

#### **PAPER**

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# ACADEMIC ADAPTATION TO THE UNIVERSITY: RELATIONSHIPS AMONG MOTIVATION, EXPECTATIONS AND SOCIAL SKILLS

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#### **ABSTRACT**

The study related academic expectations, motivation, social skills and academic adaptation and verified the impact of the first three variables on university adaptation. 320 students of different degrees participated. The Motivation Scale, the Social Skills Inventory, the Academic Expectations Scale and the Reduced Academic Experiences Questionnaire were used. Data collection took place *in loco* and Pearson correlation and multiple linear regression were used. All ethical procedures were followed. The results showed a predictive relationship of the variables in the total score of academic adaptation. It is understood that expectations met in terms of an enriching learning environment as well as the development of social skills promote academic adaptation and professional and personal growth. The study showed that expectations allow us to indicate the determining factors in the process of adapting to Higher Education. Prospective research can consider sociodemographic data and the fact that the student is from public and private institutions.

**Keywords:** adaptation; social skills; motivation.

# Adaptación académica a la universidad: relaciones entre motivación, expectativas y habilidades sociales

#### RESUMEN

En el estudio se relacionó expectativas académicas, motivación, habilidades sociales y adaptación académica y se verificó el impacto de las tres primeras variables en la adaptación a la universidad. Participaron 320 estudiantes de distintas graduaciones. Se empleó la Escala de Motivación, el Inventario de Habilidades Sociales, la Escala Expectativas Académicas y el Cuestionario de Vivencias Académicas-reducido. La recolecta de datos sucedió *in situ* y se utilizó correlación de Pearson y regresión linear múltiple. Todos los procedimientos éticos fueron cumplidos. Los resultados evidenciaron una relación de predicción de las variables en el escore total de la adaptación académica. Se entendió que expectativas atendidas en términos de un ambiente de aprendizaje de buena calidad, así como el desarrollo de habilidades sociales promueven la adaptación académica y el crecimiento profesional y personal. El estudio apuntó que las expectativas permiten indicar los factores determinantes del proceso de adaptación a la Enseñanza Superior. Investigación prospectiva puede considerar datos sociodemográficos y el hecho de el alumno ser de instituciones públicas y privadas.

Palabras clave: adaptación; habilidades sociales; motivación.

# Adaptação acadêmica à universidade: relações entre motivação, expectativas e habilidades sociais

#### **RESUMO**

O estudo relacionou expectativas acadêmicas, motivação, habilidades sociais e adaptação acadêmica e verificou o impacto das três primeiras variáveis na adaptação à universidade. Participaram 320 estudantes de diferentes graduações. Empregou-se a Escala de Motivação, o Inventário de Habilidades Sociais, a Escala Expectativas Acadêmicas e o Questionário de Vivências Acadêmicas-reduzido. A coleta de dados ocorreu *in loco* e utilizou-se correlação de Pearson e regressão linear múltipla. Todos os procedimentos éticos foram cumpridos. Os resultados evidenciaram uma relação preditiva das variáveis no escore total da adaptação acadêmica. Entende-se que expectativas atendidas em termos de um ambiente de aprendizagem enriquecedor assim como o desenvolvimento de habilidades sociais promovem a adaptação acadêmica e o crescimento profissional e pessoal. O estudo mostrou que as expectativas permitem indicar os fatores determinantes do processo de adaptação ao Ensino Superior. Investigação prospectiva pode considerar dados sociodemográficos e o fato de o aluno ser de instituições públicas e privadas.

Palavras-chave: adaptação; habilidades sociais; motivação.

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#### INTRODUCTION

Entrance to Higher Education requires from students an involvement before, during and after their access, as it will require domains and learning that will lead them to the life projects realization that involve a future career. The process that precedes the student's entrance to the university should include searches for information about the professions, information about Higher Education Institutions and their programs, but often this does not happen. This transition is not always an easy moment, as it comprises challenges and demands that are necessary for the student to be able to face the changes of age, make important decisions and face the difficulties that are pertinent to get at Higher Education (Almeida, Soares, & Ferreira, 2002; Almeida, 2007; Almeida & Cruz, 2010).

