

Article

# Social Commitment at Higher Education Institutions: Analysis of Their Strategic Plans

Adela García-Aracil <sup>1,\*</sup>, Rosa Isusi-Fagoaga <sup>2</sup>, Sílvia Monteiro <sup>3</sup> and Leandro Almeida <sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Institute of Innovation and Knowledge Management (INGENIO, CSIC-UPV), Universitat Politècnica de València, 46022 Valencia, Spain

<sup>2</sup> University Institute of Educational Creativity and Innovation (IUCIE), Universitat de València, 46022 Valencia, Spain; rosa.isusi@uv.es

<sup>3</sup> Research Center on Education, University of Minho, 4710-070 Braga, Portugal; silviamonteiro@ie.uminho.pt

<sup>4</sup> Psychology Research Centre, University of Minho, 4710-070 Braga, Portugal; leandro@ie.uminho.pt

\* Correspondence: agarcia@ingenio.upv.es

**Abstract:** The social contribution of higher education institutions (HEIs) tends to be constrained as a description of HEI activities in terms of outcomes, but no examination of how HEIs face societal problems through collaborative activities has been addressed. One way to explore social strategy pursued by HEIs is through the analysis of their strategic plans. We analyze the strategic plans of public HEIs in Portugal and Spain due to their similarities after the 2008 international financial crisis, which led to a major recession and gave rise to social actions to address societal problems. In doing so, we propose a framework that could guide future research in providing empirical evidence on the formulation, articulation, and implementation of social issues in institutional strategic plans. We interviewed HEI representatives to confirm some of our findings, highlighting several factors that enhance or suppress the attainment of social issues. Our research shows that HEI responses to social commitment differ according to each institution's regulations and social circumstances. We aspire to encourage management scholars to engage in tackling social strategy through their collaborative activities.

**Keywords:** higher education; social issues; strategic planning; social strategy; Portugal; Spain



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## 1. Introduction

Higher education institutions (HEIs) have several roles beyond educating students. They are affiliated with three unique but interconnected missions: (i) teaching and learning, (ii) research, and (iii) the third mission—knowledge transfer and engagement with external agents [1,2]. Interest in terms of knowledge transfer has grown by the interaction of different stakeholders to benefit society as a whole [2–4]. How HEIs contribute to social development to increase the capacities of individuals and society groups to live better lives, receive quality education, enjoy decent work, good health and wellbeing, all while helping to reduce the impact of climate change and environmental risks, all of which are related to the United Nations sustainable development goals (SDGs) [5], needs to be better understood.

Some authors argue that the contribution of HEIs to social development can be understood in terms of their capacity to contribute to social innovation [6–8]. Social innovation requires a commitment to solving social problems, most of which involve a complex web of interactions that allow for several interventions based on the combined input of multiple disciplines [4,9,10]. In this context, HEIs are well placed to generate such engagement [11]. The idea of university social responsibility (USR) also implies a responsibility to improve people's lives and solve global problems [12]. Therefore, the development of a sustainability strategy and the integration of social responsibility into HEIs governance are essential for HEI management [13]. Strategic planning is an important tool for managing HEIs to

ensure they survive, thrive, and compete [14,15]. Since 2010, several HEIs have published online their strategic plans, which allows for identifying HEIs' strategies related to social commitment.

This paper examines some social keywords as a benchmark of the relevance of social issues in HEIs' strategic plans. We focus our study on two southern European countries: Portugal and Spain. These countries were selected for their similarities following the 2008 international financial crisis, which led to a major recession and gave rise to social actions to address basic societal needs and meet the demands of society's most vulnerable groups (the unemployed, the elderly, ethnic minorities, women, etc.). In both countries, grassroots movements, NGOs, and social initiatives emerged to provide support for those most affected by unemployment, poverty, and social exclusion. Additionally, community-driven efforts and solidarity initiatives tried to fill in gaps left by national government austerity measures [16]. In this framework, Portuguese and Spanish HEIs played a significant role in community-driven efforts, from advocating for policies that supported social welfare, sustainable economic growth, and job creation to the setup of innovation hubs, startups, and incubators encouraging entrepreneurial activities [2]. However, despite claims about the relevance of a strategic perspective on social commitment, we know very little about strategic goal setting and the link to HEI characteristics. Since HEIs differ along various dimensions including the teaching and learning approaches, the scale and focus on HEI research and the level of their experience of technological innovation suggest that their engagement in social development differs. Our research questions are: (i) whether and to what extent HEI characteristics (e.g., age, university type) matter for the social strategy pursued, and (ii) what lessons can be learned from the different HE regulatory models in Portugal and Spain. We study the behavior of public HEIs in Portugal and Spain based on analysis of their strategic plans. Private universities are not analyzed due to non-availability of their strategic plans online. We contribute to research on the HE systems in Portugal and Spain, and provide data that could enhance the management of knowledge transfer activities at the institutional, regional, national, and European levels.

