

At the entrance gate: students and biographical trajectories in the University of Lisbon

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Abstract

University 'failure' is the starting point of this article, which is based on a case study at the University of Lisbon. The objective is to discuss concepts constructing 'school failure' as a problem in higher education systems, with special attention being given to contemporary debates on 'youth condition' in strongly individualised societies. The study selects first-year students in the University of Lisbon's eight faculties in 2003–2004, to establish a social characterisation of this group by applying an extensive survey to first-year students. A database was constructed and statistical treatment of the information undertaken. This article relates these findings to school failure indicators at the university and its various faculties. As a result, we expect to sketch a social portrait of new University of Lisbon students in 2003–2004 considered as a whole and in their internal diversity, and to illustrate links between their social trajectories and secondary school failure and success indicators.

Keywords

school failure
higher education
students
drop-out

Higher education and modernity in Portugal

From a European perspective, educational modernity is a recent fact in Portugal. The intense and continuous public investment in a school system and the democratisation and generalisation of the school experience really began just three decades ago (Candeias 2004; Nóvoa 2005; Almeida and Vieira 2006a). Despite official political discourses considering education as an objective to be attained, its effective application was until recently slow and neglected. During the late-1960s and then more intensely with the establishment of democracy in 1974, there was the turning point; however, the Portuguese education gap remains evident vis-à-vis its European Union (EU) partners.¹ However, the final output cannot disguise the ongoing remarkable shifts.

Modernity's late emergence in Portugal is associated with intense and rapid change, with different impacts according to social group, region and the reality considered. The resulting national landscape is not flat: pre-modern, modern and post-modern temporalities cross and fertilise a multi-dimensional and paradoxical present (Viegas and Costa 1998).

Until recently, university was an exclusive destiny (Nunes 1969). Even during the 1980s, the effective higher education rate among young Portuguese was as low as 6 per cent. Even today higher education hardly

1. Some indicators illustrate this contrast. In 1870, the education rate in Portugal was 13 per cent compared to 75 per cent in France, 62 per cent in Belgium and 42 per cent in Spain. In 1900, only 27 per cent of Portuguese aged ten and over had learned to read and write, rising to 48 per cent in 1940, 67 per cent in 1960 and 91 per cent in 2001. In 2006, 27.6 per cent of the Portuguese population between the ages of 25 and 64 had completed at least upper secondary education (EU27: 70 per cent, EU15:

67 per cent). Recent changes are slowly becoming visible: the same indicator for 20–24 year olds is 49.6 per cent (UE27: 78 per cent; EU15: 75 per cent)

reaches the majority of young people. In 2000–2001, 30 per cent of Portuguese 20 year olds entered higher education. Nevertheless, a remarkable political effort is being undertaken to increase the number of students. Feminisation became a new trend: in 2005, 57 per cent of students were women, constituting two-thirds of graduates (Martins, Mauritti and Costa 2005). The growth of regional public universities and polytechnics has brought the Lisbon-Coimbra-Oporto domination to an end. The emergence of private and cooperative higher education has also contributed to the increase and diversification of courses on offer (Vieira 2001).

Macro-structural changes have supported this development. The improvement in living conditions, the development of a service sector and processes of increased urban middle class social mobility and new dominant values concerning the family ought to be considered. The abrupt decline in fertility rates and the reduction in the size of families since the 1980s are evidence of this change (Almeida et al 2004). Portugal had one of the highest fertility rates in Europe in 1960 (3.1 children per woman aged 15–49); however, by 2005 this had declined to close to 1.4. This is related not only to the rise in the number of women undertaking professional activities, but is mainly due to the active mobilisation of the family to assist with their children's education (Almeida 2005; Almeida and Vieira 2006a), which is perceived as a legitimate means for accessing privileged social positions. School and schooling thus became of central importance in family strategies.

