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# The impact of quality assessment in universities: Portuguese students' perceptions

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Despite being one of the major reasons for the development of quality assessment, students seem relatively unaware of its potential impact. Since one of the main purposes of assessment is to provide students with information on the quality of universities, this lack of awareness brings in to question the effectiveness of assessment as a device for promoting institutional accountability. Aiming to contribute to increase knowledge in this field, the paper addresses Portuguese students' perceptions of the impact of quality assessment. Resorting to the findings of a qualitative study on this subject, it is argued that students seem to assume a rather ambiguous position *vis-à-vis* this impact. While seeing assessment as having only a limited capacity to produce changes, students seem reluctant about the possibility of measures being adopted to increase it.

**Keywords:** higher education; impact; quality assessment; perceptions; Portugal; students

## Introduction

Collecting students' opinions and perspectives on their experience in higher education was not undertaken as a systematic procedure until the 1990s (Harvey, 2003). However, the increasing centrality assumed by quality assessment, combined with the emphasis on institutional capability to recruit and satisfy students as 'clients' or 'consumers', have increased the demands for the integration of students into assessment activities and the collection of their opinions (Harvey, 2003). Therefore, over recent years, student participation has become one of the major features of European quality assessment systems.

In Portugal, the first quality assessment system, in operation for nearly a decade (1994–2005), formalised student participation and was based predominantly on the assessment of undergraduate degrees, though covering several dimensions of university life. The aim was to promote their development and to advise universities in terms of quality. Quality assessment was structured in two major interrelated exercises: self-assessment, developed by universities in the form of a self-study and reflection; and external assessment, conducted by panels of experts performing visits to universities using the self-assessment report as a guide (Cardoso, 2009). Within the framework of self-assessment, student participation consisted of students' responses to pedagogical questionnaires and presence at meetings with external assessment panels. The main goal was to provide information on the operation and quality of undergraduate degrees, and ultimately on the quality of the institutions (Cardoso, 2009; Santos et al., 2006).

Despite arguments emphasising students' centrality to the development of quality assessment, their role was one of being mere 'passive' informants (Correia, Amaral, & Magalhães, 2000; Simão & Santos, 2002). This is evidenced by students' exclusion from active intervention, enabled namely by their presence in the external and self-assessment teams or their collaboration in the drawing up of the assessment reports.

This exclusion may be one of the major reasons for the apparent indifference shown by Portuguese students to engage in assessment exercises (Santos et al., 2006). However, based on the literature (Dubois, 1998; Kogan, 1993; Stensaker, Langfeldt, Harvey, Huisman, & Westerheijden, 2008), it is still possible to assume that this weak engagement could have been shaped by other factors such as the scepticism of students about the capacity of assessment to have an impact, i.e., to produce practical effects or consequences.

Under this assumption, the aim of the paper is to contribute to understanding how students globally perceive this impact on universities' life. More specifically, the questions to answer are: 'To what extent do students perceive quality assessment as having an impact in universities and, according to students, what are the configurations assumed by this impact?'

### **The constraints of students' relation with quality assessment**

As some authors stress (Chen & Hoshower, 2003; Dubois, 1998; Kogan, 1993), students' relationships and involvement with quality assessment is conditioned by several factors. That is the case of the way academics tend to perceive student participation in the assessment exercises; the subjective position students assume towards the very notion of quality assessment and their involvement in its development; or the interest they have on the assessment topic (Dubois, 1998). Two major elements apparently frame this interest. On the one hand, there is the broader interest students have on themes belonging to the institutional domain. On the other hand, the expectations they have about the development and consequences of quality assessment.

Indeed, as can be seen with other institutional actors (such as academics, institutional managers, or non-academic staff), students' interest in the assessment process seems to be framed by their expectations and perceptions of its utility, goals and capability to induce changes (Chen & Hoshower, 2003; Dubois, 1998; Stensaker et al., 2008). In this sense, it is possible to argue that the more students perceive quality assessment as a valid, pertinent and consequent process, the deeper their interest is and the motivation and predisposition they show to get involved in it.

