



Work Package 2:

Research and Contextualisation

Partner Research Report

Portugal

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Declaration

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1. Background and introduction

1.1 The report aims to:

- a) understand current national strategies which support the transition from non-compulsory or mature learners to Higher Education and build on, or develop new, strategies and resources;
- b) identify existing models, structures, strategies and pedagogies in the partner country along with good practice, strengths and weaknesses.
- c) provide information for the comparative study and then to develop supportive strategies and resources for both the transition of these groups to HE and completion of their first year of HE study.

1.2 Introducing the theme

The project aims to understand current national strategies which support the transition from non-compulsory or mature learners to Higher Education. The transition from high school to university is simultaneously a challenge and a threat due either to the access constraints to higher education, but also to the gap between the two education grades in Portugal.

The issue of school transition has been developed in the literature in the last two decades, in an increasingly thorough and specific highlighting the difficulties and challenges that seem to be associated with the need to cope with new conditions and adverse times. Since this is a phenomenon that enhances crises and developmental challenges, we witnessed in recent decades to an increasing number of publications that focus on the impact of higher education institutions in cognitive, academic and psychosocial development and how students enter and adapt to this level of education (Astin, 1993; Chickering&Reisser, 1993; Evans et al, 1998; Ferreira & Hood, 1990; Ferreira et al, 2001; Gonçalves& Cruz, 1988; Pascarella&Terenzini, 1991; Upcraft& Gardner, 1989).

According to Fragoso et al. (2011) the concept of transition is not new; in some countries, like the United Kingdom, there is an extensive set of literature devoted to the several perspectives of transition. Initially these studies were focused in youth, in the sense of understanding the processes through which young people make the transition from school to work. Although this interest started roughly in the 1960s, unemployment and the economic crisis that emerged during the 1970s made the issue more visible (Goodwin and O'Connor, 2007). The focus in the youth results primarily because of the politic consequences it entails in its relationships with dropout (20,8% in 2012 in Portugal (INE and PORDATA, 2013) and success. It is often argued that smoothen transitions could be the key to foster young adults success, either this 'success' is viewed in its purely educational dimension, or also as labor market integration – therefore following the growing centrality of economy into educational values. This approach depicts transitions as processes of change – and youth is made out of a number of transitions. 'In terms of structure, transitions in a life course designate processes of adjustment to new life circumstances'. (Zittoun, 2007, p. 195).

Ecclestone (2009) explores how policy and research include ideas about identities, capacity for empowered action (agency) and the effects of structural factors on the processes and outcomes of transitions. In other words, in the processes of transition, these three dimensions seem to be appropriate to analyse transitions in a balanced and complete way. However, these three distinct



perspectives on transitions (identity, agency and structure) 'not only risk pathologising transitions by depicting them as unsettling, disruptive, daunting, anxiety inducing and risk but also create normative assumptions about how best to manage them' (p. 23). 'It also erases the positive effects of difficulty, challenge and overcoming problems and risks attributing 'problems' to particular groups so that people become a problem to be supported and managed more effectively' (Ecclestone, 2009, p. 23). To assume therefore that transitions are a problem seems to be a mistake that impedes us to look for other analytic dimensions. Therefore, transition can be described as challenging because it requires, on the part of students, adopting work strategies and personal organization significantly different. However, the transition, whether perceived as threatening or as challenging, always implies the adoption of strategies to cope with change. The phenomena concerns different academic experiences, a topic that has attracted the interest of scholars and researchers from different countries (Astin, 1993; Chickering&Reisser, 1993; Pascarella&Terenzini, 1991). Also, Besides the overcoming of developmental changes related to the last period of the adolescence and the entrance into the adult life, the students are confronted to different forms of time management, rhythm of work, type of classes, etc. Other cognitive capacities must be mobilized, and a larger autonomy is also required. This new period includes development tasks very different from those required before in what concerns autonomy, identity and personal relationships. To some authors this period represents a unique opportunity in the young adult psychosocial development. This set of experiences requires the establishment of a sense of identity, the development of new patterns of relationships with the family, teachers and classmates as well as the development of a vocational identity. Also, in higher education, the academic training of young people goes far beyond the strand curriculum and the institutions must extend its action to the socio-cultural and humanistic training of students, the development of a system of values, and the purchase and development of a wide range of skills essential to personal and professional development of young adults.

According to Zittoun (2007) usually transitions follow ruptures – modifications of what is taken-for-granted in a person's life – which can be due to various causes. To Fragoso et al. (2011) this gives uncertainty a central role which highlights that reducing uncertainty is a key-task during transitions. Perspectives of transition ceased to be focused on the individual and the psychological factors that make people more likely to overcome uncertainty. It is clear that while moving from one setting to another people experience a time of intense development, with demands that are socially regulated (Lam and Pollard, 2006).

In the context of late-modernity researchers have tried to reach a theoretical understanding that integrates structural factors as well as the role of the individuals, using globalization studies to support their frameworks (Fragoso et al., 2011). In the authors' opinion this contributes to a model of transition where reflexivity is central, a mediating link between structural factors and agency.

Almost half of the studies in this field have shown that more than half of the young adults making the transition to higher education evidence difficulties in the transition (Brooks & Dubois, 1995; Gordan, 1995; Komives, Woodard &Delworth, 1996; Pascarella&Terenzini, 1991; Ratingan , 1989; Stone & Archer, 1990; Upcraft& Gardner, 1989; Yeagle, 1995).

