The struggle for strategic planning in European higher education: the case of Portugal

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A number of significant factors are changing the strategic management landscape in higher education. Market forces are exerting significant impacts on higher education institutions (HEIs) that are fundamentally changing the ways they conduct and manage their affairs. As institutional autonomy grows, so do institutional responsibilities and accountability. Outcomes then determine the future level of autonomy for an institution. These major shifts are forcing HEIs to approach their operations more proactively and from a business perspective in order to be strategically positioned to seize opportunities and confront threats in an increasingly competitive environment. Strategic planning is a tool for assisting an HEI manage itself with foresight and an external focus. Strategic planning is moving more and more into the forefront of higher education discussions in many European countries. As interest in and appreciation of the need for this process grow internationally, higher education planners are confronted with many issues of limited market-driven management experience, as well as trans-national governance and cultural complexities. As higher education leaders in other countries, and especially Europe, turn to the United States for best practices and guidance, planning consultants (many from the business and non-profit sectors) must be equipped with a broader perspective that transcends national boundaries and also grasps the nuances of the higher education culture in Europe. This critical examination of problems in the Portuguese higher education system resulting from a lack of strategic planning and the authors’ recommendations for change will offer a better understanding of the European context and how it differs from traditional models. Planners who want to expand their reach and share their expertise with this growing higher education market need to have this perspective. Thus, this paper summarizes a comparative analysis of the extent to which public and private HEIs in Portugal are engaging in a strategic planning process, what aspects of the process are being utilized in each sector and what their perceptions are regarding this involvement.

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