

EDUCATION IN PORTUGAL: AN HUMAN RIGHTS PERSPECTIVE*

GENERAL ISSUES

Education is a process by means of which adult generations intend to transfer to the younger ones the attitudes, the knowledge and the skills the latter will require to be able to play, in the future, their role as active citizens in the society they belong to.

Without neglecting the most important part that should be played by family and group in the development of this process, complex societies have learned to delegate a part of this task on specialised systems designed to serve the whole young population of a country. These *educational systems* provide the target population with the tools they will need to survive in good physical and mental health, to be able to raise and to support a family, to protect their material and social environment and to play many different roles within the society. This is the specific objective of *formal education*.

In today's societies, it is usual to consider educational systems as built into different levels, according to the typical age groups of their users: *kindergarten*, until around the age of 5; *basic education schools* from 6 to 15; *secondary education schools* from 15 to 18; *higher education institutions* from 18 onwards. Objectives of these various educational steps are based on the principle of the cumulative acquisition of knowledge and skills, in keeping with the different stages of physical and intellectual development of the young people.

In most countries in Europe (and also elsewhere) the 9 years of basic education, together with the 3 years of secondary-level studies, amount to a total of 12 years of schooling, bridging childhood, through puberty and adolescence, until the age of young adulthood and the state of full citizenship (even if not with a total autonomy of self-subsistence). *Compulsory*

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schooling, aimed at assuring that *all people* having reached a certain age have a minimum basis of common knowledge, may cover basic education and also secondary education or just include basic education, as it is the case in Portugal.

Basic education, as suggested by its designation, is aimed at providing a common background of attitudes, knowledge and skills to young people, irrespective of their continuing studies or not. From the broadest point of view, basic education represents the minimum amount of integrated knowledge necessary for the future citizen to fit into the surrounding society, to understand its many aspects and to play therein an active and participating role.

Following that first step, secondary education usually takes two different shapes, in order to serve specific purposes: either to confer the complement of knowledge necessary to access, in due times, the level of higher education; or to initiate a process of pre-vocational training, aimed at the future exercise of a professional career.

However, the very complex technological and social organisation of today's societies requires a relatively high level of qualification for those who seek entrance into the active life. Most employments demand more than just the meagre qualifications acquired through basic education; and sometimes even the full secondary education level of knowledge is not enough to enter smoothly the work market. The present day's rule-of-thumb is that you increase your chances of success by having the highest possible degree of qualification, to face the ever-increasing level of professional qualifications required either to secure a proper job in the work market or to be able to create your own job.

Being able to work and to get a monetary return out of this activity is an essential human rights issue, for it means the citizen's and their families' ability to survive in day-to-day life. This is why governments need to develop or to stimulate economic policies that maximize employment and, at the same time, to provide some kind of material support to those who find themselves unemployed, whatever the reason.

Along the same lines, governments should encourage the young people to pursue studies until they reach the peak of their potential (and of their willingness to do so) in order to maximise their fitting the more and more sophisticated needs of work markets. For this, it is not enough to look just at these needs within given national boundaries: globalisation implies that a broader outlook, covering large economy-linked geographic regions like, in our case, the European Union, should be taken.

THE SECONDARY EDUCATION LEVEL

In Portugal, while the 9 years of compulsory, basic schooling is more or less accomplished in terms of covering most of the corresponding age group, less than 50% of the young people of age from 15 to 18 actually follow secondary school. This is a dangerous situation, for more than one half of Portuguese adults will lack in the future any kind of proper qualification to get a suitable job; and employers will frown more and more upon candidates for a job while having just a basic education background.

Of course, this quantitative deficit of secondary education will have also consequences on higher education, meaning the stagnation (if not the reduction) of the number of higher education graduates. It is sad that one of the arguments of the non-democratic regime under which Portugal lived for more than 40 years — that the more educated you get, the less happy you become — has resurrected under a new avatar: that it will be dangerous for the county to have a significant number of unemployed graduates...

The fact that Portugal has nowadays the highest percentage, in the Union, of young people having just a basic education academic background does not seem to worry the educational authorities. To the contrary: the government keeps saying that the demographic trend, going in the sense of reducing the relative weight of the younger generations in the total population, is the only cause responsible for the stagnation of secondary education attendance.

