

INTERNATIONAL MULTIDISCIPLINARY
SCIENTIFIC CONFERENCES ON SOCIAL SCIENCES AND ARTS
SGEM 2014

PSYCHOLOGY AND PSYCHIATRY, SOCIOLOGY AND
HEALTHCARE, EDUCATION

CONFERENCE PROCEEDINGS
VOLUME III



SGEM
XXXXXXXXXX

EDUCATION AND EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH

1-10 September, 2014
Albena, BULGARIA

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HIGHER EDUCATION IN PORTUGAL IN THE LAST DECADES: OLD TRENDS, RECENT CHALLENGES

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ABSTRACT

In this paper we analyze the evolution of Higher Education in the last three decades and the effects of the recent Portuguese economic crisis, officially started at 2011 with the intervention of International Monetary Fund, European Central Bank and European Commission. Based on the statistical data produced by national and international organizations we show that the process of "massification" of higher education in Portugal is late compared with other European countries – it only started in the middle eighties - and it did not question the elitist character of this educational level. We also argue that the present economic crisis may contribute to strengthen it elitist character

Keywords: Higher Education, equal opportunities, democratization, massification

INTRODUCTION

Higher education is one of the most important educational fields at the European level. Higher Education is conceived as a crucial element to the development of a European cultural identity and the creation of a new economic model based on innovation and knowledge. However, the intention to create an European area of Higher Education through the Bologna Process has to deal with a highly diverse and contrasting educational contexts, rooted in contrasting national schooling processes and rhythms.

In last decades Portuguese higher education system dealt with profound changes. The number of students increased substantially, however without a significant qualitative democratization. The system was subject to a deeply process of differentiation concerning both the higher education institutions and the courses delivered. In 1974 there were four higher education institutions. In 2012, they were 143 and delivered 1554 courses. In spite of these changes, old problems like school failure remained in higher education system. More recently, the effects of economic crisis on families' income, unemployment rate and young graduates' wages are breaking down the virtuous circle between higher education qualifications and social mobility and questioning the legitimacy of higher education system.

In this paper we analyze the evolution of Portuguese higher education, based on statistical data produced by national and international organizations and the review of literature. We discuss the old and new forms of inequality and differentiation and the challenges higher education has to deal due to the present economic crisis.