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THE LIFE-CHANGING TRANSITIONS OF AN ACADEMIC RESEARCH CAREER

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The first steps: from primary school to university

Compared with other children, I started my primary school late, when I was almost seven years old. In Portugal, children start school when they are six years old, but if by the registration day they are not yet six, they need to wait one more year. I was in this latter position and as a result of that one more year of extended freedom (and also a natural aptitude to be outside of enclosed spaces), at the beginning of my ‘academic career’ I didn’t like school.

The beginning of the 1970s was a difficult time for Portugal, marked with the euphoria of the transition from dictatorship to democracy, but at the same time there were counter-revolutions and instability following the peaceful military coup of 25 April 1974.

Following my parents’ decision to move back to my grandparents’ village in the countryside, I was able to understand the dichotomy of city and countryside (at a time when people used to say that ‘Portugal is Lisbon and the rest is countryside’). As the result of a prolonged dictatorship and a complete closure to the outside world, Portugal was at least fifty years behind in development when compared with most central and northern European developed countries. I still remember my shock when realizing the existence of those two different worlds.

The first two years of primary school were agonizing, with the school teacher mentioning to me and my parents that I didn’t pay any attention in the class, preferring to spend much of the time in the last desk of the room, close to the door or window, looking outside. In the third and fourth grades, something changed following a decisive meeting that my father had with the school teachers. My father mentioned that at such early ages all children should have the same comprehensive and demanding level of knowledge and attention. At that time my third-year teacher (who happened to be my aunt) decided to take an initiative that was extremely important for me. She decided to place me in the first row, facing the blackboard and far, far away from the window. These actions were important in my life, acting as substantial triggers that allowed me to refocus in the class and get down to learning. I started to pay attention, and by year four the family concern that there was no hope for me seemed to reduce. For reasons that I can’t fully explain, I started to enjoy school . . . in a crescendo.

When I was ten years old, my parents had to move to the Lisbon Metropolitan Area for professional reasons. Closer to the centre, I could once again compare the differences of resources
allocated to the city and the countryside. By seventh grade, and already in Lisbon, I really enjoyed learning, and by tenth and eleventh grade I was clearly competing for maximum grades. It is true that I always selected the options I enjoyed, and managed to mix sports and study well together. I was particularly good in football, the scouts, history and geography. I owe my interest in geography and history to two excellent schoolteachers, in particular Esmeralda Duraes. She was very demanding, but with an inspiring teaching style. She was clearly the best teacher I had and a very good friend (I ended up inviting her to my graduation ceremony). My final exams were somehow exciting. I decided on history, philosophy and geography, and during the three terms managed to achieve straight As, a difficult achievement as social sciences students tended to get lower marks, as these weren’t objective subjects like the sciences and therefore it was more difficult to assess an exam as ‘fully answered’.

The university years – applying and living in geography

After my final exams, and feeling very self-confident, I decided that I would be a lawyer or a geographer. While law was the subject that would grant me wealth, it was geography that I really enjoyed and that would bring me close to field trips with other people and exploring the world, as in the scouts. We could apply for a dozen university degrees and I knew exactly what I wanted to do. I decided that I would apply to three degree programmes (two in law at two different universities and one in geography and planning at the University of Lisbon). I must say that these universities were considered the most demanding and in order to make it more demanding I applied to do only physical geography. I remember thinking that if I made it to this stage it was better to choose something that was really challenging. I was accepted in physical geography, a subject that required maths, geology and biology and for which I was obviously not prepared.

These were the years of the first wave of European funds. In 1986 Portugal became a member of the European Community. For those who experienced the difficult times of the dictatorship and the tremendous economic crisis of the 1970s, these were years of abundance.

At that time university degrees in Portugal lasted four or five years (mostly five years). During the first year I remember considering changing to law, but by the end of the first year I was enjoying the Geography and Planning programme so much that when the day of the application to transfer arrived, I decided that I wanted to stay in Geography and Planning, even if my confidence in my abilities was reduced to almost zero (in terms of the number of hours spent in learning basic maths, geology, chemistry). Nevertheless, I never regretted the decision and later considered it was the best thing that happened in my life.

