

# Enrolment choices in Portuguese higher education: do students behave as rational consumers?

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Published online: 18 January 2013  
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**Abstract** As part of a progressive change occurring in the way public sector beneficiaries are conceived, higher education students started to be more and more perceived as clients or consumers. This implies assuming them as rational and conscious actors aware of what to expect from higher education attendance and of its returns. Framed by the metaphor of students as consumers, this paper aims to discuss whether students behave as rational consumers when choosing to enrol in higher education. Based on the findings of a qualitative study analysing Portuguese students' choices it is possible to conclude that they tend to behave as rational consumers when they decide to attend higher education and when they choose a given institution, but not when they decide on attending a specific study programme. In this last case, instead of comparing the diverse study programmes and collecting information before forming their preference, students first formed this preference and, only then, gathered information. Student socialisation process emerged as a key element in shaping the preference for the study programme and in the vocation to choose it.

**Keywords** Students · Higher education · Choices · Consumers

## Introduction

Over the last 30 years, Western European societies have been under deep structural changes namely in the way the State relates with the public sector. One of the most important changes has been the redefinition of the social understanding of what is public and of what are the beneficiaries of public services as clients, customers or consumers (Clarke et al. 2007; Olssen and Peters 2005; Slaughter and Rhoades 2004). This trend was a result of several interrelated factors, namely the increasing use, by the State, of markets as instruments of public sector regulation. The adoption of the values, norms and practices of private management and the market emerged as ideal archetypes to regulate the public

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sphere. In the name of greater efficiency (especially financial), rationality and quality, public organisations were increasingly asked to (and started to) behave as enterprises, which should meet the needs of their clients or consumers.

The higher education sector did not stay immune to these developments. An increasing submission of higher education to the market ideology occurred, legitimised by the neo-liberal rhetoric emphasising rational choice, the consumerist logic and the drive to equate (as in the case of public services) student participation with the suitability of educational services (Clarke et al. 2007; McLaughlin 2009). This was reflected in the rationale of higher education as a good and the concomitant increase of student responsibility towards its financing.

The way students are perceived (namely by universities) has also been changing. The image and idea of students as essentially learners and institutional actors gave place to a new metaphor (Cheney et al. 1997; Mills 2007) where universities were conceived as service providers, while students emerged as consumers, conscious about what to expect in terms of educational experience and of its returns and holding the capability to choose rationally based on optimal information (Cheney et al. 1997; McCulloch 2009; Slaughter and Rhoades 2004). This metaphor seems also to be internalised by students, thus impacting in the way they relate themselves with higher education and universities. As some studies report, student-university relations are becoming more and more marketised (Luescher-Mamashela 2010), as evidenced by the increasing adoption, by students, of a managerialist and consumerist discourse and posture towards their participation both in university governance and quality assessment (Cardoso 2009; Cardoso 2012; Luescher-Mamashela 2010); a consumer interest in and demand of information on universities' quality (Cardoso et al. 2012) and rankings, as well as in the "value-added" deriving from the attendance and investment in higher education (Dill and Soo 2005); an instrumental vision about learning combined with an extrinsically driven motivation towards grades (Molesworth et al. 2009; Swann and Arthurs 1998); or the conception of higher education as a service under the assumption that a degree is a prerogative derived from paying fees (Higgins et al. 2002; Molesworth et al. 2009).

Given a certain lack of specific research on students as consumers (Johnson and Deem 2003), this paper analyses empirical data on Portuguese students' choices when deciding to enrol or not in higher education and how they opt for a specific institution and study cycle. This analysis aims to find out if students really behave as rational consumers or if other factors influence student choice.

The paper begins with an analysis of the consumer metaphor. A link is made between this metaphor and the Portuguese higher education, defining what is considered as rational and identifying the main assumptions on which it is based (i.e. premises of the neoclassical version of economic rationality). Then the empirical data are analysed, leading to the conclusion that despite the influence of some of its premises, the consumer metaphor does not constitute the only or the most preponderant dimension explaining students' choices in higher education.

