

SCHOOL DROPOUT: CHARACTERIZATION OF THE CONDITIONS OF STUDENTS AT A PORTUGUESE HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTION

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Abstract

Entry into higher education is the beginning of major changes and adaptations in which issues such as a new life context, the demands of autonomy and independence, the motivations and personal interests of the new student emerge. Consequently, not only academic, but also social and psychological difficulties may also appear. This study aimed to analyse the perception of students enrolled in a Portuguese higher education institution about their condition regarding the difficulties in the areas related to the adversities of entering higher education, as well as their personal difficulties and resources, and their availability to collaborate in a volunteer project for dropout prevention. This study was designed based on the perspective that all individuals have relevant resources for the community, it is understood that each student, regardless of the needs or vulnerabilities that he/she may present at a given moment, has resources whose sharing is an added value for the good of the academic community (mainly for reducing school dropout). Therefore, a quantitative study was carried out using a questionnaire developed for this purpose, which allows the identification of the needs and resources of the students, as well as their availability to participate in volunteer programs with a view to suppressing the needs or necessities of their colleagues. A total of 825 students participated, being 58,91% (n=486) were females and 41,09% (n=339) were males, of 26 nationalities, being the majority (87,64%) Portuguese. The majority (59,52%) live in a place different from the usual one, therefore being students from other Portuguese locations or from abroad, and study in graduation courses (68,24%). After the analysis of the results it was possible to conclude that: a) 47,40% of the students are aware of among one and four situations of dropping out of the higher education institution; b) Adversities in entering higher education are felt by more than half of the students respondents, with 63,05% of students reporting feeling difficulties in accessing information inherent to enrolment, registration and social action services, 50,19% difficulties in spatial orientation within the campus when entering the institution and 55,08% difficulties in recognizing the city when entering the institution; c) More than half of the student respondents report having difficulties at academic level (73,49%), at personal and/or interpersonal level (64,18%) and in securing material goods (55,48%); d) 41% of the student respondents showed interest in participating in a volunteering project at the higher education institution in question; e) Most of the students who indicate having difficulties at different levels (72,91%) are available to collaborate in exchange for the support they would like to receive. A volunteer project will certainly be an added value in the scope of the different difficulties expressed by the students in this research, both at the level of the most mentioned by the students, and at the level of those that, being more residual, are still important. A project of this kind should encompass those who have shown willingness to participate voluntarily without needing anything in return and those who, being potential beneficiaries, also have available resources to meet the needs of others.

Keywords: School dropout, higher education, personal difficulties.

1 INTRODUCTION

Entering higher education is not only the beginning of the path to obtaining an academic degree. It is the beginning of major changes and adaptations in which issues such as the new life context, the demands for autonomy and independence, and the personal motivations and interests of the new student have to be reconciled [1]. Therefore, adaptation difficulties may emerge in this period, which are not only concentrated in the academic field, but also extend to the social and psychological levels [2] [3].

For many students, this moment of transition is characterized by a move away from their place of residence, the physical separation from their families and friends and the break of routines inherent to

the previous family and social context. This break of routines may place the new student in a state of greater vulnerability to isolation [4], and, consequently, there is a need to create relationships in the place and institution where they are placed so that they can feel socially supported as cited by Joyce-Moniz (1999) in Costa e Leal [5].

Araújo et al. [6] sought to characterize the difficulties anticipated by students regarding academic adaptation, social integration and autonomy in higher education in 913 individuals who entered the first year of a Portuguese public university in the 2013/2014 academic year. Some students presented leaving their parents' home as a factor associated with the process of transition to higher education, which raises a set of complex challenges. This study shows that students have an optimistic perspective of adaptation and that this situation may be a potential factor to promote higher levels of adaptation and well-being. It also reveals that family support and friendship relationships are necessary for the student to cope with the new challenges that this transition implies. The study also mentions that students had difficulties in situations in which they thought they would have less difficulty (namely in social integration and autonomy).

The fear of not relating favorably with classmates, the anxiety and apprehension about the relationship they will or will not establish with professors, the fear of not adapting or even of not fitting into the academic context are important concerns of new higher education students [1].

