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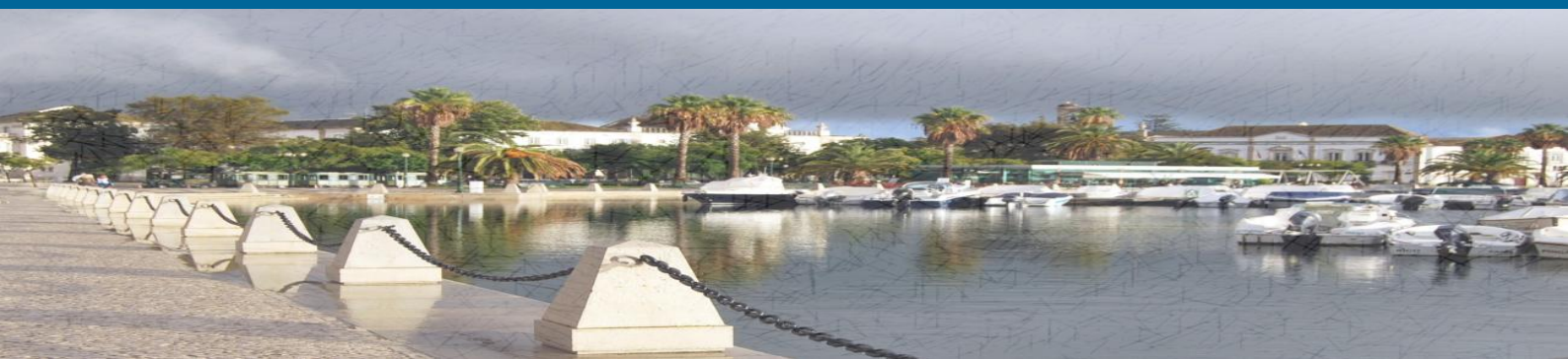
# **«Non-traditional students in Higher Education: Looking beyond (in) success and dropout»**

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# **Non-Traditional Adult Students at the Polytechnic Institute of Leiria (PIL): challenges for the Student Support Service (SSS)**

*Graça Seco, Luís Filipe, Patrícia Pereira & Sandra Alves*

*Serviço de Apoio ao Estudante, Instituto Politécnico de Leiria  
Student Support Service, Polytechnic Institute of Leiria*

## **Abstract**

In the last few years, the expansion and diversification of the higher education system has been noticeable. Since 2006, the Non-traditional Adult Students (NTAS) have been increasing in Portuguese higher education institutions. These are students that due to the most diverse reasons had to leave the formal education system and present certain socioeconomic, motivational academic, familiar and professional characteristics that reflect different difficulties from those students who have come straight from Secondary Education.

Due to being away from the system for some time, the NTAS show, amongst the most felt difficulties, lack of routines and certain study competencies that were not kept or sufficiently trained, which frequently makes them feel less competent or able to deal efficiently with the challenges that they face. They also show difficulties when it comes to time management and the suitability of study techniques to be used when facing the normal demands of higher education.

The promotion of these competencies constitutes one of the ways of helping the student to deal with new academic, personal and social challenges; so the student will be more able to answer, in an adequate manner, to the demands of higher education.

Having said that, with this presentation our goal is to show some of the challenges that have been part of our daily experience with the NTAS in the Student Support Service (SSS) from the PIL, both in psychological consultations and in the transversal competences development. We will also present a recent project which aims to build an online education program directed at this target audience.

Aware of the characteristics and difficulties of NTAS, the SSS has been developing intervention procedures that help these students to overcome the initial obstacles and to develop the necessary competences to ensure academic success and overall well-being.

## **Introduction**

In recent years, we have been witnessing an expansion and diversification of higher education system, and the Non-Traditional Adult Students (NTAS) have been scoring a growing presence in Portuguese institutions of Higher Education. These are students who, for various reasons, have left the formal education system and have certain characteristics (demographic, motivational, academic, family and professional) that are reflected in different difficulties as opposed to young people coming directly from Secondary Education.

