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University Student's Assessment Policies in a Portuguese University

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Abstract

Assessment is a central issue in what concerns student learning in higher education.

This study aims to find out the policy/regulations that three colleges, integrated into a Portuguese University, from different academic areas, namely sciences, social sciences and humanities, has formally set for teachers and students to follow when conducting student learning assessment and its strengths and weaknesses when transposed into practice. In this regards, an open-ended questionnaire was conceived. Content analysis of the answers given by students and teachers were supported by *Nvivo* 11 software. The data analysis allowed the identification of the most relevant categories about the students learning process assessment, for each one of the three schools, and the differences between the students' and teachers' perceptions about assessment practices, as well as the assessment methods preferred by the students and how they relate each form of assessment with their learning process. It was concluded that the major policies are conceived mainly regarding assessment for certification and quality, however, guidelines and practices regarding assessment for and as learning are also present, mainly through the use of different assessment methods over the semester.

Keywords: Assessment; Higher Education; University Policies; Students' Perceptions; Teachers' Perceptions

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1. Introduction

Assessment is a fundamental topic in educational contexts and it takes a major importance in higher education. As Bloxham and Boyd (2007, p. 3) point out:

> Research and experience tell us very forcefully about the importance of assessment in higher education. It shapes the experience of students and influences their behaviour more than the teaching they receive (…) assessment activity in higher education is the learning activity. (Bloxham & Boyd, 2007, p. 3)

The assessment imparts to them what truly matters in their courses, which unequivocally impact on their learning, and necessarily on what, how, when and how much they study (Bloxham, 2014), that means if they undergo on a deep approach (when the main goal is the understanding of the contents), a surface approach (when the main goal is to reach the assessment requests of the module) or in strategic approach (when the goal is to reach the highest evaluations) (Richardson, 2005). Thus it seems especially important to explore the purposes and principles of assessment in higher education as well as the policies and regulations that transpose them into practice in order to promote better learning environments.

1.1 Assessment Purposes

According to Earl (2006) assessment purposes have been classified into three distinct groups: assessment of learning, assessment for learning, and assessment as learning.

Assessment of learning is related to the traditional view of assessment. It is related to the assignment of a classification. It involves gathering a set of evidence of the student's skills through tasks with a summative profile, like exams and tests for the purpose of selection and certification.

Assessment for learning includes formative and summative assessment with an appropriate balance between the two (McDowell, Wakelin, Montgomery, & King, 2011) and reflects numerous developments in higher education, although the definitions and its range differ notably. According to these authors (McDowell et al., 2011, p. 750), assessment for learning:

- is rich informal feedback (e.g., tutor comment; self-assessment systems);
- is rich in informal feedback through dialogic teaching and peer interaction;
- provides opportunities to try out and practice knowledge, skills, and understanding;
- has assessment tasks which are authentic or relevant; and
- assists students to develop independence and autonomy.

Assessment as learning can be understood, on one hand, as learning through handling course work and reviews, and on the other hand, as a subset of assessment for learning where learning is promoted through the active involvement of the student in assessment, namely through the use of feedback, peer assessment, and self-monitoring of his progress (Bloxham & Boyd, 2007).

In this scope, Gibbs and Simpson (2005) established a group of "conditions under which assessment can support learning," aggregated in two different categories of influence: the influence of the assessment scheme and tasks on the amount and quality of their involvement in academic work and learning; and the influence of feedback on learning. In a similar vein, Carless (2007, 2015) presents the Learning Oriented Assessment framework based on three main principles: assessment tasks should constitute important learning opportunities, students should be actively engaged in self and peers assessment, and feedback as feed forward.

There is evidence that student experience is more positive in modules where assessment for learning approaches are used, and that students are more likely to take a deep approach (McDowell et al., 2011). For these results some aspects seem to have an important contribution, namely: (1) staff support and module design including feedback, and the balance between summative and formative assessments; (2) students' active engagement with the subject matter; (3) engagement in peer learning (McDowell et al., 2011). In this context, the Pastor (2011) study found also that the formative approach to learning and assessment leads to better academic performance comparatively to other methods, namely final exam or mix method.

On the other hand, as Bloxham (2014) points out, summative assessment can lead students to behave tactically focusing especially on marks and adopting a surface approach with a clear negative impact on learning. Besides, as Yorke (2010, 2011) reminds, summative assessment suffers from flaws that need to be addressed.

Despite the benefits that assessment for learning brings to learning, is it however a challenge to implement it because is time consuming and labour intensive, it requires training and expertise to be effective, and student involvement in tasks (Wei, 2010) This is especially true in an academic setting with so many demands for teachers and heterogeneous group of students, with different goals and levels of involvement, like for instance the working students that in some contexts are a significant part of higher students universe (Callender & Feldman, 2009).

Other categorizations of assessment purposes can be found, like for instance the one proposed by Bloxham and Boyd (2007), that includes four different assessment purposes that can nevertheless be matched with purposes mentioned before:

- *Certification* (assessment of learning), intending to recognise and separate between various level of accomplishment, between students, provide professional licences to exert a profession, permit the selection and ranking of candidates for a certain course;
- *Student learning* (assessment for learning and as learning), fosters a deep approach to learning through motivation to effective learning, giving feedback to the teacher to adjust procedures;
- *Quality assurance* (assessment of learning), provides data for significant partners to allow them to judge course principles and procedures;
- *Lifelong learning capacity* (assessment as learning), stimulates students to develop attitudes and competencies that promote lifelong learning.

1.2 Assessment Principles

Behind the above-mentioned purposes, it is possible to find a set of assessment principles to which they can be linked (Bloxham & Boyd, 2007), as presented in Table 1.