But during those years something had changed – the way I measured my self-confidence. In my secondary years, I felt that if I, ‘the least skilled person in the world’, could get to the top, it was just a matter of working hard – there was no need to be bright, and everybody could do this. By my university years, my concept changed slightly, as I realized that people need to develop the background necessary to construct further knowledge. As a result, my first years in physical geography were of extreme hard work, three times more than my colleagues, who had already studied maths, biology, chemistry, etc. But I was clearly enjoying the fieldwork and the maps; drawing maps wasn’t my strong point, but I really enjoyed the end result. And, if everybody complained about the high demands of the lecturers, requiring a lot of homework, continuous fieldwork and multiple examination processes, and the nastiness of not being awarded high marks . . . well . . . we were all in the same boat, but we were all amazingly enjoying our small twenty-five or so close-knit group of physical geographers.

I paid particular attention to Professor Denise de Brum Ferreira and Professor Maria Joao Alcoforado. They had both managed to raise a family and still be very good researchers and
excellent teachers. I thought I could do the same. There was a future for me at the university level. During the 1980s and 1990s, there were jobs for most of the university graduates in Portugal. There were very few universities, and very few people ended up doing a university degree. At that time most geographers ended up being teachers or working for the public administration. But by year two of my degree I already knew that I wanted to be a researcher. There was more to explore and understand, and while a lot of it could be uncertain and unknown, I was ready to search for answers, even if by that time I was already fully aware of my limitations!

**Starting research, working for the state and doing consulting**

There have been three moments in my life that represent important transitions from one phase to another. I can now tell that there was a clear ‘before’ and ‘after’. Some life events and choices have ended up triggering changes without which my life would be completely different today. The first such transition was certainly my third year of primary school and the fact that I had someone who bothered with me and tried to understand why I wasn't paying attention. The second most important event in my life was my geography and planning degree. Geography provided the best possible background for someone who wants to know everything about the world, from physical to human geography.

In my last year of geography I realized that I wasn’t much good at drawing maps, though I liked the work and found it very useful. To my surprise I realized that there was a new way of doing maps – automated cartography using computers. This was not yet available in courses in a geography or any other university degree, but there was a recent state department that was already doing pioneer work in these areas. The Centre for Geographic Information Systems (CNIG) was created to introduce the digital world, and in particular geographic information systems (GIS), at all levels of the government and the private sector. I offered to do an unpaid internship in my last year at university, and was accepted. By the end of my degree I had a research position at this new institute. My supervisor at CNIG suggested that I do an MPhil at the New University of Lisbon as he was a lecturer there for the MPhil in Planning and that it was possible to link the MPhil to GIS. The first year went very well, and after the first year of coursework I had to do a dissertation. It took me two more years to finish my MPhil. As a working student things took more time, but the expertise which I gained was brilliant.

My CNIG and MPhil years were very important – the expertise in computer-assisted geography and planning, the work with local, regional and state departments and some consulting in the private sector. All of this was happening at a time when everything was missing (no skills/expertise) in Portugal. With the first waves of EU funds reaching Portugal, it was a land of opportunity for newly qualified people. There was so much work and it was so diverse in nature that we all learned a lot (but we also learned that the secret for the successful delivery of a request to produce work was the importance of organization and the importance of ‘timing your time’ correctly).

It was during one of those research projects at CNIG that I ended up going to the US. We had a joint project with the US and one of the US researchers invited me to join his doctoral programme (Professor Jack Ahern and Professor John Mullin). I had to do my TOEFL and GRE exams and, if I passed those exams, University of Massachusetts–Amherst (UMASS) had a scholarship that would pay for my tuition (together with a scholarship from the Luso-American foundation, which would pay for my living expenses). The last two years of my PhD were paid by the Portuguese Science Foundation, as I wanted to make sure I would finish my PhD in five years.
My PhD

This was the third most important phase transition in my life. These three phases, together with the contiguous support and incentive that my mom and my father, and my two sisters, always gave to me, are at the basis of everything that is good in my life. I always felt that I was given more than I will ever be able to repay.

In the US, the structured knowledge of a PhD programme brings all students from around the world to a similar level of knowledge by the end of the first year (independent of background, every student ends the first year with a similar basic knowledge to start his/her research; theory, history, methods and some expertise in the substantive area of research will be taught to all PhD students). There I solidified my knowledge and learned a lot about the need to publish (and not to keep work on a dusty shelf unable to help others to progress).

While in the US I developed my PhD at UMASS, but because one of my co-supervisors, Professor Keith Clarke, was at UC Santa Barbara (California), I ended up also being a researcher at NCGIA – the National Centre of Geographic Information Analysis – also based at UC Santa Barbara. Through my experiences at both UMASS and UC Santa Barbara, I grew as a researcher. A lot of the computer models that I use were just starting to be developed at that time at NCGIA. I matured as a university academic (I was a researcher and teaching assistant during two years at UMASS Amherst). Many staff contributed to my education, but in particular John Mullin, Jack Ahern, Julios Fabos and Keith Clarke became good friends. With them I knew I could develop my ideas, and this is still what I say to my students: when doing a PhD please first look for a suitable supervisor in an area that you want to work on for your PhD and your future professional life – this is the key. The selection of the university should be a result of that initial selection of supervisor and topic.

