

## College-to-Work Transition in Portugal: Expectations and Realities

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**Abstract:** Having as theoretical paradigm the socio-cognitive model of vocational behaviour, a new scale to assess the college-to-work transition process is presented. In addition, an exploratory study with college students and professionals is reported, within a counselling psychology perspective, in what concerns the major needs of intervention that this research has identified.

**Key-words:** transition, college/work, assessment, self-efficacy.

**Resumo:** Tendo como paradigma teórico o modelo sócio-cognitivo do comportamento vocacional é apresentada uma nova escala de avaliação do processo de transição universidade-mundo do trabalho. Complementarmente, é reportado um estudo exploratório com estudantes universitários e profissionais, adentro de uma perspectiva de consulta psicológica, no que concerne às grandes necessidades de intervenção que esta pesquisa identificou.

**Palavras-chave:** transição, universidade/trabalho, avaliação psicológica, auto-eficácia.

### Introduction

One of the most important and challenging themes of theory and practice within the field of career development is the school-to-work transition. The works of Blustein (e.g., 2006) brought to the developmental approach of careers a new view. Like in the piagetian work, this researcher understood that it is important not only to analyse the quantitative and qualitative nature of the stages of development, but also the processes of their construction and the transitions between them.

Adding to this new perspective, his model comprehend also the contextualist nature

of this process, namely in their social aspects.

In what concerns this last aspect, we must not forget that not all people make this transition, and some of them do it in very critical manners. As the referred author explain, historically this is a problem that was raised since the beginning of the century, and that it is reflected in the vocational and career education movements. With the present challenges of a new and complex society that is arising, this kind of questions is even more serious. The assessment and the theoretical models are striving to achieve well-fitted concepts and tools to better serve the people who experience this new form of social dimension. In sum, we are dealing

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with a controversial theme, that vocational psychology has to answer in a very affirmative way. Through empirical studies, both quantitative and qualitative (among other researches), we hope that we will be able to reach some conclusions that will be efficient and useful to those kind of populations that experience everyday the struggle for a living compatible with their individual autonomy and civic rights (Watts & Esbroeck, 1998).

### **Political context and labor market vs. college graduates and career services delivery system**

Following this systemic approach of careers, so well represented in the historical work of Vondracek, Lerner, and Schulenberg (1986), and so well adjusted to the post-modern views of the vocational psychology (Savickas, 2003), in our research we address the political problem that was raised during the last decades in Portugal inside the college-to-work transition processes.

During this period young people faced complex changes in different spaces of their lives, due in large measure to the historic, socio-political, and economic changes that have taken place following the democratic revolution (i.e., 1974). A concrete result from the revolution (in which the fascist government was overthrown and replaced with a democratic government) was the tendency to open higher education to a greater number of students, supplemented by the opening of numerous private institutions of higher education.

For different reasons, in Europe we observed also a similar movement of massification and democratization of higher education; in the last decades we passed

from a ratio of 5% of college students to a 20%-30% ratio (Watts & Esbroeck, 1998), and in the present this tendency keeps maintaining. Following the thought of these authors, this situation meant new problems in what concerned the inputs of the higher education system, as the outputs from these same system. Simultaneously, the labor market did not adjust itself to this new situation, and the interface between the educational system and the occupational structure did not find a good match. From the educational system and from the occupational structure was expected more efficiency, accountability, and flexibility, in order to help to make more effective transitions from school to work.

Although Portugal does not have the similar ratio of college graduates per number of inhabitants in comparison to more developed countries in Europe, our labor market has not also adjusted to the recent influx of college graduates; our specific recent socio-political, and historical trends, gave also to our situation a similar perspective. Turning more complex and problematic this situation, we know that universities and their students have not adjusted completely their perceptions and expectations in relation to this process; the tradition of the university as an exclusive instructional institution, having no vocational concerns (only teaching and researching) (cf. Watts & Esbroeck, 1998), make from all of this problem one of the most difficult tasks for career counselors.

The various institutions of higher education in Europe are making a big effort to respond to this new challenge creating career counseling services and systems at the universities, but in some cases, like the Portuguese, the answer has been slow and reduced.

### **Expectations from college students and perceptions from working graduates of the school-to-work transition process**

In order to have a preliminary view from this situation in Portugal, we performed an exploratory research, having as main goals the understanding of the expectations from college students and of the perceptions from working graduates of the school-to-work transition process, based in the implicit hypothesis that the experience of work could modify some dimensions of the relation to the career and vocational questions in both groups.