Experiencing a transition in their life cycle with differential characteristics compared to their younger counterparts, in this article we intend to give an account of the characteristics of

NTAS in the polytechnic educative system, and some strategies developed by the Student Support Service (SSS) from the Polytechnic Institute of Leiria (PIL) to promote their adaptation, success and well-being along their path in this institution.

### **What changes with entry to higher education?**

Apart from the possibility of scientific and professional training, entry into Higher Education (HE) is understood, by many students, as a promotion of their intellectual, personal and social development as well.

In this lifecycle transition, the individual is confronted with a series of challenges and changes, to which they should seek to respond appropriately and effectively, in order to experience a positive and successful adaptation.

Recently, we have been witnessing a diversification of the HE system which hosts a growing number of individuals with different educational careers and life trajectories, compared with the so-called traditional students, such as the Over 23s Program beneficiaries, also designated Non-Traditional Adult Students (NTAS). In addition to being located in a higher age group of students, these adults tend not to follow the sequential cycles of formal education, for example in most cases, they have already entered the world of work and have family and social responsibilities.

However, both for the young who finished secondary education and for the adult who has left school for some time and who decide study in HE in the light of Bologna, experience means a set of tasks that require new academic study skills and higher levels of autonomy, participation and involvement from the student, engaging it in a more proactive and self-regulated learning process (Adams & Smith, 2004; Seco *et. al.*, 2008; Seco *et. al.*, 2012). The self-regulation of learning can be defined as:

"an active process in which subjects set goals that guide their learning trying to monitor, regulate and control their cognition, motivation and behaviour in order to achieve them" (Rosario 2004, p. 37).

Several studies point out that students tend to be self-regulating people, more determined and persistent in the course of their learning, more motivated and self-driven, plan their behaviour based on the objectives set previously; often use strategies for deeper studying and are more competent in managing their learning experiences, and have more strategies to monitor and control important aspects of their learning process. They also exhibit lower levels of exhaustion and stress and a more optimistic attitude, which seems to favour academic success in particular and well-being in general (Costa, 2007; Heikkilä *et. al.*, 2011; Huet, 2011; Valadas, Gonçalves & Sparks, 2010; Zimmerman & Schunk, 2001).

To achieve this success, it is necessary that both the student who comes from secondary education and the non-traditional adult student, adapt their strategies and methods for studying the characteristics of the current HE, rebuilding and adopting active strategies of study and engaging in a dynamic, meaningful and creative learning process (Rosário, Pienda & Núñez, 2006; Seco *et. al.*, 2012).

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**Non-traditional adult students (NTAS): characteristics and difficulties**

Since 2006 the NTAS have become a growing presence in Portuguese institutions of HE, due to the promulgation of the 64/2006 Law, that regulates the entry of individuals older than 23, with certain features considered non-traditional in these institutions. These are students who, for various reasons, have left the formal education system and have certain characteristics. For Oliveira and colleagues (2010), the NTAS are at least one of the following:

- are older students who have interrupted their studies at some point in their life;
- been away from education for a long time, having no previous experience of HE;
- have a paid professional activity;
- globally have financial autonomy;
- assume economic and family commitments to whom they have to respond;
- have social responsibilities in the communities where they live;
- seek higher education for their personal, social, professional and / or a certified training.

Contrary to what happens with "traditional" students, studies involving the processes of transition, adaptation and success in this new HE population are still at an early stage of prosecution (Batista, 2009; Correia & Mesquita, 2006, 2008; Correia & Sarmento, 2007; Oliveira et al., 2010; Pires, 2008; Soares et al., 2010).

Already, some of the major difficulties and changes in several dimensions of their lives have been identified.

The need to reconcile the numerous life roles (family, professional, academic and community) is one of the most demanding challenges that these students face and are often the cause of abandonment or withdrawal from college. However, despite the difficulty felt in that reconciliation, life experience is seen by adults as a knowledge base that will enhance their learning, and may even put them in an advantageous position.