The international contact with students, as a colleague and as a teacher, was amazing. Speaking and learning with and from students from all corners of the world, learning from teachers from around the world and experiencing best practices found in different countries were a new world for me – the lectures, the social events, parties and the exchange of food from different countries, the different celebrations and festivities. Paulina Volpe, my landlady, became a very, very good friend. All these are very beautiful memories of the best times. I still encourage my students to enjoy their PhD, the only time in life that you will be able to dedicate completely to your own research.

Preparing for life after the PhD was another piece of advice I was given at both universities in the US. With one year to go before submitting the dissertation, we were advised to start going to conferences more often and to publish – ‘to make yourself known, to make sure people know that you exist, to make sure people know that you may be helpful in their organizations too’ – and we were told this in a pragmatic and proactive way. I now tell my students to prepare for their future in the short, long and medium range. These plans shouldn’t be set in stone, but serve as guiding action plans.

Life after the PhD and as an academic member of staff

Besides the importance of the key transitions I have made, another thing that I now realize is that it is important to prepare for a transition (for a new post, for a promotion, for a sabbatical, for the development of a new lab, etc.). Some of these transitions will be structural triggers that change your entire life. They may be planned by you or appear as a result of the suggestions or actions of others, but that still leaves you to plan your response.
In my case, and following my supervisors’ advice, during the last year of my PhD, I started applying for jobs in the US. The US job application process is well structured. Usually students apply to jobs that are advertised at ACSP (the Association of Collegiate Schools of Planning) and APA (the American Planning Association) and have their first interview during these associations’ conferences (a good opportunity for employers to evaluate research and presentation skills and also to interview as many applicants as possible). I passed that first phase and was already being shortlisted for interviews at US universities. At that time, a professor from Portugal told me that I wasn’t being very patriotic, and that the two years of funding by the Portuguese National Science Foundation should require work in Portugal afterwards. Probably few people would say yes to move from a secure position in the US to a postdoc in Portugal, but I said yes – making it clear that I couldn’t stay as a postdoc forever, as was current practice in Portugal. I stayed in Portugal for four years (two as a postdoc at the IST-Technical University of Lisbon, and two as a lecturer at the School of Engineering of Catholic University). In Portugal the economic crisis was already a fact in 2002–2004. By 2005 the lack of money for research, together with the reforms of the Treaty of Bologna that required a reduction of degree length from five to three years, seemed to point to a trajectory of decline in terms of funding and academic progression. During the first term of 2006, I spoke with the dean of my school, mentioning that the Portuguese economic situation, in particular at the university level, was worrying me. I had invested a lot of my money and time in my professional future and felt it was the time to move to a different country where opportunities were available.

The US was the obvious option (having a PhD from there), but I decided to see what was available in Europe. I visited the website of AESOP (Association of European Schools of Planning) (two jobs available at that time: one in Vienna and another in Leuven – the deadline for application was only in three or four months’ time) and the website www.jobs.ac.uk (that had one job advertisement whose deadline finished in four days’ time, a lectureship at the Department of Land Economy in Cambridge, UK; while the reputation of the university was well known, the city and the department were unknown to me). I felt that this short deadline at Cambridge would give me the incentive to have everything ready for future applications and I decided to apply . . . and forgot about that during the following two months (to be frank, I didn’t think they would consider me). This was my first application. After one month I sent my application to Vienna and when I was ready to submit the paperwork to Leuven I got an email from Cambridge, inviting me for an interview. The day after the interview I got the job offer.

And that is how I came to be in Cambridge. In three months I ended up changing university and country. These changes are not easy. If you don’t define milestones and challenges, you will end up being too accommodating to the demands of others, and lose momentum on your own trajectory. It is important to be flexible, as sometimes things don’t happen as we want, but you need to be prepared to act. I am still astonished by the number of postdoc researchers that persist in the same university where they did their undergraduate and doctoral degrees, and who, now in their forties, find themselves in a postdoc position just because they are unwilling to move (or in some cases they really can’t move for personal reasons). This is probably one of the things that I find most concerning about our present academic life – the number of research staff without a secure position, always on the verge of unemployment if research grants disappear and/or aren’t awarded, but now unable to move to other more secure positions.