### **The metaphor of student as consumer**

In Western European societies, the metaphor of student as consumer became increasingly common in public discourses on higher education (Cheney et al. 1997; McCulloch 2009; Olssen et al. 2004). Impelled mainly by increasing financial constraints, the raise of neo-liberalism and its correlated rhetoric—managerialism and new public management—there

has been a progressive attempt of the State to transform its role in society by transferring market and private management mechanisms to the public sector. As a result, a gradual replacement of the traditional public service ethos by a private or market ethos has been occurring, reflected, for instance, in the replacement of the notions of user or citizen with those of client, customer or consumer,<sup>1</sup> (Cardoso et al. 2011; Clarke 2007; Clarke et al. 2007; Jung 2010; Olssen and Peters 2005; Vidler and Clarke 2005; Williams 2009).

One of the proclaimed purposes of this change was to reduce the State responsibility while rising public organisations' accountability, responsiveness, cost-efficiency, flexibility and quality (Cardoso et al. 2011; Clarke 2007; Clarke et al. 2007; Clarke and Newman 1997; Jung 2010; McCulloch 2009; McLaughlin 2009; Vidler and Clarke 2005). Simultaneously, it aims to empower individuals, increasing their freedom and capability to make rational choices towards the satisfaction of their needs.

At the level of the higher education sector, these political and organisational changes are being materialised in the progressive realignment of the mission, goals and articulation of Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) with society (Menon 2003; Olssen and Peters 2005; Slaughter and Rhoades 2004), marked by an increasing adoption of market and market-like ideology and mechanisms (Olssen and Peters 2005; Slaughter and Rhoades 2004). Behaving more and more as entrepreneurial or business-like organisations (Clark 1998; Shattock 2009; Little and Williams 2010; Lomas 2007; Olssen and Peters 2005), HEIs progressively attempted to meet the demands of society and the labour market by providing graduates holding specific profiles increasingly complying with labour market demands; and expanding their managerial capacity while generating their own financial resources through the development of entrepreneurial academic activity and the privatisation of knowledge (Barnett 2003; Clark 1998; Johnstone et al. 2006; Scott 1997; Shattock 2009; Slaughter and Rhoades 2004; Olssen and Peters 2005).

Sustained in a perception of higher education as a service or product and imposing a new approach (increasingly utilitarian) to educational planning and decision-making (Menon 2003; Barnett 1990; Scott 1997; Slaughter and Rhoades 2004), those developments are also linked to a significant change in the way students begin to be conceptualised (Barnett 2003; McLaughlin 2009; Slaughter and Rhoades 2004). From citizens benefiting from a public good, students are progressively perceived as clients or consumers of higher education and universities (Bergan 2003; Cardoso et al. 2011; Johnson and Deem 2003; Johnstone et al. 2006; Kogan et al. 1994; Lomas 2007; McLaughlin 2009; Mills 2007; Morley 2003; Newson 2004; Pitman 2000; Robertson 2000; Sharrock 2000).

Portuguese higher education has not escaped from the global trends impacting Western European societies. The restructuring programs for public administration reform, especially its bureaucratic model of collegial decision-making, are based on the assumption, on the one hand, that higher education institutions do not fix themselves as fast as the environment changes and, on the other hand, that traditional collegial governance is riddled with guild-like interests and subsequent 'irrationalities' and 'inefficiencies'. Hence traditional governance is seen as inefficient, corporative, incapable of being responsive to societal needs and demands, and unable to sustain the long-term quality of education and

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<sup>1</sup> The first concept to emerge was that of client, during the seventies. It translates an objectification of the relation between the deliverer of the service and its recipient, whereby the power is held by the first and the latter assumes a passive role (McLaughlin 2009). In the eighties, two interchangeable notions rise in parallel with that of client: the consumer and customer notions. These translate a relationship where the public service is conceived, respectively, as product to the consumer, managed by a provider mainly accountable to the state; and as a commodity to the customer, delivered by a provider accountable mainly to the management of the service (Jung 2010; McLaughlin 2009).

research (Amaral and Carvalho 2003). Dealing with a current environment of scarcity of financial resources and the supposed lack of economic relevance of higher education (Amaral and Carvalho 2003), Portuguese higher education institutions are expected to demonstrate to society that their use of resources is effective and efficient and that they are relevant to the economy and labour market. Institutions are expected to develop entrepreneurial strategies in order to capture alternative financial resources, to pay more attention to labour market needs and demands and to assume a consumer friendly attitude. Recent legislation has increased the control of higher education institutions by stakeholders, including employers and representatives from industry. Moreover, the current economic crisis and the rise of graduate unemployment have strengthened further the idea that higher education institutions should be responsive to labour market needs (*ibidem*).

