THE GAP BETWEEN REAL AND DESIRED STUDENTS:
INSTITUTIONAL STRATEGIES TO MANAGE HETEROGENEITY IN
AN ENGINEERING SCHOOL

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Abstract

Acknowledging the critical role of the successful integration of first-year students in higher education on their persistence and academic success, the present paper analyses the intentions underlying institutional strategies to welcome new students. Adopting a qualitative approach, data were collected through participant observation, privileged informants and students’ narratives. The institutional strategy presented in this paper may be perceived as a device to manage the dichotomy between the real students’ heterogeneity and the expected students’ homogeneity, and which is used to cope with the gap between the institutional expectations of students and the “strangeness” of new people. In an attempt at the elitisation of new students, there is an institutional effort towards building an identity framework that enhances feelings of belonging, pride and group cohesion. If students are not what the institution expects them to be, it then devises strategies in order to turn them into the students it desires them to be.

Keywords: Institutional strategies, student integration, organisational development, first year experience.

1 INTRODUCTION

Existing literature acknowledges the successful integration of first-year students in higher education as playing a critical role in the subsequent persistence and academic success of these students [1], [2], [3], [4]. Besides the individual and social variables that impact on the process of academic integration, the importance of institutional strategies to promote students’ integration has been increasingly recognised [5], [6], [7], [8], [9], [10], [11], [12], [13]. These institutional strategies can assume diverse configurations, such as the formal welcoming ceremony, guided tours of the facilities and different kinds of institutional induction [14], [15], [16], [17].

The present paper aims at examining, in a comprehensive but also interpretative way, formulas developed by higher education institutions to formally welcome their new students, fulfilling specific objectives related to smoothing their integration. This analysis will always have, as the ultimate referent, the institution that hosted (and somewhat promoted) this case study. Thus, the analysis will focus on the formulas devised by higher education institutions to formally welcome their new students, fulfilling specific goals related to making their integration an easier process. In fact, most Portuguese higher education institutions adopt these formal welcoming strategies, although they may vary from one institution to another [18], [19], [20], [21], [22]. As previously envisaged, this analysis effort will always have, as its referent, the institution under study: the School of Engineering of a well-known Portuguese university.

1.1 Welcome rituals and ceremonies

Higher education welcoming ceremonies should be considered from a holistic standpoint, being envisaged as true rituals from an anthropological perspective. According to Claude Rivière [23] (p. 6), “rituals are a set of individual or collective behaviours, with some degree of codification, with a corpus of support (either verbal or non-verbal), a more or less repetitive feature, and a strong symbolic meaning to their actors and usually also to those who witness them, grounded on a mental adhesion, possibly non conscious, to values related with important social choices, and which expected effectiveness does not reveal a purely empirical logic with a technical instrumentality from stimulus.-reaction relations”.

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Moreover, Van Gennep [24] (p. 155) defines “passage rites” as a “ceremonial set that go with, eases and conditions the passage from a life stadium to another or from a social status to another”. Its primordial function is demarcating the transition between two distinctive social statuses, with repercussions of changes to status and identity. Many of these rituals symbolically use bridges, doors, or tunnels as passages, representing moments of transition. According to Van Gennep’s [24] perspective, rites of passage may function either as a ritual of separation from a past, inferior status, or as a ritual of aggregation to a new status and a new state.

Welcome ceremonies take place in a variety of other social contexts. Sports teams have used ritual ceremonies to initiate new members, particularly when the new person is younger than the rest of the team. The armed forces in various countries (USA, Poland, Great Britain and Russian, among others) have long had integration rituals, which often involve violence and punishment. Some workplaces use rituals to initiate newly hired employees [25]. Thus, these practices extend far beyond higher education and are experienced in school groups, athletic teams, the military, and other social and professional organisations. It is a complex social issue that is shaped by power dynamics operating in a group and/or organisation and within a particular cultural context.

