
The public higher education system in Portugal has witnessed in recent years a greater polarization of public universities of both Lisbon and Porto metropolitan areas. This restructuring was mainly due to the decline in demand for places in higher education as a result of several factors, including the demographic decline, the economic and financial crisis and changes in the access criteria to some fields of education with higher requirements in the entrance exams. In a time of shrinking demand, it is thus necessary to understand the fundamental changes at play in a system where social and territorial equity have been, direct or indirectly, benchmarks of higher education policies in Portugal.

To this end we perform a two level analysis based on empirical data gathered from the process of access to the public higher education system in Portugal. At a first level, our analysis will focus on the behaviour of demand for higher education nationwide since 1999, in close relation to the national policies and actions that have shaped the system. At a second level we will bound our analysis to a particular field of education, namely Building and civil engineering which has registered the largest decrease of candidates in the last admission process of 2012/13. This will allow us to identify the process of restructuring and stratification of the higher education system. The candidate’s choices if unchanged in the future can cause a restructuring of the system through the polarization of not only a few institutions but also a few territorial locations or urban areas. By comparing with other education fields that also include engineering programs we can pinpoint some probable causes for these changes.

The integration of these two levels of analysis can thus hint to the fact that the system as a whole can be highly responsive and adaptive to changes of different nature, which, in turn, can or should be considered in prospective studies in other education fields, anticipating future scenarios.