However, according to several authors (Chen & Hoshower, 2003; Harvey, 2003; Leckey & Neill, 2001; Nasser & Fresko, 2002; Stensaker et al., 2008), a major factor seems to undermine the perception students have about the relevance of assessment: their lack of information on the process, its results and the possible changes induced by it. Although this lack of information can also be imputed to students, as a result of the absence of effective strategies to access that information, it seems to derive mainly from the position universities adopt for the diffusion of concrete data on quality assessment (Harvey, 2003; Leckey & Neill, 2001; Nasser & Fresko, 2002). Probably induced by a fear or a reluctance of making public students' criticisms or less positive aspects present in the assessment reports, universities do not seem to engage fully in the dissemination of that information. For instance, information is confined to some institutional bodies (top management bodies) being disseminated in a way and in a language (too technical and complex) that are not always the most appropriate for students (Harvey, 2003; Leckey & Neill, 2001; Nasser & Fresko, 2002).

The absence of awareness on what is at stake in quality assessment can, in turn, be the source of less positive perceptions of the process. From this, it could emerge as not very

effective or much focussed on crucial issues, inducing an excessive institutional bureaucratisation and regulation (Stensaker et al., 2008). Reflected in some scepticism about its validity or relevance, these perceptions constitute true obstacles to the interest and involvement of students in quality assessment (Harvey, 2003; Leckey & Neill, 2001; Nasser & Fresko, 2002).

Still, it is possible to assume that this low interest can also be determined by and partly reproduce the relatively weak and inconsistent interest students have about institutional issues (Bateson & Taylor, 2004; Brennan & Patel, 2008; Tavernier, 2004). Students' apparent indifference at this level can be due to several reasons such as individualistic values that withdraw individuals from political, social, civic and associative commitment and participation. This predominance can also be noticed in the self-centred life projects of current higher education students, which are mainly driven by personal aims of social integration and mobility (Balsa, Simões, Nunes, Carmo, & Campos, 2001; Casanova, 2003; Fernandes, 2001; Machado et al., 2003; Tavernier, 2004). This emergent social trend can help to understand why students do not develop, 'in terms of identity, strong feelings of belonging to formal and organised groups' (Martins, 2003. p. 206) as those structuring both the society in general and universities in particular. In this sense, it is possible to argue that students might be less predisposed to identify themselves with and become engaged in the several scenarios and issues shaping these institutions, such as quality assessment.

At least in the Portuguese case, the apparent indifference of students about institutional dynamics and issues can also be interpreted by the instrumental character they tend to ascribe to higher education and, concomitantly, to their trajectory through universities (Estanque & Nunes, 2003, 2004; Martins, Arroteia, & Gonçalves, 1999; Martins, Mauritti, & Costa, 2005; Pinheiro, 2003). Students increasingly tend to see the time they spend at university as an essential part of their professional trajectory: being awarded a degree and being integrated into the labour market (Brennan & Patel, 2008; Estanque & Nunes, 2003, 2004). It is possible to assume that the concentration of students' efforts in the successful pursuit of this trajectory can concur to minimise their involvement in issues located outside the educational domain as, for instance, quality assessment.

A final factor determining students' indifference can be found in the way the decisionmaking bodies of universities function and, specially, in their culture (Tavernier, 2004). In general, the normative, pragmatic and values frameworks that rule the *modus operandi* of those bodies are defined by institutional leaders, thus echoing their own systems of norms and values. By not seeing themselves reflected in the essential features of this culture, students tend to withdraw their engagement and compromise towards the organisational dimensions of university life (Tavernier, 2004).

## **Method**

The analysis presented in this paper is based on the findings of a qualitative study about Portuguese students' perceptions on quality assessment as it was developed from 1994 to 2005 (Cardoso, 2009). Assuming that these perceptions can be grasped through the analysis of students' discourses on universities' quality assessment, this study used semi-structured interviews as the qualitative tool to collect data. Interviews were conducted with a sample of 102 students from two Portuguese public universities (universities X and Y) mainly attending their final academic year (4th year, pre-Bologna). The underlying

assumption behind the selection of these students was that by being in the final stage of their institutional socialisation (Paivandi, 2006), they were more aware of university processes such as that of quality assessment than students from earlier academic years.

Table 1 summarises the students' sample distribution according to university, gender, age group and discipline of undergraduate degree attended.

