

Students with disabilities in higher education in Portugal

Alunos com deficiência no ensino superior em Portugal

Estudiantes con discapacidad en la enseñanza superior en Portugal

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Abstract: This article analyses the legislative and academic progresses in inclusive higher education, focusing on existing accessibility conditions for students with special educational needs (SEN) in Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in Portugal. Through the analysis of secondary sources, national documents, recent data, and a case study from a higher education institution, it is shown that there is increasing implementation of specific regulations oriented to students with SEN by HEIs.

Keywords: Higher Education. Disability. Accessibility. Integration. Diversity.

Resumo: O presente artigo analisa os desenvolvimentos ocorridos no plano legislativo e académico em torno da educação superior inclusiva, incidindo sobre as condições de acessibilidade existentes nas Instituições de Ensino Superior (IES) em Portugal direcionadas a estudantes com necessidades especiais de educação (NEE). Através da análise de fontes secundárias, nomeadamente em torno de documentos nacionais de carácter estatístico, bem como da realização de um estudo de caso numa instituição de ensino superior, evidencia-se a crescente implementação de regulamentação específica orientada para alunos com NEE por parte das IES.

Palavras-chave: Ensino Superior. Deficiência. Acessibilidade. Integração. Diversidade.

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Resumen: Este artículo analiza los avances legislativos y académicos en la educación superior inclusiva, centrándose en las condiciones de accesibilidad existentes para los estudiantes con necesidades educativas especiales (NEE) en las Instituciones de Educación Superior (IES) en Portugal. A través del análisis de fuentes secundarias, documentos nacionales, datos recientes y un estudio de caso de una institución de educación superior, se demuestra que existe una creciente implementación de normativas específicas orientadas a estudiantes con NEE por parte de las IES.

Palabras clave: Educación superior. Discapacidad. Accesibilidad. Integración. Diversidad.

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Introduction

This article is based on a case study carried out at the Iscte- University Institute of Lisbon, which aimed to study the accessibility in the academic context of higher education students with special educational needs, and to understand their schooling process until they entered university. All steps inherent in conducting a case study were considered, including data exploration, collection, and analysis activities. Three students were selected based on criteria related to the differentiation of special educational needs detained, to encompass accessibility and integration experiences also differentiated. Semi-directive interviews were conducted with the students, and the data obtained were subject to further content analysis. In addition, data from secondary sources was also analysed to explore and contextualize the access to higher education in Portugal in terms of the number of students with SEN enrolled, as well as the adaptations and strategies developed by higher education institutions in relation to students enrolled with special educational needs.

The right to education and inclusive higher education

Education creates the foundations for combating poverty and for creating fully inclusive societies. Persons with disabilities have the right to participate in all educational levels and forms including early childhood education and care on an equal basis with others. (Union of Equality: Strategy for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities 2021-2030).

According to Antunes et al. 2019, the focus on the democratization of education has resulted in a progressive increase in the number of students with disabilities in

higher education. However, as will be shown in more detail later, the percentage of these students attending universities and polytechnics is still much lower than that observed for students in general.

Access to a lifelong quality educational pathway increasingly constitutes, in the context of the knowledge society, a decisive resource for a better prognosis regarding professional inclusion and consequent social participation. This premise is valid for any student, but especially for students with disabilities, since the main national and European indicators (ODDH, 2019; 2021), show these people with disabilities not only with a much lower level of educational attainment than people without disabilities, but the impact of this gap is reflected in a lower employment rate.

The right to access to education and to inclusive higher education for people with disabilities is embedded in several reference documents of international law, ratified by Portugal. First, the opening paragraph of Article 26 of the Charter of Human Rights - Universal Declaration of Human Rights, of 1948, declares the universality of access to education and higher education as a right of all human beings without exception. In 1994, the so-called Salamanca Declaration by UNESCO committed adhering States to the principle of "Education for All" and inclusive education. At the heart of the text is the premise that this type of education favors the educational and comprehensive development of all students, with and without disabilities, and helps to combat stigma, prejudice, and discrimination in the face of difference (United Nations, 1994; Garcia, 2017).

We, delegates to the World Conference on Special Educational Needs, representing ninety-two countries and twenty-five international organizations, meeting here in Salamanca, Spain, from 7 to 10 June 1994, hereby reaffirm our commitment to Education for All, recognizing the need and urgency to ensure education for children, young people and adults with special educational needs within the framework of the regular education system (...) (Salamanca Declaration - Article 1).