The difficulties associated with the operation of the traditional bureaucratic-collegial model in a fast changing environment, the pressures resulting from financial and economic difficulties, the neoliberal policies initiated in the mid-1990s, the recent decline in the number of students (due to declining birth rates), and subsequent institutional competition for students, constitute some of the reasons that explain why consumerist discourses, as in other Western countries, have found in Portugal an encouraging ground for expanding.

Several levers have been introduced in Portugal to enhance student choice: policies for increasing the diversity of the system (via institutional and programmatic diversification); information on the quality of study programmes and institutions resulting from a new accreditation system, and students' satisfaction surveys implemented by the majority of institutions are some of the paradigmatic examples on Portuguese context. Those policies assume that students will use those mechanisms to demand higher quality of education provision, applying pressure in order to make study programmes more relevant to the skills they require for the workplace (Naidoo et al. 2011). Consumerism can thus be seen, also in Portugal, as a “device to reform academic culture and pedagogic relationships to comply with market frameworks” (Naidoo et al. 2011: 1145).

In this context, students are being more and more assumed as consumers of a specific service or product, seen as conscious of their educational rights, capable of defining strategies and making rational choices in terms of educational options, which are supported by informed decision-making processes, aiming to optimise the satisfaction of needs and expectations on higher education (Cheney et al. 1997; Dill and Soo 2005; McCulloch 2009; Newson 2004; Robertson 2000; Tavares 2011; Tavares et al. 2008). In the metaphor of students as consumers the concept of choice and, specifically of rational choice, assumes, then, a central role (Olssen et al. 2004). Rationality, according to rational choice theory in its economic and neoclassic version, means to choose based on an organisation of preferences which is complete and transitive, with perfect information and acquired at no cost. Where there is uncertainty about future results, which is the case for higher education, rationality means to maximise the expected utility, i.e., the utility result multiplied by the probability of its occurrence (Blaug 1992; Tavares 2011). This economic neoclassical version of rationality assumes, globally, the individual as *homo economicus*, who can be characterised as someone who is self-interested, who holds almost perfect information about all the different available alternatives and the consequences of each of them, and who seeks to maximise the utility in order to maximise the results (Zey 1992: 11).

Students, therefore, behave as rational consumers when they do not prefer any other alternative beyond the one they actually chose and when they estimate and balance the costs and benefits derived from accessing (or not) higher education, a given institution and a given study programme, aiming to maximise the utility of the educational choice made (George 1980; Hossler et al. 1989; Laroche n/d; Janis and Mann 1977; Tavares 2011).

Those costs can be, for instance, direct or indirect expenditures (tuitions, books, opportunity costs), or include social losses deriving from leaving the family household, while the benefits can consist in financial and social rewards resulting from the academic degree completed in a given HEI the student experience, the location of this HEI (farther or closer to the family household), or the status, reputation and quality of institutions and programmes (Hossler et al. 1989; Tavares 2011). The estimation of costs and benefits constitutes the economic rationale, which, according to Dill and Soo (2005), assumes students as rational investors in human capital that evaluate the costs and benefits of attending a specific institution or study programme.

In sum, in the framework of the consumer metaphor students are perceived as rational and conscious consumers, who choose according to an organised set of preferences, equating and comparing all the possible choices on higher education, surveying exhaustively all the advantages and disadvantages of each choice, linking a utility or value to each one, and making reasonable assumptions on the results of one decision over the other. Assuming this as valid, students choose in a rational way, in order to maximise the benefits and reduce the costs (Hossler et al. 1989; Tavares 2011).

