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Student assessment in Portugal Academic practices and the influence of policy

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Presentation outline

- Research problem
- Background and rationale
- Methodology
- Findings
- Conclusions
- Implications

Research problem

- **What are the institutional and academic practices of student assessment in Portuguese HEIs in the aftermath of European policy developments driven by the Bologna Process?**
- **Is there correspondence between Bologna policy related to student assessment (student-centred learning and ESG on student assessment) and the assessment procedures observed?**

Background and rationale

Bologna Process developments (Ministerial Communiqués)

Early focus on
structural reforms



Concern with student-
centred pedagogy and
learning outcomes

European Standards and Guidelines (ESG) for Quality Assurance; Standard 1.3 on Student Assessment

‘students should be assessed using published criteria,
regulations and procedures which are applied consistently.’

Background and rationale – Portugal

- Bologna Process associated with new pedagogic model (Veiga & Amaral 2009; Sin 2012)
- Student-centred and competence-based

‘a core issue in the Bologna Process is the transition from a passive education paradigm based on the acquisition of knowledge to a model based on the development of competences’ (Decree-Law 74/2006)

- HEI pedagogic autonomy (Law 38/2007)
- Sparse national regulations on student assessment

Why is it important?

- Thin evidence base on institutional and academic enactment of Bologna principles
- Sparse research into ground-floor academic practices and the student experience further to recent Bologna policy
- Furthers understanding of the enactment of Bologna and the relationship between European higher education policy, national arenas and institutional practices

Approach

- **Policy theories (Ball 1994; Cerych & Sabatier 1986; Ozga 2000; Trowler 2002)**
- **Actors' interpretation and enactment of policy vs. 'rational-purposive' model and linear implementation**
- **Implementation staircase (Reynolds & Saunders 1987) – metaphor for the situated nature of actors' experience and enactment of policy**
- **Teaching and learning regimes (Trowler & Cooper 2002)**

Evidence base (IBAR project)

Four public Portuguese HEIs (university/polytechnic, location, size)

Two degrees per HEI (Engineering and Arts)

Pedagogic
/assessment
regulations:
institution and
faculty/school-
level

Interviews:
institutional
and
faculty/school
leaders; study
programmes
directors

Focus groups:
approx. six
academics
and students
per degree

Findings

Institutional policies for student assessment

Academic practices of assessment

Institutional policies for student assessment

Info on assessment types, procedures, exam periods, attendance, marking, student rights...

Clear information on attendance requirements

Early communication of assessment information through course specifications

Noticeable emphasis on continuous assessment (3 of 4 HEIs)

Institutional policies in all 4 HEIs

Recognition of special-regime students' circumstances (i.e. working students) and exemptions

Multiple examiners - only sporadically required

No explicit qualitative assessment criteria corresponding to marking scale

Academic practices of assessment : Types

- freedom to design assessment types, informed by type of course (i.e. theoretical, practical, project-based etc.)
- autonomy overridden by policies favouring continuous assessment over final exams (Eng. in universities)
- Continuous assessment: formative and summative (e.g. summative mini-tests) - Arts/Eng. Division
- Continuous assessment predominant in Arts
- Continuous + final assessment in Eng. (tasks undervalued; weight of final exam)

Academic practices of assessment : Learning outcomes

- no consistent Portuguese terminology for learning outcomes (LOs) (*competências, resultados de aprendizagem, objetivos*)
- official policies vs. actual understanding/practice related to LOs
- majority of interviewed academics – concept not yet understood and embedded, despite course specifications containing LOs
- more familiarity with LOs and their pedagogic function among Arts academics (practical nature?)

Academic practices of assessment: Changes

- diversification of assessment methods
- increasing weight of continuous assessment and assessed student work vs. the final exam
- more concern to align assessment to course purpose
- increased reflection around teaching and assessment (seminars, course reports etc.)
- ongoing adjustments in pedagogic practices, including assessment

Conclusions

- student-centred methods on the rise – mirror European orientations
- no clear cause-effect relationship between recent Bologna policy and changes
- situated policy experience, interpretative process during enactment
- variation in assessment regulations, despite some commonalities
- differences in academic practice – endurance of learning and teaching regimes
- Institutional policy / Academic practice dichotomies

Implications: Potential areas for improvement

Poor understanding of learning outcomes



Awareness-raising of LOs' potential and role at national and institutional levels

**Absence of clear criteria to inform marking
Reliance on single examiners**



National and/or institutional regulations to improve transparency and objectivity

Academics' reticence to acknowledge working students needs



Awareness-raising of special circumstances at institutional level

Prevalence of summative assessment



Awareness-raising of continuous assessment potential

Questions?

Thoughts?

Comments?

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