

## Aspirations and Transitions to Higher Education: Portraits of Young People Living in Portuguese Border Regions

### Aspiraciones y transiciones a la Educación Superior: Retratos de jóvenes que viven en regiones fronterizas portuguesas<sup>1</sup>

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#### Abstract

*This article reports the aspirations of young people growing up in border regions (Portugal-Spain) of continental Portugal after completing compulsory education (12th grade). That is, how young people are designing their perceptions about educational and career pathways combined with inherent contingencies, in spite of living in remote and mostly rural regions. Data were collected in 28 school clusters located in 28 border regions by means of a questionnaire to which 3653 young people from the 10th to 12th grade responded. The research involved a questionnaire concerning their expectations after completing compulsory education. Our findings suggest that despite the presence of undeniable regional struggles for the recognition and inequalities of these young people's right to education, they still want to pursue higher education because they believe that it will afford them greater opportunities, even if they have to leave their hometown. Moreover, gender and parents' education seem to have an influence*

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*in those processes. Young people's aspirations regarding their future seem to incorporate both the available options and their desired pathways.*

*Keywords:* Border regions; transitions; higher education; youth; rural areas; social justice.

## Resumen

*Este artículo trata de las aspiraciones futuras después de la educación obligatoria (12<sup>o</sup> año) entre los jóvenes que crecen en las regiones fronterizas (Portugal-España) del Portugal continental. En otras palabras, cómo los jóvenes están diseñando sus percepciones sobre las trayectorias educativas y profesionales combinadas con las contingencias inherentes, a pesar de vivir en regiones remotas y mayoritariamente rurales. Los datos se recogieron en 28 agrupamientos escolares situados en 28 regiones fronterizas mediante un cuestionario al que respondieron 3.653 jóvenes del 10<sup>o</sup> al 12<sup>o</sup> año. La investigación incluyó un cuestionario sobre sus expectativas al terminar la educación obligatoria. Nuestros resultados sugieren que, a pesar de la presencia de innegables luchas regionales por el reconocimiento y las desigualdades del derecho a la educación de estos jóvenes, siguen queriendo cursar estudios superiores porque creen que les abrirán posibilidades de un futuro mejor, aunque tengan que abandonar su ciudad de origen. Además, el género y la educación de los progenitores parecen influir en esos procesos. Las aspiraciones de los jóvenes con respecto a su futuro parecen incorporar tanto las opciones disponibles como sus vías deseadas.*

*Palabras clave:* Regiones fronterizas; transiciones; educación superior; jóvenes; regiones rurales; justicia social.

## Introduction and objectives

Border regions between Portugal and Spain are peripheral, remote, and mostly rural. These regions have several specific characteristics which are not only geographical but also educational, socio-economic, and cultural, which tend to overlap with several inequalities and constraints (An agenda for the inlands – National Programme for the Territorial Cohesion, 2018).

On the one hand, there are border regions that do not offer secondary education and, therefore, young people need to leave their region in order to continue their studies. On the other hand, there is less diversity in the higher education offer in these regions – more than 60% of higher education institutions (HEI) are located on the country's coastal area. This reality affects young people growing up in those regions while planning their future pathways and trajectories (Saloniemi et al., 2020), in which considering leaving their hometown is inherent to most decisions. Several challenges exist in the lives of young people, such as uncertainty and precarious and vulnerable trajectories (Serracant, 2015; Silva et al., 2021). These challenges are maximized in border regions, where not only are cultural and economic constraints higher when compared to coastal regions, but also due to the existence of fewer career prospects and education after the end of secondary education, which in Portugal is 12 years of schooling. Therefore, issues of social and educational justice arise as these young people are limited to fewer educational opportunities while building foundations for their future (Sampaio & Silva, in press; Silva et al., 2021) compared to other Portuguese regions. Based on

the recognition that living in border regions fosters major environmental specificities in which young people are developing an identity that also comprises their choices for the future (Bendit & Miranda, 2017), the present work aims to address young people living in these regions as part of their identity, the context for their development and their future aspirations. More specifically, our focus relies on understanding these young people's future aspirations, goals and expectations concerning their career or educational trajectories after leaving compulsory education. We aim to provide a portrait of young people's circumstances in Portuguese borderlands, planning for this life transition with focus on contextual specificities; the decision of whether or not to engage in higher education (HE) becomes intertwined with the will to leave the region, the perceived utility of education to one's future and aspects related to gender and the family of origin such as level of education and beliefs toward it.

### Setting the context – Portuguese borderlands

From a total of 278 municipalities existing in continental Portugal, 38 are situated in the border regions with Spanish territory (Figure 1). These regions are mainly characterized as peripheral, remote and mostly rural or semi-urban (Silva, 2014), where inhabitants struggle with several adversities such as an ageing population, low income and geographic dispersion of the population and of educational offers. These peripheral regions have specific constraints in accessing education, citizenship and cultural rights (Collins & Cunningham, 2017), combined with higher rates of illiteracy and early school leaving (PORDATA, 2021) when compared with main urban centers.

