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Navigating through higher education: mature students in transition

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Abstract

In our paper we are going to focus mature students close to 50 years old. We will present the results of two life histories co-constructed with these mature students, who have entered university in the year of 2010/2011. Our particular interest is to investigate how they have lived this very important transition to higher education.

Keywords: mature students, higher education, expectations, transitions, biography.

1. Theoretical framework

The term 'non-traditional student' is useful for describing different groups of students that are in some way underrepresented in higher education (HE) (Bamber, 2008) and whose participation in HE is constrained by structural factors (RHANLE, 2009): disabled or mature students, women, students whose family has not been to university before, working-class or specific ethnic groups who do not fit the so-called 'traditional' major group are included, among other, in this category. Non-traditional student is therefore a fluid concept that we should look upon according to the context characteristics; in this case, students from the University of Algarve, in the south of Portugal. In a previous study we tried to understand who these students were. Our preliminary data (Gonçalves et al., 2011) taking as universe students who have entered university from 2006 on, show that even if most of them have between 24-34 years old (45%), there is 32% with 35-45 years old, and close to 20% between 46-57 years old. Their

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typical profile: mature students who have a job and a family to take care, low family incomes, low parents educational background (some have low educational levels also), with a high possibility of being the first ones in their family to access university and who spent a number of years apart from formal educational organisations (from 5 to 10 years and sometimes more). It strikes our attention the high numbers of 46-57 years olds who are coming back to higher education. Adults in that age range are not properly young in this specific context of HEI.

The concept of transition is not new; in some countries, like the United Kingdom, there is an extensive set of literature devoted to the several perspectives of transition. Initially these studies were focused in youth, in the sense of understanding the processes through which young people make the transition from school to work. Although this interest started roughly in the 1960s, unemployment and the economic crisis that emerged violently during the 1970s made the issue more visible (Goodwin and O'Connor, 2007). The focus in the youth is understandable, primarily because of the politic consequences it entails in its relationships with dropout and success. It is often argued that smoothen transitions could be the key to foster young adults success, either this 'success' is viewed in its purely educational dimension, or also as labour market integration – therefore following the growing centrality of economy into educational values. This approach, therefore, depicts transitions as processes of change – and youth is, of course, made out of a number of transitions. 'In terms of structure, transitions in a life course designate processes of adjustment to new life circumstances. Usually transitions follow ruptures – modifications of what is taken-for-granted in a person's life – which can be due to various causes' (Zittoun, 2007, p. 195). This gives uncertainty a central role which, in turn, highlights that reducing uncertainty is a key-task during transitions. Perspectives of transition ceased to be focused on the individual and the psychological factors that make people more likely to overcome uncertainty. It is clear that while moving from on setting to another people experience a time of intense development, with demands that are socially regulated (Lam and Pollard, 2006).

Last decade's evolution forced the concept of transition to change. First, because it is arguable that traditional biography do still exist or, at least, they are not certainly the norm. Contemporary life courses seem to have become more complex and lost the fixed contours they may have had (Alheit, 1995). If in a first phase this could call for a bigger attention to adults – not just young people – it seems to be no doubts that mature persons like our own students are today included in the fluid mist of transition. The recent changes in life courses mean that mature adults or older adults are also subjected, nowadays, to a number of as transitions.

Second, in the context of late-modernity researchers have tried to reach a theoretical understanding that integrates structural factors as well as the role of the individuals, using globalization studies to support their frameworks. This contributes to a model of transition where reflexivity is central, a mediating link between structural factors and agency. 'This dialectic is between cultural habitus and institutional structures, on the one hand, and the transformative power of individual action, on the other' (Simpson and Cieslik, 2007, p. 399).

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Globalization in this context is also very important because it opened doors to a perspective of transition where reducing *insecurity* and managing *risk* seems to be central, despite the dangers we recognise in this theoretical construction. In this sense it is worthwhile to bring Ülrich Beck to this debate, especially when it comes to his conceptualization of the word-risk society. Beck's (1999) initial ideas depart from the ecological crisis that brought the feeling that environmental menaces were not anymore limited to certain (secure) geographical areas. But Beck's theory begins precisely away from a sociological dualism between nature and society, depicting a world of 'manufactured risks' centred in individualization, danger, and collateral effects. Posterior events and recent societal trends lead Beck to revisit his theory that nowadays includes new axis of analysis (Beck, 2002, p. 41)[1], like the global financial crisis or the threat of global terror networks post-September 11th.

