Abstract

Until the 70’s, Portugal was a country of emigration due to the exit of national citizens to the Portuguese colonies in Africa and to different European countries that needed non-qualified working force to their industry. The independence of the African former colonies, in 1975 (a direct result of the coup d’état that in April 74 ended the dictatorship regime in Portugal), caused a shift in this mobility’s dynamics. One of the results of the democratization of higher education that followed the coup d’état has been the admission of students from different socio-economic contexts, such as students from African Countries of Portuguese Official Language. The Portuguese State signed agreements with these African countries to receive students in Portuguese Higher Education Institutions (HEI) under a special access form – so that they would not have to compete with Portuguese students for the available places. Over the last decades Portuguese HEI received these students from African countries, who enrolled in undergraduate, masters and also in doctoral programs (Semedo, 2010).

There are several investigations undertaken on the integration of the African students in Portuguese universities, especially about their motivations, obstacles to academic success and participation in academic life, among others. The majority of African students have high expectations concerning the academic life in Portugal. However, these expectations dissipate when they are confronted with the reality. In this sense, some research shows that African students are facing several problems in academic integration, mainly, financial, academic, social, bureaucratic, etc. The financial obstacles refer to accommodation, food, high value of tuition, books, among others (Figueiredo, 2005). Some studies highlight that these students also have academic problems, for example, new methods of teaching which they are not prepared; deficits in preparation of Portuguese language (Mourato, 2011) and social relations.

Our everyday experiences show us that they have a number of problems in our universities, calling for an urgent research and strong institutional will to solve them. In this sense, it is very important to question the integration of the African students within the academic community. Integration seems to be a key factor to the academic success of these students.

This paper is an outcome of the research project “Non-traditional students in higher education: research to steer institutional change”. One of the research lines of this project is focused on students from African Countries of Portuguese Official Language. Its main aim is to identify the obstacles these students face in their lives in two Portuguese HEI – Algarve and Aveiro – in order to propose new academic policies. The research methodology involves non-structured interviews to a significant number of students, professors, management and student’s union. For this paper, we intend to highlight the integration processes of these students in Portuguese HEI. We hope to answer some of the following questions: how students describe their academic integration in HEI? What are the benefits they are taking from this experience? And, finally, what are the main problems or obstacles – financial, language difficulties, relationships, academic participation, for example?