

The Legal Regime of Portuguese Higher Education Institutions: Contributions for Future Changes

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Abstract: The Portuguese higher education system is binary, divided into two subsystems, university and polytechnic, being regulated, since 2007, by the so-called RJIES (Legal Regime of Higher Education Institutions). The RJIES regulates the organic structure of the higher education institutions (HEIs) as well as the competencies of mandatory bodies, such as the general council, which is also given the power to elect the rector/president, another of the mandatory bodies. The RJIES, in place for 17 years, has not been revised since 2007 despite being subject of criticism and claim for changes. This paper presents a reflection for future changes to this RJIES regarding the process of electing the rector/president. This is noted and complained about by a wide range of the academic community – teachers, students, and non-teaching academic staff, in addition to other interested parties in universities and polytechnic institutes. Therefore, we present a brief review of the literature related to this topic, the results of survey and interviews carried out with top managers of Portuguese Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). The survey was completed online by a wide range of public HEIs managers (rectors and directors, presidents, vice-rectors and vice-presidents, pro-rectors and pro-presidents) and their *stakeholders* (teaching and non-teaching workers and students, through their representative structures, unions and student unions, and other leaders of professional and business associations). Interviews were also carried out in 2021, which remain completely current, given the fact that legal changes have not occurred so far. The results that will be presented indicate that changes should be made. Brief conclusions and a proposal for amendments to the current legislation, covering the rector/president election process, will be presented. It is advocated a new model of election of rector/president, the intervention of two different bodies, one of them being the general and supervisory council (new designation defended), with a composition mainly of external members, selected in a different way in relation to the current one.

Keywords: Higher Education; Portuguese HEIs; Governance; Leadership; Legal Regime.

1. Introduction

The Portuguese Higher education system is binary, composed of universities and polytechnic institutes, both public and private, with more than 400000 students enrolled, which represents a huge increase of students since 1974. The analysis of the literature, particularly that resulting from the publication by Taylor, Ferreira, Machado, Santiago, & Brites Ferreira (2008), points out a clear demonstration of the existence of a diversity of higher education models. Nevertheless, from very early on (2012), criticism was raised against the organic model, particularly with regard to the general council (see, for all, Pedrosa, Santos, Mano, & Gaspar, 2012) and Amaral, Nazaré, Mourato, Sarrico, Cunha Serra, Redondo, Cabilhas, & Rodrigues (2023), which in general remained even though the legislative branch has not even attempted to change it, at least until 2022.

In 2021, as part of the expanded investigation, an extensive survey and fifteen interviews were carried out with various HEIs *stakeholders*, which are perfectly current as no changes have yet been introduced to the regulatory legislation. The results obtained then, regarding the organization of the HEIs, namely the general council, are presented. This paper seeks to analyse the current legal regime regarding one of the mandatory bodies – the general council – which assumes important functions in public HEIs (PHEIs), namely, and first of all, the election of the rector of the universities/president of the polytechnics.

In the conclusions, are summarized the proposals, regarding the process of electing the rector/president, regarding future legislative changes. It is important to mention that about a year ago the government at the time announced an independent commission to analyse and propose modifications, in consultation with all those involved and the defended model.

2. The Government System Resulting From Law No. 62/2007, of September 10 (RJIES)

The governance of PHEIs is now ruled by RJIES approved by the Law No. 62/2007, of September 10. This law came to standardize, although not completely, the Portuguese HEIs governance system (Bilau, 2011), (Oliveira, Peixoto, & Silva, 2014), (Lourenço, 2017). It is now up to the general council to elect the rector/president, as well

to approve changes to the statutes, powers that, until the entry into force of this new law, were responsibility of the university assembly or an assembly specifically elected for that purpose. In universities, many of the functions of the previous senate were transferred to the new general council and in polytechnic institutes there was a strengthening of the powers of this body, which was clearly reinforced. It is especially worth highlighting the fact that, as of the entry into force of this law, the role of the president of the general council and the rector/president no longer coincides. In fact, certainly resulting from the new functions that became the responsibility of the general council, namely the election of the rector/president, the legislator's option was to assign the presidency of the general council to one of the external members, elected by all and to whom the law attributed specific powers.

