

MENTOR MONITORING

(TEACHERS)



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Presentation

The present document is intended as a framework for the experience in mentor monitoring by the teacher, in the University of Évora, which will be named “mentor monitoring”. This mentoring is directed towards 1st year students for the courses offered by the University in the academic year of 2009/2010.

This document is intended to fulfil two main goals: synthetically, to present the principal results produced by research on this subject, i.e. regarding the students’ transition from secondary to higher education and the factors shown in the process of their adaptation to a new educational reality. At the same time, it is intended to present the concepts that underlie it so as to create a common language common to all higher education institutions, to facilitate the understanding of this phenomenon; the second goal is to list and to put into practice the more relevant aspects present in the transition and adaptation to a higher education learning process, so that these can be constituted as a basis so that tutors, according to the reality of their circumstances, may better design their courses of action.

Given the experimental character of the implementation of “mentor monitoring”, this document will be dynamic and will be periodically updated, according to any needs detected, and include suggestions and proposals.

As a functional instrument, it will contain only the more relevant information. Gradually, additional texts will be sent to the tutor and other teachers that wish to have a deeper contact with the research produced on this subject.

Introduction

Over the last decades, several countries have witnessed a considerable increase in the number of students in higher education which, among other factors, has determined a progressive heterogeneity of the student population. This quantity (and diversity) has not always found the higher education institutions properly prepared because, through varying kinds of constraints, they have found it impossible to introduce necessary changes, as fast as would ,mbe desirable. The high degree of academic failure of 1st year students shows the difficulties inherent to a student's transition and adaptation, as well as the poor preparation of the institutions that receive them (Almeida e Soares, 2000).

Research conducted in the last decade reveals a growing concern with failure in the 1st year of university. Today, it is clear that the change to higher education constitutes an important moment of transition, that should be monitored by those in charge.

This research shows this transition encompasses personal, interpersonal and contextual factors that affect the quality of adaptation, learning and academic performance, in a way that is not always positive, and can cause problems that can expand over subsequent years. In addition to these aspects (adaptation, learning, performance), one should also consider the fact that the academic context of higher education encompasses developmental demands and various natural challenges that are felt and experienced very differently by different students, and in a number of cases in a problematic way.

In the particular case of the University of Évora, the research produced by the Pró-Reitoria para a Política da Qualidade e Inovação, based on 224 1st year students from 16 curricular units, revealed a failure rate of 44,2% (Vieira & Cristóvão, 2009). This figure is close to that of the global failure rate calculated for the University of Évora that, in 2007(Vieira &Cristóvão, 2007), was, for the total of students, more than 50%. This has resulted in a financial loss of 3 million Euros for the University of Évora.

I – Theoretical Foundations

We shall now present, succinctly, the more relevant aspects produced by research in the field of transition, adaptation and academic success for students of higher education, with the objective of establishing and setting out the conceptual framework in which mentoring monitoring for 1st year students can be developed.

1 – Transition and adaptation

Transition and adaptation to higher education are two key concepts for research carried out on the subject in the last two decades, both nationally as internationally. They pinpoint the 1st year in University as a critical period, that can cause crisis and/or developmental challenges, and in which over half of all students show difficulties. These concepts can be found in studies by various authors (Almeida, Soares & Ferreira, 2000; Baker, McNeil & Siryk, 1985; Chickering & Reisser, 1993; Creamer, 1990; Erikson, 1980; Evans, Forney & Dibrito, 1998; Ferreira, Machado, Chaleta, Grácio, & Correia, 2009; etc.).

The transition from secondary to higher education faces young people with multiple challenges and complex tasks in a period marked by developmental changes typical of the final phase of adolescence and the beginning of adult life. In this transition, young people are faced with tasks from four main areas (Almeida, Soares & Ferreira, 2000):

- Academic: new strategies, approaches and learning rhythms are required, as well as adaptation to new teaching and evaluation methodologies and, simultaneously, the demand for greater independence and self-discipline in the study and learning process.
- Social: college experience demands new patterns for the interpersonal relationships with family, teacher, colleagues, the opposite sex and the authorities.

- Personal: strengthening of personal identity, higher knowledge of oneself, greater independence in the management of personal life and, increasingly, the construction of a personal view of the world.
- Vocational/institutional: development of a vocational identity that, progressively, develops a higher commitment to a professional reality.

a) Personal variables and psychosocial development

The theories on the psychosocial development of higher education students indicate the issue of the development of independence as determinant. For Chickering and Reisser (1993) being independent means that the individual feels safe and stable, showing behaviour that is coordinated to their personal and social purposes. In this perspective, independence encompasses three areas:

- Emotional independence manifested by the reduction of the need for the affection, safety and approval of others.
- Emotional independence starting with the separation from parents and evolving to alliances with peers and institutional reference groups, gradually turning into personal interests and beliefs.
- Instrumental independence, meaning the skill to perform activities and solve problems in an individual way, without the need for permanent help and support.