The *validity* principle is related to the extent that the learning outcomes are properly assessed in the evaluation tasks (Reddy & Andrade, 2010). There is evidence that teachers are increasingly trying to introduce more frequent and more diversified assessment tasks aligned with learning outcomes that simultaneously support an effective learning (Kyriazi, 2015). In this scope, flexible assessment, that allows more choices for students, can be an interesting path to follow when the established learning outcomes are at the base of the assessment possibilities

Table 1. Link between Assessment Purposes and Assessment Principles

Purpose	*Emphasises…*							
	Validity	Reliability	Effectiveness	Comparability & Consistency	Equity	Practicability	Transparency	Attribution
Certification	X	X			X			X
Student Learning	X		X		X	X	X	
Quality Assurance	X	X		X	X		X	
Lifelong Learning	X		X		X		X	

Source: Bloxham and Boyd (2007, pp. 31-44).

(Wanner & Palmer, 2015). The use of flexible assessment, for instance, using online assessment techniques, if properly planned and organised may have a positive impact in learning and in future professional life (Irwin & Hepplestone, 2012). Nevertheless, Liu, Bridgeman, and Adler (2012) mention that, although the efforts of learning outcomes assessments to capture students preparation, and the fact that students grades are in general valid indicators of students competencies, they only mirror a small amount of students' knowledge and skills. Some of these competencies, that many times are not captured by assessments, namely related to personal and social development, are mentioned by a significant part of the students as one of the major gains obtained through the broader university experience (Brennan & Houston, 2010).

Reliability appears as an important principle in certification and quality assurance since it relates to the guarantee that similar evaluation assignments will produce consistently similar grades (Reddy & Andrade, 2010). Quality assurance is a central issue in universities' life, especially after the expansion of higher education (Bloxham, 2012, as cited in Medland, 2016). As among other countries, in Portugal, there is an Agency for Assessment and Certification in Higher Education called A3ES (Agência de Avaliação e Acreditação do Ensino Superior, in Portuguese). This agency is a member of the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education and his mission is to ensure the quality of higher education in Portugal through assessment and certification of higher education institutions and their studies (A3ES, 2016). A study conducted by Tavares, Sin, and Amaral (2016), based on 12 certification processes of Portuguese Higher Education institutions by the A3ES, showed that the strongest and weakest points were found under a general category of "organisation of internal quality assurance" that includes policies, structures, procedures, regulations and tools. The authors also found that the second category that aggregated more elements was the "information management" which includes aspects like efficiency and fitness-for-purpose of information system, articulation with quality system, data collection/analysis. The existence of these elements or its long-term implementation was considered as a strength, and in other cases, its insufficient development, or lack of articulation with the quality system as a weakness. Another study also carried out in Portugal reveal that, according to the perceptions of academics, the internal quality assurance process brought more awareness to some issues, as well as the requirement for a significant investment in non-academic tasks, but nonetheless its impact on teaching and learning quality is modest (Tavares et al., 2016).

The *effectiveness* principle is related to the assessment for and as learning. Effectiveness in assessment implies that evaluation tasks achieve their goals in what learning is concerned, which means, to promote proper and deep approaches to learning (Ball et al., 2012). Within this aspect features as feedback, peer, and self-assessment, as well as diversification of assessment methods and flexible assessment, arise as relevant. As mentioned previously, and pointed out by several authors, feedback is central to learn (Handley & Williams, 2011; Howson, 2015; Lilly, Richter, & Rivera-Macias, 2010; Price, Handley, Millar, & O'Donovan, 2010). Nevertheless, to reach its purposes, students need to understand it and apply it in the future tasks (Handley & Williams, 2011). Part of the problem can be found on the teacher's side that recognises some constraints in this practice, but probably do not see its solution as a priority (Lilly et al., 2010). One of the possible solutions is the introduction of online assessments that give immediate feedback, being this way an interactive assessment that can improve learning. However, this kind of assessment tasks should be carefully planned, since some voices argue that some of the questions used (namely multiple choice questions) promote essentially surface learning (Jordan, 2009). A positive side of the use of this kind of assessment practice is the positive attitude of students towards it. The study of Kyriazi (2015) showed that a large majority of students evaluated through technologies is satisfied with it. Students refer that this kind of assessment is convenient and fairer than paper based assessments.

One important feature related with feedback is peer and self-assessment. When a student evaluates the work of a colleague, he gets feedback through the comparison with its own work (Bloxham, 2014). As Medland (2015) reminds, the active participation of students in the assessment process is a trait of the assessment for learning approach. Self-assessment can rise the interest and motivation of students for the matters and for learning and conduct to better results (Sharma et al., 2016). As Bain (2010) brings up, the student involvement in assessment processes opens the possibility to hear the "student voice," through the reflection, debate and action on issues related to the academic community, promoting this way the critical thinking and responsibility for their assessment. A study conducted by Pereira, Flores, and Niklasson (2016) focused on the research that have been conducted on assessment in higher education (after the implementation of Bologna process), showed that, when assessment methods are concerned, the attention of the majority of the studies is on portfolio assessment, followed by written examinations, oral examinations, group assessment and paper and digital diaries. The authors' mention that was verified an evolution with the

introduction of alternative assessment methods, or student-centred assessment methods, in relation to the traditional written test, which "is consistent with the assumptions underpinning the Bologna process" (Pereira et al., 2016, p. 1028). Another study in this area, conducted in Portugal, showed that the more used assessment practices in different courses are written tests, oral presentations in group and team work (Flores, Veiga Simão, Barros, & Pereira, 2015). Nevertheless, some differences were found, for instance, in Education course, learner-centred methods are more common when compared to other disciplines (Health Sciences, Psychology, and Engineering) which continue to use more traditional methods of assessment. Another interesting result is the fact that the students that indicate the use of learner-centred assessment methods refer to them as more effective and fair comparatively to students that refer the use of traditional methods.

