Transition and adaptation to art higher education

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ABSTRACT:

The main purpose of this article is to contribute to the understanding of the phenomena of adaptation to Art Higher Education, as experienced by the students and perceived by the teachers, and to reflect on the mechanisms supporting this adaptation that the institution can adopt.

The data collection tools used were two questionnaires for first-year students (a characterisation questionnaire and the *Adaptation to Higher Education Questionnaire* as drawn up by Lencastre *et al.*, 2000) and semi-directive interviews with four teachers from the Lisbon Polytechnic Dance College.

The results showed that in general, the difficulties in adapting to Higher Education found in other studies carried out in Portugal, as regards the academic, bio-psychological and socio-relational aspects, are also felt by the students of the Dance College. Some particularities were however found as regards the specific knowledge, such as the heterogeneity of the previous training of the students, the poor physical preparation for a course of this kind and the low level of artistic and expressive maturity.

The large number of students (57.5%) who had moved away from their homes to study and were subject to a heavy hourly workload also led to the socio-relational aspects taking on added importance, and it was confirmed that both the Dance College and its Students' Association can play an important role to lessen the social and relational adaptation difficulties shown.

KEY WORDS:
Adaptation, Academic success, Bio-psychological success, Socio-relational success.

INTRODUCTION

The first year of Higher Education has been viewed as a critical period, potentially generating crises and/or developmental challenges, and is crucial to attain the established standards. Therefore, the way the students are welcomed by the institutions in this new phase of their lives is crucially important.

In Portugal, over the last ten to fifteen years, interest has been aroused in researching into teaching--learning processes in Higher Education (Tavares *et al.*, 2004). According to these authors, this fact may be down to the creation of the New Universities and the incentive given by Dispatch 6659/99 of 5/4/99, which requests Higher Education Institutions to "strive to identify all situations liable to be considered as ongoing educational failure". As such, the Universities of Aveiro, Minho, Porto, Algarve, Nova de Lisboa and Lisbon have played a significant role, following on, to a certain degree, from previous endeavours in this area by Lisbon Technical University and in particular the *Instituto Superior Técnico* (Tavares *et al.*, 2004).

As an exploratory venture and with a view to laying the groundwork for possible future work, we have reviewed the studies and research that explore or justify, in the light of recent psychology movements in development and education, the problem of transition and adaptation to Higher Education in Portugal, seeking to contextualise this study on the challenges faced by the academic community, in particular at the start of the third millennium, in the background of the implementation of the so-called "Bologna Process".

In reviewing some of the studies carried out by the aforementioned institutions and analysing the data collection tools, we identified some similarities between the adaptation dimensions included in them and the way they were grouped together.

Lencastre, Guerra, Serra Lemos and Costa Pereira (2000) drew up a *Higher Education Adaptation Questionnaire*. Based on a consensual definition of "success", and accentuating its multifaceted and subjective nature, they argue that not only the academic aspect should be assessed, but also factors in the socio-relational and bio-psychological fields.

Other authors have used one or more of these domains in their studies.

With regard to the *variables more related to academic aspects*, Lencastre *et al.* (2000) focus on the students' perceptions about their performance in Secondary Education and in gaining access to Higher Education, their study skills and the course curriculum.

Likewise Almeida and Ferreira (1997), in the *Academic Experiences Questionnaire*, Azevedo and Faria (2001), in the *Academic Transition Experience Questionnaire* (QETA), Soares and Almeida (2001), in the *Academic Satisfaction Questionnaire*, Almeida, Soares and Ferreira (2000), in the *Academic Expectations Questionnaire* and Gonçalves and Cruz (1988, cited by Bessa Oliveira, 2000) and Nico (1995, 2000) refer to a group of variables linked to the academic domain, such as academic learning

and performance, the curriculum, institutional satisfaction and adaptation, expectations, problems or difficulties deriving from the academic tasks and demands.