Other studies indicate adjustment to the early years of higher education as a major determinant of levels of success and satisfaction, and the development standards established over the frequency of



higher education (Almeida, Soares, & Ferreira, 2001; Bastos, 1998; Pascarella&Terenzini, 1991; Soares, 1999). Higher education students in general and from first year in particular, have been assumed as a key population in the study of the processes of adjustment and human development in the context of higher education system. The transition from secondary education to higher education is complex because of the variables that influence the context and also by the dimensions the analysis contemplate. The underlying aspects are academic (adapting to new rhythms, learning strategies and models of teaching and assessment) and personal, social, institutional and vocational.

In fact, most studies emphasizes that the student in transition into higher education can negatively face the multiple changes, suffering from difficulties in adjustment that can result in low investment and subsequent academic failure (Fisher, 1986).

The transition from secondary education to higher education emerges as one of the most important development phases, not only because students often are marked by a high school 'bookish', but also because they will face new and difficult situations, such as conditions of selection and access "dehumanized" (as is the case of the excessive importance attached to national exams), *numerusclausus* obsolete and inadequate (according to the Eurydice 2012 report restrictions on the number of places in tertiary education programmes may be set either at central/regional level or at institutional level), and negative and frustrating employment expectations. These aspects may jeopardize the effort expended by students during numerous years of schooling.

In this framework, the entrance to the university could trigger difficulties in adapting to the new environment and even academic failure. Indeed, even the different and constant revision of the secondary schools curricula in Portugal go on adding discrepancies and difficulties in progression between secondary education and higher education. In general, the year of entry into higher education, in Portugal and in other countries, is marked by adjustment problems that can occur with greater frequency and intensity in students less prepared for that transition – mature students.

The issue of student retention is important for a variety of reasons. As Yorke and Longden (2004) observed all governments invest in higher education. Although some students who do not complete their tertiary studies may benefit in some way from the experience, the emphasis on the definition of 'academic success' is associated with course completion, degree acquisition and progression to a well-paid career.

Also, the perception of the difficulties experienced by students during the transition process, as well as dropout rates and failure during the early years in higher education institutions, justify the growing interest of many researchers in academic adjustment in 1st year. This adjustment process acquires a multidimensional nature, relating to aspects underlying the curriculum and learning, especially new forms of teaching and learning, for which many young people are not prepared. Likewise challenges in the personal and social development opportunities can enhance, but also lock, the psychosocial development.

Data from 2001 and 2003 (Eurydice, 2003; OECD, 2001) revealed that out of the cycles of compulsory education, about 50% of students did not complete their studies.



Eurostat data on students aged 30 and over enrolled in higher education show that during the academic year of 2008/09, the country median for students in formal higher education programmes was 16 %. However, across 36 countries for which data is available, situations vary significantly. The lowest participation rate is registered in Azerbaijan, where mature students represent only around 2% of the total student population. It is also relatively low in Croatia, the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, France and Poland, where only up to 10 % of students enrolled in the system are mature students. At the other end of the spectrum are the Nordic countries and the United Kingdom, where mature students represent around one third of the total student population (between 29 % and 40 %). However, it must be noted that in the Nordic countries, the "typical" higher education student is generally slightly older than in the majority of other EHEA countries. For example in Sweden, the most common starting age for 1st cycle tertiary education is 22 and in Finland, it is situated between 20 and 24 years (Eurydice, 2010).

The extent to which higher education systems provide lifelong learning opportunities can also be examined through the level of participation of delayed transition students, i.e. students who have delayed their transition between upper secondary and higher education by at least 2 years. Available Eurostudent data covering 23 countries indicate that the highest share of these students can be found in the Nordic countries and Ireland, where they represent at least 25 % of the overall student population. Among these countries, Sweden counts a particularly high proportion of delayed transition students (almost 60 % of the student population). On the other end of the spectrum lie Croatia and France, where delayed transition students represent, respectively, only 1.7 % and 3 % of the total student population.

Data from Eurydice (2012) shows that the distribution of full time students and part time students in tertiary education varies from one country to another as well as from one age group to another. In 2009, from the 18-23 age grouping, almost 88 % of all students were full time students. They were nearly 73 % in the 24-29 age group, and only around 59 % and 51 % within the 30-34 and 35-39 age group respectively. In the same year, in most European countries, the participation in full time tertiary education programme decreased with the age of students. The exceptions were found in Estonia where the participation in full time programme of the age group 35-39 was higher (2.7%) than that of the age group 30-34. In Malta, Finland and Switzerland, these differences remained at less than 1 percentage point. In addition, in countries such as the Czech Republic, Greece, France, Italy and Portugal, all students of all ages analysed were enrolled into full time programme. In Belgium, Spain, Latvia, Lithuania and Malta, an increase in the participation of part time students of 30 percentage points and more was found when passing from the 18-23 age group to the 24-29 age group. In Bulgaria, Hungary, Poland, Slovenia, Slovakia, the United Kingdom and Croatia, besides the transition from the 18-23 age group to the 24-29 age group, a significant increase of more than 25 percentage points was also registered when moving from the 24-29 age group to the 30-34 age group.

