

# The Return of Graduates to Higher Education: between employability and lifelong learning\*

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## ABSTRACT

In this article, we analyse the return of graduates to higher education to continue academic training, discussing and considering the reasons that lead them to continue postgraduate training. This discussion draws on the analysis of empirical data resulting from a statistical representative sample of graduates who completed their first degrees in 2004/2005 at the Universidade de Lisboa e Universidade Nova de Lisboa (Portugal). The data analysed enables the consideration to what extent the participation in postgraduate training can be understood as an employability strategy. This debate is particularly significant in the present context given, first, that lifelong learning is of increasing importance in contemporary societies and, moreover, that graduates' unstable and precarious employment situations have been growing.

## KEYWORDS

higher education; postgraduation; first-degree graduates; employability; lifelong learning.

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## *O REGRESSO DE LICENCIADOS AO ENSINO SUPERIOR*

### RESUMO

Neste artigo, analisa-se o regresso de licenciados ao ensino superior para continuarem a formação académica, discutindo-se e interrogando-se as razões pelas quais os licenciados escolhem continuar uma formação pós-graduada. A análise apoia-se em dados empíricos resultantes de uma amostra representativa de licenciados que em 2004/2005 terminaram os respectivos cursos na Universidade de Lisboa e na Universidade Nova de Lisboa (Portugal). Os dados apresentados permitem debater em que medida a participação em formação pós-graduada pode ser entendida como uma estratégia de inserção profissional. Esse debate é particularmente relevante no contexto atual, tendo em conta, por um lado, que a educação ao longo da vida assume uma centralidade crescente nas sociedades contemporâneas e, por outro lado, que a precarização do emprego dos licenciados tem vindo a acentuar-se significativamente.

### PALAVRAS-CHAVE

ensino superior; pós-graduação; licenciados; inserção profissional; educação ao longo da vida.

## *EL REGRESO DE GRADUADOS A LA ENSEÑANZA SUPERIOR: ENTRE LA INSERCIÓN PROFESIONAL Y LA EDUCACIÓN A LO LARGO DE LA VIDA*

### RESUMEN

En este artículo se analiza el retorno de los graduados a la enseñanza superior para continuar la formación académica, discutiendo e interrogando las razones que los llevan a tomar dicha decisión. El análisis se apoya en datos empíricos resultantes de una muestra representativa de graduados que finalizaron sus cursos en 2004/2005 en las Universidades de Lisboa y Universidade Nova de Lisboa (Portugal). Los datos analizados permiten examinar en qué medida la participación en la formación de postgrado se puede entender como una estrategia de empleabilidad. Este debate es particularmente relevante en el contexto actual, teniendo en cuenta, por un lado, que la educación a lo largo de la vida asume una centralidad creciente en las sociedades contemporáneas y, por otro lado, que la precarización del empleo de los graduados ha aumentado significativamente.

### PALABRAS CLAVE

educación superior; posgrado; graduados; empleabilidad; educación a lo largo de la vida.

## INTRODUCTION

Graduate employability is a relatively new subject of study, which emerges not only from the fact that a higher education degree is not a guarantee of immediate, stable and lasting employment, but also from the recent social visibility of unemployed college graduates. In this context, there has been a proliferation of data collection and analyses about graduate employability in several countries (especially in France, the UK and Canada) since the 1970s. In Portugal, the first research in this area emerged in the second half of the 1990s, and there has been a significant expansion and diversification of these studies in the first decades of the 20th century. Therefore, we can affirm that the object of study “graduate employability” has been under construction in recent years in Portugal (Alves, 2010).

A systematic analysis of previous studies (*idem*) allowed us to identify some aspects that seem to be quite consensual among researchers. We highlight the recognition of the sharp transformation of employability paths in recent decades, which has left them increasingly complex and precarious, as well as the identification of an overall feeling of insecurity about the value of a diploma, which influences the strategies, representations and processes of professional socialisation of college graduates. In addition, we emphasize the finding that variables such as the field of study, gender or social origin of graduates influence their educational and employability paths.

Within previously conducted research, there are, however, other aspects that have seldom or never been studied. One important aspect, is the association between (re)entry into higher education and professional careers, which constitutes, in our opinion, a challenge for educational research, and this article seeks to help understand this issue.

