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António Moreira Teixeira, András Szűcs and Ildikó Mázár
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ROLE OF THE RESEARCH IN EDUCATIONAL POLICIES AND PRACTICES IN DISTANCE EDUCATION AND E-LEARNING AT HIGH EDUCATION LEVEL IN PORTUGAL

Angelina Costa, Lina Morgado, Universidade Aberta, Portugal

Higher education is, by its nature, a place of innovation in relation to knowledge and its construction and dissemination. Scientific development, in this case in education and technology, has produced emerging needs analysis, evaluation and reflection of the scientific production, making them important tasks among the academic community. This demonstrated the need to better understand the state of the art research on distance education and e-learning, higher education in Portugal, and see forward, anticipating different scenarios.

The last aim of this study is to outline scenarios of future in distance education and e-learning, in higher education, looking at Portugal's condition within the European context. Accordingly, we've decided to investigate the role of research results in educational policies and practices, since they could ground decisions in the present and become a framework for the future.

Three stages of investigation have been defined. The first step was to map the state of the art of research on distance education and e-learning, in higher education, but go beyond, in a second moment, summoning discussion and reflection of the protagonists in the process. Thirdly, the prospects of national and European perspectives of specialists in this field will be faced up.

Phase 1 – Documentary analysis of scientific production in the area concerning a ten year period

This phase involves an unconventional meta-analysis, a "qualitative meta-analysis", from the perspective of Cardoso (e. g. Cardoso, 2007; 2008; 2012; Cardoso, Alarcão & Celorico, 2010; 2013). Following the objectives of the investigation, such a study will be used but with a qualitative approach in what it is intended to embrace, record and analyze all types of studies produced within a given time frame, within a comprehensive theme, subjecting the data to content analysis and descriptive statistical procedures. The corpus of analysis consists of all documents that report research conducted in distance education and e-learning in higher education, produced in Portugal, in a period of ten years, from 2004 to 2013, inclusive, under the form of master dissertations and PhD theses, publications in journals, conference proceedings/seminars, books and chapters' books.

Phase 2 – Analysis of the prospects of the academic community about scientific production in this field and identifying future scenarios through discussion groups

The sample consists of three groups of university researchers with a maximum of twelve elements. The criteria for selecting the sample are: a) researchers in higher education; b) heterogeneity in terms of gender, age, academic education and institution; c) willingness to participate in the study. Content analysis of the transcript of the speech produced in discussion groups through appropriate software will be held.

Phase 3 – Analysis of the prospects of European experts about future scenarios in Portugal and in Europe through the methodology Delphi study

The sample consists of ten academic researchers from EU countries with recognized academic work in the field of distance education and e-learning. The criteria for selecting the sample are the same as phase sample 2. The list of participants in phase 2 and 3 will be built by the inquiry, at least three researchers.

Still in the research process, we present here the global design of the study and preliminary and partial results of phase 1 research.