About the higher education institution, it can be seen that little has changed: the rector at the universities or president in the case of a polytechnic institute, the director, president or board of directors, in the case of other higher education establishments, the scientific council (or technical-scientific for polytechnics) and the pedagogical council, continue to be the bodies whose existence is mandatory. Also, namely the way in which the rector/president of PHEIs is elected, it should be noted that already in 2012 Pedrosa *et al* analysed these issues, presenting changes and suggestions. Nevertheless, in 2023, in the report commissioned by the government, the independent Commission chaired by Professor Alberto Amaral (Amaral *et al.*, 2023) made several proposals regarding the election of the rector/president.

Here is a small summary of the most important from these reports:

a. Pedrosa *et al.*(2012), cite the presidents of the general councils and stated that the greatest importance of this body is manifested in the election of the rector/president, having suggested changes to the regime, such as the immediate suspension of the mandate of councillors candidate for rector/president, the articulation, in temporal terms, between the mandates of the rector/president and the general council, and protection from possible problems and conflicts between the general council and the rector/president.

b. Amaral *et al.* (2023), from the survey they also carried out, highlight that the majority of the respondents have a frankly negative opinion, not only in relation to the management and government model implemented by RJIES, but also in relation to the general councils and the form of election of the rector/president, where there is a huge majority (80%) in favour of his election by an extended assembly/college and that he be elected from among members of the institution, therefore registering that they are in favour of changing the current model.

3. The Survey of PHEIs *Stakeholders*, Interviews With Directors of HEIs and Reports

In this article, is presented, data collected from:

- A survey with a wide range of HEIs *stakeholders*;
- Interviews with fifteen former and current rectors/vice-rectors/pro-rectors/presidents/vice-presidents, ten of whom were nationals and five foreigners, even though, regarding the issue under discussion, only the nationals had answered;
- Reports analyses on Portugal from the OECD (OECD, 2019), CHEPS/CCISP (File, Weert, & Vossensteyn, 2013) and EUA/CRUP (Blattler, Rapp, Solà, Davies, & Teixeira, 2013) were analysed.

The proposed changes are therefore based on the conclusions of the survey, interviews and the aforementioned reports, as well as the authors' extensive experience in managing HEIs.

3.1 Survey

The survey carried out in 2021 and around 472 responses were received (using *Limesurvey*). This survey, answered online by a wide range of people responsible for PHEIs (rectors and presidents, vice-rectors and vice-presidents, pro-rectors and pro-presidents) and their *stakeholders* (academic, non-academic staff and students, through their representative structures, unions and student associations, and other leaders of professional and business associations), maintaining its relevance and, in part, confirmed by the survey also produced in 2023, by the Independent Evaluation Commission (Amaral *et al.*, 2023).

Regarding the method of electing the rector/president, the following result was found:

Table 1: Legal constraints that affect the activities of PHEIs

Legal constraints that you experience, or that you understand to exist, that most affect the activity of HEIs	Disagree	Indifferent	Agree	Total
The responsibilities of the Rector/President provided for in the Legal Regime of HEIs (RJIES) are inadequate for the proper performance of the position	25.5	42.9	31.6	100.0

In other words, 31.6% agree that the responsibilities of the Rector/President provided for in the RJIES are inadequate for the good exercise of the position, a matter that is indifferent to 42.9%, so only 25.5% of respondents disagree with the statement in cause. Interestingly, the survey did not record, with regard to the process of electing the rector/president, any further position taken with real impact.

3.2 Interviews With ten top Directors of National HEIs

Regarding the interviews carried out and regarding agreement with the method of election/appointment of the rector/president, as can be seen from the following graph of the ten national directors interviewed, seven of the directors do not agree, two agree and one does not respond.

