DEVELOPMENT OF STUDY AND COMMUNICATION COMPETENCES IN THE TRANSITION TO HIGHER EDUCATION

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Abstract

Research has been stressing the importance and relevance of intra and interpersonal competence development in the promotion of the student academic success and general wellbeing. In the transition to Higher Education, the individual is confronted with different challenges and changes to which he must try to answer in a correct way so as to reach a positive and satisfactory adaptation. Separation from family and friends, the adaptation to new tasks, new personal, social and academic demands are considered inherent difficulties to this process of transition.

As far as the academic dimension is concerned one of the most relevant difficulties is related to the adequacy of study strategies, used in secondary education, to the demands of the new context. The recent course changes concerning the Bologna Process demand the student the need to develop an active and more self-controlled learning process.

The consciousness of the importance that the student should become a real manager of his study and communicational competences, led the Student Support Service of the Polytechnic Institute of Leiria (SSS/PIL) to implement two training programmes focused on the following transverse competences: Communication and Emotional Intelligence and Study Methods and Time Management, with the duration of 9 hours each.

Those programmes, supervised on active methodologies, had, as their main objective, not only the development of adequate strategies in communication and interpersonal relationship, but also the achievement of strategies that contribute to improve the academic work and performance, stressing, thus, the importance of self-regulation to the success of the PIL student.

In this context, with this paper proposal, we want to show the structure and implementation as well the main results of the two training programmes developed by SSS, in the 4 campus of PIL, in which 126 students were involved.

In general, the programmes were assessed, very satisfactorily, by students who highlighted the importance of this type of training, especially in the context of the changes that took place, in Higher Education, due to the Bologna Process.

Keywords: Promotion of Communication Competences; Study Strategies; Emotional Intelligence; Self-regulated Learning.

1. INTRODUCTION

Stepping into Higher Education is a challenging transition period. Leaving family and friends behind, along with the adaptation to a great amount of new tasks and personal demands, both social and academic, are considered as inherent difficulties in the transition from Secondary to Higher education.

From the perspective of Schlossberg and collaborators [1], the organisation of adapting responses to this new development stage implies that in the three main phases of transition, (*moving in*, *moving through* and *moving out*), the young adult thinks, evaluates and activates his resources, aiming to promote a positive adaptation to the new academic set [2].

Based on the theory of psychosocial development of Schlossberg and collaborators [1], this transition consists of a process of change which reflects itself on four areas of the individual's development – routine, roles, interpersonal relationships and acknowledgment of own self and the world – forcing the student to assemble a variety of resources and strategies to deal with such changes. Consequently, and so that the individual can overcome any difficulties from the (new) academic context and experience an adapting transition, it becomes essential for him to organise his

developmental tasks while assembling a group of personal and interpersonal, communication, study and time management skills [3-7], among others.

In fact, the results of the investigation show that the promotion of transverse competences leads to the improvement of academic, social and professional performance, with a positive outcome on the perception of the general quality of life of the student [8-10].

Bearing in mind the importance for the student to become a proficient manager of such competences and be able to deal with his personal, social and academic issues, the Student Support Service of the Polytechnic Institute of Leiria (SSS/PIL) has been promoting several training programmes, with the objective to promote and improve the usage and development of adapting answers and strategies that endorse the achievement of greater success and the personal, academic and professional wellbeing of the student, considering the development of the transverse competences.

2. THE STUDENT SUPPORT SERVICE AT THE POLYTECHNIC INSTITUTE OF LEIRIA

The Polytechnic Institute of Leiria is a public institution of Polytechnic Higher Education which consists of five schools organised in four *Campi*: School of Education and Social Sciences – SESS (*Campus* 1), which dedicates its activity to the area of Social and Human Sciences, Communication and Preparation of Teachers; School of Technology and Management (STM), which teaches professionals in the areas of Engineering, Health Technologies, Managing, Marketing, Accounting and Solicitory; School of Health Sciences (SHS),offering courses in Nursing (this school and the STM consist *Campus* 2); School of Fine Arts and Design (SFAD) (*Campus* 3), that offers courses in Plastic Arts, Design and Performing Arts; School of Tourism and Maritime Tecnhology – STMT (*Campus* 4), which areas of study include Tourism, Managing and Touristic Marketing. The *Campi* 1 and 2 are based in Leiria, the *Campus* 3 in Caldas da Rainha and the *Campus* 4 in Peniche.

