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Equity in Higher Education **The Portuguese Case**

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Introduction

The present chapter covers the period from 1974 to the present times. 1974 is a historical date. It was the year of what became known as the “Revolution of Carnations” ending almost half a century of dictatorial regime under Dr. Salazar. The revolution was a success greatly due to its bloodless character—Carnations instead of bullets on the rifles of the insurgents of the Armed Forces Movement (MFA).

The Revolution pursued three main objectives: (1) decolonization, (2) democratization and (3) development. Another nickname was the 3D Revolution. The first two—decolonization and democratization—were achieved within an amazing span of three years. Development is a never-ending objective but the profile of the country is nowadays completely different having transformed the last colonial state in a modern European nation.

Having joined the European Community in 1986, Portugal had to struggle to liberalize the economy succeeding to protect the jobs. It was only after the recent crisis of 2008 that unemployment raised to 17 per cent in 2013 starting then to decrease and not exceeding 12 per cent in the middle of 2015.

Along this period of forty years, Higher Education System has known profound changes. At a certain extent the University was associated to the Revolution at least in

contributing to a growing delegitimation of the war pursued in Africa in a desperate attempt to preserve their colonies, such as Angola, Mozambique, Guinea.

Students were very active either in public demonstrations, which started on 1962, as well inside the ranks when mobilized to the colonial war or even as exiles mostly in European Countries. Many of them returned during the Revolution and some became members of the new political and academic elites that helped to construct a new modern democracy.

During the turbulent aftermath of the Revolution, the University was closed. The government suspended all first- year classes, as well as access to new students. Those who were to enrol were instead committed to one year of “civil service”, a sort of “cultural revolution” similar to the extension practices followed in some Latin American countries.

Also during those agitated times, some teachers accused of compromising with the former fascist regime were dispelled—“sanitized” was the word used, in many cases without any justified reason, to return later once the turbulence ceased.

Anyway that was the only occasion in the history of the Portuguese University where the concept of extension as one of the missions of the University, in the Latin America sense of community development, was attempted. In the current times “extension” is rather associated with rendering services to the civil society as a way of getting funds to supplement the public financing.

The Higher Education System was maybe the institution that more dramatically changed during the last decades. To be fair, such a change had already started in the late 1970s just before the Revolution, with the Veiga Simões’ reform aimed at providing closer links between the University and the growing demands of the economy. This Reform Act created for the first time in Portugal a binary system Universities and Polytechnic Institutes, inspired by the OECD recommendations.

Management sciences started to be taught at that time. New universities were created to reduce the traditional asymmetries between the littoral and the interior of the country.

Anyway it was only after the Revolution that the former elite system—below 7 per cent of enrolments, gradually changed to a “mass university” attaining a peak of circa 40 per cent of students in Tertiary Educational Institutions (TEIs) in the years of 1999-2000.

Such figures were possible due to the introduction of a double binary system – public and private university and polytechnic as described below with detail.

In more conceptual terms, the tertiary educational system in Portugal does not radically differ from those we meet everywhere. Since the Middle Ages that the Universities always tended to converge. In our postmodern times, the hegemonic model seems to be the American multiversity combining the Humboldt Research University with the Oxbridge Newmanian’s credo of developing the “general power of mind” duly adapted to the modern constraints of the globalization. The traditional

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rhetoric. Equity seems to be employed here as a proxy of equality which is a rather misleading interpretation.

At best and in a charitable Rawlsien reading, equity would mean the least unfair although inevitable inequality. Its underlying meritocratic logic equity is instead a machine designed to produce inequalities, in the sense of aimed at distinguishing the best performers, those whose merit is due to the combination of natural, innate gifts, honest effort and, remember the New Testament: “Whoever has will be given more, and they will have in abundance. Whoever does not have, even what they have will be taken from them” (Mathew 25:29; Mark 4: 25; Luke 8:18”, Bíblia, 1978).

This applies both to students and to institutions. In the higher education market, it is the privilege of (some) institutions to select the students, and not the students to select the institutions. Not everybody has a place in the heaven. In the triadic motto of the French Revolution it is only well known that fraternity, or if you prefer, solidarity, seldom comes as a priority. At best it is instead what results from a fair compromise of the permanent negotiation between freedom and equality. With such reservations in mind certainly that we may conclude that Portugal is now, at least, when looking at the higher education system, more equitative or more exactly less inequitative than it was forty years ago.

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