A study recently made on the independence of the students attending higher education in the Alentejo (Évora, Portalegre and Beja), using the IDA (Inventário de Desenvolvimento da Autonomia, the Portuguese version of the Iowa Development Autonomy Inventory by Hood & Jackson, 1983) with a sample of 427 students, observed that the degree of independence in general increases with age and, particularly, as regards emotional independence (emotional independence from parents, colleagues and interdependence). We have found that students with the best academic performance have higher results for time management and interdependence. We have also found differences between boys and girls already identified in other studies (White & Hood, 1989; Pinheiro & Ferreira, 1995; Ferreira, 2003), indicating that girls tend

to have better academic performance and present greater skills in time management (Ferreira, Machado, Chaleta, Grácio, & Correia, 2009).

Generally, these results point to the need for institutions to take on the development of autonomy and interdependence as an objective, and to find ways to promote it since the student's academic success is also dependent on his/her personal and social development. With the student's greater independence, better academic results are found. One of the most important factors concerns instrumental independence, especially time management that appears as an influential factor in academic performance, not only in this research but in the vast literature on students' learning and academic performance. On comparison, the results obtained from the three institutions studied (University of Évora, Polytechnic Institutes of Portalegre and Beja), significant differences were found in the level of the sub-scales of interdependence and time management, particularly between the two Polytechnics (higher in Portalegre and lower in Beja), which indicates the role played by the attitude of the different institutions towards the development of the independence of the students attending them (Ferreira, Machado, Chaleta, Grácio, & Correia, 2009).

b) Learning and academic performance

Some research has been made on student learning in higher education. In this case, we shall only refer to research on the conceptions on learning and their influence on the approaches to learning, as well as the consequences these present on the academic performance of the students in this level of education.

The researches begun by Marton in 1976 from simulated academic situations, exhaustively and rigorously transcribed, enabled the identification of description categories following well defined systematic proceedings resulting in a hierarchy according to the level of understanding achieved by the student. These categories describe qualitative differences in what has been learned and different ways of solving problems. The use of the first type of category led to the development of phenomenography, that explores the range of conceptions people have on the world around them; the second type of category, that is, the way the students solve problems led, on the other hand, to the identification of

distinctive and contrasting approaches to deep learning, that is, the attempt to rebuild knowledge through personal understanding or, by opposition, the attempt to reproduce information associated with the intention of satisfying the requirements perceived to be those most valued by the teacher.

On the researches made on learning conceptions, six conceptions were identified (Marton, Dall'Alba & Beaty, 1993) whose existence was later confirmed by the students in the University of Évora (Grácio, 2003).

1 – Increase in knowledge (or learning as an increase of knowledge itself). Learning is seen as a quantitative action and students face learning in order to acquire more knowledge (collection, consumption and storage of parts of knowledge).

2 – Memorization and reproduction. This conception, also considered quantitatively, accentuates particularly the form of acquisition of knowledge (memorize and reproduce). It is distinguished from the above by its connection to the external horizon, since it directs to the later reproduction of the memorized material, in evaluation tests.

3 – Application of knowledge. Beyond the acquisition and storage of knowledge, the subject presupposes its application according to concrete demands from the academic and other contexts.

4 – Understanding. The focal point of the learning process is centred on the student who critically analyses reality in various ways, considering the arguments discussed in the material to be learned. Learning is seen as a comprehensive process that requires preciously acquired knowledge and its integration in other contexts, through comparison and contrasting processes. A visual metaphor arises, in that the student's language makes frequent reference to looking or seeing.

5 – Seeing things differently. Understanding expands and the student makes a greater effort to see reality in a different way; it is no longer centred on the understanding of an idea, the production of a meaning or the development and construction of something (as in the category above), but emphasizes the

overall architecture of the change process and the modification of his/her own way of thinking (of something specific or of the world around).

6 – Change as a person. This conception adds to the previous one an existential perspective on the learning process. Change as a person emerges from the construction of new perspectives on phenomena, resulting from new ways of dealing and working with learning materials, allowing the student to face the world differently.

The results obtained in the University of Évora (Grácio, 2003) confirm the results obtained in international studies and indicate that students present predominantly superficial conceptions of learning.