Since the academic year of 2007-08, the Student Support Service has been developing its activity in the four *Campi* of the PIL, and its main objective lies on three major areas: psychological and vocational support, personal and social guidance and supervision and psychopedagogical support. These intervention areas result from the main practical implications taken from a research that incorporated about 1000 students in their first year at the PIL. This research had the objective to evaluate the connection between the social support networks and the adaptation of the young student to Higher Education [11].

Regarding the psychological support and vocational guidance, the students are offered the possibility of attending a free and individual psychology session with the specialised supervision of three psychologists.

Students look for the SSS on their own, through colleagues/friends and family members, or are recommended by Teachers and/or Course Coordinators. The support requests consist mainly of emotional distress, depressions, relationship conflicts and academic struggle.

With the counselling and psychological guidance activities we intend to help the students to create alternate responses to multifaceted problems of personal and/or academic nature, by optimising different resources of personal, emotional, behavioural and social sources, in order to maximise their perception of wellbeing.

On the subject of personal and social guidance and supervision, the SSS has been promoting the development of activities for fresher students, facilitating their integration and adaptation to the institution and the city. This is where the Mentorship Programme lies, in which the advanced students are based, after a training provided by the SSS, and take on the essential role of welcoming and monitoring new colleagues.

Concerning the psychopedagogical support, the Service has been promoting the dynamization of training programmes for students in areas such as Communication and Emotional Intelligence (CEI), Study and Time Management Strategies (STMS) and Job Hunting and CV Elaboration Techniques. It is also important to refer to the implementation of Specific Academic Difficulties Support Groups (SADSG), which works in small groups aiming to help the students to overcome academic difficulties especially in the areas of Mathematics, Accountancy and English.

Ultimately, and since the investigation underlines the importance of nature and quality of pedagogical practice of Higher Education educators in the increase of the academic success of their students [12-15], the SSS has been promoting some training sessions to PIL teachers, based on the implications of current alterations of the Bologna Declaration in the teaching-learning process.

3. COMMUNICATION AND STUDY COMPETENCES: THEIR IMPORTANCE TO THE ADAPTATION AND SUCCESS OF THE STUDENT

In addition to the possibility of accessing a specialized scientific and professional education, the access into Higher Education consists of, for a great amount of students, an opportunity to develop their transverse competences, at an intellectual, personal and social level [4, 11, 16-19].

According to Matos [20], the social competence comprises behaviour aspects such as establishing friendships, starting and maintaining conversations, coping with anxiety, asking for help, resisting pressure, expressing affection and opinions, team work, dealing with conflicts or taking decisions. To express these behaviours, an individual needs to activate cognitive variables, possess the capacity to transform and use information, be aware of effective social behaviours and social attitudes, be able to "place himself in someone else's shoes" and identify and overcome social problems.

If on one hand the social and relationship competences are highly valued in a world where team work and multidisciplinary team work is increasingly the basis of social order and economy, on the other hand, the communication competences represent an essential tool for the personal, professional and academic wellbeing.

Concerning the communication competences, it is vital for the Higher Education student to develop his Emotional Intelligence, that is to say, to be aware of his own emotions and have the capacity to use them appropriately [21]. According to Goleman, cited by Cunha et al [22], the Emotional Intelligence can be observed in four broad dimensions: self- awareness, self-management, social awareness and social-skills.

The importance of communication skills and emotional intelligence has been strengthened by research, which has shown that socially competent individuals are more able to use contextual and personal resources to achieve a positive developmental outcome, establishing satisfactory interpersonal relationships, rewarding and adequate, and showing improved skills to find alternative solutions to problems and adversities, with positive reflections on the perception of quality of life in general [10, 23-25].

Along with the changes at the level of interpersonal and social relationships, the transition and adjustment to Higher Education also poses challenges for academic nature, which will lead the student to face the need to readjust his study and time management strategies.