Current discourses usually affirm that the decision to return to higher education after graduation is a strategy essentially aimed at coping with situations of unemployment and or precarious employment. However, in previous research we hypothesized that the reasons to return to higher education in the years following graduation cannot be linearly associated with motivations related to unemployment or precarious employment, although they frequently characterize the professional trajectories of graduates of higher education (Alves *et al.*, 2010; Alves; Alves; Chaves, 2012).

In this article, we explore this hypothesis by discussing to what extent participation in graduate courses can be understood as an employability strategy. This debate is particularly relevant in view of the significant valorization of lifelong learning in contemporary societies, which means that individuals often tend to seek educational opportunities of different types at various ages. Although the data presented in this article do not allow examining graduates’ preferences for various types of education and training, it is possible to characterize their decisions to return to higher education within five years after graduating from college. Thus, by recognizing the importance of lifelong learning in contemporary societies, this article seeks to deepen knowledge about these dynamics through the analysis of a particular case: the demand for graduate education by college graduates.

## THE IMPORTANCE OF LIFELONG LEARNING IN CONTEMPORARY SOCIETIES

The idea that education is limited to the individual's first years of life has become obsolete in contemporary society, as a large number of individuals are increasingly involved in educational contexts and opportunities throughout their lives. The return to the educational system at various stages of life is now more common, as well as participation in different short courses and in processes of recognition and validation of experiential learning, (Jarvis, 2007).

In this context, the question of whether adults have the capacity to learn is clearly outdated. It is now recognized that there are different forms of learning and processes depending on the age and background of the learner. As Jarvis (2009) emphasizes, adult learning is a real possibility and not an exceptional event. It is based on experiential and biological factors inherent to the aging process that make learning possible for both young adults and the elderly.

In fact, lifelong learning has emerged as a central characteristic of the practices, attitudes and expectations of individuals, especially in advanced industrial societies. Although in different historical times and in various geographic areas learning has always been a lifelong experience, there is a current valorization of these dynamics that encourage transformations in individuals, in their dual condition as subjects influenced by social structural dynamics or as protagonists of social practices and processes.

In addition, educational policy guidelines have been emphasizing lifelong learning, reinforcing the importance and relevance of involvement in educational opportunities at various ages. Since the beginning of the 21st century, within the European Union, it is clear that while promoting a globally competitive knowledge economy, the investment in lifelong learning has affected the lifestyles of individuals as well as educational systems (Alves, 2010). Consequently, education, under the theme of lifelong learning, has increasingly become a "right" but also a "responsibility" for people of various ages in contemporary European societies (Biesta, 2006).

In some interpretations, it is a necessary right and duty in order to promote adaptation to a permanent state of change, considering economic and professional uncertainty and instability. Involvement in various learning modalities and the acquisition of academic credentials represent, in this perspective, strategies to facilitate access to certain social and professional positions, thus ensuring prosperity (Brown, 2003). However, Brown affirms that these strategies can prove to be an "opportunity trap" in the sense that the links between diplomas and their rewards in the labor market have been waning in recent years.

Another set of explanatory interpretations of the growing emphasis on lifelong learning is the association of the latter with existential and identity dimensions that characterize individuals in contemporary societies. There seems to be a contemporary logic of continuous learning according to which living and learning are inseparable dynamics (Gerwitz, 2008), and that individuals in late modernity have become "permanently learning subjects" (Hake, 2006). Therefore,

lifelong learning is therefore understood as an essential dimension of an individual's identity, shaping a structural condition of existence and even a guarantee that he or she is a good citizen, resulting in the idea of a "learning citizen" as a possibly inevitable political evolution (Holford *et al.*, 2008).

Although all adults can learn throughout life, not all learn in the same way. The analysis of several international studies shows that the probability that an adult will engage in lifelong learning is greater for those who initially have higher schooling levels (Bélanger, 2011), and those who have more significant opportunities for learning in their work context usually have higher skill levels (Riddell; Ahlgreen; Weedon, 2009). In addition, European statistical data indicate that participation in (formal, informal and non-formal) lifelong learning is more common among professionally active, more qualified and younger groups (Alves; Neves, 2010). It is thus important to emphasize that participation in lifelong learning (in its various forms) is related to social inequalities (Jarvis, 2007).