The perception of the world as risk, therefore, seems to extend to a significant number of life dimensions. This macro-context could explain, at least partially, the general tendency of looking at transitions as a problem, a menace, a risk, or just as a changing situation that presents threats that people need to overcome successfully. Whilst we do not deny that this could be the case, there is at least the need to recognise that this conceptualization is incomplete. Transitions need not to be seen as a problem for older adults or groups. Transitions certainly include more than a political perspective that claims for new virtues of management to be overcome in a more efficient way.

Ecclestone (2009) explores how policy and research employ ideas about people's identity, their capacity for empowered action (agency) and the effects of structural factors on the processes and outcomes of transitions. The author develops extensively these three axes of analysis. For us there are a couple of Ecclestone's conclusions that might be important for our own research. First, the three perspectives on transitions (identity, agency and structure) 'not only risk pathologising transitions by depicting them as unsettling, disruptive, daunting, anxiety inducting and risk but also create normative assumptions about how best to manage them' (p. 23). Second, all the three meanings of transition reinforce concerns about risk, suggesting that everyone needs transitions to be smoothed. The idea that people cannot deal with transitions without help sits with the possibilities of opportunity and change that transitions can create. 'It also erases the positive effects of difficulty, challenge and overcoming problems and risks attributing 'problems' to particular groups so that people become a problem to be supported and managed more effectively' (Ecclestone, 2009, p. 23).

[1] To deepen this issue, please see, for instance, Beck et al. (2003) and Beck (2003)

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2. Methodology

This small study is included in a more wide research project focusing non-traditional students[2]. It includes a first phase in which we tried to reach the highest possible number of students from the universities of Algarve and Aveiro, through a parallel survey to students and teachers. Qualitative, in-depth techniques will start to be applied in October 2011, benefiting from the analysis of the questionnaires. At the moment of writing this paper, our scripts of all interviews are being finished and tested. The two biographic interviews of John and Mary are used for the specific purposes of the paper, but also to test the script. John was interviewed three times during July 2011 and Mary two times in the same period (interviews ranged roughly from one hour and a half to two hours).

Our methodological perspective on biography, in this paper, is based in Peter Alheit's biographical learning and also in his concept of biographicity (*Biographizität*). For Alheit (1995) the real theoretical provocation within the biographical approach is its insistence on a different way of learning. Although Alheit's thesis is based in four steps we are only going to underline two: i) a certain trust in the *everyday competence*[3] of individuals to organise their biographies despite the threats posed by progressive modernisation; ii) the discovery of *learning processes within transitions*[7] which could provide adult learning with new perspectives. This does not deny the effects of structural factors over people's biographies, but acknowledges that we can act relatively independently over our own biographies. 'The learning processes between structure and subjectivity are manifold, but they can only be understood if we do justice to *both* poles: the structural framework of conditions governing our lives and spontaneous dispositions that we adopt toward ourselves' (Alheit, 1995, p. 63).

Biographicity (original concept from 1992) means that we can redesign the contours of life within the specific contexts in which we spend it, and that we experience these contexts as shapeable. Within the limits posed by structure we still have the ability to 'decipher the 'surplus meaning' of our biographical knowledge, and that in turn means to perceive the potentiality of our unlived lives' (Alheit, 1995, p.65). But biographical learning should not be understood only as constructions that assures the individual reflexive organisation of experience. It describes, at the same time, the potentiality to the production and transformation of social structures in biographical processes (Alheit and Dausien, 2007).

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[2] Project PTDC/CPE-CED/108739/2008, Non-traditional students in HEI: searching solutions to improve the academic success, funded by the FCT.

[3] Underlined in the original text by the author.

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3. Lost or found in transition? Mary and John perspectives

Mary is 46 years old today and a mother of two boys. The older is studying engineering at the university and the younger is now starting the 10th grade. She was born and lived in Angola, but her family came to Portugal after the 1974 Portuguese revolution and Angola's independence, to re-build their lives' from scratch. This was the first big change she lived at the age of 9. Her father used to be a train mechanic and arrived to Portugal too old to be successfully integrated into the labour market and too young to be able to retire. Hence the family had economic difficulties; the adaptation to Portugal was difficult at every levels. Shortly after their arrival Mary started the 5th grade in a public school close to Lisbon area, but two months later they moved and she had to change school. From 5th to 9th grade she knew four different schools.

