

### ***3. An open future: schooling experiences, academic difficulties and vocational dilemmas during the first year of university***

Maria Manuel Vieira, *Instituto de Ciências Sociais, Universidade de Lisboa*

Natália Alves, *Instituto de Educação, Universidade de Lisboa*

Ana Nunes de Almeida, *Instituto de Ciências Sociais, Universidade de Lisboa*

Isabel André, *Instituto de Geografia e Ordenamento do Território, Universidade de Lisboa*

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## **1. Ex ante: the problem, some questions**

In modern societies, education is considered to be one of the most valuable goods. From a public point of view it is seen as a democratic goal, as well as human capital qualification; from an individual one it is perceived as a self-development asset and, additionally, a passport for professional ambitions.

Massive investments have been made by Western and developing countries in order to ensure further education for all. In the last fifteen years, school enrolments increased enormously, namely in the more advanced levels of the education system (Duru-Bellat, 2006; Heath and Sullivan, 2011). However, the current limitations experienced by welfare state systems due, namely, to the economic crisis, arises the problem of education public financing. Failure rates at all levels of education become a matter of even more concern: for governments, they represent other than a pedagogic failure, but mostly an intolerable waste of money.

In what higher education concerns, academic failure and drop out phenomena are seen as highly problematic as well. In the Portuguese context, at least, a noticeable change has occurred over the past few decades from a period where academic failure was “naturalized”, being the proof of high scientific standards at university level students had to cope with, to the present situation, where extended rates of failure are criticized as indicators of pedagogic or institutional weaknesses (Vieira, 2007).

Additionally, the statistical comparison of educational systems encourages the choice and definition of common indicators to measure education efficiency and to locate each country's performance in international scales. That is precisely the case of “failure” and “survival rate” indicators. The official definition of “survival rate” in higher education underlies a cumulative, sequential approach of schooling trajectories, inspired by a linear conception of time (Leccardi, 2005, 2006): “survival rate at tertiary level is defined as the proportion of new entrants to the specified level of education who successfully complete a first qualification. It is calculated as the ratio of the number of students who are awarded an initial degree to the number of new entrants to the level  $n$  years before,  $n$  being the number of years of full-time study required to complete the degree” (OECD, 2010). However, this unilateral, institutional perspective doesn't account for the subjective perspective of the actors (Vieira, 2007; Almeida e Vieira, 2009; Vieira, 2010) – namely, the students who experience it – which may involve a multiple, broader set of reasons and meanings.

Furthermore, this concept of survival, as well as the opposite one, the concept of failure, needs to be interpreted taking into consideration the Portuguese educational context, where procedures of accessing higher education are specific. A centralized *numerus clausus* system has been put in place since 1978 and limits the free entrance of eligible candidates, ranked at the national level by the grade average obtained at upper secondary education, to a certain number of places offered once a year by each course/institution. That means that this process may

conduct to misleading trajectories, whenever desired vocations don't match with final placements. Portuguese students may in fact be placed up to their 6<sup>th</sup> choice of higher education course/institution, which may produce critical consequences, namely in terms of studying motivation, institutional affiliation or even of social integration (Almeida e Vieira, 2009; Veloso, Costa & Lopes, 2010).

The number of candidates affected has potentially enlarged in the past two decades, since Portuguese Higher Education itself has undergone a process of increased massification and competition. A more diverse student population (Alves, 2005, 2008; Mauritti and Martins, 2007) has been recruited (in terms of social class origins, of age, of working experience, but also in terms of aspirations, lifestyles and motivations regarding their studies), which opens up higher education experience to new and more plural forms.

All these constraints become critical during the first year of Higher Education attendance, although this stage is supposedly the arrival point of a long schooling trajectory made of surpassed obstacles and mature choices. In fact, for those who apply to a Higher Education institution, a clear definition of a professional project is expected. Entering upper secondary education, Portuguese pupils are compelled to make a first vocational choice among a set of offered courses. This individual "option" is in fact largely influenced by social (economic and cultural resources and expectations) and academic (previous school results) constraints (Duarte and al, 2008). However, during the three years of secondary school attendance, initial choices can be tested, vocational options explored and either confirmation or changes of field of study can occur (Vieira, Resende and Pappámikail, n/d). Although changes are formally possible, the fact is that the postponement of a final commitment is clearly the option for most of those pupils who wish to carry on their studies – thus keeping their future opened (Vieira, Resende and Pappámikail, n/d).

