

## **Educational psychology in higher education: Current scene in Portugal**

Cynthia Bisinoto<sup>1</sup>, Claisy Marinho<sup>2</sup> & Leandro Almeida<sup>3</sup>

*Universidade de Brasília – Brasil, Universidade do Minho – Portugal*

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Facing the challenges brought by Higher Education growth, the Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) created the Psychological Support Services. They seek to help the adaptation to the university setting, enhancing the overall students' development and their integration in the labor market. This qualitative research studies the structure of the Psychological Support Services in HEIs of Portugal and the main activities developed by educational psychologists. Interviews were conducted with eight services and showed that all services are designed for students. Although the most frequent activity is the students' psychological consultation, educational psychologists also develop a variety of interventions: skill development programs, support to students with special needs, and mentoring programs to welcome new students. Traditionally the services were oriented by an individual intervention and in response to the students' problem. Nowadays they are working with other agents and in a preventive way. Actions directed to educational projects and the institutional evaluation could promote a qualitative change in services.

Keywords: educational psychologist, higher education, psychological support, academic success

### **La psicología educativa en la educación superior: la situación actual en Portugal**

Con el fin de afrontar los desafíos del aumento demográfico de la educación superior, las Instituciones de Educación Superior (IES) crearon los Servicios de Apoyo Psicológico buscando: (a) ayudar a la adaptación a la universidad, (b) mejorar el desarrollo de los estudiantes y (c) favorecer su integración en el mercado laboral. El presente estudio investigó la estructura de los Servicios de Apoyo Psicológico en las IES de Portugal, así como las principales

<sup>1</sup> PhD en Psicología y Profesora en la Universidad de Brasilia-Brasil. *Dirección postal: Universidade de Brasília, Campus Planaltina - FUP, Área Universitária nº 1, Vila Nossa Senhora de Fátima, CEP 73.300-000, Planaltina - DF, Brasil.* Contacto: [cynthia@unb.br](mailto:cynthia@unb.br)

<sup>2</sup> PhD en Psicología y Profesora del Instituto de Psicología de la Universidad de Brasilia-Brasil. *Dirección postal: Universidade de Brasília, Instituto de Psicologia, Campus Darcy Ribeiro, CEP: 70.910-900, Brasília-DF, Brasil.* Contacto: [claisy@unb.br](mailto:claisy@unb.br)

<sup>3</sup> PhD en Psicología Educativa de la Universidad de Porto y Profesor Principal en el Instituto de Educación, University of Minho-Portugal. *Dirección postal: Instituto de Educação, Universidade do Minho, Campus Gualtar, 4709 Braga, Portugal.* Contacto: [leandro@ie.uminho.pt](mailto:leandro@ie.uminho.pt)

actividades desarrolladas por los psicólogos escolares. A partir de las entrevistas realizadas en ocho servicios de apoyo psicológico, se observó que todos ellos están diseñados para los estudiantes. Si bien la actividad principal es la consulta psicológica para los estudiantes, los psicólogos educacionales desarrollan también una variedad de actividades de intervención, tales como: programas de desarrollo de competencias, apoyo a los estudiantes con necesidades especiales y programas de tutoría para dar la bienvenida a nuevos estudiantes. Asimismo, en la actualidad los servicios están trabajando con otros agentes y de manera preventiva. Se propone que las acciones dirigidas a los proyectos educativos y la evaluación institucional podrían promover un cambio cualitativo en los servicios.

Palabras clave: psicólogo educativo, educación superior, apoyo psicológico, éxito académico

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The complexity and speed of social change has increased in the last decades. Higher Education, inserted in this context of transformation, is more and more considered a driving force in the social and economic development of nations. The scientific and technological progress associated with personal training and professional qualifications are assumed to be important elements to expand the competitive capacity of countries.

Considered an essential component of the development of nations, Higher Education has experienced a great growth in terms of numbers of institutions, programs and availability. Worldwide, the number of students in this educational level has increased six times between 1960 and 1995, increasing from 13 to 82 million (UNESCO, 1998), and in 2007 there were more than 150 million students in Higher Education (UNESCO, 2010). In Portugal, from 82,140 registered in 1996/1997, the number increased to 115,372 in 2008/2009 (GPEARI, 2009b). The number of graduates equally increased from 68,511 in 2002/2003 to 84,009 in 2007/2008 (GPEARI, 2009a).

On the other hand, the evident growth of Higher Education has brought a series of challenges and demands, many of them related to the expansion of the system and to the diversification of the administrative nature of Higher Education Institutions (HEI), with a remarkable increase in the private sector. Other changes on the level of students, teachers and pedagogical practices can be identified: greater differentiation of the public that enters higher education programs concerning personal and economic characteristics, motivations and expectations; necessity of political and institutional measures promoting academic success; concern about the qualification of the faculty and staff; necessity of curricular and pedagogical innovations; the institution each country's government designates to supervise educative evaluation processes; and a greater articulation between Higher Education and

Basic Education; among others (Amaral & Magalhães, 2007; Brasil, 2002, 2003; Correia, Amaral & Magalhães, 2002; Dias Sobrinho, 2003, 2005, 2008; Magalhães, 2004; Portugal, 2004; Sguissardi, 2004, 2005).

