Educational research: internationalisation principles and strategies

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Abstract:
Educational research has the recognised status of scientific research and, thus, should be regulated by common principles applicable in Social Sciences, the research field to which it belongs. The analytical and empirical frameworks of reference will only become such whenever they stand up to opposition from the specialised scientific community, regarded always as being international.

Taking internationalization as a basic principle of all scientific research, strategies may be highlighted for their internationalization in the field of educational research: (1) creation of research networks by field/domain/research area, which facilitate the congregation of complementary visions brought about by particular contexts; (2) definition of research projects to be developed by international teams on subjects and themes of transnational interest; (3) creation of inter-institutional and international advanced training courses which may issue joint or double diplomas. The negotiation of study plans and their management is a means to better understanding academic and scientific communities.

Inter-peer work in joint networks and projects is an extremely powerful tool for developing the solidarity and intellectual respect towards which scientific activity ought to be geared.

Keywords:
Educational research, Internationalisation, Knowledge and decision, Internationalisation strategies.

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INTRODUCTION

This text is much closer to an essay than to an article as far as the scientific definition of the latter is concerned. The choice for this format stems from the author's experience as a researcher in educational sciences for twenty five years, research coordinator of Didactic and Technological Research Centre in the Training of Trainers (CIDTFF) and, over the last three years, its scientific coordinator too. As scientific coordinator, she has been confronted with situations and decisions that she has had to resolve, but which have contributed towards a more in--depth reflection on the role of educational research within the scope of scientific research in general, and its intrinsic constraints in terms of educational policy orientation and making with regard to intervention practices. To reflect upon these issues from a research internationalisation perspective is one of her priorities since scientific research is, in itself, international.

Hence, some of the former ideas presented in the Newsletter *Encontros*, published by the CIDTFF, since January 2009, are taken up again in its Editorial, where the research theme in education has come to be questioned according to several points of view.

RESEARCH AND DEVELOPMENT

It is acknowledged today that social advance, in its broadest sense, is strongly related to scientific research, since the latter generates assets that no other source could ever produce. Therefore, the countries that invest more in scientific research are the most socially developed.

Knowledge and innovation are powerful tools at the service of progress and improvement of life quality all over the world. Accepting that knowledge is a concept with a broad meaning, one may say that in a social and political setting, knowledge is related to the wisdom that qualifies a society to know how to act and organize itself so as to produce more knowledge, in other words, to conduct scientific research. Innovation, the second key word, may be applied to the result of research conveyed in products, processes or different ways of thinking than the previously existing ones. Scientific research is, per se, an instrument and field of action for innovation. Therefore, politicians appeal to knowledge and innovation as channels for more and better development.

So, greater knowledge and innovation require more and better education, to cover more people over a longer period of time and at a more advanced level. In order to accomplish this goal, educational research needs to progress and its results become conveyable through practical actions. The scientific community in education is responsible not only for the knowledge produced, but also for the proposals it presents on ways of applying constructed knowledge to real issues.

SOCIAL AND POLITICAL CONTEXT FOR TRAINING

The Lisbon Agenda, signed in 2000, was established as a reference document for the Heads of State and government of the European Union, with 15 member states at the time, proposing to work on creating mechanisms to make the European Union the most competitive and dynamic region in the world until 2010. Some of the most prominent goals of the educational aims presented were: reduction of the number of pupils who drop out of school (before the age of 18) to a maximum of 10%; at least 85% of youths under the age of 22 years should have completed secondary education; reduction of 15 year old pupils with lower reading skills to less than 20% as highlighted by the PISA studies; increase to 12.5% adults in permanent training programs; increase by at least 15% the number of graduates in Mathematics, Science and Technology, while also reducing the difference between qualified men and women in these fields. Now that the Lisbon Agenda period of duration is coming to an end, four of the five goals are yet to be fulfilled, although fairly positive progress has been made in almost all the fields. Only the aim to increase the number of graduates in Mathematics, Science and Technology was attained by the group of 27 countries. As for the rest, one must think of the reasons that must have conditioned the results and also of the lack of strategies to achieve such purposes.

Nevertheless, the aims set out at the beginning of the decade were considered too ambitious and unattainable by the less developed countries.

With the Lisbon Agenda decade about to end, in March 2010 the "European Strategy 2020" was presented in Brussels with quantified goals for sustainable and economic growth and for the creation of employment, while also bearing in mind the differences among the 27 (current) EU Member-States. As for education, one of the main aims is to increase the number of qualified citizens with a post-secondary level, raising the percentage of students who, after completing secondary education, further their studies, to 40%. Another main goal is to reduce the drop out level to under 10%.

In the field of scientific research, regarded as a priority area for development, the goal for 2020 is that I&D expenditure reaches 3% of GDP. Given that these are common goals for the EU27, it is up to each country to commit to those it feels capable of taking on.