On the other hand, the more restrictive academic criteria imposed by university entrance requirements interferes with the students' vocational orientations, 'choices' and life projects. The risk of exclusion and uncertainty of admission is crucial to the young person. Increased competition for education credits has been installed in the Portuguese school system – especially in Lisbon, where the population with the more educated and higher qualified population is concentrated.

'School failures'?

Re-established in 1911, with 22,000 students and eight faculties in 2008 – medicine, psychology and educational sciences, science, dentistry, pharmacy, law, fine arts, arts and humanities – the University of Lisbon offers courses in most major subject areas apart from engineering, architecture, economics and business studies. Particularly high among first year students, 'failure' is a major problem in Portuguese higher education, and Lisbon University is not immune. The official estimated failure rate for undergraduate degree courses in 2004–2005 was 36.5 per cent, compared to a national rate of 32.9 per cent (Table 1). The rate varies from almost 52 per cent in the faculty of arts and humanities to –2.5 per cent in the faculty of Medicine. In the greater Lisbon area, Lisbon Technical University (Universidade Técnica de Lisboa) has the lowest failure rate at 29.5 per cent, while the New University of Lisbon (Universidade Nova de Lisboa) has the highest at 38.8 per cent.

However, the numbers do not speak for themselves. The OCDE 'success rate' concept is far from accurate. It is calculated as the ratio of the number of students awarded an undergraduate degree to the number of new entrants to the level n years before, with n being the number of years of full-time study required to complete the degree. The reality is thus over-simplified.

	Failure rate (%)
University of Lisbon	36.5
Medicine	-2.5
Psychology and educational sciences	22.1
Science	28.5
Dentistry	30.8
Pharmacy	31.6
Law	39.8
Fine arts	44.8
Arts and humanities	51.8
Lisbon Technical University	29.5
ISCTE-Lisbon University Institute	32.6
Lisbon Polytechnic Institute	35.5
New University of Lisbon	38.8
Total (Portugal)	32.9

Source: OCES (2007)

Table 1: Failure rates in public higher education (%), greater Lisbon.

Remarkably different situations are covered under the general umbrella of failure rate, which does not distinguish failure in its most technical sense (i.e. not passing an examination, a discipline or a year) from drop-out, withdrawal, desistance and (intra- and inter-) transferences that take place during the first years as a result of changed expectations deriving from academic experience. The indicator ignores the lengthening of studies for those students with jobs, another parallel activity or training periods – often compulsory – that delay the conclusion of the degree, and it does not differentiate part-time and full-time students.

Internal norms regulating transitions (by imposing or not imposing precedence between disciplines or credits, upon which final year approval very often depends, differ from university to university and contribute to diminish the descriptive power of the indicator.

Besides technical limitations, the rate raises the paradox between the perception of failure from the institutional perspective, which is negatively understood as a lack of academic competences, and the often-ignored perspective of the individual young person. For some, especially students coming from an underprivileged background, the extension of their studies may be seen in a positive light, as a sign of self-persistence and proof that their university dream is coming true, even if it involves taking up employment in order to finance their studies and therefore significantly reducing their university investment.

For others, particularly students from middle-class families, some of whom are academically excellent students, 'failure' is considered as the inevitable result of an institutional injustice: their desired course misplacement, which through the mechanism of *numerus clausus*, leads to an understandable lack of motivation that underlies their 'failure' and encourages students to seek more interesting academic alternatives. Having the means (i.e. the time and finances) to prolong their time at university, their academic search may eventually be understood as a stage on an

experimental step-by-step entrance into adulthood in a risky and individualised society. In modern and highly differentiated Western societies, the biography tends to become 'reflexive', and thus risky (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002). The social pressure to lead a 'life of one's own in a runaway world' is particularly evident in the young person's choice of course on their entry to university, a choice that is strongly limited by the *numerus clausus*. The new demand for achievement, while it may be precarious and contribute to the construction of their identity, is a priority that encourages the conversion of school decisions and trajectories. From this individual perspective, 'failure' emerges not as a deficit, but as a constructive search for self-fulfilment.