Based in the social cognitive career theory of Lent, Brown, and Hackett, founded in 1994, and 1996, and of Lent, Hackett, and Brown, founded in 1996, and 1999, and regarding the political context, labor market, and career services delivery system in Portugal, we built a questionnaire in order to assess the expectations from college students and the perceptions from working graduates of the school-to-work transition process. We think that this approach based in the learning theories is widely comprehensive and fits with the learning environment that college students have to deal with while attending college. In this questionnaire, which is composed by five sections, we tried to evaluate, according to the social cognitive career theory above cited, the following dimensions: (1) person inputs, (2) background contextual affordances, (3) learning experiences, (4) self-efficacy/outcome expectations/interests/choice goals/choice actions/performance domains and attainments, (5) contextual influences proximal to choice behavior. The purpose of this study was to determine the expectations from college students and the perceptions from working graduates of the school-to-work transition process. Group differences

(first year vs. last year college students vs. working college graduates) and gender differences were analysed.

### **Method**

#### *Construction of the College-to-Work Transition Scale (CWTS)*

An item pool was developed to assess each of the above dimensions and was administered to an heterogeneous sample of 91 college students and college graduates holding a full time job, using a Likert scale (strongly agree, agree, disagree, strongly disagree). We obtained Cronbach's alpha internal consistency coefficients for the 5 dimensions as follows: (1) person inputs, .66; (2) background contextual affordances, .73; (3) learning experiences, .69; (4) self-efficacy/outcome expectations/interests/choice goals/choice actions/performance domains and attainments, .87; and (5) contextual influences proximal to choice behavior, .63. The total scale revealed an alpha of .87. Thus each of the dimensions showed satisfactory internal consistent reliability (and therefore some evidence of construct validity). For clarity and concisiveness purposes we will rename some of the dimensions and call them subscales. Item to subscale correlations ranged from .24 to .48 on the Person Inputs subscale, .25 to .56 on the Background Contexts subscale, .21 to .50 on the Learning Experiences subscale, .40 to .66 on the Self-Efficacy subscale, and .29 to .49 on the Proximal Contexts subscale.

#### *Participants*

The College-to-Work Transition Scale (CWTS) was administered to another sample of 141 participants, 45 first year college students, 56 last year college students, and 40 college graduates working

in a full time job. Out of the 141 participants, 117 were females and 24 were males.

### Procedure

The CWTS was administered individually or in a few cases to small groups to first and last year college students. All college graduates responded individually to the scale. Participants were told of the objectives of the study and their cooperation, although being important, was voluntary.

### Results

Significant differences by group level (first year vs. last year college students vs. working college graduates) were found for the total scale ( $F=3.713$ ;  $p=.027$ ), for the Person Inputs subscale ( $F=5.096$ ;  $p=.007$ ) and for the Backgrounds Contexts subscale ( $F=4.044$ ;  $p=.02$ ). Means and standard deviations by group level for the total scale and the subscales Person Inputs, Background Contexts, Learning Experiences, Self-Efficacy, and Proximal Contexts are reported in Table 1.

Pairwise comparisons showed that working college graduates scored significantly higher on the total scale and on the Person

Inputs subscale than first year students. Pairwise comparisons showed also that working college graduates scored significantly higher on the Background Contexts subscale than first year students or last year students.

A more fine analysis was performed by looking at the group level differences by item of the CWTS. Significant differences were found in item 1c (persons “who do not belong to ethnic minorities”) ( $F=7.231$ ;  $p=.001$ ); 2e (“belonging to a middle high or high social class”) ( $F=7.015$ ;  $p=.001$ ); 2f (“being part of a family that has many connections in the world of work”) ( $F=6.635$ ;  $p=.002$ ); 2g (“being part of a family with high level of education”) ( $F=3.878$ ;  $p=.023$ ); 3a (“have always had school success”) ( $F=4.410$ ;  $p=.014$ ); 3f (“had help (e.g., vocational guidance, support from parents and teachers, etc.)”) ( $F=4.409$ ;  $p=.014$ ); 4i (“learn with failures in the process of looking for a job”) ( $F=3.107$ ;  $p=.048$ ); 4n (“believe more than others in the tasks they put themselves to do”) ( $F=3.555$ ;  $p=.031$ ); 5b (“the country is getting better economically”) ( $F=4.130$ ;  $p=.018$ ); and 5c (“exists greater social stability in the country”) ( $F=6.895$ ;  $p=.001$ ). Means and standard deviations by group level for all CWTS items are reported in Table 2.