In this scene of changes and new demands, questions related to promoting academic success have acquired special relevance due to the association with funding issues for HEI as being indicative of the completion of the social function of Higher Education, namely, the formation of citizens and professionals and the development of science. The thematic of academic success in the context of Higher Education, especially regarding the identification of factors that facilitate or hinder it, has been the object of several studies in Portugal (Almeida, 2007; Almeida, Guisande, Soares & Saavedra, 2006; Almeida, Soares, Guisande, & Paisana, 2007; Almeida & Vieira, 2008; Martins, 2009; Soares, Guisande, Almeida & Páramo, 2009; Vasconcelos, Almeida & Monteiro, 2009). Not only do those studies identify factors of bigger impact, but they have also proposed intervention measures in order to promote success, permanence and completion of courses by students.

In the same direction, HEIs have created, among others, Services of Psychological Support with the objective of favoring the process of adaptation to Higher Education, enhancing the overall development and training of students, as well as their integration in the labor market. The role of psychologists in such services is essentially linked to the promotion of academic success by encouraging their potential, both as people and as students (Gonçalves & Cruz, 1988). The Services not only eliminate obstacles to the appropriation of scientific knowledge that result in satisfactory performance in formal evaluations of learning. More importantly, these Services of Support have promoted the commitment of institutions to the development of varied skills that lead students to success in life. Their success surpasses the difficulties that arise from being a student and young-adult., and the frequency of a determined course and/or institution.

The first Service of this kind in Portugal was the Gabinete de Apoio Psicológico e Aconselhamento (GAPA), created in 1983 at the College

of Science and Technology of Universidade Nova de Lisboa (Dias, 2006). For a few years this was the only existing Service in the country, and until 1996, only the existence of six Services was registered. GAPA started its activities with individual psychological counseling and, after a few years, started to organize workshops to promote academic skills and actions to increase awareness of teachers and staff, helping them to identify students at risk. In the late 90s, research developed within the Guidance and Counseling Services of the European Union and disseminated at the meeting on the Portuguese situation, stated that “in comparison with most other Member-States of the European Union, the guidance services in Higher Education in Portugal are not well developed” (Duarte & Paixão, 1998, p.1). Among the elements used to support that indication, the authors mention the fact that such Services were offered in limited number to college students. These Services existed in few institutions and relied on a handful of professions (one or two) who worked part-time, which was clearly not enough to attend the student population and, even less, the entire academic community.

In the late 90s, new Services of Psychological Support were developed in Portuguese Higher Education. By 2002 there were at least 24 (Dias, 2006; RESAPES, 2002), by 2004 there were 33 (Dias, 2006), and in 2008 there were 40 services (Gonçalves, 2008). Such a quantitative increase does not translate into a change in the operating conditions and scope of interventions, specifically concerning the number of students attending. Human resources remained insufficient to meet the demands, and the Service typically had more than two full-time technicians. On the other hand, it should be added that in a few cases the professionals did come from the Institution. Moreover, there was often a waiting list for care (RESAPES, 2002). A more recent report about the Guidance and Counseling Services in European Higher Education reaffirms that although there has been a growth in the number of available Service in the HEIs, students typically face long *waiting lists*. “In times of limited resources, it is impossible to respond to all demands...” (Gonçalves, 2008, p. 262).

If the number of existing Services and professionals seems to be reduced when one takes into account the number of HEIs in Portugal and the number of students enrolled in Higher Education, one can recognize that efforts have been made towards the consolidation and legitimization of the work of psychology in Higher Education. One of them is undeniably the very creation and maintenance of Services by Institutions, especially before the European context in which the offer of psychological counseling to students for specific existing units within institutions themselves is a reality in only a few European universities (Ferrer-Sama, 2008). In general, in countries such as Denmark, Belgium, Austria, Greece, Spain, and Estonia, among others, there are few Higher Education Institutions that offer a Service of Psychological Support. In Denmark, for instance, students are considered citizens with the same rights and duties as the entire society; therefore, there is no special offer of social and medical services for them. Whenever it is necessary, students are referred to community services (Andersen, 2008).

