LEARNING BY DOING? THE CHALLENGE OF SUPERVISING INTERNATIONAL MASTER AND PHD STUDENTS

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Abstract

In the last decades, the number of international students in Portuguese Higher Education Institutions (HEI) has increased substantially. Even though the number of international students, and so intercultural supervision experiences, are in expansion, the reflection about associated supervisor learning experiences is still dispersed and isolated. In this qualitative study, sustained on ethnographic reflections of two junior scholars supervising master and doctoral students from Portuguese speaking developing countries of the African, Caribbean and Pacific Region (ACPR), key challenges associated to the supervision of international students are explored.

Considering the fourth objective of the United Nations Agenda 2030 "Better Education for All", more specifically the target 4.b., focusing on increasing the number of scholarships for students from developing countries to attend higher education, it is expectable an increase in the number of international students attending Portuguese HEI. It is hoped that this study will create opportunities for innovation within programmes and strategies to support international students (and even HEI), who should be seen also as potential future partners of and for Portuguese HEI.

Keywords: International Cooperation, Supervision, Higher Education, Professional Development, Pedagogical Strategies, master and PhD students.

1 INTRODUCTION

The last two decades represent unprecedented times for higher education institutions (HEI), very much due to globalization and internationalization processes promoted by the Bologna declaration (1999), the Lisbon process (2000) and subsequent changes of these processes, namely the creation of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) and the European Research Area (ERA) capable of attracting academics and students from all over the world [1-5]. However, according to the European Commission [6], international academic cooperation is rather fragmented, limited to isolated initiatives of some academics or research groups, and not necessarily associated with national or institutional strategies. In trying to compensate this shortcoming, the Commission presented its internationalisation strategy [6], which outlined three key priorities for countries and institutions in developing their internationalisation strategies: international student and staff mobility; internationalisation and improvement of curricula and digital learning; and strategic cooperation, partnerships and capacity building [2]. This paper attempts to shed light on issues related with graduate students’ internationalisation and improvement of their learning and research experience as well as on strategic cooperation and capacity building developed among students, supervisors and HEI.

In this sense, closely articulated with internationalization processes of HEI [3], protocols between HEIs in developed countries and organizations from developing countries have grown substantially [7]. As a consequence, and also due to national and institutional strategies aiming at targeting internationalization activities, the number of international students in Portuguese HEI in the last decades has also increased significantly [8-10], particularly students coming from the Portuguese Speaking Developing Countries of the African, Caribbean and Pacific Region (ACPR) – i.e. Angola, Guinea-Bissau, São Tomé and Príncipe, Mozambique and East-Timor, as well as Brazil [9].

At the theoretical and conceptual level, this paper lays on two distinct but complementary contributions: the internationalization of higher education and all its challenges and opportunities associated to this process, as well as the consequences it entails for HEI and students; and the analytical framework for international cooperation and development. Interlinking these two lines of
thought is challenging considering their complexity and multidisciplinarity. Nevertheless, the object of this study focus on a particular group of students: those students coming from ACPR countries to pursue a master or a PhD in Portugal – countries with which Portugal has a long history on bilateral cooperation agreements and protocols [11-13]. In this context, internationalisation as well as international cooperation between these countries (bilateral cooperation) is thus capable of being seen as an instrument of foreign (and national) policy [12].

This paper – as well as the authors’ experiences – also find ground on the model of experiential learning developed by the psychologist John Dewey (1859-1952), as consider it, as referred in the literature as an “established aspect of youth work practice” [8, 10]. According to Dewey, learning consists of a dialectical process between action and reflection, integrating experience. In this sense, learning happens mainly through participation in activities and tasks [14].