This would be true if the whole of the corresponding age group was actually following this level of studies, which is not, by far, the case. Even the relative aging of the Portuguese population is not necessarily a long-term trend: the fact that Portugal just doubled its population of foreign immigrants in a single year, now reaching 4% of the total population of the country, is a promise for a new fast growth of the children's component, once family regrouping and the natural high birth rate of immigrants make this effect to be clearly felt.

However, there is no reason to wait for this to happen: it is obvious that a well-designed educational campaign, convincing families that their children should continue studies, past the end of basic education, capitalising on obtaining the highest possible level of qualification, would produce visible results even in the short term. A more efficient alternative, (but also more expensive) would be increasing compulsory schooling until the age of 18, thereby including the secondary level of studies. We can understand that Finance

Ministers will not like this solution, due to the corresponding increase of State-supported formal education, but it would be the proper decision to take.

Whatever the solution, we can not stand idle, looking at the dwindling numbers of secondary and higher education students and doing nothing to correct this very dangerous situation.

Secondary education – the vocational training stream

It is a fact that not every person will wish to access higher education and that a proper way needs to be found to provide a minimum of vocational qualification for young people who chose an early entrance in the work market. This is the rationale for the creation of the so-called *professional schools* that have a significant demand (and success, in terms of immediate employability) in Portugal. Pertaining to the secondary education level, these schools have benefited in the past from massive European Union funding, duly matched by the Portuguese State budget.

It was very recently announced by the government that, due to the austerity policy made necessary to accomplish the objectives of the EU Stability Pact, these schools will suffer a significant budget cut. This means that a powerful incentive for a visible part of the young people to follow studies past basic schooling will suffer, even if the corresponding high value to the work market is undisputed.

Given the feeble attendance of secondary studies in Portugal, we would expect the government to encourage the corresponding vocational stream; instead, it will be forcibly even more reduced.

HIGHER EDUCATION

The higher education institutions population numbers around 400 000 and this is too low a fraction in respect to the volume of the age group 18-25 (estimated at about one million). Of course, this situation stems from the above-mentioned deficit of attendance of secondary schools, keeping in mind that not all of its population will wish to pursue further studies.

But the fact remains that, due to a general climate of pessimism that seems to afflict, in the last few years, the Portuguese public opinion, higher education does not seem as

attractive as it did in the past. There are too many opinions, going around and coming from very credible persons, claiming that higher education in Portugal has a rather poor quality; that there are too many programmes available and that some are probably irrelevant; that public higher education is too expensive and not so well managed; that there is a very low level of productivity in producing new graduates; that there are probably too many establishments and not enough students; that there are too many unemployed graduates, so that there is a need to constrict admittances.

Even if some of these arguments may apply to some programmes and to some institutions, they do not represent the whole panorama of higher education in Portugal; but constantly repeating the same kind of criticism does a lot of damage to the credibility of higher education and, as a consequence, a decrease in the demand of access.

Table 1

Chronology of Creation of University Institutions

Public Universities:		Confessional University :	
▪ Foundation of Universidade de Lisboa	1288	▪ Foundation of Universidade Católica Portuguesa	1971
▪ Transfer of this University to Coimbra	1573		
▪ Foundation of Universidade de Lisboa	1911		
▪ Foundation of Universidade do Porto	1911		
▪ Foundation of Universidade Técnica de Lisboa	1930	Private and Cooperative Universities	
▪ Foundation of Universidade Nova de Lisboa	1973	▪ Foundation of Universidade Autónoma	1986
▪ Foundation of Universidade do Minho	1973	▪ Foundation of Universidade Internacional	1986
▪ Foundation of Universidade de Aveiro	1973	▪ Foundation of Universidade Lusíada	1986
▪ Foundation of Instituto Universitário de Évora*	1973	▪ Foundation of Universidade Portu-/calense	1986
▪ Foundation of Instituto Politécnico de Trás os Montes e Alto Douro**	1973	▪ Foundation of Universidade Independente	1994
▪ Foundation of Instituto Politécnico da Beira Interior***	1973	▪ Foundation of Universidade Moderna	1994
▪ Foundation of Universidade dos Açores	1976	▪ Foundation of Universidade Lusófona	1995
▪ Foundation of Universidade do Algarve	1980	▪ Foundation of Universidade Fernando Pessoa	1996
▪ Foundation of Universidade da Madeira	1988	▪ Foundation of Universidade Atlântica	1996
▪ Foundation of Universidade Aberta	1988		

