

Higher Education policies in Portugal, in the post-Bologna period: implications on curricular development and demands for teaching

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Abstract

Since the end of the 20th century, Higher Education has suffered various reforms resulting from international policies (Robertson, 2009) with impacts, amongst others, on the courses' organization and on curricular development processes. This demanded teaching pedagogical work modes with the student as an active agent in the teaching-learning-assessing process (Zabalza, 2011; Luke, 2011). Within this framework, this presentation focuses a study developed in the University of Porto (U. Porto), aiming to analyse the effects of the Bologna Process policies in curriculum organization and development processes, and their effects on university teaching. Based on curriculum concepts supporting higher education policies in Portugal (Leite & Fernandes, 2011), in the post-Bologna period, in the study's empirical phase, data was collected through a survey questionnaire with open ended and closed ended questions, applied to U. Porto teachers. Data analysis, using both a simple statistical process (closed ended questions) and content analysis (Krippendorf, 2003) concerning the discourses (open ended question), showed paradigmatic tensions which reflect dilemmas resulting from the challenges of (re)configuring curricular organization and development, related with a critically oriented pedagogical work mode.

Keywords: higher education policies; curriculum; university teaching

1 Introduction

Since the end of the 20th century, Higher Education (HE) has been the subject of increased attention, mainly due to reforms arising from international policies outlined by global market demands (Robertson, 2009; Lima, 2012) and presented with the intention of promoting greater socio-economic and cultural development. Speeches of quality and demand in accountability, through standardized criteria to evaluate and ensure the desired quality, have moved on to constitute the agenda of the debate on HE, mainly regarding the organization of courses and curricular development processes (Leite, 2012).

In this context, the demands of teaching pedagogical work modes, where the students are considered active agents in the teaching-learning-assessing processes, have characterized the discourse of the Bologna Process (BP) (Leite & Ramos, 2011) – notably taking into consideration the quantitative expansion that generated a diversity of forms of training provision and public who came to attend HE.

This paper reports a study developed in the University of Porto (U.Porto) with the objective of analyse the political implications, arising from the BP, in the processes of organizing and developing the curriculum and in the generated effects in university teaching practice. The text is organized in three parts: the context of HE from the institutionalization of the BP and its relation with concepts of curriculum that support HE policies in Portugal in the post-Bologna phase; methodological procedures that were followed in data collection; presentation and discussion of data concerning the opinions of teachers from U.Porto about the changes resulting from the BP, agreement with current university policies and demanded and perceived needs of pedagogical and didactic training to better match a paradigm focused on learning.

At last, in the final remarks, some comments are made to the existence of paradigmatic tensions that reflect dilemmas arising from the challenges to (re)configurations of the organization and curricular development related to a critically oriented pedagogical work mode.



2 Concepts of curriculum underlying post-Bologna Higher Education policies

To think about the HE development since the second half of the past century requires dealing with ideas created in this education level concerning issues of access, permanency and effective quantitative and qualitative development. That is, it requires to be understood in the context of pressure that HE has been suffering to shift the attention of the scholarship to the market, in what Lima, Azevedo and Catani (2008) named managerialist rationale. According to these authors, the time reduction in the 1st cycle (degree) courses constitutes “a good opportunity to adopt measures of reducing the State’s expenses and not to strengthen the working conditions in schools, namely in pedagogical terms” (p. 15). Therefore, it is corroborated the idea that “university pedagogy proposed by the Bologna Process (BP) will run the risk of being a superficial or cosmetic change, limited to the introduction of a new reformer lexicon (curricular unit, learning results, contact hours, etc.) without much substance and incapable of promoting changes in the organization of the work of both teachers and students, in the adoption of tutorial schemes to support students, in the classes’ sizes, in assessment procedures and in the attention to the students’ cultural, ethical-political and civic education” (*idem*). Also in the analysis of public policies, Robertson (2009) considers that “we are dealing with a highly complex and interconnected set of processes and relations” (p. 145) in which “national and regional sectors of HE have become more closely associated in the global system, although... its nature and the consequences of their relations vary according to their different stories, sizes and to the way their economies, geopolitical interests, internal political arrangements, specific natures of the HE sector, kinds of development strategies are implemented and so on” (*idem*).

