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NON-TRADITIONAL STUDENTS IN HIGHER EDUCATION: Understanding learning experiences and trajectories to enhance quality (0161)

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## **1. Introduction**

The authors aim to present a project on Non-Traditional Students (NTS) in Higher Education (HE), started in May 2013, and funded by the Foundation for Science and Technology (the main Portuguese funding agency). The project is based on a hot subject, following international debates and concluded worldwide projects, as well as national imperatives. It proposes better understanding of NTS' experiences through research-based evidences gathered within the Portuguese context.

Though this project is being developed at specific Portuguese HE institutions (University of Aveiro and University of Algarve) we envisage that the conclusions will have wider scope. At the same time the results will be representative of the two involved HE institutions, they will allow an insight of the whole Portuguese HE settings. Additionally, it is expected they will address other international contexts' concerns, due to the supra-institutional and supra-national character over this issue. The authors intend to engage in enriching reflections with academic community as a way to gather and introduce feedback while the project is being developed, and also to rethink and continue the discussion on this topic.

Therefore, our purpose here is to present the project which is constituted by four interconnected research lines that take into consideration learning experiences and trajectories of four groups of NTS. At this starting point we can only present an overview of the project and the main concepts. Nevertheless, with the presentation we also intend to reflect on challenges and concerns to NTS' experiences that will emerge from the data collection that will be started in the beginning of the academic year 2013-2014.

## **2. Setting the scene: Description of the research project**

### **2.1. Contextual background and some underlying concepts**

In Portugal there is, at present, a lack of systematised research on NTS in HE, from conceptual, theoretical and empirical perspectives. The increased participation of NTS in HE institutions, even though recognised in the international literature (for example: Macdonald & Stratta, 2001; Watt & Paterson, 2000), is still covered in silences. An explanation may lie on the complexity of interactions between requirements, multiple stakeholders and different perspectives with their particular set of objectives. Hence, there is a need of in-depth and public reflections on (i) what, nowadays, may be called 'traditional' and 'non-traditional', (ii) the impact NTS have in HE institutions in general, and in the overall teaching and learning

process/path in particular, (iii) different strategies that are (not) being put into practice to answer different students' profiles, (iv) many concepts, such as equality and inclusivity, and (v) the way the institutions are dealing with all the previous aspects.

The project here presented follows a previous one just concluded (developed in the same HE institutions) that focused on a particular set: the so-called 'mature students' or 'non-traditional adult students'. These are usually categorised as adults with more than 23 years old with specific academic, professional, familiar and social characteristics, who have a special condition to access HE (Bago, Fonseca & Santos, in press; Gonçalves et al., 2011). The concluded project has thus allowed the academic community to better understand the characteristics of this specific group of students that has exponentially increased in HE since 2006. Furthermore, it has highlighted the need of comprehending the learning characteristics, experiences and trajectories as well as profiles of other groups of NTS in HE.

Now, and articulated with the previous points, the current project follows international tendencies in what regards widening participation, diversity and non-traditional students. We do not intend to specifically focus on each of these concepts alone, but to stress they are intertwined. The common denominator may be described as follows: groups of students which are under-represented in HE, have distinctive characteristics when compared with the so-called 'traditional students' and whose participation in HE is constrained by structural factors (Jones, 2008; RANLHE, 2011; Tett, 1999).

## **2.2. Scope of the research lines and main objectives**

As highlighted, the current financed project brings into light four different groups of NTS – thus, four lines of research. The first line focuses on non-traditional adult students' employability: their transitions to the labour market, progression in their careers and/or change in their careers. It will be also interesting to hear these students' voices regarding the ways they attribute meaning to their previous academic path, its impact in and/or its adjustment to the labour market.

The second research line considers the experiences of students with special needs. The team will particularly reflect on the suitability of HE institutions to accommodate specific types of needs: physical structures, academic support and guidance (structures outside the curriculum), curriculum design (the way teaching, learning and assessment are being put into practice).

Further, the third line takes into account the experiences of students coming from African Portuguese-speaking countries: their motivations to study in a Portuguese HE institution, their social and academic integration in Portugal and in the HE institution, and their identity building processes which occur in their transitions to Portugal and to HE.

Finally, the fourth research line focuses on students from technological specialisation programmes, which are typically post-secondary programmes with a special interest within the regional economies and that allow students to continue their studies into HE. These programmes are constituted by two parts: the first is disciplinary-based, and the second takes place in labour-context. It will be important to analyse, namely, their articulation and the impact of the supervision specifically present in the labour-context.

Although the research team will need to address the specificities of each group of students in terms of their profiles, there are common underlying objectives to the four research lines. These objectives may be described as follows:

(i) To analyse the learning trajectories, difficulties and/or barriers each group of NTS has faced/ is facing in HE - not only from NTS' perspectives, but also other 'voices': NTS' peers, lecturers, course directors, other members of academic staff who may be considered interest persons, members of non-academic and administrative structures of the institutions;

(ii) To draw recommendations directed to institutional managers from each HE institution, taking into consideration the results and different 'voices' with the intention of: enhancing the overall quality of NTS' experiences, from their transition to HE, social integration, on-going support, and academic success and thus retention, and promoting institutional change.

### **2.3. Methodology and expected impact**

The project involves two Portuguese HE institutions (University of Aveiro and University of Algarve) and it is intended to follow a common research design. On the one hand, this will be important to reflect on common and different experiences and figures. On the other hand, the team will have the possibility of identifying recommendations that will be based in stronger research-based evidences, highlighting not only the specificity of the subject within a HE institution but its supra-institutional character.

As it was observed previously, the research participants are different 'actors' allowing the collection of a plurality of perspectives, of different 'voices', on the same issues. Since (i) it is intended to comprehend a specific reality in detail, and to gather in-depth contributions, and (ii) there is no previous research in Portugal on the topics we have highlighted, the data gathering is mainly of qualitative nature. Data will be collected through semi-structured interviews, life stories of selected cases, and focus groups.

### **3. On-going reflections**

Following Shaw (2009), students' diversity may enhance and/or challenge excellence in HE, from different perspectives (from macro to micro). If we evoke Harvey and Lee's conception on 'quality' (1993) as transformation of the student, the teacher and the researcher, and alongside the notion of widening participation of Jones and Thomas (2005) as transformation, it is expected that conditions are created to accommodate differences. Hence, these conditions would be expected to respond to students' different profiles and learning careers (Crossan et al., 2003), and enhance the overall experience, academic success and retention rates. We hope the project can contribute to this discussion and to draw recommendations that reinforce these assumptions.

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