## Methodology

This paper relies on the findings of a qualitative study conducted through semi-structured interviews of sixty first year students from the Porto urban area. These interviews were conducted in Portuguese and subsequently translated. The sample selection took into account the diversity of the student population and sought to include different student profiles to gather distinct cases and potential contrasting views. The students from the sample came both from public and private universities and polytechnic institutions and from three specific first cycle study programmes: Arts, Pharmacy and Computer Engineering (Table 1). These study programmes were represented in all the existing subsystems, namely public and private universities and polytechnics, the former institutions being more research oriented, and the latter vocationally oriented. Moreover, unlike programmes in Humanities and Social Sciences, mainly offered by universities, the study programmes selected are also present in the whole system.

**Table 1** Students' distribution according to study programme, subsystem and gender

Study programme	Higher education subsystem				Total
	Public universities A	Private universities B	Public polytechnics C	Private polytechnics D	
Arts X	5 (4F–1 M)	5 (4F–1 M)	5 (4F–1 M)	5 (4F–1 M)	20
Pharmacy Y	5 (3F–2 M)	5 (3F–2 M)	5 (3F–2 M)	5 (3F–2 M)	20
Computer engineering Z	5 (1F–4 M)	5 (1F–4 M)	5 (1F–4 M)	5 (1F–4 M)	20
Total	15	15	15	15	60

F females, M males

Data gathered through interviews were systematised and analysed resorting to the content analysis technique. It is assumed, given the economic framework (neoclassic version) of rational choice, that choices are drawn from preferences. These preferences are analysed according to the students' available information as well as to their perceptions about themselves (their skills and competences), about the labour market, about higher education and about study programmes. Choices, in turn, are analysed according to the main reasons given by students for their decisions on higher education, institutions and study programmes. The researchers' also attempted to understand whether both preferences and choices are influenced by certain characteristics of students such as gender, economic income, cultural background and academic profiles. Thus, if students chose according to an organised set of preferences, equating and comparing all the possible choices on higher education, surveying exhaustively all the advantages and disadvantages of each choice, linking a utility or value to each one, making reasonable assumptions on the results of one decision over the other, maximising the benefits and reducing the costs, and choosing the preferred alternative, then they were considered to be behaving as rational consumers.

### **Students' choices on higher education: beyond consumer rationality?**

In the following subsections, it is aimed to understand if students indeed choose as rational consumers, regarding higher education, HEIs and study programmes, or if their choices are influenced by other variables, perhaps assuming a more preponderant role.

#### Choosing to enter higher education

In general, students identified employability as the main reason for choosing to attend higher education. In a context where the labour market is perceived as difficult and demanding, qualifications ascribed by higher education were seen as a passport to more and better job opportunities.

I think to get a job and to be better prepared for the labour market; I had to attend higher education (YDM1).

Students tended to perceive the labour market as a difficult environment, with few employment opportunities, especially for undergraduates. Indeed, students tended to develop a preference for attending higher education based on the idea that the labour market required, nowadays, more than ever before, better qualifications. Higher education was perceived, in this sense, as a way through which students qualified and gained competitive advantages in the struggle for jobs.

Clearly, those with higher education have more chance to work in a more stable job, better paid and this is primarily what led me to join (ZAM4).

This perception was more evident among Computer Engineering students from the private subsystem, precisely those assuming more frequently that if the labour market offered financial stability to high school students, they would not have developed a preference for attending higher education, rather preferring to enter the labour market earlier. However, in the present context students considered they have chosen the preferred alternative, which was attending higher education.

In general, obtaining an academic degree was seen as an investment, in most cases with the expected returns.

It will bring benefits. I think that the relation cost/benefit that I am having now will be rewarded in the future, when I finish the degree. Hopefully! That's what I'm counting on (ZDM3).

The advantages most associated with the access to higher education and the completion of the first cycle were, in descending order: the possibility of obtaining more and better employment opportunities, more emphasised by Computer Engineering students; the opportunity of obtaining expertise or specialised knowledge, more emphasised by the Arts students; the opportunity of obtaining social recognition and status, privileged mainly by Pharmacy students; and finally, the possibility of obtaining higher incomes, particularly emphasised by Computer Engineering students. Independently of the different academic profiles, those advantages seemed to be also influenced by gender, with female students tending to link higher education more with the acquisition of knowledge and male students with the possibility of obtaining higher incomes.