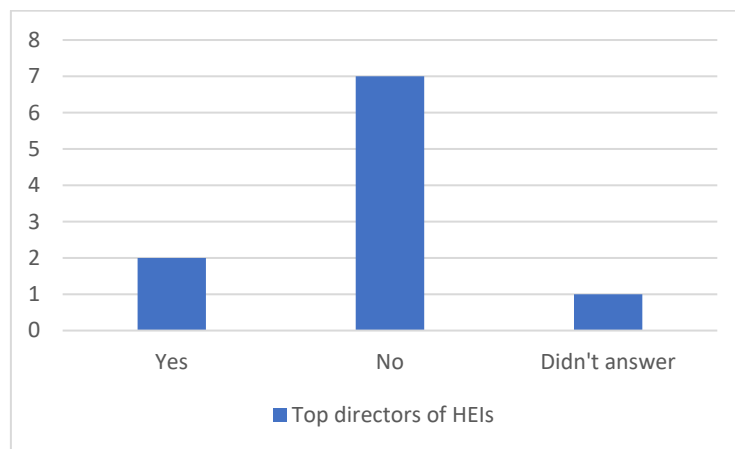


Figure 1: Agreement regarding the method of election/appointment of the rector/president

3.3 Review of the OECD, CHEPS/CCISP and EUA/CRUP REPORTS

Regarding the reports, particularly in the parts on who defend changes in the councils of HEIs, the following should be highlighted:

i) OECD – This report does not provide a detailed assessment of the powers of the HEIs management bodies, particularly those that the RJIES establishes as mandatory, much less whether they are adequate for the institution to carry out its mission with the greatest efficiency. Therefore, the report does not seek a concrete proposal to change the power of one or some of them. The assessments made are mainly in relation to the degree of autonomy of the institutions, including what the RJIES came to consecrate on what was called “organizational principles of the higher education system”, on governance structures, new or revised, with participation significantly increased external resources (minimum 30%) in a General Council of 15 to 35 people (the highest decision-making body), designed to provide greater diversity in the organizational form and legal status of public institutions (namely the option of universities public institutions and polytechnics to become public foundations under private law), and also provided for the creation of consortia of institutions. Moreover, it is mentioned that RJIES changed the appointment procedures for university rectors and polytechnic presidents, who are elected in secret ballot for a four-year term (renewable once) by the general council (which is chaired by a member external) through a public call and public hearings, with the vacancy being open to candidates from outside the institution, and in the case of rectors, academics from other universities (inside or outside Portugal), and in the case of presidents also candidates from outside the University education. Finally, it is highlighted that RJIES aimed:

- to move the higher education system from elected to selected leadership;
- intended to simplify internal governance in terms of levels and structures;
- to reduce the size of key governance bodies;

- significantly increase the participation of external *stakeholders*;
- to increase institutional autonomy;
- to place universities and polytechnics under the same general regime and potentially crucially, offering the opportunity for universities and polytechnics to apply to become public foundations under private law – which would significantly expand their flexibility in managing human resources, spending non-public resources and disposing of assets (OECD, 2019, p. 140).

ii) CHEPS/CCISP – with regard to this report, the same thing happens as with the previous one, that is, the report does not provide a detailed assessment of the powers of the HEIs management bodies. In fact, in the seven possible public policy interventions aimed at strengthening the Portuguese polytechnic subsystem that *Conselho Coordenador dos Institutos Superiores Politécnicos* (CCISP) identified, there is none that deals with the optimization of management bodies. This study analysed a series of binary systems that have faced/are facing similar challenges and identified the main trends related to the seven CCISP policy issues previously mentioned File, Weert, & Vossensteyn (2013, p.123/124).

