Promoting success for Non-Traditional Students in Portugal – a preliminary diagnosis

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Summary
The access to Higher Education for mature students older than 23 in Portugal was made easier on the sequence of the implementation of the Bologna processes, that allowed a national Law to be changed in order to take also into account the eventual professional experience of the candidates. In this paper we will present a research project[6] involving the universities of Algarve and Aveiro, which aims to study deeply the non-traditional student's situation in order to create conditions for improving their academic success and reduce dropout. In this context we report the first (still superficial) results on the profile of these students, its time evolution and retention/dropout rates, with some considerations regarding those results.

Introduction
The Bologna process in Portugal is challenging national Higher Education Institutions (HEI) to face the multiple demands of a society increasingly knowledge-based. In this context a progressive path of moulding the educational trajectories is being designed in order to foster equality and social cohesion trough the synergies raised between Higher Education (HE) and the main objectives of Lifelong learning (LLL). Although we do not possess a strong historical tradition regarding Adult Education (Lima; Guimarães, 2004), the commitment of our governments was mainly intensified in 1995, and has come a long way since then. In 2008 Portugal presented one of the EU-27 lowest levels in LLL but some progress can be seen during the latest years: 5.3% in 2008 against 3.4% in 2000 (Eurostat, 2008).
According to the European Community Commission, LLL can be defined as "all the intentional learning activities developed throughout life, in formal, non-formal and informal contexts, with the purpose of acquiring, developing or improving knowledge, skills and competences, on a personal, civic, social and or professional perspective" (Comission of the European Communities, 2001, p.42). So, actually, students can reorganize their academic paths making use of several ways to enter or re-enter a HEI, to change between academic courses subject, or even between HEI. Since

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2006 a new door was open (Law-decree 64/2006) allowing *mature* students of age 23 and above to ingress in HEI, thus enhancing lifelong learning paths. Although most of these *mature* students do not have a complete secondary schooling and the national exams required to enrol in HEI, we should not assume that this way to access to higher education is an easier loophole.

The candidates have to demonstrate that they got the required maturity and skills. For instance, in the University of Aveiro (UA), a student enrolled trough this way (M23), has successfully undertake a set of thematic exams, specially created to evaluate their academic competence. The maturity and proficiency of a candidate goes beyond the success on the above mentioned examination as it comprises a three step evaluation process: the analysis of the candidate *curriculum vitae* (CV) emphasising any professional experiences it might contain; the above mentioned exams; and a personal interview in which an appointed jury questions the candidate about a list of subjects, such as his or her CV and motivations. The results are grades that rank the candidates between themselves. Finally, it is up to the candidate to apply for a vacancy in the UA courses.

More important than the way M23 students enrol in the University, is the pathway they experience as HEI students. For this purpose we have presently ongoing a research project[6] addressing the "*Non-traditional students in Higher Education Institutions: searching solutions to improve academic success*". In this presentation we bring a preliminary analysis of the data that focus the pathway of M23 students in the UA (2006-07 to 2001-11 academic years) regarding three main aspects: the M23 student HEI retention, success and drop-out rates. Also, the characterization of these publics, regarding social class, gender, schooling level, identity, and the employment situation will be addressed, taking into account the data collected since the first edition of the ongoing process.

Theoretical Framework

According to Correia and Sarmento (2010), the standards defined to long life education, as well as the level of exigency to increase the number of students, justify the increase on the demand for HE, particularly on what concerns new publics. Between these new publics the non-traditional ones are our target, being aware that this definition undertakes diverse situations and therefore requires some plasticity in order to be able to answer to the complexity of the real picture. Assuming the Socrates Gründtvig Lihe Project – Learning in Higher Education (2002) or the RANLHE Project (2009) perspective, we understand Non Traditional Students (NTS) as some of those that integrate HE under unfavourable structural factors that constrain their participation, and are, therefore, underrepresented (Bamber, 2008) on the HEIs. Mature students, women, students with special educational needs, working-class or specific ethnic groups, are, among others, some examples of the NTS. Usually these students were away from the scholar system for along period of time, and neither themselves, nor their families, had previous experience on HE.