The remainder of the paper is organized as follows. The next section describes the relevance of strategic planning as a tool for HEIs management, and provides a description of the Portuguese and Spanish HE system. We then describe our methodology approach and present the results. The last section discusses our findings, the limitations of our study, and recommendations for further research.

## 2. Strategic Planning in Higher Education Institutions

How HEIs are responding to new societal demands has implications for their structure and administration [14,17]. Some HEIs have a strong local or regional focus, which influences their activities and specialisms; others aspire to becoming international actors [18]; and yet others have adjusted their internal procedures or adopted new administrative methods (new management) [19,20] or transformed their organizations into entrepreneurial universities [21,22].

Strategic planning identifies the institution's major directions. Although strategic planning processes are designed to meet the specific needs of the individual university, there are certain features common to every successful 'model', such as the identification of the institutional vision and missions [23], and the formulation of strategies, goals, and action plans. The strategic planning process also helps identify the university's position and strengths within the wider university community. However, the literature refers to a 'desirable' university model and the 'superfluous' diversity of universities [18]. In this paper, we analyze whether Portuguese and Spanish public universities are adopting a similar ('desirable') university model or differentiating themselves in addressing social issues.

### 2.1. Strategic Planning in the Portuguese Higher Education System

The Portuguese higher education system (HES) includes 39 universities and 67 polytechnics in the public and private sectors. In general, university education promotes

research and knowledge development, and polytechnics conduct applied R&D aimed at specific problems.

The expansion of the HES in Portugal occurred mainly after the 1974 revolution. Up to that time, Portugal had only three public universities. This expansion allowed the democratization of HE including access by disadvantaged socio-cultural groups formerly excluded from HE. The Law 108/1988 made universities independent of government and the central administration [24], and defined their mission as involving the creation, transmission, and dissemination of culture, science, and technology. Universities had to provide services to the community as a way of common appreciation.

The Portuguese HES consolidated its integration to the EU in 2005, which resulted in stronger, more autonomous institutions, and inclusion of more disciplines in line with the Bologna Declaration [24]. A legal HE framework, REJIES (Regime Jurídico das Instituições de Ensino Superior), to establish and organize the HES, was approved in 2007. This law defined the two systems in place: polytechnic (undergraduate and master's education) and university (undergraduate, master's, and doctoral education). Despite being described as autonomous, the law made HEIs subject to government supervision, accreditation, and external assessment. Also, in 2007, the HEI General Councils were established, including representatives of professors and researchers, students, and renowned external actors (up to 30%) with relevant knowledge and experience. The general councils are responsible for assessing university rectors' actions, and approval of strategic plans, activity plans, and budget proposals.

Quality assurance related to HES study programs is managed by the Agência de Avaliação e Acreditação do Ensino Superior (A3ES agency), a private and independent entity that assesses and recognizes HE study programs. The Science and Technology Foundation is the Portuguese public agency that supports science, technology, and innovation in all scientific domains through research projects, advanced training, scientific employment, research units, and international cooperation activities. As a consequence, a number of strategic issues arose, including the broad concept of European integration, research collaboration, interdisciplinary curricular developments, business–institutional partnerships, and trans-national degrees, which remain some of the issues facing the contemporary Portuguese HEIs [23]. However, additional perspective is needed to analyze the way that strategic plans address social issues associated with the role of Portuguese HEIs in their local and regional context.