Another effort, resulting less from the institutions initiative and more from the professionals, was the creation in 2000 of the RESAPES - AP, Psychological Support Services in Higher Education Network - Professional Association (Rede dos Serviços de Apoio Psicológico no Ensino Superior - Associação Profissional) which aims to establish a network of collaboration and mutual support between Services, and thereby maximizes existing resources and secures new ones. More specifically, the network's objectives are to exchange experience, mutually support, scientifically cooperate and manage the teams that make up the Services (RESAPES, 2002). As an example of the efforts made to achieve such objectives we can mention the publication of a newsletter which serves as a space for promotion of the Services as well as the sharing of knowledge and experiences. The May 2010 newsletter, for instance, contains the report on the project that has been developed in seven Services of psychological support in the country. It also contains a proposal for thinking about the difficulties that have been identified by psychologists regarding the implementation of

preventive and developmental interventions in the context of its role in Higher Education. Another recent project by RESAPES was the organization of the first international congress, which was held in April of 2010 at Universidade de Aveiro, to debate and reflect on the practices of psychological support developed in the Portuguese HEIs.

The mapping and the characterization of the Services of Psychological Support has been one of the contributions from RESAPES, which has invested in the identification of the limitations and necessities of the Services and professionals and, consequently, the formulation of some common proposals that may contribute to the modification of such situations. The characterization of the Services has indicated that the recipients or users are mainly students, faculty and staff; there are also services which are open to the community in general and are linked to a Psychology Department. There are usually academic internships in psychology in the Services (RESAPES, 2002). These services include remedial, preventive and developmental interventions, both individually and in group, focusing on counseling, psychological support and educational psychology, academic and professional integration, psychological consultation and social action (Pereira, 2009; RESAPES, 2002). Other less frequent areas of intervention or validity of the Services, are consulting with the governing bodies of the institution, research, activities such as mentoring, training of personal and social skills, techniques of study and work with students with special needs, among others.

The activities developed in the Portuguese Services were very similar to other European countries. According to Ferrer-Sama (2008), in most countries, psychologists diagnose, assess tests, work with psychotherapy, and develop different kinds of individual and group interventions to promote personal and social skills, including, most recently, eating disorders and sex education. In different countries, counseling is also conducted for issues related to studying in order to minimize academic failure and the number of dropouts/withdrawals. In such cases, the intervention focuses on setting academic goals with students, developing learning skills, and time management or self-control in situations of evaluation.

Based on previous studies, individual interventions with students—both, in Portugal and in other European countries—, focused on the problem that led them to seek professional help. This labor is central to the practice of educational psychologists. In these cases, the problems brought by students have been included according to developmental issues, in other words, the difficulties in addressing psychological and normative tasks of the transition from adolescence to adulthood, which explains the brief psychodynamic counseling (Dias, 2001, 2006).

In addition to studies on the characterization of Support Services, some publications refer to the way these services can be structured. Gonçalves and Cruz (1988) showed three types of Psychological Services in Higher Education: remedial, preventive and developmental. The first type includes activities of direct support to students with difficulties, such as brief and prolonged psychotherapy, the availability of telephone lines to ensure emergency assistance, and referral of the student to other community services. Regarding preventive Services, examples include the creation of interpersonal development programs based on a counseling network with colleagues; receiving and welcoming new students; and career guidance for students nearing completion of the course and about to enter the job market. Finally, in the developmental Services one can mention the programs offered to students to develop study and problem solving skills and strategies when facing work and educational exams; self-knowledge and social relations development programs and assertiveness training; and programs to develop behavioral and cognitive skills of choice, planning and action.

From the intersection of three intervention plans—preventive, remedial and investigative—and three moments experienced by the students—the transition from secondary to higher education (entrance), frequency in higher education and transition into job market (exit)—, Leitão, Paixão, Silva and Miguel (2000) proposed some actions taking into account the specific goals of each intervention plan and the most prominent needs of the students in each moment of the training. For example, regarding preventive interventions, when entering Higher Education, programs should be developed to promote academic

success, students should be trained to become mentors, and awareness of teaching and learning issues should be promoted. Regarding frequency within the preventive plan, the dissemination of information related to the most common problems among students (stress, anxiety when taking exams, lack of motivation) is suggested. Prior to entering the job market, programs are proposed to teach techniques in seeking jobs and to encourage self-employment.

Dias (2001, 2006) suggests that psychologists who work in Higher Education participate in secondary to higher education transition programs; facilitate workshops for the development of personal and academic skills, and time and anxiety management; and conduct psychological counseling and psychotherapy, vocational counseling, group therapy, application of psychological testing, crisis intervention and referrals, among others.

In addition to these traditional proposals of action focusing on activities with students, others that go beyond direct intervention have been proposed. Along these lines, Sandoval & Love (1977) suggest that the work done by educational psychologists in higher education focus on two elements: the evaluation, with the purpose of obtaining information on faculty and institutional aspects that need to be modified, and the promotion of teaching practice through planning and development of different methodologies. According to the authors, the performance in Higher Education should provide less direct assistance to the student through personal counseling services and more indirect support by increasing the effectiveness of the education obtained, especially by interventions with teachers. Witter (1999), in turn, indicates the following as educational psychologist functions: advising the teaching-learning process, participating in selection processes and training technical staff and faculty, teaching in psychology and in other areas, conducting research, involvement in scientific publishing in Educational Psychology, planning, development and evaluation of programs and courses in psychology, and others.