These choices seemed to be driven by the economic rationale, since the student aimed to maximise the benefits expected from higher education, i.e., a good part of the students understood the admission to higher education as an economic investment bringing the expected returns, namely stable and well paid jobs. Therefore, it can be argued that, at least in what concerns the choice of attending higher education, students seemed to behave as rational consumers, perceiving higher education as a service through which they will be able to acquire the expected benefits. Moreover, students also seem to compare the available alternatives—higher education or labour market—to be aware of the consequences of each alternative, and to prefer the former to the latter based on informal information (via friends and family).

The economic rationale seemed to be more or less present in the responses of students attending all higher education subsystems. Particularly, while students from the public sector tended to emphasise employability as the main reason to attend higher education, those from the private sector highlighted career progression, social status and the academic degree by itself. All of them are supposed to produce financial benefits. Also, this rationale was more evident among students from polytechnic institutions, perhaps because this type of institutions is more aligned with labour market demands due to its vocational orientation.

Finally, an economic rationale seemed also to be more evident in the discourses of male students rather than of female students. Male students were the ones who most frequently perceived higher education as a way to obtain external rewards, such as high incomes. By their turn, female students seemed to be less influenced by an economic rationale, tending to perceive higher education per se, stressing the personal benefits that it might bring to them (personal accomplishment, for instance), regardless of the financial return they might eventually get.

However, this economic rationale assumed different weights depending on the study programme. This reasoning was mitigated especially in the case of Arts students, for whom the self-achievement and pleasure in studying assumed an importance that could not be understated, and that, in some way, deviated from a strictly estimation of costs and benefits typical. This estimation seemed to be more frequent among students from Computer Engineering and Pharmacy, who tended to see higher education as a way to obtain, respectively, higher incomes and social status.

### Choosing a higher education institution

Regarding the choice of the higher education institution, the reasons more frequently advanced by students to justify it were, in descending order, home proximity; academic quality of institutions; economic costs inherent to the enrolment in a given institution; and the social prestige of institutions, which could be translated into a greater approval of the academic degree in the job market.

I chose this institution because it was here, in Porto... Even with a scholarship, no one can guarantee me that I can afford housing and transportation and food... (YCF2).

I came here to the institution and the overall conditions satisfied me. This was a very important factor, because I would not be paying tuition and feeling that was being underserved. Because I'm usually demanding in choices I make, if I can, I always choose for quality (XDM1).

Okay, I think, in Portugal, at least, it is the most prestigious institution (ZAF1).

Most of the previous reasons were strongly associated with the economic rationale and revealed financial constraints currently affecting students. Moreover, those reasons, especially the first one (i.e., home proximity), also indicated that students tended to choose the feasible institution rather than the one they would prefer.

This can be explained by the way most students perceived higher education, which seemed to influence their preferences for different institutions. Establishing a hierarchy between public and private sector and between university and polytechnic, most students apparently preferred the public sector and the university, and even those who attended the private sector and polytechnics, though emphasising its strong points (for instance, the quality of facilities), assumed that they would prefer to be enrolled in the top position institutions of that hierarchy (that is, public universities). This hierarchy was built essentially from the ideas of social prestige associated with each subsystem and was internalised by students through their experience in different social environments, namely through interaction with other individuals (family, peers and teachers) considered significant.

But it is clear that a public institution is more prestigious than a private one, I think (ZBM1).

In a private institution there is always the stigma "it is payable, you get a degree because you pay". It is a cliché, but it still counts. It is clear that in an interview, or in a job contest, someone who leaves a public institution and someone who leaves a private one, I think the former is clearly ahead, has a clear advantage (YBM2).

