

Chapter 12

Governance of Portuguese Universities Within European Higher Education: Nova University Lisbon Experience

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ABSTRACT

National legislation for higher education that was introduced in 2007 by the Portuguese Government changed the higher education governance model into a more centralized system with increased institutional autonomy. This allowed for a better strategic planning process that was more able to respond to society needs and, in public university foundations, gave rectors a stronger leadership role supported by a general council and by a board of trustees. A decade later, the overall autonomy scores of Portuguese universities when compared with those from other European countries according to academic, financial, organizational, and staffing (senior) criteria showed better Portuguese performance when compared with most Southern and Central European countries. This pattern remained stable between 2011 and 2016. Changes that occurred at Nova University, Lisbon, are described as a case study to exemplify the effects of this new governance model on the sustainability of long-term strategic planning and its management.

INTRODUCTION

The national legislation for Higher Education (HE) introduced in 2007 by the Portuguese government had a significant effect on the governance of Portuguese universities. It led to a new leadership approach which unified and centralized decision-making processes and allowed the strategic application of university autonomy, which supported a better system of internal management and allowed for more commitment to society. The key role is played by the Rector, together with the Rectoral team and the Deans, on the one hand, and by the General Council and the Board of Trustees (in the case of public university foundations), on the other. The last two bodies include external individuals who are not members of

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the university. The implementation process occurred between 2007 and 2009 and was fully operational in 2010, a time when Portugal, as part of Southern Europe, was affected by the global economic and financial crisis which had started in the United States of America a few years before. In order to assess the effects of the crisis on the new university autonomy legislation, a comparison is made between the overall levels of autonomy of Portuguese universities, resulting from the new reform, and the European results obtained from the European University Association Scorecard 2017. The comparison shows that Portuguese universities present high levels of autonomy, possibly because of the governance measures implemented as a result of the new legal framework. It is also possible to argue that this higher level of autonomy had a positive effect on the performance of Portuguese universities during the financial and economic crisis. In the case of NOVA University, Lisbon, this new governance experience was further extended because the institution not only fully applied the new governance model, including a long-term Strategic Plan based on key performance indicators, but has recently become a public university foundation in line with the new law. The advantages and disadvantages of this new governance model need to be evaluated in the coming years taking into account the implications of the increased academic leadership roles played by the new governing set-up, namely those of the Rector, the General Council and the Board of Trustees. The purpose of the present chapter is to address these complex issues, emphasizing not only the importance of the existence of a national legal framework for the governance of higher education institutions (HEIs), (public and private), but also how it was applied by the institutions. Based on the European University Scorecard, the level of autonomy of Portuguese universities, achieved as a result of the new legal framework is compared with other national university networks, taking into account the diversity of the university governance systems within Europe. The example of NOVA University is presented as a case study with particular emphasis on the development and application of the strategic planning process.

BACKGROUND

More than ten years have passed since the publication of a new national legislative HE framework in Portugal. This legislative package included not only a new legal regime of autonomy and governance for HEIs, but also the application of the Bologna Process nationwide, with the consequence of full inclusion and recognition of Portuguese HE degrees in the European Higher Education Area (EHA), while establishing, at the same time, the National Agency for Assessment and Accreditation of Higher Education (A3ES). In addition, academic careers were also reviewed, allowing for international recruitment in an attempt to reduce the existent high levels of endogamy.

Two years before, in 2005, as a background to the publication of the legislative package, the Portuguese Government requested the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), to perform a global analysis and evaluation of the HE system based on the following reference terms: (i) the role of HE in stimulating students to acquire knowledge in the context of diversified environments such as those that occur in the knowledge society, including lifelong learning, in the globalization era. At the national level the need was pointed out for increased contributions to social cohesion and equity, while maintaining the cultural identity of the country; (ii) a focus on strategic management procedures and the related specific structures in the development of teaching and learning, research and development, investment, finance and internationalization.

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