Entwistle (1985), interested in the researches developed by Marton and Pask, developed his line of research from the strategies and processes developed by students for daily learning tasks. In this field, the student's approach to learning was explored, and the deep and superficial approaches clearly identified. A third type of approach also arose, the strategic approach, whose goal centres on obtaining higher grades in degrees and implies (a) the manipulation of the evaluation system by the student (for example, causing a good impression to the teachers, analyse questions from previous exams and be attentive to key points or even likely questions) and (b) a more systematic organization of the student's time and effort in order to obtain the best possible results with the least possible effort, in satisfactory study conditions, from effective learning materials. These three approaches were identified from the quantitative analysis of interviews and Entwistle (2000a) defined them the following way:

Deep approach (search for meaning) – the student makes an attentive and critical assessment of the content in study, with the purpose of understanding. He tries to connect new ideas with previous knowledge and transpose them to his daily experience. He examines the logic of the exposition and relates the demonstration with the conclusions. He shows an active interest in the contents of the course.

Surface approach (routine reproduction) – The student memorizes the necessary information with the intention of meeting the requirements of the task

(evaluation). He considers the task an external imposition and is incapable of distinguishing principles from examples, centring on isolated, disintegrated elements, not reflecting on the learning goals or strategies.

Strategic approach (reflexive organization) – The student's goal is to obtain high grades. Therefore, he manages time effectively, making a consistent effort, ensuring the study conditions and materials are appropriate, using previous exams to predict questions and is alert to the requirements and criteria of evaluation.

Entwistle, like Biggs, considers differences between the superficial and deep approaches and the strategic approach (Entwistle) or high performance (Biggs) to be significant. The first two describe ways for the students to behave towards the academic tasks (high and low, respectively) and the difference between them lies, mainly, in the student's intention: to achieve personal understanding or to satisfy what is required by the teacher or evaluation. The third characterizes the attitude towards the school context (space and time organization and attention to the demands of the teacher and of evaluation), aiming to obtain the best results (Tang & Biggs, 1996).

The research produced in this field with the students from the University of Évora showed that students use predominantly superficial approaches to learning and that, though these become deeper as age increases and they advance in their courses, these never appear to be as deep as would be desirable, but even so several obtain academic success (Chaleta, 2003).

c) Variables linked to the academic context

Some of the variables linked to the academic context contribute to a greater understanding of the process of academic transition and adaptation. These variables, considered to be part of the context of human development and behaviour, contribute towards understanding the influence the space of the institution itself has on the student's learning, adaptation and psychosocial development (Almeida, Soares & Ferreira, 2000). The physical conditions and, specifically, the ratio between the students and the available resources (material and human) conditions the quality of the relationship and socialization

between the young people (aggressive and anxious behaviours), their early attitudes towards academic involvement (attention, information processing, interaction, involvement and commitment to tasks) and, in general, their academic satisfaction. These components appear in several studies as variables capable of influencing the adaptation, the integration in the physical and social structure of the institution and, consequently, their academic performance.

In a research study produced in the University of Évora (Chaleta, 2003), we tried to evaluate the students' perception on their course using the CPQ – Course Perception Questionnaire (Ramsden & Entwistle, 1981). The 1st year students' perception on their course focused, mainly, on formal teaching and the workload, indicating that these students considered classes more important than individual study and felt great pressure in the completion of tasks (workload too heavy, programmes with too many topics and too many written assignments that did not allow time for independent reading). These students considered their teacher poorly prepared, very little committed to their work and unavailable to help students and also, that they had few friendly attitudes and little attention to the students' needs. They considered there was no clear definition of the evaluation pattern or the study goals, they felt little freedom to organize their work, and that social and academic relationships among colleagues were not good.

Generally, in the first years, the students are more attentive and dependent on the demands of academic life becoming increasingly independent in this context, even if they perceive the demands as being with negative or inadequate.

Academic failure, as a whole (low grades, absenteeism, subjects that are repeated, course changes, abandonment, year transition), is a complex and multidimensional phenomenon that is frequently related to the process of transition/adaptation to university. Beyond academic skill, young students also need to develop personal skills that allow them to deal with change and the new demands they face in their academic life.

These aspects cannot continue to be omitted or ignored in the context of the university (any university) for the crossing of the gates into the institution is not a magical moment capable of endowing the students with the skills required of them, the independence, the self-discipline needed for their learning, development and academic success. To do so is to ignore the difficulties of over half the students we receive every academic year.

In numbers 7 and 10 of the books of the PRPQY of the UE (Vieira & Cristóvão, 2007; 2009), we can observe data on the academic failure in the University of Évora and references to research produced in which one of the factors referred to as relevant, consists precisely of the transition/adaptation to university life.

II - Aspects to explore within the frame of mentoring monitoring

Taking as a reference the three personal contact moments each tutor has with his students in the semester, as proposed in the dispatch 128/2009, and considering the assumptions previously presented, we now propose a series of items that can be explored in attempt to ease the transition and adaptation process, and to create the conditions for the achievement of academic success by incoming students in the University of Évora.

Mentor Monitoring by the teachers will have an invaluable importance for the students, if the tutor is perceived as an institutional reference for the student, giving him greater security at a time when he is making a transition that is complex at various levels. This monitoring through the semester can constitute a factor of security in the adaptation process and, consequently, for the achievement of academic success.