International students who come to pursue a Master or a PhD in Portugal enroll in Portuguese HEI through two main ways: i) special access schemes framed by scholarships, mainly financed by the Portuguese Cooperation Agency (Camões, I.P.) and/or by protocols signed with national state agencies, and other organizations such as universities; or through ii) direct application (by public notice), gaining the status of international students, i.e. self-financed. At this stage, important aspects should be highlighted. First, and although we do not have exact numbers on the percentage of self-financed students from ACPR countries who enroll in Portuguese HEI, we know that they represent the elite of their country’s population. In parallel, it is also important to refer that international master students from non-European countries pay more tuition fees than national and international European students, which makes this group of candidates a highly appealing target for Portuguese HEI and their internationalization policies1. However, even though the number of international students, and so intercultural supervision experiences are in expansion, the dissemination of associated supervisor learning experiences is still dispersed and isolated, and there is no disseminating and integrative policy in Portuguese HEI2. In fact, one of the recurring identified risks in this domain concerns the dissemination of a ‘Western research perspective’. Therefore, in order to enhance the quality of all advanced research and training experiences in this field, development agencies [15, 16] recommend best-practices and experience sharing. Portuguese Speaking Developing Countries of the ACPR are an interesting case of study because despite sharing a common language (Portuguese), empirical data evidence serious challenges in overcoming cultural differences, empowering the supervision experience of Master and PhD programmes.

The following sections attempt to explore these issues, interlinking their specificities and challenges from the perspective of two Professors in a Portuguese HEI which strongly appeals to the income of international students. Ultimately, we hope to contribute to deepen research in this area, to improve our (and others) supervision experience, while drawing attention for an issue that both at national and institutional levels deserve (more) attention.

2 METHODOLOGY

Methodologically, the paper relies on a qualitative study based on two autoethnographic reflections [5, 7, 12, 13, 17], corresponding to each author of the present article. Both authors are junior scholars being supervisors of ACPR students in a Portuguese public university since 2015 and 2017 respectively. The individual reflections include two parts: a self-description as supervisor and the identification of supervision difficulties that emerged with international students. These autoethnographical narratives were sustained on personal document analysis (e.g. synthesis of the supervision meetings, email exchange with supervised students, some audio records transcriptions of specific supervising sessions, which were previously authorized by the implicated students and even discussions and talks with the students after the master or the PhD was concluded). The adopted reflection approach is conceptually supported on the Model of Situated Perspective on teacher learning and professional development [18] and consists on a follow up strategy of personnel development initiated with [19].

1 In fact, this last aspect has been subject to controversial debates and critical discussions in Portugal, namely in terms of assessing the skills and the quality of students coming from ACPR countries (when compared to national ones), and the requirements and criteria related to recruitment processes; however, this topic goes beyond the scope of this article.

2 Similar findings regarding the lack of internationalization policies to recruit international academics were reported in the work of [2] T. Carvalho, S. Cardoso, S. Diogo, C. Sin, and P. Videira, “Institutional policies to attract international academics in an adverse context,” in International Mobility of Academics, H. Futao, Ed., ed Dordrecht: Springer., In Press.
Due to anonymity reasons, the name or any possible identifications aspects of the students are never revealed, only their nationality. Findings drawn up on these data cross compared with the literature review.

## 3 RESULTS

In this section, the profile of the two supervisors is described briefly (Table 1) as well as some of the identified challenges. A systematic collaborative content analysis [20, 21] of the individual reflections is still in progress (as some of the supervisions are also still ongoing) and the emergent results will be presented at the conference.

### 3.1 Lopes, Betina

Betina holds a 5 years Bachelor degree in Biology and Geology teaching at presecondary and secondary level (2004). She started to supervise master and PhD students in 2015, in two different Portuguese public Universities, two years after finishing her PhD in Education. However, her interest for students coming from different cultural and institutional backgrounds is previous to her responsibility as academic supervisor. Two major motivations can be pointed out. The first one goes back to her child memories. Betina was born in Germany and moved to Portugal when she was ten years old. Her adaptation was a difficult process and she remembers well how the lack of 'local' knowledge leads to communicational problems and how this, in some cases, influenced the perception her classmates and teachers held of her as a student. Challenges associated to cultural and communication aspects are those that she herself experienced most both as a student and as a supervisor.