* Later converted into University

** Later converted into Instituto Universitário and, subsequently, into University

*** Idem

Table 2

Chronology of Creation of Polytechnic Institutions

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Creation of a new structure of short-duration higher education* 	1977	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Law defining teaching staff careers in Polytechnics 	1981
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Creation of the new sub-system of Polytechnic Institutions 	1979	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Law establishing the autonomy of Polytechnic Institutes 	1990
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Integration of Schools of Agrarian Sciences, Sciences of Education, Engineering and Accounting in the new Polytechnic Institutes 	1980- -1988		

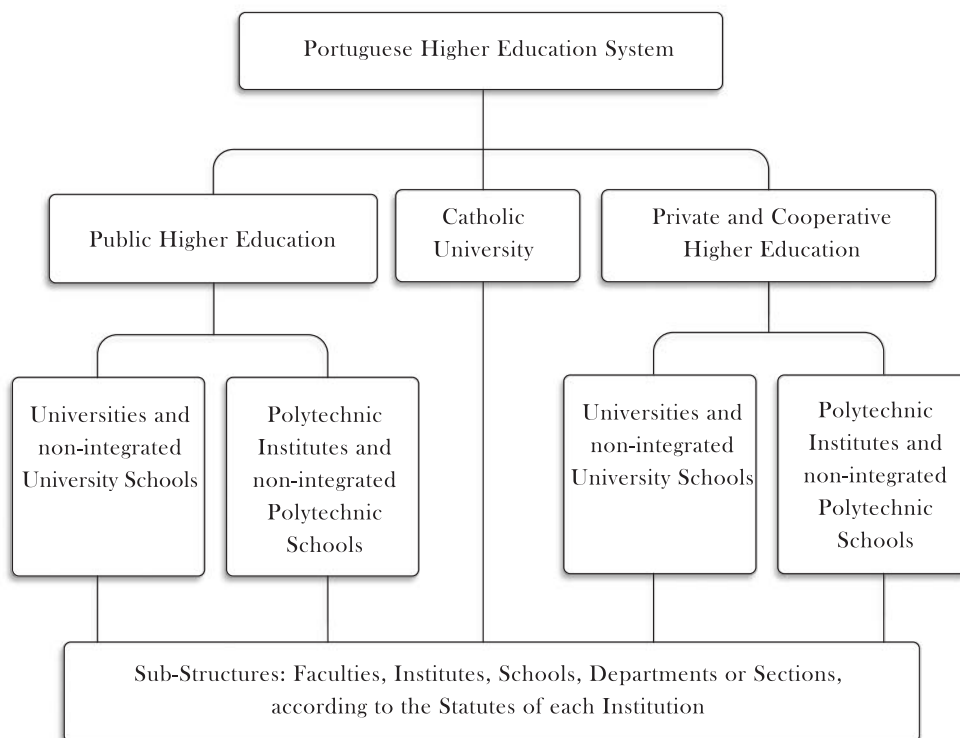
* Later defined as Polytechnic Higher Education

One of the characteristics of the Portuguese higher education system is the fact that it is "doubly double-barrelled". First, it has two components, of private and of public institutions, that almost equally share the whole students' population. This in itself is just a consequence of the previous inability of the public system to absorb all candidates and also to a certain neglect of educational authorities in the process of providing accreditation to some not-so-credible private operators.

Second, the higher education system is subdivided into universities and polytechnics, with distinct graduation degrees and programme durations: *licenciatura*, of 4 or 5 years duration for universities; *bacharelato*, with the duration of 3 years, for polytechnics.

The approach of the deadline for the full application of the Bologna Convention recommendations (2010) pushed the government to propose the extinction of the shortest degree programme and to unify first-cycle degrees into a single one (*licenciatura*), with the general duration of 4 years. This will be followed by the second cycle (Masters' degree), the PhD being the third cycle.

Figure I
Organizing Structures of the Higher Education System



We feel that the government has shown some lack of daring and determination, for a 3-year duration would be more sensible for the first-cycle degree, like the French *licence* and British BSc's and BAs, rather than 4. This reduction of the basic higher education programme duration would provide a strong motivation factor to encourage an increase of demand, it would expand globally the institutions' capacity and, moreover, it would make these programmes less expensive.

We believe that the government just chose not to provoke a fight, on this issue, with academia, which is known to be over-conservative on questions like programme duration and extent of syllabuses. Nevertheless, we feel that an important opportunity of reform has been missed.

