

Article

Inclusive Education in Portuguese Higher Education: A Study on the Conceptual (In)Definition of Students in Institutional Documents

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Abstract: Over time, inclusive education has evolved in the search for more appropriate designations for its target audience, aiming to promote inclusive language and combat prejudiced and discriminatory behavior. More current paradigms, such as the Universal Design for Learning and the Multilevel Approach, propose completely abandoning the use of designations for students (1). This qualitative study uses a documentary analysis to examine how the statutes of 26 Portuguese public higher education institutions (HEIs) designate students who need academic support and to understand the educational concepts associated with these designations (2). The results revealed that Portuguese HEIs still adopt various student designations, often based on a medical model of classification and diagnosis. Furthermore, these designations do not fully encompass academic diversity, nor do they consider the diverse needs that students may present throughout their academic journey, which consequently limits access for all to inclusive practices in higher education (3). Considering these findings, there is an urgent need to abandon student designations in Portuguese HEIs and promote inclusive practices that cater to everyone, ensuring that students remain in and succeed in higher education, regardless of medical validation (4).

Keywords: designation; statutes; inclusive education; higher education; academic supports



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1. Introduction

The history of education throughout the years has been characterized by a persistent challenge: the exclusion of groups that do not fit into the established traditional model. Discrimination within the educational sphere is widespread, spanning issues of race, social class, gender, religion, and disability, among others. In response to this systematic exclusion, the transformative concept of inclusive education has emerged, aiming to ensure the full and meaningful participation of everyone in the education system [1].

The concept of inclusion, central to this study, extends beyond the mere non-exclusion of students in higher education institutions (HEIs). Inclusion embraces inclusive education as a fundamental right, which guarantees not only access to education but also promotes the well-being, dignity, and autonomy of individuals. Furthermore, it seeks to eliminate barriers and promote practices that ensure access to education and participation for all [2].

In this context, a truly inclusive society is concerned with its actions, practices, and language. After all, through language, we can express acceptance, respect, or even prejudice toward people and their characteristics [3]. Over the years, the inclusive education field has tried to establish appropriate designations for dealing with disability and learning difficulties to minimize prejudiced and discriminatory behavior [1].

Among the various designations adopted, we find disability/disabled, incapable, and SEN (Special Educational Needs) in more significant numbers [1]. The latter designation

refers to children and young people with learning difficulties and/or some disability [4]. This concept was mentioned for the first time in 1978, in the United Kingdom, with the publication of the Special Educational Needs Report—Report of the Committee of Inquiry into the Education of Handicapped Children and Young People, also known as the Warnock Report. This report, which refers to the different levels of non-higher education, was published in response to the interests of health and education professionals and family members of children and young people with functional diversity and/or academic difficulties [5]. The document defined students with SENs as having learning difficulties or physical, sensory, intellectual, emotional, or social problems. The Warnock Report did not intend to exclude the concept of “disability”. Rather, it proposed a change in focus in analyzing students’ demands, favoring an educational vision over a medical and/or psychological approach and prioritizing educational support service creation [6].

The publication of this report generated debates for more inclusive education, advocating that teaching spaces should adapt to those who do not fit the standards of “normality” and should be open to everyone. The SEN concept represented a new educational approach for these audiences. It brought significant advances to all levels of education, transforming educational theories and practices and producing improvements in the mobilization of material and human resources [6].

In Portugal, the first publications of official provisions that adopted the designation ‘SEN’ were Decree-Law No. 35/90, concerning compulsory schooling for everyone, and Decree-Law No. 319/91, which established a special educational regime for students with SENs, proposing changes in the educational process, curriculum organization, and support measures [7].

Still in the 1990s, as a reflection of this concept, the Special Contingent for Access to Higher Education became effective, defining 2% of the vacancies set in the national competition for candidates diagnosed with physical and sensory disabilities, including psychological functions that hindered participation on equal terms with others [8].

Following the progress of the SEN designation, the Salamanca Declaration (1994) started to consider that all students could present some Special Educational Need during their educational process. In other words, this designation expanded to refer to students with “disabilities”, with high abilities, in social precariousness, belonging to ethnic or cultural minorities, and with behavioral or emotional problems, among others [9]. This reinforced the duty of educational institutions to focus on accessibility and inclusion and influenced many countries to modify their educational policies and practices [10,11].