A large field of theoretical and methodological challenges is thus opened to research. School failure has been explained by either reproduction or handicap theories: the first emphasising the impact of structural social inequalities on individual educational trajectories and results; the second by reverting to an organisational analysis that focuses on the institutional and internal dimensions of university life that can severely affect achievement. A third perspective emphasises the link between a 'sociology of students' and a 'sociology of the institution', simultaneously conducting a study of the individual social background and an analysis of the institutional contexts in which they are newly integrated (Curado and Machado 2006).

In this paper we intend to address a social and academic characterisation of students at the University of Lisbon and to relate this data with the issue of school failure. Methodologically, we handled data resulting from an extensive survey administratively applied to students enrolling for their first year at the university in 2003–2004 (first cycle) (Almeida and Vieira 2006b). A total of 2123 of the 2646 first-year students who were registered officially at the university by its central services were surveyed (OCES 2007). We also refer to data collected from responses to a postal survey that was sent to all students that the university had recorded as having given up their course in 2004–2005 (a total of 633) (Curado and Machado 2005; 2006). There were 190 responses from former students to this 2006 questionnaire, representing 30 per cent (and therefore not representative). Nevertheless, this second sample allowed us to explore some individual dimensions and perceptions of failure.

University of Lisbon students at a glance

The University of Lisbon is a metropolitan institution and the majority of its students (70 per cent) are recruited from the Lisbon area. There are two exceptions to this general rule: the medicine and dentistry faculties which have a national appeal, with 54 per cent of their first-year students coming from outside of the Lisbon area. In the majority of cases, the residential stability of the young people follows their transition from secondary to tertiary education. Often combined with spatial mobility and the difficulties of adjusting to a strange urban and residential environment, the university's 'failure' rate does not match this stable background scenario.

On the other hand, the faculties of medicine, dentistry and pharmacy have the highest entry requirements (see Table 2). More than 91 per cent of the students admitted to these faculties score 85–100 per cent in their national exams. Despite internal diversity, and including the cases of the

Faculty	National exam scores (%)		
	85–100%	70–80%	50–65%
Medicine	100.0	0.0	0.0
Dentistry	94.1	3.9	2.0
Pharmacy	90.9	6.0	3.3
Fine arts	71.2	28.2	0.6
Psychology and educational sciences	24.4	67.3	8.3
Science	17.2	44.0	38.8
Law	15.8	82.4	1.8
Arts and humanities	9.3	51.7	38.9
Total	34.8	46.6	18.8

Source: Almeida and Vieira (2006b)

Table 2: Entry grades (national), University of Lisbon (%).

faculties of arts and humanities and of science (in which those with final scores of 50–65 per cent approach 39 per cent of all entrants), the general academic panorama seems rather comfortable within the university. The profusion of students with final grades of 70 per cent and above is remarkable and diverges from the problematic registered ‘failure rate’. Other data reinforces this paradox.

Despite their good previous academic paths, restrictions imposed by the *numerus clausus* mechanism could risk excluding good students from their desired courses and frustrate their expectations. The data from the University of Lisbon shows that three-quarters of all students applying to study there are offered a place on their preferred course (Table 3).

The majority of students enrolling in the dentistry faculty were not taking their preferred course, while almost 95 per cent of medical students were taking their first choice degree. In pharmacy there was also a disparity between the numbers who had accepted a place on their first choice course, although 45.5 per cent were not. When students are unable to obtain places on their preferred courses there is greater potential for frustration and dissatisfaction, which can lead to more drop-outs and transfer requests – both of which count towards the overall failure rate.

Faculty	Yes	No
Medicine	94.9	5.1
Law	88.5	11.5
Science	70.4	29.6
Psychology and educational sciences	68.5	31.5
Fine arts	66.9	33.1
Pharmacy	54.5	45.5
Arts and humanities*	–	–
Dentistry	24.8	72.2

Source: Almeida and Vieira (2006b).