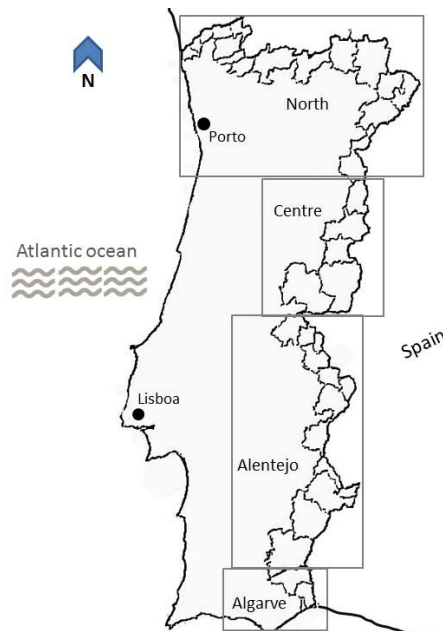


Figure 1. Map of Portugal featuring borderland regions.

Portugal is a country marked by regional asymmetries and, similarly to other European countries, follows the existing trend of an attraction to urban territories, particularly metropolitan and coastal (Cavaco et al., 2015). Commonly, inhabitants from these areas struggle with lower income households and higher unemployment rates when compared to urban areas. This situation can be explained by the general lack of infrastructures, services or industries, and agriculture-related jobs are widespread but not necessarily abundant (Ferrão & Delicado, 2017) to respond to the population needs. Employment offers are concentrated on the coastline, where most industries operate, and employers can find more qualified human resources (Statistics Portugal, 2018). If the notable lack of qualified human resources is to some extent a consequence of migration flows to larger urban areas, young qualified people also do not tend to stay or return to these regions due to the lack of employment opportunities (Ferrão & Delicado, 2017), perpetuating a cycle of unemployment and migration in border regions.

In fact, Portugal's population is concentrated on the coastline, with almost 50% of the national population in Porto and Lisbon. These cities offer a greater number of goods and services, educational offers, health, and additional transport infrastructures, among others (Cavaco et al., 2015; Sampaio & Silva, in press). Border regions do not have a diverse educational offer, especially for practice-oriented or vocational courses which are available in Portuguese public schools in more populous areas. Moreover, this could hinder students' choices regarding their secondary education, since their options for vocational or regular education are limited. Furthermore, of the 38 municipalities in the Portuguese border regions, only 28 have schools offering secondary education (see Table 1), meaning that 10 municipalities cannot guarantee that young residents will be able to complete compulsory education in their hometown.

Table 1

*Brief overview of the Portuguese educational system for compulsory education*

	Basic education			Secondary education
	1 <sup>st</sup> cycle	2 <sup>nd</sup> cycle	3 <sup>rd</sup> cycle	Regular/ vocational
Grades	1 <sup>st</sup> to 4 <sup>th</sup>	5 <sup>th</sup> and 6 <sup>th</sup>	7 <sup>th</sup> to 9 <sup>th</sup>	10 <sup>th</sup> to 12 <sup>th</sup>
Customary age	6 to 10	10 to 12	12 to 15	15 to 18

This is worthy of our attention since it is another significant layer of disadvantage to add to the inequalities already mentioned, as this implies more investment by these families to fulfil the education rights that should be guaranteed. In fact, students are sometimes forced to leave their hometown when they are around 15 or 16 years old to complete compulsory education and, as a consequence, to be in a position either to enter the labour market or to proceed to higher education.

### **Social and educational justice**

The concept of social justice points to inclusive education and embraces a broad view of equity, opportunity, and democratic issues (Ball, 2021; Estêvão, 2018). However, as pointed out by Smith (1994, p. 37) “being born in one country, region or one part of a particular city may, for example, be the single most important factor in an individual’s health, education and longevity”. The social and demographic scenario concerning the Portuguese borderlands illustrates noticeable inequalities of opportunities for young people living in these regions (Silva, 2014) and that is why addressing these issues is a matter of social and educational justice (Roberts & Green, 2013). Indeed, young people face new opportunities and risks, but social structures continue to shape life opportunities (Furlong et al., 2019). Youth transitions are generally accepted to have become more protracted, heterogeneous, complex, and non-linear over time (Furlong et al., 2019; Sanderson, 2020). There is also growing evidence that early transitions and pathways themselves are predictive of longer-term outcomes and future labour market experiences (Anders & Dorsett, 2017; Cebulla & Whetton, 2017). In this way, on one hand, we are trying to sociologically and educationally acknowledge regularities and specificities that are combined in these young people lives; on the other hand, our contribution aims to call attention to the fact that their right to education might be compromised.