Given the available data, the return to education tends to be particularly significant for graduates of higher education. However, other factors such as work environment, employer characteristics, socio-economic status, living conditions, public policies and existing institutional learning opportunities may also influence the participation of graduates in lifelong learning. Overall, adult participation in education at different stages of their lives must be understood as the result of a complex set of constraints linked both to institutional options and to individual decisions, in contexts with specific characteristics and marked by concrete public policies.

To summarize, in contemporary societies lifelong learning is generally valued by individuals, institutions, nation states and multilateral agencies, and it is inseparable from social and economic dynamics that shape the lifestyles of subjects. From the point of view of educational policy guidelines, particularly in the European Union, it appears to be the central element of a strategy aimed at the development of knowledge economies and learning societies.

However, from the individuals' point of view, it is important to characterize the degree of their involvement in lifelong learning opportunities as well as the profile of those who follow this option, and understand to what degree it is a strategy to confront increasingly precarious and uncertain professional contexts. This is what we will do in this article, by analyzing the return to higher education of graduates of two public universities in Lisbon.

## METHODOLOGY OF THE STUDY

The data presented and discussed result from a survey conducted in November 2010 of a sample of 1,004 graduates. This sample is statistically representative of the universe of 4,290 graduates of the University of Lisbon and NOVA University that completed their degrees in 2004/2005.

The respondents were questioned extensively and deeply about their professional and academic careers in the five years between completing their degree and the survey, about their opinions and assessments of different aspects of these trajectories and about social variables. Considering the purposes of this

article, we will specifically consider the data that allow us to define the demand for graduate education, and clarify to what extent it can be associated with certain types of situations of employability, with satisfaction with professional trajectory after graduation, with the perception about the suitability of the higher education diploma to professional activity, and with some social variables.

It should be stressed that six types of employability situations were identified in the survey, five of these result from a multiple correspondence analysis (MCA), while the sixth group includes all those who were unemployed five years after degree completion. With regard to the MCA, we selected two dimensions or structural lines of graduate employability, having observed that the indicators “situation in the profession” and “type of contract” are the most discriminating in dimension 1, followed by the remaining indicators (“professional group”, “working hours” and “salary”). In dimension 2, the “type of contract” is also one of the key indicators for its definition, followed by “salary” and “working hours” which have important contributions.

With regard to graduate satisfaction with career path and the perception of those surveyed about the adequacy of their degree to their professional activity, respondents commented on these aspects and assessed them on a scale of 1 to 10, where 1 corresponds to “less satisfied/adequate” and 10 to “highly satisfied/adequate”. To facilitate data analysis, we considered the answers from 1 to 6 as “less satisfied/adequate” and from 7 to 10 as “more satisfied/adequate”. Additionally, we also present survey results that allow us to define the profile of those seeking graduate education by analysing variables such as the field of studies of the college degree, social class of origin and gender.

Moreover, respondents are distributed among different fields of study: arts and humanities (21.5%), health (12.5%), physical sciences (12%), education (10%), law (9.8%), life sciences (8.5%), social sciences and journalism (7.7%), economics and management (6.7%), mathematics, statistics and computer science (6.5%), and engineering, manufacturing industries and construction (4.8%). Almost all respondents are Portuguese citizens (99.8%) and the majority were women (64.3%, while 35.7% were men). The average age at the time of the survey was 31.94 years, which indicates that most attended higher education when they were about 20 years old.

Finally, the following empirical results refer to individuals who graduated before the curricular and pedagogical changes were introduced in the Portuguese higher education system under the Bologna Process. It is also worth mentioning that their career paths after graduation began before the economic crisis that escalated in 2011. Therefore, the “setting” we present refers to the first decade of the 21st century, which may now be undergoing profound changes. However, we believe this study provides an important contribution to the analysis and reflection of current demand for graduate education by college graduates in their phase of professional insertion.

## GRADUATE EDUCATION AS AN OPTION WITHIN FIVE YEARS AFTER COLLEGE GRADUATION

First, it is important to determine the size of the group of individuals that decided to further their academic training after graduation. In the sample composed of graduates of the University of Lisbon and NOVA University, 43.3% of the individuals had completed graduate studies within five years after graduating college and about one in four (24.4%) were enrolled and attending graduate school at the time of the survey. Moreover, a group that was clearly more than half of the college graduates surveyed (67.1%) stated that they intended to take graduate courses in the future.