Comparability and Consistency in assessments across students, courses and institutions are related especially to the quality assurance and impartiality in assessments. In this area, the need for comparability and consistency is unquestionable (Wosik, 2014) and urgent namely in what comparisons across institutions is concerned (Liu, 2011). As Wosik (2014, p. 32) mentions "the assessment process should produce scores which differentiate between higher and lower performing students. Otherwise, the grades effectively measure nothing." The information that is on the basis of grades attribution derives mainly from classroom assessments and in this scope is extremely important that this information is precise, correct and significant (Brookhart, 1999, as cited in Wosik, 2014). It is also vital not to forget that these decisions affect students' motivation, their investment and academic choices.

Equity principle is a key aspect in the four assessment purposes since it means that all students independently of their characteristics (like gender, ethnicity, disability, religious or sexual orientation) experience fairness and impartiality that allow them to accede, progress and succeed in an academic context (Brewster, 2016; Equality Challenge Unit [ECU], 2015)

As Stowell (2004) points out, equity generally implies the notion that one and all should be treated justly, which leads to the notion of equal treatment. Nevertheless, in some situations differential treatment can be justified, like for instance some positive discrimination measures, for instance, special arrangements for students with disabilities (Stowell, 2004). In this context, McArthur (2016, p. 968) brings up the concept of assessment for social justice

as a two-sided concept: "it refers both to the justice of assessment within higher education, and to the role of assessment in nurturing the forms of learning that will promote greater social justice within society as a whole." This same approach is supported and extended by Mutanga and Walker (2015, p. 514) that denote that "most students with disabilities lack opportunities and freedoms to secure their capabilities" and, in this scenario, equal opportunities in the academic context should be offered to them in order to succeed. In this same line is one of the recommendations of the European University Association (2013) for the Portuguese Higher Education system, pointing out the need to guarantee access and progress, namely for under-represented groups.

The *practicability* principle means that evaluation assignments are feasible for students and teachers are given the existing resources (Tinoca, Pereira, & Oliveira, 2014). Practicability is related to the availability of staff, time, setting, or equipment needed for the assessment tasks. As Bloxham and Boyd (2007) refer, the massification of higher education and the increasing number of students represent a significant additional demand on academic staff. In terms of teaching, some solutions, like big seminars or lectures, can be implemented but this turns much more difficult when assessment component is taken into consideration, especially in the case of some methods that require significant resources. The authors proposed some solutions to reduce the workload in assessment component: reduce time in summative assessment in favour of formative assessment; provide clear module assessment workload guidance; use of peer and self-assessment; encourage group-based assessments, or assessments in class, like presentations.

Transparency is especially important for student learning and quality assurance. Clear procedures and rules, which include the identification of learning outcomes and marking criteria and procedures, are important for the student, but also for the external examiners. As Bloxham and Boyd (2007) point out, transparency is also associated with fairness and better communication between students and teachers on assessment questions, since all can access to its criteria and evaluate their appropriateness. This aspect is also expressed in one of the Nine Principles of Good Practice for Assessing Student Learning stated by the American Association for Higher Education (Astin et al., 1996) referring that assessment as a goal-oriented process "(…) works best when the programs it seeks to improve have clear, explicitly stated purposes."

Attribution principle is especially important for the certification purposes

since it implies the adequate evidence of work authorship. This principle is related to a set of misconducts, namely plagiarism and collusion, and gained a major expression in the recent years in consequence of the expansion of the internet and electronic communications. Some strategies can be used in order to prevent or reduce plagiarism, such as the use of plagiarism software as a deterrent, interactive writing and referencing exercises with feedback, and mastery quizzes on writing and referencing (Owens & White, 2013). Practical strategies to inhibit fraud can also include "limited or focused topics for research papers, required submission of paper drafts, examination proctoring, use of alternate test forms or randomly generated (computer-based) tests, random seating during test administration, exclusion of electronic devices during testing, and required student sign-offs when submitting examination" (Scanlan, 2006, p. 181). In this field, Stuhmcke, Booth, and Wangmann (2016) state that these misconducts need to be properly addressed by the universities, namely through the elaboration of an ethical code since the existence of rules and procedures to act upon it do not guarantee that the problem is tackled.

1.3 Assessment Policies and Regulations

Higher education institutions differ from each other depending on a set of characteristics, namely size, subjects, disciplines, learning practices, location, or mission, which naturally affect the education process and the students that become part of it (Fry, Ketteridge, & Marshall, 2015). Teachers are generally viewed as specialists in teaching and assessment (Poskitt, 2014), and that leads to the expectation that teachers can easily respond to the new challenges and adjust their practices. Nevertheless, within a society where rapid changes and demands are evident, this is not an easy task. Obviously, teachers have an important role in education processes in general, but as Bloxham and Boyd (2007) refer, when we talk about assessment and recent influences on it, the policy climate in relation to quality assurance and improvement is probably the most significant influence. Overall, institutional governance has a great impact on teaching processes and teaching staff (Fry et al., 2015), and consequently on their assessment practices through the support or the change of the existing practices and ethos (Medland, 2016), and should focus, not only the assessment practices in the classroom, but similarly the global practices and culture of the institution (Leathwood, 2005). A study conducted in Portugal (Santiago, Carvalho, & Cardoso, 2015) to analyse academics' perceptions on changes in the governance and management of higher education institutions in three different generations of academics showed that

there are similar perceptions of governance and management across the three groups. In general, there is a tendency to consider that the decision making and regulation of academic work are under the jurisdiction of faculty boards and academics, but the younger generation of academics considers to have less influence on the definition of institutional policies.