The intention is not for the tutor to solve all the problems presented by the students but rather, depending on the situations that exist, to identify and forward them to the Course Director who, in turn, will have the support of the GPSA (Gabinete para a Promoção do Sucesso Académico – Office for the Promotion of Academic Success) to find the most appropriate solution for each situation.

The various natural limitations the tutors can face in response to students, mean that several of these aspects will be addressed in the formation directed to all 1st year students, to take place in the month of October. A brochure is being developed to underpin this formation and will later be distributed to the course directors and tutors so that there is a shared knowledge of all the scheduled intervention to take place in the 1st semester.

- 1st contact moment – Adaptation (September/October)

It is preferable for all the students to meet their tutor in this period. In this first moment, it would be important to inquire how the transition and adaptation is proceeding, considering the following aspects:

- the way the change is being felt (transition from secondary to higher education), difficulties found and (dis)comfort connected to the change.
- inquiry into the students' weekly organization, specifically, the setting of schedules that include not only class time, but also, study time, assignment and research time and also time for the other tasks in life.
- inquiry into how their time is being managed according to the several tasks required by the different subjects.
- other aspects thought to be important in order to answer the demands of the respective course adequately.

- 2nd contact moment – Learning and time management and organization (November/December)

- Check the aspects focused on in the 1st contact moment
- Ask about the degree of satisfaction with the course and the conditions for the completion of academic tasks
- Check how the students are organizing themselves, according to the predicted evaluation tests for the different courses, i.e., if they show self-disciplined behaviours that involve planning, control and control.
- Discover if they have the necessary bibliography for the various subjects and if they are involved in scientific research using adequate credible media.

- Inquire if they regulate their motivation and their behaviour towards responding to the tasks required to them (have they set feasible goals and are they applying appropriate behaviour).

- **3rd contact moment – Academic Success (January/ February)**

- Check the aspects focused on the 1st and 2nd contact moments.
- Assess the expectation regarding academic success (completed subjects, through continuous evaluation or exam, disciplines predicted not to be successful, etc.).
- Reflect with the students on the causes of their failure, when the situation occurs, and work out recovery plans with them.

Notes:

1 – On “mentor monitoring”

- Regardless of the form it takes, mentoring has always meant the action of a subject with a higher level of development and cognitively more competent in a certain domain,

- The mentor monitoring proposed is inspired by the sociocognitive model developed from the contributions of Vygotsky, in the sense described above and in one of the components present in the mentoring models of Oxford and Cambridge that include in their pedagogical model an important component directed to the personal and social interaction between tutors and students.

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“The tutor is not a teacher in the sense that it is her or his role to impart information. Rather, the tutor’s role is to encourage her students creatively to engage with the knowledge they have encountered, constructing and re-constructing their own understanding. By demonstrating in this way the methods of the scholar, the best tutors enable their students to achieve their own scholarly independence.

Whilst good tutorial teaching has many elements in common with other forms of university teaching, what makes it unique is its element of personal interaction. Every tutorial is a unique series of complex transactions, deriving their particularity from students’ and tutors’ own knowledge and experience, their capacities to learn from and to inform the other, and the nature and quality of the relationship that they enjoy”.

(A model for tutorial teaching
University of Oxford
Institute for the Advancement of University Learning)

In the future, this component, insufficient in itself to answer the challenges and demands placed by the transition to higher education, should associate the tutorial education as a pedagogical model with the more academic component, more centred on deep approaches to knowledge, the development of independence and on the self-discipline of student. One must recognize, nonetheless, that this requires a complete and complex reorganization of higher education institutions, which is not possible in a short space of time.

2 – On the theoretical framework of reference

The research on students' learning in higher education has followed several steps and different paths. Of these, two methodological perspectives are underlined: the first, more connected to the research in the field of the psychology of learning (and teaching), to investigate how students learn and study; the second, more connected to cognitive psychology, to identify learning strategies the researchers expect the students to use in their academic work (Entwistle & Marton, 1989). From these perspectives emerges a third one, that the authors consider theoretical and eclectic and that, in this sense, conveniently uses the concepts produced by the previous two, drawing itself from the learning experiences described by the students.

The third perspective which frames the work here outlined to oversee the transition, adaptation and academic success of the 1st year students at the University of Évora is set within the model generically designated by Biggs (1993) as SAL models (Students Approaches to Learning). Its central concern is to study learning from the students' perspective and in the contexts in which it occurs (looking for its ecological validity).

While recognizing other models can be drawn into this discussion the choice for this theoretical model with its essentially phenomenographic nature, is a result of accumulated research over a decade and the fact remains that its main result reflects the reality of the students of the University of Évora.

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