

NB: This is a talk and not an article! (SL)

## What is educational research for?

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After seven intense years as President of the University of Lisbon, I had the opportunity to spend last academic year in Brazil.

It was an extraordinary experience that allowed me to live, *in loco*, the reality of another continent and to realize that the issues that affect us are the same, on either side of the Atlantic, everywhere in the world.

Throughout the year, while preparing this keynote address, I got a better understanding of the insanity that is transforming our academic world. The signs are not new, but they are deepening, day after day, with our malaise, but also with our resignation. As if things were inevitable, as if there were no alternative.

~~This year we celebrate the centenary of the Great War. It is worth remembering that it took place, like all wars, not so much by the bellicosity of some but rather by the consent of many, by a general consent of people that will be its main victims.~~

“We see, we hear and e read. We can’t ignore” – these verses of Sophia de Mello Breyner, sung in the struggles for freedom in Portugal, explain my decision to use the time the ECER organizers granted me, not for a “conventional” keynote address, but rather to add my voice to appeals and manifestos fighting against the dominant trends in universities, fighting for a new organization of academic life.

What are the things that I saw, heard and read, and that I can’t ignore? It is a long list, but I leave you only with four examples, very simple yet very elucidating.

**First.** I saw the news about the hoax, which was set up by John Bohannon. He managed to publish various versions of a fake scientific paper in 157 open access journals, involving prominent publishing houses like Wolters Kluwer, Sage and Elsevier.

The question is: Why do we accept to pay significant fees to publish our work in such a lousy publishing system? What is happening with us?

**Second.** I heard the Nobel winner Randy Schekman declaring boycott to leading academic journals, like Nature and Science, because they are distorting the scientific process and they represent a tyranny that must be broken.

The question is: Why don't we take action against this publishing industry that is damaging science, which is influencing harmfully our work and priorities?

**Third.** I read the story of Haruko Obokata, the young Japanese scientist accused of fabricating images in a stem-cell study, a story that looks like many other stories of recent years.

The question is: Why do we accept the pressures of this "publish or perish culture"? Why do we accept that impact factors and blind productivism dominate our lives?

**Fourth.** Recently, I saw, I heard and I read the news regarding the evaluation of the Portuguese scientific system, conducted through an agreement between the Portuguese Foundation of Science and Technology and the European Science Foundation. The agreement stated that half of the research units should be eliminated. In the case of Educational Sciences more than 70% of the units were excluded right away. The evaluation was conducted in the worst possible way, through absurd metrics, without the slightest knowledge of the reality of the country, without a site visit to the centers, without discussing with the researchers... It is difficult to imagine a worst way of proceeding... and I can't ignore that some of the members of the Evaluation panel are educational researchers!

The question is: Why do we accept to integrate these panels, with these absurd methods and political injunctions? Why do we accept to collaborate in the destruction of our own scientific field? Why do we accept the unacceptable? Why?

These are single stories of the past nine months. Many, many others would be to share with you. For example, this extraordinary story of a program created by scientists at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology that randomly generates nonsense in the form of computer science research papers. The program is available on a website, and did generate articles that were accepted and published by important publishing houses, like Springer or the Institute of Electrical and Electronic Engineers (I triple E).

These stories do not interest me *per se*, but as signs, as symptoms of a deeper malaise affecting the academic and university life. These signs have multiplied at an alarming rate in recent times, they are symptoms of a corrosion of universities and research that we cannot ignore.

The deterioration of the university climate in the context of a meaningless academic productivism undermines any effort to give coherence and future to educational research. That's why I decided to make this plea for a different academic life, an appeal to our personal and collective responsibility. Enough is enough!

I gave you four stories— about John Bohannon, Randy Schekman, Haruko Obokata and evaluation of research in Portugal— and I ask four questions, which are only one: Why do we accept? Why do we consent? Why do we collaborate? Why?

