The Social and Cultural Roles of the University of Coimbra (1537-1820). Some Considerations.

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Abstract

The University of Coimbra in Portugal shared the common calling of universities of preparing future ruling elites, but it fulfilled this mission in its own way. Considering the period 1537-1820, this paper presents some indicators of its specific social and cultural roles, such as the evolution of the numbers of students, their geographical origins (including a significant contribution from Brazil), and the kind of knowledge they were seeking. A second cluster of considerations focuses on the relationship with political (and ecclesiastical) power, not only in terms of the representation of the University’s instrumental function, but also of its subsequent actual behavior – combining protection and control – such as in the granting of funding resources, the appointment of professors and academic authorities, and mechanisms conditioning access to future careers.

Keywords

University, Coimbra, students, elites, power, Brazil

Resumo

A Universidade de Coimbra participou na vocação comum às universidades de formar as elites dirigentes mas fê-lo à sua própria maneira. Tomando como referência o período que vai de 1537 a 1820, este artigo apresenta alguns indicadores das funções sociais e culturais que desempenhou, tais como a evolução da frequência estudantil, as origens geográficas dos estudantes (com um significativo contributo do Brasil) e o tipo de conhecimento que procuravam. Um segundo conjunto de considerações centra-se na relação da Universidade com os poderes político e eclesiástico, quer no que toca à representação da função instrumental que ela devia desempenhar, quer mediante a análise dos comportamentos que tal concepção acarretava consigo - num misto de proteção e controlo - tais como a afectação de recursos, a nomeação de professores e autoridades académicas e a criação de filtros condicionadores das futuras carreiras dos graduados.

Palavras-chave

Universidade, Coimbra, estudantes, elites, poder, Brasil
1. Introduction

1.1. One of the fundamental characteristics of universities throughout time has been the role they have played in the formation of ruling elites. The nature and level of the knowledge they offer and the social credit of the qualifications they provide make them the breeding ground for highly skilled individuals capable of influencing the course of public affairs in civil and ecclesiastical service, leading society in ideological and scientific issues, reproducing models, making laws, and so on. This universal task, however, has been fulfilled in different ways by different universities, depending on their specific curricula, the predominant branches of knowledge they cultivate, the territory in which they are established and the population they serve, and their relationships with other institutions, whether subordinate, parallel or competitive.

Within this context, this article is intended to be a case study focusing on some aspects of the University of Coimbra in Portugal between 1537 (the year of its definitive settlement in this town) and 1820. While attempting to sketch a few of the peculiar features of this university (trying also to perform some comparative work), we will provide the reader with selected bibliographical references that may widen the perspectives adopted here.

1.2. The peculiar historical features of the University of Coimbra may be approached through a curious quotation: “The University of Coimbra was founded in Lisbon [...] by the king Dom Dinis, the sixth of the kings of Portugal [...]”. This apparently incongruous expression, at the beginning of the historical abstract that opens the 1654 edition of the *Estatutos da Universidade de Coimbra* reflects a reality – the moving of the University between Lisbon and Coimbra during the medieval period (the university stayed in Coimbra from 1308 to 1338 and from 1354 to 1377) – but it also reveals the understanding that, despite the changes in its location, the institutional identity remained unaltered.

One of the mainstays of this identity was the awareness of the role played by the University of Coimbra (we must remember that the statement quoted above was written in 1653) as a central point of reference for a vast territory, both on the continent and overseas. In spite of the existence of other institutions of higher education between 1559 and 1759 – namely the University of Évora – Coimbra was the only one to grant degrees in Law (Canon and Civil) and Medicine (and, after 1772, in Mathematics and Natural Philosophy as well). It is well known that a law degree was the main entrance requirement for higher administration both in Church and in royal service. As for theology, members of religious orders, which had their own domestic schools of advanced learning, sought at the Faculty of Divinity in Coimbra to earn the degree that would give them a broader recognition and afford them access to a professorship at the University. Even if, during the so-called “União Dinástica” (Dynastic Union, 1580-1640) significant numbers of students attended Spanish universities, especially Salamanca, the position of Coimbra was never

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3 Salamanca was not the only ‘foreign’ university that Portuguese students attended in the early modern period, as demonstrated by the works by Luís de Matos and Joaquim Veríssimo Serrão about Paris, Montpellier, Toulouse or Alcalá de Henares. But it was undoubtedly the one with the largest share of Portuguese students (see Angel Marcos de Diós, “Portugueses en la Universidad de Salamanca de la Edad Moderna” in *Historia de la Universidad de Salamanca, III.2 – Saberes y confluencias*, Salamanca, Ediciones Universidad de Salamanca, 2006, pp. 1101-