The information collected by students to support their decisions emerged as much more important for the choice of institutions rather than for the choice to enter higher education. In general, students gather more information on institutions (namely through institutional websites), although they tend to compare it with informal sources, such as the opinions of friends, graduates and high school teachers, assumed as people possessing inside information. All students, independently of their academic profiles, showed an inclination to focus on informal information (via family, peers and teachers opinions) rather than on institutional information (e.g. made available by HEIs through their websites or newspapers).

When I was searching for institutes, which offered this study programme, I went to the internet. Once a singular institution came out of that internet search, I forgot everything else and then tried to inform myself with my colleagues (XDF3).



However, information collection was only undertaken to increase knowledge on the institutions in which the study programme, previously preferred by students, was taught. Therefore, the information on the institution did not seem to be perfect: on the one hand, in the process of searching and treating this information students did not consider all the choice alternatives and did not really compare all institutions, but only those that taught the programme they were interested in; on the other hand, students did not compare all the characteristics associated with each institution, but rather collected pieces of information considered most relevant. Students processed information to be consistent with their perceptions on the higher education and its respective ranking of the different subsystems, which was based upon notions of social prestige. Information tended to be perceived and treated in a way that fitted the students' perceptions. Therefore the Arts students focused their attention on information about the type of knowledge; Computer Engineering students about employability; and Pharmacy students on information related with the institutions' social prestige.

They said that this institution emphasizes much more the classic style. I always preferred the classic style to the contemporary one (XAM1).

I found some documents about the engineer's high rate of employability of this institution (ZCM2).

And even some friends told me that this institution was the more prestigious (YAM1).

The data also demonstrated, concerning student choice of higher education institutions, that this choice seemed not to be entirely consumerist nor totally rational from an economic perspective. Although these choices mainly followed the economic rationale, emerging as a dominant tendency to calculate the costs and benefits of attending a certain institution and to maximise the expected utility (home proximity, academic quality, etc.), students usually preferred other institution beyond the one chosen based upon the hierarchy acquired during the socialisation process. For this reason the choice of the higher education institution was, first of all, not really a choice but an estimation of costs and benefits of feasible alternatives, and second, those preferences were shaped according to their socialisation process rather than based on objective information or proxies of quality, for instance. Consequently, it is possible to argue that, at this level, students' rational and consumer behaviour was mitigated, not following an entirely economic rationale, though including some of its key elements. The choice of the institution seems not to be as influenced by students' profiles and subsystems as in the case of the choice to attend higher education.

### Choosing a study programme

In general terms, the study programme choice seems not to be guided by an economic rationale since students' behaviour, at this level, appeared to be far from being consumerist. Most students pointed out vocation as the main reason to make this choice, not revealing any kind of estimation of costs and benefits of attending the particular programme attended. Vocation is defined by students as a passion or a strong feeling of suitability for a particular programme. Accordingly, students link vocation with the possession of specific personal characteristics. For instance, Arts students tended to think that if they were not creative, original, sensitive and imaginative they would not have preferred this subject area; Computer Engineering students believed that holding an inquisitive and

pragmatic mind, a taste for challenges and a tendency to cope well with the loneliness usually implied by the kind of tasks a computer engineer has to perform, were determinant in forming their preference for this study programme; finally, Pharmacy students tended to link their preference for this scientific area with the possession of personal characteristics such as an inquisitive mind and a taste for communication and interaction with people.

First, my imagination is quite fertile. Another side of me is that I adapt easily to the plastic side, by working with my hands. I love hand working. I do not like those jobs in which one person is eight hours locked in a desk in a cubicle without seeing the air, without seeing the sun. So, I always liked to combine my practical side to my imagination, creativity (XCM1).

That's how I see myself, to spend more than five hours at the computer, programming, isolated from the world in my corner with my organization! (ZDF1).

Curiosity. Working for a community pharmacy, maybe I'll contact with people and it is also a factor that pleases me. (...) I appreciate more contact with others (YDF1).