## *2.2. Strategic Planning in the Spanish Higher Education System*

The Spanish HES is comprised mostly of universities. In 2020, there were 84 universities 50 public and 34 private ones [25]. Nine of these universities were established in the 16th century; only six public universities and four private universities were founded between then and 1968. Before the 1970s, the HES had a 'Napoleonic' organization, and universities were regulated by laws and standards issued by the state [26]. Unlike many other countries, the 19th century and the industrial revolution did not result in the emergence of new institutions. A new model emerged in the 1970s with the shift from an elite system to mass HE. An important legal reform was completed in 1983, the approval of the University Reform Act (Ley de Reforma Universitaria, LRU), which contributed to introducing democratization of the internal structure of universities and moving from direct state intervention to institutional autonomy, with the goal of enhancing HE quality. To introduce a culture of assessment and quality improvements, in 1995 the Council of Universities created the National Program for the Assessment of Quality in Universities [27].

In the first years of the new millennium, Spanish universities found themselves in a new context as a result of the accreditation of official qualifications by the legal framework (Ley de Ordenación Universitaria, LOU) formulated by central government towards the end of 2001 and restructured in 2007 (LOMLOU 2007). The LOU established the universities' main directions and strategic lines. It might be assumed that the proliferation of university strategic plans was a response to a legal obligation [28]. The National Agency for Quality

Assessment and Accreditation (ANECA) was created in 2002 to encourage universities to monitor their own performance and contribute to improving the quality of the Spanish HES [1]. Further reforms include the enactment in 2009 of the Spanish Strategy University Framework to encourage the exploitation of university knowledge by industry and the universities' commitment to supporting their regions [29].

Therefore, the development of strategic plans for Spanish universities is seen as one of the tools for defining future performance and constructing a roadmap to guide university routines [1]. We guess that the analysis of university strategic planning could improve the ability of the university to meet the demands of its internal and external stakeholders, and, thus, its contribution to its community.

### 3. Method—A Framework to Study Social Commitment

#### 3.1. Sample and Method

By searching the websites of 106 Portuguese and 84 Spanish HEIs, we identified those public institutions with downloadable strategic plans. We analyzed the most recent ones, created since 2010. This resulted in a sample of 29 Portuguese and 47 Spanish public universities, representing 71% and 92% of Portuguese and Spanish public HEIs (list of universities available upon request). We used content analysis techniques to analyze the strategic plans following the general sections associated with vision and mission statement, objectives, and strategic issues. We first conducted a categorization process, which provided a corpus of material enabling identification of categories and keywords for each strategic plan. To identify common patterns within and between plan sections, individual sections were analyzed and categorized according to whether they reflected a common value or significant pattern of language use.

#### 3.2. Coding

Universities social commitment activities can be addressed to various aims such as services to faculty or to students, innovation, practical application of research results, local socio-economic development, compliance with national and institutional policies, and promotion of public value [30]. In this context, we developed a word-cloud showing the occurrence of a word as a ratio to the total number of words in each plan (excluding words of common usage, such as “the”, “and”, etc.). Then, we obtained a list of 74 major research themes or keywords for the Portuguese and Spanish strategic plans aimed at social commitment both in its own practices and offerings, such as learning and education and conduct of research, and those activities for the benefit of society such as innovative products or services and social inclusion, among others. This was necessitated by the large number of idiosyncratic keywords and characteristics of the universities such as generalist vs. specialist, old vs. young, central vs. peripheral, small vs. large, etc. The initial list of keywords was made by iteratively sorting individually and regrouping them into coherent categories to minimize redundancies and to ensure adequate representativeness of social practices [31]. This list was reviewed by independent strategic management experts from some of the universities selected for our study [30]. After several rounds of discussion with these experts, a final list of 35 major keywords was identified. These experts were also consulted to corroborate some of our findings presented below. All data processing and analysis (including interviews) was addressed from autumn 2021 to spring 2022. The list of 35 major keywords were grouped into six categories as follows (see Table 1): teaching approach, research practices, innovation strategies to core business, addressing social needs, external communication, and organizational social commitment.

**Table 1.** List of keywords by categories.

Category	Keywords
Teaching approach	Learning; teaching innovation; innovative education; service learning
Research practices	Research innovation; collaborative research
Innovation strategies to core business	Technological innovation; open innovation; business innovation; transfer; collaborative projects
Addressing social needs	Social innovation; society; social challenge; social demand; social interest; social project; social agent; social development; social inclusion; social exclusion; social entrepreneurship; social structure; social change; social environment; social equity; social participation
External communication	Social web; social network
Organizational social commitment	Social responsibility; social commitment; social character; social recognition; social action; social model

Therefore, the objective of this paper is to analyze the relevance given by Portuguese and Spanish public universities in addressing social issues by exploring the relationship between those keywords and the universities activities in the six categories listed above. The coding process raised several questions: (i) is there any relationship between Spanish public universities age and the relevance in regulate social actions in its strategic plan? Can we distinguish between polytechnics and universities in Portugal? We show below the influence of the above-mentioned universities' characteristics in each country.