**Table 1 - Sub-scales means and standard deviations for first years students, last year students, and HE degree holders working**

Subscales	First year students		Last year students		HE Degree Holders in the work force	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Person Inputs	17.16	2.75	17.95	2.82	18.95	1.99
Background Contexts	19.80	3.03	19.88	2.64	21.33	2.74
Learning Experiences	21.16	2.16	20.96	2.69	21.55	2.92
Self-Efficacy	42.76	4.02	42.55	5.74	43.85	5.60
Proximal Contexts	17.87	1.80	18.39	2.34	18.75	2.10
Total CWT S	118.73	8.16	119.73	11.07	124.43	11.14

**Table 2 - Comparisons of item means and standard deviations for first years students, last year students, and HE degree holders working**

	First year students		Last year students		HE Degree Holders in the work force	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
<b>1. Entry in the work market will be easier for persons:</b>						
a) who are more intelligent than others	2.36	.68	2.50	.71	2.70	.56
b) who are males	1.89	.68	2.05	.82	2.17	.59
c) who do not belong to ethnic minorities	2.27	.75	2.57	.85	2.88	.52
d) who do not have any disability	2.96	.67	3.20	.75	3.18	.68
e) who are in good health	2.98	.58	2.98	.62	3.00	.51
f) who are emotionally balanced	2.89	.61	2.82	.74	3.00	.68
g) who are females	1.82	.49	1.82	.51	2.03	.42
<b>2. Persons who have experienced the following situations will have an easier time entering the world of work:</b>						
a) a balanced family	2.89	.71	2.79	.71	3.00	.64
b) a childhood without problems	2.89	.68	2.64	.67	2.88	.61
c) a group of friends that gives help when needed	3.02	.69	3.00	.60	3.08	.53
d) an intimate relationship	2.47	.69	2.27	.62	2.40	.59
e) belonging to a middle high or high social class	2.53	.66	2.77	.74	3.13	.79
f) being part of a family that has many connections in the world of work	3.18	.72	3.43	.57	3.65	.48
g) being part of a family with high level of education	2.82	.65	2.98	.52	3.20	.72
<b>3. According to school trajectory, persons will have easier entrance in the world of work when:</b>						
a) have always had school success (achievement)	3.04	.64	2.64	.75	2.80	.61
b) attended quality schools	2.78	.56	2.77	.71	2.90	.63
c) had good teachers	2.84	.56	2.91	.58	3.03	.66
d) had work experiences as part of learning process (study visits, practicum experiences, etc.)	3.20	.50	3.39	.65	3.38	.63
e) in college took classes directly related to the inherent professions	3.27	.54	3.32	.58	3.25	.67
f) had help (e.g., vocational guidance, support from parents and teachers) in the process of choice	2.98	.58	2.64	.70	2.98	.66
g) were involved in extra-curricular activities	3.04	.52	3.29	.62	3.23	.58
<b>4. Persons who will have easier time entering the world of work are the ones that:</b>						
a) Believe more in their abilities	3.40	.58	3.30	.60	3.35	.62
b) have higher expectations in getting a good job	2.80	.59	2.77	.63	2.88	.72

c) have better defined their areas of interest	2.98	.45	2.98	.65	3.05	.60
d) value more than others work as a mean of personal fulfillment	2.96	.64	2.91	.61	2.95	.55
e) are able to have a better definition of their personal goals	3.09	.47	3.13	.63	3.18	.68
f) are able to better establish plans to get a job	3.09	.47	3.11	.62	3.25	.59
g) are more capable to concretize their ideas	3.04	.47	3.18	.61	3.18	.50
h) are more persistent in looking for a job	3.29	.46	3.27	.56	3.33	.62
i) learn with failures in the process of looking for a job	3.16	.47	3.05	.64	3.35	.58
j) look for jobs in the area they like	2.78	.56	2.79	.78	2.88	.69
l) majored in the area they wanted (according with their interests, values, and likes)	3.07	.58	2.93	.74	2.90	.96
m) are able to do almost anything they put themselves to	3.02	.54	2.96	.66	2.98	.66
n) Believe more than others in the tasks they put themselves to do	3.11	.49	3.05	.59	3.35	.58
o) feel to be able to perform competently a profession	2.98	.62	3.13	.60	3.25	.63
<b>5. When these conditions are present, persons will have easier time to enter the world of work:</b>						
a) have connections and influences to help them	3.38	.53	3.52	.54	3.55	.50
b) the country is getting better economically	2.98	.54	2.95	.62	3.28	.60
c) exists greater social stability in the country	2.93	.39	2.95	.62	3.33	.62
d) finished an internship	2.91	.51	2.93	.60	2.85	.66
e) were registered in employment service, looking for a job	2.78	.52	2.86	.55	2.60	.71
f) had a "strike of luck" (having read an add by chance, made a connection in the right moment, etc.)	2.89	.68	3.20	.70	3.15	.62

