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## 'I feel different...': Learning experiences and identities of African students in Higher Education

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### Abstract

*Accessing higher education is a biographical learning experience for all students, which can promote transformations in individuals' identities. This article aims to investigate the implications of biographical learning experiences on the students' identities. We will explore African students' biographical learning experiences in Portuguese higher education and how they shaped their identities. Biographical learning and identity theoretical perspectives were adopted. This is a qualitative study that used biographical interviews with 22 African students enrolling at Portuguese higher education. The content analysis carried out has been organized into 2 themes: biographical learning experiences and identity transformations. The results of the study show that African students gained new knowledge and skills and became more independent and autonomous. They develop their self-confidence and open-mindedness through a new way of seeing the world. Thus, African students' experiences in higher education contributed to the formation and transformation of their identity.*

**Keywords:** biographical learning experience, identity, African students, higher education, Portugal

### Introduction

The transition to higher education (HE) is an important biographical event in young people's life course and a significant biographical learning experience. According to several researchers, accessing HE is considered one of the most significant transitions in students' lives since it implies transformations in their identities (e.g., Almeida, 2013; Field, 2012; Hultberg et al., 2008; Ingram et al., 2009; Merrill, 2011).

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Transition to HE entails an adjustment to new roles and responsibilities (Devlin & McKay, 2014) and, consequently, (re)constructing new identity aspects and a sense of belonging (Arneaud et al., 2016; Christie et al., 2016). In this vein, academic experience involves new acquisitions, which have effects on the students' cognitive and psychosocial development (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). This transition is accompanied by personal and social transformations, such as the development of autonomy, construction, and reconstruction of identity, and assumption of new roles and new meanings in life (Azevedo & Faria, 2001). Despite the increasing academic interest in biographical learning (Alheit & Dausien, 2002) and the identity of individuals (Dubar, 2006), there is still little research on the implications of biographical learning experiences on the identity process of HE students (Bron & Thunborg, 2011; Christie et al., 2008), and especially for those who leave their country of origin. If the transition to HE is a complex process for the vast majority of students, it is even more so for those who are displaced from their home country. Such is the case for students from Portuguese-speaking African countries such as Angola, Cape Verde, Guinea-Bissau, Mozambique and Saint Tome and Principe, which are former Portuguese colonies. The colonial past still plays an important role both in migratory flows and in former colonies' organization (Augusto et al., 2022; Mains et al., 2013). Most African students choose Portuguese HE due to historical issues, the shared Portuguese language, the prestige of the universities, and the presence of relatives or friends in the country, among others (Doutor & Alves, 2020; Kishun, 2011). Coming to study in Portugal corresponds to a transition not only to an unknown learning environment but also to an unfamiliar country and culture. Adaptation to a new environment both academic, social, and cultural implies new life experiences and learning and can entail a deep transformation of identity. According to Merrill (2015), experiencing and coping with life transitions is a biographical learning experience. Therefore, biographical learning promotes identity transformations through life experiences and new knowledge (Bron & Thunborg, 2011).

This research aims to investigate the implications of biographical learning experiences on students' identities. More precisely, we will explore African students' biographical learning experiences in Portuguese HE and how they shaped their identities. To achieve these two aims we used data from PhD research of the first author (Doutor, 2021) on the biographical transitions of African students to Portuguese HE. This was a qualitative study based on biographical interviews (Delory-Momberger, 2012) with 22 African students enrolled at a Portuguese university.

The paper is organised as follows. First, the concepts of biographical learning, biographical learning experience and identity will be discussed in the theoretical framework. Afterwards, we present the methodological approach. In this section, the biographical method, as well as the procedures adopted in this study will be presented, namely the techniques used, the description of the participants of the study and the content analysis. The next section is dedicated to the presentation and the discussion of the findings. The paper ends with the final considerations.

This study intends to contribute to a better understanding of students from Portuguese-speaking African countries' learning and identities in the context of HE through a biographical approach. Moreover, the data will help the scientific community to understand the students' identity transformations that can occur during this process.