#### 4. Results

Based on the six categories proposed and the related keywords, Tables 2–7 present the number of institutions with a particular keyword in their strategic plans (N) and the weighted frequency (%), representation of the total keyword frequency divided by the number of institutions, <1968 or  $\geq 1968$  in the Spanish case, or universities or polytechnics in the Portuguese case). To go deeper, our findings were also discussed with HEIs' experts in management by online interviews.

##### 4.1. Teaching Approach

For the teaching approach category, Table 2 shows that the keyword with the highest frequency in both Portuguese and Spanish HEIs is learning, since the traditional mission of HEIs is to educate students. Keywords related to teaching innovation, innovative education, and service-learning are less frequent, although contemporary HEIs are rethinking their duty to educate students to become responsible citizens and solvers of specific social problems [32]. Among Spanish public universities, the oldest universities remain more focused on traditional learning, although HEIs experts argued that they are expanding to include service-learning approach to increase students' engagement in community service, and, in turn, increase student learning that is at the disposal of society. This confirms the findings in Chiva-Bartoll, Pallarès-Piquer, and Gil-Gómez [33]. However, integration of information and communication technologies (ICT) in HE and their impact on pedagogical methods applies more to the youngest Spanish public universities compared to the oldest ones, as it is shown by the keywords of teaching innovation and innovative education. Among Portuguese public HEIs, polytechnics' strategic plans are more focused on a service-learning approach. This result was expected due to the fact that polytechnics were established to provide training linked closely to social, economic, and regional needs, and focused on "know-how" [34]. Although both subsystems—university and polytechnic—have similar missions, universities emphasize academic knowledge, and science, technology, and research, while polytechnics emphasize professional knowledge and knowledge transfer. Therefore, our results confirm that innovative teaching approaches are associated with the curricula offered by the HEIs. This is in line with the finding in Aleixo, Azeiteiro, and Leal [35] and Qiu, García-Aracil, and Isusi-Fagoaga [36].

**Table 2.** Number and distribution of keywords for the teaching approach category.

Keywords	Spanish Public Universities				Portuguese Public HEIs				SP	PT
	<1968 (n = 12)		≥1968 (n = 35)		Univ. (n = 14)		Polytech. (n = 15)		(n = 47)	(n = 29)
	N°	%	N°	%	N°	%	N°	%	%	%
Learning	11	11.08	25	5.20	14	8.05	14	11.93	6.70	9.76
Teaching innovation	2	0.83	20	1.88	2	0.11	0	0.00	1.61	0.05
Innovative education	2	0.58	6	0.62	0	0.00	0	0.00	0.61	0.00
Service-learning	3	0.33	1	0.02	0	0.00	1	0.33	0.10	0.14
Total teach. approach	--	12.83	--	7.74	--	8.16	--	12.27	9.04	9.97

#### 4.2. Research Practices

For the research practices category, if we compare ‘collaborative research’ with respect to ‘research innovation’, Table 3 shows that the idea of being collaborative starts to appear in the strategic plans. Among Spanish public universities, those that were established after 1970 tend to be less collaborative, due possibly to the competition among HEIs and the fact that university strategies are aimed at improving rankings [37]. It could be argued also that the oldest Spanish public universities are more likely to enhance ‘collaborative research’ with firms because they mainly focus on fundamental and basic research projects with positive effects on long-term innovation performance [38,39]. This has several implications for those involved in university–industry collaborations. Collaborative research could be also aimed at satisfying societal needs and problem solving. Among the Portuguese public HEIs, although the precise keyword indicating ‘research innovation’ is not included in the strategic plans analyzed due to the pattern language used in the Portuguese managerial documents (in this particular case ‘*inovação em pesquisa/investigação*’), it is possible to indicate that universities are trying to encourage a little more ‘collaborative research’ in their strategic plans in comparison to the polytechnic institutions. One possible explanation may be the nature of the Portuguese HEIs—universities emphasizing science and research, and polytechnics emphasizing knowledge transfer. This finding is in line with the one in Franco and Haase [40], who analyzed different types of both formal and informal collaboration between HEIs and industry.

