

ECONOMIC AND MANAGEMENT HIGHER EDUCATION SYSTEM IN PORTUGAL: AN EXPLORATORY STUDY ABOUT THE CHALLENGES SETTING BY THE NEW BOLOGNA PARADIGM

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ABSTRACT

Aiming at the increase of mobility in Europe, the Bologna Process is being implemented so that, until 2010, it will be possible to apply a set of common principles to all higher education institutions of the adherent countries. This ambitious process is trying to answer to a several social questions and economic challenges, promoting at the quality of education, the research capacity and the employment of the graduates.

With the main objective of investigating the implications of this new teaching/learning paradigm in the work market with respect to the economic and business courses, an inquiry process was carried out. This paper presents the preliminary results and discusses some of the conclusions extracted from the inquiry process.

It is expectable that the results of the inquiry process may contribute to improve the understanding about this new social and organizational reality in Europe by the educational institutions, the employers and the graduates.

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INTRODUCTION

The European higher education system has been undergoing several transformations, in a process involving more than 5,600 institutions and 29 million students. Aiming at promoting the mobility in the whole of Europe and the rest of the world, the Bologna Process will establish a vast higher education area by 2010, in which common principles will be applied to all educational institutions.

The need for a European Higher Education Area became effective in the 80's and was first formalized with the *Magna Carta Universitatum*, signed in 1988. Nine years later, European Council and UNESCO agreed on a convention – usually referred to as the Lisbon Convention – about the recognition of qualifications concerning higher education in the European Region, signed and ratified by most European countries, which set a number of basic requirements and acknowledged that individual countries could engage in an even more constructive scheme. In September of 1988, the Recommendation N.º 561/98 of the Council of the European Union calls on the Member States to introduce quality-assessment and quality-assurance mechanisms into their higher education systems and to promote cooperation between the authorities responsible for quality assurance in higher education. In the same year, the Sorbonne Joint Declaration on harmonisation of the architecture of the European higher education system, by the four Ministers in charge for France, Germany, Italy and the United Kingdom, had already anticipated the creation of an European Higher Education Area.

After the Bologna Declaration, the process towards the European Higher Education Area has been pointed out by a clarification and a priority definition of objectives, as occurred successively in Prague (2001), Berlin (2003) and Bergen (2005)

This ambitious process will aspire too to answer to social issues and economic challenges so that the education quality, the research capacity and the graduate employment are ensured. The process is on the implementation stage, and its development will depend on the capacity of countries, institutions and other parts involved.

Instead of relying on a conventional public education system, higher education institutions will be focused on offering an apprenticeship system and a set of competences (e.g. initiative, adaptability, flexibility and communication skills) facilitating the graduates incorporation in the labour market, even in areas different from their original specific qualifications. The integration in the labour market is, thus, a central point of the Bologna Process, and should be considered in the reorganization of current *curricula*.

Like most European countries, Portuguese institutions are working hard on *curricula* harmonization and implementation of a specific set of tools developed to smooth the process of recognition of academic degrees and qualifications, mobility, employment, and so on. Despite those efforts, we believe that the success of the process is strongly dependent on the close collaboration networks with stakeholders, such as labour market participants (firms and other organizations).

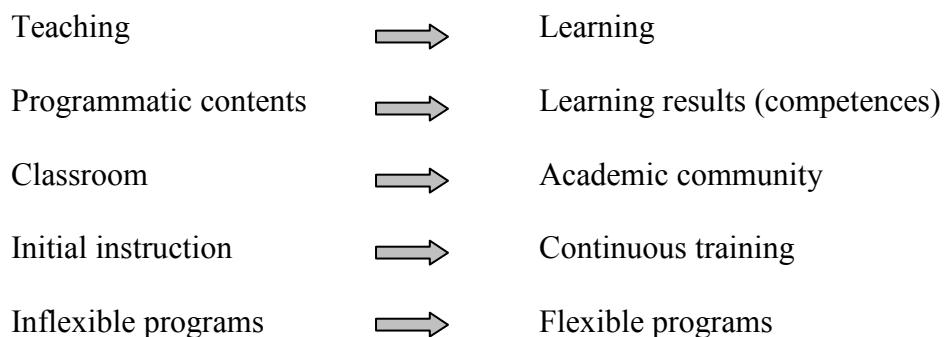
THE MAIN CHANGES ON HIGHER EDUCATION

Ministers of the 45 countries that participate in the Bologna Process had re-affirmed the importance of the prior defined objectives in a statement titled “*The European Higher Education Area – Achieving the Goal*”. This statement is a political, strategic and practical commitment as a result of an extended process that began in 1999 with the Bologna Declaration, which represents a fundamental reference in the definition of the European space for education.