For that reason, the first year at the university may turn into a probation experience, a period when former trajectories and future projects are re-assessed.

On one hand, as we stated before, due to the *numerus clausus* system, some freshmen are allocated in non "first option" courses or institutions, and this may lead them to vocational dilemmas, namely because they deal with some core cultural values associated with modern individualism. Self-accomplishment and authenticity – the need to be faithful to oneself (Taylor, 1989) – are two important attributes of individuation – the process of construction of a biographical singularity (Beck, 1992). Attending a university course that doesn't meet one's abilities turns into a problematic experience, as it denies the possibility of being authentic. Changing or leaving a current course may be a way out considered by those students in order to reach self-accomplishment –individual success -, although it represents a clear delay of school trajectory, under the criteria of institutional failure rate definition.

On the other hand, the schooling experience (Dubet, 1996; Dubet e Martuccelli, 1996) itself is particularly critical in this period, as it involves different challenges the student has to cope with. Integration is one of them. Moving into higher education means a rupture in pupils' biographies (Ferreira e Moutinho, 2007; Scalón, Rowling e Weber, 2007; Seco et. al. 2005).

This transition implies, first, the embedment into a new institutional environment, much less organized, controlled or supportive than the upper secondary school one. It also means to build a new social network, to remake friendships and contacts. Additionally, it represents a different academic and studying environment students have to master. Second, a strategic behaviour must be exercised at a certain point, since university experience exposes students to competition (academically and professionally, in a near future). Students have to learn how to

cope with a more demanding academic work, to decode the new implicit rules of the academic success - namely, how to define study priorities, time schedules and to organize work. Finally, some sort of subjectivation inevitably emerges, every time the student confronts to himself by questioning his options and abilities. In fact, if the entrance to a first choice course/institution may be a factor of study motivation for some students, for others it may be not so. Former expectations are tested by present experiences and some doubts regarding higher education decisions may arise. An institutional and pedagogical environment experienced as unfriendly or uninspiring may turn itself into a good reason to consider changing course/institution. The recognition of some sort of mismatching between higher education requirements and previous academic preparation (Veloso et. al., 2010) may also lead some students to the feeling of not being able to catch up with others and to reassessments of vocational options. For those who are strongly involved simultaneously in other spheres of life (part-time or full-time work, household and children, etc.), the first year of higher education attendance may turn into a challenging probation experience, when conciliation between studies and other priorities may turn very problematic. For some, the solution may be to delay the number of years of study required to complete the degree

Therefore, in contrast with the linear, institutional definition of “survival”, based on an unquestioned, successful academic trajectory, the subjective definition of higher education “survival” (or failure/drop-out) may include a plural set of attributes. It is more accurate to consider higher education survival, failure and drop-out phenomena as a multidimensional process, decomposed in multiple meanings and involving different students’ profiles.

In this paper, we analytically explore these issues by using data obtained from an extensive survey applied to first-year students who entered the 8 Faculties of the University of Lisbon (UL) in the 2008/2009 school-year. The internal diversity of this population (either from an academic or social background perspectives) can interestingly illustrate the multidimensional nature and misleading notion of a taken-for-granted official conception of “school failure”. The paper is organized in three main sections. We’ll present, first, methodological choices and procedures. Second, results concerning a UL freshmen portrait are summarized; focussing first year trajectories, a typology is then issued and discussed. Last, recovering the initial theoretical problem, some general conclusions are drawn.

## **2. An ongoing research project: methodology**

This paper summarizes one of the phases of a larger research project carried out in the UL (2008-2011) on “school failure and drop-out”<sup>125</sup>. From an extensive perspective, data collection was here based on a survey, aiming at describing and understanding the students’ status one year after they entered the UL. What happened to them during that year? Did they stay in the same course, did they change their trajectory by moving to another course or even to another university? Did they leave higher education (definitely, temporarily)?

An online questionnaire was conceived and applied. The first call was made in November 2009, through an e-mail sent to all students that registered for the first time in the first cycle in 2008/09. Two other calls followed, the last appealing directly to the need to increase the number of answers, in order to get representative data of the universe.

The questionnaire was divided in two sections. Section one described students trajectories during the first university year, and included questions related to their motivations and expectations about the course or higher education, and, if so, about the reasons that led them to

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<sup>125</sup> The Project is financed by the Fundação da Ciência e Tecnologia (FCT, PTDC/ESC/64875/2006).

change/leave the institution; the second part was about values and representations prior to their arrival to the university about higher education institutions, in general, and the UL, in particular (their teachers, colleagues, the staff, infrastructures, namely).