## Theoretical framework

### *Biographical learning experience as a process of identity transformation*

In the last years, biographical learning has become a relevant concept in adult education (e.g., Alheit & Dausien, 2002; Biesta & Tedder, 2007; Dominicé, 2000; Hallqvist et al., 2012; West et al., 2007). There exist certainly different definitions of the concept. For example, according to Peter Alheit and Betina Dausien (2002), biographical learning refers to the capacity of individuals to reflexively organise their experiences of giving coherence to identity and, consequently, imparting significance to their life history. Biographical learning is related to individuals' social backgrounds and experiences, which are constructed and reconstructed in everyday life. This theoretical perspective acquires more relevance when individuals deal with and learn through a transition in their life trajectory. Furthermore, the learning process refers to real experiences in life. Thus, this concept can help understand the biographical learning experiences of African students and how they affect their identities. The transition of students from Portuguese-speaking African countries to HE represents a challenge for them and contributes to awareness of their experiences of learning.

Individuals' experiences are:

constructed itself biographically. And this biographical construction of experience is per se learning, since individual mobilizes the biographical resources acquired in their previous experiences to seize what the circumstances of life raise and integrate it into the constructed system of their representations and biographical knowledge. (Delory-Momberger, 2011, p. 342)

Also, Merrill (2011) states that the learning experience is a life transition that transforms the *self* and identity. In fact, 'biography itself has become a field of learning in which transitions have to be anticipated and managed, and personal identity is possibly just the result of difficult learning processes' (Alheit, 2022, p. 9).

Biography is, according to Alheit and Dausien (2002), linked to learning. Both are connected since biography depends on learning processes. According to Alheit and Hernández-Carrera (2018, p. 629), we are 'lifelong learners' since all learning is, in a certain way, biographical learning. In a context of transition, individuals reflect on themselves and, therefore, on their biography. They can reflect on their biographies, create new meanings for their lives and assign meaning to their past experiences, as well as to future ideas or dreams (Malec-Rawinski, 2019). It is in a certain sense a construction of new knowledge. It points out a 'reflective look at one's own life' (Alheit, 2022, p. 11).

Connected with biographical learning is the concept of biographicity (Alheit & Dausien, 2002). Biographicity means that people produce knowledge based on their one's experiences and, consequently elaborate new and different ways of defining themselves (Hallqvist, 2022).

Throughout life, individuals face new experiences and constructions of the world. When dealing with a new context, individuals develop new ways of understanding their lives and the world in which they live. According to this perspective, the learning process influences not only the way individuals understand their relationship with themselves and others but also with the world. In this way, biographical learning underlines a sociability dimension, since the reflective learning process is related to individuals and their relationships, communication and interaction with others (Alheit & Dausien, 2002). Therefore, it is a biographical, individual and, consequently, a learning process.

So, their biography undergoes a modification or even several modifications, giving rise to biographical constructions. These biographical constructions are reflexive processes (Evans, 2014) and have a transitory character (Dausien, 2007) because they presuppose a reflection not only on social events but on the individual himself. Noticeably, it is a process that generates coherence and personal identity. Another description indicates that telling their own stories is an important process of biographical learning since storytelling produces learning (Tedder & Biesta, 2009) and, consequently, allows their identity construction. When individuals tell their own stories, they attribute meaning to their actions and their lives. In this respect, Brockman (2010) states that the biographical learning process underlines the importance of learning experiences – informal or non-formal – to the development of an individual's identity. Biographical learning promotes identity transformations through new experiences and knowledge (Bron & Thunborg, 2011).

### *Identity as a biographical and a relational process*

Given the transformations that occur in society, identity has been, in the last years, a main topic for several researchers (Ecclestone, 2007; Dubar, 2006). Ecclestone et al. (2010) state that identity is 'constructed through complex interactions between different forms of capital (cultural, social, economic and emotional), broader social and economic conditions, interactions and relationships [developed] in various contexts, and [also in] cognitive and psychological strategies' (p. 9). Bron and Thunborg (2017) stress that identity means how people see and present themselves in relationships.