The Bologna Process is nowadays closely linked to the European higher education system, and acts as a symbol of the enunciated change in the degree structure and in the organization of the curricula and educational and learning methodologies.

It is consensual that the traditional way of teaching became outdated. The Bologna Process poses important changes to the function, not only for teachers but also for students and the whole society. The main changes in the teaching/learning paradigms are shown in Figure 1..

Figure 1.



Despite the maintenance of the traditional way of knowledge transferring, the Bologna Process supposes new teaching and learning activities; emphasizes the changes from Teaching to Learning and from Education to Training, and lighten the "new" apprenticeship for life. Concepts as competitiveness, employability or work market are pointed out and progressively integrated in the higher education institutions. In this way, perceptions about education and about economics became very close (EUA, 2003).

In Portugal, the courses adjustments to the Bologna Process by the higher education institutions do not aim at to give students a training/educational system; instead it will display a set of apprenticeships and of competences that allow the insertion of graduates into work market, even in professional careers that are not directly related to their specific qualifications, with the immensurable competitive advantage of an intellectual and cultural increasing qualification associated with the development of the initiative capacity, adaptability, flexibility, communication, etc.

In the *Bologna Declaration* (1999), as in the *Prague Communiqué* (2001) or even in the EUA (2003, 2005) the graduate competences are pointed out, and therefore, the employability for the European work market is one of the pillars of the Bologna Process that should be considered in the reorganization of the courses curricula.

HIGHER EDUCATION SYSTEM IN PORTUGAL

In the last decades, Portugal is trying to reduce the differences in the qualification levels related to most European countries that has been felt for more than two centuries. The available indicators show precisely this evolution: according to the OECD reports, the

illiteracy tax evolved from 33%, in 1961, to 9% in the year 2001; by other side, the population with a medium level of qualifications had evolved from 0,8% to 10% during the same period; finally, the number of students in the higher education institutions had doubled in the last 15 years, from 186.780 students in 1990 to 373.891 students in 2004.

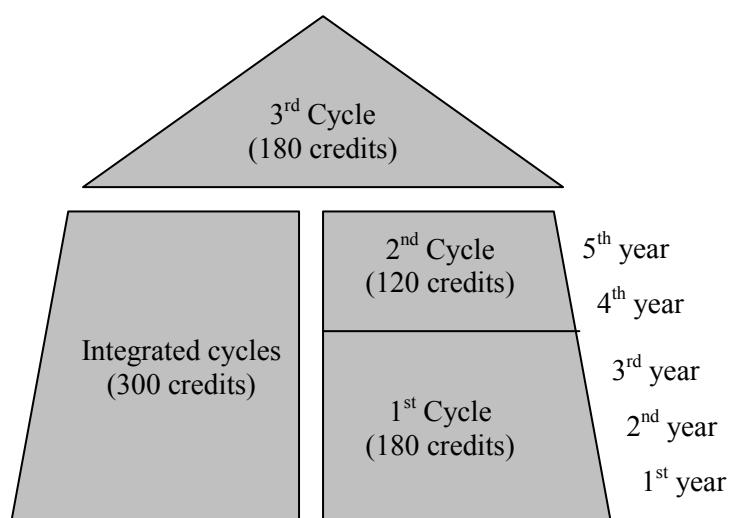
Despite on those enormous advances, Portugal still has an accentuated deficit of qualifications in the different levels of education, including in the higher education level. In an universe of 5,1 million active population, only 900.000 have surpassed the secondary level of studies, a noticeably too small number concerning to the country objectives of competitiveness.

The massive investment in the qualification of the active population did not result in an increment of the number of individuals with superior levels of education. The generational renovation is too long, extended for more than four decades. The national community presents, in this matter, two fundamental fissures: a generational problem, in that there are significant differences between older and younger generations; and a duality in the young educational competences, in that, and despite on the general increment of qualifications, the premature scholar desertion is too high (more than 40%) and higher than the European average of 10%, suggesting that still persist the educational deficit in a significant part of the population, with important impacts on the work market. It is, thus, essential the adoption of a set of decisions that can revert the current educational status quo, namely in what scholar progression and scholar desertion is concerned.

Obviously, the higher education system in Portugal is affected by the above enounced problems in the educational inferior levels, which, in turn, impacts on employability. In fact, the relation between education and employability is much stronger when qualifications are suffice to meet the society and the economy requirements and challenges. In this way, it is important to find the proper means to improve the relation between higher education and firms (and other organizations), ensuring a better absorption of the graduates by the work market. Is, thus, essential to reorganize the availability of academic qualifications, considering the courses effectively adapted to the economy and society needs. This objective will be as much attained as stronger are the relationships between the higher education institutions and firms, allowing to a deeper understanding of the reality and a greater adjustment to the expectations.