We believe that these results as a whole show an appreciation of graduate education, both in terms of the effective practices and options of the individuals, and in the context of their future intentions. In fact, we consider these amounts to be quite significant, particularly when these graduates completed the survey only five years after completing undergraduate studies, although a large group had already completed or was attending a graduate course. In addition, we note that 8 graduates had already completed three graduate courses and 46 graduates had completed two.

**Table 1 – College graduates who had already continued or who intended to continue their academic training (in %)**

College graduates who at the time of the survey...	Percentage
Had already concluded a graduate course.	43.3
Were enrolled in a graduate course.	24.4
Intended to enroll in a graduate course in the future.	67.1

Source: Bank of survey data  
Prepared by the author

We expected to find significant numbers of graduates who had continued or who intended to continue their studies in higher education. As mentioned earlier, data from various surveys and statistical studies show that the pursuit of education is more intense among active young adults and, in particular, graduates who obtained higher educational credentials.

Additionally, the trend identified among graduates of the University of Lisbon and NOVA University for having returned or an intention to return, in large numbers, to higher education is convergent with the findings of a systematic analysis of several studies about graduate employability conducted in several

higher education institutions. In a previous work (Alves; Alves; Chaves, 2012),<sup>1</sup> we concluded that the dynamics regarding the demand for graduate training seems to be stronger among university graduates located in Lisbon than among graduates of the University of Aveiro and of higher education institutions in the Algarve region.

The data from the college graduates of the University of Lisbon and NOVA University allow us to further characterize the demand for graduate training, describing which graduate training course respondents preferred, and if they chose to continue their academic career in the same institution where they graduated or in another (whether in Portugal or abroad).

It appears that the type of course completed by most subjects is graduate studies (65.5%), followed by a master's degree (30.1%), while only a small group had completed a doctorate (3%). Preferences for master's degrees (39.6%) and doctoral programs (34.7%) are more significant among those who were currently attending graduate courses. With regard to the group that intended to enroll in the future, many planned to earn a master's degree (34.7%), and a significant number also intended to choose another graduate course (25.2%), while other less mentioned possibilities included a doctorate (13.3%), another bachelor's degree (8.1%), and a post-doctoral degree (2.7%).

It is also worth mentioning the small group of those who had completed some graduate studies who were attending or who plan to enroll in higher education institutions outside Portugal (5.1%, 6.5% and 4%, respectively). Additionally, among those who had already completed, about half (49.5%) completed their education at the same university from which they graduated, while a slightly smaller group (44.3%) opted for another higher education institution in Portugal. With regard to those who were attending a graduate program at the time of the survey, the trend is reversed, as almost half (49.5%) had chosen another institution of higher education in Portugal, while a smaller group (32.1%) remained at the university from which they had graduated. In terms of future intentions, respondents favored graduate training at the same university (43.1%) in comparison with attendance at another Portuguese higher education institution (34.2%).

To summarize, we conclude that the decision to attend a graduate course is an effective practice for many graduates within five years after graduating college, and it represents a future intention for a larger group. Graduate courses and master's degrees are the modalities of graduate training preferred by these graduates, with a clear majority of graduates choosing to continue their studies in Portugal. The preferences for staying at the same university or choosing another Portuguese higher education institution are quite balanced. In this sense, the geographical and institutional mobility of these graduates appears to be circumscribed, which might be associated with the fact that these graduates are from universities located

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1 In this systematic analysis of studies, four distinct research projects were considered, which were conducted at the University of Lisbon, the Polytechnic Institute of Beja and the University of Aveiro and which covered the higher education institutions of Algarve. For further details, see Alves, Alves, & Chaves (2012).



in Lisbon, where there is also a large number of opportunities for skilled labor and academic training.

## GRADUATE TRAINING AS A STRATEGY FOR PROFESSIONAL INSERTION

Recognizing the demand for graduate training as a common choice among college graduates, it is important to question the reasons for this fact. With regard to the data from the University of Lisbon and NOVA University, graduates were not directly asked about why they chose to further their academic careers at a graduate level.

We next explore to what extent this demand for graduate education is associated with some characteristics of the careers of the college graduates, particularly the more precarious and less satisfactory employment situations, perceived as less suitable to their initial academic training. We do this to determine to what extent the empiric data from this study support a current and common interpretation – the idea that the demand for graduate training is an alternative to unemployment or a strategy to improve employability situations.

