

## Academic Experience at the Beginning and the End of University Studies

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### Introduction

Since Western civilisations have not made a clear distinction between the period when adolescence ends and adulthood begins, the transition to adulthood has become slower and more complex. This has led to the emergence of a period called 'young adult' which applies to the university student population (Arnette & Taber, 1994) and to social and cultural changes in a society believed to be more and more centred upon adolescence (Anatrella, 1991; Keniston, 1971). The experience acquired while attending university leads to new acquisitions and forms of behaviour that may have an impact on cognitive and psycho-social development (Astin, 1993a; Creamer, 1990; Evans, Forney & Dibruto, 1998; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991). Therefore, to understand how university students mature we need to understand how they interact with the university and face its challenges either from an academic or from an affective and social perspective, or even from their own vocational decisions (Astin, 1993b; Baker, McNeil & Siryk, 1985; Benjamin, 1995; Russel & Petrie, 1992; Upcraft & Gardner, 1989).

To enter university means new ways of studying and greater organisation, autonomy and commitment (Baker & Siryk, 1989; Biggs, 1988; Cone & Owens, 1991; Hossler, 1984; Pace, 1984; Pugh & Pawan, 1991). Academic life is also an important challenge as far as affective and interpersonal development is concerned. For many, it means *leaving home*, which can be quite painful. Others seem to experience this as an apparent freedom (Albert, 1988; Armsden & Greenberg, 1989; Lopez, Campbell & Watkins, 1988). The relationship with fellow mates, teachers or the family are now ruled by new competences and new forms of relationships (Biggs, 1993; Ramsden, 1988). The academic experience is therefore extremely important in the rise of autonomy (Chickering & Reisser, 1993). Last but not least, the time spent at university is associated with the building of a life pattern and the development of a vocational and professional identity (Gordan, 1995; Sherman, 1994).

Becoming mature may imply *accepting challenges*, especially if young people do not get enough support (Chickering & Reisser, 1993; Health, 1968; Sanford, 1962). Hence, it is important that specific support services are found at the universities (Blimling & Whitt, 1999; Komives, Delworth & Woodard, 1996; Upcraft & Schuh, 1996). They should help to solve young people's problems or enhance the academic experience through programmes that promote their

development. Furthermore, if we take human development as a goal, we shall not only be dealing with individual realities, but also with the quality of the context itself. These services or others may wonder what is the purpose of universities today, how their students experience them and their atmosphere (Astin, 1984, 1993ab; Pace, 1984; Pascarella, 1985; Tinto, 1993). Some variables are of the greatest importance as far as students' adaptation and development are concerned, e.g. the institutional dimension, the nature and quality of the teacher/student relationship, the type of curriculum and teaching methods used, the quality of the relationship between fellow mates and the type of student culture (Chickering & Reisser, 1993).

The impact of academic experience varies according to each institution's context, but it is always dependent on the student's commitment and academic and social level of integration (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991). These aspects seem to play a vital role (Terenzini & Wright, 1987). If we want to understand how young people adapt/adjust to university, we must consider the complex interaction between personal and institutional factors, the intention of proceeding with the course and the affective support they are getting. Another important factor is the quality of family ties (Cabrera, Castañeda, Nora & Hengstler, 1992; Cabrera, Nora & Castañeda, 1993). Several studies show how parents' emotional closeness can be responsible for young people's psycho-social adaptation to university (Berman & Sperling, 1991; Holahan, Valentiner & Moss, 1995; Lapsey, Rice & Fitzgerald, 1990; Kenny, 1987). This influence is also felt in the development of social competences (Kenny, 1987) or the level of satisfaction in relationships with their peers (Bell *et al.*, 1985) which start during the first year of the course and continue for the rest of their academic life (Lapsey *et al.*, 1990). This enables us to conclude that building up personal autonomy does not necessarily mean the end of the relationship with parents but, on the contrary, new ways of defining and restructuring it.

Most studies consider first year students and the way the initial adaptation to university is experienced (Cochrane, 1991; Van Vracem & De Ketele, 1983). Here, we shall analyse first and fourth year students to compare how students who are beginning their courses and those who are leaving college feel.

