

# HIGHER EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT: A CASE STUDY OF HIGHER EDUCATION FINALISTS

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## Abstract

The increasing difficulty of young graduates in accessing to a job reflects the evolution and expansion of higher education and the changings of the labour market characteristics. Unemployment represents, itself, an economic and social problem, and one of the most pressing concerns of young people and families. Bearing in mind that work plays a central role in social integration, in construction of identity and in the social relationship's structuration of the youngest, its sociological relevance is evident. Consequently, it involves, not only the access to employment, but also the transition to adulthood, in view of the prolongation of youth and educational trajectories. Our object of study is constituted by a sample of 655 surveys of 2019 and 2020 finalists from Guarda, Leiria and Viseu Portuguese Polytechnics. We intend, here, to contribute to the reflection on the importance, for young people, of employment in their motivations accessing higher education and their perceptions and expectations about the professional future. We approach, in parallel, the professional situation in the last year of academic training.

Keywords: Youth, Employment, Higher Education, Graduation.

## 1 INTRODUCTION

During the first decades of the 21st century, the interest about the relationship between higher education and the world of work has increased. The simple access to a higher education degree no longer solves the problem of accessing to qualified employment. The work has always played a central role in social integration and personal fulfilment, in the identity construction and structuration of social relations in contemporary societies. The particularities of the world of work have changed significantly in recent decades, witnessing a vertiginous evolution of the production processes, based on a global market economy and based on assumptions of technological evolution and scientific knowledge, which decisively change the operation of economies. This growing demand for knowledge is based on the development of higher education and, consequently, the establishment of new educational levels (Masters/PhD's). New parameters and requirements of quality and qualifications are established, because of the scientific and technological evolution, which profoundly transforms modern societies. The geographical context is particularly relevant, because when the difficulty of access to employment is higher, the tendency to accept the first job, to accept what is available, increases. Béduwé and Giret (2004)<sup>[1]</sup> refer that the dimension of urban space directly influences the probability of working.

In Portugal, there are deep economic, social and cultural historic dichotomies between regions, especially in relation to the coast and the interior of the country (Barreto, 1996)<sup>[2]</sup>; (Veiga, 2005)<sup>[3]</sup>. These dichotomies are important structural characteristics, and have intensified, in recent decades, a geographical coastal population fixation movement and, simultaneous, an urban concentration. In the Central Region of the country, the coast zone have three important urban centres (i.e. Coimbra, Leiria and Aveiro), the town of Viseu, located more in the interior, demonstrates a growing demographic dynamism, proving the tendency towards urban concentration and desertification of the interior regions. In parallel, employment problems and economic changes lead to new adjustments between knowledge of higher education graduates and the needs of the labour market. For Cottrell; Letremy; Macaire; Meilland and Michon (2002)<sup>[4]</sup>, work itself, became more irregular and diversified, in their offer, rhythm, sociability and autonomy. Beck (2000)<sup>[5]</sup> refers that this process has transformed the labour society into a risk society, where insecurity increases endemic contours, and the position of the youngest is obviously the most weakened, in face of more experienced workers and the movement of job shortages. These situations promote the extension of scholar trajectories of higher education, that reflects an increasing need for qualifications for accessing the labour market and a delay in entering into active life. Because of this movement, the transition to adulthood is, today, a process of growing complexity and durability, implying the transposition of different levels that include: the conclusion of training process; the beginning of professional life; the residential autonomy and the establishment of a family unit.

Today, young people leave their parents' homes later, increasing the average age of access to employment, reducing the early entry into the labour market and temporally extend access to a job. This movement is reinforced by the sexual democratization of teaching and consequent schooling of the female population, which depress the beginning of married life, considered by Lefresne (2003)<sup>[6]</sup> as the entrance into a new cycle of life. Iannelli and Soro-Bonmati (2006)<sup>[7]</sup> identify a Mediterranean model of youth, where young people have long school trajectories; reveal difficulties at the level of their first job; live longer with their parents (even after accessing to active life), from where they only leave, generically, when they marry (paternal networks); and there is a decrease in the percentage of young people living alone or in cohabitation. This movement fits into the continental protection model, where the family is central in the process of access to employment, revealing limitations of policies to support the unemployed of young people, in terms of employment and housing. It is, in this perspective, that the Portugal case is framed, where the family arises, thus, as compensation for the lack of state support for young people, as can be seen in Galland (1995)<sup>[8]</sup> and Villeneuve-Gokalp (2000)<sup>[9]</sup>.

