

## Article

# How Has the Pandemic Affected Access and the Feeling of Belonging in Portuguese Higher Education?

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**Abstract:** This study is based on an in-depth analysis of the Portuguese reality. The main question addressed concerns the effects of the pandemic on the social profile and conditions of participation, and higher education students' sense of belonging in Portugal. The changes resulting from the pandemic will also be considered in light of the policies that have been pursued and implemented at the national level with the aim of increasing and enhancing students' integration within the higher education community. The application of a longitudinal approach was made possible through institutional data and data produced by the EUROSTUDENT project. The results obtained clarify some of the immediate effects that the pandemic has had on higher education and on the social and academic conditions and contexts of students in Portugal. On a more structural level, these results also emphasise the importance of political choices in the process of democratisation and extending the system to new segments of the population.

**Keywords:** pandemic; Portuguese higher education; access; social conditions; sense of belong



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## 1. Introduction

The main aim of this research is to analyse the effect of the COVID-19 pandemic on the dynamics of access and social diversification in Portuguese higher education. It highlights accessibility in students' development in higher education [1] as well as a sense of belonging and engagement in the system [2], its social widening [3,4], how it may be affected by the pandemic, and what policy responses are triggered to address it [5]. The Portuguese higher education system has undergone a dynamic expansion and social widening in recent decades [4,6]. This was a response to an active population still relatively lacking this type of qualification [7]. In 2020, the age bracket ranging from between 25 and 64 in higher education was 28.2% in Portugal, in comparison to the 32.8% recorded for the rest of the European Union in the corresponding age group in the same year [8]. Although there is still a stark difference between Portugal and Europe, these values reveal a very relevant path of approximation of the country to the European reference [9]. However, beginning on 25 April 1974 (during the transition to a democratic regime) and only reinforced and intensified in the early 1990s—a "late start" in the development of the higher education system [10]—, its growth was punctuated by moments of slow progress or even inflection [6,10]. For almost forty years, the Portuguese population lived under a dictatorship, culminating in the Carnation Revolution of 1974, and had a wide skills gap in the transition to democracy. Given this state of underdevelopment, it was to be expected that access to and attendance at higher education institutions would continue to grow, as a political commitment and social dynamic. However, given the significant growth of Portuguese higher education, it is known that in certain social and political conjunctures, this incremental dynamic has been interrupted or moderated. This expresses an access system that is still very socially selective and public policies that are not always aligned with its openness [6].

Within this trajectory, there are two axes that are worth acknowledging: access (including its political orientations and forms of regulation) [6] and its social diversification (social, demographic, and regional composition) [3,11] in a broader process of educational democratisation. It is also relevant to ask how a sense of belonging and engagement in institutional spaces arise from the processes of enlargement and democratisation characterised by a greater number and diversity of paths (marked by different types of institutional and educational provisions and by various stages of the student life cycle) [12]. The main objective of this research is, therefore, to analyse how the pandemic manifests itself in these processes. In this pandemic period, and similarly to other countries, there were sudden transformations in the Portuguese higher education system in the teaching activities and academic experiences of students and teachers [5]. Portugal's economic and social crises have always been critical junctures throughout the history of the Portuguese higher education system and have challenged public policies to respond [13], however, the crisis provoked by the COVID-19 pandemic appears more abrupt and widespread than previous ones [14].

The objectives are pursued using Portuguese data produced in [15] the EUROSTUDENT project (VI and VII) and institutional data (DGEEC) [16]. As previously mentioned, the main empirical references are the EUROSTUDENT data (Edition VI and VII) regarding Portuguese students and concerning two periods—2016/17 (second semester) and 2020/21 (first semester)—, which cover the times “before” and “during” the pandemic. Although it is still too early to draw conclusions, the information gathered may already help to shed light on some of the effects that the pandemic had on higher education.

The paper is structured as follows: first, we present theoretical-analytical approaches and contributions concerning access to and the sense of belonging in higher education, taking into account its social diversity, before and during the COVID-19 pandemic; second, we explain the methodology used (including the research questions); the main findings of the study are then put forward; and, finally, the paper offers some pertinent points for discussion and concluding remarks.

## **2. Access and Belonging to Higher Education: Theoretical and Analytical Contributions to Read an Emerging Reality**

### *2.1. Access, Democratisation and Diversity: Before and during the Pandemic*

Following the main objectives, the first concern is to analyse the dynamics of growth in access to Portuguese higher education over the last 20 years, while taking into account the recent pandemic. This has as analytical objectives the identification and characterisation of these dynamics in contextual terms.

Access to Portuguese higher education has increased significantly [4,6,10]. In the past 20 years, the number of first-time enrolments in higher education—including public, private, and polytechnic institutions as well as universities—students enrolled for the first time in the first year [16] increased from 93,249 (2000/01) to 144,528 (2020/21), which shows significant growth.

Such rises in enrolment are not confined to the Portuguese higher education system. In other countries (especially in the West) this dynamic began even earlier. Since the Second World War, the expansion and democratisation of higher education systems in industrialised countries have aroused enormous interest in academia and science on account of its societal consequences [17]. This has been verified over the last 80 years by the expansion of higher education systems in Europe and the USA. Such expansion has made it possible to observe, in many cases, the transition from elite systems to mass higher education systems with universal access [18], especially between the 1980s and the early 2000's [19]. In Portugal, this expansion also had the same contours, but it happened even later.

If some dynamics of expansion or relative retraction are associated with differentiated processes and cycles of government at specific conjunctures in the recent history of the country, the pandemic seems to have made this expansion even more acute. In the period between 2000/01 and 2020/21, there was an increase in entries into the Portuguese higher

education system of just over 50,000 students with 11,206 [16] enrolling between 2019/20 and 2020/21. It is on these aspects that we based our first assumption that the pandemic and, perhaps more importantly, the policy changes chosen to respond to it had a powerful impact on the increase in access. These responses were mainly incremental in nature.

Many works have endeavoured to define analytical perspectives that can characterise and periodise the main moments and contexts of this expansion and its rhythms [19,20]. One contribution, regarding an illustration from Northern Europe, is related to the proposed identification of phases in the evolution of the Swedish higher education system [21], which shows strong growth during the period of consolidation of the social democratic state model, between the 1970s and the end of the 20th century, moving from elite education to mass education and, already in this century, the fulfillment of universal higher education. The period that concerns the last decade and a half is marked by an oscillation in the number of enrolments and expresses the ceding or weakening of the welfare state of which Sweden was one of its main symbols.