It’s in this context that the BP develops with influences of guidelines that, in their discourse, are sustained by a critical oriented concept of curriculum (Pacheco, 2001; Leite, 2002) which implies a reorganization of the courses and a new student status. This demands reconfigurations in the teaching practice, either from the point of view of “university didactics” (Zabalza, 2011), or from the point of view of international standards that do not consider local specificities (Luke, 2011).

In which concerns transformations in educational and curricular concepts proposed by the BP, what underlies is the proposal of an increased distance from the traditional perspective limited to the transmission and acquisition of knowledge (academic rationalism), inherent to a curriculum that has the goal of mere reproduction of existing knowledge (Leite, 2002), as well as an increased distance from the technicist and behaviourist perspective of learning to achieve behavioural and instructional objectives in a short term, that has the goal of mere reproduction of behaviours. That is, the BP speech suggests the use of processes grounded in a constructivist learning perspective that takes into consideration social contexts and issues and, thus, is able to foster the development of skills for living in a future that cannot be predetermined. This curricular perspective is centred both in students and in assessment processes that are perceived as means of promoting learning and self-regulation. However, it has been argued (Leite & Fernandes, 2001, p. 528) that “studies reveal that assigning centrality to students in the teaching-learning processes is not an easy process nor it constitutes a rule in the everyday of institutions”. Therefore, the implementation of the Bologna paradigm has challenged teachers, in their professional practice, to consider the student as an active agent in the learning process. These are the issues that ground the empirical study that is presented below.

3 Methodological procedures

Data collection was made through an on-line questionnaire applied to teachers at U.Porto, due to the fact this was one of the first institutions to give attention to pedagogical issues in Higher Education (HE) in Portugal. This questionnaire had two closed questions, one with 13 items and other with 4 items to collect opinions in a 4 level scale (little, medium, many, great many) related with: i) changes occurred in HE due to the Bologna Process (BP); ii) level of support of current policies in HE. The questionnaire had also an open question that focused challenges arising from a Training program of pedagogical and didactical update in U.Porto that occurred in 2005, in period preceding the adaptation to the BP. So, only teachers that attended this training program were selected to the studied sample.

The sample was constituted by 17 teachers belonging to 8 of the 14 faculties of U.Porto and distributed by several professional ranks in HE: 12% of full professors, 35% of associate professors, 47% of assistant professors and 6% of assistant lecturers. There were a greater number of professors from the Engineering Faculty – FEUP (29%) and from the Medicine Faculty – FMUP (17%). Regarding the professional experience, there were professors with experiences ranging from 9 to 39 years of teaching at U.Porto: 18% with 37 to 39 years of experience; 24% with 25 to



28 years of experience; 18% with 20 to 23 years of experience; 29% with 12 to 14 years of experience; 9% with 9 years of experience.

Considering the professional life cycle of these teachers systematized by Huberman (1992), it can be verified that the majority of the respondents (64%) is in the “experience and diversification (7 to 15 years)” phase, that is, in a phase characterized by reviewing and questioning oneself teaching know-how. From the rest of the teachers, 18% are in “serenity / conservatism (25 to 35 years)”, characterized by feelings of confidence or regrets, and 18% are in a “disinvestment (35 to 40 years)” where a growing distance from professional investment occurs.

In short, these are experienced teachers – they have a minimum of almost a decade of experience at U.Porto - that already worked in the same university before the BP (2006) and are associated to different areas of knowledge.

The contact with these teachers was made, in a first moment, personally, by telephone or e-mail. After an affirmative response to collaborate in this study, the questionnaire was published online allowing anonymous responses. The answers to closed questions were analyzed by simple statistics and the ones to the opened question were subjected to content analysis (Krippendorff, 2003).

4 Presentation and discussion of data

Obtained data are here presented and discussed beginning by answers to the closed questions and passing on to answers to the open question. As previously referred, one of the closed questions contained 13 aspects that allowed knowing the teachers’ opinions about the changes occurred in Higher Education (HE) due to the Bologna Process (BP). Table 1 presents the distribution of those answers in percentage and number, in a scale of “little, medium, many, great many”.