The extension of youth does not occur at similar paces in Europe. Portugal presents, itself, as a recent phenomenon, constituting, for Alves (2008)<sup>[10]</sup>, the reflection of a greater demand for school qualifications. More than an economic issue, the difficulty in accessing the first regular employment by higher education graduates presents itself as an eminently social issue, becoming one of the structuring phenomena of modern western societies and a concern of state entities, from which the higher education institutions, themselves, stand out. For Giret (2000)<sup>[11]</sup>, the diploma simply represents an individual characteristic, identifying more discriminatory factors such as personal characteristics (gender, social origin), staff management policies (the duration of first jobs, the use of different types of contracts, probation periods, measures to support younger people), job search strategies and the use of certain information channels on the labour market.

The acquisition of experience in the labour market during academic training can promote a parallel and complementary learning, as well as, promoting positive synergies that could improve future professional integration (Baert, Neyt, Omeij and Verhaest, 2017)<sup>[11]</sup>, (Quintini, 2015)<sup>[12]</sup>, (Neyt, Omeij, Verhaest and Baert, 2019)<sup>[13]</sup>. At the same time, the exercise of employment can also represent a sign (Spence, 1978), allowing the establishment of social and professional networks (Baert; Marx; Neyt, 2017)<sup>[14]</sup>.

The functional context of modern societies and the centrality that the work have, especially in the access to an economic and social status, reveal that the issue of the transition to work (Rose, 1998)<sup>[15]</sup> has an unquestionable importance, because it defines the social trajectories of integration or social exclusion, the processes of social reproduction and regional differentiation, which determine and reflect the social stratifications. More than an economic issue, the difficulty of higher education graduates in accessing to the first regular employment, presents, itself, as an eminently social issue, the progressive increase of the number of graduates, new challenges arise, considering that the diploma is “(...) *une condition de plus en plus nécessaire mais de moins en moins suffisante pour accéder à l'emploi: la formation n'est donc pas une garantie mais une chance d'emploi (...)*” (Rose, 1998: 83)<sup>[15]</sup>

The transition to work presents, itself, as an increasingly long and complex process, leading to instable statutes, with differentiated paths and modes of transition and is strongly structured by companies and public authorities, in addition to the inevitable formative and family context. As Fondeur and Minni (2004)<sup>[16]</sup> prove, this situation is further defined by the labour market itself which, by diversifying forms and offers (short-term contracts, interim, part-time, etc.), lead to the development of low-skilled jobs accessible to younger people. Béduwé and Giret (2004)<sup>[17]</sup> refer to the concept of pre-inserted, which corresponds to the cases where higher education students have a stable profession in a training area. It can constitute a movement to improve individual skills, a form of funding their studies, a process of improvement of living conditions, a sign of motivation, a form of research and adaptation to the market and a geographical context (dimension of urban space and the relationship with the probability of working). The students are especially involved in two types of extracurricular activities while studying at university: employment to sustain academic life, and leisure or social activities. This pre-insertion movement is particularly relevant in the context of students that have a stable and full-time job, representing the diversification of the higher education students.

## 2 METHODOLOGY

This paper is structured in different sections: Abstract, Introduction, Methodology, Results, Conclusions, Acknowledgements and References. This analysis is based on the project "Formative path, transition to work and entrepreneurship: perspectives on Polytechnic Education in Portugal" which includes the Polytechnic Institutes of Viseu (IPV), Leiria (IPL) and Guarda (IPG)<sup>1</sup>. We pretend, here, to analyse the perspectives of the finalists of these institutions on their professional future, namely: their concerns about employment during the access to higher education process, their future professional perspectives and the importance that the access to a diploma has in this process. Parallely, we also explore the professional situation in their last year of academic training.

All these matters will consider the institutional framework and its geographical contextualization, taking in consideration the dichotomies in higher education in Portugal and the distinctive economic development between coastal (Leiria) and interior regions (Viseu and Guarda) of the country. The data base is established by an online questionnaire survey that was applied to the finalists, in 2019 and 2020 with 655 valid responses. We will discuss the perspectives of these students regarding: the importance of employment in the motivations of access to higher education, the professional expectations, the perspectives on the labour market and we will carry out a characterization of their situation before work in their last year of academic training. Statistical analyses were supported by Statistical Package for the Social Sciences 27.0 program.

