



Inclusion of Students with Special Educational Needs: The Case of a Portuguese Public University

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Abstract

Attention to the inclusion of students with special educational needs (SEN) has been an increasingly reality in education. New practices in favor of physical, attitudinal and digital accessibility for students have also been perceived in Higher Education. In the case of Portugal, a greater number of students with SEN are enrolled in Higher Education Institutions (HEI). Among many reasons, it is believed that the support of a policy presenting a Special Access Contingent that guarantees a number of places for students with SEN, can be one of the main aspects. However, at national level, policies for inclusion in higher education that guarantee the rights and permanence of students with SEN are not verified. Given this reality, HEI have created internal statutes and supported the students on a case-by-case basis. On the one hand, these support initiatives can favor the trajectory of the students, on the other, they place the student to be at the mercy of the sensibility of HEIs. In this sense, this study presents, in a qualitative context, the perceptions of 10 students with different SEN, of several cycles and courses on inclusion in a Portuguese Public University. We aim to represent the main supports offered by the HEI, evidenced by the students, as enhancers of inclusion in Higher Education. The data were collected by semi-structured interviews and analyzed using the content analysis technique with the support of the qualitative analysis software webQDA. From the results, it was verified that the students reported being satisfied with the different the different supports offered by the HEI. From these results, we differentiated three categories of accessibility, being presented in order of greater reference: 1. attitudinal (187 references), 2. physical/structural (49 references) and 3. digital/material (48 references). It is noticeable that all these aspects merge, and a work of cohesion between all the supports listed is necessary. In this sense, the present work aims to promote reflection on the dimensions of support for the inclusion of students with SEN in Higher Education, based on the reality of a Portuguese public HEI.

Keywords: *inclusion; special educational needs; higher education; Portugal.*

1. Introduction

The crescent fight for the rights to equality, equity and inclusion, has endorsed the necessity of higher levels of attention and support of students with special education needs (SEN) on the national and global spectrum. From the progress obtained in favor of accessibilities, it was learned that the support for the SEN students and what is provided for their inclusion on Higher Education Institutions (HEI) is essential for their social and academic adaptation, whose academic trajectory, including the transition to higher education, the access and the permanence in it, is an essential part of the process [1]. However, in the Portuguese reality, this support is not always given efficiently. Without inclusive policies that can grant the rights and the permanence of the SEN students, they are left to rely on internal statutes of the HEI, when they existing [2].

This article explores, within an interpretive paradigm and using qualitative methods, the personal narratives and the educational experiences of 10 university students with different SEN, periods and courses that attend a Public Portuguese University. Among these narratives, it was intended to analyse and portrait the most important ways of support provided by this HEI, demonstrated as enhancers for inclusion, access trajectory and permanence.

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2. Inclusion in Higher Education

In a number of countries, the efforts for the construction of an inclusive education have focused in the basic education. However the fact that the access to the higher education is now more possible than in the past, that the university training is essential in the professional point of view, and also that the Institutions of Higher Education are part of the public education, implies the need of taking into account the inclusive character of the HEI, especially for the youngster in need [3].

The inclusion in higher education is recognized by the political goals, which aim to enlarge the participation of several students, including the SEN's. Specialists [4] support that the legislation on deficiency demands inclusive institutional practices and policies so it can meet the needs of the growing number of students with specific learning difficulties. Yet this need cannot be verified only in the access to the higher education sphere, but it must take into account the whole academic trajectory of those students, because, apart from the physical and structural obstacles, there is a need to confront prejudice over the different and the deficient.

To imagine an inclusive university involves, beyond the structural and administrative changes, the confrontation of the cultural and attitudinal frontiers, recognizing the existence of the differences and primarily appreciating it [5]. It is understood that a truly inclusive university is based on the creation of a single interface of people or services for all the students [6].

3. Methodology

In order to respond to the research goals, the chosen methods focused on the paradigm of interpretative research with a qualitative approach. This choice was made due to the necessity of describing and understanding precise situations lived in a social context [7], so we could review with students with SEN how they see and what they think about the education they are receiving, either to comprehend their universe or to report their condition and analyse possibilities (necessities) of an inclusive educational approach that would be truly significant to them [8].

The data gathering was made with semi-structured interviews that adressed different levels: I - Personal and Sociodemographic Characterization; II - Trajectory before University; III - Access to University and; IV - Continuity. The data processing was made with the Content Analysis technique, with the help of the software WebQDA.

Ten students of different educational levels (bachelor, master and doctoral programs) that attend a Public University in Portugal, located in the center region of the country, participated on this study. Their Special Education Needs vary among sensory and psychomotor disorders (visual impairment, low vision and color blindness), learning disorders (dyslexia), physical or orthopedic impairments (spina bifida and osteogenesis imperfecta) and neuromuscular and nervous system disorders (cerebral palsy and stroke).

4. Presentation and result analysis

Among the analyzed data, gathered from the semi-structured interviews, it will be described the main perception of students regarding their path on higher education. The data will be presented on tables with reference numbers to each described category and subcategory, on which the two most referenced categories will be highlighted. Citations of the students will also be presented, in order to exemplify their experience.