Fraser (2001, 2008) claims that social justice results from a dualistic dynamic between recognition and redistribution which, idealistically, should be balanced. While redistribution aims for a more equalitarian distribution of material resources, recognition requires that the institutionalized cultural values express equal respect for all participants, assuring equal opportunities for social appreciation (Fraser, 2008). Given the portrait of the Portuguese border regions, this dynamic is undermined because the struggle for recognition takes place in a context characterized by countless inequalities that can be material, also demanding redistribution, considering lower incomes and limited access to employment, but also the symbolic demand for recognition of identity differences linked to the geographical, historical and cultural context.

The struggle for redistribution for the young people living in these regions relates to fewer career and educational prospects and opportunities after completing secondary school (Karmel, 2017; Silva, 2014) compared to other geographical areas. This recognition becomes particularly important while young people are planning their future path and trajectories (Serracant, 2015; Wood, 2017). These decisions, which can be integral to young people’s identity, may not always be carried out due to economic constraints, since leaving their home town features in most decisions. The fact that 10 municipalities exist which are unable to provide access to young people’s right to complete compulsory education in their home town illustrates, in itself, how social justice and access to education are compromised. Moreover, the lack of diversified curricula, and especially of educational provision to complete compulsory education, severely undermine their right to education.

School should be a place of inclusion, recognition of differences and rights, particularly for those affected by social injustice, but opportunity structures seem to shape the transitional experiences of young people (Sanderson, 2020). The interrelationships

between family backgrounds, education and jobs remain critical in shaping youth transitions to education and employment in a more equitable way.

Crucial to individual career and education planning is the notion that students assess their choices on the basis of their knowledge of available educational and employment opportunities (Vieira et al., 2021). For young people from the borderlands, the remarkable lack of options compared to other regions becomes an additional setback when deciding their educational or career pathways, which may sometimes lead to an inner struggle between what they want to pursue and the existing options. A case study (Silva, 2014) in one school in the Portuguese border shows that the geographic dimension is not only related to mobility but also to the sense of belonging to the region, which has a powerful influence on young people's aspirations and educational decisions. For these young people, leaving their homeland is mandatory due to the lack of HEIs in their regions (Silva & Silva, 2016; Silva et al., 2021). Most of these young people come from low-income families who find that investing in their children's higher education outside their region is expensive. Moreover, even if it is conventional for students to leave, returning is not necessarily common due to the lack of qualified work opportunities, even if these young people return to their hometown where they belong and are emotionally attached.

Given the importance of analysing these complexity and diversity, disadvantages arise not only from economic constraints but also from social and cultural devaluation, since "capital resources – which are formed in an individual's living environment – determine life chances, thus influencing spatial equality of opportunity, i.e., social justice" (Israel & Frenkel, 2018, p. 1). Thus, these young people are affected not only by geographical and economic disadvantages, but also by a lack of recognition of specificities as a social and cultural group.

## Method

### Population and Sample Size

This article is a result of a broader national project taking place in 38 schools from the 38 municipalities located in the Portuguese-Spanish border regions (figure 1). With this paper, we aim to understand future expectations after compulsory education of young people growing up in the border regions. For that, and since we sought to access as many perspectives as possible on this issue, an on-site questionnaire was applied to young people studying in these regions. The first important educational choice that students make in the Portuguese educational system happens after the 9th grade (Table 1). Despite being very young, most students attending 9th grade go through a career counselling process and make important decisions about their pathway to secondary education and, afterwards, the compulsory exams in order to be eligible and accepted at HEI. Students enrolled in secondary education have already made their first choice which impacts on their educational and career path. As 10th to 12th grade students are expected to have a clearer view on education and future career options following completion of secondary education, 9th grade students have not been included for the purpose of this study. Hence, the data presented and discussed in this paper is from

the 28 border region schools that offer secondary education, since the other 10 just offer up to 9th grade. These 28 schools were contacted by email and telephone to explain the study aims and to request the participation of students to answer a questionnaire. The selected schools under analysis are distributed across different regions, from the north to the south of the country. Our sample comprised 3653 young people attending 10th, 11h and 12th grades, of whom 55.4% were female and 44.4% were male. Table 2 offers a detailed description of our total sample and by regions.

Table 2

*Participants' demographic characterization*

		North	Center	Alentejo and Algarve	Total
Number of students		1481	327	845	2653
Percentages		55.8	12.3	31.9	100
Gender	Female	56.9	52.9	55.4	54.1
	Male	43.1	46.8	44.4	45.9
Age	13 to15	25.7	15.9	23.6	23.1
	16 to18	70.1	75.8	71.1	70.9
	> 18	4.2	8.0	5.2	6.0
Mother's Education	≤ 9 <sup>th</sup> grade	34.3	41.3	35.1	34.1
	12 <sup>th</sup> grade	34.4	33.6	34.6	35.4
Father's Education	H.E.	23.1	17.7	22.5	23.3
	≤ 9 <sup>th</sup> grade	49.2	52.9	49.4	48.4
	12 <sup>th</sup> grade	23.6	24.8	24.3	25.3
	H. E.	14.5	10.7	14.3	15.4

Note. H.E. = Higher Education.