1.2 Promoting the integration of new students: institutional strategies

Soares et al. [26] (p. 11), in an effort to systematise the possible institutional contributions to the process of transition of new students in higher education, report an extensive list of institutional variables or characteristics, programmes or even courses that, according to the authors, aim at promoting not only the transition, but also students’ learning and success. Among the contributions listed, the following ought to be highlighted:

- Structured and normative institutional organisations
- Mechanisms of reception and support for students
- Joint work between high schools and higher education institutions
- Mechanisms for students’ educational, psychosocial and vocational monitoring
- Quality of the services and professionals involved
- Quality of the curriculum and faculty
- Opportunities for institutional involvement on the part of students
- Joint work of teachers and students to promote academic learning and success
- Opportunities for students to talk outside the classroom about issues related to teaching and learning
- Involvement of students in activities that bridge the gap between the course and the career opportunities after graduation
- High expectations of teachers and students
- Schemes to make training, learning and assessment pathways more flexible
- Entrepreneur teachers in teaching, research and service to the community.

As argued by these authors, the conceptual extent and importance of the previous listing “anticipates the cumulative contribution of multiple variables and circumstances, a co-responsibility of students, faculty and institution, an attention to the potential arising from both the formal program, and the ‘hidden’ or informal program, or from the informal contexts of learning and development that always exist in the training institutions, and which are particularly claimed at the age of the young-adult” [26] (p. 11).

Aware of the complexity underlying the process of integration in higher education, many institutions already show concern in promoting the integration of their students and preventing academic failure. In Portugal, deliberate interventions by the Schools’ Directorates are already beginning to take place, assuming a significant role at the beginning of the academic year. Two major processes to promote freshmen’s integration in academic life can be distinguished in Portugal: the formal and intentional reception of new students proposed by the Directorates of Schools or Universities, and the freshman’s reception ritualised by tradition, which involves the organisation of an entire integration ceremonial proposed by peers [19], [20], [21].
With regard to the deliberate ceremonies of reception for new students emanating from the governing bodies of the different Schools, these take diverse formats, which depend not only on the management's will, sensitivity and strategy but also on the financial constraints of the institution. Taking the example of the University under analysis, and particularly its School of Engineering, an approach will be made to describe the strategies used for the formal reception of new students and the inherent intentions, explicit or implied.

2 METHODOLOGY

To do this, qualitative techniques of data collection have been used, complemented with direct observation of the formal reception ceremony. This seemed to be the best alternative in terms of the methodological analysis of this social phenomenon, although the perspective of its participants is not neglected. Thus, the focus will be put on the discourses of freshman respondents. In addition, the discourse of the Director of the School of Engineering, who offered to explain the main purposes of such a ceremony, will be used as a reference. Therefore, the analytical approach to strategies for receiving new students by the School of Engineering will use three major information sources: (i) direct observation; (ii) the use of privileged informants (Director of the School of Engineering); and (iii) students’ speeches (collected through in-depth interviews six months after having attended the welcome ceremony).

2.1 Sample

The population for this study is composed of 43 first-year students enrolled in Electrical Engineering, who had been attending one of the better-known Portuguese universities for six months. In fact, in Portugal, Engineering studies remain a highly prestigious and popular scientific field for university candidates and access to them is limited to the best candidates at the national level [22]. The study programme under analysis is integrated into one of the more prestigious schools of a prominent university, at the national and international level. Thus, considering both the field of study and the university’s status, this study programme is one of the most requested by higher education candidates [27].

The sample was composed of 30 students. 25 of the participants were male and five were female, a gender distribution that is identical to the population, where 22% are women. With a median age of 19 years in a range of 18 to 20 years, the ethnic composition of the sample was 100% Caucasian. The analysis of social-educational indicators made the prevalence of students coming from families with a high educational level evident.

2.2 Data analysis

Data analysis was performed through content analysis, using the Nvivo software. The choice of this tool was based on its versatility and flexibility to encompass the methodological orientation adopted for this research. Moreover, this software tool assumed a critical role in the efficiency of data treatment, favouring the management and comparison of a considerable amount of non-structured data. Transcripts were coded according to themes and analysed using a constant comparison approach [28]. The data were coded by paragraph and sentence, as proposed by Strauss and Corbin [29]. Data reduction in qualitative research is a necessary task and portions of transcripts have been selected to illustrate the respondents’ views. Participants’ own categories were tabulated, as suggested by Silverman [30].