*information not available

Table 3: University of Lisbon students obtaining place on preferred course (%).

Faculty	Grade of 85% or higher	Preferred course	Failure rate
Medicine	100.0	94.9	-2.5
Dentistry	94.1	24.8	30.8
Pharmacy	90.9	54.5	31.6
Fine arts	71.2	66.9	44.8
Psychology and educational sciences	24.4	68.5	22.1
Science	17.2	70.4	28.5
Law	15.8	88.5	39.8
Arts and humanities	9.3	-	51.8

Source: Almeida and Vieira (2006b)

Table 4: Components of 'failure' at the University of Lisbon (%).

Table 4 combines three institutional indicators – 'very good' grades in the national university entrance exams (i.e. 85 per cent and above), the applicant's first choice of course and the official failure rate – and provides some revealing information.

Despite internal heterogeneity, the faculty of arts and humanities generally seems to match the traditional concept of failure, with poorer students and weaker school trajectories at the secondary level matching the highest failure rate in higher education. However, dentistry and fine arts don't fit the pattern, as they admit excellent students and have high failure rates. As dentistry is generally not the first option for the majority of students taking the course, this is often a disruptive factor for the student whose exclusion from Medicine (which is often their first choice) results in a stand-by moment of their school trajectory, as they seek either to transfer or to re-take the national university entrance exam. While fine arts is the first option for two-thirds of the students on the course, the failure rate remains one of the highest at the university. One explanation for this is that their experience of academe and of the institutional setting is probably not what they had initially expected.

While the majority of students at the University of Lisbon are women, their numbers are particularly high in certain faculties – e.g. psychology and educational sciences, dentistry, pharmacy and fine arts (Table 5).

Faculty	Proportion of students who are women	Proportion of drop-outs who are women
Psychology and educational sciences	85.6	100.0
Dentistry	78.6	57.1
Pharmacy	78.4	85.2
Fine arts	73.2	66.7
Arts and humanities	65.7	64.5
Medicine	63.1	72.7
Law	61.5	68.0
Science	51.0	65.7
Total	64.0	69.5

Source: Curado and Machado (2006)

Table 5: First year students (2004–2005) (University of Lisbon) (%).

Grade (%)	Women	Men
50–65	48.7	51.3
70–80	65.2	34.8
85–100	72.0	28.0
Total	64.5	35.5

Source: Almeida and Vieira (2006b)

Qui square: 66.7, $p=0.0001$

Average grade for women: 77.5 per cent
(15.5/20)

Average grade for men: 74 per cent (14.8/20)

Table 6: Student gender by exam grades.

Women also have a higher success rate than men. Female candidates with entrance grades of 85 per cent and above are over-represented. However, women also form the majority of the drop-outs. Almost 70 per cent of all students who abandon their courses at the university are women, with the proportions being particularly high in the faculties of science, pharmacy, medicine, and psychology and educational sciences (Table 6).

Having the highest entrance exam grades, women also represent the majority of those who are studying away from home at the University of Lisbon. Their professional vocations include the most selective courses, which implies that they took a wider view of the national university entrance exam, rejecting any significant female investment in their career and access to personal independence, vis-à-vis their family.

As we can see from tables 6 and 7, and in common with almost all Portuguese universities, the majority of students attending the University of Lisbon are from more privileged social backgrounds.

	CNP1	CNP2	CNP3	CNP5	CNP6	CNP7	CNP9	CNP10
Fine arts	37.2	16.7	23.1	5.1	0.0	6.4	5.8	3.8
Science	28.5	17.2	20.1	8.7	0.9	11.3	5.4	4.1
Law	37.5	18.6	13.4	6.1	3.0	8.7	5.6	4.5
Pharmacy	41.6	16.9	13.6	6.5	3.2	8.4	5.2	3.2
Arts and humanities	28.8	11.9	17.5	8.3	2.2	16.4	7.9	4.0
Medicine	28.5	32.1	16.7	4.5	0.4	8.1	4.9	3.7
Dentistry	29.4	29.4	21.6	3.9	0.0	3.9	3.9	5.9
Psychology and educational sciences	27.9	14.9	17.2	6.5	2.8	17.7	7.4	3.3
Total	31.9	18.0	17.4	7.0	1.8	11.2	6.0	4.0