The second experience reports to two-month teacher training experience in East Timor in 2010. Again, several specific episodes reinforced her opinion on the fact that learning and teaching processes that imply an international/intercultural dimension represent working contexts with supplementary difficulties, which deserve a close attention if one aims to truly achieve quality and inclusive education for all. As result of these personal concerns she was been working as a volunteer tutor since 2015 of Timorese students, supporting, for example, the task of literature reviews (systematization of information and writing) and mediation with academic services. So far she contacted with three Timorese students (student 1: 2 year support, finished PhD; student 2: 1 year support, finished master; student 3: 6 month support, returned to his/her home country without finishing).

So far Betina has supervised both national (3 PhD, ongoing) and international students (1 PhD, finished, 4 ongoing), all in the role of co-supervisor. 1 international student (Timorese) accomplished his/her degree with the support of a fellowship from the government while the other 4 are attending the PhD at their own expenses. Pursuing a PhD in Portugal, after the implementation of the Bologna process, implies the attendance of a specific Programme, being the first year entirely dedicated to attendance of curricular units and passing the assignments, including one curricular unit in which the learning product is the research project [5].

The major challenge that Betina puts out in her reflection relates to the 5 international students with whom she has contacted so far and who have struggled/are struggling with selection and systematization of information as well as academic writing using their own words. In order to assist and help students she has tried different strategies of literacy information. Some strategies seem to have positive consequences at a medium time span (results are not immediate), but it seems to her that it depends very much on the personnel learning style of each student. Her global feeling is that Higher Education, at master and PhD level, needs still much improvement. In fact, lower levels of education before Higher Education do still need improvement. The tendency has been “one supervision style for all and for each” and there is still lack of staff development strategies that help supervisors to deal with these challenges.

### 3.2 Diogo, Sara

Sara holds a bachelor on Languages and Business Skills concluded in the Summer of 2006 and she started her professional activity in the private sector, a substantial different reality than that of working in a HEI. Although she started to lecture in September 2015, it was only in June 2016 that she defended her PhD on Social Sciences (Studies of Higher Education). She became then an invited assistant professor in this same University and started to supervise (international) students in May 2017. The topic of internationalisation of higher education, as well as mobility, is deeply dear to her, as
she did her Master and PhD abroad. She herself was an international student during almost 7 years (living in Norway, Australia, but for the great part of time in Finland). As a student, she faced mostly cultural challenges, but as a supervisor, she finds communication, cultural and even political issues.

So far, Sara has supervised and currently supervises both national (5) and international (4) students, attending Master and PhD programmes at the university she works. Portuguese Master programmes length is two years and in the second year they (usually) lead to two possible paths: a curricular internship with the writing of a topic related with his/her internship experience and the master programme, or the writing of the master dissertation. The main challenge observed were very similar, regardless students’ nationality: despite the master branch type (internship or dissertation), those who were writing the dissertation and did not have a part-time job, neither the internship, felt more involved to their academic path and tend to finish sooner than those who had to split attention, energy and time between studies and work.

All the international students from ACPR countries were part-time workers (even those doing an internship) due to the financial constraints felt. It should be referred that Portugal is a more expensive country than the country where they come from and these students look at this mobility experience as an unique opportunity that will definitely improve their (and their family) life. Expectation after concluding a postgraduate degree in a Portuguese university are quite high [5] Such financial constraints lead – sometimes (not on a regular basis, but with some frequency) to loss of motivation, tiredness and loss of focus and even despair. These feelings tend to fade away as students see the progress (and they themselves acknowledge it) of their work. In parallel, and consequently, they also tend to engage and compromise more as time passes by. For the supervisor, this demands to be able to constantly motivate the student, to schedule regular meetings with previously fixed deadlines and measurable outputs and to be in close contact with the student. By other words, a balance between being able to induce motivation and pressure should be attained. More time is also needed to frequently read and assess the work of these students as some of them, especially from East-Timor have serious difficulties with the Portuguese language. Following this, cultural differences with respect to the relationship between student-supervisor, namely in the way students feel whenever they have doubts or have different ideas form the supervisor on how to proceed are frequently observed. ACPR students (also due to these difficulties with the Portuguese language) tend to not feel so at easy to expose in a clear way their doubts or ideas.