Dubar (1997, p. 13) defines identity as a socially constructed process and, at the same time, an unfinished one since 'it is constructed in childhood and must always reconstruct itself throughout life'. During his/her social trajectory, the individual incorporates beliefs, values and norms, principles and behaviours, which allow him/her to assume different identities at different moments. Thus, the production of identities emerges from the convergence of the biographical and relational processes. Identity is conceptualised by Dubar (1997) as a transactional process between a biographical process that allows individuals to define themselves and a relational one that is at the origin of how they are defined by others. Identity results from the socialisation process. Social interactions and learning experiences shape identity. Taking into account the interaction with institutions and community, individuals construct identity during their life path.

Therefore, identity refers to the representations that individuals have about themselves and those that are attributed to them by others. In this vein, identity is conceptualised as a reflexive project of the individual. This means that individuals should restructure their past experiences and project future goals. Since identity is one issue that influences students' biographical learning experiences in HE (Alhawsawi, 2015), identities are constructed and reconstructed throughout the several phases of an individual's life and, therefore, are subject to diverse transformations. There are also perspectives about identity work and biographical work which relate to biographical learning and identity formation/transformation. To understand non-traditional students' life transitions, Bron and Thunborg (2017) used the biographical work theory, which explores identity formation and transformation from a biographical learning perspective. Their theoretical approach refers to how individuals construct and reconstruct their biographies and how they form and transform their identities throughout life.

## ***Becoming a university student: biographical learning experiences and identity***

The identity of a student influences his/her vision of the world, the way he/she learns and how he/she experiences learning. Becoming a university student is a complex process, in which students have to 'find their place' (Wilcox et al., 2005) since they have left behind family, home, and friends. The study developed by Moore (2006) looks to know the process of 'becoming' a university student, as well as the identity transformations as a result of academic experience. Moore (2006) highlights the increase in the students' confidence due to their academic experiences. These experiences transformed the way students saw themselves and how saw others. According to Gu and Schweisfurth (2015), students who live and study abroad find this experience to promote a 'profound identity transformation experience' (p. 947). They became more confident, and self-efficient and developed more positive attitudes. In addition, students highlighted intellectual transformations, such as the broadening of their way of thinking and worldviews. Moreover, biographical learning experiences are characterized by constant negotiations and reproductions of their social and cultural identities. Byrom and Lightfoot (2012) suggest that identity transformation is not as intense for students who continue to live at home with their families as it is for students who decide to study abroad.

Becoming a university student is related to how students relate themselves as agents taking into account their social background and previous learning experiences in a new educational institution (Thunborg et al., 2012). In the particular case of African students, it is important to mention colonialism and how it is perpetuated. Augusto et al. (2022, p. 1) refer to the coloniality of power and 'its enduring influence over the racialisation of skill[s], education, culture and language'.

According to Peter Alheit (2022), personal identity can be 'the result of difficult learning processes' (p. 9). In this context, students need to construct an identity and learn to act, in an autonomous way, as university students (Fazey & Fazey, 2001). Otherwise, they can feel like a 'fish out of the water' (Tranter, 2003). Also, Johnston and Merrill (2005) argue that 'studying a degree is a means of changing identity' (p. 42). In fact, 'studying for a degree as an adult transforms, for many, their identity: he/she becomes a changed person' (Johnston & Merrill, 2005, p. 43). In the next section, we will describe the methodological assumptions used in this study.

## **Methodological approach**

In this paper, we are particularly interested in exploring and analysing the implications of the biographical learning experiences and identity transformation of Portuguese-speaking African countries students, who are enrolled at one Portuguese university. As mentioned before, we intended (1) to explore these students' biographical learning experiences at university and (2) to understand their implications on identities. To achieve these goals, we used a qualitative methodology (Flick, 2004). The biographical method is a significant tool for understanding the impact of learning on a person's identity. As mentioned by Amado and Ferreira (2017), biographical studies allow us to capture an individual's interpretation of his or her life path, as well as the diversity of experiences that occurred in different contexts or life circumstances. It is also important to take into account the collective deeply structural nature of these experiences.

The biographical interview was a useful method since it is an in-depth interview where the interviewee tells his/her life story. Furthermore, it allows access to the biographical experiences of the interviewees, as well as to the way they experience and

(re)interpret each life experience (Caetano, 2014). In the biographical interview, the interviewees are called to tell their life story, in particular the lived experiences in Portugal and HE. Participants were asked to tell their experiences of studying in Portuguese HE. As a space for dialogue and reflection (Merrill, 2020), a biographical interview promotes a dialogue or a communicative interaction between interviewer and interviewee. And involve interest, respect, empathy and trust relationship between both.