The recent amendment of Courses in light of the Bologna Process, requires from the student the vital need to participate actively in his learning process, building and developing an increasingly self-regulated process as a factor intrinsically linked to his academic success [6, 10, 26-31].

From the perspective of Rosario and colleagues [32], to succeed in academic life, it is essential for the student to develop self-regulated learning strategies, perceptions of self-efficacy and commitment to education objectives, making it necessary to adopt active strategies of study that will help him to monitor and regulate the processes of learning, according to the objectives defined by himself.

Regarding the self-regulated learning, Zimmerman [33] sees it as a cycle consisting of three phases: the preliminary stage, where it is expected for the student to set academic targets, plan a strategy for intervention and assess the beliefs about his self-efficacy; the phase 2 - volitional control - which is considered a step in focusing attention, self-instruction and self-monitoring of the task. Finally the stage of self-reflection that characterizes the last moment of the cycle, in which the Higher Education student has the opportunity to verify if his strategic plan was successful or whether, perhaps, it needs some changes required to implement a more adaptive response to the difficulties felt and thus return to the preliminary stage and set new goals for another academic stage.

The use of study strategies is considered as one of the important factors for academic success, and it is possible to note that the students with better knowledge about the most effective strategies are able to manage their time in a more efficient manner, have greater control of their academic performance, ultimately achieve the expected results, lower their levels of anxiety and improve their intrinsic motivation [24, 30, 34, 35].

Looking at the ability of students to deal with the academic tasks as a preventive factor to succeed in this dimension of life, we consider important the fact that programmes of promotion of study strategies allow the development of skills related to self-knowledge, time management, active techniques of study, memorisation and the decrease of anxiety levels in situations of evaluation.

Moreover, the ability to deal effectively with the challenges posed to the student in the relational and communicational dimensions on their transition and adjustment to Higher Education,

also brings us to the need for an intervention in this area, in order to promote and optimise the use and development of adaptive responses and strategies, catalysts for greater success and personal and interpersonal wellbeing.

Helping the student to become an effective manager of his transverse communication competences, study and time management, has been the main objective of the training programmes implemented by the SSS/PIL which we will now present.

4. CONTEXTUALISATION AND PRESENTATION OF TRAINING PROGRAMMES

In this article we will present, in a concise style, the objectives and guidelines of the implementation of the following training programmes:
- Communication and Emotional Intelligence (CEI);
- Study and Time Management Strategies (STMS).

Both courses were organised in three sessions of 3 hours, a total of 9 hours each. At these sessions there were used student centred methodologies, based on practical exercises and brainstorming, as well as dynamic group activities such as role playing. We also used self-records, case studies, debates and exchange of experiences on the activities developed aiming to reflect on the concept(s) related to each session.

In order to reach the largest possible number of students, the training sessions were held, preferably, after work, though this timetable might have been changed in order to fulfil the specific needs of the participants. Certificates of participation were awarded only to the students who participated in two-thirds of the total duration of each programme.

The documentation related to the training programmes, copies of the slides and other documents used, was available online on the blog of SSS (http://www.sape.ipleiria.pt), which could be accessed by using a password provided at the first session.

We will also try to present some of the most relevant results from the involvement of 126 students in those programmes that were held in three of the IPL *Campi* the 1st semester of the academic year 2008/2009, during the months of October and November of 2008.

The advertisement of the programmes was made by sending an e-mail to all students, their Students Associations and Course Coordinators. They were also promoted on the SSS blog, and posters that were exhibited in all schools, canteens, bars, residences, medical services and social services.

4.1. Communication and Emotional Intelligence

With the programme of Communication and Emotional Intelligence (CEI) we aim to develop and put into effect a set of intra and interpersonal skills in the PIL students that we consider to be valuable for their overall harmonious development. It was our intention to develop activities and proposals of intervention that in some way would allow the student to become more capable of dealing effectively with the pressures and challenges posed by the context of Higher Education, not only at an academic level, but especially at an emotional, personal and social level.

The programme was organised around two main topics - Communication and Emotional Intelligence - its main objectives consisted of helping students to become aware of the behaviours and attitudes that they perform on their daily relationships with others, identifying and characterising the factors that influence the quality of communication and emotional intelligence and promoting the development of such competences.