Overall, these data show that in some EHEA countries, it is relatively common for students to enter higher education after a certain period spent outside the education system, whereas in other countries, there is a small probability that those who did not embark on studies immediately (or



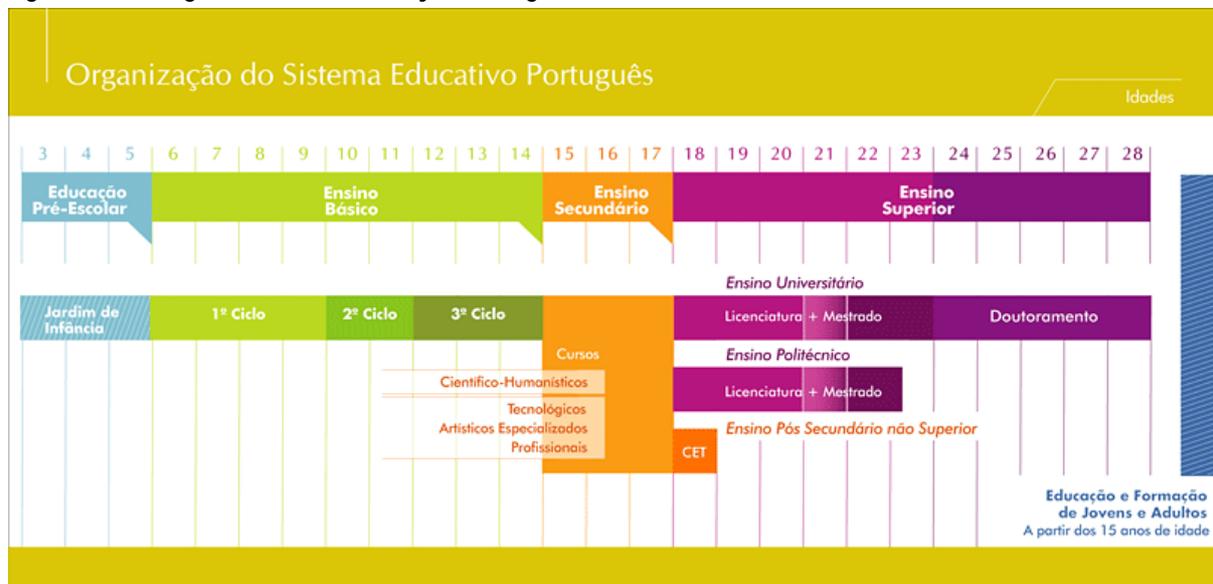
almost immediately) after the completion of upper secondary education would enter the system later in life.

2. Theoretical guidelines

National curriculum

The Portuguese education system is divided into six sequential levels: Preschool education; Compulsory education (that includes Educação Básica/Basic education, divided into 3 cycles; and Secondary education); and, Higher education. In all levels schools can be public, private or co-operative.

Figure 1. Portuguese educational system organization



Preschool education - Aimed at 3- to 5- years old, preschool education is provided in public, private and co-operative nursery schools under the supervision of the Ministry of Education and Science.

Pre-primary education is considered the first stage of the Portuguese education system and is aimed at children aged between 3 to 5 years old. In 2009, the universality of pre-primary education for all children over 5 years old was established. Nevertheless, attendance is never compulsory. The preschool network is provided by the state, private and cooperative bodies, private social solidarity institutions and non-profit institutions (Eurydice, 2012).

Compulsory education begins at the age of 6 and lasts for 12 years. Compulsory education is provided in public schools, private and cooperative schools. State-run schools are free of charge. It encompasses Basic Education (single structure system) and Secondary Education. Basic Education lasts for 9 years and is divided into three cycles: first cycle that corresponds to the first four years of schooling, comprehensive and of responsibility of a single teacher who can be assisted in different areas; second cycle that corresponds to the next two years (10-12 years old), organized into interdisciplinary areas; and, third cycle that lasts for three years and corresponds to Lower Secondary Education (12 to 15 years old), organized according to a unified curriculum plan, including



diverse vocational areas, and with one teacher per subject or group of subjects. The articulation of the three cycles is sequential and each cycle should complete and deepen the previous one, within a global perspective. Specific goals within each cycle should be integrated into the overall objective of basic education, and according to their age and stage of development (Eurydice, 2012).

In Basic Education students are allocated to a specific school according to specific criteria: geographical (place of residence or parents' place of work) or if a student's sibling is attending the requested school.

Secondary education – Secondary Education lasts for three years and corresponds to Upper Secondary Education. It can be organized in different paths, comprising courses aiming at preparation for working life or further studies. The permeability between courses oriented to working life and courses geared to go on to further study is guaranteed (Eurydice, 2012).

Organised according to different forms, secondary education is directed both to the continuation of studies, through the scientific-humanistic courses, and to working life, through technological, specialist artistic and vocational courses. Although only scientific-humanistic courses are directed to continuation of studies at higher level, all the courses allow the continuation of studies. In 2009 the majority of students in secondary education (61.6%) were enrolled in scientific-humanistic courses (EURIDYCE, 2012).

Students receive a certificate in the end of compulsory education awarded on the basis of the students' marks over the year weighted by an external grade, obtained in a national test (final examination).

