Title: Multicultural universities: working towards the integration of students from African Portuguese-speaking countries

Abstract

A research project (PTDC/IVC-PSC/4886/2012) on Non-Traditional Students (NTS) in Higher Education (HE) is being carried out in two Portuguese HE institutions (University of Aveiro and University of Algarve). The pertinence of this project, which started in May 2013, comes from the absence of systematised research on NTS in HE in Portugal. Although the project is constituted by four interconnected research lines, which relate to four different groups of NTS, the authors intend here to focus on one line in particular: students from African Portuguese-speaking countries (PALOP). This research line will allow a detailed analysis on who these PALOP students are, which their difficulties are, how they deal with them and how they experience the integration, in the two participant universities. Furthermore, it will allow a better understanding of the role of both universities' structures concerning these students' integration and to draw some suggestions at institutional level, in order to make their transition more successful.

This communication aims to reflect on how the structures of the University of Aveiro are supporting PALOP students’ integration in their new life in Aveiro at personal, social and academic levels. To achieve this goal, an exploratory data collection of qualitative nature through in-depth interviews was designed. These interviews focus on the perspectives of ‘persons of interest’ of the University of Aveiro. These ‘persons of interest’ may be characterised as having management positions and/or important roles within the services where they work in, regarding these students’ integration. The interviewees come from the Social Services, Pedagogical Office and the Rectory.

From the content analysis, we aim to collate these ‘persons of interest’ perspectives regarding the actions and resources' suitability of the University of Aveiro on the integration of PALOP students. Particularly, it will be identified i. the support structures and actions offered by the University of Aveiro regarding the integration of these students; ii. the main difficulties and obstacles in what concerns these students’ integration, and, simultaneously, the positive factors
that foster their integration and iii. actions and resources directed to these students. The perspectives that will be shared by these ‘persons of interest’ will allow us to reflect on the impact those actions/resources have on the academic path of PALOP students and to systematise suggestions to enhance their experiences in HE.

This communication is thus based on practitioner evidences which may inform policy issues. Also, it intersects with the discourses and debates on multiculturalism in HE. Hence, by sharing these perspectives, we hope to promote a proficuous discussion on this current and relevant topic and envision a more inclusive future for students with ‘non-traditional’ characteristics.