In 2008, Portugal moved forward with equal opportunity policies for everyone with the publication of Decree-Law No. 3/2008, which proposed the inclusion of children and young people with SENs in schools and made it mandatory to draw up an Individual Education Program (IEP). Specifically, specialized school teams were responsible for providing a comprehensive description of students, taking into consideration their biological and participation difficulties, as well as barriers to and facilitators of their functioning, to guarantee them educational equity [12,13].

The SEN designation has become well known in schools and higher education institutions, in official discourses, and even at the level of common sense, making it possible to identify variations associated with the same concept, such as Specific, Special Needs, and Special Educational Needs. Even the publication of the Basic Law of the Educational System (*Lei de Base do Sistema Educativo*) appropriates the designation “Specific Educational Needs” to refer to physical and mental disabilities based on medical diagnoses and excluding learning difficulties [4,14,15].

The conceptualization of SENs may have confused school and academic communities in understanding that the designation refers to all students who present learning difficulties and/or need support in adapting to the education system to succeed in their academic path [7]. Although the designation SENs has been important for thinking about inclusive education and has proposed a distancing from the medical model, it is still common to conceptualize students with SENs as those who present educational deficits and demand

individual scholarly responses based on their problems. This concept of SENs has become a reference category for a homogeneous group of students who continue to be perceived as deficient in some aspect of their learning [4].

Although it is present in (inter)national documents, the designation SENs has been the target of debate and criticism by researchers, as they suggest this designation still represents student segregation and appears to be strictly linked to special education, which may have generated misinterpretations and the trivialization of its use [15].

This concern was considered in recent Portuguese legislation, Decree-Law No. 54/2018 of 6 July, which disregards the use of a designation to refer to students, abolishing a categorization system and placing the focus on educational practices. The law proposed the creation of teaching structures designed to promote equal educational opportunities for all students and guarantee the right to educational access [13,15].

Some authors dismiss the SEN designation, such as Tony Booth and Mel Ainscow (2002), who published the 'Index for Inclusion' instrument, which is widely used to evaluate schools. The researchers proposed replacing the notion of "Special Educational Needs" with "barriers to learning and participation" and "support resources to learning and participation". The aim is to support learning and participation by increasing the inclusive capacity of educational settings [10,16].

This movement beyond designations to identify students reflects the progress brought about by the Universal Design for Learning and the Multilevel Approach [17]. The Universal Design for Learning refers to the curricular planning and organization of universal measures for all students, proposing a learning model that is accessible, flexible, and effective, accommodating all educational differences and specificities. The Multilevel Approach offers an integrated action model aimed toward the success of everyone through a set of support measures for learning and inclusion and recommends abandoning student categorization systems, focusing on strategies and intervention measures [18].

The Multilevel Approach proposes the concept of "support measures for learning and inclusion" for the organization of practices by levels of intervention [19,20], which vary in type, intensity, and frequency, depending on the needs and potential of students throughout their academic paths. The focus is no longer on "incapacity" and "disability" but on "Additional Support Needs (ASN)" that students may require to achieve their academic goals [21].

The concern with using a more appropriate designation to refer to students with some difficulty in the learning process, especially when dealing with issues full of stigma and stereotypes in society, becomes essential for providing pertinent information and conceptions for the social inclusion of everyone and for overcoming the prejudices reinforced and perpetuated throughout history [1]. The appropriate choice for the designation can favor the proximity between students and teachers so that recipients receive adequate support for their needs [6].

Regarding higher education, we know that it is equally connected, influenced, and contaminated by the designations adopted in education in general. These designations are modified according to the prevailing values in each society at a given time. However, currently, the discussion around how we designate students, and even whether we should single out students who need academic support, has had a greater emphasis in the inclusive education field. We believe there is a deep need to understand the modes and concepts that determine the designations adopted for students. In this sense, we pose two questions for our study: How are students designated and conceptualized in the institutional statutes of Portuguese public HEIs? What are the educational concepts that support these forms of designation?

Therefore, our interest goes beyond simply understanding how students are designated in Portuguese higher education; we also endeavor to investigate the educational policies enacted by Portuguese HEIs to foster inclusion. This interest is fueled by recent legal progress and the promotion of inclusive education in Portugal, but primarily by the persistent challenges that must be addressed to achieve genuine inclusion nationwide. The

history of exclusion and the deeply entrenched stereotypes in our culture pose significant barriers to the comprehensive implementation of inclusive education within this academic environment. Consequently, many students continue to encounter obstacles, resulting in high rates of academic failure and dropout, particularly among more vulnerable groups in Portuguese HEIs.