Although the compulsory core curriculum is defined at central level, strategies for developing national curriculum are adapted to each school, through the School Curricular Project, and to each class (Class Curricular Project). Schools are responsible for choosing textbooks and teachers are free to choose teaching methods.

Since the school year 2009/10, Portugal increased the duration of the compulsory schooling till the age of 18.

Basic and Secondary Education are taught in different types of public schools:

- EB1/Nursery: Preschool and 1st cycle school;
- EB1: Basic school – 1st cycle;
- EB1,2: Basic school – 1st and 2nd cycles;
- EB2,3: Basic school – 2nd and 3rd cycles;
- EBI with nursery school - Preschool, 1st, 2nd and 3rd cycles;
- EBI – 1st, 2nd and 3rd cycles;
- Secondary schools with 3rd cycle;
- Secondary Schools.

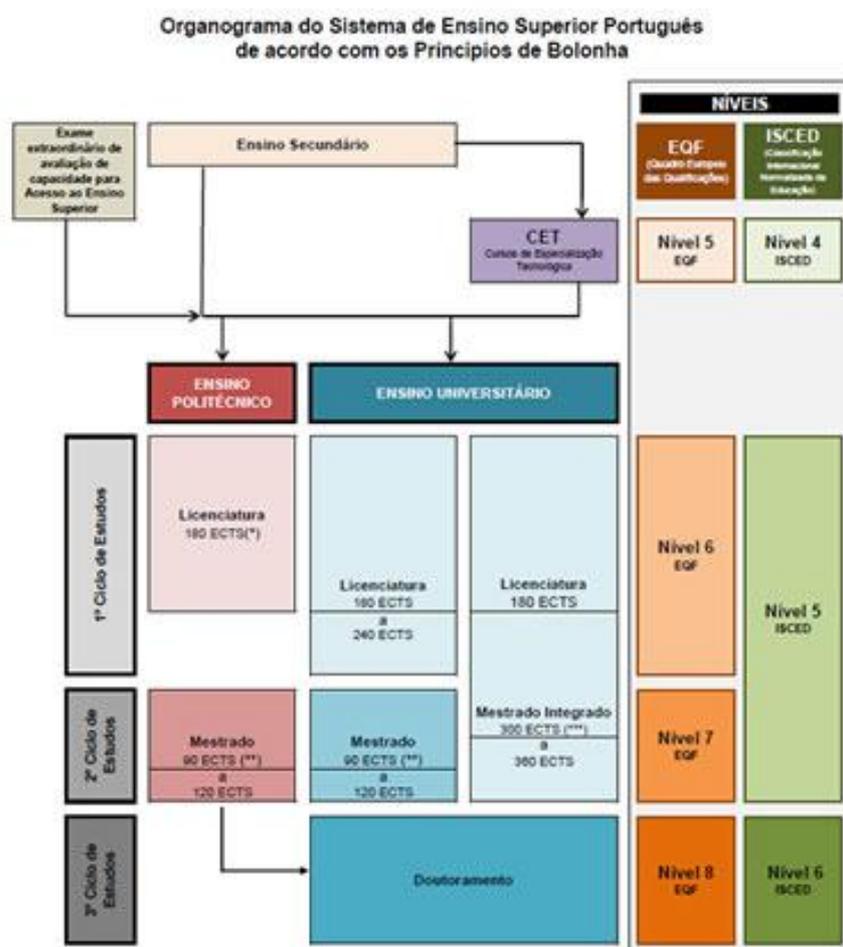
Higher education – Aimed at students with a level 4 qualification achieved through a Secondary Education course or a legally equivalent qualification.

Higher education in Portugal consists of a binary system which includes university and polytechnic education. Currently there are nearly 400,000 students spread over 35 public higher education institutions and 94 private higher education institutions.

Higher Education is structured according to the Bologna principles and aims to ensure a solid scientific and cultural preparation plus technical training that qualifies students for professional and cultural life while developing their capability to innovate and make critical analysis. Higher Education includes university and polytechnic education. Higher education is offered by public, private and cooperative university institutions and polytechnic education is offered by public, private and cooperative non-university institutions (Eurydice, 2012).

The implementation of the Bologna Process in Portugal led to the adoption of key measures to promote equal opportunities in accessing higher education, by improving student support systems, and levels of participation and completion in higher education programs, as well as attracting new audiences in the context of lifelong learning and ensuring the qualifications of Portuguese citizens in Europe. (MCTES/FHEQ, 2010)

Figure 2. Higher Education in Portugal



Source: MEC (2012)

