Abstract

The transition from high school to higher education assumes a major role in high adolescence and it is presumed as a very pleasant life experience to students. Nevertheless, the impact of such transition cannot be predicted with accuracy, as it is mediated, not only by students’ psychosocial variables but also by their expectations. In fact, the quality of the transition experience is deeply influenced by the clash between what freshmen expect from and what they actually find in higher education. Literature draws attention to the relationships between the initial experiences of students as they begin their higher education and how they perform subsequently. This research focused on the transition to higher education, approaching freshmen's personal and developmental variables. In Portugal, the new student's reception is ritualized by tradition and involves the organisation of an entire integration ceremony (known as praxe) proposed by peers. This paper argues that initiation practices in Portuguese higher education can be regarded as a transition ritual, a group of symbolic activities that brand the shift from secondary to tertiary education. For that, a qualitative methodological approach was adopted, using content analysis as a privileged tool. The target population for this study is composed of 43 first-year students enrolled in Engineering, who had been attending higher education for six months. The sample was composed of 30 students. The chosen method for data collection was a semi-structured interview, which presented topics and questions to the interviewee, without leading him/her toward preconceived choices. Thus, students were questioned about their perceptions concerning the way they experienced the transition to higher education. Data analysis was performed through content analysis, privileging the semantic approach over the syntactic one. Transcripts were coded according to themes and analysed using a constant comparison approach [1]. The data were coded by paragraph and sentence as proposed by Strauss and Corbin [2]. Participants’ own categories were tabulated as suggested by Silverman [3]. Results confirm that transition to higher education is actually perceived by students as a true-life transition. However, this life transition is experienced differently according to students' sociocultural background, which influences both the symbolic impact of enrolment in higher education and their expectations about it. The conceptualization of higher education enrolment as a true-life transition and the methodological study design are the features that highlight the present paper in the higher education scientific arena.

Keywords: Adolescence development; psychological transition; higher education; students; academic experience.

1 INTRODUCTION

Transition is assumed as a conceptual reference for any study that seeks to focus on the impact of developmental change, not only of their protagonists but also of the contexts. A transition takes place if a life event, or the absence of an expected event, results in a change in assumptions about oneself and the world and, thus, requires a corresponding developmental change [4]. Transition implies a clear demand for change, which emphasizes the ideas of crisis and stress. In fact, any developmental transition refers to a life event that causes a crisis in the individual system of those who experience it, with stress eventually emerging as an adjusted response.

Relating this conceptual perspective of the transition to higher education enrolment implies unavoidably the recognition of the (dis)continuities that are inherent to secondary and tertiary education, as well as the variables specific to students and to the contexts in which they live and interact. The transition process plays a key role in driving developmental changes, although a plain causality in this relationship cannot be predictable.
1.1 The transition to a new life…

The analysis of the transition to higher education assumes special significance, as higher education is under the focus of social and media attention. New circumstances emerge, such as the increase in the quantity and diversity of publics, with special impact on their families, social and school backgrounds, the concerns with dropout and academic failure, as well as the difficulties of professional integration. Transition to higher education has captured attention from academia due to its impacts on student’s success and retention rates [5], [6], [7].

Conceptualizing transition as a multidimensional process, in which the student has to cope with a new and dynamic environment, the present study focuses on the quality of the transition to higher education. This transition is intimately related, on the one hand, to students’ personal and developmental traits, and, on the other hand, to significant experiences they lived with their social networks. The unavoidable change affects not only their psychological development but also their acquisition of academic competences, such as studying methods and time management, among others. Transitioning students generally are concerned with two factors: developing a sense of belonging and building relationships with others [8], [9]. Students develop a sense of belonging by giving meaning to the experiences in the institution [9]. The relationship interactions can be formal or informal [10]. Hommes et al. [11] concluded that first year student performance is positively influenced by social networks.

Furthermore, the quality of transition also depends both on the challenges that the new institution is offering its new “members”, and on the mechanisms it possesses to support them. The balance between challenge sources and support means perceived by each student conditions directly transition quality. In turn, this transition quality affects the way students build (or not) a sense of mastery in dealing with a new stage of their life. If, on the one hand, the lack of significant challenges may decrease the chances for students to confront change, on the other hand, when demands are perceived as being too challenging, the students chance of new developments and (re)balances present in any transition process may be jeopardized.

The transition to higher education encompasses a broad range of shifts in the student’s life, specifically the development of new autonomies on the financial, social and family levels. Other aspects that affect the transition to higher education are managing emotions, developing autonomy, establishing identity, and developing purpose and integrity [12]. Additionally, they are expected to develop new and more demanding study habits [13]. All these challenges that freshman face in an unknown context could be so stressful, that it might result in the student’s dropout [14], [15], [16]. Smith and Renk [17] support this approach, arguing that the arrangement of several stressors of higher education student life can be an overwhelming experience for a large number of students. Some of these stressors are planning for the future, struggling with exams and assignments, coping with demanding teachers, and transitioning into financial and emotional autonomy. Thus, all students experience an adjustment period when they enrol in higher education, which may differ according to each student’s pace of development (Blimling and Miltenberger, cited in [25]). Difficulties of adjustment to higher education are the most usual problems faced by freshmen [18], [19], [20], [21], [22], [23], [24], [25], [26].