EDUCATION AND RESEARCH

Education has always been a controversial field regarding which opinions are easily given, particularly criticism about what is wrong. Immediate results are expected for measures that have been adopted and policy-makers and experts are criticised. However, most experts in educational policies share the opinion that it takes time for effects to emerge and a glimpse of results is only possible on a medium or long-term basis. Therefore, it is important to direct continued actions that improve levels of educational efficacy in a school setting. Effectively, the school is one of the determinant factors of societies' evolution. Some others refer to the fact that at the end of the 20th century we reached a third educational revolution characterized by the broadening of pre-school education, the expansion of secondary and higher education attendance rates, the mass entry of women in all levels of the educational systems (Esteve, 2003). Improving school education also implies improving research on this subject, whether in models or practices.

Placing educational research in broader frames of reference, one may say that it is rarely referred to outside the context of other intervention domains, and the terms *Investigação-Formação* (IF) [Research-Training] and *Investigação-Formação-Desenvolvimento* (IFD) [Research-Training-Development] are frequently used. .

Whereas *Investigação-Formação* is generally associated with educational intervention speakers (teachers and/or students), *Investigação-Formação-Desenvolvimento* presents far broader outlines as the concept of development is local and temporarily variable. However, this seems to be an important guideline to follow if researchers in education wish to increase the impact of their work on society.

As education is considered to be a public right and asset, one cannot deny the social responsibility of scientists in the area with regard to: (i) identifying problems and proposing ways of studying them;

(ii) understanding application scopes of research results and (iii) anticipating implications of the studies performed in terms of educational policy definition.

From this perspective, whatever the orientation required for the research, whether *IF* or *IFD*, a way of enriching perspectives on themes and issues strongly dependent on distinct socio-cultural settings, would be to create partnerships that articulate Projects/Research Centres/Institutions, preferably on an international level. Understanding the influence of the settings on the type of existing problems and proposed solutions will help to interpret the reasons which do not allow or justify the direct transference of educational practices and, therefore, condition the obtained results. Inter-peer work in joint projects is an extremely powerful tool to develop solidarity and intellectual respect, towards which scientific activity should be geared. It should also be noted that educational research, which is closely related to Social Sciences, cannot benefit from the replication of results criteria, as is the case with precise and natural Sciences, to mark out validity. Recognition on the part of the scientific community of the procedural legitimacy in all stages and the resistance capacity of the results and other inferences are what back up the validity of the studies.

RESEARCH FOR EDUCATION

Scientific research is, per se, the field of human activity in which two principles have to be verified concomitantly: (i) transparency regarding that which is set out (study object, development, result and inference methodologies); (ii) acknowledgement of the previous condition in an international setting.

The role of scientific research is broadly debated in all developed countries and is part of all political agendas. Defining the type of financing available and the areas/domains among which it will be distributed are issues that occupy, and frequently bother, the minds of politicians and the scientific community. International competition in terms of scientific production is taken for granted in all areas, and serves the results attained to sustain institutional rankings. Despite the open disbelief on the part of many academics regarding the validity and legitimacy of placing the institutions in a series on the basis of indicators exclusively related to scientific production, an improved position in such rankings is practically accepted by everyone with joy. Let us, then, assume the importance of the scientific research we have carried out in relation to others due to the relevance of the studies developed and to the impact of the results on the scientific community, in general, and the specialised area, in particular.

In the case of scientific research in education, the relationship between research and politics or, in other words, the political dimension of research is very salient. Effectively, the choice of themes reflects the concerns of the researchers whether in examining more closely the theoretical frames of reference or in the understanding of educational problems and ways of resolving them. There should be total independence, however, in all cases as regards other interests, whether economic, social or political. Nevertheless, this does not mean that educational research does not have political implications. It is true that it is up to the politicians to decide on the implications pointed out, but it is up to the researchers to know how to clearly set out the conclusions of their studies, the limitations that conditioned such conclusions and the alternative routes to be taken, whether in terms of educational intervention or future research. Educational research has a social value that should not be underestimated as a founding instrument of educational intervention, whether it is defended by formal orientations or conveyed through attitudes and practices.

In general terms, educational research has focused on three levels: (1) to continue existing research lines (for instance, adding new data; reinforcing guidelines; consolidating paradigms); (2) moving away from traditional approaches to the issues (new methodologies; new dimensions/perspectives); (3) defining new research lines. Most of the studies are situated in the first level, but it is crucial for the following ones to acquire greater expression. When an exclusively practical perspective of research is not defended, it must be clear to all that educational research also looks to ways of understanding educational problems and finding the necessary solutions.

ADVANCED EDUCATION AND INTERNATIONALISATION

The development of modern societies depends on the application of knowledge, high level competencies, an innovative spirit and the suitable use of information and communication technology systems.

One of the strong points of the Universities is, precisely, the ability to develop such skills through education and training based on fundamental research. European universities are set on contributing to accomplish the innovation goals established in the Lisbon Agenda, particularly, through their commitment to the construction of a *Espaço Europeu de Educação Superior (EEES)* [European Higher Education Space] and the *Espaço Europeu de Investigação (ERA)* [European Research Area].