Based on a preventive approach and institutional performance in Educational Psychology, Marinho-Araújo (2009) proposed three

dimensions of intervention in the HEIs: (a) policies, programs and educational processes management, (b) pedagogical proposals and operation of courses, and (c) student profile. For each dimension, the author suggests a set of actions that can be developed by educational psychologists. In the first dimension, for instance, participation in the preparation and review of the Institutional Development Plan was established; the continuing education process for teachers, supervisors and employees, as well as the process of institutional self-evaluation. The following elements are necessary in relation to the dimension of Pedagogical Proposals: collaboration in the analysis of curriculum guidelines, the monitoring of the teaching-learning process, and the analysis and review of the Courses Pedagogical Projects. The last dimension suggests that the educational psychologist promote discussions about adult development, develop surveys to know the profile of students, and prepare strategies to explain the students' skills development process, with the coordinators and faculty. Finally, there is still the possibility of Educational Psychology in Higher Education on university management, occupying administrative functions. Hereupon, Logue (2007) argues that HEI managers with degrees in psychology have particular skills that can help colleagues and institutions to better respond to current pressures experienced by Higher Education.

As evidence of such diversity of proposals for higher education, there is no single model of an Educational Psychology intervention. In contrast, several approaches, actions and strategies that support a variety of concepts and practices co-exist. With the intention of finding out how some Psychological Services have organized themselves in the current scenario, this study aimed to investigate the Services of Psychological Support in Higher Education Institutions of Portugal, especially their structure and the intervention model of educational psychologists.

## **Method**

This research aims to describe and to understand a given reality and, as such, was developed based on a qualitative approach that is based on the epistemological assumptions of the historical-cultural perspective (Vygotsky, 1999, 2003).

### ***Participants***

The research was developed in the context of Portuguese higher education, specifically at four universities and two polytechnic institutes, all public higher education institutions. Belonging to these institutions, the study focused on eight Services of Psychological Support (SPS) and, in each one, the collaboration between at least one professional could be relied upon: coordinator or educational psychologist. The sum of participating professionals was eleven including three psychologists, four coordinators (also trained in psychology) and four psychologists-coordinators, identified as such for exercising the two functions. All participants signed an informed consent agreeing to participate.

### ***Measures and measuring instruments***

Grounding ourselves in the qualitative approach, it is assumed that the methodology configuration should focus on spaces for dialogue between the researcher and the participants, thus improving the expression of the subject, its history and implications in different systems of meaning. From this understanding, we adopted the semi-structured interview as the main instrument of research. The interview was elaborated based on three major dimensions of interest —Service Profile, Educational Psychologist Performance and Service Evaluation— each composed of a number of issues of approximate content.

### ***Procedures***

Understanding that words are the starting point for understanding the significance and meanings constructed by the subjects. The

analysis of information was developed based on the procedure of apprehension of the senses through the meaning core (Aguiar, 2007; Aguiar & Ozella, 2006). Readings of these interviews revealed major topics of interest, identified as significant elements for the understanding of participants' speech. The themes with similarities of meaning were integrated, thus reaching the stage of elaboration of categories and dimensions of analysis. From this process, three dimensions of analysis composed of content categories with proximity to each other emerged.

## **Results and Discussion**

The analysis of the results allowed the elaboration of a comprehensive picture about the functioning and the work produced in the eight Services of Psychological Support in Higher Education Institutions of Portugal. In accordance to previous studies and proposals of intervention suggested to the Educational Psychology in Higher Education, it was also possible to situate the action of these services in the broader scene of psychological practice in the educational context.

The results will be presented by Services, identified by the acronym SPS (Service of Psychological Support), through detailed analysis of the three dimensions and their categories. To illustrate the content of each one, excerpts from the interviews will be used.

### ***Dimension 1 – Service Profile***

This dimension provides information about the organization and structure of the Service of Psychological Support and consists of categories related to the reasons for its creation, the objectives that guide it, the human resources they have available to conduct the activities, the audience for which they address their actions, how to access the Service and the disclosure used.

Within the *History of the Services*, there is variation among the 8 services in the date on which they appeared, with a range of 2 to 21 years. Most of the services originated in the 90's. The reasons that

prompted the creation of SPS are related to the trajectory and dynamics of the institution to which they belong. However, the need to meet the demands presented by the students and to help them overcome difficulties they encountered during training are the basis of the creation of the Services. For six of the eight SPS, the commitment to cover the needs of the students was imperative for its constitution, be them specific groups of students such as economically disadvantaged or with special educational needs, or the student body in general. Two services that were linked to psychology courses were motivated by the need to train psychologists at undergraduate and graduate level, developing research projects and serving the community.