The approval by the UN General Assembly on 13 December 2006 of the "Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD). The Convention is intended as a human rights instrument with an explicit, social development dimension. It adopts a broad categorization of persons with disabilities and reaffirms that all persons with all types of disabilities must enjoy all human rights and fundamental freedoms."... is a historic moment in terms of guaranteeing and promoting the human rights of persons with disabilities. (Under Article 24 of the CPRD - Education):

States Parties shall ensure an inclusive education system at all levels and lifelong learning directed towards: a) The full development of

human potential and sense of dignity and self-worth, and the strengthening of respect for human rights, fundamental freedoms, and human diversity; b) The development by persons with disabilities of their personality, talents, and creativity, as well as their mental and physical abilities, to their fullest potential; c) Enabling persons with disabilities to participate effectively in a free society (...) States Parties shall ensure that persons with disabilities are able to access general tertiary education, vocational training, adult education, and lifelong learning without discrimination and on an equal basis with others. To this end, States Parties shall ensure that reasonable accommodation is provided to persons with disabilities.

On September 17, 2007, within the framework of the Portuguese Presidency of the European Union, Portugal, in cooperation with the European Agency for Development in Special Needs Education, organized an event with young students with disabilities from 29 European countries, attending secondary, vocational, and higher education, which concluded in the drafting of the entitled - "Lisbon Declaration - Young peoples' views on Inclusive Education- "Young Voices: Meeting Diversity in Education".

In this document, young people underlined as main needs and challenges to overcome barriers to education in the various types that disability entails aspects such as:

During lessons and exams some of us need more time; sometimes we need personal support from assistants in class; we need adapted teaching materials at the same time as our peers; sometimes the freedom of choice of study areas is closed to us for reasons of accessibility of buildings, insufficient technology and adapted materials (equipment, books); we need content and skills that have meaning for us and for our future life; we need advice throughout our schooling as to what it will be possible for us to do in the future according to our individual needs. (ME; EADSNE, 2007).

Young people also highlighted as important points the lack of knowledge that teachers, particularly in higher education, had about disability in its various forms and types and some negative attitude towards these students. This reality was observed not only among students with disabilities, but also among their families.

For the young signatories of the "Lisbon Declaration", a gap persist in the level of knowledge and motivation of teachers to understand the needs of students with disabilities.

"Inclusive education with individualized and specialized support is the best preparation for higher education. Specialized centres could support teachers by properly informing Universities the needs. Inclusive education has mutual benefits, for us and for everyone to build our future. We must remove barriers within ourselves and others. We must grow beyond our disability - then the world will accept us better" (Idem).

The "Incheon Declaration" - South Korea, adopted in 2015, constitutes the States' commitment to Inclusive, Equitable and Quality Education by 2030.

(...) we commit to addressing all forms of exclusion and marginalization, disparities and inequalities in access, participation and learning outcomes. No education target should be considered met unless met by all. We therefore commit to making the necessary changes in education policies and focusing our efforts on the most disadvantaged, especially those with disabilities, to ensure that no one is left behind. (UN, 2015).

Therefore, access to all levels of education, including higher education, is a right for all students, with or without disabilities, although students with disabilities have, due not only to their specificities, but mainly because of the unpreparedness of educational systems and contexts, increased difficulties.

More recently, the European Disability Strategy 2021-2030, again places a strong emphasis on inclusive education, from primary education to university and, in this field, on the need for preparation of actors and educational settings so that this desideratum can be achieved.

The higher education of people with disabilities - the national context

According to Fernandes & Almeida, 2007; Araújo, 2009; Antunes et al., 2019, in Portugal the first academic services and support groups for disabled students in higher education emerged only in the 1980s. In a first phase, these services were created in Coimbra and Lisbon and covered only visual impairment students. Espadinha (2010), identifies the "Núcleo de Apoio ao Estudante com Deficiência Visual", developed in 1985 at the University of Coimbra, as the oldest project to support these students. This structure had as its main objectives production of accessible materials for blind students in Braille and audio. Also, in 1985, Ordinance no. 787/85, of 17th October was published, which dictated an addition to the numerus clausus established, for applicants with physical or sensory disabilities. The Administrative Rule included the need for higher education institutions to make available adapted material for blind students, namely Braille transcriptions and audio material, as well as psycho-pedagogical support. In 1989, the services at the University of Coimbra extended its intervention, not making its support exclusive to students with visual impairment. Still in the 1980s, namely in 1988, the "Support Service for Disabled Students" was created (Pires, 2007).