## **Methodology**

### *Sample*

The sample was composed of 403 students from 11 degree courses at the University of Évora. They were intentionally chosen amongst the first year (Group 1) and fourth year students (Group 2) of the same degree courses. We then tried to balance these two groups by area (humanities, sciences, technology and economics). The sample has a higher percentage of girls (73%) in the two groups and the mean age of group 1 was 19.6 (SD = 2.54) and that of group 4 was 23.4 (SD = 3.56).

### *Procedure*

Questionnaires were handed out to the students during class time. They were informed about the goals of the study and were left free to decide whether they

would like to join in or not, since data confidentiality had been granted. Most students filled in the questionnaire together during class time and were pleased to participate. Some questionnaires, however, had to be handed out to students outside the classes.

### Instrument

This study made use of the *Academic Experience Questionnaire* (Almeida & Ferreira, 1997) which comprises 170 *likert* format items (5 points) covering 17 dimensions. The questionnaire comprises different aspects of the academic experience such as *adaptation to the course, academic performances, relationship contexts, students' commitment and adaptation to the institution, as well as autonomy, identity and the student's physical and psychological well-being*. Rather than deeper assessment of specific aspects, it aimed to deal with the most significant dimensions of academic experience regarded as a fundamental factor for psycho-social development or academic performance. The number of items varied in the different dimensions between 6 and 15. The *alpha* coefficients varied between .69 and .88 according to the number of items in each sub-scale.

A factorial analysis of the results obtained in the 17 dimensions made it possible to group them into four main factors: *personal adaptation dimensions* (autonomy, self-esteem, psychological well-being, etc); *academic performance dimensions* (knowledge, study methods, relationship with teachers, etc); *academic commitment dimensions* (adaptation to the course, adaptation to university, relationship with fellow mates, etc), and *surviving dimensions* (economic resources management, relationship with the family, physical well being). These four factors are together responsible for 67% of the variance.

### Results

Table I shows the descriptive statistics per factor, as well as the students' identification variables. We must emphasise that in regard to the different dimensions and factors, the higher results correspond to the more positive personal perceptions or lesser difficulties experienced by the students. In order to make a comparative analysis of the four factors we divided the global scores by the number of items in each factor (scale from 1 to 5).

TABLE I. Results obtained in the four factors according to gender and year

Factors	Year	Female			Male		
		N	M	DP	N	M	DP
Factor I	1 <sup>st</sup>	119	3.37	.42	41	3.56	.54
	4 <sup>th</sup>	118	3.39	.42	40	3.66	.35
Factor II	1 <sup>st</sup>	119	3.33	.38	41	3.13	.41
	4 <sup>th</sup>	118	3.39	.40	40	3.34	.40
Factor III	1 <sup>st</sup>	119	3.55	.40	41	3.54	.49
	4 <sup>th</sup>	118	3.46	.40	40	3.64	.37
Factor IV	1 <sup>st</sup>	119	3.42	.40	41	3.49	.61
	4 <sup>th</sup>	118	3.42	.42	40	3.60	.45

The means displayed may show a small variance. In factor I, gender seems to be the only variant and boys' mean is higher and statistically significant ( $F = 18,623$ ;  $p < .001$ ). In factor II, the interaction of the gender and year variables is significant ( $F = 6,489$ ;  $p < .05$ ), showing a higher mean amongst first year girls and a higher mean amongst fourth year boys. In factor III, there is no significant statistical difference in regard to the variables considered. Finally, in factor IV, there is a significant gender effect ( $F = 4.74$ ;  $p < .05$ ), showing a higher mean amongst boys. The variances found so far seem to indicate that girls experience greater difficulties and less positive perceptions in personal dimensions (factor I). As far as *academic commitment* is concerned (factor II), the boys experience greater difficulties (mainly during the first year). However, the girls seem to be more dependent on the family (relationship, financial support) (factor IV). This was observed at first and fourth year level.