At home she was subjected to very strict rules, which seemed to combine general traditional values and traditional gender roles. Mary says that the fact that her mother married pregnant had some influence in their desire to control her life and kept the daughter 'secure'. So she couldn't 'do nothing', not even to go out with her friends – school vacations seemed a torture to her. At the other hand, school space meant a no-control zone, a socialization realm that functioned as her natural refuge. Although Mary cannot be considered as a model student when it comes to success – she repeated the 8th grade twice – she always lived school as a central space of freedom. At the 9th grade she was already 18 years old. Mary knew back then her boyfriend – he was in the army – that later on become her husband (Francisco). After finishing the 9th grade she abandoned school and started working. It is clear that Mary blames, at least partially, her father and mother for this early school abandoning: there was not the will to create the necessary conditions for her to stay at school, and they resigned easily to her new condition of trying to enter the labour market as a non-qualified worker.

For 5-6 years Mary worked in small temporary non-qualified jobs. Basically she accepted what was available. In 1989 (she was 24) she got her first job with a signed formal contract, in a public school in the area of Lisbon. Her functions were basically cleaning and to monitor children during the classes' breaks. She married and went to live also close to Lisbon, but in the opposite extreme of the urban area. This meant she had to cross the entire city to go to work in five different public transportations – spent two hours and a half to get there and another two hours and a half to get back. Meanwhile Francisco got a job as a prison guard, more or less one hour away from Lisbon. This was a difficult time for them.

Mary did this job in different schools until 1996, when she finally got the chance to change to administrative functions, also in public schools. Mary has no shame of her job: she had good relationships with the children (better with the ones considered to be 'bad students') and teachers. But she was tired of cleaning. In this sense, to change to administrative functions was a very important fact for her. 'I used to say, my pen shifted from the broom to the computer, so as you can see...' Although this change was difficult in the beginning, after some training

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courses and the help of her boss, she became comfortable in her new functions. At some point she change house again and went to live close to Francisco's work and later on – after staying some time working, again, far away from home – Mary managed to work in a school close to her new house. It was the year of 2000 Mary had 35 years old, two sons and some stability. Three years later, a new change: Francisco moves to be a prison-guard in the small city of Silves, in the region of Algarve (south of Portugal) and Mary was able to find a job in the same prison, doing administrative work.

In the year of 2007 it opened in Silves a centre for recognition of prior learning (RPL). Strongly encouraged by Francisco, Mary spent one year and a half in this centre and in 2010 she had the 12th grade. This was very important, because it gave her the opportunity to re-gain some habits of studying, researching, etc. Also the adult educator, who was responsible for her at the RPL centre and, again, Francisco, were both determinant in Mary's decision to apply to the University of Algarve, through the new form of access for people with more than 23 years old. Economically speaking is was a difficult decision, implicating the payment of two university fees (her older son begun then his first year). In September 2010 Mary has begun the bachelor of Social Education at the university– 27 years after she abandoned school – in the evening courses.

Mary's expectations had to do with being aware of the fact she was not 20 years old anymore, doubts in her abilities and the fear of not being able to keep up. Her first contact with the academia was during the mandatory interview that is part of the access process. Mary was surprised by the informality of the two professors who interviewed her. Also classes turned out to be completely different from what Mary remembered from school, demanding much more of autonomous individual / group research. At the beginning it was difficult: Mary realised she had not the same ability to memorise (...'I have to understand, or else there's no point...) and also that she had to 'battle' more than her young colleagues, taking more time to study. When asked on the differences between mature and younger students, Mary claims mature students to have more sense of responsibility, organisation and workings method's. The only advantage she sees in young students is their ability to memorise. But again and again she stresses the importance of responsibility in various ways:

> "I'm not there [at the university] to waste time, because my time is precious, right? I've got a family, I work and I want to do this, if possible, in three years. I'm not there to waste time, so for me that's central and I need to skin me-off to do it. And I'm not there to lose money because it's my money, it's not my father and my mother paying me to go there... that's what happens with young kids, someone pays for them to go there".