**Table 3.** Number and distribution of keywords for the research practices category.

Keywords	Spanish Public Universities				Portuguese Public HEIs				SP	PT
	<1968 (n = 12)		≥1968 (n = 35)		Univ. (n = 14)		Polytech. (n = 15)		(n = 47)	(n = 29)
	N°	%	N°	%	N°	%	N°	%	%	%
Research innovation	1	0.08	2	0.14	0	0.00	0	0.00	0.13	0.00
Collaborative research	2	0.16	3	0.11	1	0.32	2	0.13	0.13	0.24
Total Research Practices	--	0.25	--	0.25	--	0.32	--	0.13	0.25	0.24

#### 4.3. Innovation Strategies to Core Business

In the category of innovation strategies to core business, Table 4 shows that ‘technological innovation’ and ‘business innovation’ are important for HEI competition [41]. Business and industry are primary sources of innovation and HEI funding for research and entrepreneurial capacity-building [42]. Moreover, open innovation strategies are transforming HEIs from ivory towers to knowledge brokers, where HEIs facilitate cooperation and knowledge sharing with other organizations via knowledge transfer and collaboration [43,44]. Table 4 shows that the ‘open innovation’, ‘collaborative projects’, and ‘transfer’

keywords are highly cited in the Spanish public HE system, with the former being the most popular among the youngest universities. The transfer is relevant in both Spain and Portugal in all HEI types, which indicates the aim of interacting with society to share services and reap reciprocal benefits, although the transfer is mostly from the university to society. In the Spanish context, most transfer activities are undertaken by the oldest Spanish public universities. One of the explanations of the relevance of the transfer issue among the Spanish public universities is due to the recent Spanish national pilot call in 2019, the so-called ‘knowledge transfer sexenio’ (six-year term for evaluating teachers’ and researchers’ activities with direct impact on society, excluding formal teaching and research publications), together with the growing interest in addressing SDGs as a key strategy and assessment of organizations’ performance [45]. Among the Portuguese public HE system, and particularly in recent years, SDGs have assumed increasing relevance in various aspects of university institutions, more oriented towards research and development, to the extent that missions of research centres are guided by them, with repercussions for funding and scientific production.

**Table 4.** Number and distribution of keywords for the innovation strategies to the core business category.

Keywords	Spanish Public Universities				Portuguese Public HEIs				SP	PT
	<1968 (n = 12)		≥1968 (n = 35)		Univ. (n = 14)		Polytech. (n = 15)		(n = 47)	(n = 29)
	N°	%	N°	%	N°	%	N°	%	%	%
Technological innovation	3	0.41	6	0.37	7	0.86	1	0.07	0.38	0.45
Business innovation	2	0.16	2	0.37	2	0.14	2	0.13	0.11	0.14
Collaborative projects	0	0.00	5	0.28	0	0.00	2	0.13	0.21	0.07
Open innovation	1	0.08	9	1.14	0	0.00	0	0.00	0.00	0.00
Transfer	10	33.33	30	21.28	14	8.29	14	0.93	24.36	4.72
Total Innovation strategies	--	34.00	--	23.17	--	9.79	--	1.27	25.94	5.38

#### 4.4. Addressing Social Needs

Table 5 shows that the social needs keywords are prominent in the strategic plans of HEIs in both Portugal and Spain. Societies across the world are faced with climate change, income inequalities, and demographic changes described commonly as ‘grand challenges’ and addressed by the SDGs [5]. These problems call for new collaborative approaches, organizational forms, and perspectives on the use of resources [46]. The role played by HEIs has evolved considerably since the early 2000s when social innovation began to attract attention as the source of new goods, markets, processes, and services able to drive structural changes to societal systems [47]. In both Spain and Portugal, the terms ‘society’ and ‘social environment’ are the most frequent keywords, but this may not translate into a little general concern for some specific action plans associated with social inclusion, social exclusion, or social equity. However, it should be interpreted that HEIs are opening to the social realities and concerns. In Spain, the focus on social issues differs between the oldest and the youngest universities. This might be due, in part, to the fact that the latter understand university engagement as general commitment to the creation of new technologies and in part to the fact that universities do not understand the particularities of social innovation systems [47]. It is possible that the youngest universities are unable to distinguish among different innovation mechanisms, or to create technology transfer offices that prioritize technological innovation over social innovation. However, the differences in the relevance of social issues in the Portuguese case (see Table 5) show that polytechnics compared to universities assign higher importance to the social environment. This might be because polytechnics traditionally focus more on direct interaction with society and local industry and contribute actively to the resolution of the problems faced by different