As for the *Purposes of the Services*, they are established according to the main public for which their actions are directed. For instance, their service for support of students with special educational needs aims to promote the inclusion of said students and promote equality of opportunity. The support service for scholarship students, in turn, aims to provide psychological support to this particular group of students. Although developed based on the population they serve, the common axis of the goals that guide the Services is to promote welfare of students and academic success.

Regarding the *Human Resources* of the Services, they can be analyzed based on three perspectives. As for the *Training of Professionals* working in them, be them coordinators, psychologists or trainees, all of them are in the field of psychology. Besides the initial training, all educational psychologists have, or are pursuing, a postgraduate degree, namely a Masters in Psychology. Coordinators belonging to the faculty of the institution have a doctorate. Regarding the *Number of Professionals* within the Services, in four SPS there is only one educational psychologist to answer for all actions and demands; in two services, the team consists of two or three professionals; and finally, because of the linking with psychology courses, two services rely on the cooperation of teachers who play the role of coordinators, psychologists who work a few hours a week and psychology students in training. In these two SPS, the collaboration of trainees is essential to the operation of the

service, because they do not count on the hiring of a psychologist and, “therefore, I am the one who coordinates, but then I have a whole team of PhD students, and some PhD and master students, who work their theses in these areas “(SPS3) . Besides these two services, the other three also have the support of trainees. The *Bond of Psychologists with the Institution* is 40 hours per week for those who belong to the staff of the HEI, and in this case it includes four services. In two SPS, professionals are hired by weekly hours, which run from 7 to 40 hours; in two others, psychologists are fee-for-service, not having to comply with preset times.

As already noted in previous studies (Duarte & Paixão, 1998; Gonçalves, 2008; RESAPES, 2002), most of the Services of Psychological Support of the Portuguese HEIs have only one educational psychologist, and, in many cases, these professionals do not work full time. Although in the 1990s there was a quantitative expansion of services in the country, its human resources remain limited. Therefore, there is no guarantee that there has been an increase in the number of students served, especially an increase in proportion to the growing number of new students enrolled in Higher Education. In some cases, collaboration of trainees has been an alternative to overcome the lack of human resources. However, this alternative is not all satisfactory, as it implies a turnover of trainees (since the academic probation has a limited duration), and also by the fact that the performance of students is unethical in some situations, such as the care of fellow students and teachers. Consequently, we agree with the statement already made by RESAPES (2002) that “services cannot depend on the work of interns to respond to requests that typically are made of them” (p. 30). Also regarding human resources, and already emphasized by Ferrer-Sama (2008) in relation to the Services of Psychological Support in Europe, one should highlight the skills of professionals who make up the Services in Portugal, since all have undergraduate and graduate degrees in Psychology.

As for the target group of Support Services, four SPS are working exclusively with students, three extended their actions to the teachers

and staff, and one service, in addition to meeting all the people inside the institution, is also open to the external community. It is important to highlight that the performance of Educational Psychology focused on students, extensively criticized in the literature, already shares spaces with interventions targeted on other agents in the educational process, namely faculty and staff. However, this expansion does not always mean that there are activities that were planned and developed specifically for the needs, characteristics and expectations of this audience. In some cases, there is only the availability of the Service to receive and answer these professionals for psychological consultation or to allow the participation in activities offered to students, as one participant commented: “courses of oral presentation and social exposure are open courses; everybody goes to an open course. At the previous meeting there was a teacher and there was an employee, it is open for everyone” (SPS6).

Only in one SPS are there activities planned and developed especially for teachers or staff, which is a challenge for educational psychologists to implement and support, since there is no tradition in the country. Also, they have to increase participation in such activities that are characterized by low compliance. In addition to raising awareness among professionals themselves, a real participation also requires actions of educational psychologists at the level of institutional management, since its implementation requires support in regard to official encouragement to the continuing education of teachers, the setting of dates and terms more favorable to the participation of teachers, and other aspects.

The *Access* to activities developed by the Services of Psychological Support occurs differently depending on the type of intervention. For individual consultations, the student usually seeks the service when he has some difficulty, being “the request of the students, the students have such access. The students (...) realize that something is not going well, when their grades suffer. When they notice that there is a big difference in the past and current performance” (SPS1), or the student is directed by coordinators, teachers or the medical service. When it

comes to group activities such as workshops for developing skills, it is common that students must enroll in advance, so such activities are promoted and interested parties make their entry.