The student sample at both universities presents a similar distribution of gender, though, globally, the percentage of female students (52 per cent) tends to be slightly higher than that of male students (48 per cent). Thus, the sample replicates the national and international trends in terms of the composition of the higher education student population of most developed countries where female students represent over half of that population (Charles & Bradley, 2002; Jacobs, 1996; Mastekaasa & Smeby, 2008). In terms of age, there are also no significant differences between students at each university. The majority of students (61 per cent) belong to the 22–25 years age group.

Globally, there is a predominance of students enrolled in undergraduate degrees from engineering and technology, social sciences, exact and natural sciences and social services. There is also a slight predominance of enrolments in engineering and technology at both universities (31 per cent).

The data collected through interviews (between February and May 2007) was systematised using the thematic/categorical content analysis technique (Bardin, 1995). Assisted by the programme QSR NUD\*Ist and based in the combination of open and closed methods of analysis, this procedure resulted in an analysis grid (see Appendix). This grid was structured in themes that were assembled in categories, which were then organised in four dimensions of analysis, translating the major elements structuring students' positions and perceptions of quality assessment. The first dimension – *Students' Attitudes towards Quality Assessment* – identifies the position (more or less favourable) of students towards quality assessment. The second dimension – *Student Information on Quality Assessment* – characterises the type (extent and degree of organisation) of information and knowledge students have on quality assessment. The third dimension – *Connection with Action* – characterises the experience of students on the development of quality assessment exercises. Finally, the fourth dimension – *The Field of Students' Perceptions* – assembles the content and extent of students' perceptions of quality assessment and how they are ranked in their discourses. This dimension identifies the type of impact (capacity to induce changes) ascribed to quality assessment; evaluates the extension of students' perceptions in a *continuum* delimited by the allusion from more general (unspecific) to more specific (e.g., quality assessment) formats of assessment of higher education and institutions; and analyses the content of those perceptions, locating it in a field bounded by more traditional or more managerialist and market-driven perspectives.

Table 1. Students' sample distribution.

Attributes	University		Total	%
	X	Y		
Number of students	53	49	102	100
Gender				
<i>Female</i>	28	25	53	52
<i>Male</i>	25	24	49	48
Total	53	49	102	100
Age group				
<i>18–21</i>	9	9	18	18
<i>22–25</i>	30	32	62	61
<i>26–30</i>	11	6	17	17
<i>&gt;30</i>	3	2	5	5
Total	53	49	102	100
Discipline of undergraduate degree				
<i>Exact and Natural Sciences</i>	6	7	13	13
<i>Health Sciences</i>	2	5	7	7
<i>Engineering and Technology</i>	18	13	31	31
<i>Social Sciences</i>	6	12	18	18
<i>Humanities and Arts</i>	7	1	8	8
<i>Social Services</i>	8	5	13	13
<i>Education</i>	6	6	12	12
Total	53	49	102	100

Based on the set of data comprised by this last dimension of analysis and, specifically, by one of its categories – the *Impact of Quality Assessment* – students' perceptions of the extension and hierarchy of the practical effects, i.e., impact, induced by assessment in higher education are analysed at system, university and faculty levels. The constraints mentioned by students as interfering with this impact, namely those deriving from the assumption, by quality assessment, of a more coercive character, are also discussed.

### **Students' perceptions on the impact of quality assessment**

Students refer to quality assessment as being focussed on universities rather than either on faculties in particular or on the higher education system as a whole, and perceive its impact in an ambiguous way. While considering this impact as plausible, students think that it will be invisible and will take place only in 'the long term':

I think that the fact of universities being assessed can produce changes. Sometimes they are delayed. Maybe they tend to occur in the long term. (Interviewee 46, University X).

For students, this apparent delay in the verification of effects is due to several factors, related both to the way universities position themselves towards quality assessment, its validity and feasibility – institutional factors – and to certain features of the process itself – procedural factors – as shown in Table 2.

Amongst these factors, students emphasise the institutional ones as those being more crucial to the impact of assessment and, within them, especially the degree of acceptance, by universities, of the assessment process itself, its development, recommendations, results and the changes it induces:

It depends on the way the university receives the quality assessment. (Interviewee 54, University Y).