The effects of various European admission models on access and participation in higher education are relatively well known [22], although policy responses to the pandemic (COVID-19) may have altered its main characterising features and effects, as they have been altered to varying degrees at other times of crisis [13]. The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic has had continuing effects on education and, in particular, on higher education, which is still under investigation. The reaction of the higher education system and the policy responses to the pandemic show a relatively different nature compared to previous crises.

During the 2008 financial crisis, Portugal was included in the cluster of countries most affected and with low investment in higher education (along with the Baltic Republics, Spain, Italy, and the United Kingdom) [23]. Some studies point to no evidence that the learning and quality of higher education institutions have been affected by this crisis [23]. However, other studies (namely on the Portuguese reality), such as [13] report an increase, for example, in dropouts due to the crisis, even among students commonly described as traditional.

Access policies are very much involved in the expansion of higher education systems as well as in their regulation and development. It is through these policies that we can gauge the concepts and strategies of social justice and equality that shape the various higher education systems [1]. Advancing as a hypothesis to be validated in the case of Portugal, the policies directed at the access that materialise in periods of crisis (COVID-19 included) tend to be consonant with the preponderant policies of the main dynamics of access, which may tend to an expansion or a contraction of the system.

A UNESCO report (2021) [24] provides an account of the principal and most immediate effects of the pandemic on higher education. One of them was the abrupt closure of institutions in most European countries and the respective adaptations necessary for distance learning; another was the increase in enrolments in higher education in most developed countries. In this sense, the European Commission Report [5] identifies the main post-pandemic challenges posed to higher education systems as well as the main policy responses based on various secondary sources, which includes international surveys and specific surveys related to the effects of the pandemic. It also highlights the importance of policy measures to ensure equity of access, participation, and completion of higher education, with a special focus on students from underrepresented, disadvantaged, and vulnerable groups [5].

Keeping Portugal as the analytical centre of focus makes it crucial to acknowledge that the dynamics of access and attendance to higher education [6] can be addressed through the enlargement and social diversification of its population in the last decades [3,4]. However, this also expresses relevant fluctuations with different meanings. To this extent, Portugal did not have a continuous incremental dynamic, although in the years immediately preceding the pandemic outbreak, a relatively stable expansion trend was in affirmation. As mentioned, these processes of enlargement translated into moments of diversification of students' social profile, expressing what was identified at the end of the 1990s as a double

pattern of social recruitment [9]. In other words, there was a persistent over-representation of children from more favoured and qualified social classes, but simultaneously a progressive entry of children from less qualified social origins, namely the working classes. This pattern has been consolidating over recent decades [9,25].

The dynamics of expansion have allowed for greater diversification and an increase in educational opportunities. However, while widening access and expansionist policies have allowed this greater diversity and presence of groups that are usually under-represented, in some contexts, they are neither sufficient in themselves to guarantee greater equity in the achievement of education, nor in reducing inequalities in the social and study conditions of those already enrolled in higher education [26].

To meet the objectives framed within this social dimension that affects access and social inclusion, policy instruments may be employed in the area of regulation, funding, and organisation of the education system (as designated in [27]). This type of instrument seems to have been one of the most predominant in the Portuguese educational system during the pandemic crisis impacting on the social widening of recruitment to higher education.

## *2.2. Sense of Belonging and Integration in Higher Education during the Pandemic*

If the social widening of access entails a widening of educational opportunities, these will be more effective if after having gained access students feel integrated and feel they belong in these institutional contexts [28]. Once again, the pandemic seems to have posed challenges to the way students link to their higher education institutions and backgrounds.

Vincent Tinto's theoretical model [29,30] proposes above all to analyse dropouts in higher education, making it inseparable from the degree and type of integration of students in the social and academic systems of the institutions they attend. Thus, the decision to continue or to leave the higher education system is partly dependent on the degree of these students' academic and social integration in the educational institution. According to Vincent Tinto [29], both failing and dropping out are therefore explained fundamentally by the mismatch between the values and expectations of students and the values and characteristics of their academic context as well as by the absence of significant and positive experiences of socialising interaction. Our working hypothesis is that the pandemic (with its long periods of confinement) has worsened or weakened the process of student integration in higher education institutions. This may be even more evident for students who started their studies this year and who have no previous experience of integration in higher education. Another point of interest to be considered is the widening of access and social recruitment with which certain segments of students appear to have more difficulties integrating [31]. It is also important how institutions promote students' experiences of integration and performance, with their values and practices, configuring an institutional habitus [32]. A qualitative work highlights, for the Portuguese reality, the importance of extra-curricular activities (such as participating in seminars, conferences, or activities promoted by student associations) and that students' participation in these is related to their academic involvement and persistence in higher education institutions [33]. Indeed, such activities were certainly restricted by the pandemic, affecting their level of integration and engagement in higher education.

A sense of belonging is one of the main indicators of integration and engagement in higher education. According to Vincent Tinto's model [29,30], these dimensions of analysis are very relevant to determining success and dropout in higher education. Some authors [2] have analysed this issue considering that the aspects concerning social and academic integration and a sense of belonging in higher education are among the most affected by the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, due to the loss of direct interaction with their colleagues, peers, and teachers and the influence of these central elements for engagement and the creation of a sense of belonging to the system. Such distancing has brought about changes in the interactional frameworks, mainly shifted to online or digital spaces and through emergency remote education [2]. Some assumptions that [2] Resch et al. (2022) allow serving as a basis for the analysis of the results, reporting that social and

academic integration was drastically affected during the COVID-19 emergency and that this integration is even more difficult for first-year students (in addition to the contribution of [2], see also [34]). Other work [35] has reported that the sense of belonging has been relatively affected, especially in specific segments (such as the socio-economically disadvantaged) and those students belonging to certain minorities.

### 3. Research Questions, Data, and Analytical Guidelines

#### 3.1. Research Questions

Based on the theoretical framework and the debates set out above, as well as the research results identified in the literature, a set of research questions have suggested themselves to help focus on how we recognise changes in the dynamics of access and integration in higher education in light of the outbreak of the pandemic.

What we seek in this paper is to identify some of the manifestations of the pandemic on these axes of observation. To this extent, we pose the following research questions:

1. What overall differences are evident in access to Portuguese higher education (particularly with regard to the dynamics of those accessing and attending higher education for the first time) before and during the COVID-19 pandemic?
2. What differences are evident in terms of student composition in access to Portuguese higher education before and during the COVID-19 pandemic?
3. What overall differences are evident in students' feelings of belonging to higher education before and during the COVID-19 pandemic?
4. What differences are evident in terms of student composition in the feeling of belonging to higher education before and during the COVID-19 pandemic?