Experiences in higher education also represent for many students knowing how to skillfully manage new patterns in group relationships. The student needs to deal with the different characteristics of each teacher, with the distance from the family and with the responsibility to autonomously manage their financial resources, and in many cases, they may find themselves unprepared for this new stage (Almeida, 2007). However, such demands will require strategies (cognitive and relational) that enable the student to complete the activities and deal with the diversities imposed by the new bonds, such as managing time for different tasks, building and maintaining new bonds with peers and teachers.

Thus, it is understood that academic expectations are like goals and desires that involve students, which can influence the level of commitment, commitment and effort, being one of the relevant factors in the process of adaptation to the university (Vasconcelos, Almeida, & Monteiro, 2009). It is important to consider that the student, by showing low expectations and little academic involvement, reduces the probability of success and of staying at university, and may drop out of the course or show less commitment (Almeida, Guisande, & Paisana, 2012; Bisinoto, Rabelo, Marinho -Araújo, & Fleith, 2016; Igue, Bariani, & Milanesi, 2008).

In a study developed by Bisinoto et al. (2016), in order to understand the expectations that beginning students have upon entering university, the following dimensions were listed, in order of importance: Quality Academic Education, Perspective Professional Success, Opportunity for Internationalization and Exchange Programme, Social Commitment and Academic, Expansion of Interpersonal Relations and Concern with Self-Image. The authors relate the students' expectations with the Academic Reception Policy existing at the university, which makes it possible to guide planning, actions and services, networking, as well

as evaluating institutional initiatives aimed at improving teaching at the university.

Given the diversity of expectations upon entering university and the difficulties encountered in the transition and adaptation to Higher Education, the student may face very complex situations, growing in the group that makes up the new academic space and that do not correspond to the initial expectations (Almeida & Cruz, 2010). According to the authors, there is a diversity of students starting higher education from different socioeconomic backgrounds, with little family university tradition, insufficient prior knowledge to acquire new educational demands, in addition to low cognitive abilities that can hinder academic performance of the university student. It is understood that, although heterogeneity is increasingly present, access to the new student audience allows students who were previously unable to attend Higher Education, may be highly motivated to overcome the difficulties and reach a new professional level that they were not allowed before.

Studies about motivation (Almeida & Cruz, 2010; Bzuneck, 2009; Ruiz, 2005), in the educational field, have brought a significant understanding in relation to the direction and energy in learning (Sobral, 2009); therefore, it is possible to suppose that some difficulties encountered by the students can be overlapping given the degree of motivation found. Lens, Matos and Vansteenkiste (2008, p. 17), conceptualize motivation as a "psychological process in which personality characteristics (for example, motives, reasons, abilities, interests, expectations, future perspective) and environmental characteristics interact perceived". They also emphasize that the student's motivation can change in themselves (increasing their perception of self-efficacy, decreasing anxieties in assessments), as well as in their learning environment and school culture (the curriculum, the classroom environment, in which the teacher has an important role). Bergamini (1997) emphasizes the importance of external (context) and internal (personal) aspects as decisive for motivation. In the university environment, the quality of personal investment and dedication to studies have an immediate effect on motivation (Ruiz, 2005; Santos, Mognon, Lima, & Cunha, 2011), as it is not enough for the student to make some effort, but it is required who face challenging tasks, with persistence and depth, in order to obtain good results in learning (Bzuneck, 2009). According to Almeida and Cruz (2010), students who are less motivated and find it difficult to face difficult situations that are peculiar to Higher Education, can hinder their adaptation and face greater challenges in relation to academic success.

Wibrowski, Matthews, and Kitsantas (2016) conducted a longitudinal study on the impact of the *Skills Learning Support Program* (SLSP) on motivational

beliefs in first-generation freshman college students, on the use of self-regulatory strategies, and on academic achievement. The training involved preparing students to face social and academic challenges, such as seminars, English language improvement courses, even courses on self-awareness and relationships. The results showed that there were positive changes in learning strategies, resource management, self-efficacy, intrinsic motivation, values of academic experiences and goal orientation present in the pre- and post-tests. In addition, students involved in the training had academic achievements equal to or greater than students regularly enrolled from the first year.