Pairwise comparisons showed that working college graduates scored significantly higher on items 1c, 2e, 2f, 2g, and 5c than first year students. Pairwise comparisons showed also that working college graduates scored significantly higher on items 4i, 4n, 5b, and 5c than last year students. No other significant differences by group level were revealed.

No significant differences by gender were found for the total scale or subscales of

the CWTS. Means and standard deviations by gender for the total scale and the subscales Person Inputs, Background Contexts, Learning Experiences, Self-Efficacy, and Proximal Contexts are reported in Table 3.

A more fine analysis was performed by looking at gender differences by item of the CWTS. Significant differences were found (males scoring significantly higher than females) in items 1c (persons "who

**Table 3 - Sub-scales means and standard deviations for the total sample and for males and females**

Subscales	Total sample		Males		Females	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Person Inputs	17.98	2.66	18.88	2.19	17.79	2.72
Background Contexts	20.26	2.86	20.92	3.05	20.13	2.81
Learning Experiences	21.19	2.60	22.13	3.18	21.00	2.43
Self-Efficacy	42.99	5.20	43.96	4.42	42.79	5.34
Proximal Contexts	18.33	2.13	18.29	1.88	18.33	2.18
Total CWT S	120.74	10.45	124.17	10.70	120.04	10.31

do not belong to ethnic minorities”) ( $t=3.174$ ;  $p=.002$ ); 1g (“who are females”) ( $t=2.787$ ;  $p=.006$ ); 3c (“had good teachers”) ( $t=3.033$ ;  $p=.003$ ); 3f (“had help (e.g., vocational guidance, support from parents and teachers, etc.)”) ( $t=2.295$ ;  $p=.023$ ); and 4j (“look for jobs in the area they like”) ( $t=2.184$ ;  $p=.031$ ). Females scored significantly higher on item 5d (“finished an internship”) ( $t=-2.97$ ;  $p=.003$ ). No other significant differences by gender were revealed. Means and standard deviations by gender for all CWTS items are reported in Table 4.

## Discussion

Working college graduates were found to show significantly higher results on the total CWTS and on the Person Inputs subscale than first year students. Working college graduates also revealed significantly higher results on the Background Contexts subscale than the other two groups (first year and last year college students). These results suggest that college graduates are more realistic than college students in what concerns the more classical dimensions of the vocational development. The last ones have more unrealistic expectations in what

concerns their influences. However, both groups do not show significant differences in more dynamic transitional variables associated with patterns of self-efficacy. These data leads us to think that exists a contrast between vocational dimensions with work oriented dimensions.

Women and men showed no statistically significant differences in the overall score of the CWTS or in any of the five subscales, revealing a few differences when an analysis is performed at the item level. In this sample, the results between women and men, seem to suggest that the perceptions of the factors influencing the transition process from college-to-work are quite similar for both genders.

This study represents the preliminary stages in gathering data on the transition from college-to-work, and also the preliminary stages in the development of an instrument to assess the dimensions that might have an impact on that transition process. Additional work on the refinement of the scale such as testing new items and administering it to bigger and differentiated samples to obtain additional reliability and validity data is necessary before this instrument can be used by Career “Transition” Psychologists at other level (e.g., working with clients) than research.