In addition, adult learners seem to reveal more clearly defined goals in their desire to enter HE, being more focused and working harder to achieve their goals, they are more intentional and motivated to learn, taking their studies more seriously, looking for a degree of enhancement in their personal, social or professional life and/or a certified training; globally show greater intrinsic motivation, willpower and effort to regain some study strategies they deem no longer to possess (Crawford, 2004; Cured & Smith, 2008; Luzius, 2002 ; Oliveira *et al.*, 2010; Soares *et al.*, 2010).

In short, the problems most frequently reported by NTAS at the academic dimension level focus, especially, around time management and the adequacy of study and concentration strategies to use, given the requirements set by the dynamics of the course classes they are attending. Thus, it seems that HE institutions should provide, to NTAS, training programs for time management and study skills in order to help them overcome the initial hurdles more easily and develop the necessary skills to achieve academic success.

The promotion of these skills is one way to help the individual to deal effectively with new academic, personal and social challenges. By being able to identify and (re) formulate

goals, overcome obstacles, identify individual capabilities and social support networks, the student will be better able to respond adequately to the demands and challenges of everyday life. Developing soft skills in NTAS which promote success and well-being has to be another topic of work for the SSS.

## **Presentation of the Student Support Service (SSS) of the Polytechnic Institute of Leiria (PIL)**

The PIL is a public institution of HE located on the central coast of Portugal which comprises of five schools, organized into four *campi*, as follows:

**Table 1** – Schools and *Campi* of PIL

<b>School</b>	<u>ESECS - Leiria</u> School of Education and Social Sciences	<u>ESTG - Leiria</u> School of Technology and Management	<u>ESSLei- Leiria</u> School of Health Sciences	<u>ESAD.CR – Caldas da Rainha</u> School of Fine Arts and Design	<u>ESTM - Peniche</u> School of Tourism and Maritime Technology
<b>Training Areas</b>	Teacher training, Social Sciences, Communication	Technology, Marketing, Management, Health Technology	Health, Nutrition, Speech Therapy	Fine Arts, Design, Sound and Image, Theatre	Marine Biology, Food Technology, Tourism, Tourism Management, Tourism Marketing

During 2012/2013 the PIL has been attended by about 11,000 students, of which 188 are considered NTAS.

Constituted as a Functional Unit of the PIL in 2008, the Student Support Service (SSS) has been developing its activities with students from the 5 schools, and the scope of its assistance is focused on three major lines:

- Guidance and Personal and Social Monitoring: promotes student activities for the newcomer, to facilitate their integration and adaptation to the institution and the city, enhancing the monitoring of new colleagues by students in more advanced years.
- Psychopedagogical: aims to support the difficulties in specific areas previously identified, including through Competence Promotion Programs, which have focused on areas such as Communication and Emotional Intelligence, Management Study and Time Management, Conflict and Stress and Job Search Techniques and Preparation of Curriculum Vitae.
- Psychological Support and Vocational Guidance: aims to help students develop alternative responses to multifaceted problems both personal and / or academic, optimizing resources from different sources to support personal, emotional, behavioural and social dimensions, in order to maximize their perception of well being.

The target audience of SSS has been mainly the "traditional" student, but more recently there has been an increasing number of requests for NTAS whose nature we will describe further.

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### **Intervention with NTAS**

As already mentioned, most of the difficulties experienced by NTAS highlight the lack of certain routines and study skills that were not kept or sufficiently trained, which can lead to not feeling competent and able to deal effectively with the challenges posed by HE, reasons why they may feel insecure, anxious and concerned about their lack of ability to learn. The resumption of studies may bring about strange and frustrating situations, feelings exacerbated by the belief shared by many adults that age influences the ability to learn (Kasworn, 2003, 2005; Oliveira, 2007).

Thus, the vast majority of NTAS feel the need to develop time management strategies and study skills to help them reconcile the various roles they play in life, and these requests for help come to us almost always in the context of the psychological support .

Thus, the use of psychological support by the NTAS is due mainly to problems with adapting to the new reality of HE and its requirements, which affect the mobilization of more specific skills not always sufficiently trained or perceived. These difficulties lead to the need for a readjustment of expectations and redefining priorities, which often involves work in terms of strategies for time management and study skills and the sense of competence, taking into account the objectives defined. Issues related to self-esteem and self-confidence, managing anxiety and depression as well as problems arising from the need to reconcile the numerous roles, also mobilize the search for psychological support by these students.

