Students perceptions of quality – is there an option besides treating them as consumers?

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Abstract

Students are more and more taken into account in the definition of several aspects of their education, namely the assessment of its quality. The underlying assumption is that students are in pursuit of quality education and that their choices, expectations and perceptions can influence the promotion of educational improvement (Slaughter & Rhoades 2004).

Within this context, a major question arises, apparently not yet answered by research on quality: whether students, in relation to universities’ quality assessment, see themselves as consumers or, on the contrary, as institutional actors. Based on the revision of relevant literature on the subject, the chapter has as purpose to put forward arguments to answer this question.

This discussion is organised in four parts. The first one is focused on the analysis of the context of emergence of the notion of student as consumer within higher education and on its use as a background to student participation in quality assessment.

Next, an overview is made of the arguments legitimising student participation and the modes through which it is occurring, since the nineties, in European countries, including Portugal.

In a third moment, based on a limited set of works reporting, essentially, Portuguese students’ perceptions on quality assessment, the chapter reflects upon these perceptions trying to understand to what extent they reproduce assumptions and beliefs indicting the (self)concept of students as consumers.

The chapter concludes emphasising that, despite the increasing influence of such (self)conception, it does not constitute the only ‘identity’ assumed by students in their relation with higher education and universities. Therefore, attention is drawn on the multiplicity of ‘identities’ or concepts framing this relation namely regarding one of its specific dimensions – quality assessment.

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