The institutional leadership is this way fundamental to encourage the need for change since, as Watkins, Dahlin, and Ekholm (2005, as cited in Medland, 2016, p. 88) mention "academic staff are unlikely to change their assessment practices unless they are fully persuaded of the need for change and the effectiveness of the new approach." However, in the Portuguese higher education context, institutional governance and management tend to be perceived by academics as one of the main obstacles to quality (Cardoso, Rosa, & Stensaker, 2016). Still it is important to mention that, on one hand, the knowledge that academics hold of administrative structures is generally poor, but on the other hand, there is a greater compliance of the academics to global institutional quality assurance aspects comparatively to their adherence to individual acting related quality issues (Cardoso et al., 2016).

As governance is seen as an obstacle in some domains, regulations aren't, as well, seen in some cases as the proper guide or the facilitator, namely in what assessment is concerned. A study conducted by Raaper (2016, pp. 180-181) in one university in the UK, shows that academics tend to describe the regulation assessment as "a complicated document …, difficult to digest or difficult to get the head around." The author mentions that the document is experienced as complex and difficult to understand and apply, and as such academics tend to use covert "practices of freedom" that help them to cope with assessment practices "… such as manoeuvring within the policy contexts and flexing the regulations as much as possible" (Raaper, 2016, p. 188). For instance, one important aspect of student learning, around which there isn't a consensus about its regulation, is attendance (Macfarlane, 2013). In this field, teachers have an important role, once they may enhance student's attendance with student-friendly programmes (Bati, Mandiracioglu, Orgun, & Govsa, 2013), for example through environments that encourage discussion and exposure of doubts, since these are among the principal reasons that foster students to be in classes. Student attendance is described as a universal challenge, although students believe that attendance is necessary and that affects academic achievement (Bati et al., 2013). Literature refer that attendance is related to mandatory attendance of the student in class,

teacher preparation and the materials used, the quality of the relation class-teacher-student, the teacher's attitude and support, the scope and difficulty of the subject, the possibility of learning about the same subject outside lectures, stress, time management, difficulty travelling to the university, medical reasons, sports activities and teaching methods (Alija, 2013; Bati et al., 2013).

Besides the role of governance and teachers on institutional practices and change, students' feedback, as mentioned previously, and as stressed by Richardson (2005), is also very important for the quality of teaching and of their courses. When students express their perceptions and expectations, regarding different aspects of service provision that derive from institutional policies and structures, it possible to gather some interesting data that can give its contribution to change in order to improve the quality of higher education. The study of Sarrico and Rosa (2014), conducted with a large sample of Portuguese higher education students) showed that variables like gender, year of the course and scientific area are related to different levels of satisfaction in different academic life dimensions. The study revealed that males and students attending the first year tend to be more satisfied, as well as students from sciences, mathematic, and engineering, compared to students from arts and humanities. Regarding assessment, other study found the students from humanities seem again to be less satisfied, indicating that their assessment is less appropriate and encourages surface learning, compared to sciences and professional courses (Jessop & Maleckar, 2016). This study, conducted in the UK, showed also that, although there are huge differences in the number of assessments (for sciences the proportion of examinations was twice of the one verified for humanities), the learning benefits were similar across disciplines. It is also possible to found, again in a study conducted in Portugal, interesting data concerning the view of the students on different types of assessment (Fernandes, Flores, & Lima, 2012). For instance, concerning project work, this study shows that students consider that this kind of assessment task leads to deep learning and critical thinking, and promote a link to real life, being this way satisfied with this kind of assessment. Nevertheless, some students refer, after the project was concluded, that prefer a more traditional assessment method, where the student has a more passive role, with no application of knowledge. Project work represents a heavy workload and this raises their expectations to get a higher final grade, that sometimes in not reached (at least according to their expectations and in comparison with another kind of assessment). This study also shows that students look at traditional assessment methods as undoubtedly valid assessment methods,

which is consistent with other studies (Fernandes et al., 2012) that point out that summative assessment seems to be the focus of the student, more than the gained knowledge and the learning process.

Listen to the whole academic community, and gathering information from their experiences, and in particular from students as consumers or clients (Kahu, 2013), seems extremely important to promote and establish proper regulations, namely in what assessment in concerned.

2. Methods

2.1 Main Goal and Research Questions

This study aims to find out the policy/regulations that a Portuguese University has formally set for teachers and students to follow when conducting student learning assessment and its strengths and weaknesses that appeared when placing them into practice.

To reach our goal, three main questions were formulated:

(1) What are the major policies for student learning assessment at the university?

(2) What are the different perceptions of such policies and practices in terms of academic subject, academic position, students or teachers and teachers vs. administrators?

(3) How are these practices related to mainstream assessment discourses or conceptions?

2.2 Procedure and Sample

The study was conducted in a Portuguese University, namely in three colleges from distinct areas: sciences (CS), social sciences (CSS) and humanities (CH). This is one of the major public universities in Portugal, located in Lisbon, with a large number of students and as such one of the most representative of the country. This university is a comprehensive one, offering colleges specialised in science, technology, arts and humanities, with extensive internationalisation experience and has a focus both teaching and research orientation.

For each institution, a teacher of reference was approached after a previous contact and, from there, several teachers were invited to participate in the study. For the students, announcements were made in the student association's pages and in other associative groups. When teachers and students were interested in

participate, a formal invitation was written and sent by email. The invitation was composed by an explanatory e-mail, the interview guide, an informative note about the aims of the study and the ethical questions (anonymity, study procedures) and it was also attached an interview accomplishment and recording approval informed consent. A day was scheduled with ones that answered positively to the e-mail and the interview took place in a calm and discreet place.

The present study involved three stages, each of them comprising the following samples (see Table 2):

Table 2. Research Process Steps and Sample

Stages	Sample	
	Faculty members	Students
1st: testing the interview guide	2 academic staff with more than one year teaching experience	2 students in year 2 to 4
2nd: understanding the university policy	3 administrative leaders who participated in the process of assessment policy making off	
3rd: understanding the policy perception	5 academic staff (1 full professor, 2 associate teachers, and 2 assistant teachers) × 3	8 students (4 of year 2; 4 of year 3) × 3
Total:	20	26
Total of analysed interviews	18	24

Source: This study.