The group of students that Mary is a part of has about 40 students with ages between 19 to 51 years old, but the great majority are mature students. Mary claims that the better positive surprise of this first academic year was indeed the relationships they are able to build. It is a strong and united group that does not excludes no one. They share their notes, help one another

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when difficulties appear – either these are strictly academic or a more generic matter of psychological support. Also she claims that older students are the ones who lead and steer this type of relationships, which seem fundamental in more than one way.

Coming back to HE implicated family support and changes in the everyday management of a number of issues. Francisco assumed the responsibility of supporting their son in his studies or everything it relates to his school, the daily meals and similar arrangements – Mary arrives at home around midnight or sometimes later, and most of week-ends are dedicated to study. But when Mary talks there is never the feeling that this was a problem, as she is aware that the family supports her efforts. So, the bigger difficulties Mary had in this transition were managing time ('time is a terrible problem'), especially because of the distance between her home place and the university (between 45 minutes and one hour). Academic success was not a problem. After the first weeks and a couple of minor problems things are stabilised. Mary did all the 12 courses (6 each semester) and her grades improved in the second semester. Finally, Mary claims that university printed some significant personal changes:

> "I think that this degree [social education] made me look to certain situations with a new look [...] I didn't even knew the most part of the humanitarian civil society organisations, nothing. I didn't know what the European year of volunteering was. These are things that make you look to things with a different look..."

John is 49 years old today and a father of a daughter and a son. He lived in a small village in the central zone of Portugal until the age of 12. But soon after the Portuguese revolution of 1974, his father (worked at a train company) decided to move to a village close to Lisbon – he was afraid that someone occupied a house he was building there. John's father worked at Lisbon and stayed with the family only two days per week. This change was determinant for John, who left her family and friends behind, as well as the kind of relationships typical of small places, characterised by proximity. His new friends, older than him, were mainly drug addicts and some were drug dealers, but surprisingly or not, always advised John to be out of it. Despite the difficulties in the beginning, John claims that this change was fundamental for him to grow and increase his autonomy. Three years later, in his 9th grade, John changed to a school that was important for him. Even today he remembers his friends, teachers and staff. His father was, meanwhile, already working closer and staying with the family. With 15 years old, John started to work during the summer in a factory (tomato can), along with his friends.

John left one course behind in the 12th grade and he was forced to join the army. This was a second big change in his life. He spent 16 months in the army. Although this was not a good experience, on the other hand it opened the doors for him to run, after that compulsory period, to all the branches of security corps. He joined then the corps of revenue officers, but he was placed in the islands of Açores (Terceira) for two years – another big change in his life. John

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and her girlfriend decided to marry. Both decided to finish secondary school in Açores (evening classes), but a surprised was waiting: the school did not give them equivalences (both missed just one course to finish the 12th grade) and so they had to go back to 10th grade and re-start again – which they did. Luckily for John, his First-Sargent managed flexible schedules for everybody who wanted to study. After the two years they went back to the continent. As John did not have then conditions to go on studying, her wife entered university and she was able to get her first degree.

After a couple more changes in his place of work (and a couple more years), it was John's time. He applied to the University in the ancient regime Ad-Hoc, where people had to make a rigorous written and oral examination to access HE. He started, with 31 years old, a bachelor on management of human resources and labour psychology, but never finished. The guard's branch he belonged to was extinguished in 1993. He managed to enter then the service of foreign and frontiers and later on made the course to be promoted to inspector. And then he was sent, again, to the Açores, this time to an even smaller and different island called Santa Maria (5.000 inhabitants). Her daughter was about 4 years old. John spent the first year alone in Sta Maria and then her wife and daughter joined. This time the experience of staying in Açores was very positive: not only a new baby was born there, as they had a rewarding relationship with the people. Also their professional experiences were very good. They stayed in Santa Maria for 6 years. After that they came to the Algarve by their own choice – making this change the easiest of them all. John talks of change as a structural dimension of his life.