All interviews were transcribed and a content analysis was carried out (Bardin, 2009) based on the following categories: biographical learning experiences and identity transformations. Ethical considerations have been taken into account. Before each interview, all students were informed about the aim of the study and their rights as participants. All participants signed an informed consent form. The names of the students used in this paper are fictitious to ensure their confidentiality. As researchers, we assumed the role of guide and active listener throughout the process. During the interviews, we gave space and time to students to express their lived experiences and feel comfortable.

We conducted 22 biographical interviews according to Delory-Momberger's proposal (2012). We interviewed 12 male students and 10 females, aged between 18 and 23 years old and from Guinea-Bissau (10), Cape Verde (8) and Mozambique (4). The students were selected taking into account their gender and country of origin. They were bachelor's degree students. Concerning their field of study, nine students were studying Law, three Public Administration, three International Relations, and others Political Science, Mathematics, Computer Science and Engineering, and so on. The interviews took place over the first and third years of their bachelor's degree. In the next section, we will present and analyse some findings.

## Findings and discussion: African students' learning experience and identities

In this section, we will focus on the biographical learning experiences identified by students from Portuguese-speaking African countries and their identity transformations.

### *(1) The biographical learning experiences*

Transition to university and engaging in learning is a biographical learning experience, since it can transform identities and lives. For African students, this transition means that they have to leave their country, their family and friends. This biographical event promotes new experiences and learning but also many challenges. They considered this transition as a notable biographical learning experience.

#### Acquisition of new knowledge and skills

This theme describes the students' learning in terms of acquiring new knowledge and skills. It includes several categories:

##### *Academic knowledge and skills*

To all of them, the acquisition of scientific knowledge at university has a positive meaning. Many students value the learning and knowledge acquired. For example, one student highlighted feminism as an important learning for her life:

I have deepened my expertise on Feminism in one lecture, in which we started to speak about Feminism and Human Rights. It was the best class that I had in my life. I liked too

much. Now I am learning a lot about Portuguese politics, an issue that I didn't understand. (Ariela, 18 years, Cape Verde)

Another student highlighted Constitutional Law as an essential learning in his degree:

Constitutional Law is linked to politics. For me, it was the most interesting issue of the degree and was the issue that I liked. I feel that I have a large domain in this issue. Even last year I gave explanations about Constitutional Law to my peers that arrived at the university. (Ezidoro, 22 years, Guinea-Bissau)

Becoming an HE student was seen as a rewarding experience through which they had the opportunity to learn new subjects and expand their knowledge (Nielsen, 2020). Some students stress the acquisition of academic skills, specifically concerning the search for information: 'I learned a lot of things and I have to be able to search for more information to increase my knowledge' (Nayma, 19 years, Mozambique).

### *Language skills*

Mastery of language, both written and spoken, is of crucial importance for academic success at all levels of education. However, this competence takes on even greater relevance in HE. Here, adhering to the rules of spelling, syntax, and semantics is not enough. In HE, it is also essential to master the codes of academic writing, often not taught but always required. If language mastery and the codes of academic writing are a challenge for many domestic students, it is even more so for students from Portuguese-speaking African countries. In these countries and outside the elite circles, Portuguese often takes on different forms than the Portuguese spoken in Portugal, which is considered the only legitimate and accepted version in academia, posing difficulties for some of these students (Doutor & Alves, 2020; Lima, 2018). In addition to this situation, there is the fact that, despite Portuguese being the official language, native languages, such as Creoles, are often used in everyday communication. The linguistic challenges that some students face are evident in Djalo's words.