Table 1 – Opinions of teachers about the level of changes occurred due to the Bologna Process

Changes	Level			
	Little	Medium	Many	Great many
a) In the University’s mission, in general	19%(3)	31%(5)	38%(6)	12%(2)
b) In the management of the University of Porto	31%(5)	6%(1)	38%(6)	25%(4)
c) In the management of your Faculty	25%(4)	6%(1)	44%(7)	25%(4)
d) In the organization of the courses	12%(2)	12%(2)	44%(7)	31%(5)
e) In the way the curricular units are organized	12%(2)	19%(3)	38%(6)	31%(5)
f) In the way you organize the curricular units in which you teach	0%(0)	25%(4)	38%(6)	38%(6)
g) In the way the teaching practice is made in the university	19%(3)	31%(5)	31%(5)	19%(3)
h) In the way the teaching-learning process is ensured	6%(1)	44%(7)	25%(4)	25%(4)
i) In the assigned role to the University students	0%(0)	25%(4)	50%(8)	25%(4)
j) In the way you assess learning	19%(3)	25%(4)	31%(5)	25%(4)
k) In the conduct of research	44%(7)	19%(3)	25%(4)	12%(2)
l) In extension activities	38%(6)	38%(6)	12%(2)	12%(2)
m) In the relation between teaching-research-extension	31%(5)	38%(6)	25%(4)	6%(1)

Data in Table 1 allows verifying that there is a high concentration of choices for the levels “Great many” (38%) and “Medium” (31%) in the recognition of changes occurred in the mission assigned to the University. Although some respondents chose the level “Little” (19%), it can’t be ignored that some of these teachers consider that changes occurred due to the BP were “Great many” (12%). That is, 81% if these teachers recognized the existence of changes in the mission assigned to the University.

Concerning the management of the University of Porto, although 31% of the answers are within the level “Little”, representing almost 1/3 of the respondents, 63% recognized the existence of “Many” (38%) or “Great many” (25%) changes.

In which concerns the management of their particular Faculty, the majority of these teachers (69%) considers to have occurred “many” (44%) or “great many” (25%) changes. However, ¼ of the subjects considers that there were “Little” changes in this aspect.



If we compare the answers of these last three aspects, we can conclude that the majority of these teachers recognize that the BP has generated institutional changes in the university mission and management. As the BP has an European level in its principles and organization, this situation confirms the theories that sustain the idea that national policies are increasingly controlled by international decisions and directives (Robertson, 2009; Lima, 2012).

In which concerns the organization of university courses and the way the curricular units are designed, the majority of the subjects (75%) recognizes the existence of "Many" (44%) or "great many" (25%) changes. This data shows that the required adaptation of Portuguese courses to the new legal framework conditioned by the BP implied a new organization of most university courses. That is, it can be considered that this Process triggered a curriculum reform of university education (Leite, 2012).

Focusing on issues of organization of curricular units, it can be verified that 69% of the teachers consider that the curricular units have been organized in a way with "Many" (38%) or "Great many" (31%) differences. They also recognize the existence of changes in the way they teach. In this case, no teacher admitted the existence of "Little" changes and 76% recognized the existence of changes in a "Many" (38%) or "great many" (38%) level. It must be noted that these data are of great importance in an analysis of the effects generated by the policy arising from the BP. Having been presented in Portugal with the intention of breaking a paradigm focused on teaching replacing it with a paradigm focused on learning, the opinions of these teachers reveal that the Bologna process generated effects in curricular processes that imply a more active role given to students in the construction of their learning (Leite & Fernandes, 2011).

This recognition also occurs in the responses referring to the role assigned to college students. However, when compared with the responses regarding teaching practice, provided the teaching-learning process and evaluated the learning, it appears there is a tension between the proposition and effectiveness, revealed in a concentration of 75% of the answers in the levels "Medium" (31%) and "Many" (44%). In this case, although teachers recognize changes in the way they organize the curricular units in which they teach, as well as in the assigned role to university students, when the focus turns to the changes occurred in teaching practice, the concentration of answers falls into "Medium" (31%) and "Many" (31%) levels. In which concerns the way the teaching-learning process in ensured, the concentration of responses falls into levels "Medium" (44%), "Many" (25%) and "Great Many" (25%). Regarding the way learning is assessed, the concentration of responses falls into levels "Many" (31%), followed by levels "Medium" and "Great Many", both with 25% of the responses.