## 3 RESULTS

### 3.1 Access Motivations And Professional Expectations

The concern about unemployment affects those who progressively see one of the most important vehicles of social ascension being inflated. This movement is originated by the improvement of the financial resources of the Portuguese population and consequently by the bigger investment in education, but also by the implementation of government educational policies, namely the progressive expansion of the offer of higher education, which reached, this school year, new maximum values. Thus, new challenges are set up to the state's traditional role in regulating the higher education system, but also in terms of the social and professional expectations of young people and their families. To try to deepen these issues, we present below the data on access motivations, representations and professional expectations of the finalists of the IPG, IPL and IPV in relation to the diplomas and employment.

*Table 1 - Motivations of access to higher education according to institution (%)*

		<b>IPG</b>	<b>IPL</b>	<b>IPV</b>
I looked, but I could not find a job after finishing compulsory education	Mentioned	3,2	0,7	1,2
	Not mentioned	96,8	99,3	98,8
Family pressure	Mentioned	12,7	9,9	7,5
	Not mentioned	87,3	90,1	92,5
The social prestige associated to a higher education degree	Mentioned	39,7	17,8	20,5
	Not mentioned	60,3	82,2	79,5
It was the reliable way to get a well-paid job	Mentioned	52,7	52,1	57,5
	Not mentioned	47,3	47,9	42,2
Job opportunities in this area of training	Mentioned	61,8	48,3	58,5
	Not mentioned	38,1	51,7	41,5
It was the safest way to get a job	Mentioned	42	39,8	43,5
	Not mentioned	58	60,2	56,5
Rise hierarchically in established employment	Mentioned	11,5	6,6	6,8
	Not mentioned	88,5	93,4	93,2

*Legend: The question was structured as follows: What are the 3 most important reasons to access to a higher education? (Chose up to 3 options).*

*N: 655*

The finalists significantly value the importance of obtaining a degree, namely the fact that the access to the diploma, objectively interferes with the increase of the possibility of finding a qualified job, with good working conditions, especially in relation to remuneration and stability levels. They also assume that their motivations for access to higher education focused, mainly, on concerns related to the future professional integration and working conditions. Motives like it was the surest way to get a well-paid job; it was the safest way to obtain a job or employment opportunities in training area, represent the indicators of greatest significance.

These results show that finalists have the expectation that the frequency of higher education can allow for a safer and more stable future professional integration. In this context, it should be noted that the variable age has proved to be very relevant and are the youngest (up to 23 years) who express the highest expectations, regarding the relationship between diploma and employment, and the social prestige associated with the possession of a higher education degree, especially in the case of IPG finalists (located in the more interior region of the country).

*Table 2 – Expectations about future employment according to institution (%)*

<b><i>In relation to future insertion in the labour market, considers that:</i></b>	<b><i>IPG</i></b>	<b><i>IPL</i></b>	<b><i>IPV</i></b>	<b><i>Total</i></b>
It's too early to think about it	4	4,4	3,6	3,9
It is not a concern, because employment is already guaranteed	1,6	3,9	2,6	2,8
It's a moderate concern	45,2	49,5	49,8	48,8
It is a very strong concern	49,2	42,2	44	44,4
Total	100	100	100	100

*N: 655*

The information contained in table 2 intensifies the trends revealed by the previous data. The finalists show a great concern about their future professional insertion, and a higher percentage assume that it represents a very strong or moderate concern. At the same time, the variables age and social origin show relevance, as previously verified. Thus, again, are the youngest (up to 23 years) the ones who reveal a major concern, attitude that cold exteriorize their socio-economic contexts. The representations of the finalist towards the diplomas reinforce previous explanations.

We note that the positions, regarding the importance of the diploma in access to employment, in salary and material income and in the increase of social status, are very positives, and there are no major differences between the three Polytechnics under analysis.

Despite the movement of school inflation, the representativeness of unemployment of the most qualified young people and the movement of education (Hartog; Pereira; Vieira, 2001)<sup>[18]</sup>, the finalists reveal high professional expectations and a significant symbolic representation in relation to the diploma, which allows us to consider whether they cannot consider themselves a diploma students (Marques, 2006)<sup>[19]</sup>.