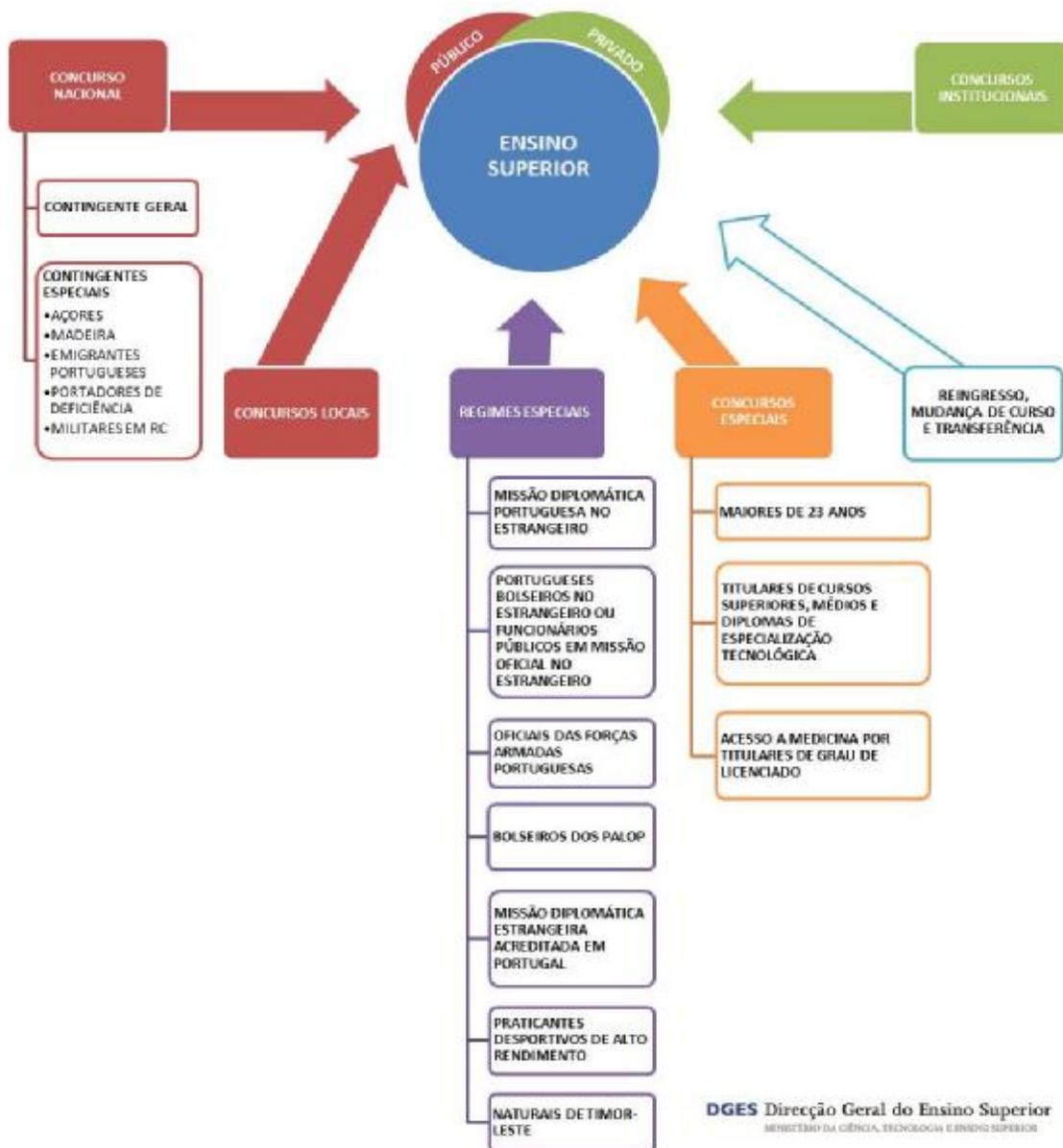


In the year of 2012, the annual tuition fees for the 1st cycle courses are fixed by each higher education institution and range from EUR 630.50 to EUR 999.71. Tuition fees for the 2nd cycle courses legally needed for the practice of specific professions are fixed by each higher education institution and range from EUR 630.50 to 999.71. The minimum value of the above fees is calculated as a 1.3 times the national minimum wage at the beginning of each school year. The maximum wage value is updated every year according to the rate of inflation. The most institutions adopt the maximum value. Tuition fees for other 2nd cycle courses are fixed freely by each higher education institution and range usually between EUR 1 500 and 9 500 for the entire course (2 or 4 semesters). A very small number of fees are above EUR 9 500.

3 Examples

3.1 National/institutional policies and practices

As presented in the section above, in Portugal, universities have a certain degree of autonomy but they are not autonomous in the selection of the students. There is a national competition (lead by the general direction of higher education) for students arriving from secondary education who present between one and six different choices of degrees and /or universities. Universities receive, one week before starting the academic year, the list of the students interested to enrol in their degrees. In addition off this national competition, there are several specific competitions for recruiting new students such as: competitions for students who want to change of degree, to change of university, to come back to university, who already have a degree, who come from former Portuguese colonies, who are children of diplomacy staff, etc . All of them follow the national rules even if in some cases there is some autonomy in the decision and in the procedures. Disabled students have also specific regimes. A specific competition exists for mature students; it is also prepared according national rules but the criteria of selection are local/institutional. We consider here mature students those who have more than 23 years ("Maiores de 23") and who did not finish secondary education (12 years of education in Portugal) but want to enrol in a university degree. These students have to pass an exam (at University of Algarve the exam has two parts: one of Portuguese language and culture - 20% of the final mark – and another of the specific discipline of the degree the student wants to enrol – 80% of the final mark), to submit their curriculum for evaluation and to make an interview with the jury. The diagram below shows the system of access to higher education in Portugal.



Although the transition to higher education is a well-identified problem at a national level there are no national measures or strategies to follow it. Some research or development projects have this issue as the central theme. At local level, almost all the institutions have specific strategies to support this transition. These strategies/activities may be categorised as follow: a) visibility of the higher education institution (HEI) and its life; b) help in the preparation to exams to enter; c) internal organisation to support students once they are enrolled.