As for the *Promotion of the Service*, almost everybody tends to publicize the existence of the Service and activities it performs. The most common strategies listed by the HEI web page are (in descending order) faculty and staff tell students about the Services, posters and pamphlets at the institution, newsletters, blogs, facebook, and twitter. Two services did not promote their work because they were unable to accommodate new demands: "This year the service was not promoted, people came without any advertisement because we had no possibility of attending more people" (SPS7). As already indicated by RESAPES (2002), advertisements of the services are typically reduced and made through the distribution of pamphlets and murals inside the HEI. However, it must be taken into account that an important and possibly more frequent way to access the Service is the student's own search. Therefore, it is essential that students are aware of the existence of the service and the available support. Aware of this, one of SPS has been engaged in establishing different channels of communication with its public, namely by means of modern interactive tools - blogs, Facebook and twitter.

### ***Dimension 2 – Educational Psychologist Performance***

This dimension provides information related to the practice of educational psychologists and covers the main activities, the intervention model that guides them and the difficulties and facilities in their development. Concerning the *Activities Developed* by educational psychologists in the Services of Psychological Support, it appears that there is a wide variety of practices, which reflect institutional priorities, the trajectory of the Service, the ideological and theoretical options of psychologists and coordinators, and the availability of human resources. In general, the common activity of the Services and to which great attention is given by educational psychologists, is the psychological consulta-

tion, held in seven of eight SPS: “It is clear that what is most common and what we do the most is an individual psychological consultation, but there is no restriction in organizing any kind of intervention, it is an option” (SPS5). Although common in many Services, it would be incorrect to say that the psychological consultation is homogeneous as to how it is developed by psychologists, and the theoretical orientation adopted by the subjects addressed. The practice involves the evaluation (with or without test application), diagnosis, and definition of the problem and intervention, which may occur as psycho-pedagogical support, brief advice or psychotherapy. The psycho-pedagogical support is directed toward academic issues such as organization of time or of reading and writing; for example, the brief advice is directed to a relatively limited emotional problem that requires a punctual orientation. Psychotherapy is longer, held in weekly sessions and utilized in cases of psychological or psychiatric disorders. The issues and demands around which the appointments are developed are varied, with cases related to leaving home, adjusting to college, vocational guidance, family or relationship problems, financial difficulties, special educational needs, transition into the labor market, as well as issues related to depression, grief, eating disorders, and severe psychopathologies. As to theoretical approaches, a cognitive-behavioral approach is more normally used for achieving results in a shorter period of time, but educational psychologists have freedom to resort to the best approach they identify.

The only service that does not perform psychological counseling is the one exclusively linked to the support of students with special educational needs: “I do not do that individualized psychological counseling (...). Despite not doing psychotherapy or psychological consultation in the strict sense of the word, I end up giving some support to these students” (SPS2). Psychological support and individual guidance given to students with special needs are characterized as a special welcome to the student and an opportunity to gather information about their needs and mutually decide what measures can better serve him. Although SPS does not make this psychological consultation with students with

disabilities, it occurs in two other services that also serve a similar public.

The recurrence of psychological consultation is an eminent clinical practice in the structure and dynamics of the Services, and it is for some professionals the activity that gives identity to the Service. "If I do not distinguish that the clinical area is a central and nuclear area, it can be superseded by other things and we don't have a clinic. And then it loses its identity as a service of psychological treatment" (SPS6). Similarly, another participant pointed out that it is through the psychological consultation, a legitimate practice that is the responsibility of the of Psychology professionals, that the Services ensure the presence of educational psychologists because it "can only be assured by me or by a trained psychologist, while training, for example, the way we organize it should be done by a psychologist, but can still be understood in other ways. Consultation cannot be understood in any other way" (SPS7).

On the one hand, the emphasis on psychological consultation is justified for giving identity to a Psychological Service, while on the other hand, the participants recognize that this kind of practice, exclusively, can minimize the contribution of the Service, since support for academic success and welfare of students is restricted to a small number of students. This would leave the Service institutionally vulnerable. Accordingly, "a service that constantly reduces itself to giving clinical support and period, I think is much more vulnerable institutionally (...) a purely clinical work in higher education does not protect the service much, because the clinical work will always be seen as a complement, not the core business of the thing" (SPS6).

The need to face this vulnerability is one of the reasons that the Services began to develop other strategies of intervention such as workshops, lectures, and volunteers (Dias, 2006). Nevertheless, more than protecting the Service in terms of maintenance, the analysis of the interviews indicates that investment in other areas of intervention also accrues from the understanding that the diversification of forms of intervention may expand the field of Educational Psychology and, consequently, increase the impact on academic success. "Sometimes

psychologists are accustomed to working in offices, there are lots of consultations and here it is not just consultation. The consultation here is very important, sure, and we really appreciate this work, but that's not all" (SPS4). In addition to ensuring the institutional maintenance of the Service, diversification of the forms of assistance reflects the openness of educational psychologists to build actions more consistent with the specificities of the context and, thus, commit themselves more effectively in the democratization of Higher Education.