First, the overall levels of dissatisfaction with their professional situation and a sense that their education was inadequate for their employment are very low among these graduates, and their professional conditions are not as precarious and unfavorable as is so often conveyed in current discourses and in the media. However, we ask: is a furthering of the academic career more likely for those who have less favorable professional options? Or is it more likely for those who show higher levels of dissatisfaction? And is it more likely for those who consider their professional situation less suitable to their initial education?

By assessing the profile of those who chose graduate training in terms of their employability situation (see Table 2), we can see that those who had already completed training after college graduation compose a significant presence of those who had a more favorable professional situation (type 6) followed by two groups with relatively favorable employment situations (types 4 and 5). The unemployed group must also be mentioned, given that in this case, the number of individuals who had completed some form of graduate studies is highly significant.

With regard to the individuals who were enrolled in academic training at the time of the survey, the college graduates who were in a considerably precarious professional situation (type 2) stand out, followed by the unemployed and those that were in a classic employment situation in which greater education is needed to advance (type 4).

Considering Table 2, the intention to attend graduate courses in the future seems to be particularly prominent among those who were in unfavorable professional situations, that is, who were unemployed or in a considerably precarious employment situation (type 2). Next, we highlight the college graduates with more favorable situations, particularly within the groups that held a qualified employability situation (type 6) and a qualified paid employment (type 5).

Overall, the data presented support the conclusion that the demand for graduate study seems to stem from various logics that are, in a sense, disparate.<sup>2</sup> For some, graduate education could essentially be an additional resource in the course of more unstable, precarious and underqualified employability paths, marked by periods of unemployment. For others, it could mean an attempt to meet the challenges that arise in relatively stable and favorable employability paths, reflecting broader trends according to which those who enjoy more qualified professional situations are also those who more easily seek lifelong learning. In these cases, the completion of some form of graduate education may be associated with more favorable professional situations, remaining unclear whether these were obtained after the additional academic training, or if these favorable professional situations facilitated access to graduate education.

To determine if it is those who are more dissatisfied with their career paths who are more likely to further their academic studies, we observed (see Table 3) that the graduates who are satisfied with their degree are slightly more likely to be found among those who had already completed, were currently attending or intended to take a graduate course in the future. In other words, the association between, on the one hand, satisfaction with career path and, on the other hand, with the demand (already fulfilled or aspired in the future) for graduate training is quite tenuous.

**Table 2 – College graduates who had already taken or who plan to take graduate courses by employment situation (in %)**

Employment situation	Concluded a graduate course	Enrolled in a graduate course	Plan to enroll in a graduate course
1 – Unemployed	37.5	20.8	83.3
2 – Considerably precarious employment	34.6	26.9	80.8
3 – Precarious employment	36.8	17.2	67.8
4 – Underqualified for employment	39.4	20.3	67.1
5 – Qualified employment	38.8	17.6	70.7
6 – Qualified insertion: entrepreneurs, consultants and capitalised professionals	54	20	72
Total	43.3	24.4	67.1

Source: Bank of survey data  
Prepared by the author

<sup>2</sup> However, it should be noted that the chi-square test (a measure of association between variables) could not conclude if there is a correlation between the employment situation and attendance in graduate training courses.

**Table 3 – College graduates who had already taken or who plan to take graduate courses by level of satisfaction with career path (in %)**

Level of satisfaction	Concluded a graduate course	Enrolled in a graduate course	Plan to enroll in a graduate course
Less satisfied	37.7	23.9	66.0
More satisfied	44.3	24.3	67.3

Source: Bank of survey data  
Prepared by the author

Therefore, the current notion that the demand for graduate training is a strategy that addresses situations of great dissatisfaction with the professional path is not supported in data collected from graduates of the University of Lisbon and NOVA University. Alternatively, this demand seems to be a component of the professional path and it appears to be slightly associated with those who express greater professional satisfaction.

Can the demand for graduate education constitute a strategy to address the gaps perceived between one's college degree and professional situation? In this case, we consider it analytically more appropriate to relate the degree of adequacy/inadequacy perceived one year after graduation with the effective attendance (whether completed or in progress at the time of the survey) of a graduate course. Thus, we can explore if the inadequacy felt in the transition to the labor market soon after graduation boosted the demand for graduate studies in the five-year period after graduating from college.

