

Two sides of academic engagement? Institutional discourses and academics behaviours in knowledge society

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The traditional roles and aims of higher education institutions (HEIs) have been questioned as a result of the KS (KS), particularly in countries characterised by advanced capitalism. However, it is possible to identify two discourses of KS (Cummings et al, 2018). When the concept emerged, in the late 1960s, it was mainly associated with 'knowledge economy', since knowledge started to be identified as the emerging 'axial principle' of society (Carvalho, 2021). In this context, the emphasis was placed on research and innovation as one of the main pillars of economic development. HEIs were expected to provide new information and innovations to support the economic growth and academics expected to commercially engage with society. However, there is also a more social and civic discourse of the KS, looking at it also from a social perspective. The main argument is that there is the co-creation of knowledge with and for society, having knowledge primarily a social impact. Within this perspective, HEIs and academics are expected to be civically and socially engaged (Benneworth, & Humphrey, 2013).

This paper aims to discuss, in a comparative way, if different HEIs assume distinct discourses regarding the KS and if this has an impact on academics' behaviour. The paper takes the Portuguese case as reference, since its higher education system is significantly diversified, namely due to the co-existence of two subsystems (universities and polytechnics). The study explores the views of key institutional actors, regarding engagement and tries to analyse if the institutional discourse is mirrored by the academics' practice of a more economic or social engagement.

A mixed methodology was used, being based on both qualitative and quantitative methods. The qualitative approach is based on 32 individual semi-structured interviews and focus groups conducted with different key actors in 10 HEIs: top managers (rectors, vice-rectors or pro-rectors (or presidents, in the case of polytechnics); people responsible for the promotion of academic engagement in each institution (heads of academic engagement and innovation offices); and academics from different scientific fields. The qualitative data collected was content analysed, using an analysis grid derived from the guidelines prepared for the interviews.

The quantitative approach draws on data from the APIKS project (Academic Profession in the Knowledge-Based Society) survey, delivered to Portuguese academics in 2019. A stratified sampling technic was used to select the sample of academics invited to participate in this research (n = 16,066), ensuring its representativeness. The overall response rate was around 20%.

Data analysis has shown that discourses on the role of HEIs in KS vary significantly within the national system, not only between HEIs, but also between different types of professionals, with polytechnic institutions assuming social and civic engagement more than universities. In the same line, the data from the questionnaire revealed that the subsystem has an important effect on the dimensions of academic engagement. The engagement with society performed by

academics from polytechnics tends to be more focused on teaching-related activities and supervision of students and less on formal research collaboration and informal dissemination of knowledge.

Further comparative analysis needs to be developed to understand if the conclusions reached are only verifiable in the Portuguese case, or if there is, in fact, an academic divide on the perspectives regarding the KS in different higher education systems.