Similarly, to what was seen in the case of support for students with disabilities in basic and secondary education, the 1990s were marked by some increase in support for these students in higher education, with services and/or support offices having been developed for students with disabilities in several universities, as is the case of the Universities of Porto, Aveiro and Évora. It should be noted that, as in Coimbra and Lisbon, support started initially for students with visual impairment and was later extended to other areas of disability (Espadinha, 2010).

In the 1990s, namely in 1994, the Portaria n.º 216/94, from 12 April was established, which dedicated 1% of the vacancies of the special quota in higher education to students with physical and sensory impairments. In 2001, through the publication of Order in Council no. 715/ 2001, of 12 July, this special was extended to 2%.

In 2004 the Working Group for the Support of Students with Disabilities in Higher Education (GTAEDES) was created. This Working Group, which is still active today, is made up of public higher education institutions with support services for disabled students. The common objective of the project is to contribute to improving support for disabled students in higher education, promoting an increasingly better quality of support services in universities and polytechnics in Portugal. The existence of GTAEDES allows, according to the organizers, the ability to facilitate the exchange of experiences between higher education institutions and to promote the development of joint initiatives and learning activities in this field.

The Order No. 8584/2017, of 29 September, established the Regulation for the Allocation of Scholarships for the Attendance of Higher Education of Students with disabilities equal to or greater than 60%.

Also, in 2017, Order No. 10734/2017, of 11 December, created the Program "Inclusion for Knowledge" to promote the existence of appropriate conditions for the inclusion of people with disabilities in terms of training, performance of teaching/research activities and participation in academic, social, sporting and cultural life in the context of higher education institutions. The "IncluIES" Desk, a structure that enables the dissemination of services and good practices, as well as collaboration and exchange of information at the level of inclusion in higher education was established under the aforementioned Order, as was the Working Group for Special Needs in Science, Technology and Higher Education (GT-NECTES). This structure "has the mission of advising the Minister of Science, Technology and Higher Education on the definition of strategies that promote access and inclusion of citizens with special needs in higher education, in academic activities (...)".

Inclusion and differentiated attention to all students according to their needs and characteristics, in line with the already more consolidated practices in basic and secondary education, will have to be duly accompanied and framed in the new realities of the teaching-learning process in HEIs, and the effort to progressively improve the available regulations is not negative. Here, perhaps we can expect a growing contribution from the GT-NECTES in face of the competences that are assigned to it and the support they can provide (Order No. 10734/2017, December 11).

Table 1- Five aspects that distinguish truly inclusive higher education institutions:

1) Early preparation of support for students with disabilities before they enter university;
2) Training of teachers in general to design accessible curricula adapted to the needs of each specific student (concept of reasonable adaptation, inscribed in the Convention);
3) Hearing from the student with disabilities about the issues central to their true inclusion and success in higher education, including about the supports offered by their institution;
4) Develop and improve support services for students with disabilities based on the auscultation carried out in the previous point;
5) Design and implement an Individual Inclusion Plan for each student.

Source: Vickerman e Blundell (2010) – adapted.

The barriers that hinder, or even, in some cases, prevent, the access of students with disabilities to higher education in Portugal starts before this educational stage. We are talking about basic and secondary education. Although, since the 90s, Portugal has an advanced legislation, in constant revision and in theory facilitating the inclusion of these students in schools, the fact is that its implementation is far from being a success, which at the outset penalizes a lot the academic preparation of these students (Capucha & Nogueira, 2010). Thus, the transition to higher education places additional demands for which these students, most of the time, were not properly prepared, which leads them to drop out (Gonçalves & Cardoso, 2010; Fernandes & Almeida, 2007). The authors also draw attention to other types of barriers which may cumulatively cause great difficulties for these students, such as teachers' unpreparedness, difficulty in interacting with non-disabled peers, architectural or communication obstacles or even the unpreparedness of the academic support services themselves.

In 2003, the Council of Europe pointed out as the main obstacles to the inclusion of students with disabilities in higher education, the unpreparedness of universities in general to welcome people with disabilities, specifically, the issue of accessibility, the lack of training/capacity of teachers, the use of rigid and standardized teaching tools or methods, the scarcity of sign language interpreters, the scarce investment in distance learning, which in the meantime has improved due to the COVID19 pandemic; the lack of specialized human resources and the low financial investment to support these students. At this level, Abreu (2011) found that many of the students with disabilities surveyed were unaware of the support they could benefit from, either at the time of enrolment, or what they could enjoy during the school year. According to the author, although these students had benefited from adaptations, these seemed to have decreased as the demands of education increased. The author also concluded the inexistence of a visible connection between the support cores for students with disabilities in higher education and the teachers of the different curricular units. Thus, for Fernandes & Almeida, (2007), it is not at all sufficient to guarantee access to higher education for students with disabilities, it is essential to provide universities and polytechnics with the resources and assets so that these students can successfully complete their studies.