**Table 4 - Item means and standard deviations for the total sample and for males and females**

	Total sample		Males		Females	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
<b>1. Entry in the work market will be easier for persons:</b>						
a) who are more intelligent than others	2.52	.67	2.71	.62	2.47	.68
b) who are males	2.04	.72	2.25	.61	1.99	.74
c) who do not belong to ethnic minorities	2.56	.77	3.00	.59	2.47	.77
d) who do not have any disability	3.11	.71	3.08	.72	3.12	.71
e) who are in good health	2.99	.57	3.00	.59	2.98	.57
f) who are emotionally balanced	2.89	.68	2.71	.81	2.93	.65
g) who are females	1.88	.49	2.13	.45	1.83	.48
<b>2. Persons who have experienced the following situations will have an easier time entering the world of work:</b>						
a) a balanced family	2.88	.69	2.83	.70	2.89	.69
b) a childhood without problems	2.79	.66	2.79	.72	2.79	.65
c) a group of friends that gives help when needed	3.03	.61	3.21	.51	2.99	.62
d) an intimate relationship	2.37	.64	2.42	.65	2.36	.64
e) belonging to a middle high or high social class	2.79	.76	3.04	.81	2.74	.74
f) being part of a family that has many connections in the world of work	3.41	.62	3.63	.49	3.37	.64
g) being part of a family with high level of education	2.99	.64	3.00	.78	2.99	.61
<b>3. According to school trajectory, persons will have easier entrance in the world of work when:</b>						
a) have always had school success (achievement)	2.82	.89	2.92	.65	2.79	.70
b) attended quality schools	2.81	.64	2.96	.75	2.78	.62
c) had good teachers	2.92	.60	3.25	.68	2.85	.56
d) had work experiences as part of learning process (study visits, practicum experiences, etc.)	3.33	.60	3.33	.64	3.32	.60
e) in college took classes directly related to the inherent professions	3.28	.59	3.21	.59	3.30	.59
f) had help (e.g., vocational guidance, support from parents and teachers) in the process of choice	2.84	.67	3.13	.61	2.79	.67
g) were involved in extra-curricular activities	3.19	.58	3.33	.64	3.16	.57
<b>4. Persons who will have easier time entering the world of work are the ones that:</b>						
a) Believe more in their abilities	3.35	.60	3.38	.49	3.34	.62
b) have higher expectations in getting a good job	2.81	.64	2.71	.62	2.83	.65
c) have better defined their areas of interest	3.00	.57	3.08	.58	2.98	.57



d) value more than others work as a mean of personal fulfillment	2.94	.60	3.04	.46	2.91	.62
e) are able to have a better definition of their personal goals	3.13	.60	3.13	.68	3.13	.58
f) are able to better establish plans to get a job	3.14	.57	3.33	.48	3.10	.58
g) are more capable to concretize their ideas	3.13	.54	3.17	.48	3.13	.55
h) are more persistent in looking for a job	3.29	.54	3.25	.53	3.30	.55
i) learn with failures in the process of looking for a job	3.17	.59	3.38	.58	3.13	.58
j) look for jobs in the area they like	2.81	.69	3.08	.65	2.75	.68
l) majored in the area they wanted (according with their interests, values, and likes)	2.96	.76	3.00	.83	2.96	.75
m) are able to do almost anything they put themselves to	2.99	.62	2.96	.62	2.99	.62
n) Believe more than others in the tasks they put themselves to do	3.16	.56	3.21	.59	3.15	.56
o) feel to be able to perform competently a profession	3.11	.62	3.25	.61	3.09	.62
<b>5. When these conditions are present, persons will have easier time to enter the world of work:</b>						
a) have connections and influences to help them	3.48	.53	3.42	.50	3.50	.54
b) the country is getting better economically	3.05	.60	3.21	.59	3.02	.60
c) exists greater social stability in the country	3.05	.58	3.21	.59	3.02	.57
d) finished an internship	2.90	.59	2.58	.65	2.97	.56
e) were registered in employment service, looking for a job	2.76	.60	2.63	.58	2.79	.60
f) had a "strike of luck" (having read an add by chance, made a connection in the right moment, etc.)	3.09	.68	3.25	.79	3.05	.65

**Conclusion: from a developmental stages focus to a transitional processes focus, or from an individualistic level to a social/systemic level of understanding and intervention**

According to previous works of the authors of this paper (cf. Authors, 1998; Authors, 1999; Authors, 1998a, b), and corroborated by works like from Richardson (1993, 1994), we think that both from a conceptual analysis as from

an exploratory research analysis this problem must be discussed at an individual/psychological level, and simultaneously at an organizational/socio-political level in a very critical way.

We believe that career service delivery systems must be developed in order to stimulate the consciousness of college students for important career and vocational features. Not only the person characteristics or contextual environments are important to explain the success or failure

in the school-to-work transition. More dynamic and complex socio-cognitive variables must be focused, in order to empower people in direction to autonomy in their life cycle. A full range of methods should be placed in the higher education system, that could permit to the students learn how to deal with more efficacy with the developmental tasks of defining interests, choice goals and actions and to cope effectively with the demands of the labor market. In brief, we think that career education activities should be transitional centered more than individualistic centered, considering that vocational development is not a mere matter of stages, but also a construction of a system of transitions. From the expectations of career development to the realities of the adaptation to the world of work there is a long way to run.

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