3 RESULTS

3.1 Analysis and discussion of results

3.1.1 Welcome ceremony: Intentions and pretentions

The School of Engineering under analysis welcomes its new students in a formal ceremony that takes place in the early days of the academic year, and to which all new students are formally invited through a written invitation signed by the Director of the institution and delivered at the time of enrolment.
The organisation of this event is handled by the central office of the School and has the direct involvement of the School Board. For this event, all the representatives of the various advisory and management bodies (President and Vice-Presidents of the Scientific, Pedagogical and Direction Councils) are invited, as well as representatives of all Departments (Heads of Department and Degree) and Services (Heads of Service of the various services, such as Library and Computer Centre). Their presence is considered particularly important, insofar that all are subject to a brief personal presentation, as well as a description of the body they represent.

This event takes place at the Hall of the School of Engineering, which is prepared with formal festive decorations (lights, flowers, red carpet, hoisted flags). The ceremony is chaired by the Director of the School of Engineering, who opens the ceremony with a welcome speech, lasting for about 45 minutes. At the end of the speech, bags with the symbol of the School of Engineering are distributed, containing a range of publicity material of the institution, from the student's schedule to pens, pins and notebooks. After this moment, always welcomed with great enthusiasm, new students follow, in groups (usually coordinated by the Director of the Degree) to the Department concerned, which is responsible for continuing to introduce its services. This second phase of the reception ceremony for newcomers, carried out by each department in general and by each degree in particular, has increased over the past years, from a purely formal presentation to a moment of conviviality and integration. In the case of the Department of Electrical Engineering, the reception continues with the presentation of some faculty members and departmental rules and procedures.

Addressing the Welcome Ceremony itself and analysing the opening speeches of the past three years, it was found that they have identical form and content, being distinguished only by any change in the organic structure of the institution. In general, the focused contents are, according to the analysis, the following:

- Official welcome to the School of Engineering;
- History of the School of Engineering;
- Reference to alumni that are famous or with recognised social value;
- Benefits of the training in the School of Engineering over the training of similar institutions;
- Benefits of being an engineer over other professions;
- Presentation of the organic structure of the Faculty of Engineering;
- Presentation of each representative and functional characterisation of the various sectors.

The lack of material support that allowed access to the full record of these speeches led us to confront their author for our content analysis. The Director of the School of Engineering and author of the welcome speeches, besides validating our analysis, complemented it, letting us know other intentions underlying his words. According to him, his speech would first aim at accommodating the new students in the School of Engineering and proposing to them their “adherence to the spirit of the School”. On the other hand, it was also intended to “draw the attention to the difficulties of integration and to the availability of the School to support students in this integration”. He continued, warning students of “the need to work hard from the start and never give in before trying to overcome the obstacles that they are faced with throughout the degree”. He ended by wishing “the best of luck and greatest successes in this new stage of the new students’ lives”.

There seems to be, in the intentions underlying this ceremonial event (with hopes to eventually become a ritual), clear objectives in terms of promoting new students’ integration. For some time, the Board of the School of Engineering had decided on the importance, in particular during the first year, of building an adjusted academic pathway. The Welcome Ceremony arises precisely from this inference and as a way to welcome new students.

Analysing the content of the speeches, three main intentions underlying this phenomenon seem to emerge: (i) symbolic, (ii) informative and (iii) ideological.

The intentionality inherent in the organisation of the Welcome Ceremony to operate as a moment of passage seems clear (“[...] from now on”), clearly distinguishing a “before” and an “after”. This is consistent with Van Gennep’s [24] perspective, according to which the rites of passage may function either as a ritual of separation from a past, inferior status, or as a ritual of aggregation to a new status and a new state. To help this transition, there is a festive, yet formal, atmosphere to the ceremony. In addition to the pure and simple way of welcoming new students, there are traits that assume the nature of a rite of passage. The symbolic intentionality of the entire ceremonial process inherent in the
Welcome Ceremony would function, then, as an attempt to ritualise the passage from high school student to higher education student.

The informative intentionality also seems explicit. The presentation of the various bodies and services of the School and the several “alerts” (literally) present in the speech of the Director of the institution contribute directly to this idea. The explicit appeal to the dedication to their academic work, from the first moments of their experience as university students, is noteworthy. Appeals are also made to using tenacity and persistence as ways of overcoming academic obstacles that students may be confronted with in the future, in a clear allusion to the degree of difficulty that they may face in their university path.