Table 2. Factors interfering with the impact of quality assessment as perceived by students.

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<i>Institutional factors</i>	
Government and management	Predisposition, capacity and power of decision of those responsible for universities' governance and management to implement the recommendations and changes induced by quality assessment; elements contributing to limit the action at this level.
Acceptance and development of quality assessment	Degree of acceptance of quality assessment; institutional devices ensuring the effectiveness of assessment's recommendations and, consequently, the induction of practical results.
Institutional position towards the changes	Degree of acceptance (by academics or the institutional culture) and of institutional implementation of the changes induced by quality assessment.
Financial constraints	Institutional perception of the financial impact of quality assessment; financial capability of universities to implement the recommendations/changes induced by assessment.
Account of students' feedback	Institutional acceptance of the contribution of students to quality assessment; predisposition to satisfy students' expectations and needs (expressed in their assessment judgements).
<i>Procedural factors</i>	
Political configuration	Legal framework of quality assessment; political power of the body responsible for the coordination of assessment to enforce its recommendations.
Internal dynamic	Capability of quality assessment to produce consequences dependent on the features characterising its development: periodicity, scope (national), effectiveness, accuracy and independence, pertinence of its exercises (self-assessment and external assessment).

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This acceptance emerges, in turn, as essentially determined by the nature and characteristics of these changes, by the 'interest' of universities to promote them and by the institutional culture:

(It) depends on the university, its culture. There are universities that want to move forward and that are not worried about it. (Interviewee 56, University Y).

If aligned with what the university had already established the process happens. If not, I think it will take longer. (Interviewee 25, University X).

Less systematically, the impact of quality assessment also appears to students as determined by some of its specific configurations. That is the case of:

- The political framework in which assessment was defined and developed, perceived as being weak in terms of legislation and coordination: '(The) problem with the former (system) was the fragility of its power. It was not given the political power and decision to close universities. (Assessment) was more a bureaucratic process'. (Interviewee 57, University Y).
- The settings assumed by the development of assessment, namely its frequency, different exercises and scope: '(The) necessity for something more permanent' (Interviewee 23, University X); 'Because it was a national process'. (Interviewee, 45 University X); or
- The impartiality of assessment and the character assumed by its recommendations: '(If) assessors develop an independent, rigorous and demanding work' (Interviewee 87, University Y); '(The) assessment is merely a document which is not binding'. (Interviewee 63, University Y).

The soft and somewhat weak impact of quality assessment seems to be balanced, from the students' perspective, by changes induced by other processes, also occurring at the university level. That is the case of the Bologna process, which students see as having a rather dynamic and transformative character:

At this moment, (this possibility of change) is occurring in Portugal with Bologna. (Interviewee 45, University X).

Regardless of the ambivalent perception of the impact of assessment, students' discourses indicate a certain idealisation of what it should be and of the spheres (i.e., higher education system, universities, degrees, etc.) in which it should be seen. This idealised impact essentially materialises in the induction of improvements at the level of certain features and activities of universities, such as education and teaching; institutional facilities, equipments and services; and undergraduate degrees:

(At) teaching level, the pedagogical practice, teachers' training. (Interviewee 2, University X).

(The) infra-structures, the different activities comprised by the university. (Interviewee 15, University X).

(The) structuring of a degree (in order) to change the features that are not necessary. (Interviewee 13, University X).

These findings somehow overlap with those from other studies (Amaral, 2003; Chen & Hoshower, 2003; Leite, Santiago, Sarrico, Leite, & Polidori, 2006) stressing that, amongst

the several areas of institutional activity, students conceive teaching as the area in which more real effects should be seen as a result of the development of quality assessment.

However, it is also possible to identify a certain ambiguity in the idealised perceptions of the impact of assessment. This ambiguity is translated by the fact that some of the institutional spheres expected to be the target of changes induced by assessment, namely teaching and undergraduate degrees, correspond precisely with those that some students see as the most immune to any kind of change.

The ambiguity of students' perceptions is even more evident when they are confronted with the possibility of linking quality assessment with measures that could lead to more robust consequences or to increase the effectiveness of its impact. That is the case of transforming assessment recommendations into obligations or connecting assessment results to either reward and sanctions for universities or to their funding.

