

WORDS BEYOND THE PANDEMIC: A HUNDRED-SIDED CRISIS

Coord.: José Reis
A collective work by CES

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Centro de Estudos Sociais
Universidade de Coimbra



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Hugo Pinto

The role of Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) has changed significantly in recent decades. From a vision focused essentially on work qualification and the production of new knowledge, the HEIs evolved to give centrality to so-called knowledge transfer, privileging the connection with the business fabric and innovation. This connection has been stimulated essentially through the use of industrial property mechanisms (patents in particular), strengthening support for academic entrepreneurship and an organisational culture aimed at obtaining its own income from services and research contracts.

Although somewhat belatedly, Portugal did not stay away from this trend, replicating institutional practices and models from other places, namely the United States of America. This vision of transfer, based on the commercialisation and economic valorisation of science, has not been free from criticism. A number of broader proposals regarding the role of HEIs have been put forward, albeit in a limited manner, to foster innovation systems, generate open innovation logics aimed at activating collective appropriation of the benefits of knowledge, or consolidate civic involvement through the promotion of citizenship and leadership. The post-pandemic period will certainly be characterised by a complex set of challenges to HEIs, both in their more traditional functions of Education and Research and in the area of knowledge transfer.

The pressure on public budgets will further squeeze HEIs' availabilities. It is plausible that HEIs will focus on areas of R&D and Education that are considered more marketable. It is necessary to anticipate problems arising between private appropriation of and public access to therapies and vaccines to be developed with the support of HEIs and public investment.

On the other hand, the spectre of the pandemic will lead to an excessive channelling of resources into research in the biomedical sciences – currently those where investment is already more significant – creating distortions and barriers to the production and transfer of new knowledge in many other areas. Systemic support activities, such as those performed by intermediary entities, namely transfer offices, are likely to be strongly affected – especially in view of the fact that they already existed within a precarious institutional framework –, with impacts that are difficult to measure.

It is therefore essential to provide HEIs with the financial capacity to maintain their mission and to structure their lines of interaction with society in a planned manner and according to a long-term vision. This includes the desired linkages not only with the local productive, social and cultural fabric, but also with international networks, so that the HEIs' universalist vocation is not held hostage to regional development goals or finds itself too dependent on productive specialisation.