2.3 Instrument

To better understand university student's assessment policies an open-ended questionnaire was developed. The academic staff and student's questionnaire was structured according to the following topics:

(1) General knowledge about university students learning assessment policies

(2) Personal perception about the policies

(3) Relationship between teachers' practice and policies

(4) Example of an assessment method

(5) Evaluation of the relationship between practice and policy

(6) Perception of the policy's strengths and weakness

(7) Students' assessment suggestions

2.4 Data Analysis

To analyse the data obtained and the formal regulation policies, *Nvivo* 11 software was used. Data was analysed through classical content analysis approach, once it allows to understand what concepts were predominantly discussed (Leech & Onwuegbuzie, 2011). This method analyses texts regarding presence and frequency of terms or concepts, which enable to then create categories and themes (Berg, 2009).

This enabled the organisation in categories and also group comparison, namely by gender, academic subject (sciences, social sciences, and humanities) and position (students' vs. teachers and teachers vs. administrators).

3. Results and Discussion

3.1 Major Policies for Student Learning Assessment

After a detailed analysis of the differences and similarities among the current documents regulators of the learning assessment process in each college it was possible to identify the following similar guidelines:

- The classification is given on a scale from 0 to 20 values.
- The negative classification is given from 0 to 9.4 and the positive from 9.5 to 20 values.
- There are 2 types of assessment: regular and special.
- The continuous assessment[1] can contemplate different methods of assessment.
- The most practical subjects can be evaluated with an essay (ex: monograph, report, reflections, etc.).
- There are several times of assessment: regular, 1st period, 2nd period, special period, and the special period for finishing the course.
- The student can only register once for a better mark.

Table 3 shows the different guidelines between colleges:

[1] Continuous assessment is an ongoing assessment process in which formative, as well as summative, assessment is included.

Table 3. Different Policies' Guidelines of the Three Analysed Faculties

Faculty of Sciences	Faculty of Social Sciences	Faculty of Humanities
Attendance		
Attendance is not mandatory except for practical classes.	The attendance is defined by the professor.	Attendance is mandatory for continuous assessment.
Assessment information		
Available in the course web page before the beginning of the semester and explained in the first lesson.	Explained during the first semester week and put available online.	Published within the first lesson's summary.
Final assessment access		
Available to every student.		Limited to 2 subjects per year. For worker students, they are limited to 4 per year.
Final assessment format		
Written test + possible oral test to defend the grade.	Written test or written test + oral test or theoretical practical test.	Only written test or written test + oral test.
Classifications disclosure		
Maximum deadline after the test and one week before the recovery test.	Until 72 working hours before the recovery.	Maximum deadline 15 days after the test or 5 days before the recovery assessment.
Right to consult the tests		
Available to every student.		It is a bureaucratic step related to the review of the classification in discord situation.
Sanction for fraud		
Possible disciplinary case.	Fail in the test and in the subject.	Fail in the assessment moment.

Source: This study.

3.2 Different Perceptions of University Policies and Practices in Terms of Academic Subject, Academic Position, Students vs. Teachers and Teachers vs. Administrators

Given the analysis of the guidelines of the studied colleges and the ones founded in the literature, a comparison was made between the practices that were found in the discourses of the teachers and students of the three colleges. To undertake this comparison, it was considered only the questions that were simultaneously posed to teachers and students.

Besides the presented themes, other ones appeared, but did not had an expression in the group (academic subject, academic position, students vs. teachers and teachers vs. administrators) and therefore were not included in Table 4. Some of them were: attendance count through the call, marks delivery deadline, assessment criteria for students with special educational needs and the need for flexibility, availability of the assessment plan, consistency and transparency in the assessment process. Hereafter, the most relevant themes will be presented and discussed.

Table 4. Identified Themes by Sample Type (Values Represent the Number of Subjects That Mentioned the Theme)

Major Policies for Student Learning Assessment - Themes -	Faculty Members						Students		
	Administrative			Teachers					
	CS	CSC	CH	CS	CSS	CH	CS	CSS	CH
Attendance	1	1	1	5	5	5	8	8	8
• Attendance sheet*	1	1	1	4	2	2	8	8	8
• Attendance value bonus*	1		1		2	2		4	2
• Bonus for presence*				2		1	3	5	2
Assessment methods	1	1	1	5	5	5	8	8	8
• Continuous assessment*	1	1	1	5	5	5	8	8	8
• Self-assessment/peer assessment*			1	3	4	1		3	
• Formative assessment*		1	1	4	5	5	3	7	4
• Technology in assessment*	1			1	1			2	1
• Feedback	1	1	1	5	5	5	3	6	5
Access to exams	1	1	1	5	4	5	6	7	8
Fraud		1	1					2	8
Right to consult the test	1		1	3	3		6	1	2

Source: This study.

Note: *Those answers were based on the topic 7 (4. Example of an assessment method), and therefore are related to one subject example that the interviewed choose according to with their classification of "a comprehensive method of assessment."

3.3 Attendance

From all the themes emerged, one of the most debated was students' attendance, causing a great discussion about its verification methods and its relations with the continuous assessment or its bonus value at summative assessment. In what concerns the mandatory classes, which Bati et al. (2013) refer as a factor for student attendance, CS regulations only consider it for practical/

laboratory classes. This guideline is followed by the majority of teachers that mention that they verify student's attendance by a sign sheet. From these, two teachers give 10% of the assessment classification to attendance. In this regard, some teachers do not assume the mandatory classes as an advantage:

> (...) attendance should not be used for assessment. Students should go to classes when they represent a value to their learning and that should call them to classes, not be mandatory. (CS, Administrative Teacher)

In CSS, where the rules leave this criterion to teacher's choice, half of the responders verify student's attendance, being this a necessary element of continuous assessment. However, in CH the rule assumes students' attendance as mandatory to access continuous assessment, but only half of the responders does so.

