

# The Commoditization of Higher Education in Portugal

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*In the following interview, Alfredo Soeiro, EUCEN representative of the Universidade do Porto, discusses the impact commoditization and competition of higher education have had on the Portuguese higher education system. Soeiro discusses how student needs in higher education have changed in recent years and shares his thoughts on how institutions are differentiating themselves in the highly competitive marketplace.*

## 1. How do institutions differentiate themselves in the crowded Portuguese higher education marketplace?

Higher education in Portugal has public and private institutions. There are two systems in terms of studies and research: universities (that confer degrees from undergraduate to doctoral levels) and polytechnics (that confer degrees from undergraduate to master's level). An independent agency, A3ES, serves as the national accreditor for higher education programs.

Differentiation, in terms of attractiveness for new students, is made according to the types of courses offered and vacancies available. There is a system that classifies all candidates and for each program; only the best classified students are admitted entry.

In terms of national rankings of the institutions, there is no established system. The differentiation among institutions is made based on subjective considerations, including location, public image or personal referrals.



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In Portugal, higher-priced private institutions are providing a pathway to professional degrees for students who would not be able to access the higher-quality public institutions. These professional degrees have become more critical in the wake of the recent economic crisis, as students are looking to enroll in degree programs that can move them into high-earning careers quickly.

## 2. What are the majority of students in Portugal looking for when they enroll in higher education? Have these preferences changed in the past 10 years?

In a personal summary, most students look for longer educational pathways (four to five years). Students who enroll in shorter study programs (three years) provided by the polytechnics have grades lower, in general, than

the candidates for the longer studies offered by universities. The public system has more candidates, and better classified candidates, than those offered by the private system. The main areas with candidates that have higher classifications start at the health sector (medicine and pharmacy), followed by business, engineering and architecture.

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Following international trends, Portuguese students choose their programs based on the degree that will give them the greatest chance for a high-paying career upon graduation. The days of choosing a course on interest are effectively over.

### 3. How significantly do the quality of education and student experience differ between high-priced and low-priced institutions?

There are mostly two types of prices offered by higher education institutions. The price of the yearly fees in the public system is around €1000 and, in the private system, is higher with a multiplier factor between one-and-a-half and three.

There is no significant difference between the public and private institutions in absolute terms. The comparison is made in terms of perception of future employment. The graduates from public institutions seem to have better chances of obtaining employment more quickly. However, there are no reliable studies that confirm this perception.

There are no agencies that rank the performance of institutions in terms of quality. The format and content of courses do not differ substantially and student experience is, in principle, similar. In my opinion, though, the real dif-

ference arises from the quality of the teaching staff.

### 4. How are local institutions changing the way they approach the higher education marketplace as MOOCs (Massive Open Online Courses) branded by elite institutions and online programs are becoming more prevalent?

There is no significant difference. One university is administering one online course; one polytechnic has already done it. Basically these two are open education resources. Some institutions across Portugal are considering producing MOOCs as well. However, the issue has not been approached in public terms and has no current impact on the performance of the institutions. The MOOCs have provoked no apparent change in the programs or in the education marketplace.



#### AUTHOR PROFILE

##### *Current Position and Past Experience*

Alfredo Soeiro is currently member of the Steering Committee of EUCEN. He is associate professor of Civil Engineering at the Universidade do Porto in Portugal. He was pro-rector of Universidade do Porto between 1998 and 2003 responsible for Continuing Education and had the role of academic director and vice president of Civil Engineering between 2004 and 2007.

Soeiro was instrumental in founding numerous continuing education associations, including the European Universities Continuing Education Network (EUCEN), the Latin American Continuing Education Network (RECLA) and AUPEC – Portuguese Association of Universities for Continuing Education.

#### BY THE NUMBERS: HIGHER EDUCATION IN PORTUGAL

Population	10.56 million
Year the First Institution Opened	1290 (Universidade de Coimbra)
Percentage of Adults with Tertiary Education	14.7 %
Number of Institutions (Approximate)	71
Free Degree Options	1 (Universidade Aberta)

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