**Measurement Tool**

The questionnaire was subject to a process of approval and data protection by the General Education Board of the Portuguese Ministry of Education. For the present work, we selected items intended to access secondary school students' perceptions about their career or educational paths after 12th grade, in particular students' choices after compulsory education and students' goals of leaving or staying in their regions. The items were constructed based on theory and data, ensuring their content validity (with two experts) and face validity (with a group interview with young people). Additionally, a pre-test was applied to a pilot study ( $n = 45$ ) to provide insights into the items' language, clarity format, and chosen response scale. Those items and their

respective descriptive statistics are listed in Table 3. The answers to the items were given on a five-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 – totally disagree to 5 – totally agree.

### Procedure and Statistical Analysis

Concerning statistical analysis, the univariate normality of all variables was confirmed, using the Kolmogorov–Smirnov test and the asymmetry (values  $<|3|$ ) and kurtosis (values  $<|8|$ ) rules of thumb and the non-existence of outliers ( $|z| < 3$ ; Kline, 2011). In the analysis of the results, the statistical procedures used included descriptive statistics, parametric tests for independent samples and for paired samples (Student's *t*-test and ANOVA one-way) and Kendall's coefficient (to study the relationships between variables). Concerning the ANOVA, it should be noted that after testing the homogeneity of the variances of the variables used by means of the Levene test, the Hochberg GT2 post-hoc test was used when homogeneous, and the Games-Howell post-hoc test when non-homogeneous, given the inequality in the number of subjects in each of the studied groups (Field, 2009). Cohen's *d* coefficients were calculated in order to estimate the effect size for these differences and interpreted in line with Cohen's (1988) recommendations. Kendall's non-parametric correlations were calculated in order to measure strength of dependence between variables and the results were interpreted according to Kendall's (1970) guidelines. After missing value analysis, we found that there was a low rate of questions per item and per participant, so no procedure was undertaken to address them. Data were analysed using IBM SPSS Statistics 28.

## Results and discussion

### Students' choices after compulsory education

As already mentioned, the main aim of this article is to understand future expectations after compulsory education of young people growing up in the border regions (Portugal-Spain) of continental Portugal. In order to achieve this goal, we carried out an analysis concerning young people's expectations after completing compulsory education, focusing on the items related to their transition goals after secondary school (Table 3).

Table 3

*Items, descriptive statistics and normality assessment*

Transition goals after secondary school	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Skewness <sup>1</sup>	Kurtosis <sup>2</sup>
1. After 12 <sup>th</sup> grade I intend to engage in higher education.	4.32	1.17	-1.695	1.77
2. After 12 <sup>th</sup> grade I intend to start working.	2.44	1.38	.52	-.99
3. After 12 <sup>th</sup> grade I intend to work and study.	3.34	1.31	-.30	-.96



Transition goals after secondary school	M	SD	Skewness <sup>1</sup>	Kurtosis <sup>2</sup>
4. I imagine higher education as something hard to achieve.	3.13	1.16	-.20	-.69
5. I think that pursuing higher education will help me to have a better future.	4.57	0.81	-2.25	5.36
6. I always grew up with the idea of pursuing higher education.	4.06	1.22	-1.10	.091
7. When I think about the future I always think to work or study somewhere else.	3.82	1.15	-.74	-.26
8. I would like to continue studying in this region.	2.54	1.33	.41	-.97
9. I have to start working because I want to help my family.	2.80	1.29	.14	-1.01
10. I just think about going to college if some of my friends will also go.	1.45	0.81	2.00	3.85
11. I only think about engaging higher education if I go to a University in this region.	1.59	0.92	1.63	2.21

Note. 1 Standard Errors for Skewness: .049; 2 Standard Errors for Kurtosis: .098.

Most of the participants intend to engage in HE after 12th grade ( $M = 4.32, SD = 1.17$ ) and some of the participants find it hard to achieve ( $M = 3.13, SD = 1.16$ ). Correlation analysis using Kendall’s tau were performed in order to estimate a rank-based measure of association regarding the items of students’ choices after compulsory education (Table 4).

Table 4

*Correlations regarding the items focused on students’ choices after compulsory education*

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. After 12th grade I intend to engage in higher education.							
2. After 12th grade I intend to start working.	-.42***						
3. After 12th grade I intend to work and study.	.20***	.17***					
4. I imagine higher education as something hard to achieve.	-.09***	.13***	.09***				
5. I think that pursuing higher education will help me to have a better future.	.5***	-.27***	.16***	.02			

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
6. I always grew up with the idea of pursuing higher education.	.61***	-.38***	.11***	-.09***	.48***		
7. When I think about the future I always think to work or study somewhere else.	-.2***	-.07***	.15***	.01	.17***	.21***	
8. I have to start working because I want to help my family.	-.2***	.37***	.20***	.19***	-.10***	-.21***	-.02

\*\*\* $p < .001$ .