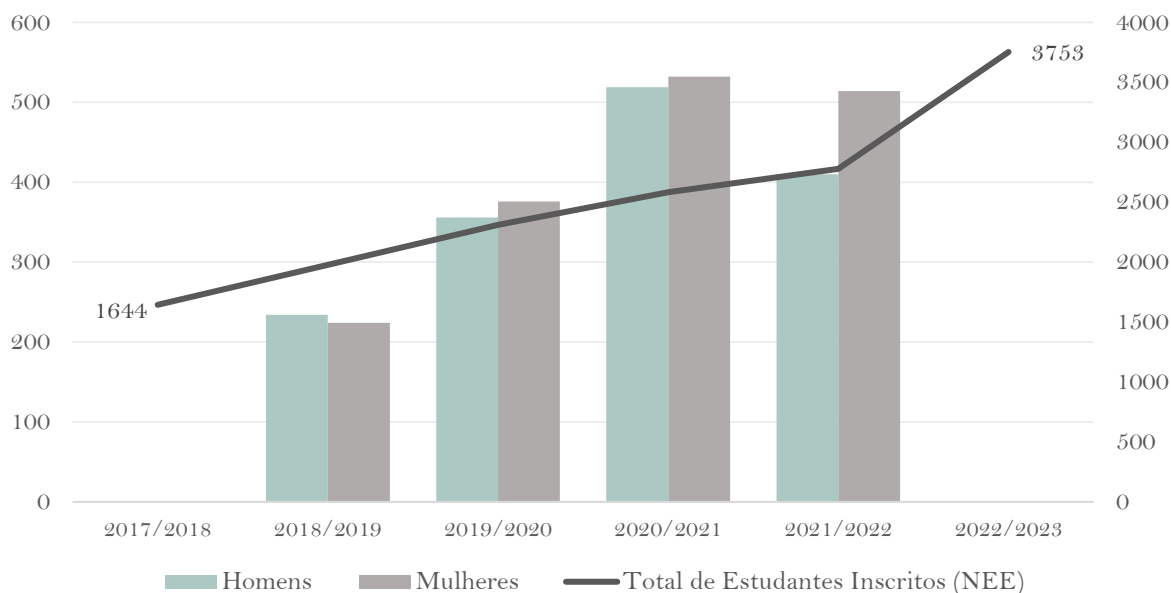
Accessibility and integration of students with special educational needs in Higher Education in Portugal

Based on the premise that the education system should ensure accessibility and integration at all levels throughout the schooling period, carrying out actions that allow access, permanence, and success of all students, it is important to observe the level of accessibility of students with specific educational needs, focusing on the context of higher education. In order to characterize the population of students with specific educational needs enrolled in higher education, as well as explore the conditions of accessibility, support and follow-up promoted by educational establishments aimed at these students, we will use the analysis of the results from the "Survey on Special Educational Needs (SEN) in Higher Education Establishments", conducted by the Directorate-General for Education and Science Statistics (DGEEC) for the academic years between 2017/2018 and 2022/2023. We will also use the results of an additional and complementary survey, applied by the same institution to characterize the educational situation of this group of students, with achievement of this survey not being compulsory.

Figure 1 collects data from both surveys and refers to the number of students with SEN enrolled in public and private higher education institutions, shows that from the 2017/2018 academic year until the present, this number has more than doubled. The trend towards a growth in the number of students enrolled is clearly observable. Regarding the gender of the students who responded to the survey, with the exception of the academic year 2018/2019 that registers a higher number of male students (n=214), its distribution denotes the prevalence of the female gender. In the academic year 2021/2022, more than half of the total respondents were female (55.6%; n=514), compared to 44.4% (n=410) of males.

Regarding the specific needs of the students surveyed in the 2021/2022 academic year (n=914), it should be noted that in terms of their health condition, 113 indicated having a chronic illness and 103 a motor limitation, these being the predominant health conditions, followed by learning disability (n=94), autism spectrum disorder (n=93) and attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder (n=87). From a set of 12 identified health conditions, 186 students reported having "another condition".