The national numerus clausus system

We disagree with the present situation of a global *numerus clausus* system in higher education in Portugal, for it is based on both right and wrong reasons. The right ones relate to the assessment of the *material capacity* of a given institution to provide quality education to a number of students, in each one of the programmes it offers. This is not only proper but also self-evident.

Another one is to try to make an exercise of planned economy, in trying to decide which programmes have an immediate work market value, and should be offered, and those which do not, and so should be eliminated. A recurrent argument applying to this situation is that, because secondary education effectiveness is supposed to be stagnant, most teacher training programmes aimed at this educational level should be strongly limited.

The actual fact is that secondary education attendance should be stimulated urgently and that, even in the absence of measures to achieve that purpose, it will grow visibly in a few years, due to the entrance of immigrants' children into the educational system. And what about the many adults that have had no more than 4 or 6 years of basic school and are in desperate need of a complement instruction at secondary education level and that educational authorities seem to have forgotten?

Apart from the teacher training programmes, many others are nowadays considered as almost redundant, on the grounds that the Public Administration do not offer many jobs to people with these qualification profiles. This applies mostly to Humanities (History, Philosophy, Portuguese and Foreign Languages), forgetting that a higher education graduate in these fields is certainly more competent to access the work market than a person with just a secondary level qualification.

And, apart from immediate employability, does a civilised country have no other need for educated people?

THE GENDER ISSUE

Gender problems in education is not a real issue, even if it may be in other fields like high-level management, political activity, salary discrimination in low-paid jobs and overwork in combining professional and domestic duties.

As a matter of fact, student populations in all levels of education reflect the slight demographic advantage of women over man. This is true even in higher education where opportunities for access seem to be properly balanced.

Total and Women Students, from 1995/1996 to 2001/2002

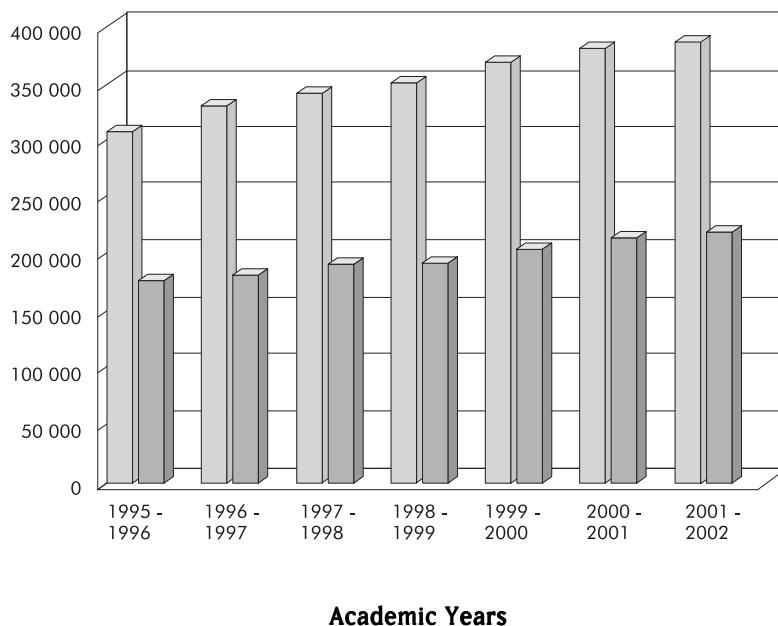


Figure 2

This is also true in terms of the number of graduates, as it should be in keeping with the numbers of students.

Total and Women Graduates, from 1993/1994 to 2000/2001

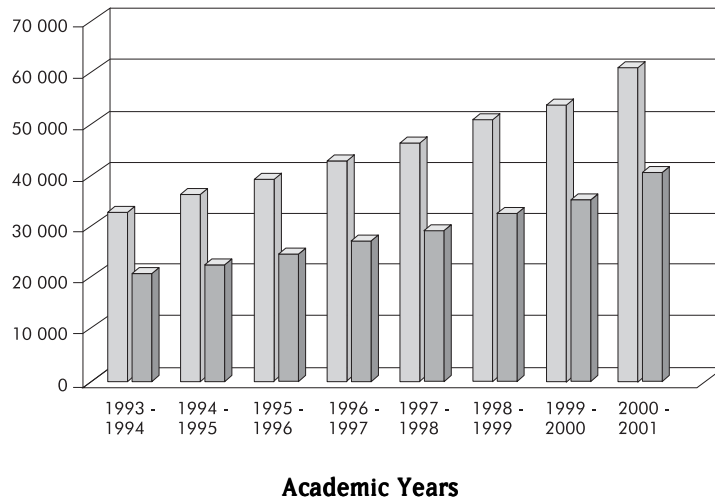


Figure 3

The slight deficit that we can observe of women's PhDs in respect to men's shows that the trend points to achieving a balance in a few years, even if the situation was somewhat critical some years ago.