The response rate was very positive, 1253 questionnaires out of 3894 students (32 per cent) being received; besides, the resulting distribution by faculties replicated the available statistics concerning the universe. As an online tool was used (SurveyMonkey), the database was easily structured and handled, under the general descriptive statistics SPSS<sup>126</sup>. Programme. In this paper we concentrate on results from section one and comparison within the UL is emphasized, so that diversity of its faculties and students is made clear.

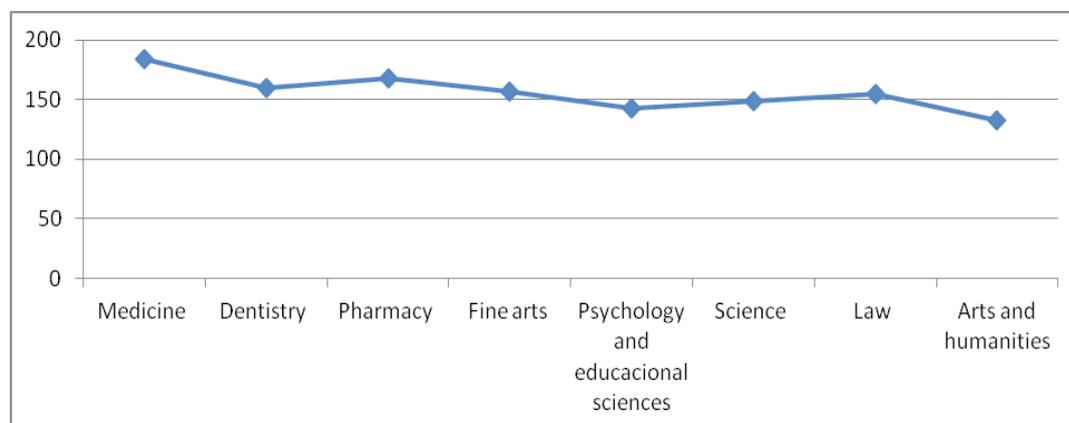
These data were also related with those usually collected at the entrance moment in the UL, through means of the universal application of a questionnaire to students registering for the first time and where previous school trajectories, social and family origins are systematically reconstituted.

### 3. Who are the first year students of the University of Lisbon?

The portrait of students that attended the 1st year in 2008-2009 highlights a young population, mostly female, academically successful and coming from well off families. The average age of these students is 20,7 years old (69,4 per cent are aged 17-19 years old). Compared with other European countries, Portugal has one of the youngest university students' cohort in the EU (HIS, 2005). The UL is not an exception to this.

These figures can be understood as indicators of successful and linear school trajectories. Opposite to their European colleagues, the large majority of these students never interrupted their studies before attending tertiary education (HIS, 2005). They followed a linear path since they entered the primary school until they reached the university. Their former educational careers are also characterized by high educational achievements: the average score obtained in national examinations is 151/200. Against this backdrop, some important differences are revealed when the faculty level is considered. While Medicine and Pharmacy have the highest requirements, Psychology and Educational Sciences and Arts and Humanities have the lowest ones. These data suggest an internal hierarchy based on educational excellence and social and professional status of the different courses.

**Graph 1.** Entry grades (national) by Faculty, University of Lisbon, 2008/2009



**Source:** Observatório dos Percursos dos Estudantes (OPEST), UL

126 Full overview of the results and the questionnaire is available at: <http://www.opest.ul.pt/pdf/caloirosumanodepois.pdf> - in Portuguese).

Another characteristic of these students is its high feminization rate – a new trend that aroused in the middle 80’s (Almeida &Vieira, 2009; Alves, 2009; Martins, Mauriti and Costa, 2005; Balsa et al, 2001). The majority of students enrolled in tertiary education in Portugal are women, and in the case of the 1st year students of the UL this number raises up to 62,8%. The presence of women is particular high in some faculties –e.g. Psychology & Educational Sciences, Dentistry, Pharmacy, Fine Arts and Arts & Humanities - while Science remains a men’s field.