Despite clinical activity being perceived as a structure for psychological practice, its lack of efficiency is already well reported in the literature. Clinical activity has little impact on transforming the system. On the other hand, practices that take into account social, political and ideological influences in the conformation of problems, and make use of interventions with different agents and institutional instances (since they assume the problem is not the responsibility of the individual subject) are already proposed (Marinho-Araújo, 2009; Sandoval & Love, 1977; Witter, 1999). For them to gradually become concrete, educational psychologists themselves need to have clarity and conviction about the role and importance of adding other types of interventions, as well as theoretically and empirically supporting such proposals.

Although not equally present in all Services, other measures are developed by educational psychologists: (a) skill development programs carried out in terms of workshops (experiential character) or lectures (for information purposes) on issues of time management, study methods, resume writing techniques, conflict management and emotional intelligence; (b) formally established research practices in Services linked to psychology courses and, the other ones, developed on the initiative of the psychologists themselves as a way to validate and guide their actions; (c) coordination and supervision of social action volunteering in peer counseling, mentoring and support for special educational needs; (d) mentoring programs in which student volunteers are specially trained to welcome new students (freshmen) and in that training they work on communication skills, listening, self-help and referral to eligible volunteers to assist the beginners in the process

of integration into academic life; (e) providing advice on the inclusion of students with special educational needs, involving treatment and counseling to the student himself, the teachers and staff; implementation of necessary educational, physical and technological changes; actions to raise awareness with the academic community; training of teachers and students about characteristics and potential of people with special needs; (f) training of undergraduate and graduate psychologists, particularly in Services related to the psychology courses; (g) programs to prevent risk behavior conducted through courses and workshops on stress and anxiety management before examinations; (h) telephone line support for students by which volunteer students (peer counseling) offer active listening and emotional support to students of the institution; (i) support in the recruitment and selection of new employees to the institution; (j) teaching, specifically in a course of Personal Development and Social Skills offered to all students of the institution; (l) training of teachers based on the teaching modifications required by the Bologna process; (m) implementation of relaxation sessions; (n) psychological characterization of familiar and economically disadvantaged students who apply for scholarships, as support for evaluation of the applications; (o) therapeutic groups organized around issues related to anxiety, interpersonal relationships, and others.

The first highlight on the *Activities Developed* by educational psychologists refers to diversity; Services of Psychological Support for Portuguese HEIs are not tied to one type of intervention, they are actually involved simultaneously in different modalities. An important contribution of such diversification is undoubtedly expanding the ways in which we can achieve academic success and welfare of subjects as well as the growth of the institutions themselves, since the development paths are not predetermined and can be improved by many means. The variety of activities also shows a remarkable qualitative change in the intervention model that guides the psychological practice, which is no longer primarily remedial and healing, taking a more preventive characteristic. Along these lines, practices which seek to address the

difficulties brought by the students are organized, now, with practices that aim to foment the full development of students.

The second highlight related to the *Activities Developed* refers to the fact that, although there is diversification in terms of type of intervention, most of them are focused on students, specifically in direct and specific interventions with the student body. This is, indeed, the recurring emphasis on Support Services in Europe (Ferrer-Sama, 2008) and is the basis of various proposals of action for Higher Education (Dias, 2001, 2006; Gonçalves & Cruz, 1988; Leitão et al., 2000). Moreover, a retrospective look at the Services of Portugal indicates that the ongoing activities are the same ones which were the basis of the creation of the first Service of Psychological Support over 25 years ago. Thus, if different activities are developed in parallel to traditional psychological consultation, notably for the inclusion of preventive actions, then said activities remain focused on students and play some rather uninventive models. Areas still in need of intervention in Higher Education would be, in relation to institutional management and educational proposals, non-frequent spaces of intervention.

As announced by the nature of activities developed by the Services, the *Model of Intervention* used by professionals varies according to the extent of their practices. Thus, in the Services that focus exclusively on psychological consultation, the individual and remedial model prevails. Therefore, the work “is largely individual in nature (...). All the work with the student is done exclusively with him” (SPS5). “Most interventions are remedial in nature (...) in relation to psychological consultations. (...) Even when supporting students with special educational needs (...) often the situation is already settled (...) and we do a remedial intervention...” (SPS4). Differently, in SPS the consultation and the mentoring programs coexist; as well as academic skills development and risk prevention, actions of teacher training and support to special students, remedial and preventive models, with both individual and collective interventions.