Thus, building upon these concerns, our study aims to examine how the statutes of Portuguese public HEIs designate students in need of academic support and to elucidate the educational principles underpinning these designations.

In the following sections, after detailing the methodological framework that guided our research, we will share the results of our document analysis of the statutes of all public higher education institutions in Portugal. The final considerations will provide additional insight into the importance of abandoning the use of discriminatory designations and propose guidelines for improving institutional documents.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Study Design

To address our research questions, we employed a qualitative approach [22], utilizing methods of document analysis [23] and thematic analysis [24] to examine both student designations and educational policies outlined in the statutes of Portuguese public HEIs.

Operationally, the thematic analysis proceeded through three stages: (1) pre-analysis, (2) material exploration, and (3) data processing, inference, and interpretation [22,25]. These stages will be elaborated upon in the subsequent sections.

2.2. Participants and Procedure

We chose to study the student statutes because they constitute the official documentation of HEIs and support the inclusion of students, ensuring compensatory actions and institutional deliberations. They represent how HEIs perceive the target audience of inclusive education, enable activities to support different educational demands, and bring students closer to HEIs and their services [26,27].

In the pre-analysis stage, we followed two important steps to select the documents to be analyzed: (1) procedures and techniques for obtaining the documents and (2) understanding and analyzing the selected statutes [28]. First, we defined the inclusion and exclusion criteria of the papers to be studied in this study. The relevant criteria for the choice of the statutes were the target audience consisting of students in need of academic support, being a public institution, having its statute, and being identified and recognized by the General Directorate for Higher Education (Direção-Geral do Ensino Superior [DGES]) and by the Inclusive HEI Desk (Balcão IncludES) as a statute for the inclusion of students.

The DGES provides on its website *Balcão IncludES* a program promoted by the Ministry of Science, Technology, and Higher Education, which brings together content about support for inclusion in higher education in Portugal, as the link to student statutes of all Portuguese HEIs. The *Balcão IncludES* is an important portal for access to content developed for inclusion in higher education, in our case, the statutes.

Therefore, the documentary corpus included the statutes of all Portuguese public HEIs, 12 universities, and 14 polytechnic institutes, except for 3 polytechnic institutes which did not present their documentation and shared the same ordinances of the universities and the same location, namely, Aveiro Polytechnic Institute (Instituto Politécnico de Aveiro), Faro Polytechnic Institute (Instituto Politécnico de Faro), and Évora Polytechnic Institute (Instituto Politécnico de Évora). The statutes were published and/or updated between 2008 and 2022 and made available on the DGES website and the *Balcão IncludES*, as shown in Table 1.

We conducted a rigorous and iterative examination of the selected documents to gain a comprehensive understanding of their content. During this process, we formulated hypotheses and objectives, and identified recording units—individual excerpts from the text that were analyzed separately. In this study, the recording unit was defined as the distinct

contribution of each institutional document. Furthermore, we established categorization rules to define the criteria for identifying the analyzed categories.

Table 1. List of HEIs and consulted statutes.