With regard to the *variables more related to bio-psychological aspects*, Lencastre, Guerra, Serra Lemos and Costa Pereira (2000) list variables that are linked to the students' perception of their physical and psychological health, quality of life/well-being and their overall level of satisfaction with life. This aspect is also included by other authors in their studies. Hence, in the *Academic Experiences Questionnaire* Almeida and Ferreira (1997) integrate variables such as independence, self-confidence, personal perception of skills, career development, psychological well-being and physical well-being. Gonçalves and Cruz (1988, cited by Bessa Oliveira, 2000) consider a group of variables linked to problems or difficulties deriving from having to make vocational decisions and Nico (2000) refers to the personal dimension as one of the five dimensions that contribute to "academic comfort". It is pointed out that among the studies mentioned, neither Azevedo and Faria (2001), in compiling the *Academic Transition Experiences Questionnaires*, nor Soares and Almeida (2001) in the *Academic Satisfaction Questionnaire,* include personal development or bio-psychological variables.

Finally, we can mention, in the work by Lencastre *et al.* (2000), who drew up a group of *variables more related to the socio-relational aspects*, which encompass aspects such as lifestyle at University, adaptation to the role of a University student, insertion into the university context, opportunities available and satisfaction with the relational and social environment.

Almeida and Ferreira (1997), in spite of not creating a group of variables linked to socio-relational aspects, include some aspects of a relational nature linked to leaving home, separation from friends and important people in their lives, development of more mature interpersonal relations with peers, teachers and family, and exploration of social and sexual roles. Azevedo and Faria (2001) also assess the contribution of social support networks, especially teachers, family and peers and Soares and Almeida (2001) include the students' satisfaction with the quality of the relations established with others

inside and outside the academic context and the expectations of students in relation to their social development. Gonçalves and Cruz (1988, cited by Bessa Oliveira, 2000) focus on problems or difficulties deriving from undertaking social tasks in relation to others, peers, teachers etc, and Nico (1995, 2000) talks about relational adaptation and peri-school adaptation.

Seeking a better understanding of the "reality" of the Dance College and the adaptation and adjustment difficulties felt by first-year students, we opted as our data collection tool the *Higher Education Adaptation Questionnaire* (Lencastre *et al.*, 2000), accepting its intention to capture the perceptions on the success in the three above-mentioned dimensions.

As we also intended to obtain the view of the teachers, we decided to identify the representations that the teachers have not only regarding their students and their adaptation difficulties when starting at the Dance College, but also the means of support provided during this transition, contributing to success in all aspects.

As such, the aim was to contribute to the understanding of the phenomena of transition and adaptation to Higher Education, and more specifically to ascertaining the possible mechanisms to make it easier for young students to adapt to the new educational context of Art Higher Education in general and the Dance College in particular. Hence, the research aims were to study and diagnose:

· the difficulties students felt in starting at the Dance College, as regards "breaking away" and changes in their lives and the strategies used to face up to these aspects;
· the difficulties perceived by the 1ˢᵗ-year teachers in relation to the new students, and the strategies used to help them integrate, as well as their proposals concerning how the College should intervene in this area;
· the background of these issues in studies of a similar nature carried out by other institutions, trying to identify new aspects to take into account when we are planning for Art Teaching, in particular in the dance area.

METHODOLOGY

The sample was made up of students who attended the first year of the Dance College and four teachers who taught 1st-year modules.

To collect data the following tools were used:

- Questionnaire characterising the population, specifically compiled for the purpose and given to students in the first month of lessons, which included demographic, schooling, family, motivational and expectation aspects.
- *Higher Education Adaptation Questionnaire* (Lencastre, Guerra, Serra Lemos and Costa Pereira, 2000), given at the start of the 2nd Semester.
- Semi-directive interviews to four of the ten teachers who were teaching 1st-year modules at the time.