Regarding the *Facilities and Difficulties* encountered by educational psychologists during professional practice, one can say that there

are few things in common between different Services, which indicate that there are certain specificities to each institution and each Service. Although they are not common to most services, some aspects can be cited. The first of them, teamwork, appears on statements made by four Services; in two of them it is identified as a favorable aspect to the development of the activities and in the other two it is reported as a complicating factor. On the one hand, the educational psychologist who is alone in the Service says that “such difficulty of being alone is one of them, and that’s it. I often see the need to switch with colleagues and seek work overseas” (SPS8), on the other hand, professionals who rely on the cooperation of other colleagues say that “we worked hard as a team (...) I think that this sharing knowledge is a plus, because if I were to work alone and always follow this route I would probably never think in a different perspective” (SPS4). In addition to exchanging ideas and discussing cases and procedures, the enhancement of teamwork is also based on the fact that it allows the performance of the Service in a greater number and variety of practices.

### ***Dimension 3 – Service Evaluation***

This latter dimension provides information about the evaluation that the professionals make about the Services and includes categories related to their perception of the contributions coming from the work and possible changes that could be done to improve them. The general idea expressed by participants about the *Contributions of the Service* is that they are acting to promote the welfare of students and academic success, as well as reducing drop outs and failure. In some cases, the argument that supports the relationship between the importance of the Service and academic success is anchored on financial parameters, as indicated by some participants, “Since the money came to the universities for the success (...) if the student repeats 3, 4 years, the university stops making money, and soon the universities lose money. Since they lose money, we must tackle the failure by creating strategies for them to solve the problems” (SPS3). Moreover, “this kind of Service costs

money, but if it has impact on academic performance level, it saves money. If people spend fewer years here, the institution spends less money, and contributes to some indexes that have to be presented about success and failure” (SPS5). In other cases, the prospect of promoting the overall development of students is the central argument: “for us this is what is important, their development (...) it is the most important factor for us. We believe that from the standpoint of the institution it is too” (SPS7).

Although geared to the common idea of promoting academic success and welfare, there is no agreement between the psychologists about the reasons that motivate and support that idea. Similar to positions related to Higher Education, SPS also seem divided between those that, on one hand, defend their formative and emancipator role in society and, on the other, bind themselves increasingly more to mercantilist interests (Dias Sobrinho, 2005, 2008; Goergen, 2008).

As for the evaluation of the participants concerning possible *Changes* that could be made, there were aspects not pointed out to as needing to be changed in the dynamics of three Services. Regarding the amendments that have been suggested in other SPS, the need to expand the number of professionals to enable the Services to engage in activities that are different from those carried out so far is common to the four of them. In this sense, they said that “what is very important for us is resources, especially human, because if we have it, there is a lot more that we can implement” (SPS7) and, even, “the creation of intervention programs itself requires work that ends up being more work beyond the research projects that we have (...) and this would imply a change in the very logic of the service in terms of employment” (SPS5). For the participants, having a greater number of professionals is what, in most services, enable them to develop preventive and developmental actions, as well as working with other agents such as teachers and staff, following alumni, and implementing advisory practices to bodies of the institution.

### ***Final considerations***

The analysis of the results and the discussions helped to understand how existing Services of Psychological Support in six Higher Education Institutions in Portugal are working, both in terms of similarities and specificities between them.

Overall, it appears that the role of Educational Psychology in the Portuguese Higher Education System is indeed a reality. Despite the limited number of professionals and the diminished magnitude of their actions being elements that contribute little to the Services, Higher Education is already a context of legitimate research and intervention in Educational Psychology. While in other countries, such as Brazil, the scientific production in this area and the presence of educational psychologists in HEIs is considered restricted and recent (Bariani, Buin, Barros & Escher, 2004; Oliveira, Cantalice, Joly, & Santos, 2006; Serpa & Santos, 2001), in Portugal, there are services in existence for over 25 years, and several studies and publications, as previously presented. The actions of Portuguese HEIs in Educational Psychology are, therefore, established and represent an important advance for the area.

During the past decades, individual and collective efforts undertaken by researchers and professionals in Educational Psychology allowed the building of a corpus of theory and practice that currently sustains the work in psychological support services. Traditionally, the role of Educational Psychology in Portugal HEI has emphasized the direct intervention with the student in an individual perspective and in response to the problem that leads him or her to seek help. However, without abandoning the classic treatment of individual subjects, Services of Psychological Support have been investing in preventive practices and actions with other agents that also participate in the educational process of students. Thus, discrete, but important investments are being made in training teachers and staff, at the articulation between different services of the institution, participation in recruitment processes, among others.

In order to further enhance the actions of Support Services, investment must be made in areas related to institutional management and pedagogical projects of the courses. For example, educational and institutional evaluation could promote a qualitatively different change between services. An important support in this process could be given by the RESAPES (Psychological Support Services in Higher Education Network), which like the disclosure they make of the work done by the services of the country, could make the promotion of work experience that transpire in other countries.

Finally, the quality of work done by educational psychologists is closely related to its clarity in ideological, political and theoretical issues that influence its actions and the development of critical and reflective behavior. In times of so many changes, assuming the responsibility for and undertaking the construction of spaces for initial and ongoing training is essential to foster the role of Educational Psychology, as well as create new contours.

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