Abstract

A progressive attempt to replace traditional public administration values and concepts by others that are closer to private management can be observed in the replacement of the service user concept by that of consumer or client. This redefinition's more implicit or explicit intent is to increase consumers'/clients' status, their capacity to choose and make rational choices in the market, and, ultimately, to ensure that organisations fulfil their needs.

Influenced by this tendency, higher education institutions (HEIs) also started to see students as clients or consumers and to influence their choices by trying to define HE demand. This is evident in the shift in their external communication strategies: ‘institutional information’, based on HEIs' prestige, is being progressively replaced by ‘marketed information’, based on economic consumer logic.

In trying to understand how students are perceived by Portuguese HEIs, we undertook qualitative research based on the content analysis of undergraduate degrees' announcements in newspapers. Major findings evidence that their content: (1) can be classified in a continuum bounded by two poles: the use of ‘institutional information’ and the use of ‘marketed information’; (2) show the presence of a social representation of students as clients or consumers; (3) seems related to HEIs' nature (public vs. private), positioning in the HE system (universities and polytechnics) and ‘symbolic capital’ (traditional vs. new institutions).