The answers to these questions are still approximations that initially result from the capacity to analyse an emerging reality using instruments that may provide information on various forms of characterisation in contexts, frameworks, and, to a lesser degree, causal mechanisms. It is an exploratory knowledge of an emerging reality about which there is still no consolidated information. Some contributions reflect concerns about whether it is still too early to draw conclusions, and the "research on the social and economic effects of the pandemic is ongoing to provide the basis for a more thorough long-term analysis" ([36], p. 7).

These questions were identified and justified using this data, as well as the analytical strategy. Following on from this and building on the research questions, we propose the following hypotheses: there are differences in students' overall sense of belonging in higher education before and during the COVID-19 pandemic, and there are differences in the composition of students regarding their sense of belonging to higher education before and during the COVID-19 pandemic. Furthermore, another dimension of analysis worth considering is that immediately after periods of expansion of the higher education system conditions are created for academic integration and development, capable of retaining this increasingly diverse population and reducing drop-out [29].

#### 3.2. Data and Empirical Sources

The main empirical references are taken from statistical sources, primarily those produced by the EUROSTUDENT Project [15,37] and, secondarily, those provided by the DGEEC (Portuguese General Directorate of Education Statistics [16]) (Directorate-General for Education and Science Statistics (Direção-Geral de Estatísticas da Educação e Ciência, DGEEC)). With these sources, we defined the information capable of responding to the analysis objectives drawn from the research questions.

The first research question uses the data from DGEEC as its main empirical reference in order to characterize the dynamics of access to higher education and completion of secondary education in the period from 2000/01 to 2020/21 and to identify the most relevant moments prior to the pandemic as well as the variations that occurred due to the pandemic. The indicators selected from DGEEC served as an empirical source for the analysis of the dynamics of access to higher education, mainly from the following aggregated statistical



indicators: enrolment in HE (for all students and students enrolled in first year/first time); and rate of completion of secondary education. This information is collected through the census survey on the Register of Students Enrolled and Graduated in Higher Education (RAIDES)—which is an annual and nationwide survey—and addressed to all higher education institutions. To complement this analysis, students who gained access to higher education through non-traditional routes (indicator available in the Portuguese data from the EUROSTUDENT Project, in 2016/17 and 2020/21) have been included.

The following questions took the Portuguese data from the EUROSTUDENT Project [16] at two points in time as its source. Portuguese data were used from the EVI edition (2016–2018), which covers the period prior to the pandemic (information collection took place between March and May 2017), and the EVII (2019–2021), which was carried out during the pandemic period (with information collection between November and December 2020 in the first semester of 2020/2021). The set of indicators chosen to answer the proposed research questions took these two editions into account.

The collection of information contained in the final samples in each year resulted in 4894 valid cases for EVI (in a universe of 323,028 students calculated in 2016/17 from the DGEEC official statistics) [38] and 6394 valid cases for EVII (referring to a universe of 357,327 students calculated in 2019/20 from the DGEEC official statistics) [9]. In the EUROSTUDENT project [37], PhD students are not included in the samples. In both rounds, weighting was used to correct their distribution on central characteristics of this population already recorded in the previous academic year, such as type of education (polytechnic and university), area of training (defined as in [39]), and demographic characteristics (such as gender or age).

### 3.3. Analytical Guidelines

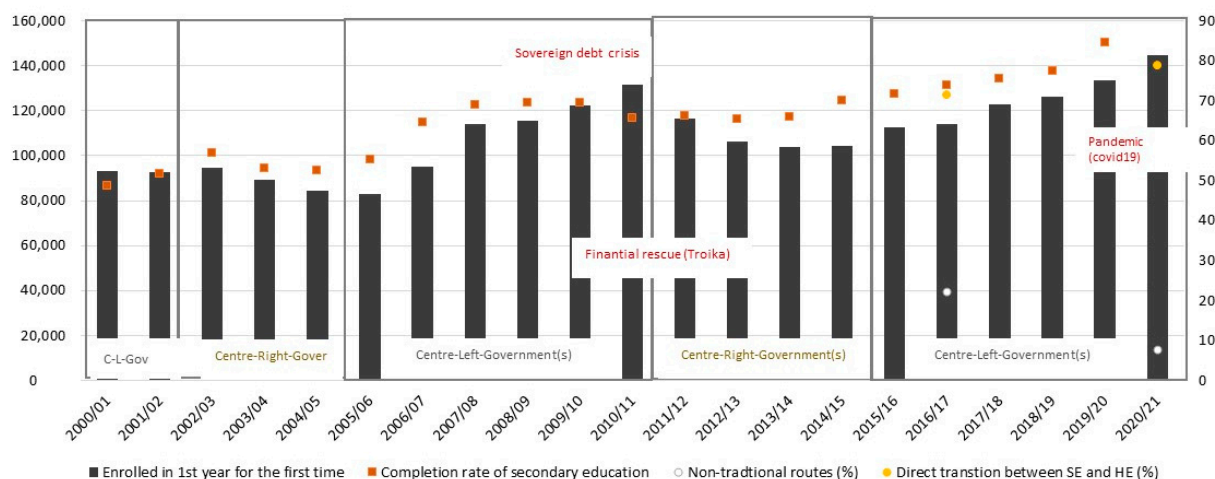
In order to recognise the changes in the characteristics, contexts, and conditions of students accessing and attending higher education before and during the pandemic (evidenced in the comparison between data from the second semester of 2016/17 and the first semester of 2020/21), the following variables/indicators (available respectively in the two rounds of EUROSTUDENT VI and VII) have been applied: educational background (parents with higher education); migrant background (known origins of immigration and the direct experience of immigration with or without schooling in the Portuguese education system); housing during the semester (referring to housing contexts and the student's family situation); in addition to capturing the trend of family financial support for students' expenses (through the indicator recipients of family support) and the Gini coefficient of students' income (which measures inequality in students' income before and during the pandemic (see Table 1). These variables, as well as the figure showing the broad dynamics of participation in the education system, offer a first-hand perspective on characterising living conditions and contexts (comparing two moments) and dynamics over a longer period of time (Figure 1), which is complemented by institutional data.