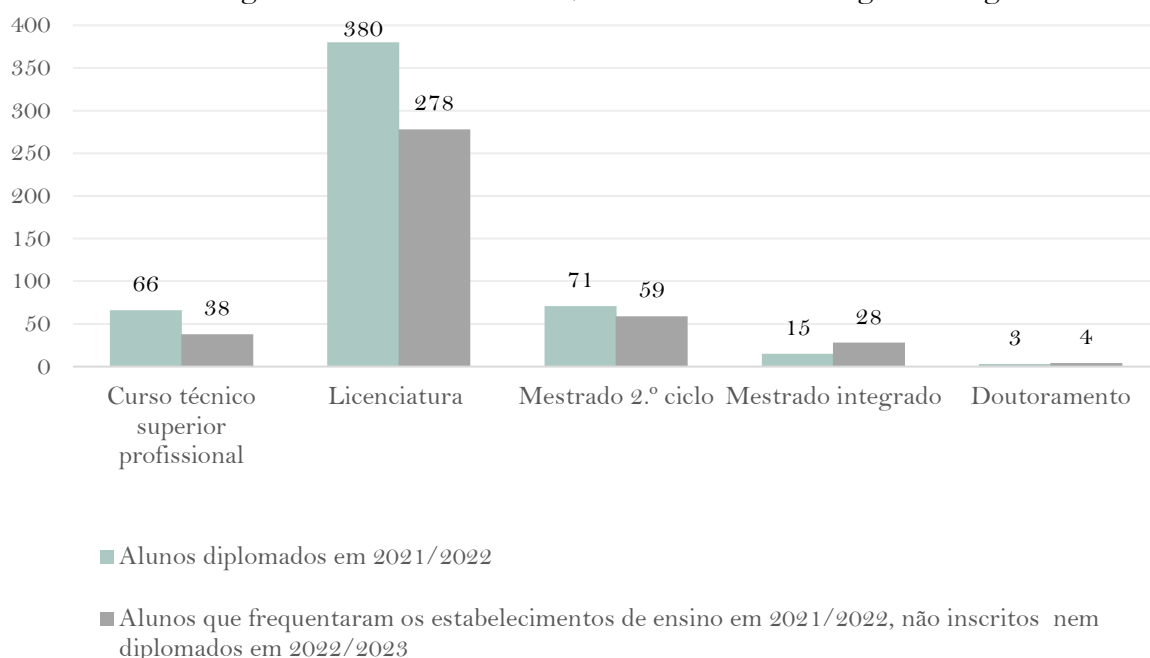
Figure 1- Evolution of the number of students with SEN enrolled in higher education institutions, by gender (2017/2018 – 2022/2023)



Source: DGEEC; Survey of Special Educational Needs (SEN) in Higher Education Establishments [2018/2019, 2019/2020, 2020/2021, 2021/2022, 2022/2023]; Survey of Special Educational Needs in Higher Education Establishments - Characterization of Student's Educational Status [2018/2019, 2019/2020, 2020/2021, 2021/2022].

Regarding the number of graduates (figure 2), the most recent data (2021/2022) point to 535 students. Their distribution by academic degree shows that the majority (n=380) concluded the first cycle of studies of Higher Education, obtaining the degree of bachelor and 71 students completed the second cycle, which comprises the degree of master. However, there is a very small number of students in advanced studies and only 3 have a PhD. Looking at the figure, a proportion of students with SEN who attended the 2021/2022 academic year neither graduated nor were enrolled in the same establishment/course pair in the following academic year. Such data suggests a possible drop-out situation, the reasons for which would be interesting and of great relevance to investigate in future studies.

Figure 2 - Number of students with SEN graduating in 2021/2022 and number of students with SEN attending educational institutions, neither enrolled nor graduating in 2022/2023



Source: DGEEC; Survey of Special Educational Needs (SEN) in Higher Education Institutions, [2022/2023]

It is also important to characterize how HEIs have sought to create adaptations and support resources for students with SEN. Table 1 shows the evolution of the number of HEIs that have adaptations and resources aimed at supporting this group of students, it can be seen that more than half of them have specific regulations for students with SEN, either through specific provisions in their general regulations, specific regulations/statutes for students with SEN or other types of regulations. Also, at the level of support services for students with SEN, there has been an increase since 2017, with 64 HEIs currently providing specific support services for this student. In general terms, there has been a gradual evolution in the number of HEIs providing these services.