The items included in the Higher Education Adaptation Questionnaire are wide-ranging and relative: socio-demographic characteristics; performance in Secondary Education, access to University and Higher Education; study skills; assessment of the content and teaching methods of the 1st semester modules; opportunities to blend into university life; satisfaction with the relational and social environment; problems felt and degree of concern experienced; satisfaction with life in general; perception of performance in Secondary Education; self-assessment of the study skills; satisfaction with performance in the 1st semester; perception of adaptation to university and motivation towards the degree. The questionnaire is based above all on variables related to the student, lightly touching on the curriculum and the institution. The answers to the items are generally presented in manner similar to a *Likert* format, on a scale from 1 to 5 (where 1 means less quantity of the characteristic measured).

To be applied in the Dance College, only two changes were made, namely with regard to the name of the institution and changing the reference from "classroom" to "studio", as this is the students' study location.

The script for the semi-directive interview to the teachers encompasses three essential topics: i) representations of the 1st-year students at the Dance College and the difficulties they face in their adaptation to the new educational background; ii) strategies used to help the students overcome these difficulties; iii) identification of what can be done as regards the institution to improve the students' ability to adapt.

Out of a total of 44 students, the characterisation questionnaire was answered by 31 students and the Higher Education Adaptation Questionnaire by 40, the latter representing all the students who attended the 1st year: 33 were female (82.5%) and 7 were male (17.5%).

The average age of the sample was 20 years, with students aged between 18 and 29 years, which shows the diversity in the age group of the students that enrolled into the Dance College. In relation to the place of residence, only 17.5% live in Lisbon outside the academic period; 25% said they live in the region of Greater Lisbon and Setúbal (this is the segment that that spends most time on commuting and transport every day); 52.5% live in other regions of Portugal and 5% live abroad. These last two groups (57.5% in total) correspond to students who have left home to come and live in Lisbon during the academic year — clearly the majority.

In order that the teachers interviewed translated the diversity of the 1st-year modules, an attempt was made to select teachers with wide-ranging characteristics (age, professional category, training, functions carried out, years of service in the institution), so as to embrace as wide a range of opinions on the issues raised as possible.

Outside the College, all the interviewees carried out several tasks linked to culture and teaching and some had worked for the Ministry of Culture or Ministry of Education. They have also written dance reviews for different publications and held cultural programming functions in this area.

To analyse the quantitative data we used the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) for MS Windows, version 12.0, which processed the answers obtained by the questionnaires.

As we were working with a sample of only 40 respondents in the *Higher Education Adaptation Questionnaire and* 31 respondents in the *Population Characterisation Survey*, clearly insufficient to carry out statistical tests that enable the significance of the relations among the variables to be ascertained, we processed the data considering a frequency count

for each variable, and subsequently carried out a descriptive analysis of the answers.

The *Population Characterisation Survey*, contained, as well as the closed questions, two open-ended questions that were submitted to the content analysis method (Bardin, 1997), a method also used to process the answers to the semi-directive interviews with the four teachers.

The main constraints of the work are linked to the difficulty in finding specific literature about Art Teaching and the absence of data collection tools specifically designed and validated for the target population, to cater for its particularities.

RESULTS

The content analysis process of the interviews enabled the identification and definition of three major topics: art higher education: specificities and needs; the students of Dance Higher Education; and the Strategies used and proposed by the teachers. Some aspects emerged that affected the students and required redoubled attention, such as:

· the poor technical and physical preparation when enrolling into the College;
· the problem of the excessive physical injuries incurred, the urgent need to find answers to solve this situation and the conviction that these injuries lead to heavy psychological pressure and drain motivation;
· the poor academic and art preparation, which is shown in the low levels of reflexivity, critical thinking and "artistic culture" shown;
· the lack of knowledge as regards what choosing a degree and a career in arts in the dance area implies, and what this means not only from a technical and physical point of view, but also at the artistic level and the ability to expose oneself, which tends to translate, in practice, to a low level of motivation when it comes to meeting the demands of the teachers, and a worrying drop-out rate;
· the need of the College to adapt to the students it has, finding forms and strategies to empower the adaptation and development (technical, academic and artistic) of its entire student body.

