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Title

Routes towards Portuguese higher education : students' preferred or flexible choices?

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Abstract

Background - An equitable and democratised higher education system should, in principle, be permeable to the flow of populations with different social and/or cultural backgrounds, allowing access to any parts of the system. However, despite the democratisation efforts that took place in Portugal after the 1974 revolution, and although the student population is now much more diversified and heterogeneous than ever before, the particular routes to higher education still hinder the free access of students to some areas of the system. Purpose - In this study, those different routes to higher education and the way they might influence students' choices are analysed. Of particular interest was whether students tended to make choices based on feasibility rather than personal preference. Sample - Data were collected through individual semi-structured interviews with 60 first year students (32 female and 28 male), from universities and polytechnics, both public and private, and from three first cycle study programmes (Arts, Pharmacy and Computer Engineering) in the urban area of the city of Porto. Design and Methods - The analysis was a small scale qualitative investigation of Portuguese students' perceptions underlying their choices in higher education. The sample selection took into

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account the diversity of the student population and sought to include different student profiles to gather contrasting cases and potentially contrasting views. Data gathered through interviews (conducted in 2009/2010) were systematised by means of a content analysis technique and submitted to a codification process according to a grid of categories that emerged from the analysis of data. Results - Findings from this small scale exploration suggest that the majority of the students interviewed chose a study programme based on preference but based their choice of institution on feasibility Conclusions - The study provides insights into factors that limit student access to all parts of the higher education system, namely to some selective and more prestigious institutions.(HRK / Abstract übernommen)