**Table 1.** Social contexts and conditions of students in HE in comparison, between 2017 (second semester, EVI) and 2020/2021 (first semester, EVII).

Variables in Comparison
Educational background
Migrant background
Housing during the lecture period
Recipients of family/partner contribution (incl. all transfers in kind)
Distribution and concentration of total income

As well as an analysis of the characteristics of access, it is also relevant to investigate whether students attending higher education feel integrated in their institutional space. A relevant indicator that may work as a proxy is a sense of belonging to higher education (measured here through the student's assessment of his/her agreement with the statement

‘the feeling that I don’t really belong in higher education’). This indicator will be cross-checked with others related to academic backgrounds and contexts (such as the type of higher education institution, whether students are in their first year or in subsequent years, the type of access route or entry qualification, and field of study); and to social characteristics and conditions and their living conditions (students (not) living with parents; highest educational attainment of parents; migration background/differentiation between national/international education background; student/workers; public support; and size of study location) (see Table 2).



**Figure 1.** Enrolment in HE (in the first year/first time), rate of completion of secondary education, transitions to HE ["signalling social and financial crises and ideological positions of governments"], 2000/01 to 2020/21. Source: [16] DGEEC/MEC and [15] EUROSTUDENT PT V and VI.

**Table 2.** Academic contexts and conditions (1) and social contexts and conditions (2) of students, by the sense of belonging in HE between 2017 (second semester, EVI) and 2020 2020/21 (first semester, EVII).

Variables	Categories
(1) Academic contexts and conditions	
Type of higher education institution	University
	Other HEI
Students in their first year of HE	Students in their first year of higher education
	Students in higher education for longer than one year
Entry qualification	Non-traditional route
	Traditional route
Field of study	Education
	Arts and humanities
	Social sciences, journalism, and information
	Business, administration, and law
	Natural sciences, mathematics, and statistics
	ICTs
	Engineering, manufacturing, and construction
	Agriculture, forestry, fisheries, and veterinary
	Health and welfare
Services	

**Table 2.** *Cont.*

Variables	Categories
(2) Social backgrounds, contexts, and living conditions	
Students (not) living with parents	Students living with parents
	Students not living with parents
Highest educational attainment of parents	No tertiary education (ISCED 0–4)
	Tertiary education (ISCED 5–8)
Migration background	Second generation migrant students, domestically educated
	Migrants, domestically educated
	Students without migrant background, national ed. background
	International students (foreign HE qualification)
Student/ Workers	Other (born abroad, but native background, national ed. background)
	Not employed during the lecture period
	Student
Public Support	Worker
	Recipients
Size of study location	Non-recipients
	Less than 100.000
	100.000–300,000
	Capital city

Moreover, the relationships between these variables were tested using a chi-squared test (test for Independence) and considering statistical significance at the 0.05 level. The same relationships (the same crossings with data from different moments in the pandemic) were analysed from the point of view of Cramer's contingency coefficient  $V$  in order to analyse the level of association between the variables [40]. From this analysis orientation, we also seek to identify which trends may have been modified or bolstered as a result of the pandemic while taking into account the degree of significance and association between the variables under study.

#### 4. Results

##### 4.1. Access and Diversity: Growth during the Pandemic

Identifying and characterising the contraction and expansion phases of access in the Portuguese higher education system may prove useful in analysing the effects of the pandemic on these processes.

A large part of the policies put forward in response to the pandemic relate to the assessment of pupils and the way they complete secondary education (ISCED 3), which seems to have had an impact on boosting applications and entries into higher education.

Figure 1 places the trends of improved educational attainment in secondary education and increased enrolment in higher education, observed in the pandemic period, over a broader time horizon (2000/01–2020/21). The data shows a parallel between the various cycles of government (which have different policies and ideological orientations) and the upward or downward trends in the number of students graduating from secondary school and, within these, the relative weight of those who decide to enroll in the first year of a higher education course. These data suggest the relevance of the political context in mobilising populations towards higher education (as has already been seen in other studies, for example for the Swedish case, in [21]).



At the beginning of the last decade, especially in the academic years 2012/13, 2013/14, and 2014/15—years that were very much affected by the financial crisis and subsequent rescue of Portugal by the Troika—policies and the promotion of access to higher education failed to keep up with the upward dynamic of the completion of secondary education (Figure 1). It is also noteworthy that the fall in the rates of completion of secondary education in the years 2009/2010 and 2010/11 seem to have had repercussions on the flows into higher education. This reveals the importance of not only policies directed at access to higher education but also those directed at the completion of secondary education, especially those that were implemented to provide policy responses to the pandemic (caused by COVID-19).

Contrary to the retraction in the flows of access and attendance to higher education as a consequence of the previous financial crisis, in the current pandemic context, the policy measures implemented (aiming to ensure the sustained growth of enrolment applications and, simultaneously, mitigate early drop-outs, namely from secondary school), allowed the national competition for access to higher education in the academic year of 2021/22 to reach the highest level of applications and entries recorded in 20 years. The 2020 suspension of the eleventh and twelfth national exams for the completion of secondary education is particularly noteworthy as this measure (DL 14-G/2020) may have been the most relevant for the increase in the flow of students applying for higher education and the decrease in social selectivity in the completion of secondary education. Complementing these measures, the pressure on the HE system from the exponential growth in access applications led to an exceptional increase in the number of vacancies in all areas. Such responses had similar effects in many developed countries, where during the pandemic, there was an increase in enrolment [24].

Figure 1 is essential to take stock of how the pandemic affected access to higher education in Portugal while keeping in perspective other previous crises. If Figure 1 and Table 3 are read together, it can be seen that, although there has been social diversification among those enrolled in higher education, there has been a higher incidence of students following standard routes and taking direct transition routes between secondary and higher education. This can be deduced as an effect of the policy orientations described above.

Table 3 is particularly useful in answering the research question: how has the characterisation of higher education students in Portugal changed as a result of the pandemic?

The growing accessibility for young people whose parents never earned a diploma is highlighted in Table 3. These data compare the years 2017 and 2020. By this analysis we can confirm that the double recruitment social pattern [4,9] noted above has intensified, attenuating (without eliminating) the difference between the relative proportion of parents with higher education and the Portuguese population in the corresponding age group (45–64 years).

By comparing the information pertaining to the two years, it can be verified that it was possible to maintain and even deepen this social widening in higher education during the pandemic, probably in part due to policies promoting access to Portuguese higher education (as already mentioned).