Having considered expectations and motivation as fundamental constructs for good initial academic adaptation, especially in the first year of the course, it is important to take into account that relational skills must perpetuate over the years in Higher Education in a continuity of this integration and adjustment to this new stage of life. In the student's trajectory, some factors such as a good relationship with teachers and classmates, support and the quality of family relationships can contribute or imply in their academic adaptation (Polydoro, 2000; Soares et al., 2014). Soares and Del Prette (2015) highlight those social skills facilitate the student's technical and social performance. Social skills, according to Del Prette and Del Prette (2001) are different classes of social behaviors in an individual's repertoire to deal with the different challenges of various social contexts. The university is a social environment, in which the student promotes or inhibits their social relationships among peers, professors, employees and administrators. When it promotes a satisfactory interaction, it increases the probability of succeeding in academic activities, reducing tensions. Therefore, social skills have been associated with academic adaptation, with a view to facilitating the university's greater involvement in their activities, successfully reaching their professional goals (Couto, Vandenberghe, Tavares, & Silva, 2012).

Comedis (2014) investigated the relationship among the social skills of cooperation, empathy, self-control, assertiveness and academic students' performance of entering sociology. The study showed that self-control and social skills in general showed a significant relationship with academic performance. The author recalls that the generalization of results is limited to first-year students and that it is possible that social skills have a high relationship with academic performance in the transition period between High School and Higher Education. In the study by Mello and Soares (2014), the authors investigated the relationship between social skills and frustration in fresher and medical graduates. The research showed that there are differences between beginners and graduates regarding reactions

of frustration, assertive and empathetic social skills regarding the perspective and feelings of the other, and altruism. The study also revealed that the more students overcome the challenges pertinent to acting as future physicians, assuming the attributions, the more social competence they present with patients, which would lead to better professional performance.

The real difficulties faced by students in the transition and academic adaptation can be understood as a series of challenges they face in the motivation field, social skills and academic expectations in the situations experienced by fresher. These situations need to be experienced positively so that the student can reduce the probability of future problems such as failure and dropping out of the course. Therefore, this study aims to 1) relate the constructs academic expectations, motivation, social skills and academic adaptation and 2) verify the impact of the first three variables on university adaptation.

#### METHOD

### **Participants**

The study included 320 students, belonging to public (N=87) (27.19%) and private (N=233) institutions (72.81%) of different degrees, of both genders, 63.1% women and 36 .9% men. The volunteers were from the first (N=222) (69.38%) and second periods (N=98) (30.63%). Ages ranged from 17 to 45 years (M = 22.47; SD = 4.73). As for social class, 29 (9.06%) belonged to A, 40 (12.50%) to B1, 93 (29.06%) to B2, 100 (31.25%) to C1, 42 (13, 13%) C2, 15(4.69%) to DE and one (0.31%) did not inform.

#### Instruments

Academic Motivation Scale (AMS) (Sobral, 2003). It consists of 28 items subdivided into seven subscales: three correspond to types of intrinsic motivation; another three integrate types of extrinsic motivation, and the last one represents lack of motivation. Answers should be chosen on a Likert-type scale ranging from (1- no match) to (7- full match).

Social Skills Inventory (SSI) (Del Prette & Del Prette, 2001) is a self-report instrument for the assessment of social skills. It consists of 38 items, describing a situation of interpersonal relationship and a demand for the ability to react to that situation. The respondent must estimate the frequency with which they react as suggested in each item and estimate the frequency of their response on a Likert-type scale, with five points, ranging from zero (never or rarely) to 4 (always or almost always).

Academic Expectations for Higher Education (Marinho-Araújo, Fleith, Almeida, Bisinoto, & Rabelo, 2015) adapted from the Academic Perceptions Questionnaire, version A Expectations (QPA-E) (Almeida,

Costa, Alves, Gonçalves, & Araújo, 2012). The scale contains 61 items and the answers must be chosen from a spectrum of six points, considering a continuum between little and much.

Academic Experiences Questionnaire-reduced – (AEQ-r) (Almeida et al., 2002). It consists of 55 items on a five-point Likert-type scale, ranging from 1 (nothing to do with me) to 5 (everything to do with me). The instrument covers five dimensions: Personal, Interpersonal, Vocational, Study-learning and Institutional and Cronbach's Alpha ranging from 0.72 to 0.87 in the subscales.