Equally, in terms of adaptations, there has been a growing demand to ensure accessibility for students with SEN to the HEIs' infrastructures, with 70 out of a total of 95 institutions having accessibility in all their central buildings. Such improved accessibility contributes to the increasing promotion of the level of participation of students with SEN, which is not limited exclusively to the removal of architectural barriers.

Table 2- Evolution of adaptations and support resources aimed at students with special educational needs in Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), by type of support (2017/2018-2022/2023)

School year	Total HEI's	HEI's with specific regulation	HEI's with specific support services	HEI's with material production units	HEI's with all central building accessible
2017/2018	112	63	51	18	63
2018/2019	111	65	54	19	69
2019/2020	104	65	57	17	61
2020/2021	104	67	61	22	71
2021/2022	100	71	63	22	70
2022/2023	95	64	64	22	70

Source: DGEEC; Survey of Special Educational Needs (SEN) in Higher Education establishments, [2017/2018, 2018/2019, 2019/2020, 2020/2021, 2021/2022, 2022/2023].

Recent data from the DGEEC focuses on the 2022/2023 academic year, show that of the 95 higher education institutions, 37 claim to manage, in total, more than one hundred and fifty student residences. Of these, more than half (56.3%) are in adapted buildings and have 132 adapted rooms. Similarly, in terms of spaces and sports facilities aimed at the practice of adapted sports, around 23.2% of higher education establishments state that they have infrastructures or sports facilities adapted for students with SEN. In the light of this data, which allows us to know and generically characterize the resources that HEIs have made available to students with SEN, it is possible to affirm the existence of a concern to adjust the services and spaces managed by these establishments with a view to favoring their conditions of accessibility. However, it is important for us to find out in more detail, by listening in the first person, about the experience of integrating students with SEN into higher education, the challenges they

have faced throughout their schooling process to date and the type of response/support provided to them by the higher education institution they attend. To this end, a survey was conducted about students from the Iscte-Instituto Universitário de Lisboa.

Considering the way in which the school pathway of these students led them to higher education, it was found that, regardless of the type of disability they had, all the students interviewed had attended regular education. Even if, as they mention, in the schools they attended there were specific units for students with disabilities, they didn't use them, having always been with their respective class until they finished secondary education. In some cases, it appears that the permanence in the classroom came from a strong decision on the part of the parents, as they mention:

In all the schools I went to there were specific rooms for these students, but my mother said that it was not worth it, that I had learning capacity like anyone else and therefore it would not make sense for me not to progress in my learning because I was in the middle of those who cannot because of intellectual problems (...). My parents felt that it wouldn't make sense and that they were closing me in a bubble when I had full capacity. [E3, student with motor disability, Iscte-Iul].

Due to their limitations, students report having only needed slight adaptations or material support resources during their schooling process up to university, such as computers or Braille machine. They say that although they do not remember "a great deal of support", the schools and most of the teachers were always willing to provide the necessary means and resources to ensure the best conditions for their learning process. The greatest adaptations referred to concern the assessment process in some subjects, such as Sports or Visual and Technological. In other subjects, they had more time to carry out the assessment tests. In this respect, still as children, they stated that they had suffered bullying situations on the part of their peers due to the non-acceptance of differentiated assessment elements, which they considered to act in favor of these students with SEN. In this respect, conflict management by teachers had not always contributed to calming the sense of discrimination felt by these students. For this reason, they state that the greatest challenges they faced were essentially at the level of interpersonal relationships with colleagues, experiencing situations of prejudice and stigma towards their disabilities until they entered university. As they stated:

I suffered some prejudice from schoolmates, from teachers, never. [E2, student with cerebral palsy, Iscte-Iul]

The biggest challenges, maybe the classmates, especially at a certain stage they don't understand and think that there [at school] we all have to be the same. And they think that those who are not equal have their "benefits". (...) Sometimes they don't interpret this as a support or an equity issue, but rather as "oh, he's benefiting", or "she's the teachers' darling", or "well, they give her the tests beforehand and that's why she gets good grades...". They can't see beyond the disability. [E3, student with motor disability, Iscte-Iul]

At the beginning the process of adapting to braille was difficult. The first times were complicated and then the study time was more demanding because those who read in black take less time than those who read braille, or those who listen on the computer... that was one of the main challenges." (...) "In assessments I had more time as a rule, in relation to other colleagues. (...) "Sometimes I have some difficulty, but the fact of not seeing interfered little [in interpersonal socialization relationships]. E1, visually impaired student, Iscte-Iul].

