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FOREIGN STUDENTS IN HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS IN PORTUGAL, EXPECTATIONS AND REALITY - A CASE STUDY

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Abstract

The objective of this presentation is to provide a case study analysis of the presence of foreign students in higher education institutions in Portugal, in a public university, focusing on students from African Portuguese Speaking Countries (PALOP), namely, scholarship students entering the Portuguese higher education system, through the protocol between the Ministry of Science and Higher Education, the Ministry of Internal Administration, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the governments of the PALOP.

The analysis considers two dimensions. On the one hand, it considers the volume and evolution of the presence of this set of students in the Portuguese higher education system, in the light of the institutional and legislative framework, which enables international mobility and favours the entry of students from these nationalities into higher education in Portugal, and influences the dynamics of their progression. On the other hand, the real conditions under which those students enter higher education in Portugal are analysed, as well as the possible dissonance between the expectations built on the basis of a normative discourse, established and legislated, and the experiences actually lived in the context of their reception, and the difficulties experienced by those who enter with "scholarship status" on the basis of a term of responsibility that exempts the host state from any social responsibility.

The differences between the educational systems have a particular relevance in the adaptation of these students, from the language, which, being Portuguese, is one of the greatest difficulties in interpreting texts and consulting bibliographies, digital literacy and social and economic needs that make access to elementary resources (photocopying, personal computer, Internet, and daily mobility) difficult.

Keywords: Foreign Students, scholarship, higher education

1 INTRODUCTION

The internationalisation of higher education institutions (HEIs) constitutes one of the most striking faces of the global dynamics of social and educational reordering and transformation of the various sectors that operate in the production and transfer of knowledge.

Such internationalisation arises in a framework of clear institutional recognition of the relevance of HEIs in the development not only of education, at a global level, but also as drivers of the dissemination of knowledge, as well as of world economic development based on that knowledge, in a logic of market context and promotion of economic competitiveness. In accordance with Silva, "it is knowledge ready to be transformed into a high-tech product, into new production processes and services, and is related to the possibility of obtaining immediate profit in the economic sphere" [1.]

In Portugal, a country at the periphery of these international mobility movements, in addition to the general ideological framework very favourable to internationalisation, the structural under-funding of HEIs, resulting from the decrease of public resources for higher education, intensified with the 2008 economic and financial crisis [2] provided the rise of "academic capitalism" [2].

In order to acquire complementary sources of funding, HEIs seek to "sell their products", in this case teaching and research activities. In this context, one of the ways to obtain additional resources is precisely through attracting international students. Furthermore, the presence of these contingents has a favourable effect on the representation of the institutions in the rankings of quality and prestige. Institutionally, the policies undertaken by the Ministry of Science, Technology and Higher Education seek to favour the entry of national institutions in this dynamic, linked to migratory movements of highly qualified population – either through the production of regulatory legislation, or by opening specific vacancies for international students (in the case of degree courses), or through cooperation agreements

with the Community of Portuguese-Speaking Countries (CPLP), within which we highlight in this study the Portuguese-speaking African countries (PALOP)¹.

From their perspective, the possibility of obtaining a degree in Portugal - a European country - is often seen as a means of ensuring not only the acquisition of high-level technical and scientific skills, but also the acquisition of the highest possible level of competence, including language, social, political and economic skills and abilities [4].

The colonial past, the late development of higher education in the countries of origin of these students and the common linguistic reference are conditions that favour this process [5], [6], [7], [8]. In this relational context, international student mobility from south to north is a response to possible gaps in the educational offer at this level in the countries of origin, and as an opportunity to develop and widen the offer (especially the offer of post-graduate studies, with higher tuition fees) in the destination countries, such as Portugal. However, this mobility, even if institutionally and legally established, is challenged by the existence of distinct and sometimes very unequal concrete benchmarks, either because of the study programmes in the previous cycles of education, or because of the mother tongue of the mobile students, which does not always coincide with that of the destination country, although officially the common language is Portuguese. These educational and cultural distinctions impact on the success of the experience [9] [10] [11] [12]. As we will see below from the case study carried out at a public university in Portugal, the trajectories of these students are marked either by academic failure or by abandonment of the study project before its conclusion. This situation calls for the urgent need for specific measures in the welcoming of these students. Measures that, based on a serious diagnosis of their difficulties, seek to mobilise resources and empowering activities, invested in different competencies that stabilise this impact.

