From a student’s standpoint, what has changed in Portugal’s higher education since 25 April 1974? In a word: Everything. The Student Estate today is 6.5 times more numerous than it was in 1974. It draws upon a greater range in socioeconomic backgrounds, is more varied in age with non-traditional students – students mature, students working even, and already retired – but increasing by leaps and bounds. Today’s Student Estate is, in the majority, female, though the tendency is towards a balance between the genders. Although concentrated in the two metropolitan regions, there are students all over the country. It is now possible to attend a higher education institution in virtually all cities, even the smaller ones where some establishments have local extensions. Students today pay fees. They apply to the university or polytechnic nearest home or, for older students, nearest their family or job. Those who cannot find a place near home maintain strong links with their hometowns. Thanks to improvements in road and rail, they go home at weekend to meet friends, their family group and those with whom they most identify. Today’s student, if in the Student Estate, is not of it. She – or he – does not identify with, or become involved in, student movements, as once was the case. Indeed, if we consider student celebrations and events, they are akin more to commercial shows, similar to those attended by students and non-students alike. In short, the Student Estate, which once enjoyed a particular status, seems to have undergone a certain shift in social location. It is now a fluctuating sub-set of youth culture.

Yet, massification does not inevitably mean democratisation, universal access, or even homogenisation for that matter, for massification brings new forms of stratification in its train, a dynamic evident first of all amongst universities and polytechnics and then subsequently amongst students themselves. Massification is not the end of elites. It is, on the contrary, the rise of new elites. Competition is today held to be the most potent force in shaping institutions and in motivating large numbers of students. The most prestigious universities seek to stand out from their national counterparts. They seek actively to emulate their international peers. Taking into account the most recent trends, Portugal’s new elites will be predominantly male and urban. The relative weight of male students is increasing, and for the first time, enrolments amongst men rose faster than for women. The future elite of Portuguese higher education will be concentrated in the metropolitan areas of Lisbon and Porto. It will be internationally mobile. It will contend for places in programmes such as Health and Welfare, Medicine included. Its members will push themselves forwards for places on Management courses (including Services), Electronics and in Law.

In the long run, the outcome for Portuguese universities may well be to follow the path Scott described more than a decade ago: ‘The most likely outcome is a highly differentiated development of a few world universities (or, more probably of world-class elements within them)’.