These reports denote the urgent need to promote, from the bases level, a greater coexistence with disability and diversity, mainly in school settings, where children and young people spend much of their time and where they should learn to live together.

The interviewed students did not mention any problems in the application and enrolment process, although in some cases they revealed the need for support/guidance regarding the bureaucratic procedures. Although they consider that the transition from secondary school to higher education initially generated some strangeness, both in physical terms, due to the need to adapt to an unknown space, and in academic terms, due to the feeling of a higher level of demand, but also in personal terms, due to the contact with a new reality and with other people, they see this transition as positive:

It was kind of complicated and strange, because I was coming from secondary school, from a completely different space in which I was with other colleagues, other teachers. It was a completely different reality; the teachers are more demanding here and this is another level. It was an adaptation even to the spaces... E1, visually impaired student, Iscte-Iul]

I was lost, but after meeting people it got better every day. (...) I've been here for 5 years now. [E2, student with cerebral palsy, Iscte-Iul].

The students specially highlighted the welcome and the availability of resources and/or adaptations at the institutions, even students that had previously changed institutions. The concern of the higher education institution with the students' well-being and with ensuring that they have the necessary conditions for their pathway to be as successful as possible is appreciated by them. In the discourse of the interviewed students, it is reflected that it is present in the way the institution acts the care to listen in the first person what their real needs are and what they consider to be the best ways

to meet them. We can thus conclude that this institutional attitude contributes to the structuring of a relationship of openness and proximity with students with special educational needs, contributing to an increasing reduction of unequal accessibility and participation conditions.

What they asked me was how they could help me concretely. In my case, I just needed more time for written assessments. What matters is to provide conditions for the students! (...) This year, in the Iscte, they even asked me if I had any complaints, if I needed anything else, if everything was to my satisfaction... "I had a meeting at the beginning of the year, and they questioned everything, accessibility, food, etc., if I needed to be further ahead in the classroom... [E3, student with motor disability, Iscte-Iul].

Nevertheless, the search for the guarantee of quality integration and participation of students with SEN in all strategies and spaces, considering that all students have specific needs, there is still barriers to remove. Essentially, about physical accessibility, which includes removing architectural barriers and implementing orientation and mobility mechanisms for blind people. Despite the fact that spaces have been restructured in the buildings and on the university campus, there are still obstacles present which, at first sight, are not very relevant, but which effectively have an impact on the day-to-day life of students.

The Iscte-Instituto Universitário de Lisboa, is equipped with lifts that allow an easier access to all its buildings. However, in some external spaces and auditoriums there is a need to introduce structures capable of serving as ramps for the passage and circulation of people who use wheelchairs. Even in cases where the existing steps are hardly perceptible, they are sufficient to condition the mobility of students with motor limitations in their chairs. The reduced existence of tools that favour orientation is, likewise, another improvement to be made. We refer, for example, to tactile floors and/or the placement of information/signposting in Braille for visually impaired students. This plan includes, for example, the identification of the number of classrooms, bathrooms or other places. Also, the access to other spaces within the institutional complex seems to be susceptible to generating some inaccessibility. It is the case of the car park, whose open-air access on rainy days conditions the students' journey, due to the inexistence of a structure that allows them to take shelter. They also highlight other situations which can be conditioning, either for these students or for others with different disabilities:

In the bar the counters are a bit high, I can stand up, but for those who can't it is difficult. [E3, student with motor disability, Iscte-Iul]

(...) Sometimes I have difficulty and need help. There are places where I can go already, I've got used to it better, but there are places where it is difficult for me to go because (...) the space is very big and there is always some difficulty, but thinking about something that Iscte needs to improve...maybe in the classrooms, for example, I never know what the number of rooms is... E1, visually impaired student, Iscte-Iul]

One of the things that need to be improved are the floors, the pavements, it is necessary to put the floor smooth. (...) All the auditoriums should have a ramp/platform. Except for the Grand Auditorium which has a platform, none of them do, but my chair is heavy, and that platform only takes 110kg. [E2, student with cerebral palsy, Iscte-Iul].