In the light of the conceptual framework that served as the basis for compiling the *Higher Education Adaptation Questionnaire* (Lencastre *et al.*, 2000), and aware that it was drawn up to collect the perceptions of students about their success in three domains (academic, bio-psychological and socio-relational), we can observe that the students' views are also included in the teachers' perceptions about the adaptation difficulties shown by 1st-year students at the Dance College.

In effect, if we consider what the authors of the aforementioned questionnaire (Lencastre *et al.*, 2000) define as the variable more related to the *academic success dimension*, we see that in this domain, according to the opinions expressed by the teachers interviewed, the lack of preparation that the students "bring" from Secondary Education, not only with regard to physical and technical development in dance, but also in terms of development of critical thinking and reflexivity, constitute "obstacles" to good adaptation and *academic success* throughout their time at the College and especially throughout the 1st year of the course.

In the variables more related to the *dimension of bio-psychological success*, we can observe that, in the opinion of the teachers interviewed the physical health of the students is the biggest concern, given the high number of physical injuries suffered by all, but which are especially evident in the 1st-year students.

The teachers interviewed state these injuries are caused solely by lack of physical preparation, the poor state of repair of the College and its studios (without proper heating and sometimes with unsuitable flooring for these lessons) and the lack of specialised medical help. However, several studies, such as those carried out by Kielcolt-Glaser and Glaser (1988) and Glaser *et al.* (1986) (cited by Lencastre *et al.*, 2000), related the immunological function to specific events in the students' lives such as taking exams and other factors that cause stress and competitiveness and which they are subject to. According to these studies, when the students are exposed to high pressure during exam periods, there is a lower immunological response in several ways, which means in these phases they are more likely to fall ill as their biological defences are diminished. Another point to consider with regard to the

1st-year students is the high hourly workload they are submitted to, which leaves them little time to themselves to organise their personal life, added to the fact that over 50% of them have left home to come to Lisbon to attend the College. These are all pressure factors and physical injury can arise as a way of "drawing attention" to them or saying that they are unable to deal with the situation.

Without scientific studies that document the origin of the students' injuries we cannot state that they are solely down to lack of physical preparation, the poor condition of the College, or the stress and pressure the students are subject to on a daily basis. But, as mentioned by the teachers, there is an urgent need to carry out a study that allows diagnosis of the true causes behind the high number of injuries suffered and plan the best way to prevent them.

As for the *socio-relational success dimension*, whose variables are the least mentioned by the teachers interviewed, there is at least a definite sense that they are aware that students experience problems of personal and social adaptation and that the College has a role to play in this domain. Hence, the nomination of a Tutor Teacher for first-year students is just one of the responses that the College has come up with to help with the socio-relational adaptation. But we also think, as mentioned in the interviews, that the Students' Association has an important role to play in this domain, and based not only on the teachers' opinions but also on our observation of the various strategies and activities that have been implemented at the College, we believe all the College's actors — management, teachers, students' association and the whole college population in general — have made an effort to improve the way new students are welcomed and the facilities created for different activities (bar, study room, lounge, etc).

The teachers interviewed were aware not only of these adaptation problems, but also knew a lot about what can be done to lessen them, and showed a willingness to carry out the actions needed within their scope to, little by little, improve the context of the Dance College in all its aspects.

As in the analysis of the interviews carried out on the teachers, in a first reading of the results of the *Characterisation Survey* and the *Academic Adaptation Questionnaire*, what stands out most are the students' physical adaptation problems, the

difficulties in adjusting to the heavy hourly workload and the physical effort of the course and their worries about feeling physically weak. However, when delving deeper and more objectively into the results, we assess them in line with the three domains of success[1] (academic, bio-psychological and socio-relational) considered by the authors of the Higher Education Adaptation Questionnaire (Lencastre *et al.*, 2000).

