Access policies: between institutional policies and the search for the equality of opportunities.

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ABSTRACT

Portuguese higher education can be characterised, as a mass system, as the total gross participation rate in universities and polytechnics, public and private, is over 50 per cent. Recently, under the simultaneous pressure of demographic decreasing of the population potentially involved in higher education and financial stringency, higher education institutions, both public and private, have started to compete for students, while responding to an increasing social demand for more diversified higher education.

The government and higher education institutions are being challenged to widen access to higher education to improve the country’s educational and economic performance, with the objective of attracting new publics and students from a broader range of social backgrounds. In the public sector, the competition for students is being mainly felt in the polytechnic sector, but it is in the private sector, both universities and polytechnics, that the need to recruit more students is felt more intensely.

The Portuguese government, allegedly to enhance the equality of opportunities in the access to higher education and to attract new publics, has recently broadened the area of recruitment of the special contingent of adult students who have not completed secondary education courses, by lowering the qualification age from 25 years to 23 years old, and has completely deregulated the system by allocating to each institution the responsibility for the selection of adult students.

This paper intends, firstly, to contextualise this governmental action in the framework of the access policies, that, since the beginning of the 2000s can be characterised as offering not only ‘more’ higher education but also ‘more diverse’ higher education; secondly, to identify strategies that Portuguese higher education institutions are deploying to meet institutional needs (meaning institutions’ own good) and the political goals assigned by the government; finally, to identify differences of institutional reactions according to their public or private nature and university or polytechnic identity.