This tension is also evident when analysing the responses to aspects related to changes in the conduct of research, extension activities and in the relation between teaching-research-extension. In these cases, a concentration is observed in a scale of 63% to 76% of responses that points out to changes in the levels "Little" and "Medium" and a minority, in the scale of 24% to 36%, in the levels "Many" and "great many". These values show that the BP did not produce large effects on the exercise of these activity dimensions of teachers.

In summary, given the data presented in Table 1, we can say that, according to these teachers, the BP generated changes in the mission assigned to the University, in the management of the U.Porto and its Faculties. It can be concluded that there were also notable changes in the organization of university courses, in how the courses are organized, in how each teacher organizes himself and in the assigned role to university students. Although these changes have been acknowledge, data lead us to infer that more operational aspects related to teaching practice, the way the teaching-learning process in ensured and the way learning is assessed, the generated changes were lower. The same happens in which concerns the conduct of research, extension activities and the relation between teaching-research-extension, where a concentration within levels of "Little" and "Medium" is verified. That is, data shows that, although these teachers consider that there have been changes from the point of view of speech and demands, from an operational point of view, teachers expressed in their answers a paradigmatic tension between the announced, the lived and the idealized.

This tension is confirmed by the data found in Table 2 on the level of agreement of teachers to the policies that are being experienced in HE.

Table 2 – Level of agreement to current university policies.

Changes	Level			
	Little	Medium	Many	Great many
a) Agreement with the Bologna paradigm	6%(1)	50%(8)	25%(4)	19%(3)
b) Organization of university courses according to the BP	6%(1)	31%(5)	50%(8)	12%(2)
c) Agreement with the principle underlying ECTS	19%(3)	25%(4)	50%(8)	6%(1)



d) Agreement with the tutoring system for learning	19%(3)	44%(7)	19%(3)	19%(3)
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It can be verified a high concentration of responses in the level "Many" in which concerns items related to aspects of agreement with policies involving changes to the organization of university courses within the Bologna paradigm (50%) and with principles underlying the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System [ECTS] (50%), opposing a concentration of responses in the "Medium" level on the aspect of agreement with the Bologna paradigm (50%) and to the tutoring system for learning (44%). That is, comparing data from answers related with the level of agreement to the BP policies with data from the occurred changes, it appears there is some tension, while recognizing that some of the "imposed" aspects by the BP are positive.

Considering the changes boosted by the BP require a new way of understanding the teaching practice, the curriculum, the teaching-learning-assessment process and the university mission, some additional data was collected through an open question. The obtained data in these responses refers to the type of challenges that these teachers consider to be facing in the teaching profession.

In which concerns the outlined challenges, only one teacher focused an aspect related to the need to comply with a new rule arising from compulsory attendance at lectures. The most referred outlined challenges are related with teaching processes, with the assigned role to students and with learning assessment procedures. For example, it is referred that "The biggest challenge is to put students to work effectively in groups"; "teach large groups"; "manage time"; "lack of teachers training in new technologies". It is also referred "difficulty in the relationship with students" and difficulty in "finding ways to help students to be autonomous".

Regarding the new expected role of students, it is pointed, for example: "students realize that they have to fulfill a different role". Learning assessment is another aspect referred by these teachers as a challenge. It is pointed, for example, "to be able to fulfill some assumptions, such as formative assessment".

5 Final remarks

From the data presented we can say that, according to these teachers, the BP originated changes in the mission assigned to the University, in the management of U.Porto and its Faculties, as well as in the organization of courses and in the role assigned to students, indicating a relationship of interdependence between these aspects.

However, despite the recognition of these changes, the answers deserve our attention regarding the operational aspects related to the way teaching is carried out in university education, the way the teaching-learning process is ensured and the way learning is assessed. The same happens with regard to the conduct of research, extension activities and the relationship between teaching-research-extension. That is, although there were changes in the speech and demands, from an operational point of view, there is a paradigmatic tension between the announced and the achieved. This tension is particularly relevant when attention is focused on the student activity and learning, or in other words, when it's necessary to (re)configure the organization and development of the curriculum towards a critically oriented pedagogical work mode.

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