Despite the difficulties experienced by NTAS transversely described in the literature, applications received in SSS turn out to be quite specific. In addition their availability for more lengthy support is very limited.

Knowing, however, that students who use the most effective strategies for time management and study skills, seem to feel more control over their academic achievement, and ultimately achieve the expected results, experience lower levels of anxiety and improve intrinsic motivation (Adams & Smith, 2004; Pereira, et al., 2005; Seco et al. 2012), SSS has been promoting training in the development of these skills in order to help the NTAS to deal effectively with the new academic, personal and social intrinsic. With the *Time Management and Study Training* (lasting for 9 hours distributed over 3 sessions) it has been sought to promote the empowerment of their performance through the implementation of training skills and cognitive-motivational strategies and facilitating the processes of self-regulation, to promote their academic success in the light of the paradigms of the Bologna Process.

One of the great difficulties of NTAS to be able to participate in these training actions stems from the fact that they take place between 18h and 21h, during which the NTAS are normally in school. If they are conducted in daytime they also cannot participate because the NTAS often find themselves working. Given these difficulties, the SSS in conjunction with the Unit for Distance Education (UED) of PIL is finalizing an online training program in Time Management that will start being streamlined in the 2nd semester of the school year of 2012 -2013.

Through the sharing of theoretical information in conjunction with the completion of a series of practical exercises, the training is aimed at supporting the NTAS in developing their capacities to identify and use strategies to manage time more appropriately for each situation in order to achieve the best possible balance between the various responsibilities and requirements.

So, this training proposal, which has duration of 5 weeks, is intended to foster the development of strategies that promote a more optimistic and effective time management, covering topics such as: goal setting, time management, prioritization and planning activities. This training is intended to develop skills on how to properly manage time and organize study; establish objectives in the short, medium and long term; properly set priorities and deal with time "distracters".

In summary, adequate strategies to encourage study in HE, promoting the development of support networks between teachers and students and among students themselves, towards a more personalized monitoring of learning. Thereby maximizing the cognitive and interpersonal potential in each and every one to pursue their academic life with satisfaction, managing as well as possible their personal and institutional resources.

## **Conclusions**

Considering the many paradigm shifts that have happened recently, more and more higher education institutions (HEIs) find themselves faced with new and demanding challenges that lead them to engage in a holistic perspective of the student. Both for the ones coming from Secondary Education as to the NTAS, such perspectives involve looking carefully at how they interact with the HEI they are attending and how they live and experience the challenges and opportunities that will arise. Indeed, a growing number of investigations has stressed the assumption that a good adaptation of HE to the student involves dynamic combination of several factors: the institutional level (services, material and social resources, organizational climate), personal (self, style coping, sense of autonomy, soft skills, etc.) and external variables (family climate, socioeconomic status, etc.). It appears to be, the promotion of the overall student development, one of the central tasks of the HE, which, by its progressive massification and internationalization is receiving more increasingly diverse students coming from multiple and heterogeneous contexts.

In the case of the PIL, the intervention developed by SSS with NTAS is still recent and therefore without significant numbers. However, and given the few cases studied, it seems fair to say that both the training developed as well as the psychological support seem to have contributed to improvement in strategies of time management and study skills and student well-being in general.

Thus, it is our intention to continue to streamline training proposals in the development of soft skills, innovating and adapting them to the requirements and characteristics of NTAS, as is the case with our online training already underway. We will also continue to provide psychological support in times more compatible with the availability of this target audience.

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Taking advantage of the NTAS's life and professional experience, it is still our intention to promote actions which allow them to share this with younger students, to promote their empowerment and personal development.

Assuming that, like other life transitions, entry into the HE confronts the individual with multiple requirements and numerous challenges in the personal, interpersonal, social, academic and professional spheres, it's important that HEIs seek specialized support for their students, and especially NTAS, to respond, if possible in a preventive manner, to the specific needs of diverse students who increasingly come to HE and the need to manage effectively their personal, interpersonal, academic and social competences.

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