Table 1 presents in detail the structure of this training programme:

(Table 1. Scheme of the Communication and Emotional Intelligence training sessions)

Sessions	Topics covered
S.1	• Communication o Verbal Communication and Non Verbal Communication o Facilitators and barriers to communication
S. 2	• Styles of communication and interpersonal relationship o Aggressiveness, Passiveness and Assertiveness • What is Emotional Intelligence?
S. 3	• Emotional Intelligence o Self-knowledge, Self-esteem and Self-control

	o Motivation, Empathy and Sociability
	o Limitations and Potentialities
	• Self-assessment and practical applications

On the whole, on this training programme we started by conducting a general approach to the concept of communication, to gradually focus our attention on the different forms and styles of communicating, and finally to examine the concept of Emotional Intelligence and its implications in interpersonal relationships. The approach of these issues was made by means of dynamic and interactive methodologies, supported by some theoretical explanations.

4.2. Study and Time Management Strategies

With the programme of Study and Time Management Strategies (STMS), we intended to foster an intervention which would maximize the students cognitive-motivational strategies for the development of processes of self-regulation, essential to the academic success in light of the guiding principles of Bologna.

It was our intention to carry out activities and proposals of intervention that, in some way, would allow optimising those strategies, seeking to promote the development of processes of self-regulation in the student, as well as competences of organisation, motivation, study strategies and management of time.

Indeed, several studies have pointed out the inadequacy of strategies of work and study, and the organisation of the times and the tasks assigned, as being associated with a good part of the rates of failure recorded [8, 11, 26-29, 32]. Beyond these factors, issues of motivation, difficulties in managing the evaluation anxiety and high levels of absence can also carry negative implications on scholar success.

This programme was organised around two major topics - Study Strategies and Time Management - its main objectives consisted of supporting students in the development of their capacity to identify the most appropriate study strategies to each situation and understand the advantages of each particular strategy, emphasising the role of a set of strategies and processes of cognitive, metacognitive and specific area nature associated to the capacities of changing, adapting and transferring of study strategies.

Table 2 presents in more detail the structure of this training programme:

(Table 2. Scheme of the Study and Time Management Strategies programme)

Sessions	Topics covered
S.1	• Development of Study and Time Management Strategies • Establishment of objectives for a short, medium and long term • Motivation and its implications for learning

S. 2	• Study Organisation:
	  o Defining and Planning Priorities
	  o Time management
	  o Taking notes
	• Learning Methods

S. 3	• Importance of study active techniques • SQ3R Method (survey, question, read, recite, review) • Anxiety Management in evaluation moments

On this programme of Study and Time Management Strategies, we started by identifying the constraints and difficulties experienced by most of the students at the level of study competences, and then we fostered a series of activities that promoted the development of the most appropriate and effective study and management of time strategies. Thinking of interactive and dynamic methodologies, our intention was also to work on some techniques to deal with anxiety in situations of evaluation.

4.3. Participants

In both programmes that we have just described a total of 126 students participated, distributed by the Campi of the PIL and training programmes:

(Table 3. Number of participant students by Campus and Training Programme)

	Campus 1 SESS	Campus 2 STM + SHS	Campus 4 STMT	Total
Communication and Emotional Intelligence	45	19	12	76
Study and Time Management Strategies	29	16	5	50
Total	74	35	17	126

As shown in Table 3, the highest number of students participated in the programme developed in *Campus* 1 (a total of 74), followed by *Campus* 2 (with a total of 35) and finally *Campus* 4 (with 17 students). The CEI programme included 76 students and the STMS programme included 50 participants.

4.4. Main Results

For purposes of evaluation and monitoring of the programmes, we used a Training Evaluation Scale (TES), adapted from the Programme Implementation Assessment Scale (PIAS) by Jardim & Pereira [9].

The TES allows the student to appreciate the quality of the programme based on four dimensions: (1) the nature of the training (2) performance of the trainer, (3) organisation of training (4) promotion of the development of competences and an overall assessment item.

The instrument consists of 19 items, symbolised on a Likert scale of 5 points, in which 1 qualifies "Highly Unsatisfied ", 2 " Unsatisfied ", 3 "Indifferent", 4 "Satisfied" and 5 " Highly Satisfied".