iii) EUA/CRUP – regarding the latter, it does not differ from what has already been mentioned with the other reports analysed here. It also does not specifically comment on the management bodies of HEIs, either in terms of it concerns commenting on how its functioning could be optimized, or proposing organic changes that could improve it. However, it appears that it pronounces on the degree of autonomy, as already seen, and on the review of the RJIES in which, specifically, to allow the implementation and incorporation of major reforms, they considered that the RJIES should not be reviewed until the next scheduled review date (2017). Moreover,, if changes to the legal framework are planned in the meantime, the degree of autonomy enshrined in current legislation should be maintained and reinforced (Blattler et al, 2013, p. 8). It was also recommended that the autonomies granted by RJIES by the government for a further period of five years, so that viable strategic planning could take place at institutional, regional and national levels, and that due impact assessment and wide consultation take place before any changes to the law were made, as well as the government commit to maintaining a stable legal framework which includes the existence of Foundations.

4. Proposed Recommendations for Changes of the RJIES

None of the results presented in the previous section surprise us either. In fact, for example, over time, the method of election/appointment of the rector/president has never been peaceful, namely whether it should be the result of a broad election, directly by the entire community, or indirectly, in this case by a greater or lesser number of participants. There have always been defenders of both solutions. In view of all these results, in addition to the perception that we have been building over the years and the importance of finding a solution that is feasible and easily accepted by HEIs, we believe it is necessary to propose the following recommendations regarding changes to the organization of institutions:

- i) As a first principle, the PHEIs (of an associative or foundational nature) must be left to choose the organization they best consider adopting to pursue the purposes of that specific institution, simply defining “minimums”, becoming recognised as such the bodies of the HEIs for auditing (until now already existing, but not included in the organic structure;
- ii) In these “minimums” there will be a deliberation, control and supervision body (general and supervisory council) with a legally established maximum and minimum number of members, just as in associative-type PHEIs there will be an assembly, as opposed to the board of trustees existing in PHEIs foundation type, maximum bodies guaranteeing the greater autonomy that is sought to be granted to the HEIs and which assume powers hither to held by the responsible minister, and it is established that the election of members of the different bodies, whether representing or not, must be done by single-member election and not by lists;
- iii) The rector/president body must be maintained for HEIs either a university or polytechnic nature, respectively, and the law does not provide for any further differences between university and polytechnic HEIs, other than those that may arise from the statutory autonomy of the institutions;
- iv) External elements must be a majority in the bodies in which they participate, under penalty of seeing their role diminished or even neutralized, and the current form of co-optation must be changed, as well as ensuring that they are “true” external, it is that is, from outside the higher education system and are not linked to any national legislative body;

v) Finally to put an end to the current distortion of the general council, which is practically elected/chosen thinking about the personality to be elected as rector/president, this process must require the intervention of two bodies, one of which is responsible for proposing, through a selection process, a maximum of three names from among the candidates and at the end approve the election (assembly or board of trustees, which has the same powers as the first) and the other (general and supervisory council) who is responsible for electing/nominating from among the names proposed (a solution that can be observed in countries such as Austria (Pedrosa et al, 2012), (Krüger, Parellada, Samoilovich, & Sursock, 2018).

In Table 2, recommendations for change are proposed, with regard to the election of the rector/president:

Table 2: Recommendations for changes of the RJIES

Article 80-B	
Competence of the assembly	
1 – The assembly is responsible for, among other powers assigned by the institution's statutes:	
a) Approve the public announcement for the recruitment of the rector, director or president, prepared by the general and supervisory council, with precise rules regarding deadlines and procedures, and prepare the recruitment and selection process from the list of up to three candidates to be elected by the general and supervisory council;	
b) Approve the deliberations of the general and supervisory council on the election and dismissal of the rector, director or president.	
(…)	
Section III (formerly Section II)	
General and supervisory council	
Article 82	
Competence of the general and supervisory council	
1 — The general and supervisory council, among other powers assigned by the statutes of the higher education institution, is responsible for:	
(…)	
d) Elect the rector or president, in accordance with the law, statutes and applicable regulations, from among the names presented to him by the assembly, resulting from the selection process, as well as approve his dismissal, in accordance with the law and regulations statutes;	
(…)	
Section IV (formerly Section III)	
Rector and President	
Article 85	
[...]	
1 — The rector of the university or university institute or the president of the polytechnic university or polytechnic institute is the highest governing and external representation body of the respective institution.	
2 — The rector or president is the body that conducts the institution's policy and presides over the collegiate executive body.	
Article 86	
Selection and election process	
1 — The rector or president is elected by the general and supervisory council from among the candidates selected by the assembly, under the terms established by the statutes of each institution and according to the procedure set out in the competent regulations.	
2 — The selection and election process include, in particular:	
a) The public announcement of the opening of applications;	
b) The methods used by the assembly to evaluate applications;	
c) Submission of applications;	
d) A pre-selection by the assembly of the higher education institution, within which up to three candidates must be selected;	

- e) The public hearing, by the general and supervisory council, of the candidates selected by the assembly, with presentation and discussion of their action program;
- f) The final vote of the general and supervisory council, by majority, by secret vote;
- g) The repetition, at the same meeting, of the final vote of the general and supervisory council, by secret vote, if none of the candidates manages to reach the majority of votes stipulated in the statutes to be elected.
- 3 — In order to evaluate the applications, the assembly assigns a specially designated committee to prepare an evaluation report.
- 4 — The methods used to evaluate applications are approved by the assembly, following a proposal from the committee specially designated for evaluating applications.
- 5 — Prior to evaluating the applications, the committee referred to in the previous paragraph examines the admission requirements for the selection and election process, excluding candidates who do not meet them.
- 6 — Appeals may be appealed against decisions to exclude the candidature assessment committee, with suspensive effect, to be lodged with the assembly, within two working days and to be decided, by an absolute majority of its members in full office, within ten working days.
- 7 — For the purposes of evaluating applications, the committee referred to in the previous paragraph must consider:
- a) Analysis of each candidate's curriculum vitae, particularly for the purposes of assessing their relevance to the exercise of the functions of rector/president and their merit;
- b) Analysis of the action program proposed by the candidate.
- 8 — After assessing the elements referred to in the previous paragraph, the commission prepares an evaluation report on the candidates, which is presented to the assembly, justifying, for each one, the reasons that recommend or not recommend their election.
- 9 — Without prejudice to the expression of an evaluative judgment on the applications under consideration, the committee cannot, in the report provided for in the previous paragraph, rank the candidates.
- 10 — The commission may consider in the evaluation report that none of the candidates meets the conditions to be elected.
- 11 — After delivering the evaluation report to the assembly, it carries out its discussion and assessment and proceeds, by secret vote, to choose the three names to be proposed to the general and supervisory council, which will be the three candidates with the most votes.
- 12 — If there are only three candidates or less, they will all be proposed to the general and supervisory council, with voting taking place only to determine the number of votes obtained by the candidates or by the single candidate.
- 13 — If there are more than three candidates and there is a tie in the votes that determines the choice, a new vote will be held immediately to break the tie and, if this persists, the chairman of the assembly will cast the tie-breaking vote.
- 14 — Rectors of a university or presidents of a polytechnic university or a polytechnic institute may be elected:
- a) Professors and researchers from the institution itself or from other institutions, national or foreign, of higher education or research;
- b) Individuals of recognized merit and relevant professional experience.
- 15 — The following cannot be elected rector or president:
- a) Anyone who is retired;
- b) Anyone who has been convicted of a disciplinary, financial or criminal infraction while carrying out public or professional functions, within four years of serving the sentence;
- c) Anyone who incurs other ineligibility or incompatibilities provided for by law.
- 16 — If none of the candidates meets the majority of the general and supervisory council, provided for in the statutes, to be considered elected, a new electoral process will restart after a second final vote and if this majority is not reached again.
- 17 — The assembly may only refuse to approve the election of the rector or president based on ineligibility, illegality of the election process or violation of the general rules and principles of the Code of Administrative Procedure.