Another dimension of diversification in the higher education system, in the sense of what ([37] Hauschildt et al., 2015) have called the decline of the 'normal student', relates to the increasingly evident presence of international students or students with migratory experience in a more internationalised institutional space where foreign and immigrant students are now a recognisable segment [9,38]. This diversification by these categories may have been reinforced by the political mechanisms of widening access, especially those concerning the response to the pandemic.

**Table 3.** Characterisation of the contexts and social conditions of higher education students, 2016/17 (second semester) and 2020/21 (first semester) (weighted sample values and %).

Social Contexts and Conditions of Students in HE	2016/17 (2nd Semester) (EVI)	2020/21 (1st Semester) (EVII)
<i>Educational background</i>	%	%
Parents with higher education	35.0	40.5
People with higher education: corresponding age groups (45–64) *	18.8	23.3
Ratio (parents/Portuguese people (45–64) with higher education)	1.9	1.7
<i>Migrant background</i>	%	%
Students without migrant background, domestically educated	78.3	72.3
Second generation migrants, domestically educated	12.6	14.8
International students (qualifications obtained in foreign educational institutions)	3.2	7.6
First generation migrants, domestically educated	3.5	3.5
Other students, domestically educated	2.3	1.8
<i>Housing during the lecture period</i>	%	%
Living with parents	48.8	53.3
Living in student accommodation	6.2	6.3
Living with partner and/or children, not with parents, not in student accommodation	13.4	12.6
Living with others, not with parents, not with partner/children, not in student accommodation	23.9	21.5
Living alone, not with parents, not in student accommodation, not with partner/children	7.7	6.3
<i>Recipients of family/partner contribution (incl. all transfers in kind)</i>	%	%
Recipients of family support	90.1	79.6
<i>Distribution and concentration of total income</i>	<i>coefficient</i>	<i>coefficient</i>
Gini coefficient	0.39	0.44

Source: [15] EUROSTUDENT PT (VI, VII), \* [41] INE, Labour force Survey.

During the pandemic, some of these formally enrolled international students—especially those from Portuguese-speaking African countries—returned to their countries of origin while others chose not to come to Portugal at all, which resulted in difficulties arising from differences in time zones, time access, inadequate access to the Internet and the obvious disadvantages of studying with much less interaction with colleagues ([42] p. 158). Even so, what we have seen in this last three-year period under analysis is that the population of those in higher education has diversified and that the pandemic has neither interrupted nor moderated this international dynamic. This diversification by these categories may have been reinforced by the political mechanisms of widening access, especially those concerning the response to the pandemic.

Table 3 also shows the distribution of students by their housing arrangements in the years in focus: 2020/21 (first semester) and 2016/17 (second semester). The changes observed in this period are not very significant. Last year, in the midst of the pandemic, the relative weight of displaced students sharing a house with others or living alone decreased slightly, while the proportion of those staying with their parents increased.

This relative rise in the number of those living with their parents, in comparison with the previous survey, may be related to two effects of the pandemic: firstly, the long periods of confinement and change to distance learning have caused some retraction in the search

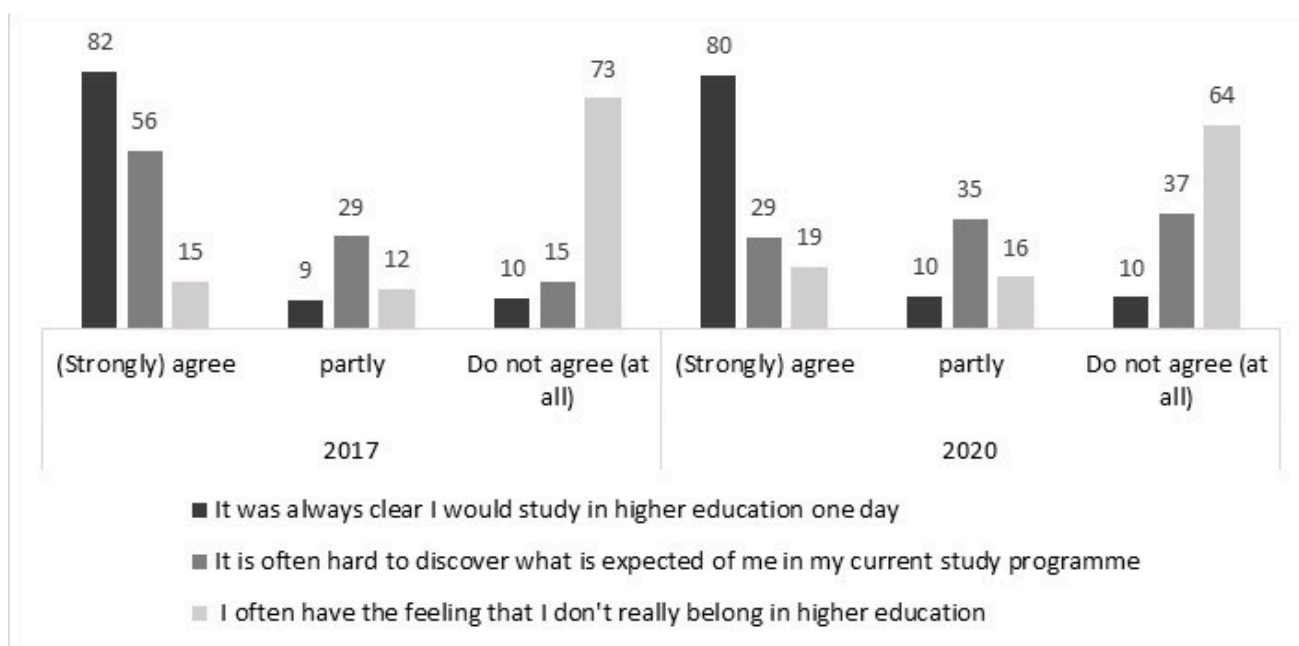
for alternative accommodation outside their family home; secondly, reduced income (either their own or their parents) may have resulted in the need to cut costs.

In fact, several indicators point out that inequality among students, which is historically very high in Portugal, may have deepened in the context of the pandemic crisis. The average inequality, measured by the Gini coefficient, is relatively high among students (its value is 0.44). According to national data from the Employment Survey, this value is 0.55, before social benefits, and 0.32 in relation to household disposable income (2019 for the general population). Although these indicators are not strictly comparable (taking into account their definition), inequality seems to be more accentuated among students. This inequality may be more blurred in terms of opportunities for access to higher education, but it can be seen in the conditions that allow for continuous study and course completion, and, in this respect, inequality has increased (as can be seen in Table 3).