Obviously, these are rhetorical questions. We all know very well the answers. It is a struggle for survival in the academic jungle. But we need to problematized these answers in the context of the dominant trends in university space, all around the world, but particularly in Europe after the Bologna Process.

Maybe these trends can be summarized by comparing two famous quotes:

- the first one belongs to Eliot Freidson, in his classical book on Professional powers, published in 1986:“Universities are remarkable inventions for subsidizing social work that does not have immediate commercial value”;

- the second one belongs to Nicholas Barr, an economist who had a prominent role in the reform of higher education in the UK:“50 years ago higher education was not important in economic terms, today it is necessary to draw attention to the economic value of universities”.

Just twenty years separate these two quotes. But they represent a huge change on the way how universities are understood. It is not anymore about the importance of knowledge for social and economic development. No. It is about the economic value of the universities themselves.

In an over-simplified argument, maybe we can illustrate this ideology with three E plus one. These E are toxic concepts, because our immediate survival depends on breathing this lethal atmosphere, even if we are condemned to a slow death.

The words that I am going to say are not guilty. The problem is not with the words. The problem is with the ideologies of modernization they serve, ideologies that look above all to the “economic value of universities”.

**The first E stands for Excellence.** Excellence is the most pervasive concept for defining universities. Obviously, no one can be against “excellence”. But behind this concept there is call for productivism, for a rise of productivism that is undermining the foundations of the academic profession.

The “publish or perish culture” is directly linked to forms of teacher evaluation and international rankings that dominate universities, allowing to the publishing industry a tremendous power.

“Who are the most ruthless capitalists in the western world?” – asks George Monbiot, an English writer and journalist. “Whose monopolistic practices make Walmart look like a corner shop and Rupert Murdoch a socialist? While there are plenty of candidates, my vote

goes not to the banks, the oil companies or the health insurers, but – wait for it – to academic publishers”.

Academic publishers rely on our “generosity”. We all work for free, as authors or reviewers, but they charge outrageous fees to access research that has been mainly paid by public funds.

Even one of the richest universities in the world, Harvard University, issued a memorandum, two years ago, saying that it couldn’t afford journals publishers’ prices. And in that same year, 2012, the mathematician Tim Gowers, a Fields medalist, launched a movement against the exorbitant “cost of knowledge”, advocating a boycott of Elsevier journals and encouraging alternative routes for academic publishing.

We are facing a situation that pushes a productivism that is leading to the trivialization of unacceptable practices, like auto-plagiarism, self-citation or slicing of papers. There are even those who boast of having published hundreds and hundreds of papers throughout their lives. This is a crown of glory or insanity?

Each day we publish more. Each day we read and discuss less. There is increasing pressures to impose a culture of productivism. We cannot comply with this corruption of science and universities that is destroying academic life. It is time to say “no”.

**The second E stands for Entrepreneurship.** What does it mean?

On the one hand, it means the entrepreneurial university, the emergence of a managerial discourse as if universities were like business... but they are not. Please allow me to acknowledge the *Manifesto for universities that live up to their missions*, launched in 2012, criticizing the mantra of current modes of governance, built around ideas of efficiency, profitability and competitiveness that are eroding academic freedom.

One of our main problems is the increasing separation between the management practices and the academic life. Within universities it is clear that power is shifting from academics to managers and bureaucrats.

On the other hand, entrepreneurship means a spirit characterized by innovation and risk-taking. No one can be against it. Unfortunately, this is leading to an acceleration of time and to the adoption of metrics that narrow the scientific scope. We are witnessing a technological drift with deep consequences in the evaluation and financing of research.

It is exactly what is denounced by our colleagues that launched, in 2010, the *Slow Science Manifesto*, where they write: “Science needs time to think. Science needs time to read, and time to fail. Science does not always know what it might be at right now”. The last demand, addressed to a public audience, is very inspiring: “– Please, bear with us, while we think”.