2 METHODOLOGY

The objective of this presentation is to provide a case study analysis of the presence of foreign students in higher education institutions in Portugal, focusing on students from African Portuguese Speaking Countries (PALOP), namely, scholarship students entering the Portuguese higher education system, through the protocol between the Ministry of Science and Higher Education, the Ministry of Internal Administration, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the governments of the PALOP.

The analysis considers two dimensions. Firstly, it considers the volume and evolution of the presence of this set of students in the Portuguese higher education system. For this purpose, institutional statistical data produced by the Directorate General of Education and Higher Education Statistics (DGEEC) for the years 2012 to 2019 are used. Following, the real conditions under which those students enter higher education in Portugal are analysed, as well as the possible dissonance between the expectations built on the basis of a normative discourse, established and legislated, and the experiences actually lived in the context of their reception, and the difficulties experienced by those who enter with "fellowship status" on the basis of a term of responsibility that exempts the host state from any social responsibility. This second component is carried out through a case study at a public University in Lisbon, Iscte-University Institute of Lisbon. The data processed shows the evolution of students who enter through the special contingent of scholarship holders from countries with Portuguese as their official language, as well as their academic progression at the university. The analysis also highlights the results of the diagnosis and pedagogical intervention procedures that have been carried out to welcome and improve the academic success of these students.

3 PALOP STUDENTS WITH SCHOLARSHIP STATUS IN HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS IN PORTUGAL

3.1 Inflows into the national system between 2012 and 2019

Table 1 shows the evolution of the number of PALOP scholarship holders entering higher education institutions in Portugal between 2012 and 2019. This period coincides with two very contrasting political

¹ Decree-Law No. 393-A/99, of 2 October 1999; and Ministerial Order No. 393-A/99 no 854-B/99, of 4th October - that regulates these special regimes for access to higher education.

contexts from the point of view of social policies, and in particular of the policies to encourage school enrolment, namely at higher education level.

The first period coincides exactly with the peak of the effects of the 2008 economic and financial crisis, in which Portugal experienced a period of great austerity with a strong impact on all public social and wellbeing services [2]. In this period, although the number of PALOP grant recipients increased (+21%), it was relatively contained.

Table 1. Number of students with PALOP scholarship status, incoming year by year

	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	Growth rate	
Male	181	145	169	209	204	281	473	803	2012-2015	2016-2019
Female	205	200	223	258	290	365	497	756		
Total	386	345	392	467	494	646	970	1559	21,0%	215,6%

Source: DGEEC, Students enrolled per form of entrance (own calculations).

It is in particular after the political transition to the left, which occurs in 2016, that the number of those entering the higher education system through the special access competition to PALOP scholarship students increases exponentially (216% between 2016 and 2019). Meanwhile the targets enshrined in the "legislature contract" for 2020-2023, signed in November 2019 between the government and public higher education institutions, propose to significantly reinforce the presence of foreign students in the national system where the contingent here under review also fits². This strategy announces a 100% increase in the number of these students by 2023, and also allocates specific financial resources for those enrolled in doctoral studies (not included in the figures presented in this analysis).

The analysis of the sociodemographic profile and academic contexts of PALOP "fellowships" students enrolled in Portuguese higher education, presented in table 2, denotes the strong prevalence of male. This trait is in clear contrast to that observed in the national student distribution, where females have been prevalent since the 1990s [14].

The age structure of these students shows an increase in the proportion of those aged over 23 (26% in 2012 and 39% in 2019).

The large majority of these students integrate institutions of the public system. Although in this subsystem students also have to ensure the payment of fees, in terms equivalent to those required from national students, their cost is controlled, with part being paid through the State Budget (currently students/families pay around 700 euros/year for 1st cycle courses in the public system; in the private system, costs average around 350 euros/month for the same level of education). The distribution of these scholarship students by type of education, although it gives prevalence to university education, shows the relevance of the polytechnic offer, which has a more technical and professional orientation.