Translated by the equivalent rejection and acceptance of some of the features of these measures, students' ambiguity is particularly visible in the case of recommendations being ascribed with a mandatory character and of university funding being estimated based on the assessment results.

The reasons for students' acceptance of these last two measures are linked with the fact that they are the only way for assessment to accomplish its real goal: the introduction of 'practical' results translated in the enhancement of the 'services' delivered by universities. However, many students make this acceptance dependent on requirements such as the need to make assessment more systematic; to take into account the nature and pertinence of its recommendations and the institutional capability to follow them; and to include both an extended period to promote the recommended changes and the monitoring of universities. As for the reasons for the rejection, students specially underlined the restraining of the autonomy of universities; the possible damage that could be inflicted on students, caused by the eventual degradation of the social prestige and financial condition of universities; or the absence of institutional conditions allowing for the feasibility of such measures.

In contrast, the establishment of a regulatory system that would lead to sanctions or rewards for universities based on their performance, is more consistently perceived as one of the plausible solutions to give quality assessment a more robust and consequential character:

Otherwise assessment is not worth anything. It has no effects because the university knows that nothing will happen. It would not try to change. (Interviewee 20, University X).

In addition to the monitoring of institutional performance and providing incentives for universities to improve, such a regulatory system is perceived by students as a positive measure aimed at rewarding these institutions for good management:

(The) rewarding or punishment of the administration of the university, of the presidents and the rectors. (Because) they are the ones that make decisions. (Interviewee 80, University Y).

The adoption of such measures is still perceived as a way to encourage institutional competitiveness, assuring that only the 'best' universities and undergraduate degrees remain, and contributing to their recognition and 'merit':

(It) is a way to promote a little bit more concern and competitiveness among universities. They have to achieve better results. (Interviewee 41, University X).

Students offered suggestions on the format of the sanctions that should apply to universities with 'lower quality': closing and/or suspending university operation or undergraduate degrees, as a way to safeguard the interests of students; fixing sanctions according to the insufficiencies presented by universities; and imposing financial sanctions (a fine, for instance).

(To) suspend a degree, a university, or a department. (Interviewee 23, University X).

Otherwise the universities should be fined. (Interviewee 56, University Y).

Despite a general alignment of students' positions with this regulatory system, there are cases where agreement with it is mitigated, translated either by rejection of the system or acceptance of it only under certain conditions. In the first case, the reasons for the rejection are coincident with those given to justify the refusal of the coercive measures previously mentioned. Some students also proposed alternatives to this regulatory system, consisting of continued monitoring of universities or in their awareness of the value of assessment and the fulfilment of its recommendations. In the second case, the establishment of rewards and sanctions is determined by certain institutional requirements, replicating those imposed on the conversion of recommendations into obligations or to the combination between the results of assessment and the funding of universities.

Moreover, the reward and sanction system is perceived as feasible if it does not comprise the imposition of sanctions, especially of financial nature. The feasibility of sanctions is admitted only if students are not adversely affected; when directed at institutional management; and, above all, after having exhausted all the possibilities to encourage the implementation of the assessment recommendations and especially in the case of an obvious institutional resistance to change.

A sanction that will not affect students seems more adequate. (Interviewee 48, University X).

From the moment that (the university) stops changing and accommodate to what is wrong, that (regulatory) system can be established. (Interviewee 38, University X).

In this context, some students argue that the most serious sanction to any university with less positive assessment results than other universities is the decline in the public's perception of its social image and prestige and its inability to attract new students, rather than in material punishments resulting from such institutional regulatory system:

The greatest reward universities have is, undoubtedly, the capacity of attracting students.

(Interviewee 64, University Y).

### **The ambiguous impact of quality assessment**

The main aim of this paper was to contribute to the understanding of how students perceive the impact of quality assessment in universities, assuming that the lack of or poor awareness of this impact endangers the assertion of assessment as a device for promoting institutional accountability.