According to Arkoff (1968), cited by Sharma [3], the adaptation to higher education is reflected by the student's personal growth, ability to obtain grades and the completion of the proposed degree. In other words, from this author's perspective, adaptation is reflected by the fact that the student is able to achieve grades that allow for continued attendance and subsequent completion of the course. However, Sharma [3] points out that adaptation is also reflected by the student's individual and personal growth. And to exist, students will face a panoply of demands to which they will respond differently depending on their individual characteristics. Demands that are not only limited to academic involvement (institution, course, etc.), but also to social and emotional changes brought about by contact with a new life experience that is more liberal, independent, autonomous, more responsible, and with the need to balance and reconcile all these new factors with which they are confronted when they enter college. As first-year students, they are also faced with differences in the new study cycle from the previous cycle that they need to manage. Sharma [3] mentions, among them, the greater competition, the greater academic load, and a different style of teaching from the professors, which is much more demanding. Costa et al. [7] stress the increased importance of autonomous work by the student, emphasizing that most school work is no longer essentially guided and provided by teachers. This characteristic of higher education functioning can be detrimental to the engagement and maintenance of student focus at this level of education.

It is understood that the new student needs to adjust to the new context and to a series of inherent changes, and the support provided by friends, family and teachers is determinant. Thus, it is fundamental to think about the case of students who do not have this support available in their personal, family and even academic life contexts. These students, according to Machado and Almeida (2000), cited by Costa and Leal [5], require urgent attention and intervention.

The level of social integration achieved in college is identified by Forbes and Wickens (2005), cited by Araque et al. [2] as a factor that may determine the student's decision whether or not to continue with their studies. Indeed, students will be more integrated if their skills enable them to cope with the demands of higher education student life [2]. However, it also makes sense to think that the abilities that the student already has may also be promoted and expanded by the integration pathway.

It can then be thought that during the first year, students need support and follow-up in the institution and, namely for those who are displaced from their area of residence, the absence of this support in the educational institution and/or in the city that receives them can carry the risk that new students, at the time of this transition, will have difficulty in successfully overcoming the vicissitudes of this first year of higher education. This year may become a precarious year that, instead of promoting development and integration, may be a potential dropout from higher education both in this year and in the following years.

The "poor integration of the student in the institution or in the city" is also mentioned by the Conselho de Reitores das Universidades Portuguesas [8] as a dropout situation that is close to the factor "city" mentioned by Ferreira and Fernandes [9] as a factor that influenced the students' dropout, as well as the reason "adaptation problems to Vila Real and academic life" mentioned in the study of Silva et al. [10] as a reason for dropout. In a deeper analysis of these "adaptation problems to Vila Real" in this same study, it can be perceived that they were based on reasons for "difficulty in relationships with peers", "adaptation to new circles of friends" and "violence and humiliation of the hazing" [10]. An

identical situation was verified in the study of Ferreira and Fernandes [9], which presents as factors that influenced the dropout of students the "academic environment", the "relationship with classmates", the "integration in college" and the "hazing". Dropout factors such as lack of personal achievement, student's disintegration in their academic environment and poor institutional conditions were among the most verified throughout the study of Silva [11].

Thus, it is essential to implement preventive practices through training and awareness-raising in the day-to-day life of institutions, in order to stimulate the involvement of the academic community in recognizing and signaling risk situations and also in designing and implementing student support mechanisms [12].

Fredricks et al. [13] share the idea that students' involvement in extracurricular activities has been related to a lower likelihood of dropping out, and may be of particular importance for certain groups of individuals, such as students who are academically at risk. Although student involvement may start out of pleasure or participation itself, it can result in commitment and investment, and it can lead to an increase in the individual's interest and learning, which may also have implications for dropout [13].

In education, volunteering can be seen as a strategy and as a credited extracurricular activity. It is considered an active citizenship practice that promotes the development of skills and responsibility in individuals [14]. Higher education institutions are also able to raise awareness and encourage young people to participate in volunteering activities [15] in their area of training, thus being an added value for the acquisition of skills and professional experience [16].