As far as the students are concerned, they all answered that attendance depends on the teacher, and at least one teacher calls their names to verify attendance. Everyone agreed that the attendance sheet system is not a valid one, stating that some students sign for others.

The majority of the students agree with mandatory attendance and its verification in practical classes, especially when they do laboratory work, reports, study visits, presentations, small essays or worksheets. This study corroborates literature findings (Alija, 2013; Bati et al., 2013), since students in this study referred the importance of attendance in order to have academic success, and about factors that motivate them to be at class, namely the methods used, the difficulty of learning about the same subject outside lectures and the work production during lessons.

> (...) there are subjects where we do real practical activities, but there are other ones where we only listen (…) attendance should only be count in practical classes. (CSS, Student 6, 3rd year)

In general the discourses seem to present some arguments, that support mandatory attendance (better academic performance and preparation to professional life), but simultaneously arguments that go against mandatory attendance, namely the right of voluntary choice, and the promotion of a culture

of "presenteeism," instead of real engagement, as Macfarlane (2013) points out when discussing the reasons for and against mandatory attendance.

3.4 Assessment Methods

In the three colleges analysed, the policies would contemplate two types of assessment: final assessment or continuous assessment. According to with the policies, and also with teachers and students, continuous assessment is favoured and fostered, which in line with the assumption of the assessment for and as learning (Bloxham & Boyd, 2007; McDowell et al., 2011).

Giving the assumptions of continuous assessment and student-centred assessment, a teacher of CH reveals how he defines his assessment methodology:

> The idea that the elements of assessment are distinct and do not have to have the same weight. (...) Two things are fundamental: First, the moments of assessment are moments of learning. Second, the moment of assessment should be chained in a way that optimises the abilities that the student already has. It should flatter one goal: For the subject X, one student in the beginning of the semester should not be the same student at the end of that semester. (CH, Assistant Teacher 1)

A teacher from CSS talks about the benefits of the continuous assessment as assessment for learning and lifelong learning, as McDowell et al. (2011) defend that students experience is more positive in subjects where assessment for learning approaches are used, namely staff support including feedback. This way students' active commit with the subject matter and engagement in peer learning.

> I can see myself in the principles of continuous assessment, with the different possibilities for students to express themselves individually and in a group with written reports and oral presentations and then discussing several themes (...) When they put themselves in a group and manage to organise themselves, after several years they can find benefits of mutual aid, cooperation, interaction, which is very good for lifelong learning, team group. (...) And I support that process. (CSS, Full Professor 2)

The efficacy of the assessment is also related to the diversification of the methods that are used and with the assessment flexibility (Kyriazi, 2015; Wanner & Palmer, 2015). To better understand the most common methods of assessment

it was proposed to interviewers to choose an assessment plan that they consider a comprehensive one and to describe it. The methods that were referred were the following: tests (mid-term or final exam), computer multiple-choice tests, group essay/project, presentations (which may or may not include discussion), individual essay, tasks to solve at class with professor feedback (report of laboratory activities, questions, texts analysis and translations), homework and online exercises.

The majority of the assessment plans chosen use three or more assessment methods, which lead to think that the assessment method developed by the majority of the teachers from this university has in consideration the validity principle (Reddy & Andrade, 2010), which supports the evidence that the teachers try to introduce assessment moments more frequently and more diverse in the course of the semester (Kyriazy, 2015).

The most common methods were the final exams, group essays, presentations and practical classes where the attendances are supervised, as found by Pereira, Flores, and Niklasson (2016). These assessment methods correspond to alternative methods or student-centred assessment methods and that promotes the relationship between assessment and learning.

A CS teacher supports the importance of continuous assessment and the way it enhances the assessment for learning:

> (...) my disciplines (...) are more aligned to promote continuous assessment. Students develop work during a period of six months to arrive at the final exam with a good deal of study by doing the practical study. (...) then end up studying and consulting information that we have not addressed yet and because of this many students became more available, more prepared to discuss and ask questions. (CS, Associate Teacher 4)

This teacher states that his method engages students in authentic and relevant tasks, promotes autonomous and independent learning, is rich in formal and informal feedback (McDowell et al., 2011) and is part of an assessment methodology that supports learning (Gibbs & Simpson, 2005).

Some teachers, when asked about the assessment plans, report that sometimes tests are the only method used. Many teachers argue that with 300 students per class is unaffordable to apply other assessments' methodologies. A large number of students per class is related to the massification of higher

education, which arises the practicability principle (Tinoca et al., 2014). In some assessment plans, the formative evaluation means dividing the subject into modules and to do two or three tests throughout the semester and a final one. One of these students (CSS) said that modular tests were conducted online, but that the correction and marks were not obtained immediately, as well as feedback.

According to Bloxham (2014), summative assessment can lead students to behave strategically focusing specially on marks and adopting that way a surface approach with clear negative impact on learning. A CSS professor corroborates the literature, saying that perhaps the tests are the most inefficient way of assessment regarding learning promotion:

> one of the worst is especially the final exam. (…) they study two days before, they only memorise and what they keep in terms of competencies is very limited and introduces several barriers to proper skills. (CSS, Full Professor 1)

Usually, written assignments are more connected with traditional methods, which were found to be less effective and fair comparatively to the use of student-centred assessment methods (Flores et al., 2015).

A student of the same college raises the possibility of changing the way questions are made, which should demand student reflection and critical analysis. This student view is related to the concept of a deep approach, where the main goal is the understanding of the contents and to express a genuine interest in the subjects (Richardson, 2005). Bloxham (2014) adds that the assessment should encourage metacognition, stimulating thinking about the learning process and not just focused on learning outcomes.

