Portugal: higher education and lifelong education in Portugal

Alberto Amaral and Madalena Fonseca

Abstract

At the time of the 1974 revolution there was in Portugal an elite higher education system with a gross participation rate of only about 7 per cent (Amaral et al. 2005), with most of the Portuguese population having a low education level. Following the 1974 revolution, education has been assumed to be a major political priority and enrollments in higher education increased sharply from 30,000 students in the 1960s, to nearly 400,000 students by the end of the 20th century (MCTES 2006). This very fast development of higher education has led to a high duality in Portuguese society (ibid.), with a well educated younger population living side by side with an older generation with low education levels.

Educational attainment in Portugal has risen significantly in recent decades although disparities with other OECD and EU countries have persisted. The net entry rate into higher education (Type A programmes) was 81 per cent in 2008, the third highest in OECD and EU19 countries (OECD 2010, p. 48). This indicator ‘provides an indication of the accessibility of tertiary education as well as the perceived value of attending tertiary programmes’ (ibid., p. 78); it corresponds to the probability that a young person will enter tertiary education in her/his lifetime if current age-specific entry rates continue (ibid., p. 53).

Recent education policies in Portugal have had as their main objectives broadening access, in particular of adult population and lifelong learning in formal and non-formal education; the development of vocational study programmes; and ensuring quality assurance. Higher education has shown evidence of a better performance or at least its main macro indicators show a clear improvement, while upper secondary education indicators remained beneath the set goals.

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