Students who intend to engage in HE after 12th grade are also the ones who believe HE could help them to have a brighter future and who always grew up with the idea of engaging in HE, which is revealed by the strength of the dependence between items. Most of the students believe that pursuing higher education will foster a better future for them ( $M = 4.57$ ,  $SD = 0.81$ ). In a similar proportion, most of the students always grew up with the idea of pursuing higher education ( $M = 4.06$ ,  $SD = 1.22$ ). This notion that HE can lead students to a brighter future seems to be moderately associated with the perception of growing up with the belief of engaging in HE after secondary school. In contrast, low mean values indicate that few of the students intend to start work ( $M = 2.44$ ,  $SD = 1.38$ ) and expect to conciliate work while enrolling in HE ( $M = 3.34$ ,  $SD = 1.31$ ). Students who expressed they to want to start working after 12th grade reveal associations with the lack of belief that HE would help them in the future. Additionally, students who reportedly want to start working are those who want to help their families, but they are also those who did not grow up with the idea of going on to higher education.

The data shows that despite the undeniable geographical and social constraints in border regions, most young people expect to be involved in HE after completing 12th grade and only a minority intend to start work without continuing their studies, as supported by previous research (Silva & Silva, 2016). One of the underlying reasons seems to be the belief that having a college degree will enable them to have a brighter trajectory in the future, making them suitable for more qualified jobs and probably also as a tool to achieve chosen career goals as part of their identity. We are aware that this cannot impact solely because of structural inequalities that are very difficult to overcome, but aspirations can be a powerful stimulus for students' engagement in school. The same happens when education is perceived as important for the future and in embracing the educational aspirations that underpin this achievement.

As already mentioned, although with a lower mean value, some of the participants report the need to start working to help their family ( $M = 2.79$ ,  $SD = 1.27$ ). This item is negatively linked to the intention of engaging in HE, which seems to indicate that students who have to start working in order to help their families do not intend to pursue HE and did not grow up with the idea of continuing their studies. Hence, unlike those who want to in engage HE, students who are planning to start working

after compulsory education do not seem to share the conviction that HE could function as an enhancement for their future accomplishments. Furthermore, the idea of going to HE seems to have been absent while these students were growing up, which could also explain why young people choose to work rather than continuing to invest in their education. This might be due to the lack of qualified job offers in their regions (Ferrão & Delicado, 2017) that foster the thought of HE not being a priority. This urgency to jump straight into the labour market seems to be linked to the need to help their families, which in turn is associated with an awareness of not going into HE as working students. On the one hand, this perception is probably a reflection of the economic constraints that families face in these regions; on the other hand, since the HE application process in Portugal is based exclusively on students' grade average, young people may have the perception that the difficulty in accessing HE is mainly related to their grades and then discard HE when considering their future options.

### **Students' goals: getting out or staying?**

Our findings revealed an especially low mean value regarding students who are only considering in engaging in HE in their region and a considerably higher mean value of those who thought about studying somewhere else. In fact, few of the inquired students think of engaging in HE if they go to a university in their region ( $M = 1.59$ ,  $SD = 0.92$ ). Low mean values suggest that few students would like to continue studies in their region ( $M = 2.54$ ,  $SD = 1.33$ ) and the majority think about studying somewhere else when they think about the future ( $M = 3.82$ ,  $SD = 1.15$ ). The lowest mean value was regarding only going to HE if some friends also go ( $M = 1.45$ ,  $SD = 0.81$ ).

There is an association between students who consider their peers in their decision and only plan to engage in HE if going to a university in the region ( $T = .48$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and those who would like to continue studying in their region ( $T = .21$ ,  $p < .001$ ). While these numbers may reflect the determination to leave the region, they could also be linked to the students' notion about the lack of university choices in their regions more than the desire to leave the region per se. The literature supports the fact that students weigh and evaluate their options based on information about educational and labour offers available inherently to their career and educational plans (Vieira et al., 2021) combined with the struggle for redistribution for these young people (MacDonald & Giazitzoglu, 2019). Furthermore, students' taking HE into account in their future plans only for the nearby university and their desire to continue studying in their region seem to be linked to the trend of taking their peers into account in this decision. This association might be illustrative of the relational component underlying these choices, which must not be forgotten, since willingness to stay in the region is related to the emotional bond young people have with their peers and furthermore connection to their hometown (Yndigegn, 2003).

A one-way ANOVA test was performed to explore whether the region where the schools are situated makes an important contribution to students' aspirations after compulsory education. The results had non-significant coefficients for the majority of the items, pointing out that students' perceptions about their future plans after secondary school do not seem to differ between regions. However, tests were significant for

the items related to the regions where students might conceive their future, namely study or work in another region, continue studies in their region and only think of HE if the university is in their region.