Based on the sum of all the answers we can deduce the degree of satisfaction of the students facing all the dimensions of the programme. It also included an open question, in order for students to submit comments and suggestions of other topics that they would like to deepen in the future.

In order to understand a little better the extent to which the training programmes actually contribute to the predicted development of competences, TES includes two items that seek to evaluate the perception that students have on the degree of development of those competences before and after the training.

The TES was completed, anonymously and confidentially, by the participants, in the last session of each programme, which explains why the number of completed questionnaires does not match the number of participants. If some students were not really present in the last session, others left just before the end, without completing the evaluation.

The TES for the Communication and Emotional Intelligence (CEI) programme was completed by 55 students and the TAS for the Study and Time Management Strategies programme (STMS) by 39 participants, a total of 94 questionnaires answered.

We will now present the average values in each of the dimensions of the TES, in the two training programmes, data systematised in Table 4.

The results are interpreted considering the unit, so a rating between 2.5 and 3.4 will be classified as Indifferent, a rating between 3.5 and 4.4 as Satisfactory and above 4.5 Highly satisfactory.

(Table 4. Average values obtained from the 4 dimensions of the Scale for the Assessment of Training)

Dimensions	Items	Mean values	
		CEI	STMS
1. Nature of Training	1.1 – Content	4,3	4,3
	1.2 – Topic Interest	4,4	4,6
	1.3 – Theoretical knowledge	4,1	4,1
	1.4 – Practical knowledge	4,5	4,3
	1.5 – Content applicability	4,3	4,5
2. Performance of Trainer	2.1 – Clarity of explanations	4,7	4,8
	2.2 – Learners motivation	4,6	4,7
	2.3 – Relationship with trainees	4,8	4,9
	2.4 – Encouraging participation	4,6	4,7
	2.5 – Demonstrated knowledge	4,7	4,8

3. Organisation of Training	3.1 – Available documentation	4,0	3,9
	3.2 – Use of educational resources	4,2	4,1
	3.3 – Quality of facilities	4,0	4,1
	3.4 – Programme length	3,5	3,7
	3.5 – Training timetable	3,9	3,8
4. Competences Development	4.1 – Competences at beginning of training	3,5	3,6
	4.2 – Competences at end of training	4,3	4,3
	4.3 – Stimuli for deepen	4,5	4,5
5. Global Evaluation		**4,7**	**4,6**

Considering the global evaluation of the programmes (item 5), both the participants in the CEI (M= 4.7) and the students involved in the STMS (M = 4.6), expressed their satisfaction with the training.

The comments left by the students involved in the training stressed: "Exceeded expectations", "More of these initiatives are welcome. Keep up!" and "Carry on with projects like this because they help students to fit in."

Analysing the data relative to the dimension "nature of training" we verify that while in the STMS programme students seemed to be very pleased with the interest of topic (M= 4.6), the CEI programme pleased them for the acquired practical knowledge (M= 4.5). Concerning the theoretical knowledge learned, the students expressed their satisfaction (M= 4.1) in both programmes. In addition, the contents of the two programmes had a satisfactory evaluation (M= 4.3 for both) by the students involved.

Regarding the STMS programme, students were highly satisfied with the applicability of acquired contents (M= 4.5). In the CEI programme, the average obtained in the applicability of acquired contents is slightly lower (M= 4.3), yet, still qualitatively classified as satisfactory.

Reflecting on the results for the performance of trainer, we realise that this dimension has the higher averages, and that students were highly satisfied with the clarity of the explanations (M= 4,7 in CEI and M= 4.8 in STMS), with the ability to motivate learners (M= 4.6 in CEI and M= 4.7 in STMS) and encourage participation (M= 4.6 in CEI and M= 4.7 in STMS) and with the demonstrated expertise in the subject (M= 4.7 in CIE and M= 4.8 in SMTS).

On this dimension we would like to highlight the average values in the "relationship with the trainees" (M= 4.8 in CIE and M= 4.9 in STMS), item that almost reaches the highest value of the scale. As a footnote, we would like to stress that in the 3 PIL's *Campi*, the programmes were developed by three different trainers.