The data presented in Table 4 do not indicate a clear association between an (in)adequacy perceived after graduating from college and a higher demand for graduate education. Moreover, graduates who had already returned to higher education at the time of the survey tend to be more numerous among those that perceived a greater suitability of their degree a year after graduation. This reinforces the idea that the demand for graduate education appears to be a component of the professional paths of graduates, which is relatively independent of their perception of the adequacy of their degree to their profession.

The results presented allow us to safely and with more detail corroborate the findings of previous studies. In fact, some studies of professional insertion in Portugal have revealed that the main reasons mentioned by graduates for continuing their academic training are similar in the various studies considered:<sup>3</sup> they relate to work and to the deepening of knowledge necessary to perform their professional activity, as well as to the furthering of their studies, which they considered as

<sup>3</sup> Once again, we refer to the systematic analysis of studies in which four distinct research projects were considered, and conducted at the University of Lisbon, the Polytechnic Institute of Beja, the University of Aveiro and covered the higher education institutions of the Algarve. For further details, see Alves, Alves, & Chaves (2012).

“having always been part of their life projects”, although they are not justified as an alternative to unemployment or as a strategy for professional mobility (*idem*). In addition, in a previous survey of masters and doctors from four universities,<sup>4</sup> we also concluded that the reasons individuals gave for their choice of these types of graduate courses mainly refer to the appreciation of the academic environment as an opportunity for learning and personal development, although they simultaneously expected to improve their professional performance (Alves *et al.*, 2010).

**Table 4 – College graduates who had already taken or who plan to take graduate courses by level of perceived adequacy of degree to current profession (in %)**

Level of satisfaction	Concluded a graduate course	Enrolled in a graduate course
Less adequate	35.8	22.7
Highly adequate	40.1	23

Source: Bank of survey data  
Prepared by the author

To summarize, we conclude that satisfaction or dissatisfaction with career path or the assessment of respondents about the adequacy of their degree to their profession can hardly be unequivocally associated with their continuation of academic education. However, if they were to be associated, there is evidence that those who are more satisfied and perceive a higher level of suitability of their degree are more effectively involved in graduate education. Moreover, a certain polarization tends to be noted in the profile of individuals who most tend to seek (in the past, present or future) graduate education, considering that this group combines college graduates with highly favorable professional situations with college graduates who are unemployed or in precarious professional situations.

## THE SOCIOLOGICAL PROFILE OF COLLEGE GRADUATES SEEKING GRADUATE EDUCATION

In addition to the characteristics of the paths for professional insertion, what factors influence the demand for graduate education? To characterize the profile of those who engage in this type of lifelong learning, we consider variables such as field of college studies, gender and social class, which have proved to be relevant in

<sup>4</sup> The four institutions considered were: the Faculty of Science and Technology of NOVA University, the School of Economics and Management of the Technical University of Lisbon, the Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences of the University of Lisbon, and the University of Aveiro. We surveyed masters and doctors from these institutions as the latter host the research team of the project Telos II, undertaken between 2003 and 2006 with support from the Foundation for Science and Technology, under which the survey mentioned took place in 2005. For further details, see Alves *et al.* (2010).

the sociological analysis of professional insertion and educational paths. Therefore, it is interesting to assess whether (and how) these variables can be associated with the decision to enroll in graduate studies.

With regard to the areas of studies, Table 5 shows that there are variations. The number of graduates who had completed or enrolled in graduate studies is higher in the physical sciences and life sciences. Besides these two areas, the number of those who had completed is also higher in law, while among those who were planning to begin graduate studies, college graduates from the arts and humanities have more weight. On the other hand, the number of graduates who had returned to higher education from the fields of economics and management is very low, whether referring to those who had already completed (followed by the area of education) or who were enrolled (followed by engineering, manufacturing industries and construction, as well as mathematics, statistics and computer science).