Transition, as a rite of passage, to be effective, implies disassociation from previous memberships and establishment of new ones [26]. During the transition into HE, students can go through 4 phases [27]: Preparation (where some of the expectations are created), Encounter, Adjustment and Stabilization. Molnar [29] states that the first six weeks of the first semester in higher education are considered to be a critical period for retention. Also van Harper et al [30] concluded that it is important for students to make a good start.

Actually, the transition to higher education implies, more than an academic transition, a life transition. It involves an integrated analysis of personal and environmental variables, which are related to learning, success and integration processes. Despite the fact that research in this field tends to emphasize the positive impact of attending higher education in student development [20], such impact is not plain, being mediated by other students’ psychosocial variables, such as projects and interests, coping strategies, social class or gender, among others [31], [32], [33], or even mediated by students’ perceptions of the campus. These perceptions are of particular relevance in the processes of freshmen academic integration and socialization [34], [35]. The early experience in HE can confirm or disconfirm learning identities developed in previous educational environments [36].

The present study approaches essentially the psychosocial variables of first-year students, leading actors in a transition, which will impact significantly in their future. The analysis focuses on the clash
between students’ initial expectations and the confrontation with the reality of the new educational context, at the physical, cultural and academic levels. This study explores, through the qualitative analysis of the students’ discourses, the personal impact of experiencing the transition, giving prominence to the meanings connected to their experiences.

2 METHODOLOGY

The target population for this study is composed of 43 first-year students enrolled in Engineering, who had been attending higher education for six months. The sample was composed of 30 students. Participants were 25 male and five female students, which is a gender distribution identical to the population with 22% of 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 chosen method for data collection was a semi-structured interview, which presented topics and questions to the interviewee, without leading him/her toward preconceived choices. Thus, students were questioned about their perceptions about the way they experienced the transition to higher education.

Data analysis was performed through content analysis, privileging the semantic approach over the syntactic one. Transcripts were coded according to themes and analysed using a constant comparison approach [1]. The data were coded by paragraph and sentence as proposed by Strauss and Corbin [2]. Participants’ own categories were tabulated as suggested by Silverman [3].

3 RESULTS

3.1 The symbolic impact of enrolling in higher education

The perceived symbolic impact of joining higher education was explicitly asked and the results highlight the existence of a personal (and often even social) meaning of a positive nature related to enrolment in tertiary education. In fact, one of the most mentioned meanings of joining higher education relates to the notion of transition, of passage. Samuel perceives his enrolment in higher education as “a transition to the accountability age”, while others underline only the change, without ascribing it a value-based nature, as Nelson: “Change: neither for better nor for worse, for something different. You cannot stop, you must keep moving forward”.

Another expressed meaning related to the concept of sequential process may be found, especially, in respondents from middle-class families, which tend to see the enrolment in higher education as a way of fostering their social mobility: “One more stage in my school career. Just that. A sequence. A path. A necessary step to get a degree” (Brian).

Thus, enrolling in higher education implies, both the notion of a step towards a wished upward social mobility and a major shift in their social status and self-esteem.

Still, the most usual meaning ascribed to this academic transition is the idea of a goal accomplished by merit. This logic of meritocracy is clear, particularly in the words of students with academic success, for whom enrolling in higher education is perceived as an accomplishment: “The result of a long effort. A sort of a prize. An award I deserved” (Alexis). However, while the enthusiasm of students from the middle-class by enrolling in higher education is more linked with the idea of conquest, victory, students from families with higher cultural capital highlight the notion of an achieved goal in acknowledgment of their competences, which is consistent with the plan to preserve the cultural and economic background of their families. The gap between the concepts of “goal” and “victory” lies, in essence, on initial expectations underlying the goals of the whole school pathway. For those who regard higher education as the obvious way (the heirs of a heavy cultural capital), it means a goal achieved; for those to whom higher education represents a desire, yet not a certainty, the sense victory is intensely experienced. For the former, this achievement is not a surprise, because it is a predictable transition, fulfilling a family tradition: “Another engineer in the family, or rather, another future engineer in the family” (Mark). For the latter and for their family (especially from lower socio-cultural backgrounds), it is a dream came true, as they see higher education as a “passport” for a process of upward mobility: “It’s about evolving a lot in life. It seems that people respect you more. It’s good, you feel good” (Peter).

1 All names used to refer to students are fictitious.
Another feeling mentioned by freshmen is pride, which refers not only to enrolment in higher education per se, but essentially, to their enrolment in a prestigious institution: “Coming here is an achievement because everyone knows that this is difficult and only the best come here” (Sam). This feeling of pride is mostly emphasized by students who came from families in both ends of the socio-cultural background range. Yet, while students from less advantaged classes link this pride to their enrolment in higher education in general, students from the upper classes connect their pride to the high prestige and reputation of the institution.