Last but not least, there is the importance of ideological intentionality. Relating directly to the idea of institutional culture discussed earlier, it seems to be another objective of the Welcome Ceremony to “share” (or even instil) the values and intentions underlying the whole way of understanding and relating to the School of Engineering. The intentions are clear: “to propose their adherence to the spirit of the School from then on”. It is this spirit of the School of Engineering that may be assumed as a fundamental element of the entire institutional culture. The appeal to the historical past of the School of Engineering and to the name of public figures of recognised social impact are explicit strategies in order to “enrich” the institutional image before the new students, providing them with the narcissistic desire to also ascend to places with social visibility. Enrolling in the School of Engineering appears, thus, as a valid passport to success, although engagement is necessary. This ceremony seems to be intentionally organised to induce in newcomers a sense of self-importance, given that all the details are carefully prepared to that end: the invitation is personalised and signed by the Director, there is reserved seating, lights, flags and flowers. These are explicit attempts to not only appeal to feelings of pride and well-being of the student but to also foster a sense of upward social mobility. The initial idea of anonymity is thus countered by showing significant individual attention. Symbolic gifts (material advertising the School of Engineering, pins, pens and bags) that are offered also contribute to the building of a strong and distinct academic identity. In reality, this academic identity encompasses not only the fact of becoming a higher education student but also a student of that school in particular and a future engineer. Actually, the Welcome Ceremony speeches emphasise the fact that the School of Engineering is the most reputable in the University and one of the most recognised in the field of engineering at an international level. On the other hand, it is also stressed that the engineering profession is one of the most prestigious and well paid at the national level.

These intentions are believed to underlie the organisation and structuring of the Welcome Ceremony. Although this is not the only initiative welcoming new students and attempting to facilitate their integration, it seems important to understand the impact of this ceremony in the words and speech of the recipients.

3.1.2 Welcome ceremony: perceptions and deductions

In answering the question: “How was your arrival in this School? How did you feel?”, the interviewees were free to select and focus on the moment of reference to their “arrival” into the university world. It is notable that 30% of the new students interviewed spontaneously referred to the Welcome Ceremony as their first experience as university students. Therefore, it may be considered that, at least for these new students, this ceremony served as the main ritual of entry into higher education. The remainder of the respondents either did not refer to any specific moment or situation (60%) or referred to other events (10%), such as the enrolment moment or the first time they visited the campus.

Carlos had his first contact with the School of Engineering through the Welcome Ceremony and provided this positive assessment: “It was the day of the Welcome Ceremony. I found it very good. It gives freshmen the perception that the School cares about them”. João confirms “I was at the Welcome Ceremony of students’ reception. I think it was nice. I liked it”. However, for Alexandra, the impact seems to have been quite different and there was little positive about the intended ceremonial nature: “I was at the reception ceremony, but it was boring: a lot of people were there, talking so loud that no one could understand anything”. Thus, of those freshmen who referred to the Welcome Ceremony as a turning point, 70% ascribed significant importance to it, as evidenced by Carlos and João. The remaining 30% of freshmen, like Alexandra, did not perceive it as a relevant moment of integration.

1 All names used to refer to students are fictitious.
The assessments of the Welcome Ceremony made by the new students can also be analysed in terms of the achievement (or not) of the intentions identified earlier. Thus, in the case of symbolic intentionality, it may be considered that the spontaneous choice of the Welcome Ceremony as the moment of entry into the School may serve as a good indicator of its importance as a rite of passage. For Tiago, “that is the ideal way to welcome freshmen, to get started at the School”. Miguel’s words reinforce the importance of this ceremony, emphasising its positive nature, in the respect for students: “It was very fun, not intimidating, quite the contrary. It was very accessible to students”. It is precisely the Bourdieu’s heirs who most appreciate the Welcome Ceremony as an initiation ritual into university life, perhaps because it may function as a confirmation of their expectations of the prestige and quality of education ascribed by their social networks. From those freshmen who perceived the Welcome Ceremony as relevant to their integration process, the majority (57%) could be considered Bourdieu’s heirs.