Other difficulties – although with fewer students – relate with the political dimension, as for example, the need to enrol in one political party to be able to enter and leave the country whenever needed to collect data; be very careful in collecting data, e.g. through interviews, questionnaires, and to be even more careful on how to report it as the findings may show weak governmental policies and/or behaviour) and administrative issues (e.g. obtaining visas). These political (and bureaucratic) challenges imply a diplomatic communication as well as sensitivity in dealing with key actors.

Table 1. Supervisors Profile

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Supervisor</th>
<th>Academic Background</th>
<th>Experiences of ACPR countries</th>
<th>(Co)Supervisor experience</th>
<th>Background of International Students</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Betina</td>
<td>Biology and Geology Teacher, Master in Science Communication and Education, PhD in Education (Didactics and Curriculum Development)</td>
<td>East Timor – 2011 (2 month in service training course for science teachers) Angola – 2016 (external evaluation of academic course for teachers) 2018, 2019 (master course for science teachers) and attendance of several conferences São Tomé and Principe – 2016/2017 (external evaluation of an educational reform)</td>
<td>Concluded: Co-supervisor of 1 PhD student from East Timor in Portugal Ongoing: Supervisor of 3 master students from Angola (distance supervision) Co supervisor of 4 PhD students from Angola in Portugal Co-supervisor of 3 Portuguese PhD students</td>
<td>Science Teachers (Biology and Physic) at pre-university level University Lecturer</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| Sara (since 2017) | - Bachelor in Languages and Business Skills
- Erasmus Mundus Master in Higher Education Studies (Universities of Oslo, Tampere and Aveiro)
- PhD on Social Sciences (Studies of Higher Education), Co-tutelle agreement (University of Jyväskylä and Aveiro)*
She herself was an international student | 2018: One week conference in Maputo (Mozambique) on the importance of the role of Higher Education for the Development of ACPR Countries
Ongoing Supervision of 2 master students from São Tomé and Príncipe + 4 Portuguese students
Ongoing Co-Supervision of 1 master student from Mozambique
Ongoing Co-supervisor of 1 PhD student from Angola | Public Administration & Management
Political Science

4 FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

In alignment with development agencies recommendations [15, 16, 22], namely the recommendations on the sharing of experiences in order to promote tacit knowledge and transform it to tangible knowledge, allowing to identify and disseminate adaptive practices, two junior supervisors reflected on their (learning) experiences and challenges of supervising international students.

Portuguese Speaking Developing Countries of the ACPR are an interesting case of study because despite sharing a common language – Portuguese, empirical data evidence challenges in overcoming cultural differences. Lecturing in a HEI – and all the working dimensions attached to the academic profession – are not taught. Professors are not specifically prepared to the act of supervision and there is neither (specific) training regarding international students and possible barriers one may find in the teaching components (in fact, this aspect also allows us to think, and rethink, the University mission), but this is a reflection that goes beyond the scope of this paper. We learn by doing, by trying, by attempting to push beyond what we know. If experience is important, as it is in fact, and proved by the already supported model of experiential learning conceptualised by Dewey, the same holds true regarding the importance of reflection. And that is what the authors aim at doing in this paper and in their daily work.

Considering the fourth objective of the United Nations Agenda 2030 "Better Education for All", more specifically the target 4.b., focused on increasing the number of scholarships for students from developing countries to attend higher education [23] by 2020, it is expectable an increase in the number of international students attending the 1st, 2nd or/and 3rd cycle programs in Portuguese HEI. It is hoped that this study will create opportunities for innovation within programmes, curricula and strategies to support international students, who should be seen also as potential future partners of Portuguese HEI.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The Portuguese Foundation financially supported work associated to this research for Science and Technology (FCT) under Grant SFRH/BPD/100330/2014 and UID/CED/00194/2019 co-funded by the POCH, by the European Social Fund and Portuguese National Funds from the Portuguese Ministry of Education and Science as well as FEDER, through COMPETE2020 – Programa Operacional Competitividade e Internacionalização (POCI). At last, but not least, a special word of gratitude for the involved students who have been helping us to grow as academic scholars throughout their own learning path.

REFERENCES