If we take a look into the related literature, we find that most of the studies regarding NTS are mainly concerned on their socio-economical origins and in approaching questions related to their access and participation on the HE process (Shuetze; Slowey, 2002; Burke, 2002). We lack research focused on teaching and learning processes as well as on proposals and methodologies to alter the present scenarios. The first papers on this field were focused on the reasons behind the academic dropout (Bean; Metzner, 1985; Tinto, 1993), and this problematic is still an actual one, given the strong present governmental political orientations towards efficiency. Regarding now the main interpretations for academic retention, and following the main conclusions of the RANLHE (2009) European study, we observe that the integrationist Tinto model tends to some conformism, neglecting external factors (Yorke, 1999), though it remains an interesting approach. On the other hand, the social-cultural approaches as the one we find in Reay, David e Ball (2005), rely on the concepts of cultural capital, habitus and field, providing an update of the social reproduction theories elaborated by Bourdieu and Passeron (1979). From another point of view, the biographic research, mainly developed by Merril (1999; Merril; Alheit, 2004), was able to elaborate a synthesises between the socio-cultural context and the so called student's life psychosocial contexts as seen from the histories were adults recreate their experience (RANLHE, 2009, p. 19). In addition, and summarizing, we can say that more recent studies take into account gender and ethnicity, or the transitions collision (Bowl, 2001), among the traditional factors that are responsible for academic dropout.

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Under Thomas (2002) perspective, the main conditions that influence mature student's successes are seven: 1) academic background; 2) academic experience; 3) expectations and institutional commitment; 4) academic social match; 5) income and employment; 6) family support and commitments, and, finally, 7) university support services. This set of factors allows us to understand the larger rate of dropout found within the NTS as compared to the traditional ones, as this is rather a major consequence of the practices of the institution that tend to recruit them, than the image of the characteristics of the students (Thomas; Quinn, 2007, p.). Likewise, retention rates change with the scientific area of the studies and with the type of scholar attendance regime they chose (full-time / part-time) (National Office for Equity of Access to Higher Education, 2007). Also it is consensual that the peak of dropout occurs during the first year of university classes (Davies, 1999; Gordon et al, 2002).

But what are the achievements, or the rate of success of these complex, multidirectional and volatile learning careers (Merrill, 2003), when compared with those of the traditional students (TS)? In the sequence of a long research of literature review, Kasworm (1990) concluded that non-traditional adult students achieve equal or even better results than the TS, whether we consider curricular grades or ability or capacity tests results (Oliveira, 2007). Among the diverse reasons found to justify such a different performance, we can point out, as examples, the higher degree of learning intent of the NTS's, their greater intrinsic motivation, facing study commitments in a more serious way and having an attitude and behaviour within the classroom that makes them take the most out of classes attendance (*Ibid*, p. 69). These findings are is good agreement with the androgenic statements of Knowles (1998).

Methodology

The profile perception of NTS at the University of Aveiro, Portugal, was assessed through a student's survey questionnaire elaborated and implemented by the research project already mentioned. This research project, that will last until 2013, includes a first phase in which a parallel survey is taken in order to characterise the highest possible number of students and teachers on both Universities of Algarve and Aveiro. Then, in-depth qualitative techniques will be used to analyse the questionnaires and thus inform sets of biographic interviews to students, teachers and academic management. Finally, focus-group interviews will be organised close to the end of the project. Hence, this paper will present a preliminary analysis of NTS's profiles at two stages of the specific programme to access HEI for NTS older than 23 years: at the beginning of the programme (academic years of 2006-07 and 2007-08) and today (years 2009-10 and 2010-11).

The questionnaire is divided into several dimensions: a) Students and family characterization (age, civil status, family basic elements, education level of parents, etc.); b) Academic and professional courses (including also main reasons invoked to entry higher education, time dedicated to studies, etc.); c) Processes of learning and teaching (feedback of learning evolution during courses, tutorials, class participation, evaluation criteria, etc.); d) socialization data (including the relationships between teacher/student and student/student, participation in academic life and even participation in cultural, religious or civic organizations outside the university). The data here presented, defined by a particular focus, uses only few dimensions (questions/answers) of the questionnaire in order to ascertain who are the students accessing university through this special access mode. Hence we have chosen basic social-demographic data on the students' and their families. On the other hand, we want to have a first glance on some of the factors related to the processes of learning and teaching. Thus we are going to look at some results on the methods and processes of learning and on some obstacles students reported. Considering the specificities of students enrolled in the 1st year of bachelor degree (academic year of 2010-11), when compared with those of the 2nd and 3rd years, a parallel questionnaire was made, adapting some questions to those students.

The responses considered for this study and collected until January 2011, were a total of 153, distributed by four academic years as follows: 12 for 2006-07; 36 for 2007-08 and 2009-10; and 69 for 2010-11. These were obtained from a universe of 501 students enrolled in the University of Aveiro through the modality created in 2006 for mature, older than 23 years national citizens (Law-decree 64/2006). All questionnaires were answered on internet through the web platform LimeSurvey ™, version 1.9, by Carsten Schmitz, Germany.