> I would like that tests demand more knowledge than debiting information. We have to study a lot and then we got the test and have questions to just say what we have memorised and I think that a critical analysis would be more productive in the future. (CSS, Student 8, 3rd grade)

Most students chose subjects related with several assessment methods, which can be thought that the use of different methods promote learning content and are assumed as more effective quantifiers of students' skills.

> (…) with group works we learn so much more … there was a subject that seems uninteresting, but the teacher proposed a research project and we were researching and interviewing people (…) it became interesting and we learned a lot. (CSS, Student 2, 2nd year)

The extract is also according to the study of Fernandes et al. (2012) which showed that project work is considered by students the kind of assessment which leads to deep learning and critical thinking, promoting a link to real life. In fact, it seems that students value assessment methods that are challenging and integrate theoretical and practical information (Bloxham, 2014).

Finally within this theme, information and communication technologies in teaching that present important advantages such as immediate feedback and self-assessment, and also a form of interactive learning (Lilly et al., 2010). Among the teachers surveyed, only two teachers (one CS teacher and a teacher at CH) integrates the computer as an ally in the assessment, namely with small tests.

> There is formative assessment through electronic tests in which the student can choose whether to join the result of these tests to the summative evaluation or not. (...) The tests are made online. For that reason, can also be used as a way of self-assessment. (CS, Assistant Teacher 2)

Although the use of this method is not widespread, it is noted that self-assessment can raise the interest and motivation of students for the subjects and for learning, conducting consequently to better results (Sharma et al., 2016). As for the students, only three approached this subject, two of them expressing negative feelings towards it, contrasting with literature, which states that the majority of students are satisfied with the practised methods (Kyriasi, 2015).

> I do not agree with the assessment tests on the computer and the multiple-choice questions, it seems to me that it is not the best way to tell if the student knows or not (...) we have 30 minutes to answer 45 or 50 questions. This way we do not have time to think. Teachers often say that students have to learn to think, but this way we do not have this possibility. You can only perform this type of testing if you memorise the questions. (CSS Student 2, 2nd year)

This student invokes the principles of equality and reliability in the

assessment (Brewster, 2016; ECU, 2015; Reddy & Andrade, 2010), which implies equal opportunities to demonstrate what have been learned and that assessment should generate comparable marks across time and methods, as well as the practicability principle. Another factor that is considered as demotivating in these computer tasks is multiple-choice questions tests, a method related to superficial learning (Jordan, 2009), is the time to perform it, as a teacher from CSS said:

> It is important to evaluate the student's skills, not the student's competence to resist to time pressure. (CSS, Teacher 4)

3.5 Access to Exams

Access to exams seem to be an important and problematic issue, but for the last only in CH. According to the regulations, students only have access to written exams of two subjects in a whole year; if they achieve 8/20 and worker students have access to four exams. Different perspectives are handled between teachers and students. The first group explains that is a way to promote students' attendance and students argue that this is part of an economic system and delays the completion of the course, as the statements bellow indicate

> In this college, there are no exams, only if one fails the course and goes to the exam or if one wants to achieve better grades. Exams are not part of the standard assessment. (…) a student can take two exams per year. (…) It is thought that the student who is evaluated considering all his effort during the semester will be much better evaluated. (CH, Assistant Teacher 3)

> (…) this is a business (...) made to keep students here, to make it compulsory to do another year, not letting us to do exams (…). (CH, Student 7, 3rd year)

> We have many courses per semester, if we fail in three we can only take two exams ... and then we have to have a specific grade to it, that does not make any sense. It is good to have continuous assessment, but then it is not because we cannot choose (…) if I have 7.4 I can no longer go to exam. And if you have a 12 and want to go to improve then you can only do one more exam that year. (CH, Student 8, 2nd year)

3.6 Fraud

Fraud is an important issue in higher education, also related with technologies development, which needs to be addressed adequately (Stuhmcke et al., 2016).

> Students understand much more than we about technologies (...) we had the case of a student who discovered the exam and shared it. We found out and the exam was cancelled. (CSS, Assistant Teacher 3)

According to the university policies, the CSS is the one that best describes what happens to the student in case of fraud. In the CS, students only know they may be subjected to disciplinary proceedings. The college where this issue has raised more discussion was the CH, in which all the students interviewed talked about it, indicating that, in most cases, the penalties and procedures for appeal were not sufficiently described in the assessment regulations.

3.7 Right to Consult the Test

The right to consult the corrected examination was a topic that only seems important to students. Although this topic appeared in several interviews, it only revealed as an issue in one college, which is related to specific regulations of the faculty.

The right to consult exams is something that CSS and CS provide in the Regulation and is accepted either by teachers and students. However, the same doesn't happen in the CH policies, in which regulation the exam inquiry is a step in the bureaucratic process of mark review that can compromise transparency principle, which is especially important for student learning and quality assurance (Bloxham & Boyd, 2007). Even though, the following statements express this reality of not having the access to exams review as a right.

> (…) to see the exams corrections is important to learn, but this does not happen here. (CH, Student 4, 2nd year)

Finally, it seems relevant that the number of students who had knowledge of the existence of the student learning assessment regulation was quite different between academic area. Although in the CH only one student who volunteered

for the study had no knowledge of it, in the CS only three, and in the CSS half of the students, knew of its existence.

Some of the students that were aware of its existence refer that it was related to an assessment problematic situation in the past, in which they had to rely on the university students learning assessment policy.

> I knew about it when a problem arose and I had to go check the policy. (CSS, Student 1, 2nd year)

In this regard, the CH was the one where more students showed more negative feelings regarding the regulations. These findings are in line with Jessop and Maleckar (2016) study, in which students from humanities were less satisfied with the assessment methods used. Similarly, is also in the CH that the policy has fewer pages, which raises the possibility that it lacks important information. In the CS, the students learning assessment regulation has almost fivefold pages than CH regulation, but in this faculty, one teacher warns that its length limits its use, as indicates Raaper (2016).