Source: Almeida and Vieira (2006b)

CNP1–employers, managers, senior professionals (business, public administration); CNP2–intellectual occupations and self-employed professionals; CNP3–technicians and intermediate-level professionals; CNP4–administrative employees; CNP5–personal service workers and sales; CNP6–farmers, agricultural workers, fishermen; CNP7–skilled, semi-skilled manual workers and artisans; CNP9–non-skilled manual labourers; CNP10–members of the armed forces.

Table 7: Father's occupational category (University of Lisbon) (%).

	Compulsory education			Secondary	Tertiary
	1st cycle (ages 6–10)	2nd cycle (ages 10–12)	3rd cycle (ages 12–15)		
Fine arts	12.7	7.8	14.5	24.1	41.0
Science	17.7	8.8	13.9	27.3	32.3
Law	24.5	6.1	12.3	24.5	32.6
Pharmacy	13.5	6.7	11.7	28.8	39.3
Arts and humanities	32.7	9.2	16.2	20.2	21.7
Medicine	11.5	6.7	8.7	18.7	54.4
Dentistry	21.2	3.8	7.7	30.8	36.5
Psychology and educational sciences	22.4	8.6	16.4	27.2	25.4
Total	21.4	7.8	13.5	24.5	32.9
Total Portugal (aged 40–60)	62.5	8.8	10.0	8.9	9.8

Source: Almeida and Vieira (2006b)

Table 8: Educational attainment of student's mother (University of Lisbon) (%).

The proportion of students whose fathers belong to cohorts CNP1 and CNP2 accounts for almost half of the total. If we add those from CNP3 then a total of two-thirds of all first-year students at the University of Lisbon are from families with technical-occupational resources. On the other side of the scale, the presence of students from families in which the father is a skilled or unskilled manual worker is comparatively small, accounting for just 17 per cent of the total. A detailed examination indicates an interesting internal diversity: different faculties recruit differently. Students from CNP1 families (associated with economics and finance) are particularly well represented in pharmacy, law and fine arts, while those from CNP2 backgrounds (associated with education) are concentrated in medicine and dentistry. Students from families with lower occupational statuses are more likely to be found studying arts and humanities and psychology and educational sciences.

Unequal opportunity in access to higher education is still a significant fact in contemporary Portugal. Comparing the educational attainment of the students' mothers with those of the general population reveals a strong over-representation of secondary and tertiary education levels and an under-representation of primary levels among students at the University of Lisbon (Table 8). Mothers with higher educational backgrounds are important in medicine, pharmacy and fine arts, while those with lower educational backgrounds are particularly significant in arts and humanities and psychology and educational sciences.

This data raises the question of the reproductive impact of privileged family origins in the students' school career and of the existence of parallel social entry routes to the highest level of the education system. Table 9 shows that the highest grades on the entrance exams (which give access to the most selective schools) are closely associated to the parents' educational levels and occupation. School achievement is thus not simply down

	Admission grade		
	% 50–65	% 70–80	% 85+
Illiterate	14.3	71.4	14.3
No school	42.9	40.5	16.7
1st cycle	27.7	49.9	22.4
2nd cycle	21.9	46.2	32.0
3rd cycle	19.6	52.4	28.0
Secondary	18.9	42.9	38.1
Further	23.7	45.7	30.6
Undergraduate	9.2	42.0	48.8
Postgraduate	7.7	42.9	49.5
Total	18.3	45.7	36.1

Source: Almeida and Vieira (2006b)

Table 9: Admission grades and level of mother's education (University of Lisbon).

to the individual, but is a family affair (although restrictions due to the *numerus clausus* mechanisms may affect academic performance).