Regarding whether young people report thinking about work or study somewhere else in the future (Welch's test [2, 870.88] = 12.72,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta^2 = .009$ ), the Games-Howell post-hoc test shows that differences emerge between Alentejo-Algarve and North ( $M = 3.76$ ,  $SD = 1.159$ ) and Alentejo-Algarve and Centre ( $M = 3.68$ ,  $SD = 1.117$ ), with the Alentejo-Algarve inhabitants being those who most think about working or studying somewhere else ( $M = 3.98$ ,  $SD = 1.12$ ). When students were asked if they would like to continue studying in their region ( $F[2, 2616] = 19.41$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta^2 = .015$ ) differences appear between Alentejo-Algarve and North and Alentejo-Algarve and Centre. These results have an intermediate effect size, indicating that students would rather continue their studies in the Centre region ( $M = 2.78$ ,  $SD = 1.35$ ) rather than in Alentejo-Algarve ( $M = 2.32$ ,  $SD = 1.31$ ) and North ( $M = 2.61$ ,  $SD = 1.32$ ). Also, students seem to prefer to continue their studies in the North region rather than in Alentejo-Algarve. Although going to a university in their region does not seem to be a decisive factor for students to engage in HE, differences appear significant between regions (Welch's test [2, 836.29] = 6.67,  $p = .001$ ,  $\eta^2 = .013$ ) with an intermediate effect size. Students from the Centre ( $M = 1.78$ ,  $SD = 1.02$ ) appear more likely to be engaged in HE if they attend a university in their region than students from Alentejo-Algarve ( $M = 1.56$ ,  $SD = 0.93$ ) and the North ( $M = 1.56$ ,  $SD = 0.88$ ).

These results suggest that students from the Centre seem to be the least willing to leave their region. In contrast, students from the Alentejo-Algarve region seem to be the most willing to leave. Some geographical factors may explain these results. One of them is the proximity of universities and other HE institutions. In these regions there are two universities with reasonable courses on offer. However, this apparent geographical proximity is not exact, considering that the border areas in this region are more difficult to reach due to lack of public transport, road accessibility and isolation. These regions are the most disperse and least populous regions of Portugal with 22.2 inhabitants per km<sup>2</sup> contrasting with 78.7 for the Centre (PORDATA, 2021) as a result of geographical dispersion. Moreover, if we consider the access of students to the main urban centers, where there are more HE offers in quantity and diversity, the students from the Alentejo-Algarve are geographically more distant but also struggle with a lack of mobility. These are issues that these students have to cope with in their everyday life, not only in their education but also regarding an overall lack of infrastructure, for example, health care services, cultural offers, among others (Ferrão & Delicado, 2017). This feeling of isolation and the difficulties that follow can become deeply rooted, promoting the desire to leave in order to achieve future goals.

### **Young people's expectations: are there any gender differences and is parents' education a key factor?**

A Student' t-test for independent samples was performed to access if gender differences appear when students were asked about their future aspirations. Results retrieved statistically significant differences for most of the items, as displayed in Table

5, indicating that student's perceptions about future goals after compulsory education might be different between boys and girls.

Table 5

*Independent samples t-test results for the items according to gender (girls or boys)*

	Girls		Boys		<i>t-Student</i>	<i>d</i>
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>		
1. After 12th grade I intend to engage in higher education.	4.54	0.98	4.04	1.32	10.75***	.436
2. After 12th grade I intend to start working.	2.30	1.35	2.61	1.40	-5.63***	.223
3. After 12th grade I intend to work and study.	3.41	1.32	3.24	1.30	3.32***	.131
4. I imagine higher education as something hard to achieve.	3.15	1.14	3.11	1.19	0.88	--
5. I think that pursuing higher education will help me to have a better future.	4.67	0.71	4.45	0.90	6.92***	.279
6. I always grew up with the idea of pursuing higher education.	4.30	1.09	3.75	1.31	11.38***	.457
7. When I think about the future I always think to work or study somewhere else.	3.97	1.10	3.64	1.18	7.20***	.285
8. I would like to continue studying in this region.	2.38	1.29	2.74	1.36	-6.78***	.268
9. I have to start working because I want to help my family.	2.72	1.28	2.90	1.30	-3.61***	.142
10. I just think about going to college if some of my friends will also go.	1.31	0.68	1.61	0.92	-9.30***	.378
11. I only think about engaging higher education if I go to a University in this region.	1.50	0.85	1.70	0.98	-5.65***	.226

Note. *d* = Cohen's *d* for effect size: According to Cohen (1988):  $d \leq 0.2$ , effect size small;  $d = ]0.2, 0.5]$ , moderate effect size;  $d ]0.5, 1.0]$ , high effect size;  $d > 1.0$ , very large effect size.