#### **Data Collection Procedures**

Initially, a contact was made with the institutions' course coordinators to present the study and invite students to participate. The instruments were applied in person and collectively, in the classroom and in the following order: Academic Motivation Scale, Academic Expectation Scale in Higher Education, Social Skills Inventory, Academic Experiences-Reduced Questionnaire and Sociodemographic Questionnaire.

#### **Data Analysis Procedures**

In order to relate the constructs two by two, the Pearson correlation test was used and to assess the impact of the independent variables academic expectations, motivation and social skills on the dependent variable academic adaptation, the multiple linear regression test was used.

## **Ethical procedures**

All participants signed the Informed Consent Form, were informed about the study purpose, the confidentiality of the data and the possibility of interrupting participation at any time. During data collection, an email was made available for permanent contact. The study was approved by the Ethics and Research Committee of the University.

#### **RESULTS**

Statistically significant relationships were found between the total scores of the AEQ-r (Academic Experiences Questionnaire-reduced) with the total scores of the Academic Expectation Scale (AES) and the Academic Motivation Scale (AMA). However, the total score of the AEQ-r is not related to the total score of the SSI (Social Skills Inventory). The total SSI score does not have a significant correlation with the AES and AMS scores. The strongest correlation found was between the total AES score and the total AMS score.

activities, the adaptation becomes easier from student to university. Regarding AMS, only the Intrinsic Motivation for Knowledge factor ( $\beta$  = 0.243, p < 0.01) had a positive impact on the total AEQ-r scores. This

result points out and reinforces the fact that the student seeks learning, demanding that the activities provided at the university have a close relationship with the teaching-learning process. Finally, in relation to the SSI, the Coping and Self-Assertion with Risk factor positively impacted the total AEQ-r scores ( $\beta$  = 0.152, p < 0.001), while the Conversation and Social Resourcefulness factor negatively impacted ( $\beta$  = -0.239, p <0.001). The result presented may indicate that the relationships built in the adaptation process to Higher Education need to be emphasized both in cognitive and academic aspects, as well as in interpersonal relationships. The student needs to develop skills to deal with different actors in the university community, defending ideas, supporting opinions, receiving and making criticisms for the benefit of their own professional and personal growth. Of all the significant variables, the one with the greatest predictive power was AMS's Intrinsic Motivation for Knowledge (β = 0.243, p < 0.001). Finally, the impact of the variables motivation, academic expectations and social skills on academic adaptation was estimated by the MLRA. The MRLA results demonstrate that there is a prediction of the variables in academic adaptation [F(3, 315) = 25.531,p < 0.001], explaining 18.3% of the academic adaptation scores (R2). The AES and AMS significantly impacted academic adaptation scores, but there was no influence from the SSI. Of all the variables, the one that had the greatest impact was the AES ( $\beta$  = 0.28, p < 0.001).

## **DISCUSSION**

The research aimed to relate the constructs academic expectations, motivation, social skills and academic adaptation and verify the impact of the first three constructs on university adaptation. With regard to the first objective, the results showed that there is a significant relationship between the total AEQ-r score (the total sum of the obtained values) and the total AES score (the total sum of all the obtained values). Thus, the students' expectations allow for the evidence of determining factors in the process of adaptation to Higher Education. The results obtained by Igue et al. (2008) corroborated what was obtained in this study. The authors described the academic experiences of university students with the aim of verifying whether these changed according to the year of study. They analyzed whether the expectations and experiences of students from the 1st and 5th grades showed differences. They found significant differences in the Institutional dimension of the beginners' experiences. Grade 5 students had higher expectations than beginners with 79.7% of students in the "high" or "very high" category. This data may indicate that satisfaction with the experiences lived can contribute to the adaptive process and to the certainty regarding the choice of career, according to the authors.