Based on the discussion of a limited set of data derived from a study of Portuguese students' perceptions of quality assessment (Cardoso, 2009), it can be concluded that

students tend to perceive the impact of this process, i.e., its capacity to induce concrete changes, in an ambiguous way. This impact is conditioned by several factors, especially those related to the way universities react to quality assessment and to the changes recommended or induced by external reports. Furthermore, institutional change is perceived as being the result more of other 'macro' processes (for instance, the Bologna process), that aim at reconfiguring higher education as a whole, than of any assessment exercise directed at the performance of individual universities.

Still, the impact of quality assessment emerges as idealised and focussed on the quality of three main spheres of university activity: teaching and education, material conditions and degrees offered. This idealisation, also identified in other studies (Amaral, 2003; Leite et al., 2006), seems to signify that these are the matters of greatest concern for students in terms of the performance and quality of these institutions.

The ambiguity of students' perceptions is also evident in the way they conceive the possible adoption of measures aimed at giving assessment and its results a more robust character and enforcing the degree of change induced by its recommendations. At this level, such ambiguity is evidenced by two types of student perception. On the one hand, perceptions expressing the idea that the impact of quality assessment can be more structural if the process is reinforced by a system of institutional rewards and sanctions; on the other hand, there are perceptions where the power of assessment to induce changes is seen as being reduced, derived from its assertion as an instrument directed at institutional monitoring or advising.

This means that although students tend to perceive quality assessment as having a transformative capacity, i.e., a practical effect, the legitimacy of this capacity emerges as being connected to the establishment of a reward and sanction system based on the assessment's results. This is perceived as the most plausible solution to make assessment more consequent and, thus, preferred to other more robust measures, such as those that could affect the autonomy and funding of universities: the conversion of recommendations into impositions and establishing a link between the assessment's results and institutional funding.

A final pertinent conclusion is that the ambiguous perceptions students have of the impact of quality assessment seems to indicate that it apparently missed one of its major intentions: to allow students to gain a better knowledge of the quality of universities. Indeed, quality assessment and its consequences seem to have been conditioned by the way they were perceived and developed by Portuguese universities for nearly a decade, reflected in the weak strategies designed to inform students about these features.

Recently legislation (Law 38/2007) established a new quality assessment system that came into operation in 2009. The challenge universities now seem to face is to be creative and to engage in new and diverse strategies aimed at informing students of the assessment process and its consequences. This would certainly contribute to support its position as a real instrument promoting institutional accountability.

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## Appendix

Analysis grid: dimensions, categories and themes, translating the major elements structuring students' positions and perceptions of quality assessment.

### **First dimension: Students' attitudes towards quality assessment**

More or less favourable position of students towards quality assessment.

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Categories	
Legitimacy	Legitimacy, relevance and meanings attributed to assessment, whether in a broader sense (multiple formats of assessment designed to measure various aspects of the operation and performance of the higher education system and university) or a narrower sense (directed at assessing the quality of undergraduate degrees).
Instrumental aims	Purposes or aims of the assessment (in a broad or narrow sense) – why to assess?; areas of activity and/or operation (at system, university and/or faculty level) perceived as its 'target' – what to assess?
Forms of assessment	Targeting or focus of the assessment (in a broad or narrow sense) on the processes and/or results of the higher education system and/or university and/or faculty.

  

Themes	
	Informative assessment
	Assessment focused on systemic, university and/or faculty processes and on the verification or identification of their 'strong' and 'weak' features. It relies on the collection and dissemination of information to address the entities responsible for coordinating and monitoring the assessment, the university and its different groups of actors, society, or external stakeholders.
	Formative assessment
	Assessment based on the collection and dissemination of information on the systemic, university or faculty processes, with the ultimate aim of inducing a reflective and critical analysis and the definition of improvement strategies.
	Control or regulation assessment
	Assessment based on the verification and regulation of both processes and results, especially those of the university, emerging thus as an instrument of accountability.
	Comparative assessment
	Focusing on the university processes and results, assessment has as its main goal to produce information on their quality, allowing for the comparison and classification (ranking) of universities and, ultimately, the induction of inter-institutional competition (for funding, recognition, and students).
	Punitive assessment
	Oriented towards the university performance, assessment focuses on the implementation of sanctions whenever institutional results are negative, insufficient or inadequate.

## **Second dimension: Student information on quality assessment**

Depth and degree of organisation of information and knowledge students have on the quality assessment of undergraduate degrees.