\* $p < .05$  \*\* $p < .01$  \*\*\* $p < .001$

The results indicate that gender played a role in the educational and career aspirations of young people. Girls are the ones who are willing to go into HE, in contrast with boys who seemed to be more willing to consider starting work without further education and who mostly expressed the need to start work to help their family. Results

showed that girls seem to be more oriented towards academic goals and aspirations and willing to leave their region than boys, which apparently was a purpose inherent through their development. Several research findings support these results, showing that in recent decades girls tend to be increasingly more ambitious and focused on engaging in educational pathways (Vieira et al., 2021) and are also more than half of the accepted applicants in Portuguese higher education institutions (Statistics Portugal, 2021). Furthermore, it may also be possible that boys are more connected to their hometowns, considering their willingness to only engage in HE if they go to a nearby university which is also strongly associated with the idea of only going to HE if their friends go too. Yndigeegn's (2003) results in a case study from the Danish-German borderland follow this direction, finding that boys are the ones who were greatly attached to their hometown, family and friends. Skrbis and colleagues (2014) also found that girls seemed more attracted to the idea of mobility than boys when living in remote locations.

As regards the parents' education, it has been repeatedly demonstrated that parents' educational and social background impact on their children's school performance, success and future educational choices (Crede et al., 2015; Girelli et al., 2018). In order to analyse if parents' education had a significant role in students' future goals and aspirations, an ANOVA-one-way test was performed. The descriptive statistics of mothers and fathers' education levels regarding these items are presented in Table 6.

Table 6

*Descriptive statistics of mothers and fathers' education levels regarding the items of transition goals after secondary school*

		Mothers			Fathers		
		<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
1. After 12th grade I intend to engage in higher education.	<9th grade	925	4.02	1.36	1298	4.14	1.27
	12th grade	911	4.41	1.05	642	4.48	1.05
	H.E	594	4.75	0.73	378	4.75	0.74
	Total	2430	4.34	1.15	2318	4.33	1.16
2. After 12th grade I intend to start working.	<9th grade	919	2.73	1.40	1290	2.61	1.40
	12th grade	905	2.37	1.34	635	2.3	1.33
	H.E	586	1.97	1.23	374	1.89	1.18
	Total	2410	2.41	1.37	2299	2.41	1.38
3. After 12th grade I intend to work and study.	<9th grade	910	3.27	1.31	1276	3.32	1.30
	12th grade	893	3.42	1.28	632	3.37	1.33
	H.E	581	3.28	1.35	367	3.22	1.35
	Total	2384	3.33	1.31	2275	3.31	1.32

		Mothers			Fathers		
		<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
4. I imagine higher education as something hard to achieve.	<9th grade	924	3.25	1.13	1295	3.21	1.14
	12th grade	905	3.14	1.12	638	3.1	1.15
	H.E	593	2.86	1.23	376	2.82	1.21
	Total	2422	3.11	1.16	2309	3.12	1.16
5. I think that pursuing higher education will help me to have a better future.	<9th grade	922	4.46	0.90	1294	4.52	0.86
	12th grade	910	4.61	0.78	642	4.6	0.8
	H.E	593	4.75	0.59	377	4.76	0.61
	Total	2425	4.59	0.79	2313	4.58	0.81
6. I always grew up with the idea of pursuing higher education.	<9th grade	922	3.75	1.33	1294	3.83	1.29
	12th grade	910	4.08	1.18	641	4.23	1.13
	H.E	593	4.57	0.85	378	4.63	0.81
	Total	2425	4.07	1.21	2313	4.07	1.22
7. When I think about the future I always think to work or study somewhere else.	<9th grade	922	3.69	1.16	1294	3.73	1.18
	12th grade	909	3.87	1.13	642	3.93	1.1
	H.E	593	3.95	1.15	378	3.9	1.18
	Total	2424	3.82	1.15	2314	3.81	1.16
8. I would like to continue studying in this region.	<9th grade	922	2.63	1.3	1292	2.6	1.33
	12th grade	906	2.55	1.34	639	2.48	1.37
	H.E	591	2.37	1.33	377	2.3	1.2
	Total	2419	2.53	1.32	2308	2.52	1.33
9. I have to start working because I want to help my family.	<9th grade	919	3.03	1.27	1288	2.96	1.27
	12th grade	900	2.78	1.27	636	2.67	1.30
	H.E	591	2.43	1.28	376	2.38	1.30
	Total	2410	2.79	1.29	2300	2.78	1.30
10. I just think about going to college if some of my friends will also go.	<9th grade	920	1.51	0.86	1288	1.46	0.79
	12th grade	905	1.43	0.79	639	1.42	0.79
	H.E	591	1.31	0.69	377	1.37	0.81
	Total	2416	1.43	0.80	2304	1.43	0.79
11. I only think about engaging higher education if I go to a University in this region.	<9th grade	918	1.72	0.97	1289	1.67	0.97
	12th grade	906	1.56	0.92	637	1.5	0.86
	H.E	588	1.4	0.79	376	1.38	0.79
	Total	2412	1.58	0.92	2302	1.58	0.92