organizations in the performance of their functions. Polytechnics also tend to be more recent institutions, which emerge in response to regional and local needs. Universities tend to focus on the development of human capital in the region as a whole, and to overlook specific needs—indicated by the frequency of the term ‘society’ in their strategic plans. Universities are more involved in scientific and technological developments [8] and contributing at the national and international rather than the regional level. Most Portuguese enterprises are small or medium-sized; large enterprises are confined to coastal urban centers, where the largest universities are concentrated more on university–industry collaborations rather than local and regional needs as polytechnics do (this finding is also corroborated for the keywords shown in Tables 3 and 4).

**Table 5.** Number and distribution of keywords for addressing social needs.

Keywords	Spanish Public Universities				Portuguese Public HEIs				SP	PT
	<1968 (n = 12)		≥1968 (n = 35)		Univ. (n = 14)		Polytech. (n = 15)		(n = 47)	(n = 29)
	N°	%	N°	%	N°	%	N°	%	%	%
Social innovation	1	0.41	1	0.02	3	1.00	3	1.27	0.13	1.14
Society	11	33.58	34	23.51	14	26.00	14	14.80	26.09	20.21
Social challenge + social demand + social interest	9	2.00	22	1.63	9	3.21	11	1.00	1.72	2.03
Social project + social agent	1	0.16	0	0.00	2	0.21	0	0.00	0.15	0.10
Social development	7	1.16	10	0.54	6	1.71	3	0.16	0.20	0.93
Social inclusion + social exclusion	4	0.33	8	0.23	5	0.36	10	0.67	0.26	0.45
Social entrepreneurship	1	0.25	3	0.11	1	0.07	3	0.53	0.15	0.14
Social structure + social change	9	0.75	21	0.60	3	0.21	13	0.87	0.64	0.55
Social environment	10	22.41	30	16.34	3	1.43	14	5.93	17.89	3.76
Social equity	4	0.50	17	0.74	7	1.00	6	0.73	0.68	0.86
Social participation	3	0.66	9	0.42	1	0.07	0	0.13	0.13	0.10
Total addressing social needs	--	63.75	--	44.74	--	42.29	--	26.13	49.60	30.27

#### 4.5. External Communication

Table 6 shows that the keywords associated with external communication refer to global communication, which has gained ground at HEIs in the last twenty years [48]. Social media has become relevant to enhancing social networking and websites have become more prominent in HEIs as a way to share information and increase HEIs’ activity visibility [49]. We can see that social media strategies are generally well represented in HEI management plans in both countries. Use of social networking sites has opened multiple opportunities for HEI provision of in-class support and distribution of teaching materials, access to scientific publications, tools for new students and student recruitment, exchanges of information to foster collaboration, and communicating HEI activities to increase competitiveness, etc. [50]. Table 6 shows that the oldest Spanish public universities use social media more frequently to advertise their offers and create a brand image. This is confirmed by a study of use of web 2.0 tools in world universities, which found that the oldest universities are better at exploiting social media in their libraries [51]. In Portugal keyword frequencies are very close in both types of institutions: universities and polytechnics. In general, it could be said that the expansion and massive use of digital tools has equally triggered Portuguese HEIs investment in new communication processes and infrastructures related to teaching and research.