I learned the language. In language, I know more now than before. Before I could not speak because my Portuguese was weak and I could not express what I wanted to say. Now I can do, almost everything. I am more comfortable. (Djaló)

### *New values and behaviours*

The acquisition of new values and behaviours is also mentioned by some participants. For example, one student stressed: 'I am learning to like being with people. I believe that is to learn to be a more social person. Beyond colleagues, I can meet more people' (Inussa, 19 years, Guinea-Bissau). Transitions can be seen as an opportunity for behavioural change (Elder et al., 2003). So, relationships in an academic context are essential to socialisation and integration as well as to academic success (Tinto, 2006; Wilson et al., 2014). Another student identified communication, socialization, and the establishment of new friendships as important learning experiences for her well-being and produced an identity transformation:

I learned to socialize with people. I learned to be more expressive, and more communicative. This experience improved my communication and expression with others. I am better now because I was very shy. (...) I learned to communicate with all people and which are the expressions that I should use to speak with persons of different ages. It was that that I learned. (Nayma, 19 years, Mozambique)



In interpersonal relationships, it is also possible to stress the capacity to respect, understand, communicate and value peoples' opinions: 'I improved my capability to better understand people. I learnt a lot. I learnt to value the person's opinion even when is not valid. I have to listen to people's opinions. Always. I have to respect people' (Ezidoro, 22 years, Guinea-Bissau).

Transitioning to Portuguese HE means, for many students, the acquisition of life skills and learning. In this regard, one student highlighted: 'By the way, it was not just learning from the course it was real life learning! Cooking, shopping, cleaning the house and I also have more freedom. It's slowly adapting, but it has been good' (Jair, 19 years, Cape Verde).

### *Money management*

Another skill mentioned by students refers to money management. It is, clearly, synonymous with a reduction in family dependency and, consequently, an increase in responsibility. This independence results in the need to make decisions by him/herself, which promotes the management of financial resources. In this sense, one student reveals:

Here I have to pay my bills, I have to be attentive to light and water. The cost of life is very different. Here I can only count on myself. Here I learned to make the bills to know where I can spend my money (Shaira, 19 years, Mozambique)

### *Time management and organization*

The acquisition of organization and management of time is an important biographical learning experience and skill to face personal, academic, and professional responsibilities that impact on the way students perceive themselves:

It was a personal change in the way that I now organize better my things and it allows me to have more time to enjoy others' things. Now, I am more organized in my responsibilities, which are studying and working (Ezidoro, 22 years, Guinea-Bissau).

Furthermore, individuals sharing their experiences and life stories have shaped their biographies and, consequently, transformed their identities (Nielsen, 2020).

## **(2) *The identity transformations***

Identity transformation refers to the representations of African students about themselves. It includes the following categories:

### *Becoming independent*

Transition to HE is a biographical and complex event that involves a broad range of learning, for example, in the way individuals see themselves. Thus, the transition process promotes new experiences, challenges and identity changes: 'I became more independent and here makes a person grow up because it's very different from my country and being with my parents. Here I have to deal with responsibilities' (Shaira, 19 years, Mozambique). In fact, the absence of relatives and the lack of their support played an important role in becoming independent (Casanova et al., 2020; Nielsen, 2020). Another student states: 'I changed a lot! I became one person more independent in terms of money management. I know what can I spend. So, that is independence. I gained independence here' (Kelly, 18 years, Cape Verde).

HE is seen as a positive learning and rewarding experience (Kurantowicz & Nizinska, 2013). The experiences told by students seem to affect the formation of student identity (Thunborg et al., 2013).

### *Becoming autonomous and responsible*

Students mentioned that they became more autonomous and responsible. When students leave their homes to enrol in HE it is common for them to make decisions, define goals and become more autonomous in the academic context (Nielsen, 2020; Ferreira et al., 2013). The following narrative underlines this issue:

Related to university, I developed a lot. The academy has consequences in our personal lives and it shifts many things. It was a big shift, today I have more maturity. They are difficult things to explain but it was a big shift in my personal life. The academy helps me a lot. (Djaló, 20 years, Guinea-Bissau)

It looks like their identities were reconstructed throughout their life experience:

Now I feel like a woman. I am not a girl. Now I have another kind of concern, I have a house and I have to buy food. (...) Now I think more about my future than I thought last year. I feel that I have grown up since I came here [Portugal]. I have responsibilities. (Shaira, 19 years, Mozambique)

Both quotations support Merrill's (2014) assumption that university can be seen as a transitional space in which occur learning transitions, encouraging students to reflect on past and present identities. In the context of biographical learning experiences, the reflection both about the events and themselves is crucial. This process generates both personal identity and coherence (Alheit, 2022).