Maybe the best way to oppose entrepreneurship is to use the French word *désintéressement*, so difficult to translate into another language. It is not disinterest, but a greater interest, well defined by Jacques Derrida in *The university without condition*, that is, the university of an unconditional freedom.

The slow science movement is part of a larger action against the entrepreneurial tendencies that are suffocating universities and research. It is time to say “no”.

**The third E stands for Employability.** This is the most pervasive and toxic concept in European debates, always followed by another concept, yet more toxic, lifelong learning. Throughout the 20th century, the right to education has been inscribed in social struggles and movements, with a strong participation of teachers and educationists. Now, with the regurgitation of lifelong learning, education is not anymore a right, but a duty – the duty to be a lifelong learner in order to stay employable.

Universities have been incorporating this concept, losing sight of their educational and cultural missions to focus primarily on training and employability. By accepting these tendencies, we become responsible for our own destruction, as it is stated in an important *Charter of dis-excellence (Charte de la désexcellence)* issued recently by a group of European scholars.

It is critical to measure our role, if only by silence, in the adoption and development of ideologies that are conditioning universities, that are constraining our academic life, that are redefining research priorities. It is time to say “no”.

Intentionally, I decided to describe the three E always confronting them with movements and forms of resistance that are growing in the university world: the statement of the Harvard University, the boycott proposed by Tim Gowers, the *Manifesto for universities that live up to their missions*, the *Slow science manifesto*, the *Charter of dis-excellence...*

It is my way of calling upon our own responsibility, as professors, as researchers, as educationists, as members of the European Educational Research Association.

At the beginning, I said that I would present three E plus one. **The last E stands for Europeanization**, another toxic concept. After decades of “Europeanization”, Europe is as it is. I will not speak of it. But I want to expose the divisions between North and South, between center and periphery, which are being exacerbated by scientific policies at the European Union.

We like to emphasize the importance of knowledge in contemporary societies. That is the main argument to fight for the raising of the European budget for science. *Horizon 2020* has now a budget of 79 billion euros.

Curiously enough, no one questions the “competitive funds” strategy that regulates European science. It is the best example of the triple E ideology. The result is self-evident: the strong get stronger, the weak get weaker. After three decades in the European Union, Portugal is still a net contributor for European funds for science. Ironically, one could argue that the citizens of less developed European countries are paying for the science that is being done in the most developed countries. What a strange Europeanization!

And then we have stories like the one I told you before about the evaluation of research centers in Portugal. Everything is done under the auspices of the European Science Foundation, with the complicity of some of our colleagues. What a shame! Needless to say – everything is legitimized through languages of excellence, innovation and competitiveness, languages of entrepreneurship, knowledge transfer and technological

merit, languages of outputs, productivity and impact. Needless to say – each member of the evaluation panels naively believes that he or she is doing his work, in the best possible way. But, in fact, they lend themselves to policies that reproduce fractures and divisions in Europe. Always in the name of Europeanization. It is time to say “no”.

Four times “no”. To excellence. To entrepreneurship. To employability. To Europeanization. Not because of the words, but because of the ideologies that lie behind them.

Let me be totally clear. I have no academic nostalgia. But it doesn't oblige me to adhere to “ideologies of modernization” that are destroying our academic life, our intellectual freedom.

Concerning this presentation, what interests me is to emphasize how these ideologies are impoverishing research, in particular with regard to educational research. That is what I will try to explain in section this talk.

### **And what about Educational Research?**

#### **What is Educational Research for?**

Again, I will leave you with three ideas, plus one.

#### **First – Instead of “Excellence” we need an all-inclusive research.**

Instead of an ideology of “Excellence”, we must state the inclusiveness of educational research. For a long time, before the emergence of “scientific”, “technocratic” and “applied” tendencies, democratization was at the forefront of educational research.

We must reestablish this lost tradition, against the myth of the objective expert, which is behind an exhausted peer-review system, behind bibliometric evaluations and impact factor tendencies.