The informative intention was also spontaneously referred to by 56% of the audience for whom the Welcome Ceremony was intended. As Daniel said, “It’s always good to know who the most important individuals in the School of Engineering are. And it’s always good to know that you are welcome. The Welcome Ceremony served, somehow, that purpose”. However, for André, the informative function could be even more effective: “I was present in the Welcome Ceremony. I think it is a good initiative, but I think I could give more information on other competitor faculties and courses. It should provide more information, such as: if you don’t start working immediately, you won’t get anywhere. We are a bit lost, we don’t know, from the outset, what we will do and how much we have to strive in order to achieve the goals of each discipline”. Note that the intentional calls for immediate and deep academic involvement expected in the speech by the Director of the School of Engineering were not, in any way, perceived by this new student, who six months after his enrolment, regrets not having been “notified ahead”. Daniel ends up by making some suggestions to promote the informative effectiveness of the Welcome Ceremony: “I was waiting for a guided tour to the School, to show its services. It would be helpful”. Josué added a few “items” to those already offered by the School of Engineering: “A map and a list of standards of conduct; it would help”.

Finally, concerning the ideological intention underlying this ceremony, it is necessary to emphasise the difficulty of perceiving its real impact on the institutional perception of the new students. Linear causality seems here an inappropriate and inconsistent resource. None of the respondents referred to the Welcome Ceremony as a possible direct and explicit trigger of feelings of pride or belonging. However, even though a linear cause-effect relation cannot be established, the pattern that emerges from the data analysis points, as previously mentioned, to the fact that freshmen feel they are “special” in having succeeded (deserved) in accessing this new stage of life. On the other hand, there are dissident, even reactive, responses to the perceived objectives of instilling a positive institutional vision and of fostering a sense of pride. For Salvador, this symbolic intentionality seems to have little effect, since he assesses it as follows: “It was a little demagogic. I was not convinced”. David uses irreverence and mocks: “A red carpet and a band would be nice. Somewhat like in the session of the Freshman’s Welcome, speeches and more speeches to say that we are good, the best. I guess it worked for some, for those who needed their ego cuddled”.

4 CONCLUSIONS

Mass higher education is unavoidable and has led to the emergence of a new and diverse public who, a decade or two ago, would not have had the chance of pursuing a degree. The Welcome Ceremony may be perceived as a device for higher education institutions to manage the dichotomy between the real students’ heterogeneity and the expected students’ homogeneity. In the case under analysis in the present paper, the Welcome Ceremony may be used to manage the gap between the institutional expectations of students and the “strangeness” of the new people. Rather than focusing on the official and spoken nature of the Welcome Ceremony’s purpose, the previous analysis stresses the unspoken.

In an attempt towards the elitisation of these new publics, the higher education institution under analysis tries to manage the heterogeneity that typifies the students that enrol for the first time. This attempt of homogenising newcomers is done through a holistic effort to build an identity framework that aims at feelings of belonging, pride and group cohesion. All the rituals surrounding the Welcome Ceremony, specifically the speech that refers to the most distinguished alumni, are a clear attempt to guarantee an elitist stance in comparison to other higher education institutions and other professional fields, weaving a web in which corporatism is certainly one of the main features. Hence, to upgrade data and conclusions on this study, it would be relevant to collect data longitudinally, on possible
subsequent changes of students' interpretations of the Welcome Ceremony. Moreover, it would also be interesting to know whether this event has built a sense of community among students and whether it actually serves other, unintended functions.

The Welcome Ceremony herein discussed is one explicit approach used by the School of Engineering to preserve a place overlooking the remainder of higher education institutions and other professions. In fact, the high academic status ascribed to the institution and to Engineering itself is encountered prior to the students' enrolment in higher education, because there is social pressure that instils high expectations in future students, shaping a highly positive view of this School of Engineering in particular and the Engineering profession in general. These high expectations concerning the prestige and excellence of this School of Engineering and field of studies are induced in newcomers prior to their enrolment, working like the Pygmalion effect.

The analysis of the words of first-year students involved in the Welcome Ceremony prove the effectiveness of this strategy in the elitisation of the new public: "Being a student of the Faculty of Engineering is being a bit superior to others" (André). Indeed, it seems undeniable that the self-concept of new students such as André is significantly increased by the feeling that they are part of a reference group. This is, according to Manning [31], a real ritual of reification, as it induces in freshmen the idea that their institutional and career choice is of value. In fact, ritualistic declarations about the institutional mission, the alumni's professional success and the relevance of the institutional culture assure newcomers that their personal and financial sacrifices are not in vain. Moreover, this Welcome Ceremony assures students that they are part of an elite, which will play an important role in their professional, and even personal, success.

If students are not what the institution expects them to be, then it undertakes certain strategies in order to turn them into the students it desires.

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