According to Costa and Oliveira (2010), the acquisition of autonomy influences the academic adaptation of students. The next statement underlines this issue: 'University changed my mentality. I am feeling that I became a person with maturity. Now I spend my time studying. So, it changed me, now I am a hardworking student' (Ismael, 20 years, Guinea-Bissau).

Kurantowicz and Nizinska's research (2013) also stresses that becoming a student involves interrogating previous assumptions and routines. The transition to HE constitutes a 'turning point' in life trajectories since puts into test the resources and levels of maturity of students (Gresham & Clayton, 2011).

### *Becoming self-confident*

Our findings indicated that African students became more confident in their academic skills: '(...) it influenced a lot my life because I changed. Here I started to feel more confident' (Nayma, 19 years, Mozambique). The mastery of academic skills has particular influences on students' self-esteem and agency. The study developed by Tett and Maclachlan (2007) stresses the impact of HE on the trust and self-esteem of students. When students feel they have learnt, they present high levels of self-esteem, agency, and confidence in several situations and aspects of their lives (Turner & Tobbell, 2018).

I believe that it increased my skill of thinking and my way of seeing things changed. It gave me more strength to fight for my dreams and never give up. To give up is always my last option. Now I have that in my mind. So, we must fight for what we want. (Ismael, 20 years, Guinea-Bissau)

Previous research, such as the study of Bron and Lönnheden (2004) points out that mature students view their experience of HE as a democratic process since they gained self-confidence in their life and learning. The same seems to happen with these students.

Some participants indicated that their communication skills and the ability to respect the opinion of other persons are a result of this biographical learning experience:

Even the way of communicating changed. Ever since I have been here [Portugal], my mother and I can talk about many subjects. Now, we already discuss the situation of the world when before I stayed in silence. I was always quiet and accepted all the things that people said to me. Now I have an opinion and even one day when I was talking with my brother and questioned the reason for something he told to me: - Now you have to stop to discuss with me. Before you used to be quiet! (Dilson, 22 years, Guinea-Bissau)

This awareness of new learning and knowledge is shared by another student who is proud of herself for the fact that has more knowledge when talking with their parents: 'I feel different in terms of knowledge. Now I can have a conversation with them [my parents] with more knowledge' (Kelly, 18 years, Cape Verde). All these statements corroborate the results of several researches that show the role of HE in promoting self-confidence and intellectual, academic and interpersonal skills (Bron et al., 2014; Nielsen, 2020; Silva et al., 2017).

### *Becoming open-minded*

Some students mentioned that became more open-minded because they expanded their worldviews. After the HE, they have a new way of looking at the world:

I have grown up, now I see the world differently. I grew up as a person, daughter, student, and woman. I grew up a lot and I'm only 19 years old. Today I have a different worldview. Now I know how to achieve things, how to get things. I realize that I want to be independent soon. (Sadjo, 19 years, Guinea-Bissau)

Our findings are similar to the results of Nielsen (2020) about the change in the way Erasmus students see the world. In addition, this experience in Portugal can 'become a change to an individual's way of looking at oneself and the outside world' (p. 12). Some students also mention a different way of thinking:

Well, many things changed. My way of thinking also changed a lot. The way that I obtain my knowledge, the way that I obtain the information that is given to me. In other words, my brain is being educated. It is that. The way I saw things is not the same. I believe that is it. (Larisse, 19 years, Mozambique)

This statement illustrates what Maldonado-Torres (2007) labelled the coloniality of being. The coloniality of being refers to how people, and in this case, African students internalise the oppressive power structures produced by colonial history. This reflects the awareness of former colonial individuals of the Portuguese education system.

The confrontation with a new context, such as an academic context filled with new information and experiences entails, naturally, new ways of thinking or acting in students (Dalcin & Freire, 2019). This new way of thinking shows clearly the development of agency (Munford & Sanders, 2014). Agency refers to the way individuals think about the circumstances they are facing, and how they react on emotional and social levels. So, agency is connected with social structure (Ecclestone et al., 2010) and without awareness of the structural constraints, there is no agency.