Results

Student's social-demographic background

From the pool of 153 responses the questionnaires showed that the overall population of NTS, in the University of Aveiro, are equally distributed between genders, with, however, a slightly higher number of men (52% male) that show small fluctuations year-by-year in both directions. The higher difference between the number of men (75%) and women was found in the first academic year (2006-07) and equilibrium (50%) was met in 2007-08. The last two years of this study show an overall equilibrium as a result of compensating shifts (2009-10): male NTS were in higher number, while the converse occurred 2010-11, when 54% were women. This tendency that is also present in the U-Alg (paper to be presented at the 2011 Seminar of European Society for Research on the Education of Adults (ESREA), Turkey) can be explained if we take a look into the scientific areas of the degrees chosen, and the class regime: day classes and/or night courses.

Table 1 – Age-groups of non-traditional students.

	Age group													
AY	**23-28**		**29-34**		**35-40**		**41-46**		**47-52**		**59-64**		**65+**	
2006-07	23%	23%	31%	27%	**38%**	33%	8%	2%	0%	15%	0%	0%	0%	0%
2007-08	23%		26%		**31%**		0%		20%		0%		0%	
2009-10	**34%**	30%	23%	35%	20%	15%	14%	15%	3%	4%	3%	1%	3%	1%
2010-11	28%		**41%**		12%		15%		4%		0%		0%	

AY - Academic year

In Table 1 we describe the distribution of NTS between the different age groups. Using a 7 year groups' distribution, one observes a shift in students' age between the two first academic years and the present, moving towards the decrease in age. We are probably facing the reflections of the increasing presence of mature students that recognize certified qualification as a need in order to move up in their professional life or even to begin one.

Near 60% of these students are either married (13%) or live with their partner (46%); 7% are divorced. Moreover, most of non-traditional students have children (76% and 70% respectively for the first two and the 2 last academic years).

More than three quarters of these students accumulate the requirements of a job with their studies activities. From these, more than 71% of non-traditional students have a full time job while 5% have a part-time job and less than 3% are unemployed and looking for a job. The numbers of unemployment are very low among our students, especially when we consider that the national average is, nowadays, more than 10%.

The number of full-time NTS rose from 4% of the total number of TS at UA, at the beginning of the programme, to 12% in the present.

Table 2 – Education level of non-traditional students' parents and spouses

Educational Level	Father		Mother		Spouse	
	2006 to 2008	2009 to 2011	2006 to 2008	2009 to 2011	2006 to 2008	2009 to 2011
Cannot read or write	0%	1%	10%	3%	0%	0%
Can read without schooling	4%	1%	6%	3%	0%	0%
Up to 4th grade (or equivalent)	**48%**	**54%**	**42%**	**55%**	0%	4%
Up to 6th grade	10%	11%	12%	11%	0%	7%
Up top 9th grade	17%	16%	16%	12%	35%	16%
Up to 12th grade	13%	8%	2%	8%	12%	18%
Bachelor (1st cycle)	2%	2%	2%	3%	3%	2%
5 year 1st degree	4%	4%	6%	2%	**38%**	**42%**
Master (2nd cycle) or PhD	0%	2%	4%	3%	9%	9%
Disabled to work	2%	0%	0%	0%	3%	2%

Table 2 shows the educational levels of parents and spouses. Parents of most students have very low education levels, with almost half of them having only 4 or fewer years in school. The second note is the 10% level of illiteracy registered among mothers in the academic year of 2009-10. The converse was observed for the education levels of spouses that showed to have 9 or more years of schooling, within those 50% attended 3 or more years of HE and one tenth have master or PhD degrees.

The substantiation that there are no major differences in the education level between men and women, with even a greater increase in the women educational level as related to men, in the time interval analyzed, is quite remarkable, as it is contrary to usual statistical findings, and even to the habitual distribution. This is a point of interest that deserves further attention, as it diverges from the natural educational evolution in the recent decades in Portugal, and may be aligned with a popular governmental programme designed to improve qualifications via certification of competences.

Finally, overall data on family income shows that around 37% (number amplified to 43% for 2009-11 families) of non-traditional student families earn less than €1,000/month and 17% between €1,000 and €1,500 a month. These correspond to approximately 2 and 3 times, respectively, the national minimum wage. Hence, more than half of non-traditional students may be classified as belonging to low income households.

Academic paths

NTS have diverse pathways and levels of education when they enter HE. Our analysis showed at least three major profiles: 1- students that completed secondary school, in some cases through equivalent alternatives means, such as professional courses or second opportunity education; 2- students with in completed secondary school (12 years of schooling, compulsory, nowadays); 3- students only with a 9th grade school diploma or equivalent.