Total and Women PhDs, from 1980 to 2001

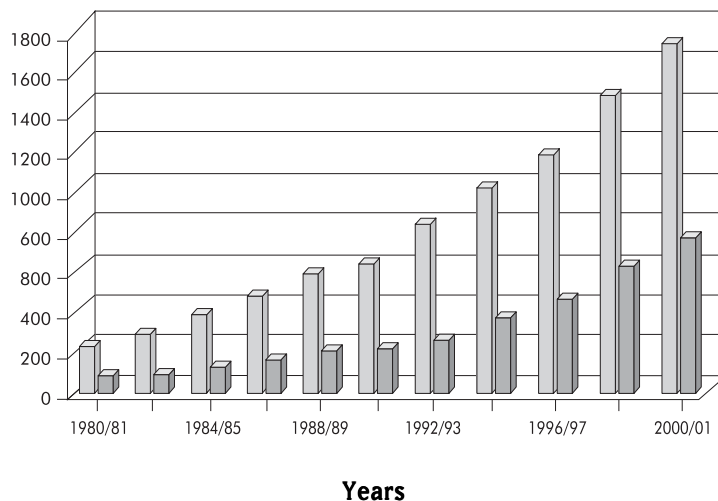


Figure 4

INDIVIDUAL PROFILES AND EDUCATIONAL FLEXIBILITY

Another human rights issue is the recognition that individuals are different in many respects in what concerns their ability to learn. Meta-cognitive profiles differ between extremes like the ultra-confident, permanently curious students that would like to take the most out of the teaching that has been available to them and those who want just to satisfy the minimum requirements for passing an exam and who are only happy when studying anonymously within a group. Curriculum rigidity favours the latter and mostly annoys the former.

On the other hand, there are students who react positively to a higher study workload and those who really need more time to digest the integration of new knowledge. There is no way, in Portugal, to reach the end of basic education *before* the allotted time; neither can it happen for secondary or for higher education. Curricula are fixed and, moreover, are rigidly separated into academic years.

In higher education, these questions are easily solved by adopting a true system of credits, allowing both for fluctuations in curricula through the availability of a visible number of optional courses within a programme and for a certain degree of freedom in the order different courses can be followed. There is also no reason to limit the number of courses a given student may enrol in, in a given academic year.

Application of these principles in secondary education is probably not advisable, but a certain degree of curriculum flexibility at this educational level is not only possible but highly recommended.

And, of course, there should be no administrative reason to bar a student from going as fast as he or she feels able within the full path of basic or secondary education.

CONTINUING EDUCATION AND TRAINING

To close these considerations about the relationship between human rights and education we deal briefly with the field of non-formal education, that is, the part that does not belong to the school environment and to the typical groups of age that attend it.

The first point relates to a singularity in Portuguese Public Administration, wherein the formal education system is strictly separated from the vocational training system, with the single exception of the above-mentioned professional schools. Formal education belongs

to the two Ministries of Education and of Science and Higher Education, while training is managed by the Ministry of Work, Social Security and Vocational Training. There are few interactions between these governmental structures, and that explains why educational budgets are structurally insufficient while the budget for training presents frequently a yearly *superavit*.

Training adults for the exercise of a vocational activity is obviously a strategic issue to be addressed, for it means providing them with a proper tool to face the increasing risks of unemployment, either due to enterprises bankruptcy or to the workers' qualifications becoming obsolete due to technological progress.

The present situation of economic recession lived in Portugal has caused a terrifying increase in unemployment numbers and this is clearly a human rights issue. From this point of view, training massive numbers of people, either already unemployed or as a prophylactic measure to avoid this situation, by giving enterprises a competitive edge through upgrading their technological structures is clearly a mission with a high social priority.

It is obvious that all efforts developed until now in this field are still insufficient.

CONCLUSION

Education is the beginning, the proper path and the ultimate end of all initiatives aimed at providing people with opportunities for surviving, for raising families and for making sure that they will have the means to do exactly that, in respect to their own children, forever and ever again.