I had to make those decisions in my life. You need to be analytical about your options and understand the number of places available in the subject areas of your competence, and the probabilities of being considered for a post (e.g., having some teaching experience or a previous affiliated or lectureship position may be important). Periods with a postdoctoral fellowship
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shouldn’t last more than three to five years, which means you should start to consider your next move after the third year). There may be positions as a researcher or senior researcher. In some countries, this is a semi-permanent or permanent position. Or you should consider applying to university lectureships. Most PhDs finish their degree when they are in their early thirties or late twenties. This is the time when they still don’t have children and are still available to do long commutes (in some cases across the Atlantic). These initial university positions open the door later on to tenure-track positions. Not doing this at the right time will have substantial consequences, as later on it will become extremely difficult to make that move, as partners, children and family should take precedence. A very frank conversation with your department head or director of research is always a good thing. Describing the need to move on as a stepping stone, and the openness to return to that department if a position is open, seems a fair way to start planning your initial career development.

During the first years of an academic career there is a probability that you will change places a lot (three years as a postdoc in University A, two as an affiliated lecturer in University B, etc.). But you also need time to build on solid ground. This will allow you to have a deeper knowledge in the institution where you are, and to have the time to focus on your own research (moving around and restarting too many times might prevent you from maturing your own research). One piece of advice – even if you need to move during those initial years, always promise to finish the work you started (you will see that people will be thankful and will find you reliable).

Now at this stage of my life as a university senior lecturer, there are other concerns that I have. Certainly a lot of them are related to research, but increasingly there are concerns with the logistics, procedures and processes of the system, particularly when I am just a small grain of sand in these big institutional arrangements. Interestingly enough, I no longer just think about me and my options. I have started thinking about my legacy, my impact on the system and how much I can improve the lives of my students by making certain things work better. Are my students proud of me? Am I facilitating their progress? Am I increasing their chances that they will become good researchers and teachers, and have a job?

Final remarks

When I look back, I see that my generation was lucky. In Portugal we were all opening the country to the outside, to Europe, following the years of dictatorship and several world economic crises. The funds from the EC in 1986 allowed an increase in graduates and ended up bringing vast numbers of people out of poverty. Those were the enlightened years in Portugal, and to a certain extent in Europe at the start of an expanding European Union.

At this moment (2013), in contrast, the Portuguese government is cutting to virtually zero the number of scholarships abroad by reducing tuition fees (and applying this reduction retrospectively) to a value below international entry requirements in most US, continental Europe and UK universities. Hopefully, this is not a premonition of the darker inward-looking years of the past. In Europe, including Portugal, there are the dark clouds of universities being closed or merged (that seems to be the case in Portugal, Spain, Greece and Italy). In Portugal the University of Lisbon is merging with the Technical University of Lisbon. The European Project seems to be at risk, and the years of austerity seem to be the start of a fragmented Europe. In this context, where do universities sit? How can I prepare my students (many of them international students)? Can I keep attracting the same students to a continent that obviously is facing tremendous challenges and in a dozen years might be at risk of losing its status as a centre of
research and innovation in the world? How can I contribute to an improvement of this situation, here in the UK, in Portugal and in Europe in general? And where is all this change heading?

I have had experiences in many different academic environments – Portugal, the US and England. I can say that the differences of the last decades are reducing with the standardization of programmes and practices. The Anglo-Saxon system is still more pragmatic than that of continental Europe. But if we compare England and the US, PhD programmes take a longer time – five years in the US and three in England. The structured PhD programmes of the US have now arrived in most European universities (which are now advertising their PhD programmes and universal transfer credit systems). The emphasis on publication seems to be spreading, propelled by journal citation reports, impact systems, H-factors and author citation records.

In Europe, rhetoric points to universities as the centre of the ‘creative system’. Nevertheless it seems that it is in the emergent countries that most investment is being made in universities (with results clearly seen in the increase in the number of universities entering the ranks of top university lists). My contacts with Asian universities and visits to their university campuses make it clear that this is where the new lands of opportunity are and probably where a lot of new researchers will be able to make their own life-changing transitions to develop new avenues of research and development.

Note

1 TOEFL stands for “Test of English as a Foreign Language”, and tests the applicant’s ability to use and understand English in an academic environment. GRE stands for “Graduate Record Examination”. It is a standardized test, and tends to be an admissions requirement for US graduate schools, as well as other worldwide graduate schools and business programs. It aims to measure verbal reasoning, quantitative reasoning, analytical writing and critical thinking skills that have been acquired over a long period of time and that are not related to any specific field of study.