We can observe that more mothers than fathers completed compulsory education and have a college degree. In this alignment, mothers' HE attainment is higher than fathers, following the trend of having in general a higher percentage of women enrolled in HE. Our results seem to suggest that students whose parents have a higher education level report a greater intention to engage in HE and less intention to start work than those whose parents completed secondary school or have a college degree. This means that parents who completed the 9th grade or less seem to have children who intend to start working after secondary school completion, when compared with parents who completed secondary school and higher education. The influence of families' socio-economic level on academic achievement, although achievement is by no means transversal within a given social level, has been widely reported in the literature and national statistics (Bendit & Miranda, 2017). Even though not only parents have this influential role – such as a positive school, classroom climate (Berkowitz et al., 2017) connectedness and engagement with the school – they are normatively the first socialization figures for their children. Furthermore, students whose parents have a higher education level are the ones who always grew up with the plan of attending HE and tend to think it will enable them to have a brighter future. Parents have resources to socialize their children via the transmission of expectations, beliefs and values towards education. These transmitted beliefs might surpass the contribution of socio-economic level, influencing students' perceptions and feelings about education and future goals.

In sum, more girls than boys grew up with the plan of pursuing HE and find it worthwhile to prepare for a brighter future, even if they must leave their home region. Boys seem less willing to leave their region and their peers, even though almost half of them intend to pursue HE. The intention to transition to HE seems rooted in the development of these young people, who reported having always grown up with this idea, and is probably linked to their parents' values regarding education. In fact, students whose parents have a lower education level are also the ones who reportedly feel the need to start working to help them; and students who only consider joining HE in the future by attending a nearby university have less educated mothers and fathers than those whose parents completed 12th year or graduated from university. This may also have to do with household income issues, or because parents who attended HE are more aware of the lack of provision in the region.

### **Conclusion**

The main aim of this paper is to address young people living in Portuguese border regions as part of their identity, context for their development and future aspirations; and, at the same time, to understand how young people are shaping their perceptions of educational and career paths, despite living in peripheral and mainly rural regions.

There are undeniable regional struggles for the recognition and inequalities of these young people's rights to education. These young people struggle with the choice of pursuing their vocational identity, the consequent need to leave their region and the affiliation to their home region, challenging them to remain simultaneously attached to both realities (Silva, 2014) adding an extra challenge to their life plans. Still, even with uncertainty over their trajectories, young people still want to invest in further education



(Serracant, 2015; Silva & Silva, 2016). Our results show that the majority of young people living in border regions expect to be involved in HE after completing their 12th grade, and only a minority intend to start work without continuing their studies. Those students who are planning to start working after compulsory education do not seem to share the conviction that HE could function as an enhancement to their future accomplishments.

Additionally, our findings revealed that only a small number of students are considering engaging in HE in their region – with their peers being a consideration in this decision – and a considerably higher percentage of those who thought about studying somewhere else. Focusing on the different regions, results suggest that students from the Centre seem to be the ones who want least to leave their region; and, contrarily, students from Alentejo-Algarve seem to be the ones more willing to leave. Considering gender, the results reveal that girls seem to be more inclined to have academic goals and aspirations, and are more willing to leave their region than boys, which apparently was a purpose inherent in their development. Boys appeared to have a greater tendency to consider starting work without pursuing their studies and the need to work to help their family. In fact, the results show that students whose parents have a lower level of education level are also those who reportedly feel the need to start work in order to help them. Nevertheless, these students are also the ones that report a greater intention to engage in HE; they always grew up with the plan of attending HE and tend to think it will enable them to have a brighter future. Given that parents tend to see HE education as essential to their children's future, they certainly develop family values that emphasize the role of education in future adult roles.

Similarly, if young people's meaningful relationship to their region is a constitutive dimension of their identities (Bendit & Miranda, 2017), so is the construction of a future chosen education or career path. These choices do not occur in the void but are interconnected with other life events, resulting in individualized goals and trajectories according to the existing options (Ball, 2021). Youth experiences are heterogeneous and marked by agency possibilities, but their cultural background also has repercussions on their educational opportunities and transitions into adult life (Silva, 2014).

Taken together, these results show that school might function as a mechanism which can diminish the marginalization of young people living in remote areas (Amiguiño, 2008). Despite other theories considering that it reproduces various inequalities, for instance related to social class, school turns out to be of great value in terms of socialization, citizenship and the construction of youth identity (Bendit & Miranda, 2017) especially among young people from lower social classes.

We expect that our results might be socially and politically relevant, as lately regional development has become a concern due to the slower growth of these regions. However, it is imperative to highlight the influence of school figures such as teachers and peers, and the community, who surely have a role to play, and must be further explored in future research on students' aspirations in border regions. Furthermore, young people living in these regions have frequently been forgotten in social sciences empirical literature but, specifically, in the field of educational sciences. Thus, we expect the present work will contribute to the recognition of social and educational inequalities, to characterize youth heterogeneity and hopefully to inform further policies and measures to address redistribution.

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