Finally, it is sought to verify what position the finalists hold in relation to the offer of qualified employment at regional, national and international level. The finalists are consistently optimists, assuming that, both regional and at national level, they will have easier access to a qualified profession after completing their academic training.

It is very interest to see that the finalists from the IPG, an institution located more in the interior of the national territory, were the ones more confident about accessing to a qualified job at regional level (42.7% assume even that it is going to be a very easy process). Bearing in mind the levels of dual economic development (coastal/interior) that characterize the national territory and its relationship with the availability/offer of employment, this matter may reflect the expectations of young people to settle in their region of origin, as it was possible to verify in previous analyses (Sousa, 2004)<sup>[20]</sup>; (Sousa, 2012)<sup>[21]</sup>. Globally, the finalists continue to reveal an effective confidence that the access to a higher education diploma will allow an easier entry into the labour market, regardless of the geographical context.

### 3.2 Professional situation of the finalists

In view of the diversification of the frequency of higher education, in social terms, the reflection and professional contextualization of working student became very pertinent. To Lefresne (2003)<sup>[6]</sup>, the first work experience along the school path allows a socialization of work, constituting what Bédoué and Giret (2004)<sup>[17]</sup> call pre-inserted. This concept refers to those who claim to have a stable profession that corresponds to the training they are carrying out, allowing an effective increase of the individual's skills. In the other hand may also reflect a need for funding of academic training.

Parallely improves living conditions by externalizing a strong motivation signal for work, increases the degree of future employability, and allows access to information about the labour market. "(...) if for some the exercise of a paid activity tends to be a primary constraint in the way they set up (at the material level and at the level of representations) their relative positions in the space of the conditions of existence, for others the work can be seen only as a strategy of greater autonomy vis-à-vis the family, a complementary means of access to income, a way of covering needs that eventually parents cannot or do not want to afford (...)" (Martins; Mauritti and Costa, 2005: 63)<sup>[22]</sup>.

Taking in consideration the social contexts circumscribing these finalist students from the three Polytechnics under analysis, this matter reveals an analytical relevance.

*Table 3 – Finalist's situation in the last year of studies according to institution (%)*

	<i>IPG</i>	<i>IPL</i>	<i>IPV</i>	<i>Total</i>
Full-time study	89,3	79,1	85	85
I have a professional activity	10,7	20,9	12,8	15
Situation in the profession				
Self-employed with dependent workers	0	5,3	5	4,5
Employee	100	94,7	95	95,5
Works:				
Full-time	42,9	55,8	52,5	52,6
Part-time	57,1	44,2	47,5	47,4
Total	100	100	100	100

*N: 655*

Table 3 states that 15% of the finalists say that in the last year they were in full professional activity as self-employed and mostly full-time (57.1%). They are mainly finalists between 31 and 40 years (69.7%) and between 24-30 years (24.5%), and in terms of contract, the ones over 30 years claim to have more stable employment. However, these data reveal, contrasting previous analyses (Sousa 2004)<sup>[20]</sup>, (Sousa, 2010)<sup>[23]</sup>, a progressive decrease in the representativeness of students that work, a movement that may reflect the progressive schooling of the generation that abandoned the education system too early, with various incentive access programs and promotion of higher education. We can exemplify this with the example of the qualification of the internal staff of the public institutions, as it was possible to prove, in the case of the IPV in Sousa (2012)<sup>[21]</sup>.

As for the characterization of the professional situation, we verified that about 40% of the finalists have a profession in an organization with less than 10 workers, and 20.4% between 10 and 49 workers. As regards to working conditions, 48.1% have a fixed-term contract and 34.6% do not, with 59.8% receiving between 400-600 euros and 22.7% between 601-800 euros. The age is more distinguishing than gender in the professional characterization of this population, and are, overall, the finalists over 30 years, who perform a full-time professional activity, in bigger size organizations and with higher salaries.