Table 3 – School level of non-traditional students at the entrance of UA

AY	9th grade		12th grade incomplete		12th grade complete		Post-12th grade		Other	
2006-07	0%	15%	58%	27%	42%	46%	0%	4%	0%	8%
2007-08	19%		17%		47%		6%		11%	
2009-10	6%	8%	17%	22%	71%	67%	6%	3%	0%	0%
2010-11	9%		25%		65%		1%		0%	

AY - Academic year

From Table 3 we can recognize that NTS profile at the entrance of UA has evolved from lower or less traditional school pathways to more consistent learning background, as they ingress mainly with secondary school studies complete. This may be related to a different attitude about an "easy way" to enter university as it was at first perceived. Most M23 candidates now know it is a serious programme that requires a defined level of background preparation.

Resulting from the above and respective age groups, NTS when responding to the question of how long they interrupted their formal education, the answers revealed, for all years of this study, that

more than 60% went back to learning after a period of 10 or more years. Only 9% revealed that were less than 3 years without any contact with formal education.

Table 4 – Profile of non-traditional students regarding their status and levels of retention

	Students											
AY	Registered		Active		Dropout		Finish		Full-time		W/S status	
2006-07	16%	43%	11%	27%	77%	54%	12%	19%	56%	55%	91%	85%
2007-08	27%		37%		41%		22%		42%		83%	
2009-10	24%	57%	81%	88%	19%	12%	---		50%	50%	73%	68%
2010-11	33%		93%		7%		---		50%		65%	

AY - Academic year; W/S - Student with the special status of worker-student.

In Table 4 information is given about the activity profile of NTS. Half of the enquired students say they attend classes on full-time bases and more than two thirds benefits from the special status of worker-student, which allows greater flexibility and compatibility with job requirements. Focusing our attention on NTS enrolled before 2008, one may realise that only 41 finished their 1st cycle of studies, 60 are still attending classes in order to obtain that degree, and 119 dropout.
Although student's declared to rarely or never miss a class, a large majority said they have failed courses (62.6%). These answers bring to our attention the issue of retention. The next steps, therefore, will be to understand deeply the motives beneath retention in this specific case of the universities involved in the project.

Perceptions on learning processes

83% NTS discern three main methodologies adopted by their teachers, evenly distributed, as follows: professors give lectures, simply talking at the students (27%); group work and students' presentations (31%); and discussion/debates based on articles and other documents (25%). Evaluation activities of some kind come forth with only 10%.
Table 5 summarizes student's perceptions on general learning process dimensions ordered by crescent mean rank. That is, the lower mean corresponds to the statements they tend to disagree more with; medium values represent statements to which they (simply) agree, and higher values represent statements students tend to agree fully.

Table 5 – Student's perceptions on general learning process dimensions

Academic year	2006-07		2007-08		2009-10		2010-11	
	Mean	St.Dev	Mean	St.Dev	Mean	St.Dev	Mean	St.Dev
Traineeships and internships are important for your learning process	5.09	± 0.94	5.03	± 1.18	4.77	± 0.92	**4.67**	± 1.01
Professors offer themselves to support student's outside class	4.58	± 1.24	4.57	± 1.14	4.47	± 1.13	**4.62**	± 1.04
Professors do their duties when it comes to the planned teaching activities	4.36	± 1.43	4.71	± 0.86	4.48	± 1.05	**4.51**	± 1.03
Professors stimulate critical thought and student's autonomy	4.09	± 1.04	4.52	± 0.91	4.22	± 0.97	**4.43**	± 1.12
Professors stimulate student's participation and the debate of contents	4.25	± 1.29	4.59	± 0.92	4.32	± 0.98	**4.30**	± 1.26
Professors show themselves available to change / integrate student's suggestions during classes	4.45	± 1.21	4.14	± 1.10	3.81	± 1.23	**4.28**	± 1.08
Evaluation methods and criteria are presented and discussed with the students at the beginning of the courses	4.23	± 1.74	4.60	± 0.91	4.17	± 1.15	**4.15**	± 1.10
Tutorial sessions are significant to your learning process	4.18	± 0.75	4.00	± 1.26	4.38	± 0.86	**4.14**	± 1.01
Globally, the number of hours of the courses are suited to learning processes	4.23	± 1.24	3.94	± 0.84	3.80	± 1.13	**4.13**	± 1.11
Generally speaking, there is a balance between theory and practice in your programme	4.38	± 1.33	3.94	± 1.00	4.00	± 0.97	**3.83**	± 1.18
Professors give you feed-back on your learning's evolution	4.09	± 0.94	4.37	± 1.29	3.32	± 1.25	**3.77**	± 1.22

