

***A Collegium Statement on:
Autonomy and the Re-engineering of Higher Education in Portugal***

At the invitation of the Gulbenkian Foundation, on the basis of a rich and synthetic documentation and with the help of renowned academics and experts from Portugal, the Magna Charta Observatory on Fundamental University Values and Rights joined the debate on the reform of Portuguese higher education.

0. They noted the expansion of tertiary education in the country, from some 60,000 study places 30 years ago to more than 400,000 today, a huge effort for a small European country. They understood, however that provision is now too high as demand is on the decline due to demographic factors: for decades, growth was the aim in government and institutions; at present, mentalities have to change to cope with restrictions and unpredictability. As perspectives change, the function of higher education and of academic institutions needs reassessment; using existing strengths in innovative ways to accomplish new tasks: hence the proposed revision of the legislative framework for science and education.

Such legislation, for the Observatory, should determine the general conditions of development in Portuguese research and education; it should bet on the institutions' capacity to act and propose, thus allowing for flexibility and timely answers to very diverse social needs, public or private. Clearly defined roles for government and institutions, making them partners in the evolution of society, should give vigour to institutional autonomy not only as a tool of management but also as a vital element of universities as powerhouses of knowledge. Such autonomy needs to be taken advantage of by the institutions, on a permanent basis, if the concept is not to lose its value.

The Observatory recognises in the Portuguese situation many similarities with academic transformation in other areas of Europe. Drawing on such comparisons, the Collegium would like to point to five "zones of turbulence" needing attention by the legislators when re-defining the rules of higher education in this country.

Public Interest

1. With the reversal of expansion trends, the temptation consists in turning on oneself at the risk of losing sight of long term ends, innovation, integration of knowledge and creativity within the European Higher Education Area. How can institutions be encouraged to search for partners, public or private, in order to offer efficient service to students and economic stakeholders? How much is this public service of general interest, justifying strong

governmental support? How much does this point to complementary funding from the beneficiaries of academic activities, in training and research? Indeed, institutional autonomy is shaped by the checks and balances between intelligence as a private and/or a public good; the better the definition of the roles of institutions and of their stakeholders, the stronger will be the universities' strategies for long term social interaction and development.

Role of State

2. With growing unpredictability linked to declining demand, the temptation consists in urgent interventions of short-term nature. To meet that risk, there is a need for a strong and durable frame of references common to government, stakeholders and institutions, references that make rules, funding and information transparent and open, so that confidence is being strengthened. Thus, the State should provide conditions that encourage institutions both to compete and collaborate with rivals and partners, not only at national but also at European and international levels. Differentiated answers tailor-made to local needs in function of institutional strengths should re-inforce specific profiles of activities, making sense of autonomy, as supported by the Observatory.

Governance

3. Governance is at the core of legislative change all over Europe and the temptation consists in adopting rather than adapting corporate practices to academic institutions of collegial traditions, a process often encouraged by public authorities at supranational (EU), national, regional or local level. How can these varied interests be taken into account in function of the size, nature, heterogeneity and capacity of different institutions of higher education and research? This calls for leadership – from inside and outside the institutions, i.e., for the development and support of those steering the university so that they feel confident enough to develop accountability and the use of evaluation and quality assessment to measure, compare and strengthen the contribution of their institutions to intellectual growth, knowledge dissemination and social development in Portugal and in the world, as a whole.

Diversification

4. To meet the demand, the system, over the years has diversified with the creation of Polytechnics and a private sector of higher education, at the risk of fragmentation. Like in other European countries, the temptation consists in blurring differences – a trend that could be re-enforced by declining demand in the number of candidates. How to stay

relevant to social needs – those of students, employers, local and regional authorities -, i.e., how to be specific, timely and innovative is essential. Not all institutions can do the same and no country can live without universities with international commitments, institutions focusing on the “know why” of education and science, thus offering a critical appraisal of knowledge, its use and dissemination: Other institutions, much more centred on the “know how”, applied research and development, are more specifically agents of social convergence and require different strategies of presence in the community. It is the system as a whole that should provide for diversity of purpose, scope and stakeholders in a differentiated society.

Europe and networking

5. In the reflection on the changed rules of the game, the temptation consists in keeping to Portuguese borders, at the risk of remaining on the periphery of Europe. Flexibility, comparability, compatibility and mobility require the wider context of the European Higher Education and Research Area. It means adopting not only a two/tier architecture of curricula but also using ECTS, common quality references as well as developing the European dimension of courses – not to speak of lifelong learning provisions and the social responsibility towards students, objectives added to the Bologna Declaration in 2001. How can the law define conditions propitious to networking so that Portuguese institutions can join with foreign partners (from Europe and elsewhere) in the development of research or the provision of teaching (for instance, through integrated curricula) – with institutions of similar nature (in size or activities) or of a complementary type (more specific, larger, more prestigious or less) so that stakeholders, be they students in Europe or other parts of the world, are offered a sample gamut of education, at various levels, in one group of collaborating institutions? Can institutions be encouraged to take up their future with all challenges involved in terms of salaries, compensation or status of staff and students.

For the Observatory, a positive answer, here too, means trusting the institutions, strengthening their adaptation and timely reactions through what amounts to reinforced autonomy, i.e., the capacity to contribute to their further integration in society, be it in Portugal, in Europe or beyond, a bet they all have to take if they want to live up to their expectations and those of society.