Volunteer work emerges as relevant to student success in school. According to Haski-Leventhal, Ronel, York, and Ben-David [17], it is promoter of self-confidence in the person who practices it. It causes enthusiasm, well-being, and willingness to continue studies and to take on higher grade responsibilities. Self-efficacy, self-esteem, self-confidence, and positive affect towards others are also promoted by volunteering, and it also has the function of relieving stress in volunteers [18]. The ability to set goals, make future plans, and reduce the likelihood of engaging in deviant behavior have also been verified as positive implications of volunteering [19]. Therefore, volunteering is an activity that, when performed with commitment, contributes to the development of personal and social skills [20].

The development of skills such as event planning, teamwork, leadership, decision making and problem solving, communication skills, presentation skills, public speaking and interpersonal relationships have been found to develop in university students during volunteering in a study by the Institute for Volunteering Research (IVR) [18]. The promotion of students' skills is, in this case, subsidiary to the fact that they make their resources available to intervene in reducing the needs of others, i.e., it is a secondary gain. Thus, for the reasons explained above, volunteering should be increasingly encouraged, instilled and developed by higher education institutions, mainly for its contribution to preventing and reducing dropout.

Thus, a study was developed with the objective of analyzing the perception of the enrolled students about their condition regarding the difficulties in the areas related to the adversities of entering higher education, as well as the personal difficulties and their resources in these same areas and, also, about their availability to collaborate in a volunteer project for dropout prevention in response to the perceived needs.

The design of this study is based on the perspective that all individuals have resources relevant to the community, i.e., it is understood that each student, regardless of the needs or vulnerabilities they may present at any given time, has resources whose sharing is an asset for the good of the academic community (especially for reducing dropout).

2 METHODOLOGY

2.1 Participants

This study used a convenience sample composed of students from a higher education institution in Northern Portugal. There were 825 students, 58.91% (n=486) female and 41.09% (n=339) male, of 26 nationalities, being the majority (87.64%) Portuguese. The majority (59.52%) live in a place other than their usual place of residence, thus being students from other Portuguese localities or from abroad, and study in undergraduate courses (68.24%).

2.2 Data collection tool

The online semi-structured questionnaire "Characterization of Students' Conditions" previously constructed for this study, based on the literature review, was used as a data collection instrument.

The analysis of the conditions of the students of the higher education institution under study was carried out based on data collected through the online questionnaire survey "Characterization of Students' Conditions" which allowed identifying the needs and resources of the students of the higher education institution under study, as well as their willingness to participate in volunteer programs to meet the needs or shortages of their peers. This questionnaire survey included six groups of questions to characterize the institution's students. In group I (characterization of the student) we intend to do a sociodemographic characterization of the responding students. They are asked about their gender, nationality, place of residence (if different from the current one), distance (in km) from their address before entering the higher education institution to the current one, the curricular year they are attending, the type of education, the school they are attending, the access condition to higher education, and the reason why they chose the institution in question. Group II (dropping out of higher education) alludes to the perception that students have about dropping out of higher education. An attempt was made to understand whether or not the respondents have any knowledge of students who have left higher education or were considering leaving it, i.e., the aim was to find out (approximately) how many students known to the students surveyed had already left higher education and how many of the students surveyed intend to leave higher education. In group III (adversities in entering higher education) we try to understand which are the adversities in entering higher education, namely, the difficulties that students feel in terms of access to information inherent to their enrollment, registration, and social services, in terms of spatial orientation within the campus of the higher education institution, and in terms of recognition of the city. Group IV (personal difficulties) aims to understand the personal difficulties felt by the respondents and is divided into three areas: Difficulties in securing material goods, difficulties at the academic level, and difficulties at the personal and/or interpersonal level since studying at the institution. Group V (volunteering) seeks to understand if students are interested in joining a volunteering project and if they are interested, what they are willing to share. In group VI (reciprocity), restricted to students who indicate needs, we try to understand if they can collaborate in a volunteer project, and in which area, in exchange for the support they receive. Thus, the questionnaire survey "Characterization of Students' Conditions" includes, in total, six groups, twenty closed-ended questions, ten of which include an "other" option where the student may answer openly, in case he does not identify with the previous options or if he wants to add another one to the one available.