In order to proceed to a more detailed analysis of the results obtained in some of the questionnaire's dimensions, we have taken some results in regard to a few dimensions we believed would improve the results' analysis as far as students' development and progressive adaptation to the courses were concerned. We came across a significant effect of the interaction between gender and year in the following dimensions: *adaptation to the course* ( $F = 7.862$ ;  $p < .01$ ), *adaptation to the university* ( $F = 3.895$ ;  $p < .05$ ), *study methods* ( $F = 4.386$ ;  $p < .05$ ) and *family relationship* ( $F = 7.245$ ;  $p < .01$ ). Concerning *adaptation to the course* and *adaptation to the university*, the first year girls seem to have greater difficulties than boys or the fourth year girls. A quite different pattern can be found amongst the fourth year boys who experience greater difficulties than the fourth year girls or the first year boys. These inconsistent results, especially with respect to the fourth year boys, may lead us to conclude that this particular sample could have some unexpected random peculiarities. On the other hand, it may also reflect these students' deep worries, since they are about to finish their course and leave university. Therefore, if their final score is not what was expected they might face greater difficulties in relation to *practicum* or applying for jobs because of their low average. Concerning *study methods*, the results between the first and fourth year girls, as well as the fourth year boys are similar, whereas the first year boys experience less difficulty. Therefore, we should see how committed to attending classes these students are, since their mean is the lowest in relation to the time spent studying beyond tests. Concerning *family relationships*, the girls seem to find them important or feel more dependent. The first year boys present lower results, which may suggest that they feel more independent from their parents or the family structure. This is in complete opposition to what was found with the first year girls.

Looking into other dimensions' results, gender strikes us in relation to *commitment to extra-curricular activities* where boys are ahead of girls ( $F = 11,493$ ;  $p < .001$ ). Finally, in regard to the *relationship with fellow mates*, we found no significant differences concerning gender and year, although boys' results tended to be a little higher. The same does not go for the *relationship with teachers* where the year variance is significant ( $F = 6.585$ ;  $p < .05$ ). The first year boys do not seem to be so committed to getting on well with teachers or may experience greater difficulties in this area.

## Conclusion

Against initial expectations, we were faced with just a small variance in relation to the first factor – gathering personal dimensions according to year of attendance. It would be reasonable to believe that academic experience might have had an impact upon personal understanding of facts, level of self-confidence and hence on people's physical or psychological well-being, since it implied new demands in terms of schooling and relationships. The lack of differentiation by course degree year could point out to the convergence of different situations. On the one hand, the students had completed the first year and overcome the initial adaptation crisis. On the other, we may wonder whether the 4th year students were not wondering about their competences and integrity, since they are leaving university and entering the world of work. Last but not least, the variation found in relation to boys concerning the first factor may lead us to conclude that girls are particularly committed to *self* dimensions, or more vulnerable to change and adapting to new situations.

Concerning the second factor that deals mainly with learning and academic achievement, the results clearly show differences in favour of girls. They seem to be more committed to school tasks, especially during the first year. If we take the mean of the time spent studying daily, there is a difference in favour of girls too. Therefore, they seem more able to manage their time during the school year and more adapted to their courses degrees. We should probably not dissociate this result from the fact that a higher percentage of girls have been able to attend their first choice course. However, when we compare the mean at the end of the 4th year there is no difference and the boys are now ahead of girls, especially in regard to adaptation to the course. We may then conclude that attendance of a course is bound to change a vocational project with the commitment, consequently, to take a degree in an area of study that had not previously been chosen.

Concerning the involvement in *extra-curricular activities* there are some differences according to gender. Boys seem to have higher levels of participation. This is probably the reason why they seem to adapt more easily to the university than girls. It would be worth investigating whether there is a relationship between the results obtained in this dimension and the results of students in factor I. In case of an affirmative answer, we could reach the conclusion that the students would be more self-confident and more autonomous when they are more committed to extra-curriculum activities. In relation to factor IV, girls seem to be more dependent on the family structure. This may suggest that they need to be closer to their parents or other family members or even that they are more dependent for their economic survival. Boys do not seem to experience so many difficulties in the dimensions included in this factor, which may suggest that they are more self-confident or optimistic. We have already considered these results in relation to factor I. Finally, we could conclude that being a boy or a girl seems to influence the way college students go through the academic experience and the impact it has on them. However, we feel it would be necessary to enlarge research on this topic, including for example more balanced samples of gender to confirm these results.

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