> The regulation is so big that it does not make sense for a day-to-day use, I only read it when there is a doubt (...) some days ago I realised some indications that were there and I didn't know. (CS, Associate Teacher 5)

Nevertheless, in all colleges, at least one student stated to be satisfied with the assessment system and to have nothing to report.

> So far I did not have any problems. (CH, Student 5, 2nd year)

> (...) I think our faculty is the best, the relationship with teachers is very important and here is good and teachers are flexible in finding new possibilities so our experience is the best for everyone. (CSS, Student 5, 3rd year)

> Weaknesses ... do not know, I am quite satisfied with the assessment that is made here. With organisation, everything is done. (CS, Student 8, 3rd year)

3.8 Relations between Practices and Mainstream Assessment Discourses or Conceptions

Taking into account the assessment literature it seems that these policies are geared towards the assessment of learning (McDowell et al., 2011), oriented to specific issues of assessment management, as time available to perform an assessment, academic calendar, deadlines, continuous assessment criteria and accessibility criteria for final exams. It is understood that these aspects can ensure the requirements to some learning assessment goals, namely assessment for certification and quality assurance.

> The assessment of knowledge and skills aims to prove that the set learning objectives for each course have been achieved by the students, as well as to assess their level of compliance. The adopted assessment methods should be in line with these objectives, allowing students to demonstrate and teachers evaluate the knowledge, skills, and capabilities provided. (Assessment policy of the CS)

So, as can be seen in this excerpt of the assessment regulation objectives of the CS, there is a strong focus on issues related to certification and quality. However, it turns out that other issues are addressed to meet the assessment guidelines for learning and as learning, especially the effort in the three colleges to favour continuous assessment over the exclusive assessment through a final exam, thus promoting formative assessment.

> (…) after the assessment of group work she would sit with us to explain what we had done and what we could improve. (CSS, Student 7, 3rd year)

Another policy guideline that also exists in all colleges has to do with the use of different assessment methods, which may include the possibilities for self-assessment and peer assessment, and the use of new technologies that some teachers and students mentioned exist in disciplines they considered as comprehensive.

> (...) self-assessment and peer assessment are very important (...) for me it gives feedback on how I am conceiving students work and how their

colleagues do it (...) also for themselves to have perception of their effort and competencies.... (CSS, Assistant Teacher 5)

4. Limitations

A number of limitations to the study were acknowledged. Concerning the voluntary sampling, it is assumed that these may or may not be representative of the study population (Maroco, 2014) and therefore there must be a precaution to what extent the results are assumed as a representation of the teachers and/or students group opinions. On one hand, perhaps a significant amount of students who volunteered to the study were the ones that were in the extremes, disgusted or very pleased with university policies. On the other hand, having the opportunity to listen to the ones who are interested in university policies, it can promote the understanding of the issues that underlie policies and enhance reflection about what can be done and what can foster university students' assessment policies. In what concerns the sample of each college, the number of teachers and students interviewed were not sufficient to attain gender differences or differences related with teacher career status, analysis regarding these variables are suggested to future investigations. Some other aspects, related to the sampling process (the advertisement system of the study and the protocol that required personal contact by email only after an inquiry by the student or the teacher, made the step three took too long to be held; the interest and availability of teachers and students) may also influence the collected data.

Although the European University Association (2013) for the Portuguese Higher Education system recommended the need for equal opportunities and, even if some teachers have stated that there are specific clauses that pertain to the assessment of students with disabilities, none of the participating students had disabilities nor was an issue addressed by them, except for one CH pupil who reported not agreeing with the adaptations, which could be an indicator of the underrepresentation of this group.

5. Conclusions

This study allowed understanding similarities and differences between policies perceived in the three institutions investigated.

It was argued that the regulations are fundamental to define procedures,

to promote equity but also to protect students and teachers in each college. Similarities, namely in marking range, inclusion of different types and methods of assessment, were found across the three colleges, as well as differences, in attendance, assessment information, final assessment access and format, classifications disclosure, right to consult the tests, and sanction for fraud, as well in detail level of these regulations. These differences were also verified in the discourse of teachers and students. Differences were found also in the knowledge that the students from different colleges have of the regulations. The students from the CH seem to be the ones that are more aware of the regulation but simultaneously the ones that more dissatisfied with it, which can be related to the fact that it is the less detailed regulation, and the one who appear to have more restricted rules, namely in what access to exams and the right to consult the exam are concerned.

Within the themes that emerged in the discussion, attendance appeared as an important theme for students learning and assessment. Students and teachers agreed that attendance should only be mandatory in practical lessons, however, the method chosen to assign the attendance was a subject of disagreement. Students do not believe in the accuracy of the attendance sheet and suggest the use of the call in every needed situation. Some of the students and teachers agreed with the necessity of an entity to monitor the students learning assessment implementation (time set for tests, learning goals assessment), and to supervise and support teachers during the first years of teaching.

Although some practices that are nowadays questioned about its effectiveness, like the focus on summative assessment and single assessment methods, appeared in the discourses of teachers and students, a substantial part of the discourse of both groups point to aspects mentioned in the literature as especially relevant for assessment for and as learning, like for instance, formative assessment and feedback or flexible assessment.

The analyses found no differences between teachers with different academic positions or between teachers and teachers with administrative functions, as well as gender differences, which leads to the possibility that these variables are not so relevant in this context.

Despite the limitations presented in the previous section, it is concluded that the regulations on assessment are fundamental in higher education, namely for proper certification, student learning and quality assurance, which is in line with the literature. However, it is important to stress that future policies should guide

teachers to develop assessment plans more focused on assessment for learning and assessment as learning.

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