2.3 Data collection and analysis procedures

After the necessary authorizations were requested and obtained, the questionnaire was made available online to all students of the higher education institution. To promote the need to fill out the questionnaire, dissemination sessions were held. Posters were displayed on the doors of the different buildings of the higher education institution, in the waiting room of the Academic Services counter, in the Social Services, and on the door of the Canteen. The questionnaire was also disseminated in the classroom among the first years of each course and each study cycle. In this dissemination action the objectives and the need to fill out the questionnaire were explained and an informative pamphlet was handed out indicating how to access it.

The data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, calculating the average measure of central tendency and its respective percentage.

3 RESULTS

For data analysis purposes, 825 questionnaires were validated as fully completed.

3.1 Dropping out of Higher Education

When asked about the number of students from the higher education institution who have left higher education, it is observed that 30.55% (n=252) of the respondents indicate having no knowledge of students in this situation. Of the students who claim to know of colleagues from the institution who have left higher education, it is noted that 29.82% (n=246) report knowing one or two situations and 17.58% (n=145) say they know of three or four situations. Thus, 47.40% (n=391) of the students know between one and four situations of dropping out.

In relation to the number of students from the higher education institution who the respondents know are considering leaving higher education, it can be observed that of the total respondents, 58.18% (n=480) are not aware of any case, 27.27% (n=225) of the students report knowing of one or two colleagues who are considering leaving higher education and 7.88% (n=65) indicate knowing of three or four situations. Thus, 35.15% (n=290) know of between one and four cases.

3.2 Adversities in entering higher education

In the third group of the questionnaire, we listened to the adversities felt when entering higher education, namely in three areas of difficulty: access to information related to enrollment, registration, and social services; spatial orientation within the campus; and difficulties in recognizing the city.

Regarding the difficulties experienced by students in accessing information inherent to the application, enrolment and social services, difficulties were identified in 63.05% (n=795) of the selections, at different levels, mainly in "filling in the documents to apply for the scholarship (online platform)" with 13.88% (n=175) of the selections, and in "identifying the services of the health office" with 9.67% (n=122) of the selections. It should be added that 466 (36.95%) students selected the option "I had no difficulties in accessing information related to registration, enrollment and social services" and that 1.03% (n=13) of the selections referred to the option "Other".

As for the difficulties experienced by students when entering the higher education institution, at the level of spatial orientation within the campus it was found that 49.81% (n=535) of the students' selections indicated that there were no difficulties in spatial orientation within the campus and 50.19% (n=539) of the students' selections indicated that they had experienced them in different ways. Of the possible options, the most frequently checked difficulty was "Location of health office" with 12.48% (n=134) of selections, followed by the option "Location of Central Services" with 11.17% (n=120) of selections. The least checked option was "Location of student residences, with 3.07% (n=33) of selections. Regarding the option "Other", this corresponded to 1.12% (n=12) of selections.

With regard to the difficulties experienced by students in recognizing the city when they entered the higher education institution, it can be seen that 44.92% (n=517) of the students' selections indicated that they had no difficulties and, in turn, 55.08% (n=634) of the selections indicated that the students had difficulties, mostly in "Identifying the urban transport lines and timetables" with 177 (15.38%) selections. The least selected option (among the possible options) was "Location of hypermarkets" with 68 (5.91%) selections. The "Other" option accounted for 35 (3.04%) selections.

3.3 Personal Difficulties

The fourth group of the questionnaire concerns the analysis of students' personal difficulties. This was divided into three scopes: Difficulties in securing material goods, difficulties on an academic level, and difficulties on a personal and/or interpersonal level.

With regard to the difficulties experienced by students in securing material goods since they have been studying at the higher education institution, it can be observed that 44.52% (n=455) of the students' selections refer to the absence of needs at this level. However, 55.48% (n=567) of the students' selections indicate that they have felt difficulties at different levels, with the most mentioned (among the possible options, except for "Other"), with values higher than 10%, being "Accommodation" with 17.32% (n=177) and "Financial resources to participate in school projects and study visits" with 15.46% (n=158). The least mentioned was "Hygiene products" with 1.96% selections. It is also observed 1.66% (n=17) of the selections in the "Other" option.