With regard to their distribution by disciplinary areas, Fig. 1 highlights only the areas of greatest demand, according to gender. Business, Administration and Law is clearly the area of choice in both genders (in 2019, 36% of men and 27% of women were enrolled on courses in this area). Despite this, a relative decrease is observed compared with previous years: for men, after a significant increase since 2016, it decreases slightly in the transition between 2018 and 2019; for women, the decrease is evident from 2017 onwards. The differences in educational choices according to gender are more evident in the courses which, although not in the first position, come immediately after in the preferences of these students: in the case of males: Engineering, Manufacturing and Construction (19% males; 12% in the female distribution); In this distribution Health and Social Protection corresponds to the area in second position, with 22% of women's preferences (male 6%).

The national data highlighted here does not allow us to observe fluctuations in the presence of this contingent of students over time; nor does it allow us to measure their success and possible difficulties. It is this analysis that we carry out through the case study reported on the presence of students with PALOP scholarship status in the Iscte.

² IGeFE, Institute of Education Financial Management. Commitments and Goals of higher education institutions in the 2020-2023 Legislature Contract, in: <https://www.igefe.mec.pt/Page/Index/55> (10/05/2022).

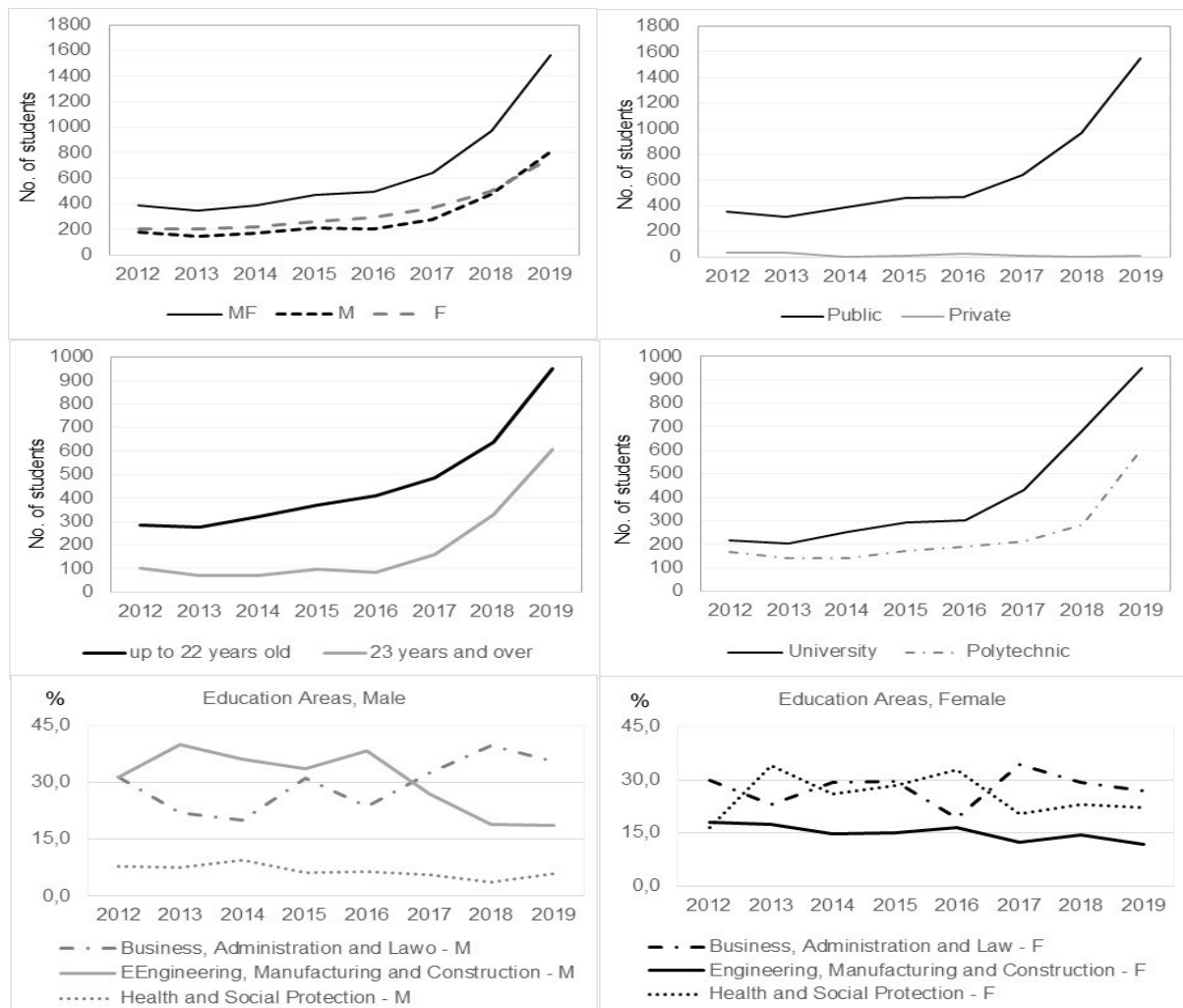


Figure 1. Sociodemographic profile and academic contexts of PALOP "fellowships" students enrolled in Portuguese higher education

Source: DGEEC, Students enrolled per form of entrance (own calculations).

3.2 The PALOP scholarship holders at Iscte: entry flows and progression experience

The figures regarding the admission of PALOP fellows to Iscte (Table 2.) are in line with those observed in the national as a whole, showing an upward trend especially from 2018, when the current rector is appointed for her first term.

In December of that year, by rectoral decree, the first author of this paper was appointed responsible for organising the reception of all students entering the University through special admission quotas. One of the tasks defined as a priority at the time was precisely to begin a diagnostic study to characterise the various contingent. This work was carried out on the initiative of Rosário Mauritti, responsible for the coordination of the reception of students, involving, besides the Iscte Soft Skills Lab, the directorate of education management services, the directorate of social action services, and one of the colleagues, also author of this paper. In an initial phase we have tried to ascertain the number and diversity of students involved in the different special contingents, which study cycles they enrol in and what kind of difficulties they manifest in their academic life.