Therefore, in the *academic success* dimension, we can conclude that most of the students enrolled in the 1st year of the Dance College (71%) are attending Higher Education for the first time, with the average final grades at Secondary School of 14.1[2]. Although the level of failure in the 1st-year modules is low, the average of the final grades in the 1st year (12.3) is below the Secondary School average[3]. Most of those surveyed (53.8%) consider themselves "a reasonable student", but only 2.2% assess themselves as "very good", while 7.7% situate themselves in the "very weak" category. These data correspond to the level of performance and average grades obtained both at the end of the 1st semester and at the end of the 1st year. The average final 1st-year grade is 12.3, with a standard deviation of 1.62, which suggests that most of the students have a "realistic" perception of their performance as a student at the Dance College. If we consider the difficulties experienced in academic terms and the degree of worry associated, we can observe that academic concerns are not at the top of the list (only 22.6% of the respondents state they had difficulties in academic terms, although they did not show great concern regarding this situation).

In the *bio-psychological success* dimension, we can conclude that the average age of the 1st-year students at the Dance College (20.52), although not deviating from the average age of 1st-year Higher Education students at national level (20.3), is not the most usual age for students who finish Secondary School, given that in line with Portugal's education system, a student's normal school career, if never failing a year, will lead to entering Higher Education at 18 years of age. At 20 the student is nearer the stage of a Young Adult than the end of adolescence, and should show a "degree of maturity" greater than an 18-year-old, which can contribute to a more developed identity and clarification of oneself. In effect, when questioned about the factors consid-

ered most important for the choice of course, 36% of the respondents declared that the "vocation" was the most crucial factor, and 23% said that the option was made owing to the interest of the curricular programme. These answers show a certain degree of independence in relation to the opinions of third parties (family and friends) and a certain awareness of one's own identity. On the other hand, only 3.8% of those surveyed point to the fact that they have family or friends on the same course and 3.8% also stated that the fact it was easier to gain access to the course was a determining factor. Therefore, in the light of Chickering's theory (1969), in general the 1st-year students at the Dance College showed very high levels of independence and establishment of identity. When surveyed at the end of the first month of lessons about the quality of their adaptation to the Dance College, it is interesting to note that while 26% said they felt no difficulty in adapting to the Dance College, 30% did not answer the question. Nevertheless, at the end of the 1st six months, 47.2% showed difficulties in adapting to the items mentioned in the bio-psychological domain.

We can therefore deduce that, once the "initial enthusiasm" of the first month of lessons has subsided, the students start to feel some difficulties. The results show, as mentioned earlier, that the difficulties are linked chiefly to injuries and physical discomfort. There is a general consensus throughout the college community (teachers and students) that these injuries hinder the proper undertaking of the college activities and affect the performance and adaptation of the students. A final point to make in the bio-psychological domain is that most of the surveyed students, at the end of the first semester, consider that they adapted well to the Dance College (57.5%) and are very satisfied or reasonably satisfied with their life (10% and 40% respectively). However, we do not want to talk merely in percentage terms but rather about the students themselves. Behind every one is a person and a future, and one cannot ignore that 20% said they were not very satisfied with their life and 2.5% stated they were plainly unsatisfied. It is therefore important to continue to study and understand what resources the Dance College has at its disposal to help and support these students who, although in the minority, clearly show they require support.

In the *socio-relational success* dimension, we can conclude that one of the aspects that most contributes to success is the students' ability to adapt to the new background and from there develop new friendships. In the case of the Dance College, this is especially relevant owing to the fact, as we saw earlier, that 57.5% of the students are living away from home and enrolling into the College also represents a change of residence and a "severing", at least during the week, of previous relations (family and friends).

At the end of the 1st month of lessons 8.7% of the respondents said they felt difficulties in adapting to the city of Lisbon, which is the same percentage who revealed they missed their home, family and friends, and 4.3% stated they felt "alone and lost". On the other hand, one factor that we believe cannot be neglected is that the students who live in the Lisbon suburbs continue to live with their family, but have to commute every day, often spending several hours on public transport. These students also find it difficult to maintain old friendships, because of the "scarcity of time" left after spending so long on commuting and the course workload.

