

## **Higher Education Postgraduate Symposium**

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### **Education and Europeanization:**

#### **Higher Education Policy and the Case of Portugal.**

The main focus of my research is the European character of Portuguese universities, i.e., the development of the *European Dimension* of higher education or, to use the formal aim introduced by the European Union (EU) in 1999, the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) in the Portuguese context.

In this work I look at initiatives related to the mobility of students in Portuguese universities, especially in the past five years, and take them as an indicator of their European character. Then I analyse the official political discourse concerning the reform of higher education institutions in order to describe the process of Europeanization of Portuguese universities taking place in the present and recent past and predict its character in a near future.

The creation of the EHEA is sustained by political statements such as the Bologna Process. The Bologna Process, which is presently the major process of higher education reform in Europe, takes its name from the 'Bologna Declaration', which was signed on 19 June 1999 by the Education Ministers of 29 countries in Europe. The ministers' meeting was preceded by a discussion, on 18 June, involving a large number of representatives of the academic community, ministries and international governmental and non-governmental organizations. The 'Bologna Declaration' builds on the Sorbonne Declaration, signed in May 1998 by Education Ministers from France, Germany, Italy and the United Kingdom.

## **Education and Europeanization: Higher Education Policy and the Case of Portugal.**

The Bologna Process refers to multi-national reforms and changes currently undertaken by 45 European states. It is not an EU policy but an inter-governmental co-operation, a 'soft law'.

In Bologna, European higher education ministers committed themselves to the creation, by 2010, of the EHEA by introducing changes in national systems in order to obtain easily readable and comparable degrees, based on an undergraduate cycle leading to a Bachelors degree of a minimum of three years and a graduate (Masters) cycle; credit transfer; promotion of mobility; promotion of European co-operation in quality assurance, and making European higher education more attractive for students and scholars around the world.

In 2000, at the Lisbon Summit, the Council of Ministers debated the need to go on working and investing in higher education in order to strengthen the links between education and research, since it was considered by EU politicians that only with this connection could the EU become "the most dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world capable of sustained economic growth with more and better jobs and greater social cohesion" (Lisbon Presidency Conclusions, paragraph 5). This strategy is called the 'Lisbon Strategy' and it raises new debates about the role of education.

Countries are taking their own decisions – rule of subsidiarity – on what higher education is concerned still there is a certain level of convergence among countries who participate in EU actions and programs as a step towards an efficient strategy for the development of the EHEA. I assume in this research that the 'European Action Scheme for the Mobility of University Students' – know as ERASMUS programme – has been used by the national educational systems as a tool to promote the mobility of students in both national and European universities and look for evidence that it has a significant role in the definition of the European character of Portuguese universities.

## **Education and Europeanization: Higher Education Policy and the Case of Portugal.**

This European character is achieved at the university level by the establishment of partnerships with other universities abroad, with curriculum change, the creation of local commissions and national agencies, the introduction of language courses and, in some cases, the offer of teaching in a foreign language.

My main research questions can be summarized in the following ones: Are Portuguese universities becoming more European? Does student mobility in higher education promote the Europeanization of Portuguese universities? What does the official political discourse concerning the reform of higher education institutions in Portugal tell us about the intentions of implementing change in the present and near future in order to respond to the EU proposal of creation of the EHEA?

Larger questions related to those stated above can also be raised:

- Recent EU documents underline the need of reforming universities' agenda in order to contribute to the 'Lisbon Strategy'. Are the changes proposed by the EU concerned with the quality of higher education in its Member-States as a public good to all its citizens (in the tradition of the origin of educational systems in Europe) or are these changes an indicator of an economically oriented drive in higher education in the European context?
- EU political statements say that universities are calling for a fundamentally new type of arrangement or 'contract' with society. Is this really the case?
- Is the mobility of students a sign of the construction of a cross-national European identity or is it the result of an individual desire for career advancement, prestige and upward social mobility?
- Are changes occurring in European universities a result of a 'vertical process' coming from above, the EU, to below, the local institutions (the model used by

## **Education and Europeanization: Higher Education Policy and the Case of Portugal.**

a nation-state with a centralized educational system) or are these changes the result of a 'horizontal process', the dynamic interaction between all actors inside universities, Member-States, and EU bodies?

The hypotheses that I will test in my research are the following:

- 1) The *European Dimension* in higher education has a hybrid character: the EU provides initiatives to develop a stronger European citizenship but the Member-States have to deal with the lack of resources when implementing changes and when participating in the construction of a European project.
- 2) The mobility of students plays a key role in developing the *European Dimension* of higher education in universities within the EU and it is an indicator of the process of Europeanization in the Portuguese context.
- 3) There are trends towards the Europeanization of Portuguese universities: the number of foreign students in Portuguese universities has grown radically, as well as the number of students going abroad, since the country joined the EU in 1987, especially in the last five years.
- 4) The concept of a European strategy in higher education is gradually being accepted by the Portuguese government and universities and has a visible presence in the official political discourse.
- 5) The ERASMUS programme is seen as highly positive by Portuguese policy and decision makers both at the governmental and university level.

**Education and Europeanization:  
Higher Education Policy and the Case of Portugal.**

Data concerning student mobility will be analysed but I take into account the larger frame that includes the voices of the ones behind decisions which make possible the existence of initiatives like ERASMUS programme. These voices include policy and decision makers at the government level as well as at the university level.

I also look at political statements in treaties, laws, manifestos, and summarise the EU official political discourse concerning mobility and Europeanization of higher education.

I will look for connections between data collected from different sources, both quantitative (from statistical sources on the Portuguese higher education system and ERASMUS programme) and qualitative (from semi-structured interviews with policy and decision makers at the governmental and university level).

In this work I adopt a case study design with the three main higher education institutions – University of Porto, University Nova of Lisbon and University of Coimbra – taken as representative of the Portuguese higher education context.