Alexandre Homem Cristo is a Portuguese active blogger who writes about research developments in and around education and its meaning for policy and practice.

He graduated in Political Science at the Portuguese Catholic University in Lisbon and took a MA degree in Comparative Politics at the Institute of Social Sciences (University of Lisbon).

Parallel with research projects in public policy and school autonomy, Alexandre Homem Cristo also collaborated (between 2009 and 2011) with the FLE (Freedom in Education) in research projects.

Only 26 years old, he was the youngest keynote speaker at the ECNAIS Conference in Warsaw in November 2011.

Alexandre’s presentation was centered on the theme “Space for market mechanisms in education: competitions, efficiency and effectiveness: value for money”.

Alexandre believes that freedom of choice means, first of all, having choices to choose from. Diversity is the answer and it should come first, before quality.

We are talking about freedom of Education and the importance of independent schools. But in Portugal, private schools are still related to elites...

Alexandre Homem Cristo: That is a big problem we have in Portugal. There is the idea that private schools are for an elite and that you have to pay a lot of money to have access to that type of education. However, that
idea is being crushed in most developed countries in Europe. Most schools are financed by the state but have total autonomy both in ideological and pedagogical methods.

**So, what is the problem in Portugal? Is there a misinterpretation of the word “independent”?**

*Alexandre Homem Cristo:* There is definitely a problem with the terminology. Portugal is a country that has a great tradition of private schools, many of them religious, and that can actually work as a block. Makes it much harder to twist mentalities. And we suffer from the myth that private schools, which are financed by the state, are getting rich. And that is just not true.

**And how do you change mentalities?**

*Alexandre Homem Cristo:* That is difficult. You cannot make people change their minds but you can prove them they are wrong. For that you need to invest in more information. Again in Portugal, the Ministry of Education does not release all the information it has about education in the country. And it is not because there are no numbers or studies, but simply because the information is not getting out. They have the student’s profiles and their family’s history, but the information is inside the building. And if the information got out, that could actually show the true reality of education in the country and start to change people’s opinion on the matter.

**So, if tomorrow you were given the title of Minister of Education in Portugal, what would be your first task?**

*Alexandre Homem Cristo:* First of all, I would free information. I would allow the diffusion of information regarding quality in schools, student’s profiles and so on. Then I would meet with all the private schools’ directors and ask them what do they need, which are the obstacles for their autonomy? Finally, I would try to implement a measure that is lacking in Portuguese education: the ability for headmasters to choose their teachers.
In your presentation you defended that diversity should come before quality. This has to be very well explained to parents, or it may scare them, right?

**Alexandre Homem Cristo:** Sure. I was not talking about neglecting quality in Education. What I meant by “diversity more than quality” was: it is urgent to achieve pluralism in Education. Diversity is a basic principle of democracy. Furthermore, pluralism is the only way to educate for the future. In Portugal, Education has been practically the same for decades. Education nowadays does not respond to society’s present needs.

The future is unknown, but it is obvious that if you have a society with pluralism in Education, you will have much more prepared citizens for whatever is coming. You will have all kinds of knowledge, preparation, talents, methods and so on.

**Your speech also approached the importance of marketing for schools. How important is it?**

**Alexandre Homem Cristo:** I think it is very important for schools to inform both parents and the community of what they are offering. And many times this “marketing” – I would call it good publicity - does not mean financial investment. For instance, you can open the doors for the community and let them see the space, meet the teachers, the students and the activities. And that is actually good, both for the people that can visit the institution and the students, who have the opportunity to mingle with different people.

Well, marketing immediately makes us think about markets. And today, markets immediately make us think about economic crisis. How do you convince the governments to invest in Education when all they talk about is cutting expenses?

**Alexandre Homem Cristo:** That is a very difficult question. Well, some of the biggest reforms in Education were made in times of social and economic crisis (Sweden and New Zealand are two good examples).
However, I must admit that in Portugal, for instance, the present crisis is much more severe than those in the past. I think it is going to be very difficult to convince the government to invest in all of what is needed in the Education system. Nevertheless you can already start with something. Releasing information, as I said earlier, is the first step. Then it is very important to give more autonomy to private schools. In Portugal, even the number of students per class or the schedules have to be approved by the Ministry of Education. That is absolutely unnecessary. And if we could change the mentality that private schools are not for the rich and finally be opened to diversity, freedom and autonomy in education, we would already be many years ahead.