The main aim of the first category is doubtless marketing to attract new students. The institution advertises itself, shows the list of degrees, their structure, their learning outcomes and potential professional exits. We consider this as support to transition because a lot of information about the organisation and the functioning of higher education is also presented and given to future students. In the scope of LiTE project this aspect must be considered because these marketing/dissemination



activities are often the first contact of non university students with this level. In some cases, as it is the case of the University of Algarve, an annual calendar of activities is presented, in the beginning of the school year, to heads of secondary and professional schools and to educational authorities. Some examples are: open day of the university and of faculties / departments, visit each school with professors and students and with some concrete examples of activities as musical groups, theatre groups, sport teams, etc.; a catalogue of conferences presented by university professors that can be demanded by each schools according to their curricular plans ("equipaUALg"); summer courses for secondary students ("UALg junior"). These activities are normally really expected by schools and students and are much participated.

Under the category of activities for helping students to enter we should give the example of specific courses organized to "Maioresde 23" candidates to help them in the preparation of the final exam. Some of these candidates leave the educational system long time ago and HEI conceive courses to prepare them to the exam. This is a first step to help in the transition. Some HEI have specific agreements with secondary schools to prepare students by organising pedagogical and scientific activities together with the secondary teachers, in particular in studying strategies and autonomous work. At the University of Algarve, under the present category, we start this year a new initiative called "Ano zero". It is a one-year special curriculum for secondary students who failed one discipline in the last year of secondary school or for students whose final classification average was not enough to get a place in a particular degree. In the concrete case, the most unsuccessful subjects in secondary system are Mathematics and Physics/Chemistry. Our "ano zero" students attend to a special program in one of these two subjects to prepare them to the national exam (which is compulsory) to finish secondary studies and to allow the participation in the national access competition. In parallel these students attend, as extraordinary students, to three or four disciplines of the 1st year of a degree in which they are interested to enrol when having the legal conditions. ECTS are given to them if they succeed in these disciplines. They are not exactly full university student but they are in the university environment so their transition will be easier. By the end if they pass in the national exams and come to our university in the degree in which they attend disciplines, the first year ECTS of "ano zero" are given.

As specific internal organisation is concerned, HEI seem to be more and more aware of the need of strategies to support transition. Some HEI have tutors, in other cases a professor responsible of the degree is asked to follow very closely 1st year students and in particular students who do not come directly from secondary level or who have some specific need. Reception activities are organised to integrate new students. A wide range of sessions is also available to present all the specificities of HE. Examples of topics of these sessions are: evaluation system; ECTS organisation; visit to the university campus to library; use of on-line resources; etc. Specific activities (informative sessions) are also available for students of Technological Specialization Courses (courses of post-secondary level and short duration, Polytechnic subsystem) who want to enroll in 1st cycle degrees. All the universities organize also special activities to support foreign and mobility students (reception week, Portuguese language courses, etc.) and in some cases, as it is at UALG, they are also helped by the university support given to their special structures as African students group ("Núcleo de Estudantes Africanos"). Disabled students have normally (or should have) individual support and a



large number of HEI have specific rules adapted to them. In all the HEI there is psychological support for all students provided at an institutional level, not only for clinical needs but also for vocational or organizational reasons.

In all the categories mentioned above, we have to stress the role of students unions in the support of transition. Not only in the organisation of cultural and sportive activities but also in solidarity measures and in pedagogical commissions, they are very important and indispensable partners to university bodies.

These activities (as result of not exactly defined strategies) represent the awareness of the problem and attempts to address it and, in fact, to support the transition to first year students. As mentioned there are no special strategies to support the transition from non-compulsory, or mature learners, to Higher Education (HE). Eventually, university bodies and staff particular attention must be given by to non-traditional HE learners and underrepresented groups; they are a truth asset for degrees quality and for all the other students because their life-experience and knowledge and their insertion in class is also a resource to support the transition of all the others.

In what concerns the student financial support system, the Portuguese government assure student scholarships that can be need or merit based. Eligibility for need-based scholarships is determined by the income of the student and his family. In the year of 2012 need based grants amount vary between EUR 987 and 6 017.50. Merit-based grants amount is 2.425 (2010-2011). There is a special loan scheme for higher education students at low rates, with government guarantee. In 2010, 3.4 % of all students enrolled took out the loan.

Also, tax benefits for parents are provided through tax deduction on educational expenses. Family allowance – child benefit – is granted to families with sons/daughters enrolled in higher education, less than 24 years old when the household income does not exceed 1.5 times social support index times 14 (2011: EUR 8 803.62) and when the family assets are less than 240 times social support index (2011: EUR 100 612.80) (European Commission, 2012).

3.2. Individual examples of underrepresented groups

3.2.1. Mature students

The term 'non-traditional student' is useful for describing different groups of students that are in some way underrepresented in higher education (HE) (Bamber, 2008, cit. by Fragoso et al., 2011) and whose participation in HE is constrained by structural factors: disabled or mature students, women, students whose family has not been to university before, working-class or specific ethnic groups who do not fit the so-called 'traditional' major group are included, among other, in this category. Non-traditional student is therefore a fluid concept that we should look upon according to the context characteristics (Fragoso et al., 2011)

Several authors assume that there is a variety of expectations among nontraditional students who are returning to academic environments: while many individuals can take advantage of job training, others are looking for specific college courses or degrees. In addition, we cannot forget that higher education is not the central feature of their lives, but just one of the multiple activities in which they



are engaged every day (Cannaday, 2010). In this context some years ago Levine (1993) considered that the relationships these mature students developed with the college/university was like the one they already had with their banks, supermarkets and other organizations they patronized.