NTS attribute the highest evaluation/importance to the role of the traineeships and internships in their learning process, followed by the readiness of teachers to support students outside classes and the teacher commitment and pacification of teaching activities. Conversely, NTS value negatively (with a lower mean) the quality/quantity of feed-back on students' evolution in classes. Two statements concerning the organization of the curriculum have also low ranking among NTS: (a) the number of hours they have got to attend in class is not considered adequate to learning. (b) Students consider their curricula to be fundamentally theoretical. Next in the rank we find significance of tutorial sessions. Although, tutorial sessions are available to students in all

curricular units, generally students do not take full profit of tutorial time. The analyses of the reasons beneath this behaviour is in it self an important topic for analysis.

Table 6 – Obstacles to non-traditional students' progression

	2006-07	2007-08	2009-10	2010-11
Difficulties to understand certain courses contents	**23%**	**25%**	**41%**	**55%**
Professional motives / Incompatibility of professional – university schedules	**92%**	**69%**	**78%**	**50%**
Lack of specific support to adult students over 23	0%	**44%**	**53%**	**45%**
Income difficulties	0%	34%	28%	24%
Lack of motivation	8%	6%	9%	6%
The bachelor / master programme your in does not match your expectations	0%	13%	9%	2%
Lack of structural conditions (equipment, labs, etc.)	**54%**	9%	3%	2%

As obstacles, NTS refer three main reasons that impede their progression (Table 6): (a) difficulties to understand courses contents; (b) professional incompatibilities with life in university; (c) absence of support mechanisms focus on NTS. On the academic year 2006-07 data show a unexplainable behaviour (54%) that may probably be attributed to an inquiry anomaly not yet understood. The tendencies observed on data show a slight increase in the difficulties of NTS to understand curses contents and reduction on professional incompatibilities with HE, most probably a reflection of shifts in NTS age-group.

Discussion

Before we move on to present a synthesis of our data, we have to underline the preliminary character of these information. In fact, we gathered data for all the academic years since 2006, choosing to assume here a comparative perspective between the two first years (2006-07 and 2007-08) and the present here defined by the years 2009-10 and 2010-11. Our aim is to capture some differences in those two moments. In other words, the study we bring is a first capture of an overall picture. Hence, only the use of all the data and a broader statistic analysis (cluster analysis) will allow this project to be more reliable and informative regarding NTS profiles. In this way, and bearing in mind that we need to be cautious, however, there are some first conclusions that we can look upon:

1. Although there are some differences according to the scientific areas of bachelors, the majority of the NTS, at the UA, are men, but this predominance seems to be changing in the last academic years. The NTS tend to be younger and younger and, usually, they have already formed a family (many with children), are married or living with their partners. We are talking about working-students, with full-time jobs. Their parents had short contacts with school, which is quite the opposite of what happens with their spouses. The low familiar incomes suggest that these students have working class origins. There are three possible situations in what respects to the pathways these mature students demonstrate when they enter in the UA: students that completed secondary school, students with incomplete secondary school and students only with a 9th grade school diploma or equivalent. The vast majority of them went back to learning after a period of 10 or more years. Hence, we can trace some questions that need an answer in the future, specially in what regards the socio-economic background of the NTS, at the UA.

2. A large number of NTS admits to have failed courses, even if we can recognise high levels of motivation, as long as they don't show feelings of regret about the chosen bachelors. Here we have to mention the issue of retention and drop-out. In fact, the percentage of active students (that is, registered at the UA and effectively attending the classes) has been rising. At the same time, there is a clear reduction of the drop out rates. This scenario forces us to deepen our analysis in the future, in order to better characterize this phenomena.

3. If we look at the learning processes, is easy to see that the NTS, at the UA, tend to have a positive vision of this dimension, especially in what relates to the performance of the teachers.

There is, anyway, a certain tendency to escape to the neutral categories, in what regards the evaluation's scale. On the other hand, the structure of the bachelors, in some aspects as the theory/practice equilibrium, or the number of hours, is one point that should be given some attention.

4. These data should be completed with the information gathered for the other years, in order to be possible to construct a global vision. The teachers' survey will be very important to this aim. Only a holistic reflection on the information is expected to provide a complete perspective about the conclusions taken so far. Then, there will be the appropriate time to conduct out in-depth interviews. In so doing we mean to give a preliminary answer to the main question: "Does the profile of today non-traditional students diverge from that at the genesis of the specific programme for their access to higher education?"

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