**Table 1.** Distribution of the 1<sup>st</sup> year students by sex and Faculty, UL, 2008/2009

Faculty	Women	Man
Psychology & Ed Sciences	85,3	16,5
Dentistry	76,0	24,0
Pharmacy	74,8	25,2
Fine Arts	72,1	27,9
Arts & Humanities	72,1	27,9
Medicine	64,6	35,4
Law	61,4	38,6
Science	46,6	53,4
Total	62,8	37,2

**Source:** OPEST/UL.

The third characteristic of these students to be mentioned is their social origin. As can be deduced from Tables 2 and 3, and much like all Portuguese universities, the majority of students attending the UL are from privileged social backgrounds. Considering their parents’ educational attainment, we find an over-representation of those with the highest educational degrees. More than an half of the parents attained secondary or tertiary education. Parents with the highest educational backgrounds are especially important in Medicine, Health Sciences and Fine Arts, while those with lowest ones are found in Psychology & Educational Sciences and Arts & Humanities.

**Table 2.** Distribution of the 1<sup>st</sup> year students by parents’ educational attainment<sup>127</sup> and Faculty, UL, 2008/2009<sup>128</sup>

Faculty	1 <sup>st</sup> Cycle	2 <sup>nd</sup> Cycle	3 <sup>rd</sup> Cycle	Secondary	Tertiary
Fine Arts	6,8	9,5	6,8	24,3	52,7
Science	8,0	6,6	16,0	35,1	34,4
Law	12,4	9,7	15,7	22,6	39,6
Pharmacy	7,1	4,3	11,4	34,3	42,9
Arts & Humanities	14,9	6,5	21,5	28,4	28,7
Medicine	0,9	3,8	6,6	16,0	72,6
Dentistry	10,3	3,4	17,2	24,1	44,8
Psychology & Educational Sciences	8,3	10,7	17,9	35,7	27,4
RUL (Health Sciences)	3,0	0,0	9,1	21,2	66,7
Total	9,6	7,0	15,4	28,1	39,9

**Source:** OPEST/UL.

127 We followed the proposal of Almeida et al. (2003) and we use the highest educational attainment of the students’ parents.

128  $\chi^2=116,443$ , Monte Carlo Sig (2-sided)=0,000.

The proportion of students whose parents belong to cohorts CNP1<sup>129</sup> and CNP2 accounts for almost half of the total. If we add those from CNP3 then a total of two-thirds of all first-year students at the UL are from families with technical-occupational resources. On the opposite side of the scale, the presence of students from families in which the parents have a low occupational status reaches just 11,3 per cent of the total. This diversity is not randomly organized. A detailed examination indicates an interesting internal diversity: different faculties recruit different students. Students from CNP1 families are highly represented in Law and Medicine while those from CNP2 backgrounds are concentrated also in Medicine, Fine Arts, Health Sciences and Pharmacy. Students from families with lower occupational statuses are more likely to be found studying at the faculties of Arts & Humanities, Science, Psychology & Educational Sciences.

**Table 3.** Distribution of the 1<sup>st</sup> year students by parents' occupational category<sup>130</sup> and Faculty, UL, 2008/2009<sup>131</sup>

Faculty	CNP1	CNP2	CNP3	CNP4	CNP5	CNPn
Fine Arts	19,1	32,4	11,8	13,2	20,6	2,9
Science	15,1	15,1	27,5	14,0	14,7	13,6
Law	22,9	21,4	13,9	11,4	15,9	14,4
Pharmacy	18,8	31,9	17,4	8,7	20,3	2,9
Arts & Humanities	15,7	16,2	16,2	19,1	17,0	15,7
Medicine	21,2	48,1	11,5	10,6	3,8	4,8
Dentistry	19,2	15,4	23,1	11,5	15,4	15,4
Psychology & Educational Sciences	18,1	15,7	15,7	22,9	21,7	6,0
RUL (Health Sciences)	19,4	32,3	19,4	12,9	9,7	6,5
Total	18,2%	22,4%	18,1%	14,5%	15,5%	11,3

**Source:** OPEST/UL

CNP1–employers, managers, senior professionals (business, public administration); CNP2–intellectual occupations and self-employed professionals; CNP3–technicians and intermediate-level professionals; CNP4–administrative employees; CNP5–personal service workers and sales; CNPn includes CNP6–farmers, agricultural workers, fishermen, CNP7–skilled, semi-skilled manual workers and artisans, CNP9–non-skilled manual workers and CNP10–members of the armed forces.