**Table 5 – College graduates who had already taken or who plan to take graduate courses by area of college studies (in %)**

Area of studies	Concluded a graduate course	Enrolled in a graduate course	Plan to enroll in a graduate course
Education	36	18	66
Arts and Humanities	41.4	30.7	70.2
Social Sciences and Journalism	37.7	24.7	79.2
Economics and Management	29.9	10.4	83.6
Law	52.6	20.6	73.2
Life Sciences	52.3	40.7	53.5
Physical Sciences	55.8	33.3	65
Mathematics, Statistics and Computer Science	36.9	16.9	56.9
Engineering, Manufacturing Industries and Construction	34.7	16.3	75.5
Health	44.5	16.4	55.5

Source: Bank of survey data  
Prepared by the author

Those who had least attended graduate courses, that is those from the fields of economics and management, are those who express the highest intention to attend in the future, followed by those from the social sciences and journalism, as well as engineering, manufacturing industries and construction. The fields that stand out due to the fact that only a few graduates (but in any case more than half)

did not intend to attend graduate school in the future are life sciences, health, and mathematics, statistics and computer science.<sup>5</sup>

Considering that sociological variables, such as gender and social class, usually affect educational path and professional career, it is important to assess whether they also influence the choices of graduate training paths.

Table 6 indicates that a slightly higher percentage of men than women had completed graduate studies, and especially that more men were attending or planned to take graduate studies.

**Table 6 – College graduates who had already taken or who plan to take graduate courses by gender (in %)**

Graduates that at the time of the survey...	Women	Men	Total
Had already concluded a graduate course.	43.2	43.6	43.3
Were enrolled in a graduate course.	23.4	26.3	24.4
Intended to enroll in a graduate course in the future.	65.9	69.3	67.1

Source: Bank of survey data

Prepared by the author

This result is important because gender strongly influences the initial educational path and women more often show situations of higher educational attainment and greater prolongment of education. However, the data presented indicate that after college graduation there seems to be a greater parity between men and women in search for graduate education, although this tends to be slightly more chosen by men and, above all, more men indicate it as a future intention.<sup>6</sup>

In addition, in broader terms, international statistical data reveal a certain parity between men and women in participation in lifelong learning (formal, non-formal or informal) (Alves; Neves, 2010). However, it appears that men tend to choose modalities more oriented to the labor market and linked with professional performance, which could be related to their greater participation in the labor market, in general, in Europe (Holford *et al.*, 2008).

Moreover, social class inequalities have been recognized by the sociology of education as a variable that strongly influences initial educational paths and, in particular, access to higher education. Thus, there is a need to explore to what extent

5 It should be noted that the statistical association test between field of studies of the degree and the intention to attend graduate studies in the future reveals a statistically significant relationship (significance level of 0.01), although poor (Cramer-V = 0.131). The relationship between field of studies and having already completed or being enrolled shows no association with statistical significance.

6 However, it should be noted that the chi-square test (a measure of association between variables) could not conclude if there is a correlation between gender and attendance of graduate courses.

the social class of origin continues to affect educational paths at a graduate level. Table 7 indicates that the option for graduate education is more common among those from more privileged social classes and among those from social classes distinguished by higher schooling levels.

**Table 7 – College graduates who had already taken or who plan to take graduate courses by social class of their household of origin (in %)**

Social class	Concluded a graduate course	Enrolled in a graduate course	Plan to enroll in a graduate course
EMP (Entrepreneurs, Managers and Professionals)	47.8	22.8	68.1
TSP (Technical and Supervisory Professionals)	47.7	26.8	64.2
SEW and SEF (Self-employed workers and Self-employed farmers)	37.7	20.8	61
SS (Support Staff)	43.8	26.3	70.8
IW and AW (Industrial Workers and Agricultural Workers)	27.9	22.1	70.7

Source: Bank of survey data  
Prepared by the author

In fact, it appears that those who had already completed a graduate course are more frequent among those from the two most advantaged social classes – entrepreneurs, managers and professionals and technical and supervisory professionals – and among those from support staff, where the latter, in most cases, have intermediary-level qualifications. With regard to graduates enrolled at the time of the survey, those from families of technical professionals and support staff appear in greater number, that is, in both cases they generally have intermediary or high-level qualifications. Thus, we conclude that the effects of belonging to families who hold higher levels of schooling and greater economic resources continues to be felt after graduation in a higher demand for graduate education.

With regard to future intentions of returning to higher education, it appears that they are more expressively stated by graduates from intermediate social classes, such as support staff, but also among low-skilled professionals with limited economic resources (such as industrial workers and agricultural workers). Especially in the latter groups, the participation in education until the time of the survey was comparatively less significant.