### *Becoming more social*

Some students highlight the development of sociability. For example, one student mentioned: 'Now, I do not feel shy. Now I am more sociable because I relate and interact with people easily' (Ezidoro, 22 years, Guinea-Bissau). Another student identified communication, socialization, and establishment of new friendships as important learning experiences for her well-being and, consequently, identity: 'This experience improved my communication and expression with others. I am better now because I was very shy' (Nayma, 19 years, Mozambique). These examples illustrate how students constructed and reconstructed their perception of themselves in a different social context and support the idea that transitions and biographical learning experiences can lead to a change in behaviour, values (Elder et al., 2003) and identities (Gu & Schweisfurth, 2015; Johnston & Merrill, 2005).

Our findings also indicated that biographical learning may have significant effects on African students' identities. Through the analysis of student stories, we saw how identities were transformed (Bron, 2020). In summary, African students' identities were shaped through biographical experiences. Living and studying in a different country, students learn to manage money, pay their bills and organise their lives. In their words, they became independent. Students learned to deal with challenges, define goals and make decisions, which means becoming more autonomous. Connected with autonomy, they also acquire maturity through biographical learning in HE. Through the acquisition of academic knowledge and skills, students develop self-confidence in their knowledge. Few students highlight that HE contributes to a new way of looking at the world. They becoming open-minded. Another transformation is related to sociability. These biographical experiences allowed them to acquire and develop Portuguese language and communication skills. They defined themselves as more sociable due to this life transition.

To the assigned identity (Dubar, 1997) of HE students, participants claim a biographical identity defined by predominantly psychological traits. These traits are indicative of a personal development process stemming from new life experiences, where an adult identity seems to begin taking shape.

## **Final considerations**

Taking as a starting point that the biographical learning experience transforms the identity of individuals (Bron & Thunborg, 2017; Merrill, 2011), we were interested in understanding how the biographical learning experiences of students from Portuguese-speaking African countries reshaped their identity.

African students highlighted several biographical learning experiences. For them, the transition to HE was essential to the development of autonomy (Azevedo & Faria, 2001; Nielsen, 2020). In this sense, responsibility, sociability, and independence are some of the biographical learning experiences mentioned by students. Therefore, access to education as a biographical learning experience is experienced by these students as a life transition that transforms their learning and identity (Merrill, 2011; Thunborg et al., 2012). Identity must be seen as a continuous process of experience (Kondrup, 2014). Overall, this awareness of biographical learning experiences is an evident sign of agency in individuals' lives. Related to this issue, Berger and Luckmann (2010) reinforced the idea that identity is shaped and reshaped by social relations. This is what happened with these students who according to their representations became more sociable and communicative individuals.

Our findings also show that their biographical learning experiences enabled students not only a new view of the world but above all a new and different view of themselves (Ecclestone et al., 2010). The transition of these students to Portuguese HE cannot fail to take into account the specific situation of their home countries, all former Portuguese colonies. The common Portuguese language, in spite of the problems mentioned above, the availability of study grants, and special schemes for the entry of students from Portuguese-speaking African countries in HE may have underlying forms of neo-colonialism. Furthermore, several studies with African students in Portugal have reported economic and social difficulties (Doutor & Alves, 2020; Lima, 2018) and various forms of discrimination (Doutor et al., 2018; Kilomba, 2019). The colonial past as well as the covert prejudice against Portuguese-speaking African communities affects the way Portuguese society looks at African students (Vala et al., 2008), shaping their life experiences.

Biographical learning experiences can transform students' identities (Bron & Thunborg, 2017). The biographical learning experiences reported by the participants led them to claim an identity for themselves marked by attributes conventionally assigned to adults. It is as if the transition to HE, and the biographical learning it provides, accelerate the transition process to adulthood and the assumption of a new identity. At this point, other questions arise, demanding further research. Among them, we emphasize the importance of analysing the transition to HE of non-native students, including those from Portuguese-speaking countries, by employing an intersectional approach (Hancock, 2007; Walby et al., 2012). This approach will enable us to understand how multiple forms of discrimination like classism, sexism, and racism overlap and intersect in the making of their biographical learning experiences and identities.

## Declaration of conflicting interests

The authors declare no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship or publication of this article.

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