As for pedagogical accessibility, the students refer that their needs have been ensured, which include fundamentally an extension of time during the evaluation tests and the access to materials accessible for reading. There is also some coordination between teachers and the institution's services. In other words, if the teacher does not have the technical competences or technological tools to provide adapted material, the conversion of the material into accessible material is carried out, for example, in collaboration with the library, which then gives it to the student. There were cases in which support was made available, assigning, or facilitating the access to technological equipment whenever it was needed or when those for personal use were not an option or did not exist. It is worth emphasizing at this point the important role that technological development has played in improving accessibility and consequently the autonomy of students with SEN. At the level of communicational accessibility, no points for improvement are identified, as they state that all conditions have been guaranteed.

From the perspective of the students interviewed, the resources made available by their educational institution and the direct support provided to them have strongly contributed to their learning process and to their success in their academic path. They therefore gave a positive evaluation of the educational commitment to providing the best possible conditions for students with SEN according to their possibilities and specific needs.

Considering the experience of these HE students attending the same educational institution as an example, it is clear that institutional commitments and changes have contributed to the full integration and participation of students with SEN. Certainly, there is a need for improvements and adaptation of spaces capable of meeting the different needs that permeate the diversity of students attending higher education institutions. These, according to the data presented higher education institutions, appear to be increasingly awake and active to respond appropriately to the challenges that their students with SEN may face in the HEIs they manage. The fact that there has been a growth in the number of institutions integrating specific provisions for students with

SEN in their regulatory plans demonstrates that there has been a strong and fruitful development in the area of inclusion and accessibility policies in the higher education sphere. There is therefore a long way to go for most universities in regulating and implementing good practice in the field of inclusive education, non-discrimination and accessibility, but this needs to be accompanied by further adaptation and improvement of spaces and infrastructures.

Discussion

Despite the many significant advances achieved by the Portuguese educational system since the Revolution of April 25th of 1974, it still has a long way to go in terms of democratisation and integration of its most excluded social groups, as is the case of students with disabilities. The Portuguese educational system is at a turning point: either it is able to generate more effective processes of social inclusion, thus effectively reducing social inequalities that invert deeper trends of social reproduction, or it will tend to mimic the current logics of the "Tyranny of Merit" (Sandel, 2019) that, under the supposed neutral dictates of equal opportunities, will continue to hide multidimensional inequalities, even if the Portuguese educational system tends to be generating a gradual social and educational integration.

It will be from a perspective of reducing inequalities, through the creation of structural, institutional, and organisational conditions that concretise an effective inclusion of students with disabilities, that it will be possible for the Portuguese educational system to reach more advanced levels of development.

This article raised decisive problems for the future of students with disabilities in the Portuguese educational system and particularly in Higher Education. The difficulties of discrimination, stigma and prejudice, accessibility, teachers' absence of training, lack of knowledge of the best pedagogical practices, the missing of consultation of students and the danger of dropping out of school are highlighted.

But there are also favourable opportunities for social inclusion, such as certain organisational practices, distance learning and the pedagogical appropriation of the new digital technologies. Organisational empowerment processes, as Iscte is currently experiencing, which regulate, apply, and evaluate the inclusion of people with disabilities, and which consider first-person consultation and the diversity of the educational universe, will be fundamental conditions for a more democratic, inclusive, and participatory Higher Education.

Conclusions

In the last five years there has been an increase in the number of students in higher education who have specific educational needs. Increasingly higher education institutions should be able to guarantee, with the greatest effectiveness, support resources aimed at these students, promoting accessibility - in its different levels - and the reduction of inequalities, ensuring their commitment to the promotion of inclusion.

The data collected during the case study allow us to confirm the existence of a continuous and tendentially adequate response to the specificities of higher education students with SEN. However, there is a considerable number of cases of students with SEN who are not attending the same course/institution pair as in the previous academic year, which reveals the need to determine whether this is a possible drop-out situation, bearing in mind that they did not graduate. It is also important to explore, in a future study, the factors that contributed to the non-permanence of these students in higher education and how the educational institutions can contribute to the continuity of the students in the academic environment.

It should be noted that, independently of the initiatives mentioned above, as of today Portugal has never had legislation dedicated to this subject to standardize the regulation of support for these students in higher education. If this observation is true, it is equally true the fact that a broad national strategy has never been designed at this level, so higher education entities develop their own measures to support students with disabilities. In this sense, Castanheira (2013), considers that in Portugal there is still a great disparity of support, processes, and regulations from one university to another. Thus, if in some higher education institutions good practices are recognized in others only reply to random requests from students and families, what the author called "minimum services".

Real inclusion in higher education in Portugal will only be possible with an applicable national legislation which frames the regulation and associated practices.

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