For students from low socioeconomic and cultural status, expectations about the professional future are the most significant reason for enrolling in higher education, emphasizing explicitly their desire of upward social mobility: “It gives me the chance of a better way, afterwards in work. It’s easier to get a better job with a higher education degree” (Mark).

3.2 New experiences, renewed competences

The lives of the new students undergo profound changes, with a considerable emotional impact. According to Nico [26], the shift of their roles assumes four dimensions. The first dimension is career choice strangulation experienced by many students after enrolling in higher education. In fact, high school alumnae have to make a career choice that is supposedly accurate and final. Despite the wide array of options, their choices are deeply conditioned by the previous school pathway, both in terms of subjects and grades. Moreover, many high school students confine their career exploration to the realities they are familiar with: “At home, they are all engineers!” (Anthony).

The students’ urge to quickly overcome the adaptation process is the second dimension referred to by Nico [26]. The purpose of this new challenge is a rapid integration, so that the academic, professional and life projects are not endangered (“The quicker I fit in, the better”, Fred states). This goal contrasts with the feeling of confusion and strangeness linked to this life transition. Alexis admits that, after six months in higher education, she is still “somewhat dizzy. I don’t even know what I have to study”.

The third dimension focuses on the declining of the higher education degree as a strategic tool in the labour world, which leads students to reassess their personal investment in the academic venture (as Lloyd’s mother warns him: “My mother keeps saying that then I will not get a job”). Nonetheless, employability remains one of the triggers for students to enrol in higher education, especially in prestigious universities, such as the target of the present study, which provides students with good professional perspectives. In fact, a different target population studying, for instance, Literature and Humanities, could be more susceptible to this dimension proposed by Nico [26].

The fourth and last dimension argues that the life stage spent in higher education is probably the last chance to be young, so it tends to be perceived from a hedonistic point of view: “I went to many parties, because I think it’s important to enjoy while you are young, while you can…” (Samuel), because, like Anne, he wishes to “participate in everything he is entitled to” as a higher education student. However, this opinion conformity is only apparent. In fact, for Anne, with regular study habits and with remarkable academic success, the priority is to achieve her academic goals, managing her participation in extra-curricular activities according to them. For Samuel, his active participation is his real priority, at the expense of his academic duties, assessing his peers “not only by the grades they have but by their involvement in issues that relate to students, such as tuitions, protests, action in terms of student movements”.

Bearing in mind these four dimensions, Nico [26] argues that higher education institutions should provide freshmen curricular and organizational conditions that may foster their emotional balance and support the adequate construction of their plans for personal and professional future.

4 CONCLUSIONS

Results from the present study allow establishing that joining higher education is perceived by freshmen not only as the start of a new stage in the students’ academic career but also the attainment of a successful step of a life project. Indeed, from the analysis of freshmen narratives, the idea of transition emerges spontaneously and explicitly, reinforced by the concept of passage, of sequential progression. Thus, the transition to higher education is perceived by students as a life transition.

Furthermore, the symbolic impact of the arrival to higher education differs in function of the students’ socio-cultural background. On the one hand, students from the middle-class are enthusiastic about joining higher education because it represents for them a true conquest, a victory. On the other hand,
students from families with higher economic and cultural capital tend to emphasize the idea of an achieved goal, which is consistent with the plan to maintain the cultural and economic family heritage. That is, for the Bourdieu's heirs, whose destiny is drawn socially to attending higher education, enrolling in higher education means a goal achieved. Conversely, for those who do not possess a family tradition in higher education, being the first higher education student is perceived as a true victory and reflects the sense of entering a new world.

If the symbolic impact of the arrival to higher education differs in function of the students' socio-cultural background, results show that it also influences their expectations about higher education. In fact, the majority of students whose expectations were focused mainly on relational issues tend to come from less privileged social backgrounds, which can be justified by more difficult access to more diversified sources of information. Regarding the architectural expectations, the disparities between students from different social origins are clear. While middle-class students highlight the oldness of the infrastructure of their school, underprivileged students praise more its architectural beauty and privileged students leave out any criticism. Moreover, whereas upper classes students expect much bigger facilities, conversely, students from lower classes did are impressed by the actual dimension of the campus. The newcomers' social origin also seems to condition the importance ascribed by them to the sources of information that shape their initial expectations: while students with upper socio-cultural background build their expectations on the basis of information conveyed by parents, relatives and connections, students from lower social classes rely essentially on information given by high school and peers.

Therefore, the major divides between students' initial expectations towards living in the higher education and the subjective appropriation of reality seem to be largely conditioned by the horizons allowed by their socio-cultural "ghetto". This clash between what is expected and what is found would be, hence, the major source of academic discomfort, whose level of influence stems largely from each student's developmental history, with special relevance to their social origin.

REFERENCES


