

The last decades have witnessed the emergence of the private sector as a relevant reality in many higher education systems around the world. This is even the case of Europe, where the dominance of public provision has been more resilient. However, in many of those experiences most private institutions seem to be lured by the possibilities of rapid growth and often become associated with demand-absorption patterns. This creates an image that private institutions are basically fulfilling the demand that the public sector cannot or does not want to enrol.

This may become a vulnerable position, especially in those countries, as in the case of most European countries, where demographic declines may outpace increases in the enrolment rate per age cohort. In those cases, private institutions are expected to face a tighter market in terms of student demand, thus forcing them to rethink their mission and profile – in general a painful and lengthy process – if they want to survive. These problems will be analysed through the Portuguese experience. In this paper we analyse the strategies followed by private institutions in this country to tackle the decreasing student demand, in order to assess to what extent these institutions are trying to change their academic profile or rather pursuing similar strategies under different guises.