

Title: Demand for Higher Education: the impact of admission criteria across programmes

The alignment between students' qualifications and higher education (HE) programme requirements is essential for academic success, timely degree completion, and favourable labour market outcomes. However, policy shifts in admission criteria can disrupt this alignment, with limited empirical evidence on these effects. How demand for HE responds to changes in access to HE is central to understanding student behaviour and informing public policies. Such changes may stem from political business cycles, leading to grade inflation during election years (Pereira dos Santos, Tavares & Mesquita, 2021), or shifts in expenditure provision (Titl & De Witte, 2022). But also, internal assessment changes coming from exams' grade leniency (Bygren, 2020; Lima, 2023, Murphy & Wyness, 2020) or policy changes in the admission criteria, including student mobility (Biscaia, Sá & Teixeira, 2021) and social mobility (Britton, Dias & Gol, 2023).

We focus on the case of Portugal, where the admission criteria design is centralised, and students self-select into programs based on their high school performance and national standardised exam results, enabling an analysis of access and potential inequalities across socioeconomic groups and fields of study.

The primary objective of this study is to investigate how changes in admission criteria affect demand for HE programmes and the match between student and programme requirements. Furthermore, we examine whether those (potential) effects vary across student body composition (e.g., gender, socioeconomic background) and fields of study.

Using the staggered difference-in-differences identification strategy proposed by Callaway and Sant'Anna (2021), we examine how policy changes affect student-to-programme matching. Our dataset spans eleven years (2012–2022) of programme-level information from public HE institutions, capturing year-to-year changes in admission thresholds, available places, and standardised exam requirements.

Preliminary results indicate that admission policy changes significantly affect student enrolment patterns, causing a gradual redistribution of students across programmes. These changes, in turn, impact the overall quality of student-to-programme matches. Specifically, at the university level, significant effects are observed from changes in mandatory exams that adjust assessment requirements without being stricter or looser. Statistically significant treatment effects (ATT) were found for occupation rate (-.018\*\*), and satisfaction rate for first-option placement (.050\*\*).

These findings suggest that policy shifts influence student preferences and institutional capacity, affecting programme demand and enrolment stability. Thus, further research is needed to understand individual student choices and how different education systems respond to these policy shifts.

Keywords: Access to HE; student-to-programme matching quality

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