The results found in this study corroborate that the experiences at the university are related to the types and levels of expectations of students and when these expectations are higher, they are associated with better rates of academic adaptation. The results of the present study also show that there are statistically significant relationships between the total AEQ-r scores and the total AMS scores, but there is no correlation between the total AEQ-r score and the total SSI score. Santos et al. (2011) researched the relationships between academic life and motivation for learning with 239 university students. The results found showed that there is a positive and significant relationship between the learning goal and the student's abilities. These skills refer to understanding your cognitive skills, such as expression, comprehension, problem solving and concentration. The negative association of the learning goal with the involvement factor in non-mandatory activities and with the factor conditions for study and academic performance indicates that any task that is not related to the formal required for the course can take up important time studies, although they contribute to greater integration, persistence and effort to integrate (Santos, Alcará, & Zenorini, 2013).

Although the present study has pointed out the absence of correlation between the total AEQ-r score and the total SSI score, the research by Soares et al. (2014) points out that in the face of greater student's social involvement, their chances will be increased to achieve satisfactory interpersonal relationships at the university, which means that a good interpersonal relationship tends to favor the adaptation process and academic success (Almeida et al., 2002; Polydoro, 2000). According to the authors, university students face an adaptive period that demands a series of cognitive and behavioral skills to achieve their goals. The varied interactions with groups with different characteristics in academic aspects can lead students don't know how to deal with these specific demands. Deficiencies in this interactive process of study, cooperation and work activities can make it difficult to adapt to the university context. The best or worst experience in this environment is influenced by social skills and its dynamics are a consequence of social behaviors (Soares et al., 2014).

The correlation found between the total AES score and the total AMS score can be understood by the fact that a positive association among two psychological variables in the spectrum of interpersonal and curricular relationships indicate that academic expectations linked to social, vocational and curricular involvement are associate the student's adaptation to Higher Education (Soares et al., 2014). The literature review carried out by Ruiz (2005) identified variables that influence university students' motivation to learn. The Pintrich model was

used, which incorporates four main components: sociocultural context, factors related to the classroom environment, internal factors and motivated behavior. Thus, it is expected that for the student to successfully complete their education, they need to know how to use in a self-determined, self-regulated, directed and active way the strategies to conduct both their motivation and their behavior and their learning. The experience in each situation can serve as basis for seeking to improve their skills to achieve the construction of knowledge within this diversity (Leal, Miranda, & Carmo, 2013).

Motivation and academic expectations impact academic adaptation, having relevant roles in the student's trajectory to university (Marinho-Araújo et al., 2015). Motivation can be understood as a construct that presents both environmental and personal determinants, prompting the subject to act and move forward towards their goals (Bergamini, 1997). By carrying out assignments and activities exploring and researching new content, the student can be intrinsically motivated to learn and explore what is still unknown. Thus, motivation can provide knowledge of something new related to learning, enabling the student to deepen their level of participation and knowledge for academic achievement (Falcão & da Rosa, 2008). With regard to academic expectations, Marinho-Araújo et al. (2015) bring the idea that these variables will influence the permanence of students in the course, as the different perceived challenges determine or not the process of integration into Higher Education. The authors point out that the arrival at the university reflects important feelings translated as growth and professional fulfillment, the quality of the course and institutions, the curricular proposals, the high expectations with the classes and with the professors. It may be that the academic expectations that strongly impacted this study are, according to Polydoro (2000), marked by the enthusiasm of the new environment so desired and idealized as a space that changes people's lives and their future professional conditions.

Some studies (Igue et al., 2008; Vasconcelos et al., 2009) are consensual in showing that the students' expectations are related to the adaptation, integration and student satisfaction in Higher Education, contributing to the student's permanence in the HEI. The data estimation points to the fact that it is based on academic expectations that the student can supposedly understand the learning environment and the skills necessary for success at the university. It is assumed that students' initial expectations, regarding what they expect to find at the university, are covered by pleasant and affable conceptions about the new school environment.

The results also show that students' expectations are also related to interpersonal relationships and

Table 1. Impact of Motivation Variables, Academic Expectations, and Social Skills on the Overall Academic Adaptation Score

