

Editorial

This edition of the journal *Sísifo* focuses on the problems and perspectives of assessment in education. This theme is of utmost importance and relevance to modern-day life and the diversity of contributions contained in this edition, written by a broad range of Ibero-American authors, considerably enhances the set of texts presented therein.

Over the last two decades, the issue of assessment has acquired increasing visibility and importance within the scope of educational debates, decisions and practices. This real “invasion” of assessment in the field of education crosses over into all areas of intervention, including education policies, the functioning of organisations and the individual performance of actors. The issue of assessment, generally confined to student activity and their learning results, has spread out to cover organisational dimensions, educational policy measures and also the collective and individual professional performance of teachers.

Such importance attributed to the educational system’s assessment processes is, simultaneously, the result of exogenous (“importation” of assessment practices) and endogenous (significant changes in internal regulation forms) practices. Furthermore, the expansion of assessment is a universal phenomenon that may be observed in all sectors of society. The installation of assessment devices is put into practice everywhere — in both state and private services ranging from health to industry. This new assessment culture, stemming from indicator systems and classified by some as “devouring” and

“obsessive”, is, in the case of the public sector, at the core of New Public Management. The latter derives from transposing the norms and operative methods of the private business sphere to public service administration. In other words, the “contamination” of the dominant economic rationality of public institutions seems to have been spread. Indeed, much of the time its functioning logic has been protected by competition and measurement, inherent to the universe of marketing.

Such “invasion” of the educational sphere on the part of assessment has accompanied a reinforced tendency towards a functional subordination of educational policies and practices to economic-based rationalities of an instrumental nature. The mechanisms that support this “invasion” involve, on the one hand, discourse based on the key-words *efficacy*, *economy*, *adaptation* and *innovation*, and on the other a conception presenting assessment as a supposedly neutral activity dominated by scientific criteria. In practice, such recourse to assessment has proven to represent a recourse to knowledge and, above all, to an instrument of power for controlling and legitimizing policies and practices, on the part of decision-makers (those who pay the orchestra choose the music...). So, in effect, assessment contains an ideological dimension which, in fact, corresponds to a “huge imposture”¹, since this seemingly neutral technique and source of knowledge serves to camouflage a government technology.

Higher Education and universities are clearly the main targets of this more recent “assessment

fever”². In the case of universities, such a frenetic expansion of this “fever” has had a strong impact on research activities, namely in the field of social and human sciences, the effects of which are particularly perverse. The recent assessment process, to which Research Centres in Education Sciences have been subject, represents a clear illustration of the relatively arbitrary use of this instrument of power.

As referred to in the Introductory Note to this edition, nowadays a kind of obsession with assessment may be observed, as if it might hold a “magic solution to the problems of education and training”. It is neither a solution nor is it magical. It is, however, most certainly a problem.

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(Lisbon, July 2009)

ENDNOTES

1. See dossier “L’idéologie de l’évaluation. La grande imposture” published by the journal *Cités*, 37, 2009.
2. See dossier on Assessment in the University World, published by the “Revue d’Histoire Moderne et Contemporaine” (2008 supplement), entitled, precisely “La fièvre de l’évaluation”.

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