The item relative to the organisation of training registers lower levels than those previously mentioned. The assessment of the length of both training programmes had the lowest average values of the entire scale (M= 3.5 in CEI and M= 3.7 in STMS). The students seemed to be less satisfied with the 9 hours length of each programme, generally seen as insufficient, and reinforced this assessment through their comments, which stressed the need for a longer duration of each training proposal.

With a little higher value and in a satisfactory level of assessment (M= 3.9 for CIE and M= 3.8 in SMTS) are the training timetable. Even with regard to organisational aspects of the training, students are satisfied with the teaching resources used (M= 4.2 in CEI and M= 4.1 in STMS), with the quality of facilities (M= 4 in CEI and M= 4.1 in STMS) and also with the documentation that they had access to (M= 4 in CEI and M= 3.9 in STMS).

Finally, with regard to the comparison between the average values of the two items that assess the perception of the competences development before (item 4.1) and after (item 4.2) the training, we see that as a whole, students thought that their competences of CEI were satisfactory (M= 3.5 before beginning the training and M= 4.3 after the completion). Also regarding the STMS programme, the average values are considered satisfactory (M= 3.6 at the start of training and M= 4.3 at its final), and in both cases there is a slight increase of the average after the participation of the students in the corresponding programmes.

Based on the application of Student's t test, we realise that the difference between the averages is statistically significant (t= -8,317, p= 0000 in CEI; t= -5,654, p= 0.000 in STMS), suggesting that the students noticed an improvement in the degree of development of their competences at the end of both training programmes.

From the analysis of this data, it is possible to be said that the participants considered these programmes of great importance to the development of study strategies, viewed as an important tool

for their academic performance as well as relational skills and emotional intelligence, recognised as essential to the success and personal, social and professional wellbeing.

5. CONCLUSIONS

Analysing the results previously presented, it appears that, in both programmes, the discussed themes, the used methodologies and resources were, in general, evaluated in a very positive way by the participants, who were satisfied, and recognized its usefulness.

The students perceived a positive impact of both programmes in the development of their competences, especially related to study strategies and time management skills, and the Study and Time Management Strategies programme contributed to optimize the capabilities of the students at the PIL, in a sense that these become more capable of self-regulating the process of learning throughout life.

In the course of the involvement in the Communication and Emotional Intelligence programme, the students also seem to have perceived a development of their communication and intra and interpersonal relationships skills.

In this context, we noted that the focus on methodologies based on the student's use of practical exercises, role playing, share of ideas and debate, enabled a better adaptation in all activities, allowing their involvement in the process of training, something highly treasured for those who participated in both programmes.

Despite considering that the topics initially proposed, were appropriately discussed and the essential competences developed, the students suggest that each topic can be focused for a little more time and that the programmes may have a slightly longer duration in order to maximise the use and practice of the developed competences.

Therefore, we believe that the trainings here presented have reached their objectives, and are generally very positively evaluated by their participants who felt motivated to engage in future programmes in this field and highlighted the recognition of the importance of a more pro-active posture in their personal, social, academic and professional development.

Considering that the construction of transverse competences helps people to deal with personal, school and work problems, it seems, then, that their promotion and development may be an important tool in the primary prevention of the general welfare of PIL's students, something that the SSS has been trying to accomplish.

One of the aspects to develop in the future is the need to rethink the length of the programmes, as well as the methodology for evaluating their impact in the performance of students. If on the one hand, the evaluation of the students about the differences felt is important, on the other hand, it reflected a value related to their personal perception and satisfaction. Therefore it is important to define some criteria for measuring the competences of the student before beginning the training, so that after it may be possible to verify to what extent their participation is related positively with the change of the competences in analysis.

Another challenge for the future is intrinsically linked to the need to develop, in future actions, the accurate adjustment of the programmes to the diversity of the offer of Courses taught in the PIL's Schools. Consequently, it's SSS intent to continue boosting these training proposals, innovating and adapting them, on one hand, to the requirements of the diversity of the student population of this Institute, and on the other, to the challenges of (new) strategies for teaching-learning in particular, and the labour market in general.

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