AEQ-r Total	Non-standardized coefficients		Standardized coefficients	t	Sig.	R²
	В	Standard error	Beta			
(Constant)	2,453	0,219		11,223	0,000	
AES_Acad _Form	-0,165	0,058	-0,281	-2,844	0,005	
AES_Acad_Soc_Commit	0,091	0,036	0,186	2,538	0,012	0,288
AES Expan_Interp_Rel	0,059	0,036	0,117	1,639	0,102	
AES_Exchange_Oport	-0,004	0,022	-0,012	-0,197	0,844	
AES_Prof_Success_Persp	0,033	0,035	0,066	0,957	0,339	
AES_Concern_Self-Image	0,040	0,024	0,108	1,642	0,102	
AES_Devel_Trans-Skills	0,104	0,044	0,201	2,353	0,019	
AMS_IMK	-0,016	0,026	-0,045	-0,592	0,555	
AMS_IMAT	0,077	0,025	0,253	3,113	0,002	
AMS_IME	0,021	0,020	0,079	1,078	0,282	
AMS_EMR_ID	0,027	0,029	0,071	0,932	0,352	
AMS_EMR_INT	-0,015	0,020	-0,056	-0,757	0,450	
AMS_EMER_CE	-0,026	0,020	-0,084	-1,300	0,194	
AMS_DEMOT	-0,010	0,012	-0,047	-0,833	0,406	
SSI_SACR	0,077	0,033	0,131	2,341	0,020	
SSI_SAEPA	-0,004	0,034	-0,007	-0,123	0,903	
SSI_CSS	-0,096	0,029	-0,194	-3,280	0,001	
SSI_SEUNS	0,005	0,029	0,011	0,182	0,856	
SSI_SCAAS	0,012	0,029	0,021	0,402	0,688	
AEQ-r-Total						
Constant 2,29		0,18		12,55	0,00	
SAE_Total	0,170	0,03	0,28	5,01	0,00	
AMS_Total	0,10	0,03	0,23	3,85	0,00	0,183
SSI_Total	-0,07	0,05	-0,08	-1,47	0,14	-, <b>-</b>

Source: Elaboration made by the authors.

friendships developed at the university, hence the concern with self-image. In other words, it can be interpreted that the student is motivated to regulate the expression of behaviors by controlling self-presentation in order to adapt to the context (Snyder, 1974). On the other hand, the expectation of academic training with quality indicates that the student, in addition to aiming for certification, also expects to achieve professional success, remuneration, recognition, that is, the social status that the future career can provide (Moreno & Soares, 2014).

Finally, although transversal competences are recognized as one of the goals of Higher Education (Castro & Almeida, 2016), students seem not to be aware or even motivated to develop skills that do not

have a close relationship with graduation, supposedly showing a lack of knowledge of different aspects that involve academic life, such as psychosocial development, the general objectives of the course and specifics of the disciplines, and even the demands linked to the labor market.

#### **FINAL CONSIDERATIONS**

The aim of the study was to relate the constructs academic expectations, motivation, social skills and academic adaptation and to verify the impact of the first three on university adaptation. Thus, upon entering Higher Education, the student starts a new stage of life surrounded by different expectations, some of them fanciful, about the type of teaching and the future

career. Knowing the initial expectations of students and how they change over the years of graduation, considering, for example, internship experiences, the approaching completion of the course and entry into the labor market, would be relevant for the student's integration to the educational institutions. Understanding the initial expectations brought by students and how they change would facilitate the development and promotion of actions that awaken in the student the identification of their expectations, favoring adaptation to the university. It is noteworthy that the study pointed to the fact that more realistic expectations are related to better academic adaptation.

Furthermore, the learning process involves both internal and external motivational elements, demanding a challenging pedagogical environment for the student. Thus, curricular and extracurricular activities must effectively provide the acquisition of knowledge, even promoting the student's commitment to their teaching and learning process and their social involvement. Institutional investment in infrastructure, such as libraries and laboratories, and in the quality of pedagogical actions would greatly recognize the importance of external and internal determinants that involve motivational processes.

In addition, academic adaptation encompasses interpersonal relationships and a socially competent student can manage and build bonds with peers, professors and other members of the university community. The study indicated that being engaged at the university both with people and with the curriculum, signals that academic expectations related to social involvement, career and undergraduate disciplines influence students' adaptation to higher education. After all, the university does not only train future professionals, but subjects prepared to deal with life's challenges.

In terms of limitations, the study could have had a sample of students from other states of the federation, in addition to researching the behavior of variables considering demographic data and the fact that students come from public and private institutions. Prospective studies could focus on this comparison and establish a relationship between the variables and professional career success.

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