#### 4.2. The Feeling of Belonging to Higher Education: Variations and Diversity in Times of Pandemic

To analyse the variations in the students' sense of belonging to higher education, we have considered how higher education has been affected by the pandemic. As already mentioned, the feeling of belonging is particularly interesting for gauging levels of institutional integration.

Figure 2 highlights this issue for the two academic years under analysis (the second semester of 2016/17 and the first semester of 2020/21), allowing an investigation into students' sense of belonging prevailing in the year prior to the pandemic and in the academic year following its outbreak, although still in the middle of the pandemic crisis.



**Figure 2.** Students' evaluations of their attendance in higher education, 2016/17 (second semester) and 2020/21 (first semester) (%). Source: [15] EUROSTUDENT PT (VI, VII).

It should also be noted that the indicator for a sense of not belonging in higher education shows that 35% (partially or totally) agree with this statement. This is 8 p.p. more than in the previous survey (EVI). This increase may be due, in part, to the effects of the pandemic, which include greater challenges in the process of integration of students in their educational institutions. Such perceptions may be related to the reduction of academic activities, making it difficult for students to establish a sense of belonging to the community. Vincent Tinto's model reports that students' permanence in the higher education system is dependent on the processes of integration into the social and academic systems of the educational institution of which they are a part [29,30]. However, the

pandemic has suspended this possibility, increasing the likelihood of students dropping out of higher education. Also noteworthy is the fact that 10% are considering dropping out of higher education.

The same figure reveals how students consider a qualification pathway in higher education as being linked to expectations and decisions built up over their academic experience. Figure 2 provides some relevant information on some of these elements. For the vast majority of students, eventual attendance in higher education had always been projected (80% of the students in the sample), while on the contrary, almost 20% felt that they did not belong.

These indicators not only present very consistent distributions of responses but also show an almost naturalised conception of educational routes that are completed in higher education, although a fifth of these students' express processes of fragile integration at this educational level.

The sense of belonging in higher education is another potential proxy variable in analysing students' academic integration. The data collected by the Portuguese survey allows for a comparison between the years 2017 and 2020 (Portuguese EUROSTUDENT VI and VII). The Tinto Model refers to the degree of integration of students in the institutions they attend as a factor in deciding whether or not to drop out of higher education. To summarise, and as an important result of the research, it is relatively clear that the pandemic, although it has not affected the project of carrying out higher education training, has weakened students' sense of belonging and their understanding of what is expected of them in the development of their courses.

Table 4 permits this analysis and reveals how the feeling of belonging shifts according to the various academic contexts and conditions between two points in time.

In general terms, those who clearly or partially agree that they feel they do not belong in higher education increased by nine percentage points. The pandemic has reinforced this difficulty in the feeling of belonging in higher education and almost all student segments were analysed (looking at their academic contexts and conditions) (Table 4).

For example, students who entered higher education through non-traditional routes are those who have a lower integration (or a lower sense of belonging) in higher education (being statistically significant, for a  $p = 0.000$ , although with weak intensity for a Cramer's  $V = 0.070$ ) (Table 4). It seems to be more or less indifferent to study in university or polytechnic education. However, the feeling of belonging in higher education institutions seems to be slightly more difficult in polytechnic institutions (statistically significant in the 2020/21 academic year, for a  $p < 0.05$ ). However, the pandemic may have had a greater impact on the feeling of belonging to higher education among first-year students compared to the rest of the students (being statistically significant, for a  $p = 0.000$ ). This is certainly related to an academic experience marked by constraints (to cope with their relational contexts, affecting the dimensions of educational and pedagogical relationships, as well as those that refer to more convivial dimensions). However, it is important to note that data collection in 2016/17 was in the second semester and data collection in 2020/21 was in the first semester, which for this segment of students (who are in their first year) the time difference in collecting information in the academic year may make a difference in capturing the sense of belonging for these students. Even so, considering this difference in the moments of implementation of the survey, the difference between the levels of belonging to higher education is analytically and statistically very consistent.

As we have seen, first-year students are generally more vulnerable to the conditions of integration and its effects, especially in the way it might affect their academic success [34]. Therefore, they already had less of a sense of belonging prior to the pandemic, but the post-pandemic consequences on the functioning of academic activities seem to have aggravated their ability to integrate (being statistically significant for  $p = 0.000$ , but of low intensity for a Cramer's  $V = 0.095$ ).

Those in arts and humanities, ICTs, and services, also showed more difficulty in integrating into this institutional space pre-pandemic (this relationship is also statistically

significant, at both moments of the survey, for a  $p < 0.01$ ). ICT students had the lowest feeling of belonging to higher education before the pandemic (25.2% stated that they do not belong in higher education), and although they continue to show high percentages after the pandemic (21.4%), the effect of the pandemic appears to have been greater amongst arts and humanities students, who now show a higher percentage of feeling disconnected from the higher education system (from 19.6% to 24.2%, respectively). Interestingly, ICT and service students felt more integrated after the pandemic. These students have a great affinity with communication technologies and this may have given them more comfort with a communication and relational model via technologies.

In relation to students' backgrounds and contexts, a sense of belonging to higher education was the same between students who lived with their parents and those who did not. Although not statistically significant, it seems that the pandemic brought greater difficulties in establishing a sense of belonging and integration among students who live with their parents.

Higher education students whose parents do not have higher education seem to share the feeling of not belonging more, regardless of the effects of the pandemic (with significant  $\chi^2$ -test values). Before the pandemic, students from less educated backgrounds felt more distant from the institutional space of higher education than those from more educated backgrounds. In the Portuguese context, staying at home makes the characterisation of social origins even more important. These serve as contexts and shape the social and educational paths of these students until a late stage in their lives.

As a result of the pandemic, the differences between these two segments (students with parents with higher education and without higher education) in relation to the sense of not belonging seem to have been attenuated.

Students with migration experience (first or second generation) are those who report greater difficulty in having this sense of belonging (Table 5). First generation immigrant students (other than international students) already showed more difficulties pre-pandemic integrating into this institutional space. In 2017 (with a statistical significance of  $p = 0.006$ ), it was not as visible for second-generation migrant students, but it seems that such a feeling was reinforced by the pandemic for this segment of students. It is also worth noting the increased difficulty in establishing a sense of belonging to higher education among students studying in less populated regions (being statistically significant, for a  $p = 0.002$ ). However, and taking into account some of the categories already pointed out, although this feeling has visibly increased, it still seems to have been transversal to many of the contexts under observation.