The Portuguese higher education system is presently structured in three cycles, as shown in Figure 2..

Figure 2.



In the new model, current courses are reorganized in two cycles (3+2), as shown in Figure 2. The 1st cycle relates to the basic scientific education that allows students to perform an intermediate and generic professional activity. The exercise of a specific professional activity related to the scientific instruction area supposes an additional training attained in the 2nd cycle. In some cases, the exercise of any intermediate job related to the scientific area of instruction is not allowed, so that it is necessary to fulfil both cycles (Integrated cycles) before any professional activity can be performed.

The 2nd cycle allows students to attain some flexibility in what scientific areas and curricula structure choices are concerned, at same time that facilitates the transition from one scientific area to another. The mobility between national and foreigner higher education institutions is also encouraged.

THE BOLOGNA PROCESS AT UNIVERSITY OF ÉVORA – EMPIRICAL STUDY

In this way, we start a three-year-research project aiming at identifying (1) the manner in which *curricula* adequacy to Bologna Process impacts on the labour market; (2) the labour market acceptance to the Bologna Process developments, namely by comparing the competencies and skills currently promoted and those expected to be achieved through the educational system; (3) the expected impacts in terms of immediate employment tax after two main cycles degrees; and (4) the expectations of students in a transition process to Bologna-based curricula in what future employment is concerned.

Following the above purposes, an inquiry process was carrying out, in which we hope to obtain certain insights about the eminently practical impacts of the Bologna Process development. The inquiry was applied to economic and business current students and graduates, as well as to employees, of two geographical, economical and social Portuguese regions: *Lisboa e Vale do Tejo* and *Alentejo*.

Collecting information about the opinion of the graduates concerning to the relation between the academic formation (background), the professional activity and the Bologna Process, is a form of the universities to reach the desirable platform of excellence demanded for the new European Space for Higher Education. Moreover, it will be a way to analyze the adequacy of the scientific background given by these institutions to its graduates in what professional tasks and professional mobility, as well as its acceptance in the work market is concerned.

At moment, the available results of the inquiry process are those related to the questionnaire that was implemented to 50 students that are currently attended the post-graduate courses on the area of economic and management sciences: 43 students of the MSc in Management (Finance and Marketing) and 7 of the MSc in Economy, both at the University of Évora. The response tax was, respectively, 81,4% (35 responses) and 100%.

The average age of the students in the sample is 27 years, being 57.1% female. The most representative band is 21-26 (54.8%). The majority had concluded their degree studies quite recently (88.1%), with 4-years duration (59.5%), in the University of Évora (52.4%).

When asked if during the frequency of the course, they had participated in some interchange student program with foreign institutions, 95.2% of the students had affirmed that they didn't. However, 69% had answered that they would like to have participated, relating as main reasons of the impediment the financial difficulties (31%), the lack of information (21.4%), the unfamiliarity of foreign languages (16.7%), the lack of institutional support (16.7%) and familiar reasons (4.8%). They had pointed out that the selected countries would be, over all, England (16.7%) and Spain (9.6%).

The previous results show the lack of availability of the students for the mobility proclaimed in the Bologna Declaration and, as a result, for the construction of the European Space for Higher Education.

About 72% of the students are employed, having got a job up to six months (35.7%) after getting the degree. In a scale of 1 to 4, being 1 "irrelevant" and 4 "extremely relevant", the professional experience was considered the main obstacle in the job attainment (average of 3.71). More than 40% indicated that its professional activity inserts partially in the area of the initial formation. They relate equally that in the current or last job, it had been requested and/or they felt the necessity of other types of specific knowledge (50%), as computer and information systems knowledge (31%).

In terms of the satisfaction degree, students said they are satisfied (50%) with the current professional activity, mentioning the job localization as the factor that generates greater satisfaction. On the other hand, 50% mentioned that the question of employment was determinant in the choice of the course, and the same percentage (38.1% for each)

had affirmed that a higher education diploma is important or very important for the national work market.

When questioned about the adequacy of course curriculum to the work market, 61.6% answered affirmatively and 40.5% confirmed that the academic graduation was very important for the attainment of the current job. By other side, to 38.1% of the students the experience and/or knowledge acquired during the course had been important for its professional activity and 57.1% had considered having acquired the necessary competences to perform their current professional activity.

These results indicate that there are an adequate relation between the formation received and the formation demanded for the work market. Relating to the students job expectations, to 33.3% and to 28.6%, respectively, the professional functions have a little and a sufficient correspondence to idealized professional functions at the beginning of the course.