The social distinction between faculties must not be ignored, as they suggest inequality is not just a matter of selection but can operate through the production of different school itineraries (Barrère and Martuccelli 2000; Dubet 2004). Pupils from underprivileged groups (often the first generation of their family to get to university) enter the university and enter the faculties of psychology and educational sciences or arts and humanities. For students from more privileged backgrounds there are two main access routes: students from economically privileged families enrol in the faculties of pharmacy, law and fine arts, while those from educationally privileged families are concentrated in the faculties of medicine and dentistry.

The postal survey sent to students at the University of Lisbon who had dropped out of university in 2004–2005 adds some detail to the failure issue by focusing on the drop-out case and its causes from the students' own perspectives (Curado and Machado 2006). Different individual patterns emerge.

There are three principle reasons for the students, many of whom were back in higher education, having abandoned their previous course. Almost one-third stated that they were 'not motivated' as they were not studying their preferred course (with the exception of medicine). For many of those who had originally dropped out of courses within the faculties of science, pharmacy and dentistry, their reason for leaving was that they had in the meantime obtained admission to their preferred course at another institution. Disorganisation, programme dispersion, bureaucracy and a lack of academic supervision (in science, arts and humanities and law) were some obstacles listed that prevented their successful integration.

Approximately 14 per cent of respondents said they had financial problems caused by insufficient grants and the fact that full-time study (particularly in the faculties of law and of arts and humanities) is not compatible with the economic need to earn a wage.

Psychology and educational sciences	22.1
Dentistry	20.4
Pharmacy	20.2
Fine arts	21.3
Arts and humanities	25.0
Medicine	20.4
Law	21.4
Science	21.2
Total	21.5

Source: Curado and Machado (2006)

Table 10: Average age of first-year drop-out students (2004–2005), University of Lisbon.

However, 39 per cent dropped out for ‘other reasons’ such as successfully transferring to another degree course either within the same faculty or within the university, or transferring to a different university, often having re-taken the entrance exams. Some remained in what has been termed a ‘waiting room’ course before succeeding in obtaining entrance on to a course more in line with their expectations – mainly on courses related to the health professions. More than just drop-outs, the current university system produces considerable intra- and inter-university student mobility that is not accounted for in the failure rate.

The age of the respondents and the school year during which they left the University of Lisbon highlights other ‘failure’ patterns (Table 10). On the one hand there are younger students and a relatively swift decision to drop out during first year. This is the case in the faculties of dentistry, pharmacy, science, medicine and even fine arts, where able but unsatisfied students are quick to plan a strategy for ‘righting’ an accidental ‘wrong’ placement or choice in order to achieve their objectives in the next academic year. On the other hand there are older students and later drop-outs, who are largely to be found in the faculties of law and, especially, of arts of humanities. Drop-outs take place later in the individual’s course, with students dragging intellectual or scientific handicaps year after year, which results in the non-attainment of academic goals.

Next steps

The empirical elements gathered here illustrate the multi-dimensional situations behind the institutional indicator of ‘school failure’ and reveal the indicator’s methodological limitations. Based on a reductive arithmetic operation and departing from an institutional perspective, which is too often interpreted as a synonym for academic handicaps, it can mask another reality. Apart from students who are insufficiently academically prepared, school failure may also be linked to the persistent search by the more able students for a placement that suits their own vocation (and which is placed at risk by the selective screening that is the *numerus clausus* system), their experiences and the day-by-day construction of their identities and aspirations for self-fulfilment.

Institutional, numerical ‘failure’ indicators can also be methodologically questioned from another point of view. They ignore the internal dimension of behaviour (representations), they reveal results (not processes) and they express major general trends that are summarised into statistical regularities. However, they often hide surprising individual ‘unexpected trajectories’ (Lahire 1994) and avoid the study of atypical situations. Extensive counting and description must thus be combined with intensive, qualitative, in-depth and longitudinal approaches, so that a plural but more consistent portrait of school failure can be drawn.

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