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A mirage turned into reality: strategies and socio-cultural representations of a group of East Timorese students in Portugal and the return home.

Authors: Cristovão D¹; Nogueira P²

Institutions: ¹GABINETE PARA A AVALIAÇÃO E PROMOÇÃO INSTITUCIONAL DA QUALIDADE, UNIVERSIDADE DE ÉVORA; ²DEPARTAMENTO DE GEOCIÊNCIAS, UNIVERSIDADE DE ÉVORA

Abstract:

During two years (between February 2009 and February 2011), a group of ten East Timorese students took up residence in Evora (Portugal), in order to pursue their postgraduate studies. In this period they lived a reality with different characteristics from the ones they knew, at a cultural, linguistic and academic level. Through narrative analysis of their testimony we intend to explore the individual and social dimension of this experience, including their life courses, expectations and socio-cultural representations.

Some of the factors that often are associated with the choice of a host country for further studies, such as cultural, linguistic, geographical proximity, or even the quality of life (IMO, 2008), were not considered in this case. On the contrary, the language issue revealed itself to be a major obstacle. The motivation of these students was the importance of “grab” the opportunity (scholarship, obtaining a master’s degree), regardless the difficulties they were about to face, or even without having a clear notion of the possible difficulties. All of them completed the master degree on the required period of time; however, the diminute dominance of the Portuguese language was clearly a factor of impoverishment of the international student mobility experience, not only at an academic level but also in socio-cultural terms. While at academic level they were exposed to an additional effort to obtain approval, at a social level they ended up to move on a very restricted space and with an essentially functional character.

We also observed that in a first moment, their option to go and study in Portugal was essentially characterized by an individual perspective (life project, professional career, social mobility), however, when asked to reflect in terms of the future, they mostly adopted a collective perspective (proximity and family support, development of Timorese institutions). Although the conclusions of this research are restricted to the present study case, it is interesting to perceive the proximity of these reports and life experiences not only to the concept of brain circulation, but also to the notion of transnationality, since in addition to the route that these students already had done in their lives (of successive migrations, from their village of origin to the city, from the city to the neighboring country and from there to Portugal), they consider a continuing expansion of their cognitive and physical borders (as they intend to go on studying abroad), but with a scheduled return to their country. Only in the long term it will be possible to attest to what extent this bet on higher education abroad will have repercussions in the development of the country, but it is expectable that a knowledge network will go weaving throughout all these transmigrations.

The aim of this presentation is to identify the strategies used by the students in their integration process, and reflect on the impact of this experience on their return to Timor-Leste at a personal and professional level. We also hope that this analysis can provide useful information for other students who are studying abroad, as well as to the higher education institutions who receive these students in order to enhance their individual, social and academic integration.

Keywords: International student mobility, Timor-Leste, Portugal, brain circulation, transnationality