5. Conclusions

According to the literature, (please see Taylor et al.,2008), there is an evidence of a clear demonstration of the existence of a diversity of higher education models results. On the other hand, analysing the answers to the questions formulated within the scope of the survey and the interviews carried out, as well the reports prepared by Pedrosa et al (2012) and Amaral et al. (2023), it seems that the Portuguese HEIs have a model for electing the rector/president which, at the very least, is not consensual and which interferes with the very choice of members of the general council, particularly its external members. The survey shows that 31.6% agree that the

competencies/duties of the Rector/President provided for in the RJIES are inadequate for the good exercise of the position, a matter that is indifferent to 42.9%. Only 25.5% of respondents are in disagreement with the statement in question, with no further stance being taken with real impact regarding the process of electing the rector/president.

We can conclude from the interviews with the top directors of the HEIs, there is clearly no agreement with the method of electing the rector/president, as of the ten national directors interviewed, seven of the directors do not agree, two agree and one does not respond.

Analysing the reports of the OECD, CHEPS/CCISP and EUA/CRUP there is no great importance attributed to the process of electing the rector/president, and the OECD report highlights the changes introduced by the RJIES to this process and which, according to they say, intended to create the conditions for the selection of personalities from outside the HEIs.

Therefore, recommendations for changes regarding the process of election/appointment of the rector/president are presented:

- i. The election of the rector/president changes and takes place before two different bodies of the PHEIs, the assembly or board of trustees, on the one hand, and the general and supervisory council, on the other;
- ii. The aim is, this way, to put an end to the enormous dependence that currently exists on the election/choice of members of the general council, almost always linked to the subsequent election of the rector/president, which some intend to ensure in advance, through the election/choice of certain members, particularly external ones, who are almost exclusively chosen based on the guarantees they give of voting for a particular candidate;
- iii. In this new process it will then be up to the university or polytechnic institute assembly, or the board of trustees in the case of foundational HEIs, to approve the public advertisement for the recruitment of the rector/president, prepared by the general and supervisory council, with precise rules regarding deadlines and procedures, and prepare the process of recruitment and selection of the list of up to three candidates to be elected by the general and supervisory council, as well as, subsequently, approve the deliberations of the general election (and dismissal) council of the rector/president;
- iv. The general and supervisory council elects the rector/president, in accordance with the law, statutes and applicable regulations, from among the names presented to it by the assembly or board of trustees, resulting from the selection process, as well as approving his or her dismissal, in accordance with the law and statutes;
- v. Therefore, it should be noted that the assembly or the board of trustees is responsible for a committee, specially designated for this purpose, to prepare an evaluation report using the methods approved by the assembly, on the proposal of that committee, and is responsible, prior to the assessment of the applications, examine the admission requirements for the selection and election process, excluding candidates who do not meet them;
- vi. In this evaluation report of the candidates, which is presented to the assembly, the reasons for which or not to recommend their election are based, for each one, and, without prejudice to the expression of an evaluative judgment on the candidacies under consideration, the commission cannot, in this report, rank the candidates, but may consider that none of them meets the conditions to be elected. After delivering the evaluation report to the assembly, it carries out its discussion and assessment and proceeds, by secret vote, to choose the three names to be proposed to the general and supervisory council, which will be the three candidates with the most votes or the existing candidates if fewer in number;
- vii. It is then on the names on this list that the general and supervisory council will vote, and if none of the candidates meets the majority foreseen in the statutes, to be considered elected, a new electoral process will restart after a second final voting.

The change in the legal regime for electing the rector/president proposed here aims to eliminate what many identify as a constraint in the functioning of the general council, having opted for the solution of two different bodies to the detriment of the direct election, desired by many, as it is understood that the election of someone external to the institution may have merit in some situations, which, if a direct election were chosen, would remain a mere academic hypothesis, very difficult to implement.

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