**Table 6.** Number and distribution of keywords for the external communication category.

Keywords	Spanish Public Universities				Portuguese Public HEIs				SP	PT
	<1968 (n = 12)		≥1968 (n = 35)		Univ. (n = 14)		Polytech. (n = 15)		(n = 47)	(n = 29)
	N°	%	N°	%	N°	%	N°	%	%	%
Social web	8	3.25	27	3.14	6	1.50	6	2.20	3.17	1.86
Social network	11	12.67	30	9.45	14	16.00	15	14.53	10.28	15.24
Total external communication	--	15.91	--	12.60	--	17.50	--	16.73	13.45	17.10

#### 4.6. Organizational Social Commitment

For the category organizational social commitment, Table 7 shows that ‘social responsibility’ is increasingly important in HEIs’ strategic plans, and figures in the global discussion on competitiveness and sustainability [52]. The youngest Spanish public universities are giving more relevance to social commitment and social engagement. This might be due to the more rigid hierarchical arrangements and bureaucracy place in the oldest Spanish public universities; that is, hierarchical culture could be influenced for some prevailing climates based on benevolence for the youngest public Spanish universities, while the oldest Spanish universities are more based on principles [15,53]. Schneider et al. [53] (p. 381) claim that ‘organizational climate emerges in organizations through a social information process that concerns the meaning employees attach to the policies, practices and procedures they experience, and the behaviors they observe being rewarded, supported and expected’. Since then, numerous studies have suggested that different organizational climates have different effects on organization members [54,55] and on the HEI’s commitment to its societal role. This applies also to Portuguese public universities but not polytechnics. Although polytechnics have a stronger focus on societal and local industry needs, organizational commitment is stronger in university institutions. This commitment and HEI research activities are guided by the SDGs [56]. University institutions are more dependent than polytechnic institutions on private funds, which might also explain their strong commitment [35]. It should be noted also that in Portugal, HEIs’ social actions are geared mostly to student support services such as accommodation, food, sport, and grants to reduce tuition fees, which perhaps explains the high frequency of references to ‘social action’. On the other hand, polytechnics and universities in Portugal have generalized the provision of medical and/or psychological support services and in the latter case made these available to the local community. This is important in the context of the low household incomes in Portugal compared to other European countries, supporting HE among disadvantaged social groups. Government and institutions take the view that it is not enough to democratize access, but also the conditions of academic success, with this last concern being particularly addressed in the ‘social action’ keyword.

**Table 7.** Number and distribution of keywords for the organizational social commitment category.

Keyword	Spanish Public Universities				Portuguese Public HEIs				SP	PT
	<1968 (n = 12)		≥1968 (n = 35)		Univ. (n = 14)		Polytech. (n = 15)		(n = 47)	(n = 29)
	N°	%	N°	%	N°	%	N°	%	%	%
Social responsibility	8	4.91	24	5.54	10	3.93	11	1.42	5.38	2.83
Social commitment	9	1.50	25	2.45	1	0.14	3	0.16	2.21	0.17
Social character	2	0.50	3	0.11	2	0.14	1	0.05	0.21	0.10
Social recognition	4	0.50	5	0.25	3	0.43	2	0.11	0.32	0.28
Social action	0	0.00	4	1.80	13	7.57	14	4.11	1.34	6.34
Social model	0	0.00	1	0.11	0	0.00	0	0.00	0.09	0.00
Total organizational commitment		7.41		10.20		12.21		5.84	9.47	9.72

## 5. Discussion and Conclusions

HEIs have been subject to a series of reforms to increase their social role and moral obligations in terms of satisfying social, ethical, economic, political, and environmental needs and problems. HEIs are social institutions responsible for the outcomes associated with their involvement in society. The literature describes strategic planning as important for HEI operational goals, objectives, and strategies based on appropriate policies, programs, and actions. In this paper, we examined whether Portuguese and Spanish public HEIs' include social issues in their strategic plans.

We found that the HEIs are socially responsible and seek to educate their students to be citizens in a global society by providing access to HE for the disadvantaged population (e.g., social equity, social inclusion, social exclusion), conducting research that involves and improves communities (e.g., collaborative research), and helping local communities to solve social problems (e.g., social innovation, social participation). We identified six categories: teaching approach, research practices, innovation strategies to core business, addressing social needs, external communication, and organizational social commitment. We split our analysis to consider whether the HEIs' characteristics influence pursuing social actions. In the case of the Spanish public HES, we focused on the differences between universities founded before and after 1968 (i.e., the oldest vs. the youngest); in the case of the Portuguese public HES, we identified differences between universities and polytechnic institutions.