On the other hand, the youngest perform mainly part-time activities (82.9% of students between 20-23 years and 52.2% of students between 24 and 30 years old) in smaller entities, with lower salaries (91.7% of under-23s and 69.6% of students between 24-30 years). The age is distinctive and cold reflect two different positions: on one the other hand a way to finance higher education (under 30 years); and older ones (over 30 years old, married or in a non-marital cohabitation) to whom the "return" to the education system cold represent a strategy to improve the current professional

situation. This context allows to distinguish two distinct populations: a) the group over 30 years, married or in a non-marital cohabitation, working full-time, for which the access to a higher education degree may constitute a strategy for improving the professional situation, especially in the Administrative positions and for Specialized Technicians. Simultaneously, we verify a mismatch between profession and studies areas (Engineering, Management, Marketing, Social Service, Communication and Sports).

We can consider they are pre-inserted (Béduwé and Giret, 2004)<sup>[17]</sup>; b) the group under 30 years with part-time activities, with low salaries and precarious work conditions, whose may reflect a need for education financing. They are those who perform public service activities (87.5%) in the commercial/catering and services areas (transport/communications), and this situation is transversal and independent of the type of academic training attended.

As far as access to employment mechanisms are concerned, the finalists mention the use of personal connections, especially by younger people, which reflects the importance of social and family support networks in the process of access to employment (Polaveja, 2003)<sup>[24]</sup>.

## 4 CONCLUSIONS

According to Teichler (2005)<sup>[25]</sup>, controversies are observed in all societies around the connotation of education and its instrumental role, to ensure the individual and social economic achievement. Galland (1991)<sup>[26]</sup> considered inevitable the tendency towards an increase in the demand for higher education, extending temporally the school trajectories and the entry into adulthood. In Portugal, the school year new records are established with new maximum vacancies and students in the higher education system. The public Polytechnic higher education made available 23186 vacancies (DGEEC, 2020)<sup>[27]</sup>, which represents 44.7% of the total public higher education offer. These circumstances will affect also, above all, those who progressively see one of the only vehicles of social ascension being arising from inflation, and the concern of students about their professional future is intensifying. This issue has been proven in the case of the analysed population. The finalists from the IPG, the IPL and the IPV unanimously express access motivations focused on the importance of the diploma to access a stable and well-paid employment. At the same time, they assume a clear belief that the possession of a higher education diploma continues to be extremely important in the process of transition to work, recognizing, in addition, its importance in the possibility of increasing they social status.

The finalists revel a high professional expectation and supports that the access to the diploma will simplify, at regional, national, or even international level, the access to a qualified employment. They represent a profile of diploma students, who place a clear belief that obtaining a higher degree represents an increase in value to the labour market, irrespectively of the social and geographical context. Regarding the future professional expectations, the finalists mainly reveal more functional concerns, namely with the salary and job stability. We may question if this evident optimism facing the future professional insertion is conscious or an illusory felling.

Concerning the professional situation of the finalists in the last year of their academic training, we found that only 15% have a professional activity, with no major differences at working conditions level (50% have a fixed-term contract, work mostly in organizations up to 49 workers and 40% up to 9 workers). Those who engage in a full-time professional activity claim to enjoy higher salaries. Having present Paugam (2000)<sup>[28]</sup> and Foundeur; Minni (2004)<sup>[16]</sup>, we assume that the students present, above all, a precarious employment (unstable contractual relationship), and the variable age reveals, here, relevance, being the older ones who have less precarious working conditions.

These results allow us to verify that there are two distinct groups: the first constituted by up-30 years students, with better working conditions, whose attendance of a higher education degree can represent a strategy to improve their professional situation; the second constituted by the younger population who, carrying out part-time activities, may seek a form of financing of their education. We can conclude that, for those who engage in full-time professional activities, access to higher education diplomas may allow, above all, the consolidation of jobs already held (public sector) and projects careers (private sector).

Nevertheless, polytechnic education continues to promote the increase of diversify and democratization of the access to higher education, especially in the interior areas of the country, in parallel to the persistent concentration of university education in the economically more developed coast regions. For many, especially those from low socioeconomic family contexts, from the interior of the country, the polytechnics institutions continue to represent the only possibility of attending higher

education degree. However, with the new challenges between educational institutions and access to employment, it is questionable that the local/national labour market had the capacity to absorb an increasing flow of graduates, an issue that has been proven for example by the increase in emigration, of young graduates in Portugal in the last decade (Pires; Pereira; Azevedo; Vidigal; Veiga, 2020)<sup>[29]</sup>.

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