Since the first time John entered HE he though one day he was going to come back. The fact that her daughter (20 and already in university) and son (14) are more autonomous now was important to define the moment. John's motives are not professional (the bachelor is not going to influence his professional path) but mainly personal. He entered HE (also Social Education) with high expectations and the natural fears that come from comparing his age with the younger colleagues. Also the fear of being seen by the others as a 'cop' or a 'snitch' was central. In the beginning, John established formal social relationships with his colleagues: as he expected, the 'snitch' label was a difficult one to overcome. It was only in the second semester when a course on 'Theatre of the Oppressed' allowed a huge improvement of the social relationships between students, along with a two-day field trip. John recognises he also changed, 'adopting a younger posture', including to change his way of dressing, now more informal. He values immensely people's ability of accepting the difference of the other, considering that a social educator must has this type of posture in life. And the creation of this kind of collective spirit was fundamental for the students to build a very, strong united group who is capable of helping the ones who feel difficulties of some kind whenever is needed. When comparing mature/ younger students, John claims the younger students are more able to memorise, have more skills when it comes to computers, but that they lose in all the remaining dimensions. He considers that mature students have a greater life experience, general-cultural knowledge, a better ability to dialogue and elaborate on scientific matters, and a greater ability to make relationships between issues and to

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build on that. To be older is therefore an enormous advantage (that's why, John says, older students got better grades than the younger ones).

Besides this good relationship between the students, John claims to be positively surprised with the kind of relationships and posture – more informal, friendly and opened to dialogue – built by the professors:

> "It is not only to know the student's names, it is also the posture, to be available, that we are able to pose questions, the openness, the openness the professors demonstrated with no exceptions [...] Every professor showed to be opened to help us, to dialogue and that was, for me, the enormous difference regarding my former days of student and that created an enormous expectation [...] And I feel that professors look at us, the people of my age, with respect and affectionately..."

When asked on how HE affected the family balance, John explains all the details that naturally change and affected family. But there is always the feeling this was a 'good' change:

> "I would dare to say it was a positive change. For the commitment that everybody had so that I could begin this life-project, its pride, I feel my daughter and son take a pride in me, I feel my wife takes a pride in me, I feel my father and mother take a pride in me".

John speaks a lot of the changes that HE triggered on him. Some of them are personal. He clearly opposes his former 'I', much more serious and rigid, to a new younger and joyful 'I', always joking, much looser and frequently joining younger colleagues to beer and socialise at night. But mainly he claims HE to open-up his horizons and mentality, to help him to build a more open version of reality and to change the ways he see things at general. Finally, John says to have developed his abilities to approach new issues, to research, write confidently and with efficacy, etc. and also that these skills help him in his job.

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Conclusion

The short biographies here presented give us room to highlight some points to debate. First, an overview of John and Mary's biography depicts two persons who seem to be in transition since they were young. Both changed several times their places of life and work, and face difficulties in several dimensions of their lives (especially Mary). Analysing this set of huge changes, it is no wonder that for both the transition for HE was not a big problem. Quite the opposite, they claim this transition to be one of the smoothest of their lives.

The second point is, in a sense, a consequence of the first. To both Mary and John the transition to HE was not seen as a huge threat or a risk. It presented challenges and opportunities, mainly. Each in their own way acknowledges the difficulties in this path. But when they speak about such difficulties, there is always a discourse that underlines the positive aspects of the transition and the sense of being pride of the changes they are able to trigger for their lives.

Third, we are looking to biographies where structural factors that constraint people's lives are very noticeable. Mary and John spent a great deal of their lives fighting to overcome some of the effects posed by such factors. Nevertheless, it seems undeniable they both have a certain degree of control and autonomy over their own biographies. Moreover, there are important biographical learning processes included in a number of transitions of their lives. Looking only for the HE transition, it seems that HE is promoting significant changes that can have a transformative effect. As they entered university recently, there is an open learning process ahead of them and numerous changes still operating. But the first year of this transition process seems fundamental to open up the possibilities of their unlived lives (cf. Alheit, 1995). Both Mary and John are aware of transformative potentialities of their unlived lives – although, clearly, they prospect different things.

Finally, it is very important to make a reflection on the age factor. Common ideas that circulate regarding higher education claim younger students to be well prepared, to have time and space to develop their skills – despite all the remaining structural factors that we do know to have relationships with academic success (social class, gender, etc.). By the contrary, non-traditional students have been a 'problem', among other things, because drop-out rates are high and academic success is low. Time management, difficulties to join work and studies, or difficulties among the family have been pointed out as factors affecting mature students success. The importance of these two biographies here presented is, precisely, to show that this is not necessarily the case. Both Mary and John have a very positive perspective on the advantages of age, experience, responsibility, and went as far as stating their younger colleagues to be disadvantaged. Their subjective learning processes during this transition clearly depict them as found in transition – not lost.

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