On the one hand, analysis of their strategic plans shows that the oldest compared to the youngest Spanish public universities, and Portuguese public universities compared to polytechnics are mostly focused on traditional learning approaches, and highlight technological innovation, knowledge transfer, and social advancement (e.g., social development). Although reference to the relevance of a service-learning approach in their strategic plans is not frequent, the interviews with institutional experts confirmed its importance. This suggests that a service-learning approach is embryonic in both HE systems, and that institutional change should be implemented to support community engagement and identify new models for assessing students' educational experience in organized service activity, and adjust the roles, recognition, and rewards of faculty [30,57]. In the case of technological innovation, the oldest Spanish universities and the Portuguese universities seem more aware of its importance for economic growth, and the need for human resources accumulation. Although the literature stresses the complexity of the relationship between technological innovation and education, skills, work, and production for economic development, it is positive that strategic plans gathered this connection with the purpose of highlighting the role of HEIs in socio-economic development [1,18,56,58]. These institutions also give more priority in their strategic plans to 'transfer' and 'social development' to achieve sustainable development compared to the youngest Spanish universities and the Portuguese polytechnics [35,45]. This result should be interpreted with caution. It does not mean that technological innovation, transfer, and social development are not considered important by the youngest Spanish universities and the Portuguese polytechnics, but rather that they are assumed to be part of their regular responsibilities and mindset. Therefore, HEI characteristics matter for their social strategy.

On the other hand, we found similar patterns among the Spanish and the Portuguese public HEIs regarding research practices and external communication. In both systems, collaborative research is at an early stage. This is because Portuguese and Spanish HEIs need to prioritize competitiveness and quality according to their respective national quality agencies (A3ES in Portugal and ANECA in Spain). To survive, HEIs need to develop competitive strategies that are reflected in numerous submissions to calls for research and number of papers published in top academic journals, as determinants of award of tenure and promotion. This has resulted in some institutions neglecting societal aspects [22,40]. We suggest that HEIs should maintain their capacity to provide value for society through knowledge transfer and co-creation of knowledge involving different stakeholders—employers, social agents, students, policy makers, or other practitioners—to extend collaboration within institutions and among organizations.

Both HES have similar missions, the oldest Spanish universities and the Portuguese universities are more focused on scientific and technological knowledge and competitive research, and the youngest Spanish universities and the Portuguese polytechnics are more focused on professional knowledge and are closer to their local and regional institutions. This article provides new insights into the HEI characteristics that matter in terms of addressing social issues and highlights the need for better stakeholder participation. These improvements should include more collaborative research and collaborative projects, a focus on social innovation rather than only technological innovation oriented to marketization of the HE sector, increased social responsibility to achieve appropriate institutional responses to changing internal and external conditions, a greater commitment to social issues, and a further recognition and motivation of HEIs' staff for participating in non-economic activities that will benefit society and will also contribute to addressing the SDGs successfully. Moreover, both HESs can learn from each other the relevance of the knowledge transfer in all the activities implemented by HEIs, as is fostered in the Spanish HES, and providing training focused on know-how and designed to meet local socio-economics needs, as is promoted in the Portuguese HES.

#### *Limitations and Future Research*

Our study has some limitations, as the strategic plans typically cover the coming four to six years of activity and it is likely that over that time frame, the HEIs will adjust the plan to adapt to the context. The rates of the changes to the knowledge, social, political, and labor contexts suggest that although medium-term planning is required, institutions cannot be bound by it. They must be able to react quickly to changes to the social, economic, and political contexts. The COVID-19 pandemic is a stark reminder of this need for flexibility. The data analyzed were based on keywords and may not be a good representation of the content of the strategic plans. To obtain a better understanding of trends and developments in HEI activities, future research could examine the evolution of strategic plans regarding interactions with society. However, after developing our strategic plans' content analysis, it can be confirmed that the key elements regarding social environment, social network, social responsibility, social development, knowledge transfer, service-learning, and collaborative research are common good improvements in HEIs' answer to social demands. Portuguese and Spanish public HEIs are increasing their legitimacy in social issues by including the social approach in their strategic plans. The common patterns that we have found in our study corroborates that the EU's efforts in addressing the Agenda 2030 SDGs, and its inclusion as evaluation criteria in the Portuguese and Spanish national quality agencies ensure that HEIs are following a 'desirable' university model in the way they should address social issues for achieving institutions' desirable results. Management scholars are conflicted among profit and non-profit outcomes and results, but an effort has been made in engaging and recognizing the relevance in tackling social local problems, thereby contributing towards a more socially inclusive society.

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