Regarding the results, it was verified that students consider the support they receive from HEI on different areas as satisfactory. From the qualitative analysis results, the gathered data was grouped and separated into three accessibility categories, as shown on the image below (which depict the software used on the analysis. Version in Portuguese) and are presented in order of greater reference: 1.attitudinal (187 references), 2.physical/structural (49 references) and 3.digital/material (48 references).



Image 01 - The study's categories, Source: webQDA

Among the faced barriers, attitudinal ones were perceived as the most difficult to confront, in view of the changes that are deemed needed regarding individual and collective values on overcoming prejudices in relation to differences [5]. More than physical barriers, the discrimination that these students face is an extremely relevant information, and it can result on the lack of acceptance and prejudice among the academic community [9].

On the other side, the same aspects are responsible for the higher reference regarding the satisfactory support provided by this HEI, as it can be seen on the table below. The participating students referred that the general support of the academic community (75 references) and attitudinal support of the Pedagogical Office (34 references) of this HEI is satisfactory (see Table 1), as highlighted by student D.: *"in general people help each other. Do you need help with this internship report? I can help you. Do you need help with some paper? We can help you and vice-versa, and there's a very strong team spirit, there's a will that everybody succeeds and also in terms of integration"*.

Table 1 - Results on the category "Attitudinal Accessibility"

Category: Attitudinal Accessibility		References	Participant
Subcategories	General support of the academic community	75	11
	Pedagogical Office	34	9
	Previous information	21	10
	Comprehension	18	7
	Promotion of social activities	13	8
	Respect	11	6
	No discrimination	10	6
	Volunteer support	5	3
	Total	187	

It becomes clear that the architectural barriers need to be seen not only as a set of ramps and measurements to be taken into consideration, but as a general philosophy of reception, comfort, and autonomy, in all spaces and buildings [3]. It is relevant that the research found that students affirm that this HEI presents physical/structural General Accessibility (25 references) and Accessibility for displacement (14 references), see Table 2. Student M. says that *"the University is very well adapted on this aspect, it is very good, very well thought, and by the way, that is precisely the reason why I am here"*.



Table 2 - Results on the category “Physical/structural accessibility”

Category: Physical/structural accessibility		Reference	Participant
Subcategories	General accessibility	25	9
	Accessibility for displacement	14	5
	Adapted class rooms	6	2
	Student housing accessibility	2	2
	Parking accessibility	1	1
	Refurbishment of spaces	1	1
Total		49	

Accessibility consists on the elimination of barriers on the physical and digital spaces and on regarding the equalization of opportunities [10]. With that in mind, the support given must enable the student to act with autonomy regarding the acquisition and availability of materials; the elimination of digital barriers is an essential aspect for Higher Education inclusion.

The participants also referred (see Table 3) in 48 text units that this HEI present Digital/Material Accessibility, especially in terms of financial investment, professional formation and time to offer support on Adapted Formatting (26 references), and Investment in softwares/support materials (12 references), as affirmed by student D.: *"there's a lot of support for students, they are here and want us to be welcome... in terms of materials I have no complain, my office is full of adapted materials"*, and reaffirmed by student A.: *"I came here to study and I'm glad I came to here, which is one the best universities in terms of material accessibility; the university has a good documentation service that give us adapted materials"*.

Table 3 - Results on the category “Digital/material accessibility”

Category: Digital/material accessibility		Reference	Participant
Subcategories	Adapted formatting	26	8
	Investment in software/support materials	12	4
	Student Support Service	10	4
Total		48	

The interviews allowed to perceive that students create their own strategies of inclusion, according to their life experience and academic background. On the other hand, this HEI adds support and promote the continuity in higher education, as verified on the presented accessibility categories. On that sense, and according to some authors [11], each student with SEN has the right to find the conditions for their continuity and the university must ensure these rights.

5. Final acknowledgments

To talk about inclusive education on High Education Institutions can be a challenge, either social, educational or even political. Due to that, this paper intended to promote a thought on the support dimensions and inclusion of students with SEN on HEI, using the students personal and academic experiences as a way to create a better understanding of the positive aspects regarding inclusion. Among many ways of support described by the students, it was verified that Attitudinal Accessibility was the most referred regarding satisfactory support for the inclusion on High Education Institutions. This result is most probably due, to the fact that attitudinal practices and attitudinal accessibility are interconnected to equal rights, given that they secure respect to difference, singularities and disabilities, whatever they are. On an expanded way, they aim to end prejudice and discrimination, promoting acceptance to all. The goal of the presented analysis is not to highlight aspects that need to be changed, but to clarify the satisfactory conditions for students to develop with what is offered to



them, as well as present the reality of inclusion on HEI as something attainable. There are challenges, but there is also inclusion.

Acknowledgement

This work is financially supported by National Funds through FCT – Fundação para a Ciência e a Tecnologia, Portugal, for the Doctoral Grant with reference no. SFRH/BD/124543/2016 and under the project UID/CED/00194/2013.

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