It is necessary to rebuild a culture of discussing and debating, of reading each other's work and engaging in an intellectual conversation. We cannot yield to the tyranny of numbers, to the tyranny of evaluation mechanisms that are destroying imagination and freedom. We must reinvent research as an open collective praxis.

#### **Second – Instead of “Entrepreneurship” we need a far-convergent research.**

Entrepreneurship ideology tends to narrow research in terms of technological developments or policy-oriented work. Furthermore, it leads to a quest for “disciplinization” which, in my opinion, follows a tendency to confine the scope of educational research.

Our best tradition relies on multiple approaches and ways of thinking. It is strange that precisely nowadays, when the most inspiring research is looking for convergence, some educational researchers are worried with issues of identity and “disciplinization”.

That is why I believe that we should broaden the scope of our work, also in terms of methods, as stated by Michel Serres: “Devoted to the search for truth, we do not always reach it; if and when we arrive through analyses or equations, experiments or formal proofs, but also through experimentation, sometimes, and, when experimentation doesn’t get you there, let the story go there, if it can; if meditation fails, why not try narrative?”.

The point is to enrich, to deepen and to diversify our understanding of educational matters. There is no simple way to accomplish this goal. We can’t hope to reach a consensus on how to organize and to conduct research in education. But we can engage in an intellectual dialogue in order to achieve convergence and trust.

Convergence, because we can’t afford to close ourselves inside a “discipline”; we need to be interdisciplinary, to work across disciplines. Trust, because it is the only way out to escape quantitative and bureaucratic evaluations; and nothing will be achieved without time, collaboration and commitment.

### **Third – Instead of “Employability” we need a wide-open research.**

I share the irony of David Labaree addressing to emergent scholars in the field of educational research: “Be wrong, be lazy, be irrelevant; and work to balance your work in the pursuit of t, wrong and lazy”. It is an important position against the “utilitarian turn” that is invading universities and also educational research. Yes, I believe that we need a wide-open research and it means two important movements.

The first one, in order to consider our own positions and dispositions as researchers. If we lose this dimension, we are forced into logics of alienation and productivism. David Labaree is right: “Academic writing can be and should be a medium for personal expression and artistic creation”.

The second movement, in order to open research to a wide public. We need to “go public”, to connect our research with public purposes and expectations. One of the main problems of education research has been, forever, the fact that everyone knows about education. It is true that it is more difficult to legitimize a research-based knowledge, but it is also true that makes easier a close relationship between knowledge and society. And this is crucial for research in contemporary times.

Here are three answers to the question **What is educational research for?** But I promised you three answers, plus one. My last answer is related with Europe. If we believe, as we like to proclaim, that education and knowledge are the central elements of development, then we cannot accept the way how European science funds are being managed and allocated.

The cynical argument that funds are distributed according to the quality and merit of the research teams, infrastructures and proposals cannot be accepted for granted.

Rhetoric of Europeanization is at the service of deeper fractures and divisions in Europe. We cannot continue to play this game, naively, as if it has nothing to do with us. We cannot comply with this, nor at the level of our responsibility as academics, neither at the level of an association like the European Educational Research Association.

It is time to end ????

VERGÍLIO FERREIRA

You can not think outside of the possibilities of the language in which they think. Broaden the repertoire of possibilities

Why do we need good pieces of research in education? To think and to engage in multiple conversations.

To think, that is, to open new possibilities for thinking, to broaden the spectrum of our ways of thinking and talking about education.

To engage in multiple conversations, that is, to relate different “worlds” and perspectives through knowledge produced about education.

In this sense, education research needs to be understood as a provocation of thought and a place for dialogues.

The point is to enrich, to deepen and to diversify our understanding of educational matters. There is no simple answer to accomplish this intention. We can't hope to reach a consensus on how to organize and to conduct research in education. But we can engage in an intellectual dialogue between different people and different perspectives.