In effect, if we consider that the socio-relational domain is influenced by the students' perceptions regarding social rejection, difficulties in romantic, family and friendship relations, we can observe: 2.3% state they encounter difficulties because they are away from home; 8.4% say the difficulties are linked to romantic, family or friendship relations; 3.2% feel "social rejection". In total, 24.9% of the surveyed students expressed difficulties in the socio-relational domain. When questioned about their degree of satisfaction at the end of the 1st semester, no student said they are unsatisfied, either with their colleagues, the working environment or the social environment, although very few said they are overjoyed.

We believe it is therefore clear that although there are positive points to emphasise in the College and the way it welcomes the students (especially noticeable in the way the students praise the quality of the teachers, the curriculum and the diversity of material), there is a lot to do to enable and support a better adaptation of the students, thus contributing to their academic, bio-psychological and socio-relational success.

CONCLUSION

In reviewing the study carried out in 2004/2006 in the light of the reality at the Dance College at the end of 2007, we are pleased to see that steps continue to be taken to make it easier for the 1st-year students to adapt and to help all Students taking the Degree, in the various dimensions included in this study.

In effect, in October 2006 a pilot project got underway run by the Student Support Office which, little by little, has helped to tackle some of the problems identified here. Hence, while one of the adaptation problems most commonly mentioned by the students and teachers was the problem of physical injuries, it is important to point out that the Dance College's physiotherapy/massotherapy department has been improving its working methods and technical facilities. Nevertheless, we believe it would be useful to carry out an in-depth study of the kind of injuries that appear, as indeed suggested by the teachers to understand the true reasons causing them (whether they derive from excess physical work, the poor studio and college facilities, the general discomfort of the students, or any other factors), so that the best ways to overcome the problem can be devised.

Another of the adaptation problems was linked to the number of students who were away from their family and the difficulty they had in dealing with the new challenges entailed in moving to an "unknown" city and environment, in which they had to "put their independence to the test", not only as regards the day-to-day tasks, but also their emotional autonomy. But the Student Support Office, in collaboration with the Cognitive-Behavioural Nucleus, through a protocol with the Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences of the University of Lisbon, has provided all the Dance College students with individual psychological support free of charge, as well as holding group sessions related to personal development strategies at all levels and will start, in the academic year of 2007/2008, also as part of the protocol, another project to implement stage performance optimisation strategies.

For the immediate future the Student Support Office is also working closely with the physiotherapy/massotherapy department to diagnose, as quickly as possible, the "real" reasons behind the injuries, acting as a prevention tool, also carrying out "socialisation" initiatives in close collaboration with the Students' Association aimed at first-year students, especially those who are far from their usual social and family environment.

Finally, while emotional and artistic immaturity was, in the teachers' opinion, a blockage towards the students' development, by taking advantage of the restructuring of the curriculum in the light of the so-called "Bologna Process", a curricular module was introduced into the 1st academic semester called "Dance Appreciation", which aims precisely to develop the students' critical and reflexive thinking and their artistic maturity.

We conclude by saying that it is still worth researching into strategies that aid a smooth adaptation to Higher Education, especially when the Institutions in question, as is the case of the Lisbon Polytechnic Dance College, are willing to receive information gleaned from the studies carried out and act on it (in a timely fashion), in line with the findings. It is now up to the Student Support Office, created as a result of this research, to continue to grow and meet the needs of the College and the Students.

Endnotes

1. The number of respondents did not enable us to carry out a more complete statistical analysis, namely pointing out the correlations between the objective levels of academic success (percentage of modules passed) and the subjective levels of success (representations of the personal success and satisfaction levels shown) (Lencastre et al., 2000, p. 88) which in our view would enrich the scientific validity of the research.

2. Translator's note: In Portugal academic grades are given out of 20 (twenty).

3. These data are, however, not very representative, given the completely different nature of the Dance College modules and the subjects studied at Secondary School.

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Translated by Thomas Kundert