As for the difficulties experienced by students at an academic level since studying at the higher education institution, it can be observed that 26.51% (n=316) of the students' selections do not refer to difficulties in this regard. However, 73.49% (n=876) of the selections, indicate difficulties at the academic level, with the most marked, with percentages higher than 10%, in descending order, being the options "Lack of basic knowledge to be able to understand some subjects" with 16.61% (n=198), "Identify the type of study that is necessary to develop in each Curricular Unit" with 14.18% (n=169), "Develop the level of study necessary to be successful" with 13.76% (n=164) and "Poor organization in the study" with 12.50% (n=149). The least checked option was "Low academic achievement" with 4.95% (n=59) selections.

There seems to be a recognition of the existence of "Lack of background knowledge to be able to understand some subjects" and accompanying this trend is the difficulty in "Identifying the type of study that needs to be developed" and "Developing the level of study needed to be successful". In the option "Other" there were 1.84% (n=22) of selections.

Regarding difficulties at a personal and/or interpersonal level experienced by students since studying at the higher education institution, it can be seen that 35.82% (n=428) of selections indicate that students have not experienced difficulties at this level. However, these were marked 64.18% (n=767) times. The most frequently mentioned difficulties were "Missing my family", noted by 16.32% (n=195) and "Finding colleagues with whom I enjoy doing academic work" noted by 10.46% (n=125) students (both with a percentage greater than 10%). The least mentioned was "Feeling respected by colleagues" by 4.44% (n=53). Regarding the option "Other", 0.59% (n=7) of selections were found.

3.4 Volunteering

In the context of group V of the questionnaire, which refers to volunteering, the students' interest in participating in a volunteering project at the higher education institution was heard. 41% (n=338) of the students showed interest in participating in a volunteering project at the institution.

Table 1 regarding what students report they have to share, indicates that the most marked response was "Time to participate in extracurricular and cultural activities with other classmates," marked 22.88% (n=181) of the time. This was followed by "Time for fundraising campaigns," with 21.62% (n=171) of selections. The least selected option was "Accommodation" with 2.53% (n=20) of selections. The option "Other" was selected 0.25% (n=2) of the time.

Table 1. Students' willingness to share.

<i>Options</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
Time for fundraising campaigns	171	21,62
Time to participate in the development of a project to prevent school drop-outs	104	13,15
Time to participate in extracurricular and cultural activities with other colleagues	181	22,88
Help a colleague with difficulties in a specific course unit	143	18,08
Foodstuffs	78	9,86
Accommodation	20	2,53
Clothing	55	6,95
Household goods (blankets, sheets, pots, cutlery, etc.)	37	4,68
Option "Other"	2	0,25
Total	791	100,00

3.5 Reciprocity

The surveyed students who reported having difficulties (i.e. the possible beneficiaries of a volunteering project) were asked to indicate in which areas they could collaborate in exchange for the support they would receive, should they become beneficiaries of the project. Thus, Table 2 shows the areas in which those students could collaborate. It can be seen that in 27.09% (n=308) of selections students expressed that they were not available to get involved in any activities in exchange for the help they would receive. There are, however, 72.91% (n=829) of selections of possible ways to collaborate in return for the support received. The majority of the selections, more specifically 18.12% (n=206) refer to availability for performing administrative tasks, followed by availability for performing services (reprographics, audiovisuals, etc.) with 13.72% (n=156) of responses, "Accompanying schoolmates" with 12.84% (n=146) of selections and availability for "Technical support tasks" with 12.31% (n=140) of selections. Least chosen was the option "Canteen support" with 6.86% (n=78) of selections.

Table 2. Domains in which students who have indicated that they have needs in group IV will be able to collaborate in exchange for meeting some of their needs.

<i>Options</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
Aministrative tasks	206	18,12
Technical support tasks	140	12,31
Service tasks (reprographics, audiovisuals, etc.)	156	13,72
Canteen support	78	6,86
School support for colleagues	146	12,84
Social support to colleagues	103	9,06
I am not available to be involved in any activities in return for the aid I wish to receive	308	27,09
Total	1137	100,00

4 CONCLUSIONS

After analyzing the results, it was possible to conclude that 47.40% of the respondent students are aware of between one and four situations of dropping out of the higher education institution. As for the number of students from the higher education institution who the respondents know are considering leaving higher education, 58.18% of the students know of no cases, and 35.15% know of between one and four cases. It can then be seen that more students know colleagues who have already left the institution than students know colleagues who are thinking of leaving. Effectively, one cannot take measures to help those who have already left, but one can create preventive measures for those who are about to leave.