	Categories
Identification of assessment	Ability of students to recognise specifically the existence and development of the quality assessment of undergraduate degrees. Depth of the knowledge and discursive ability of students to describe the main features of this form of assessment and compliance between that description and assessments' 'actual' features. Students' knowledge on the development of assessment of the quality of their undergraduate degrees and the possibility of access to the corresponding reports (external assessment reports).
Information relevance	Students' opinions about the 'quality' (fitness) of the information they have (or to which they have access to) on the quality assessment of undergraduate degrees. Elements perceived as capable of interfering with the structuring of the 'quality' of the information and requirements deemed necessary for its increase. Students' interest for the quality assessment of undergraduate degrees and perception of this interest as a determining factor in accessing information about the process.
Means of accessing information	Means by which students had (or have) access to information and knowledge on the quality assessment of undergraduate degrees.  Themes  Institutional  Information obtained from the university, through several information and communication devices (website, for example), through contact with other institutional actors (teachers, course directors, managers, academics, peers), or access to external assessment reports.  Extra-institutional  Information deriving from external sources of information and communication: media, collective actors linked to quality assessment definition and development and/or to higher education; informal contexts of interaction; access to external assessment reports out of the university context.  Institutional and/or academic participation  Information essentially resulting from the participation (past or present) of the students in the university governance and/or management bodies and/or other academic bodies (student unions).  Experience of assessment  Information mainly deriving from the experience and participation (involvement) of the students in the quality assessment of undergraduate degrees.  Other ways of access  Information obtained through means other than those mentioned above, such as common sense knowledge, or individual strategies of

	access to information as a result of a personal interest in the subject of quality assessment and its development.
Information mediation	Authorities perceived as having the responsibility for the dissemination of information on the quality assessment of undergraduate degrees. Self-perception of students as responsible for obtaining this information through the use of specific strategies for its selection and access to its sources. Major obstacles identified in accessing that information.

***Third dimension: Connection with action***

Experience of students on the development of exercises of undergraduate degrees quality assessment.

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Categories	
Institutional context	Context of students' experience in the undergraduate degrees quality assessment: awareness of the opportunities for participation in the process; elements that contribute to the shaping of that awareness, including the institutional framing of that participation and of the quality assessment process, or the accumulated (prior) experience of students in its development; description of the experience (actual, partial or absent) of assessment; importance given to the possibility of student participation in the process.
Constraints	Factors perceived as interfering with the 'quality' of student involvement in the quality assessment of undergraduate degrees.
Predisposition	Students' predisposition to become involved or act in the undergraduate degrees quality assessment and conditions defined for that involvement.
Compliance	Adequacy or compliance recognised by the students to the devices designed for their participation in the undergraduate degrees quality assessment. Suggestions towards the amendment of these devices in order to allow for the increase or make more effective student involvement in the assessment process.
Institutional perception	Students' position on the way their participation in the quality assessment of undergraduate degrees is perceived within the university, namely by academics. Factors that contribute to the development of this perception. Orientation of this institutional perception (positive, ambivalent, negative) and its impact or consequences on student involvement in the undergraduate degrees quality assessment.

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***Fourth dimension: The field of students' perceptions***

Content and extent of students' perceptions on both a broader and a narrower concept of quality assessment.

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Categories

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Impact of quality assessment	Quality and extent of the impact (real or actual, partial, absent) recognised by students to quality assessment. Domains of activity or operation of the higher education system, of university, of faculty, or of undergraduate degrees perceived as more likely envisaged by that impact. Conditioning factors that determine or influence the quality and extent of the impact of quality assessment. Perception of this impact as dependent on the assumption by assessment of a more coercive character through giving assessment recommendations a compulsory character or of linking quality assessment results either to a reward and sanction system for universities or their financing.
Extent of student perceptions	Extension of students' perceptions in a continuum delimited by the allusion from more general formats of quality assessment (multiple formats of assessment designed to measure various aspects of the operation and performance of the higher education system and university) to more specific formats of quality assessment (directed at assessing the undergraduate degrees quality).
Content of student perceptions	'Location' of the content of students' perceptions on quality assessment in a field bounded by more traditional or more managerialist and market-driven perspectives on higher education, universities and the assessment of their quality.

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