Acknowledging the fact that Universities are one of the most important strategic resources in Europe, with knowledge-based economies and societies, it is important to promote and consolidate research dynamics in borderline areas of knowledge, which are associated with training programmes with a prospective vision.

The importance of research goes much further than the new knowledge achieved as the quality of higher education is strongly dependent on its relationship with research. Accommodating work markets as well as creating new ones, which everyone hopes the universities will be able to provide, depend, primarily, on the competencies of its qualified students.

The development of institutional strategies to encourage research, supported by the *European Research Council* (ERC), may lead to better consolidated strategic research plans with more advantageous results. Internationalisation in the European Educational and Research Space is regarded today as a unique opportunity for the development and accomplishment of the European Council goal in 2000, that "in 2010 Europe should be the most competitive, dynamic and knowledge-based economy, capable of generating better jobs and better social cohesion". Despite delays in the achievement of this great goal, one cannot fail to consider the underlying principles.

The concept of internationalisation has come to be discussed in a number of settings, proliferating a variety of meanings, and going as far as to talk about "internal internationalisation", within each institution. According to the *EUA Handbook Internationalization of European Higher Education*, internationalisation is defined as the "integration process of international, intercultural and global dimensions in the purposes, roles and goals of higher education".

Research in a collaborative international context would be indispensable for higher education of an international nature. The inter-institutional partnerships that have been developed for the creation of double and joint levels, particularly the post-graduate level, are the most vivid expression of sharing dynamics of the best existing knowledge in each one of them. Excellent educational institutions are almost always excellent institutions in research.

ACTION MEASURES

Scientific Research is an international activity which would not be worthy of its title were it not for the sharing of international environments. Three action measures are set out below:

(1) Constitution of research networks by field/domain/research area that facilitate the congregation of complementary visions generated by specific settings. The partnerships among groups of an intra and inter disciplinary nature, are crucial for identifying the research questions and finding solutions, taken here to mean innovative ways of responding to problems.

If scientific research, in its latent sense, is inseparable from the knowledge society, educational research is also an instrument at the service of the most effective organisation of educational systems, teacher training and student learning. Inter institutional and international cooperation for research in education should be confronted as a strategy that will render acceptance of produced results acceptable.

(2) Definition of research projects to be developed by international teams on topics and themes of transnational interest. The problems in education are far more global than local. Issues related to the school, organization of educational systems, teaching strategies, student learning, lack of discipline, motivation

and school success are themes worth studying and understanding in a more general manner.

A very interesting, and highly promising example of international partnerships is being developed by the Iberian-American States for Education, Science and Culture (OEI), which has shown that it is possible to establish knowledge groups and networks capable of proposing solutions for existing problems. The Iberian-American Conference of Ministers of Education held in El Salvador, in May 2008, reached agreements that made it possible to draw up the project "Educational Goals 2021". This is a huge politically ambitious project as it represents the effort that all the countries will have to develop so that in 2021 the educational systems of the Latin American countries and the Caribbean will be more effective. Through education greater cohesion, social inclusion and greater social and economic development may be generated. Research in education should be at the service of the cause so that the project may be accomplished.

(3) The creation of inter institutional and international advanced training courses that set out to grant joint or double diplomas. The negotiation of common study plans and their management is a possible channel to improve the understanding of academic and scientific communities. Therefore, it is deemed necessary to develop conditions and mechanisms capable of attracting more foreign post-graduate students, to receive more visiting teachers, promote research strategies outside the country in high quality institutions, to develop strong partnerships among University research groups, for example from the European University Association (USA), which may give rise to the creation of joint doctoral programmes. To monitor the initiatives of the *Council for Doctoral Education* of the USA, established in January 2008, will make it possible to increase awareness of the importance of advanced human resources training and to share the idea defended by the former Council President, Georg Winckler: *"Doctoral education is a major priority for European universities and for EUA. 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".*

FINAL NOTE

We have entered the second decade of the 21st century, a century which began with great expectations created by multiple reflections debated in a wide variety of international forum, some of an academic nature, others more social. In many of such forum, new problems were identified, partnerships were established to propose ways of approaching them, declarations and agreements were drawn up and goals were defined for their resolution. Education and training were and are at the centre of the resources which provide the highest contribution to finding solutions. In this field, the institutions of Higher Education, particularly Universities and Research Centres, have a decisive role in the development and creation of knowledge, whether through research or the ability to promote its transference to situations and settings in which it may be useful. This does not mean that the importance of knowledge is merely assessed by its practical application .The affirmation alone that such knowledge, being important, is something that cannot be ignored. The area of education is, for sure, a privileged field where this principle may be applied. Researchers in education form an autonomous scientific community are tied to time related issues and conscious of the importance of national and international networks for the construction of new knowledge. Working with a view to internationalization also means responding to OECD recommendations in its Report of the Higher Education Evaluation System in Portugal, in December 2006, on defending that the Higher Education Institutions should adopt more pro-active internationalization strategies.

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