The adversities in entering higher education are felt by more than half of the responding students, with 63.05% of students reporting difficulties in accessing information related to enrollment, registration, and social action services, 50.19% with spatial orientation on campus when entering the institution, and 55.08% with recognizing the city when entering the institution.

More than half of the surveyed students report difficulties at the academic level (73.49%), at a personal and/or interpersonal level (64.18%), and in securing material goods (55.48%). These students refer, at the academic level, mainly difficulties related to the lack of basic knowledge to be able to understand some subjects (16.61%), the identification of the type of study that is necessary to develop in each curricular unit (14.18%), the development of the level of study necessary to be successful (13.76%) and the poor organization of the study (12.50%). At the personal and/or interpersonal level, the most common problems mentioned were missing the family (16.32%) and the difficulty in finding colleagues with whom to do the academic work (10.46%). The material good most difficult to secure and most mentioned by the students was accommodation (17.32%).

It can also be concluded that 41% of the student respondents showed interest in participating in a volunteering project at the higher education institution in question. They expressed willingness to share, essentially, "Time to participate in extracurricular and cultural activities with other colleagues" (22.88%) and "Time for fund-raising campaigns" (21.62%).

Most of the students who indicate having difficulties at different levels (72.91%) are available to collaborate in exchange for the support they would like to receive. This availability is verified, essentially, for the performance of administrative tasks (18.12%), the performance of tasks in the reprographic services, audiovisual services, among others (13.72%), the school support to colleagues (12.84%) and the performance of technical support tasks (12.31%).

Higher education has the responsibility to guarantee and ensure an effective training to its student population, and also has a responsibility in terms of dropout prevention [7]. The fact that the higher education population has been changing over the years [7] from being restricted to a few to being a right of all generations [11], has brought about increased challenges at this level, given the diversity of students who now attend universities and polytechnic institutes.

It is through preventive measures that, in the future, it will be possible to reduce the dropout rate of students. These measures could consider the conclusions presented here and, therefore, could involve the development and subsequent implementation of dropout prevention projects by a multidisciplinary team.

These projects may consider measures to promote the integration of students. For example, in the first moment, when the student enters the higher education institution, the multidisciplinary teams may have an important role in the implementation of actions to promote the welcome and integration, as a facilitator of the establishment of relations between new students and students who are already in the institution for a longer period. They can also promote greater accessibility to information regarding enrollment, registration and social action services, actions aimed at an easier recognition of the city when entering higher education and spatial orientation within the campus.

Given the economic and material difficulties mentioned, and that the difficulty in securing accommodation is the most pointed out in the second study, measures at this level are also urgently required. In particular, efforts should be made to create more student residences, which should help to reduce these difficulties in the future.

Subsequently, preventive measures can be implemented to accompany students, involving strategies to deal with their difficulties, especially at the academic level. Thus, multidisciplinary teams may create working groups to provide study support, where students who are willing to participate voluntarily may collaborate.

According to Viveiros [14], volunteering as an activity that promotes skills to those who get involved in it (either as volunteers or beneficiaries) may be included in education as a strategy, since it is considered an active citizenship practice, promoting the development of skills and responsibility in individuals. This is also corroborated by the perspective that it is an intervention that implies the promotion of personal, social [20], professional (Clary & Synder, 2000) cited by Duarte [21] and professional skills, as well as knowledge as solidary people who intend to include and develop other individuals, in this case their colleagues, aiming at greater social justice and equality (Henriques, 2015). Fredricks et al. [13] relate the lower likelihood of dropping out of school to involvement in volunteer activities by groups of students (e.g., those at academic risk).

For this reason, it is considered to be a good option for future intervention in this sense of preventing and reducing dropout among higher education students. A volunteer project will certainly be an added value in the scope of the different difficulties expressed by the students in this research, both in the level of the most mentioned by the students, and in the level of those that, being more residual, are still important. A project of this kind should encompass those who have shown willingness to participate voluntarily without needing anything in return and those who, being possible beneficiaries, also have available resources to meet the needs of others.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This work has been supported by FCT – Fundação para a Ciência e a Tecnologia within the Project Scope: UIDB/05777/2020.

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