For a half of the inquired students the reality faced after the conclusion of the course was worse than the initial expectations, namely with respect to the time needed to get a job and to the career perspectives. Some students had affirmed that the reality was better than their own expectations: 14.3% for the quickness in getting a job, 8.6% for the diversity of tasks, 7.1% for the autonomy, 7.1% for the responsibility, and 2.4% for the perspectives of professional career. However, to a great part of the students the reality equals the expectations in relation to the responsibility (61.9%), the remuneration (47.6%), the autonomy (47.6%), work environment (45.2%) and the diversity of tasks (42.9%). As main causes of non confirmation of the best expectations, 38.1% and 31%

had related, respectively, the political and economical conjuncture changes and the political and economical structural changes. Based on the above results we may conclude that the expectations of the students had been partially frustrated in relation to adequacy for the work market.

When questioned about the “Process of Bologna” thematic, the majority of the students (54.8%) had affirmed having a good level of knowledge concerning the subject. to 42.9% and 35.7%, respectively, the Process is important and very important related to the question of mobility inside the European Economic Area.

On the other hand, 38.1% of the students had mentioned their disagreement (in opposition to 35.7% that agree) with the possibility to a degree course organized in accordance with the rules of the Bologna Process to be understood as a more valuable course by the work market.

However, the majority (52.4%) had related that the adequacy of the courses to the rules of the Bologna Process constitutes an incentive to return to higher education, indicating as main reasons for this option the acquisition of new abilities (26.2%), the international recognition of the courses (23.8%), the mobility (23.8%), the perspective to get a job (19%), the new educational methodologies (14.3%), the new teaching-learning paradigm (11.9%), the flexibility (7.1%) and the comparability of the courses (7.1%).

We may, thus, conclude that the students in the sample have a reasonable knowledge about this new reality and believe in an effective adjustment between the expectations created by the Bologna Process and its acceptability by the work market, adopting the

new principles inserted in the courses adequate to Bologna Process (p.e., employability, mobility, international recognition, acquisition of new competences).

Questioned on the consequences that can result of the implementation of the European Space for Higher Education, the majority of the students had agreed to the assertions presented in the questionnaire. Specifically, 60% to 70% had agreed (1) with the probability of an enlargement on the international competitiveness among institutions of higher education of the different countries; (2) with the gradual deletion of that institutions without enough dynamic and a proactive activity; (3) with the possibility of a bigger interchange of students between institutions of higher education of different European countries, with a certain trend of displacement of the best students to the universities located on central European countries and/or in more economical, scientific and technological developed countries; (4) with the possibility of a bigger international mobility of the professionals with a superior level educational background – due to the comparability of the new degrees – with the consequent increment of the competition in what the most motivating, prestigious and best payable jobs are concerned; and (5) with the probability of a significant displacement of students to those institutions of education located in countries or regions with apparently minor requirements for a degree acquisition.

We believe that the results of the inquiry process, although in a preliminary stage, could contribute to the dynamic of the reflection and the debate about the thematic and, in particular, will help the involved higher education institutions, the adjacent work market, and the students to better understand this new link to the social and entrepreneurial reality of the Europe. Lastly, the results of the inquiry process could be

used as indicators to the future of the professionals on the field of economics and business sciences.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

Following the purpose of supporting mobility in Europe and in the rest of the World, the Bologna Process will create, before 2010, an extensive area where common principles will be applied to all the European institutions of higher education. The main impact of the Bologna Process results not so much from the text of the Declaration, but from placing the reform of the higher education systems in the political agenda of the countries. In Portugal, the process of Bologna is, above all, a great chance to face, in the context of the great challenges of the knowledge society, the Portuguese higher education organization problems that are due, to a large extent, to the maintenance of older referential for the curricular organization of the courses and for the practised methodologies of education, which do not take care to the realities of a massive higher education first cycle.

The Bologna Process constitutes, thus, a great chance for the reorganization of the Portuguese higher education system, placing great challenges to all the involved parts. First, and considering the scientific-pedagogical autonomy, the institutions are called to interpret the legitimate expectations of the society, as much in the national plan as in the plan of the construction of an European space, in which the mobility and employment of the citizens have a fully meant. It will compete to the institutions of higher education, using their own prospective capacity of thought, to find the proper solutions for the enunciated problems, to modernize higher education and to adapt it to the new realities

and necessities that emanate from the growing impacts of the knowledge society, opposing future solutions to the trends of immediatism of the formations and offering a great diversity of qualifications with constant concern for its social, economical and cultural relevance. In short, the institutions of higher education will have to be capable to prepare and to consider coherent and sensible solutions that could promote the convergence at the European level, namely through cooperation and partnership actions, preserving the cultural contexts.

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