Beyond a democratized openness at the entrance gate of higher education, more discrete qualitative dimensions of this process still remain significant issues in contemporary Portugal and in the UL. Following the increase of private and public educational offer, expanding access in tertiary education has benefited all social classes, but it helped to maintain their relative positions unchanged, giving rise to what Garcia & Poupeau (2003) refer to as a “uniform democratization”. Democratization came with a selection process (Garcia & Poupeau, 2003) that results from and reinforces the hierarchies of social prestige attributed to different areas of training and faculties (Machado et alli, 2003). In the UL, students from more privileged milieux attend the more

129 Portuguese Standard Classification of Occupations. CNP1–employers, managers, senior professionals (business, public administration); CNP2–intellectual occupations and self-employed professionals; CNP3–technicians and intermediate-level professionals; CNP4–administrative employees; CNP5–personal service workers and sales; CNP6–farmers, agricultural workers, fishermen; CNP7–skilled, semi-skilled manual workers and artisans; CNP9–non-skilled manual labourers; CNP10–members of the armed forces.

130 We used the highest occupational category of the students' parents.

131  $\chi^2=124,757$ ,  $p=0,000$ .

prestigious Faculties, such as Medicine, Fine Arts, Dentistry and Pharmacy while those from poor ones are at the less prestigious ones – Arts & Humanities, Psychology & Educational Sciences.

#### 4. One year after: to stay, to change or to leave

As we stated before, far from being an arrival point tertiary education may become a new point of departure instead. In fact, the first year at the university may turn into a probation experience, a period when past trajectories and future projects are re-assessed and vocational choices are tested, in a rather tensional way.

One year after entering the UL, the vast majority of students is attending the same course at the same faculty. The highest proportions of those who didn't change can be found in Medicine, Psychology & Educational Sciences and Fine Arts. However, even among those, 31% change and 11% seriously admitted to inflect their trajectory (Almeida et al., 2010, p.12).

**Table 4.** Students' situation one year later, by faculty, UL, 2008/2009<sup>132</sup>

Faculty	Same Faculty & Same course	Another course	Dropped-out
Fine Arts	89,5	9,2	1,3
Science	83,5	15,6	1,0
Law	87,2	6,0	6,8
Pharmacy	82,2	16,4	1,4
Arts & Humanities	78,1	14,7	7,2
Medicine	99,1	0,9	0,0
Dentistry	71,9	28,1	0,0
Psychology & Educational Sciences	94,3	4,6	1,1
RUL (Health Sciences)	64,7	32,4	2,9
Total	84,3	12,3	3,4

**Source:** OPEST.

Among those who changed, students from Health Sciences and Dentistry come into view. In spite of the high marks obtained in national examinations, the rigid *numerus clausus* rules didn't allow many students to attend their expected course. In the case of Health Sciences and Dentistry, only 31,5 per cent and 35,3 per cent, respectively, are placed in their first option (Almeida, 2009, p. 12). These students are those who changed to another course, another faculty or to another university in order reach their vocation and self-fulfilment. In fact, the main reasons presented to account for their decision are related with vocation (50%, "it wasn't the course they wanted") and the motivation (31%, "lack of interest").

The last group is residual and it includes the students who left the UL and are not currently enrolled in tertiary education. Most of them are from the Faculties of Arts & Humanities and Law. Opposite to the former group, the main reasons quoted are related to the material conditions of their lives: the difficulty to conciliate studies, work and family life (44,2 per cent), the economic constraints (27,9 per cent) (Almeida et al., 2010, p.31).

In order to identify and differentiate who are the students that, one year after, are in the same course/same faculty, those who changed and those that left tertiary education, an hierarchical cluster analysis<sup>133</sup> was performed. Nine different groups were obtained.

<sup>132</sup>  $\chi^2=98,061$ , Monte Carlo Sig (2-sided)=0,000.

<sup>133</sup> We used Between-groups linkage method and the squared euclidian distance measure.

The nine groups can be assembled into two large ones according to the students' situation one year after attending tertiary education. The first one includes G1, G2 and G3. All of them share the same characteristic: a trajectory *change*. In G1 the students changed to a different course; in G2 they dropped-out from tertiary education and in G3 they also dropped-out but they are attending a non higher education course. The second group includes all the others and is characterized by a trajectory *stability*. One year after, these students are attending the same course at the same faculty. However, despite these similarities, groups differ from one another.