Other authors (Schuetze&Slowey, 2002) identified three criteria that define non-traditional students: a) education routes, usually no-direct or winding; b) entry routes, both traditional via secondary school credentials and prior learning; and c) mode of study, full-time, part-time, and interaction between study and other major commitments.

Osborne et al. (2004) state that the decision to return to higher education often involves a complex decision/motivation process and invokes a consider lifestyle change for the adult learner. The authors pointed out some factors that can influence this decision: "cognitive interest, anticipation of benefit, self-confidence, self-belief and self-respect, support from family and employers, opportunity, and altruism" (Osborne et al., 2004, pp. 295-296).

Those who commence their studies over the age of 21 have sometimes been considered 'mature students' whereas others confine the category to those embarking on HE over the age of 23 (the case of the official Portuguese definition) or even 25 (the official definition in Spain, for instance). McCune et al (2010) talk of younger mature students when aged 21-30 and older mature students when aged 31 or over.

For mature students higher education represents a fantastic opportunity but can also pose some significant challenges. These include balancing study with other commitments, financing higher education and acquiring new or relearning old study techniques. Generally speaking, mature students are characterised in the literature as needing to overcome a series of constraints to participate in education, representing barriers that are more noticeable during the transition of mature students to HE. The comparisons to younger students are unavoidable, mainly because these two groups show differences in their central position towards HE. As Bowl (2001) notes, younger students can prioritise their academic life, whereas mature students must fit their studies around financial responsibilities, childcare, and family expectations. The barriers experienced by mature students include personal factors, family constraints, factors related to paid work and institutional factors (e.g. see McGivney, 1990). Swain and Hammond (2011) found that the more important learning constraints were young children, high-pressure jobs, unsupportive partners, health problems and difficulties with language.

Although these barriers are important obstacles to older students transition processes, mature students have also, in comparison with younger students, some advantages. For instance, evidence suggests mature students are more likely to engage actively with their studies (McCune et al., 2010). This form of engagement may reflect their greater experience and responsibility in family and paid work. More precisely, it involves the way they approach learning, which can be better understood using John Richardson (after Entwistle) definitions on deep and surface approach to learning. The deep approach is based on understanding (meaning active questioning during learning, relating to other parts of the course and relating evidence to conclusions); the surface approach based on memorising (failing to distinguish principles from examples, i.e. memorising information for assessments). Although mature students are often considered deficient in study skills, Richardson



(1994, p. 318) claims that age has been ignored as an explanatory variable, and advances the hypothesis that ‘mature students are more likely than younger students to adopt a deep approach or a meaning orientation towards their academic studies and, conversely, that they are less likely than younger students to adopt a surface approach or a reproducing orientation’.

3.3. Effects of current economic context

The financial and economical crisis conducted to the introduction of many austerity measures, particularly in what education and health sectors concerns.

Significant restrictions resulted in major difficulties on social level.

In what concerns higher education public institutions, sever restrictions on state funding are compromising not only the institutions regular functioning, but also access to higher education. Table 1 presents the number of students in the higher education system in the past decades.

Table 1 - Students enrolled by 1st time in higher education: total, by subsystem and type of education

Year	Subsystem and type of institution						
	Total	Public			Private		
		Total	Academic	Polytechnics	Total	Academic	Polytechnics
1996	81083	47450	29377	18073	33633	24166	9467
1997	82140	51734	31729	20005	30406	21565	8841
1998	81885	56187	33621	22566	25698	16823	8875
1999	79210	55232	35371	19861	23978	17141	6837
2000	84746	59074	36024	23050	25672	16575	9097
2001	93249	65929	39229	26700	27320	16942	10378
2002	92836	65921	39235	26686	26915	16333	10582
2003	94446	67640	41971	25669	26806	16137	10669
2004	89269	64801	41238	23563	24468	14528	9940
2005	84363	63365	40880	22485	20998	12545	8453
2006	82720	63691	42559	21132	19029	11608	7421
2007	95341	70151	44780	25371	25190	16428	8762
2008	114114	84279	52818	31461	29835	20171	9664
2009	115372	87988	54243	33745	27384	18956	8428
2010	T 122314	T 94400	T 59611	T 34789	T 27914	T 19209	T 8705
2011	131508	102895	65012	37883	28613	19497	9116
2012	116576	94481	60899	33582	22095	15214	6881

Source: GPEARI/MCTES – DIMAS/RAIDES and PORDATA (12/2012)



4. Relevance and impact

In the last few years there were a number of significant changes in the higher education system in Portugal, mainly as a consequence of the implementation of the Bologna processes. Although national assessment of the impacts of such changes over the academic lives of students or their transitions to higher education (HE) are impossible to achieve, there is room, in this report, to stress the relevance of some of measures that took place:

First, some of the changes printed to HE made access to university studies easier, bringing more non-traditional students (maybe mature students are the most important group, in the sense they have been noticeably excluded from HE in the past) to higher education institutions (HEI). Equally important is the variety of non-graduate different paths that can give access to HE. For example, Technological Specialization Courses (TSC): allow students with secondary or incomplete secondary studies to enrol HE technical or technological courses. But it is possible to access HE regular degrees after completion. Theoretically speaking, students who did TSC courses had at least one year to experience academic context, rules, etc. – hence the possibility that if they follow to HE 1st cycle degrees can face this new experience with a much better understanding of general academic environment and probably, facing less problems in their transitions.

