

The university challenge

Professor Isabel P Martins, Scientific Coordinator at CIDTFF, discusses the directions and objectives for educational research, and the significance of scientific internationalisation...

Duly recognised as scientific research, educational research should be governed by common principles applicable to the field of social sciences, the research area it is associated with. The reference guidelines for educational research can only be formulated and considered as such when they are able to stand up against contradiction within the scientific community of this specific area, which is, by definition, always seen as international in nature.

If internationalisation is taken as a basic principle of all scientific research, then strategies to achieve this goal in the field of educational research can be outlined as follows:

- The building-up of research networks according to the particular research area that would facilitate the pooling of complementary visions generated by specific contexts;
- The definition of research projects to be developed by international teams on subjects and themes of transnational interest; and
- The creation of inter-institutional and international postgraduate courses that could award joint or double degrees.

Science, research and development

The development of modern societies depends on the application of knowledge, high-level skills, an entrepreneurial spirit, and the appropriate use of information and communication technologies and systems. One of the strengths of universities is precisely the ability to develop these skills through education and training based on fundamental research.

Therefore, we should think carefully about the role of educational research in the framework of scientific research in general and about its constraints with regards to educational policy guidelines and to the decision about intervention practices. We should make it a priority to analyse these issues from a perspective of the internationalisation of research, given that scientific research is, by its very nature, international.

European universities are fully committed to helping to achieve the objectives of innovation that were established in the Lisbon Strategy, particularly through their

commitment to building the 'European Higher Education Area' and the 'European Research Area'.

Since universities are one of the most important strategic resources in Europe, in a knowledge-based economy and society it is important to promote and consolidate dynamic research projects at the cutting edge of knowledge, which work hand-in-hand with training programmes that look to the future.

The importance of research is more than simply the attainment of new knowledge, because the quality of education at tertiary level is highly dependent on its relationship with research. The answer to existing, as well as to new job markets to be created – which universities are expected to provide – depends, in good measure, on the skills of their graduates.

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Since education is considered to be both a right as well as a public asset, scientists have an undeniable social responsibility with regard to:

- Identifying problems and proposing ways of studying them;
- Understanding ways of implementing research findings; and
- Predicting the implications of studies carried out with respect to educational policy-making.

Hence, whatever the slant that research, research training, or research training development might take, the creation of partnerships that bring together projects/research centres/institutions, all of a preferably international nature, will be a way to enrich perspectives regarding topics and issues that are strongly dependent on different

sociocultural contexts. Indeed, this peer work on joint projects is a valuable tool for developing intellectual solidarity and respect, which should be the basis of scientific work.

The concept of internationalisation has been the topic of discussion in various contexts, giving rise to various meanings. According to the 'EUA Handbook Internationalisation of European Higher Education', internationalisation is defined as 'the process of integrating an international, intercultural, or global dimension into the purpose, functions or delivery of postsecondary education'.

Internationalisation in the European area of education and research is today regarded as a unique opportunity for the development and implementation of the European Council declaration of 2000 that 'in 2010 Europe should be the most competitive and dynamic economy based on knowledge, capable of generating better jobs and greater social cohesion'. Despite the set-backs in achieving this goal, we should not let go of the underlying principles. The development of institutional strategies supported by the recent European Research Council could lead to more carefully conceived strategic plans for research and more fruitful results.

Educational research – measures to be taken

Scientific research is an activity of an international nature; thus without the benefit of these international environments it will not merit the status of scientific research. Three basic measures are outlined below.

The setting up of research networks according to the particular research field/area, which would facilitate the pooling of complementary visions generated by specific contexts. Thus, partnerships between groups of researchers with an intra and interdisciplinary character are absolutely essential in order to identify research questions and find solutions, which are here seen as innovative ways to tackle problems.

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Inter-institutional and international cooperation in educational research must be seen as a strategy that will enhance the acceptance of the results produced.

Defining research projects that will be undertaken by international teams on topics of transnational interest. Problems in education are more global than local in nature. Issues related to school, the organisation of educational systems and curricula, teaching strategies, learning, indiscipline, motivation and educational achievement are issues that require a more global approach in order to study and understand them.

A very interesting and a highly promising example of international partnerships is being developed by the

Organisation of Ibero-American States for Education, Science and Culture, which has come to show that it is possible to set up groups and information networks capable of proposing solutions to existing problems. The Ibero-American Conference of Ministers of Education, held in El Salvador in May 2008, reached agreements that led to the drafting of the document 'Educational Goals 2021', a politically ambitious project that recommends steps that the various countries should undergo so that, by the year 2021, the educational systems of the countries of Latin America and the Caribbean can become more efficient, and so that education can give rise to better social cohesion and social inclusion, and at the same time a greater socioeconomic development. In order for this project to be achieved, research on education should be at the service of this cause.

Setting up of inter-institutional and international courses of advanced training that could award joint or double degrees. The negotiation and management of joint curricular modules is one way to improve understanding within the academic and scientific communities. To this end, it is seen as necessary to develop conditions and mechanisms capable of attracting more overseas postgraduate students, to welcome more visiting professors, to encourage research internships abroad in top-class institutions and develop strong partnerships between university research groups, for example the European University Association (EUA), which might lead to the setting up of joint doctoral programmes.

Paying close attention to the initiatives of the Council for Doctoral Education of the EUA, established in January 2008, will raise awareness of the importance of advanced training for personnel, and will spread the idea put forward by the former President of the EUA Georg Winckler: "Doctoral education is a major priority for European universities and for EUA," he said. "It forms the first phase of young researchers' careers and is thus central to the drive to create a Europe of knowledge, as more researchers need to be trained than ever before if the ambitious objectives concerning enhanced research capacity, innovation and economic growth are to be met."

From an educational research viewpoint, this implies that we shall pursue the OECD's recommendations stating that higher education institutions should adopt more proactive strategies for internationalisation.



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