

Higher Education Systems and Institutions, São Tomé and Príncipe

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Without Abstract

São Tomé and Príncipe, officially the Democratic Republic of São Tomé and Príncipe, is a Portuguese-speaking island nation in the Gulf of Guinea approximately 150 miles off the western African coast. An archipelago with only 1001 square km of combined land area and an estimated population around 198,000 inhabitants, it is one of the smallest countries in the world. Since its independence from Portugal in 1975, the country has evolved from a one party, socialist state to a liberal, multiparty democracy assuring ample civil liberties and political rights.

In economic terms the World Bank ([2017](#)) describes São Tomé and Príncipe as a lower middle income developing country with a fragile economy. The main economic activities are the services sector, agriculture, fishing, and a recently growing tourism sector. The country imports most of its consumer goods and relies heavily in public expenditure as the main driver of growth. The life expectancy is 66.6 years and the adult literacy rate is around 91%.

Higher education in São Tomé and Príncipe is a very recent phenomenon. Until the mid-1990s the few Santomeans pursuing tertiary training were forced to do it abroad, namely in Portugal, France, or the USA and, particularly after the country's independence, also in communist countries such as the USSR or Cuba, through various scholarship programs. The development of higher education in São Tomé and Príncipe was thus largely neglected until recently. Nevertheless, the reduction of scholarship opportunities in foreign countries (namely after the collapse of the USSR) and the realization by the government that most of Santomeans studying abroad never returned have led the national authorities to pursue the development of a national higher education system. In 1994 the first higher education institution (HEI) was established, the "University Institute of Accounting, Business Administration and Computing" (IUCAI). It was followed in 1997 by the "Polytechnic Institute of São Tomé and Príncipe" (ISPSTP), initially devoted mainly to the training of teachers for primary and secondary education. The establishment of the ISPSTP resulted from cooperation with two Portuguese institutions, the University of Porto and the Polytechnic Institute of Bragança, which played a key role as advisors on curriculum design, administrative and organizational structure, and financial planning (Machado-Taylor et al. [2003](#)). The number and scope of the courses provided was subsequently augmented and in 2014 the government changed the status of ISPSTP turning it into the "University of São Tomé and Príncipe" (USTP) which still remains the only public HEI in the country. In 2005

the “Lusíada University of São Tomé” is created as a branch of a Portuguese private institution. These three institutions, one public and two private, are to this day the only HEIs in the country, which results in an extremely small and underdeveloped system, even taking into consideration the size of its population.

A Brief Overview of the System

The main difficulty when analyzing the system is the scarcity and inconsistency of the available data (Langa [2013](#)). Both the ministry of education and the institutions themselves lack a culture of gathering and reporting statistical data on higher education. The academic literature on the system is also largely insufficient.

Data concerning the academic programs offered by HEIs in São Tomé and Príncipe reveals that IUCAI, the first HEI to be established in the country, is a business-oriented small institution offering bachelor degrees in areas such as accounting, management, taxation and auditing, law, and a few engineering fields. The Polytechnic Institute of São Tomé and Príncipe started mainly as a vehicle for the training of teachers for primary and secondary education, as part of a wider strategy to both upgrade the literacy rates of the population and foster the development of an indigenous higher education system. In subsequent years the scope of the courses offered was broadened and to the original courses in Portuguese, French, history, geography, mathematics, and biology were added training opportunities in areas such as modern literature, business and administration, agronomy, physics, and chemistry. In 2014 the government has decided to create, in collaboration with the Brazilian Ministry of Education and two HEIs from that country, the “University of São Tomé and Príncipe” turning the polytechnic institute into one of the four organic units of the new public university. The other units comprise the “Superior Institute for Education and Communication” offering training primarily for teachers of basic education and the “Superior Institute for Health Sciences” offering bachelors in nursing, clinical analysis, health services’ management, and other health-related areas. The fourth unit is the “Research Centre for Development” a research facility founded by UNESCO and an Italian ONG in 1988 primarily focused in the agro-food area. As for the “Lusíada University of São Tomé” it is a business-oriented institution providing training also only at the bachelor level and in areas such as economics, business sciences, law, and computer science. In terms of overall enrolments levels in these institutions there is an almost absolute lack of data whether from official sources or otherwise. A notable exception is found in Langa ([2013](#)) in which based on anecdotal evidence the author was able to compare enrolment levels between 2006/2007 and 2011/2012 in the public and private subsectors. These data show that while in the beginning of that period the number of students enrolled in each subsector was relatively similar (around 600 or 700 students) in 2011/2012 the two private institutions already had more students (1050) than the public institution. However, it is not possible to verify if that situation is still prevailing or if the change in status of the public institution and the increase in the number and scope of the courses offered resulted in an increased number of students.

Higher Education Governance and Funding

São Tomé and Príncipe does not have a specific higher education law. The general law of education (Decree-Law 2/2003) defines the scope, purposes, academic degrees offered, and the typology of higher education institutions existent in the country. In general terms, and following trends in other

Lusophone countries, higher education is divided into university training, more scientifically and culturally oriented, and polytechnic training, of a more professional and technical nature (Teixeira and Videira [2015](#)).

The higher education system is supervised by the Ministry of Education, through the Directorate of Higher Education and Science which is mandated to “assure the design, execution and coordination of the policies concerning higher education and science” (MECC [2017](#)). However, the scarcity of the information available does not allow detailing how this supervision actually works (Langa [2013](#)). In official documents it is possible, however, to discern some of the Ministry’s main concerns surrounding the provision of higher education in the country. Among these are the recognition of a lack of strategic planning of the sector, the need to guarantee the quality of the training provided as well as its international recognition, and the need to invest in human resources development both at the level of the institutions and supervising authorities. These concerns were translated in a partnership established in 2017 between the Government and a Brazilian institution (“The Institute of Studies and Educational Research”) aiming at both evaluating the higher education system and helping to create a national evaluation and accreditation agency.

In terms of the financing of higher education there does not seem to exist a clear specific funding policy, apart from the significant amount allocated to the scholarships program for overseas studying (mostly through international donations) which tends to favor the higher education budget in terms of the overall spending on education (Espírito Santo [2014](#)). Even after the establishment of HEIs in the country this scholarships program remains, in spite of critiques made to it by various entities, a significant portion of the country’s overall expenditure on education and training.

Other relevant issues for the analysis of higher education in São Tomé such as the characterization of its main stakeholders (students, academics and administrative staff), teaching and learning, curriculum development, and innovation or internationalization are completely absent from official data or other sources and are thus impossible to analyze.

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