The pandemic seems to have affected even more the integration of the students who in recent years have contributed more to the social diversification in higher education—second generation immigrants, international students, and students enrolled in HEIs located in less populated regions.



**Table 4.** Academic contexts and conditions according to the feeling of not belonging in higher education, 2016/17 (second semester) and 2020/21 (first semester) (weighted sample values and %).

“I Often Have the Feeling that I Don’t Really Belong in Higher Education”		2016/17 (2nd Semester)				2020/21 (1st Semester)			
		(Strongly) Agree	Partly	Do Not Agree (At All)	Total	(Strongly) Agree	Partly	Do Not Agree (At All)	Total
Type of HEI	University	14.2%	11.7%	74.0%	100.0% (n = 3084)	19.3%	15.3%	65.4%	100.0% (n = 3766)
	Other HEI	15.6%	13.3%	71.0%	100.0% (n = 1770)	19.8%	17.9%	62.2%	100.0% (n = 2047)
		$\chi^2(2) = 5.247 p = 0.073$ Cramer’s V = 0.033				$\chi^2(2) = 7.981 p = 0.018$ Cramer’s V = 0.037			
Students in their first year of HE	Students in their first year of studying in HE	16.5%	12.9%	70.5%	100.0% (n = 1900)	24.8%	19.6%	55.6%	100.0% (n = 1190)
	Students studying in HE for longer than 1 year	13.6%	11.9%	74.5%	100.0% (n = 2954)	18.1%	15.2%	66.7%	100.0% (n = 4531)
		$\chi^2(2) = 10.144 p = 0.006$ Cramer’s V = 0.046				$\chi^2(2) = 51.226 p = 0.000$ Cramer’s V = 0.095			
Entry qualification	Non-traditional route (n = 3766)	17.0%	15.9%	67.1%	100.0% (n = 1049)	22.7%	17.9%	59.4%	100.0% (n = 419)
	Traditional route	14.2%	11.5%	74.3%	100.0% (n = 3658)	19.3%	16.1%	64.6%	100.0% (n = 4975)
		$\chi^2(2) = 22.936 p = 0.000$ Cramer’s V = 0.070				$\chi^2(2) = 4.707 p = 0.095$ Cramer’s V = 0.030			
Field of study	Education	14.9%	9.8%	75.3%	100.0% (n = 174)	19.8%	19.8%	60.5%	100.0% (n = 177)
	Arts and Humanities	19.6%	13.4%	67.0%	100.0% (n = 448)	24.2%	16.8%	59.0%	100.0% (n = 632)
	Social sc. Journalism and Information	15.3%	11.9%	72.8%	100.0% (n = 464)	20.4%	16.0%	63.6%	100.0% (n = 668)
	Business. Administration and Law	13.2%	12.0%	74.8%	100.0% (n = 1085)	19.0%	16.1%	65.0%	100.0% (n = 1414)
	Natural sc. Math. and Statistics	15.3%	13.6%	71.1%	100.0% (n = 235)	22.6%	15.9%	61.4%	100.0% (n = 345)
	ICTs	25.2%	13.7%	61.1%	100.0% (n = 131)	21.4%	15.0%	63.6%	100.0% (n = 173)

Table 4. Cont.

“I Often Have the Feeling that I Don’t Really Belong in Higher Education”	2016/17 (2nd Semester)				2020/21 (1st Semester)			
	(Strongly) Agree	Partly	Do Not Agree (At All)	Total	(Strongly) Agree	Partly	Do Not Agree (At All)	Total
Eng. Manufacturing and Construction	14.2%	12.8%	73.0%	100.0% (n = 1182)	20.2%	16.0%	63.8%	100.0% (n = 1294)
Agricult. Forestry. Fisheries and Vet.	7.0%	4.0%	89.0%	100.0% (n = 100)	15.2%	15.2%	69.6%	100.0% (n = 125)
Health and Welfare	11.6%	11.2%	77.1%	100.0% (n = 704)	16.3%	16.5%	67.2%	100.0% (n = 823)
Services	18.8%	15.5%	65.7%	100.0% (n = 329)	7.9%	15.2%	76.8%	100.0% (n = 164)
	$\chi^2(18) = 55.952 p = 0.000$ Cramer’s V = 0.076				$\chi^2(2) = 38.194 p = 0.004$ Cramer’s V = 0.057			
Total	14.2%	12.3%	72.9%	100.0% (n = 4854)	19.5%	16.2%	64.3%	100.0% (n = 5814)

Source: [15] EUROSTUDENT PT (VI, VII).

**Table 5.** Students with specific social backgrounds, contexts, and living conditions according to the feeling of not belonging in higher education, 2016/17 (second semester) and 2020/21 (first semester) (weighted sample values and %).

“I Often Have the Feeling that I Don’t Really Belong in Higher Education”	2017				2020			
	(Strongly) Agree	Partly	Do Not Agree (At All)	Total	(Strongly) Agree	Partly	Do Not Agree (At All)	Total
Students (not) living with parents	14.6%	12.0%	73.4%	100.0% (n = 2347)	20.2%	16.0%	63.8%	100.0% (n = 3103)
Not living with parents	14.9%	12.6%	72.5%	100.0% (n = 2506)	18.7%	16.5%	64.8%	100.0% (n = 2712)
	$\chi^2(2) = 0.542 p = 0.763$ Cramer’s V = 0.011				$\chi^2(2) = 2.284 p = 0.319$ Cramer’s V = 0.020			
Highest educational attainment of parents	15.6%	13.6%	70.8%	100.0% (n = 3081)	19.7%	17.4%	63.0%	100.0% (n = 3399)
Tertiary ed. (ISCED 5–8)	13.1%	10.0%	77.0%	100.0% (n = 1692)	18.9%	14.6%	66.5%	100.0% (n = 2335)
	$\chi^2(4) = 22.359 p = 0.000$ Cramer’s V = 0.048				$\chi^2(2) = 9.454 p = 0.009$ Cramer’s V = 0.041			

Table 5. Cont.