In G1 we find those students who changed to a different course, a different faculty or even to another university. Since the beginning of their 1<sup>st</sup> year they had doubts about the course and they knew they would not conclude it. They were approved only in some subjects or even not evaluated. In some way all of them gave up that first year. When educational and socio-demographic attributes are taken into account, we find that the students who belong to this group were studying at the Faculty of Dentistry and at the Rectorat of the UL. Health Sciences were their first option and their marks at national examinations were less than 135 points out of 200. They constitute a good example of the subjectivation dimension involved in the schooling experience. The first year in higher education was a time to confront themselves with the vocational decisions they made and to define new educational strategies.

The G2 includes students who dropped-out tertiary education and were full time workers. However, for them this was not a final decision since they intended to repeat the national examinations in order to change their educational trajectory. Once they withdraw, they were not evaluated or they failed in all subjects. The students of this group were attending the Faculty of Arts & Humanities and studying Languages, Literature and Culture or Geography. They come from poor educational backgrounds - both parents attained only the 1<sup>st</sup> cycle - and they lived alone or with their procreation family.

The students that belong to G3 left tertiary education and are attending a non higher education course. Since they made such a decision they were not evaluated. As their colleagues of the G2, they intend to repeat the national examinations and to return to higher education. Before leaving they were studying at the Faculty of Arts & Humanities. They were aged over 23 years old and they lived with their procreation family.

**Table 5.** Cluster Analysis – Students’ Profiles, UL, 2008/2009

<b>Active variables</b>	G1	G2	G3	G4	G5	G6	G7	G8	G9
Students’ Situation At NOV2009	107	27	16	100	101	223	249	70	175
1st Year	Another course	Drop-out tertiary ed	Another course not Tertiary ed	UL, same faculty, same course	UL, same faculty, same course	UL, same faculty, same course	UL, same faculty, same course	UL, same faculty, same course	UL, same faculty, same course
Remaining in Tertiary education but changed	UL another course UL another faculty Another Univ			Never thought to change	He/she thought seriously to change	Never thought to change	Thought to change	Never thought to change	Never thought to change
Intending to repeat national exams		Yes	Yes						
1st year intention	Doubts He/she knew that will not attain the course			He/she was decided to attain the course		He/she was decided to attain the course		He/she was decided to attain the course	
Educational success 2008/2009	He/she was approved in some subjects Not evaluated	He/she failed in all subjects Not evaluated	Not evaluated			He/she was approved in all subjects	He/she was approved in some subjects	He/she failed in all subjects	He/she was approved in all subjects
Students’ work status 2008-2009		Full time job		Part time & full time job		Full time student			Full time Students

Table 6. Students' Profiles

Non active variables	G1	G2	G3	G4	G5	G6	G7	G8	G9
Faculty	Dentistry RUI/(Health Sciences	Arts & Humanities	Arts & Humanities	Science Law	Arts & Humanities	Medicine	Science	RUI (Health Sciences)	Psychology & Educational Sciences
Course	Health Sciences	Languages, literature & culture Geography		Law		Medicine	Computer engeneering Physics Biology	Law Health Sciences	Psychology Pharmacy
Marks in national examinations	<= 135	Did,'t answer		Didn't answer		>= 166	136 a 165		
1st option	Yes			Yes		Yes			
Age			>23 years old	>23 years old		<19 years old	<19 years old		<19 years old
Gender				Male		Female			
Displaced from the habitual residence				No		Yes			
Father's educational attainment		1st cycle (4 years)		1st cycle (4 years)					
Mother's educational attainment		1st cycle (4 years)		1st cycle (4 years)					
Father's occupation						CNP1		CNP2	
Mother's occupation					CNP1	CNP2		CNP2	
Household		Alone Family of procreation	Family of procreation	Alone Family of procreation		Family with both parents	Family with both parents		
School failure before tertiary education				Yes during compulsory education		No	Yes during secondary education		

Opposite to these three groups, the others include those students whose situation is the same one year after entering the University: they stay at the same faculty and in the same course. The first difference comes from their relation with the course. While students in G4, G6, G8 and G9 never thought to change, their colleagues in G7 confronted themselves with the questioning of their vocation and decisions and thought to modify their educational trajectory; students in G5 thought seriously about it. Among those who never questioned their decision, the G4, G6 and G8 students were determined to finish their course since the very first day of school.