Therefore, on the one hand, students projected their personal characteristics in the study programmes and, on the other hand, they incorporated the perceived features of study programmes in the perception they had about themselves, shaping this preference. When asked if social prestige was a reason impacting their programmes' choices, the majority of students said that if it was, they would choose higher prestigious programmes than the ones chosen. Without admitting constraints on access (for example, their average grades), students tended to justify their preference for lower social status programmes by associating the ones perceived as the most prestigious with characteristics that collided with their personal ones. This was the case of Arts students who related a degree in Architecture (a very prestigious programme within Portuguese academia) with very strict rules, mathematical calculus and little freedom; and of some Pharmaceutical Sciences students who, despite recognising that being a medical doctor would be very prestigious, saw Medicine as very demanding in terms of the workload implied as students. On the contrary, Computer Engineering students seemed to be guided by the social prestige associated with the Engineering profession.

Finally, we were able to detect the influence of gender amongst students' perceptions on the choice for the study programme. While female students tended to emphasise communication, interpersonal contact and care for a future family life, male students mainly stressed their pragmatism, ambition and competitiveness. In both cases students perceived themselves as looking for a study programme matching these different characteristics. This might be explained by the early socialisation process of females and males (Eagly 2000), which reproduces traditional women's educational roles and men's competitive roles. In this sense, gender appears to influence students' self-perceptions, which, in turn, influence their preferences for certain study programmes. Perhaps this gendered perception is the reason explaining the over-representation of female students in programmes such as Arts and Pharmacy and of male students in Computer Engineering programmes.

But I always liked to deal directly with people. I think, given my personality and sensitivity to people, that I like dealing with the public (YBF3).

I prefer most to be alone with my mouse and pipettes. I prefer being in the lab doing my work, quiet and peaceful with the ear phones to listen to my music. (...) I like being alone, I like to have my time and space (YBM1).

Although the choice of study programmes seemed to be far from being consumerist, the majority of students, while acknowledging the difficulty inherent to the job market, believed that their study programme would offer them a competitive advantage in the struggle for jobs. However, this argument was applied to reinforce vocation rather than to justify the choice itself. The only exception was for some Arts students, mainly from the private subsystem, whose aspirations included the prospect of emigrating to international labour markets where their skills could eventually be more valued.

Since vocation emerged as the major reason to choose a given study programme, available information on different programmes tended to be disregarded by students. Instead of comparing the diverse study programmes and collecting information before forming their preference, students first formed this preference and, only then, gathered information. So, this information seemed to be guided or determined by a prior student preference.

I have searched in the internet schools which had the Arts programme (XBF3).

Basically, every day I would search for anything about Pharmacy (YDM2).

Moreover, the preference for the study programme seemed to be determined by the influence exerted mainly by family and friends, the educational background (especially success in certain curriculum subjects) and the life plans of students. Thus, the student socialisation process emerged as a key element in shaping the preference for the study programme and in the students' perception on the vocation to choose it.

Since the study programme was not apparently chosen according to the information previously gathered, students did not hold perfect information on the several possibilities of attending programmes and, therefore, their choices could not be seen as strictly following an economic rationale, neither as behaving as a rational consumers.

## Final discussion

Trying to contribute to the critical discussion of the metaphor conceiving students as rational consumers, the central aim of this paper was to explore if students behaved as such when deciding to enrol in higher education and making their choice of institutions and study programmes. As consumers it was expected that students would make rational choices, based on objective information and weighing up their preferences according to an economic rationale.

However, it seems that students tend only partly to behave as rational consumers. Although students seem to behave as rational consumers when they decide to enrol in higher education, that behaviour was not so evident regarding the choice of HEI and seemed to be absent from the study programme choice. The consumerist behaviour of students appeared to be limited by different modes of processing information and by the dominant social perceptions. Further, rational consumerist behaviour seemed to play a different role according to different student profiles. In this sense, students do not constitute a homogeneous group and are not guided by a universal reasoning.

Students' choices must thus be seen as a multi-determined process, linked with their socio-cultural context, and not as the sole result of the economic rationale (Tavares 2011). It can be argued that students' behaviour concerning the decisions on higher education seems to be far more complex than what is assumed by the metaphor of students as consumers. It should therefore be used with caution in the Portuguese context. These

findings, although limited by the size and scope of the study, can be usefully taken into account, on the one hand, in the definition of access policies aiming to improve equity in higher education, and, on the other hand, in institutional recruitment strategies to attract students.

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