“I Often Have the Feeling that I Don’t Really Belong in Higher Education”	2017				2020				
	(Strongly) Agree	Partly	Do Not Agree (At All)	Total	(Strongly) Agree	Partly	Do Not Agree (At All)	Total	
Migration background	Second generation migrant students, domestically educated	12.4%	11.9%	75.7%	100.0% (n = 605)	22.4%	13.8%	63.8%	100.0% (n = 842)
	Migrants, domestically educated	23.1%	10.1%	66.9%	100.0% (n = 169)	22.3%	12.2%	65.5%	100.0% (n = 197)
	Without a migrant background, a national ed. background	14.6%	12.8%	72.6%	100.0% (n = 3792)	19.2%	16.4%	64.4%	100.0% (n = 4082)
	International students (foreign HE qualification)	12.9%	8.4%	78.7%	100.0% (n = 155)	18.9%	14.9%	66.2%	100.0% (n = 429)
	Other (born abroad, but native background, nat. ed. background)	20.9%	7.3%	71.8%	100.0% (n = 110)	14.7%	22.5%	62.7%	100.0% (n = 102)
	$\chi^2(8) = 21.522 p = 0.006$ Cramer’s $V = 0.047$				$\chi^2(8) = 14.084 p = 0.080$ Cramer’s $V = 0.035$				
Student/Workers	Not employed during the lecture period	14.2%	12.3%	73.5%	100.0% (n = 3386)	20.4%	15.8%	63.8%	100.0% (n = 4026)
	Student	15.7%	12.0%	72.2%	100.0% (n = 681)	18.4%	15.1%	66.4%	100.0% (n = 912)
	Worker	16.3%	12.7%	71.0%	100.0% (n = 787)	16.4%	19.3%	64.3%	100.0% (n = 874)
	$\chi^2(4) = 3.062 p = 0.548$ Cramer’s $V = 0.018$				$\chi^2(4) = 13.799 p = 0.008$ Cramer’s $V = 0.034$				
Public Support	Recipients	14.1%	11.9%	74.0%	100.0% (n = 1162)	17.7%	14.6%	67.7%	100.0% (n = 786)
	Non-recipients	15.1%	12.2%	72.8%	100.0% (n = 2709)	18.9%	15.9%	65.2%	100.0% (n = 3554)
	$\chi^2(2) = 0.731 p = 0.694$ Cramer’s $V = 0.014$				$\chi^2(2) = 1.741 p = 0.419$ Cramer’s $V = 0.020$				
Size of study location	Less than 100.000	16.7%	11.9%	71.4%	100.0% (n = 1109)	23.3%	18.0%	58.7%	100.0% (n = 823)
	100.000–300,000	14.5%	12.8%	72.7%	100.0% (n = 2195)	18.4%	16.5%	65.1%	100.0% (n = 3030)
	Capital city	13.7%	11.9%	74.3%	100.0% (n = 1550)	19.6%	15.0%	65.4%	100.0% (n = 1962)
	$\chi^2(4) = 5.508 p = 0.239$ Cramer’s $V = 0.034$				$\chi^2(4) = 16.467 p = 0.002$ Cramer’s $V = 0.038$				
Total	14.2%	12.3%	72.9%	100.0% (n = 4854)	19.5%	16.2%	64.3%	100.0% (n = 5814)	

Source: EUROSTUDENT PT (VI, VII).

## 5. Discussion and Conclusions

This research sought to analyse how the pandemic may have influenced the dynamics of access to higher education in Portugal, the changes in students' social and academic environment, and their sense of belonging, which infer greater difficulties in integration and connection to the higher education system and, more specifically, to their particular institution and study programme.

Not only did the political responses to the pandemic result in a social widening of access to higher education but it also posed a greater challenge to students' ability to integrate and establish a sense of belonging, jeopardising permanence in the system through the completion of an academic qualification. Perhaps one of the most noteworthy aspects of this social diversification among students is that those who did not already have a sense of belonging or who came from relatively vulnerable living conditions or backgrounds felt more disconnected and distant from their training contexts in higher education.

Pandemic policy intervention has focused mainly on accessibility and the institutional and political systems for entry into higher education, although there have been some additional support measures for higher education students to continue attending their courses. The political responses to the pandemic (that in Portugal have increased and pressured access to higher education) have focused mainly on the completion of secondary education and the increase in enrolment capacity and may not have a permanent application or lasting effects on the higher education system if they are discontinued. Such analysis draws attention to the fact that the evolution and expansion of access and schooling processes are not irreversible realities, and situations of regression or moderation may occur, as has happened at certain times and in some highly qualified countries due to political and state model reorientations (expressed in the Swedish model by [21]). The data also underline the political hesitation surrounding the strategic importance of widening the recruitment base of those who access higher education, contributing to Portugal's structural delay regarding the need and objectives of improving the qualification of the adult population. This highlights that public policies in this area and the processes of transformation of the state can be very impactful on the dynamics of the development of the higher education system [17,21].

In fact, one of the hypotheses in this analysis is that the policy response—mostly based on the elimination of barriers (such as exams) in the completion of secondary education—has affected the social widening and diversification of access, but has perhaps reduced the diversification of academic pathways, with a greater incidence of the direct or traditional academic pathways segment, compared to return pathways or access to higher education later in students' lives [9].

If some academic experiences may have been suspended (such as leaving parents' homes to live in the city where the educational institution is located), the fact is that the widening of access has allowed the social diversification of the student body. This is best illustrated by the growth of students who are children of immigrants (second generation) and even international students.

Two essential points summarize the main contributions of this research:

Firstly, the political response to the pandemic has eliminated some of the more socially selective mechanisms for achieving secondary education, namely the national exams for concluding this level of schooling. Secondly, even if the pandemic has not greatly increased academic drop-out intentions (which for the moment we are unable to ascertain with certainty), it has blatantly affected the integration of students, putting their continuity in the higher education system at risk. Unlike other crises, such as the previous financial crisis (analysed in other studies, such as [13], the pandemic has revealed some noteworthy distinctions in the case of students who gained access through non-traditional routes.

It is also noteworthy to mention that those with recent or vulnerable experiences in their higher education experience—for example, first-year students or those with an immigrant background—were those who, with the pandemic, most reinforced a feeling of not being part of the higher education institutional environment. Such analysis will

be very relevant for the definition of policies to maintain students, in their diversity and inclusiveness, in higher education.

Future waves of the EUROSTUDENT survey will be very useful for continuing this line of research. These will make it possible to clarify whether the effects of the pandemic on the higher education system are of a more conjunctural or structural nature. Another line of research could be based on analysing changes in the models of social and institutional integration of students in higher education as a result of the pandemic and how this type of event (such as the pandemic) can challenge Vincent Tinto's theoretical model [30].

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