Second, the whole system of HE gained a new flexibility in its structures and procedures. The fact that, for instance, all Portuguese HEI built systems to recognise and validate Prior Learning makes possible that students build academic continuums between their past training and professional experience and the new learning identities about to be built in HE. Prior Learning seems especially important for mature students, allowing those with a bigger professional experience in a particular field to improve their knowledge and skills without the need to make a totally new start.

Third, the recent introduction of the so-called “zero year” in HEI (the University of Algarve will have its first experience in the academic year of 2012/2013), presumably to become gradually generalised to our country, can make a difference regarding transition. This “transitional year” between secondary studies and HE studies, but located at HEI, constitutes an opportunity to a gradual adaptation to academic life at general.

Generally speaking there are, therefore, recent national changes that can contribute, not only to a further democratization of knowledge and learning in HEI, as it is possible that some of these changes affect positively transition in its version of menace and risk – despite the fact that there are also positive effects in facing and overcoming problems, difficulties and challenges posed by transition (Ecclestone, 2009).

Even taking into account that access is easier in Portugal nowadays, especially for mature students, widening the accessibility of HE to promote social mobility and social development is mostly twofold: it depends on staying in HE and graduating in good standing. In this sense, the way that students generally perceive learning and specifically teaching situations is fundamental to the quality of their learning (Prosser and Trigwell, 1999). Consequently, one should give greater attention to the underlying nature of an institution’s teaching and learning environment, the manner in which this environment influences student non-completion and student perceptions and expectations (Laing and Robinson, 2003). There are, therefore, a number of factors than can influence student’s



transition to HE – and some of these factors do depend of HEI policy, management, academic bodies, evaluation rules, pedagogy, etc. In this particular moment of this research project, it seems reasonable that we focus on these factors, rather than stressing factors structural factors of students' lives, identity dynamics or even the possibility to “counterbalance” structure with agency. In short, national measures and national strategies in HE are important and we could argue that some of them can have an eventual positive impact over transition. But a substantial part of the problems and menaces that arise during transition depends not on this macro-level of educational policy and HEI specific policy, but rather in the global learning environments provided by HEI to their students.

Quinn's (2010) research on working-class students' transitions to HE in the UK challenges traditional understandings of transition and identifies the majority of areas that constitutes a transition as problematic. Quinn argues that the prevalent notion of transition as an anchored turning point both in time and place does not fit her research findings but rather requires a more open and flexible concept. Thus, transition would not be defined only by the movement from one set to another – even if we have included socially regulated determinants to the changes– but as a condition of our subjectivity. In this sense, transition is not a punctual, well-localised event but rather an everyday event. “However, current educational systems and policies ensure that transitions are moments of crisis which must be traversed well or not at all, and a linear pathway suggests there is no going back to take an interesting byway” (Quinn, 2010, p. 124). The importance of this research and the questions it arises suggest that HEI rigidity and traditional procedures and rules can be responsible for some of so-called “failed transitions”. And for us it seems important the possibility, in HEI, to try some solutions in order to make student's transition easier: basically, by changing academic rules and procedures towards a bigger flexibility, adequate to the HEI context and its students. In this sense, flexibility seems of outmost importance for a number of groups that fit the designation of non-traditional students or, especially, mature students. We hope, therefore, that shortly we will be able to follow this line of reasoning, after conducting the next steps of our research project.



5. Discussion of findings

The findings presented indicate that some efforts are being held in Portugal in what concerns the access to higher education, particularly if we consider the economic and social context.

The restrictions resulting from recent austerity measures have resulted in major problems to the society and to public institutions.

Most of the Portuguese HE institutions have now special measures to support student maintenance in the system. These measures are for all types of students (traditional and non-traditional): the fees payment can be renegotiated with the institution when students can no longer pay their fees for economical reasons; the possibility to become/apply as a part-time student; e-learning and b-learning courses; lifelong learning courses. In what concerns lifelong learning courses, the idea is to allow any individual, at any stage of life, can continue his studies in a logical recognition of acquired skills and specialization in various types of context, or simply to allow any individual to change his educational and professional background. The focus is on delineate institutional strategies that allow root widening access to new audiences and lifelong learning, offer education and training to a diversified population, as well as to implement new ways of recognizing non-formal learning.

Working students that enter the university have a special legal status that allows them to study without been required to attend classes. These students must certify that they have a job (this document must be delivered when attending the university). Special privileges may include: harnessing school year with the approval of at least half the number of subjects to which they are registered (usually 6 per semester); or even classes of compensation or pedagogical support which are considered by teachers as essential to the learning and assessment process.

These measures can be considered as supportivemeasures for all students as they and aim at facilitating the students transition to higher education, as well as the student maintenance in the system.



6. Summary and conclusions





7. References and links to resources/websites

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