It is interesting to note that overall, in the case of graduates of the University of Lisbon and NOVA University, we can identify a higher participation in graduate courses (whether completed or in progress at the time of the survey) among those

from more advantaged social classes. In contrast, graduates from less privileged social strata had participated less until the time of the survey, but expressed a greater intention to take graduate courses in the future.<sup>7</sup>

In summary, the results allow us to document how demand for graduate education varies by field of study in college and by variables such as gender and social class. It is noteworthy that fewer college graduates from certain fields (such as economics and management, and engineering, manufacturing and construction) had taken graduate courses within five years after college graduation, but more of them expressed an intention to take graduate courses in the future. With the same logic, college graduates from lower social classes (the case of industrial workers and agricultural workers) had returned to higher education in lesser number but more indicated they would take graduate courses in the future.

The analysis indicates that social class still influences, in some way, the demand for graduate education, and is higher among more advantaged social groups. A reverse trend is observed in the gender variable, because while numerous studies indicate that women take longer educational paths and with greater success, this study found that within five years after college graduation more men had sought graduate studies and they also indicate higher intention to take graduate courses in the future, although the differences are slight.

## CONCLUSION

This article presents and discusses empirical information that allows characterizing graduates who return to higher education within five years after college graduation. We found that a significant number had already completed or enrolled in graduate courses within five years of their college graduation, and an even larger group expressed intentions to return to higher education in the future. These subjects prefer to attend master's and other graduate programs in higher education institutions in Portugal, and many choose to remain at the same university.

While exploring the reasons that led graduates to return to higher education, we conclude that, contrary to what is often suggested in current discourses and the media, it is not possible to linearly associate unemployment or job insecurity with a decision to seek graduate education. This hypothesis had previously been formulated, following other studies on the characteristics of the demand for graduate education in Portuguese institutions of higher education (Alves; Alves; Chaves, 2012; Alves *et al.*, 2010), and clearly supported by the analysis of the data presented about graduates from the University of Lisbon and NOVA University.

In fact, it was found that the demand for graduate education is significant for individuals who are unemployed or in situations of great professional instability and precariousness, but it is equally significant among those in more favorable

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7 However, it should be noted that the chi-square test (a measure of association between variables) could not conclude if there is a correlation between social class and attendance in graduate courses.



professional situations. Thus, as graduate education is associated with diverse and even disparate situations of employability, it appears that, in addition to being viewed as a strategy for professional insertion, the demand for graduate education is a common practice and expectation among the graduates surveyed. In this sense, it can be understood as a frequent component of their professional careers in the five years after graduation, and possibly an indication of broader dynamics of participation and involvement in various modalities of lifelong learning.

However, far from being an equal opportunity for all, the demand for graduate education tends to be influenced by variables such as gender, social class of origin and field of study at college. It is noteworthy that in certain fields of study (such as economics and management, engineering manufacturing and construction) fewer graduates attended graduate training within the five years after the initial degree, but more stated an intention to do so in the future than graduates from other fields.

Meanwhile, social class continues to influence the educational decisions of individuals after graduation, despite the great importance that college graduates in general give to graduate education. In our opinion, the debate about social inequalities in access to education should not conceal this analytical dimension of the graduate training paths. If lifelong learning opportunities are presented in political and media discourses as equal for everyone, it is important to emphasize that, to the contrary, they can also reproduce existing social inequalities.

However, with regard to gender, the trend appears to be reversed. While, women have greater success than men in initial educational paths, the data presented here allow us to raise the hypothesis of a lower involvement of women in graduate studies, or at least of a parity between men and women in the access to graduate education. This result is important because, apparently, in addition to having less favorable professional opportunities after college graduation (Alves, 2010), women are also less involved in graduate education. The reasons for this trend refer to the relationships between educational and professional paths and family dynamics. In previous studies we concluded that the time need to complete a master's degrees is influenced by gender and can be associated with family transitions (Alves *et al.*, 2010).

Finally, considering the results analyzed, we emphasize that the demand for graduate education is the result of a multiple and complex set of variables and conditions. Moreover, far from being simply understood as a response to precarious and/or unsatisfactory professional situations, the continuation of an academic path can be viewed, in our opinion, as one of the dimensions that highlights the importance of lifelong learning in the lives of individuals in contemporary societies.

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