When educational success in the 1<sup>st</sup> year is considered, we find that G6 and G9 students were approved in all subjects, while their G7 colleagues were approved only in some and those in G8 failed in all subjects. This is the most surprising case. G8 students were confident on their decision and determined to finish the course; however, they had no success at all. In some way, this is the only case where we can truly speak about school “failure”, because in the others poor results in evaluation were a consequence of previous decisions taken concerning another future.

G4 students are studying at the faculties of Science and Law and these courses were their first option. Men aged over 23 years old are over-represented. They come from poor educational backgrounds and they live alone or with their procreation family. Their educational trajectory wasn't a very successful one: they failed during compulsory education. Students belonging to G5 are attending the Faculty of Arts & Humanities and they come from families where the mother has a very high occupational status.

G6 students are studying at the Faculty of Medicine and this was their first option. Their performance along the secondary education was extremely high: their marks in national examinations were over 166 points in 200 and school failure is absent from their school careers. They are mostly women, aged less than 19 years old. They come from privileged social milieux – both parents have high occupational statuses – and they live with both of them.

Students in G7 are studying Computer Engineering, Physics and Biology at the Faculty of Science. School failure occurred during secondary education and their grades in national examinations ranged from 136 to 165 points. They are very young and they live with both parents.

Last, G8 includes students attending Law and Health Sciences. They come from privileged occupational backgrounds. Both parents are in intellectual occupations or they are independent professionals.

## **5. Back to the problem and final remarks**

Higher education is a moving terrain in contemporary Western societies. Once compulsory education policies and family strategies have stimulated longer and more qualified schooling trajectories for all, upper levels of education systems tend to accommodate new social and political demands. From an institutional perspective, higher education is the place for obtaining and democratizing educational credentials and for training professional expertise expected in the job market; however, against the backdrop of both a dramatic financial and economic crisis and the existence of a competitive school market, it becomes the object of strict public scrutiny – waste, for example in terms of failure and drop out rates, is measured, (nationally, internationally) diffused, compared, condemned and combated. Available indicators are not neutral, but implicitly take for granted that linear, continuous and traditional schooling trajectories are the only existing, legitimate and desirable ones.

The introduction of an individual perspective, the student's one, blurs this macro scenario. Youth condition has undergone impressive changes, mostly encouraged by individuation processes

in risk societies. The injunction for self-accomplishment and authenticity plays an important role in planning, executing and re-assessing students' own school ambitions and strategies. So the entrance in a university is very often the starting point for an experimental, probationary year where the student questions his vocation, ambition and competences. This dynamics is particularly relevant in a country like Portugal, where a *numerus clausus* regime imposes its drastic seriation upon individual choices and preferences. And where recent access to school brought new fringes of students for the university, no longer an exclusive bastion of a privileged elite.

Starting from this theoretical framework, the paper explored the subjective definitions of higher education "survival" (or failure/drop-out), considering it as multidimensional process, decomposed in multiple meanings and involving different students' profiles. With its 8 faculties, the UL offered the field for data collection and handling. Despite an evident openness of recruitment tracks, UL freshmen compose an heterogeneous population. Diversity is not randomly distributed: students from well off families are still largely dominant in the most prestigious and selective courses (Medicine, Pharmacy, Dentistry, Fine Arts); students from poorer families, with weaker school grades, occupy the lower levels of the prestige course ranking (Educational Sciences, Arts and Humanities, Psychology).

On the other hand, the hierarchical cluster analysis performed summarized distinct modes of experiencing and assessing the 1<sup>st</sup> year in the UL –grosso modo corresponding either to stable or to changing trajectories. For many students (often those holding the highest grades), this is a time to question their vocation and institutional placement; some change (drop out) for another course or institution, some accommodate to their initial situation.

Failure rate has thus multiple meanings that don't rely solely on academic performance causes. As this research has pointed out, normative reasons linked to the individuation process and the quest for individual authenticity (through an exploratory process made of institutional mobility) may underline - and even reinforce- part of the official "failure" rates. At the same time, institutional causes (as unfriendly, disorganized or demotivating academic environments) may explain some drop-out figures, as they reflect higher education students' non integration processes. At last, social inequalities such as financial and material constraints still condition daily lives of some students that (definitely?) leave higher education after a one year period: conciliating work, family and studies becomes problematic in disadvantaged milieux.

Official "failure "or "survival" indicators are thus to be re-assessed. Not only because science deserves it. But mostly because ignoring their subtle, plural and contradictory dimensions contributes to conceal emergent social phenomena related both to contemporary youth condition and the building of higher education systems.

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