Specifically, with regard to the PALOP scholarship holders, as we can see in table 2, most of these students are attending undergraduate programmes (49%). Their proportion by academic degree is very

similar to the one we find in the whole of the students from Iscte: the public University in Portugal which in relative terms has the highest proportion of post-graduate students.

Table 2. Entry flows and progression experience of PALOP scholarship holders at Iscte

Admission year	Until 2014/15	From 2015/16 to 2017/18	2018/2019	2019/2020	2020/2021	Total	%
<i>Academic degree</i>							
Undergraduate	14	42	27	48	74	205	48,6
Post-Grad	0	0	0	0	19	19	4,5
Masters	0	7	13	84	31	135	32,0
PhD	1	5	13	6	38	63	14,9
Total	15	54	53	138	162	422	100,0
<i>Number of completed ECTS</i>							
Up to 32 ECTS	7	23	19	36	23	108	25,6
36 to 60 ECTS	3	21	20	73	138	255	60,4
> 60 ECTS	5	10	14	29	1	59	14,0
Total	15	54	53	138	162	422	100,0
<i>Current curricular year</i>							
1	0	9	14	69	160	252	59,7
2	5	24	25	68	1	123	29,1
3	9	19	14	0	0	42	10,0
4	0	2	0	1	1	4	0,9
5	1	0	0	0	0	1	0,2
Total	15	54	53	138	162	422	100,0

In order to complete a full year of studies (performing all the curricular units foreseen in the syllabus) the student must complete 60 ECTS. According to the data presented, a significant number of these students fall short of this target. One of the associated reasons is related to the guidelines for students to enrol part-time (32 ECTS/year). But even considering this target, it is clear from the analysis of this data that a relevant segment manifests difficulty in academic progression and success.

The entire application process for these students is carried out exclusively in a consortium involving the embassies of the respective countries, the Portuguese Ministry of Science and the Portuguese Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Their entry into Portuguese institutions is part of a quota involving up to 10%/year of all students entering higher education through the national entrance examination. In this 10%, besides PALOP scholarship holders, other special situations are also included, such as " Employees on diplomatic missions and their families"; "Portuguese citizens with a scholarship abroad or civil servants on official missions abroad and their families"; "Naturals and children of naturals of East Timor"; "High performance sportsmen and sportswomen", etc. Of all the situations covered here, those entering through PALOP scholarship status clearly represent the largest proportion. Each year we have between 80 and 90 candidates, of whom only around 50% actually enrol. Among those who formalize their admission, many uses "agents"/representatives (someone who is in Portugal and goes to the University in person) to regularize their situation.

