher Education Department

Initially, private higher education supplied courses in social sciences, law and business and administration. Technical and laboratory-based studies, which require more financial investment, were supplied only by the State. This situation is now changing, albeit gradually. Over the past decade, then, the number of universities and polytechnic institutions established by private firms and investors has greatly increased, to the extent that today, more than one third of higher education students are to be found in the private sector (see Table 6).

*TABLE 6: Students enrolled on higher education*

Academic Year	Public education	Private education	Total
1986/87	94652	21639	116291
1990/91	135350	51430	186780
1994/95	186291	104062	290353
1995/96	198775	114720	313495
1996/97	212726	121399	334125
1997/98	224091	120777	344868

Source: Ministry of Education, Higher Education Department

At the same time, the State budget suffered 'cuts' or did not grow in proportion to the social needs of the population. Consequently, government faces the challenge of having to meet the ever-increasing social needs of a more educated and better informed citizenry, with a limited budget. In a context where different social services have to compete for scarce State budget resources (Ray et al., 1988; Farchy et al., 1994), the Portuguese government has ended up having to justify the 'user pays' system.

This has happened in the tertiary education sector, where institutions could no longer offer free tuition. As in several other European countries (Williams, 1990), students are now obliged to pay a fee to attend public institutions. In 1998/99, the total amount of fees paid by students to public universities and polytechnics constituted up to 10% of the global budget of these institutions.

Additionally, public higher education institutions are directed to get funds from other sources than the students and the State, namely by selling services to the community, researching in co-operation with state and private research institutions and/or by getting firm subsidies. In this way, diversification of sources of funding has accompanied the tendency towards privatisation. It must be said, however, that the State still contributes more than 80% of the total current budget of public higher education.

It should also be noted that the fee that students pay for attending state tertiary level institutions is the same, irrespective of the branch of study followed, the institution attended, or the financial capacity of the students. In accordance with the Law 113/97, that annual fee is equal to the minimum wage of Portuguese workers, which is established annually by government.

In the private higher education sector, fees vary from institution to institution; the state, however, establishes the maximum ceiling that can be charged. That ceiling is very high, and is generally equivalent to between five to ten times what students pay in public institutions.

---

**Belmiro Cabrito** can be contacted at the following address: *University of Lisbon, Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences, Lisbon, Portugal. His e-mail address is: b.cabrito@fc.ul.pt*

## References

- Farchy, J. and Sagot-Duvauroux, D. (1994) *L'Économie des Politiques Culturelles*. Paris: PUF.
- Le Grand, J. and Bartlett, W. (1993) 'Quasi-markets and social policy: the way forward?' In J. Le Grand and E. Bartlett (eds) *Quasi-Markets and Social Policy*. London: Macmillan, 202-220.
- Neave, G. (1996) 'L'enseignement supérieur en transition: 25 ans d'expérience'. *Gestion de l'Enseignement Supérieur*, Vol. 8(3), 17-28.
- Ray, J.-C., Dupuis, J.-M and Gazier, B. (1988) *Analyse Économique des Politiques Sociales*. Paris: PUF.
- Vieira, M. M. (1995) 'Transformação recente no campo do ensino superior'. *Análise Social*, Vol. XXX (131-132), (2.º-3.º), 315-373.
- Whitty, G., Power, S. and Halpin, D. (1998) *Devolution and Choice in Education: The School, the State and The Market*. Buckingham: Open University Press.
- Williams, G. (1990) *Le Financement de l'Enseignement Supérieur: Tendances Actuelles*. Paris: OCDE.
- Williams, G. (1996) 'Les nombreux aspects de la privatisation'. *Gestion de l'Enseignement Supérieur*, Vol. 8 (3), 45-66.