Until this moment, the only information we receive as a host institution is a list with the name of the students, the courses they are enrolled in, their age and country of origin - the fields with telephone and email, although available in the statement, are empty. This information, which is clearly insufficient, is only made available in September, sometimes when classes have already started for the remaining

students. At Iscte, the academic year is organised in two semesters. The first semester normally starts in the second half of September, while the second semester begins in February. It is also only then that they themselves are notified of entry. At a late date: many are still residing in their countries of origin, they have to start the process of requesting a visa, paying for the trip and finding a place where they will live upon arrival at their destination, often without guaranteeing the conditions of financial sustainability in Portugal. In this aspect, it is also important to mention that the status of "scholarship holder" is misleading. This status is attributed based on a declaration that can be signed by any person, with or without family ties to the grant holder, where the person assumes all the costs with the student, in case he/she enters the higher education system in Portugal. This statement exempts both the Portuguese State and the country of origin from any responsibility of direct financial support for the exchange student.

Specifically, in relation to academic achievement, in the results of the diagnosis of needs we carried out with these students we found three key areas of academic difficulties that characterise a significant proportion of this segment:

- literacy (reading and interpretation of texts written in European Portuguese and English)
- numeracy: apparent lack of basic concepts about statistics
- adapting to technologically sophisticated contexts

Examples:

- basic operation of Office tools (including the use of email, word and Excel)
- use of technological resources for communicating with Iscte (whether with the academic services, teachers, resources allocated to curricular units or others)
- Interpret what is asked for in an essay or test
- structure a basic academic paper
- difficulty in selecting and organising information
- unfamiliarity with citation and referencing standards and the rules for preparing a bibliography;
- lack of knowledge of available resources and/or their use for bibliographical research (library resources, repositories, b-on, etc.)
- integration into working groups in academic activities that are carried out in teams
- individual organisation in the management of tasks associated with different assignments
- conciliation between study and work activities
- social and economic deprivation hindering access to basic resources (photocopying, personal computer, internet, daily mobility, etc.)

As a result, several training and capacity building actions were instituted, such as the Preparatory Course for Academic Success focusing on mathematics and the use of the Portuguese language in European expression in academic contexts. The pedagogical action with a wider intervention is developed by the Iscte Soft Skills Lab, completely free of charge, with a training offer suitable for improving conditions of entry and academic success.

Specifically, for PALOP student who express difficulties and come to us for support, and according to their needs:

- "digital literacy workshops" especially suitable for students who have little familiarity with the use of digital platforms and Office tools
- academic practical Portuguese workshops on the oral and written use of the language in its European expression.
- Curriculum unit specially designed for students of post-graduate courses in writing technical and scientific texts

Moreover, Iscte Soft Skills Lab offers a wide range of training courses to support study and academic progression, open to all students. This has a significant digital open access component through institutional login, and has another that integrates the students' curriculum plan involving a diversity of transversal skills and foreign language teaching.

4 CONCLUSIONS

This work is always unfinished and requires the mobilization of the whole community to succeed: teachers, researchers, academic staff, students and their representative structures.

The responsibility of the institutions regarding the students hosted, mechanisms framed by the state, deserves to be the object of future research. As already mentioned above, one of the major difficulties is in fact that, in most cases, these students only obtain authorization to travel to Portugal (visa) a long time after the beginning of classes. Classes start in September, and in many cases, visas are granted in October, November, December, or in the following academic semester. The waiting time for the authorization to be granted by the consular services and, as a result, students lose a whole semester of classes, which means that they cannot finish their degree in the stipulated time. Others need to assume the condition of student-worker, which can directly impact on their academic performance, not being able to dedicate themselves exclusively to their studies. All these issues affect their performance, not to mention those who sometimes arrive and do not even have a place to live as a result of illegal situations, which are beyond our control but are still a problem that we should address.

We cannot forget that these students will one day represent their host institution, are a significantly relevant segment in the increase of students in post-graduate studies and contribute to an exchange of experiences between the various countries involved, thus allowing a unique intercultural richness.

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