HEI	Statutes	Codes
University of the Azores	Regulation No. 1285/2018—Regulation of Students with Special Educational Needs at the University of the Azores, 6 February 2018.	E01
University of Algarve	Statute for Students with Special Educational Needs, of 6 May 2013.	E02
University of Aveiro	Statute for Students with Special Educational Needs of the University of Aveiro, 8 July 2015.	E03
University of Beira Interior	Order No. 2018/R/60—Academic Regulation of the University of Beira Interior, 30 August 2018.	E04
University of Coimbra	Order No. 4722/2018—Republishing Regulation No. 597/2011, Regulation of Special Rights for Students of the University of Coimbra, 15 November 2011.	E05
University of Évora	Order No. 53/2022—Academic Regulation of the University of Évora, 1 April 2022.	E06
University of Lisbon	Order No. 6255/2016—Regulation of Students with Special Educational Needs of the University of Lisbon, 11 May 2016.	E07
University of Madeira	Regulation No. 193/2022—Regulation of the Statute of Students with Special Educational Needs, 23 February 2022.	E08
University of Minho	Order RT-03/2020—Academic Regulation of the University of Minho, 20 December 2019.	E09
University of Porto	Statutes—Student with Special Educational Needs of the University of Porto, 8 October 2008.	E10
University of Trás-os-Montes and Alto Douro	Regulation No. 409/2021—Regulation of Special Rules of Attendance of the University of Trás-os-Montes and Alto Douro, 12 May 2021.	E11
Nova University Lisbon	Regulation No. 397/2018—Regulation of Students with Special Educational Needs at the Nova University Lisbon, 2 July 2018.	E12
Polytechnic Institute of Beja	Regulation—Statutes of the Student with Special Educational Needs of the Polytechnic Institute of Beja, 25 May 2018.	E13
Polytechnic Institute of Bragança	Regulation—Regulations of the Polytechnic Institute of Bragança.	E14
Polytechnic Institute of Castelo Branco	Regulation of the Support Office for Students with Special Educational Needs of the Polytechnic Institute of Castelo Branco, 25 February 2019.	E15
Polytechnic Institute of Cávado and Ave	Order No. 151/2016—Statute of Students with Special Educational Needs of the Polytechnic Institute of Cávado and Ave, 2 November 2016.	E16
Polytechnic Institute of Coimbra	Order No. 5509/2016—Regulation of Support for Students with Special Educational Needs of the Polytechnic Institute of Coimbra, 11 April 2014.	E17
Polytechnic Institute of Guarda	Regulation—Regulation of the Special Statutes of the Polytechnic Institute of Guarda, 14 January 2011.	E18
Polytechnic Institute of Leiria	Regulation No. 115/2020—Regulation of the Special Statutes Applicable to Students of the Polytechnic Institute of Leiria, 12 February 2020.	E19
Polytechnic Institute of Lisbon	Order No. 800/2013—Academic Regulation of the Polytechnic Institute of Lisbon, 2 July 2013.	E20
Polytechnic Institute of Porto	Regulation P. Porto/P-002/2021—Special Statutes for Students, 27 January 2021.	E21
Polytechnic Institute of Portalegre	Order No. 2490/2018—Regulation of Support for Students with Special Needs, 9 March 2018.	E22
Polytechnic Institute of Santarém	Order No. 7884/2017—Regulation of Attribution of the Statute of the Student with Special Educational Needs of the Polytechnic Institute of Santarém, 7 September 2017.	E23
Polytechnic Institute of Setúbal	Regulation No. 586/2022—Regulation of Academic Activities and Guidelines for Students School Performance of the Polytechnic Institute of Setúbal, 29 June 2022.	E24
Polytechnic Institute of Viana do Castelo	Order No. 5583/2021—Regulation of Students with Special Needs at the Polytechnic Institute of Viana do Castelo, 4 June 2021.	E25
Polytechnic Institute of Viseu	Regulation No. 451/2017—Regulation of Special Study Rules, 18 August 2017.	E26

2.3. Data Analysis

Following this, we proceeded with the organization and thematic analysis of the data. Thematic analysis, a qualitative technique, aims to identify, analyze, and report patterns (themes) within a specific dataset. Our approach to coding and categorizing the data was

inductive, allowing themes to emerge from the data themselves through careful reading and re-reading of the selected documents to identify existing patterns and themes [24].

Following the pre-analysis stage, we moved on to further explore the material. For this purpose, we utilized NVivo software version 14 to code the data, group units, and establish categories. These categories encompass academic performance, psychological and health factors, and social factors.

Finally, in the last stage of data processing, we identified trends and organized the analysis of students' special statuses qualitatively, presenting and describing the thematic nuclei and categories. In the subsequent sections, we will provide detailed results of this analysis, emphasizing the main thematic nuclei and categories identified.

3. Results

The twenty-six statutes analyzed aim to improve the inclusion of a specific student group. All of them present a classification model to designate and conceptualize their target audience, as follows: "Special Educational Needs (SEN)" (E01, E02, E03, E04, E05, E07, E08, E09, E10, E11, E12, E13, E15, E16, E17, E18, E19, E23, E24 and E25), "Student with Learning Support" (E06), "Disabled Student" (E14, E20 and E26), "Additional Support Needs (ASN)" (E21), and "Special Needs (SN)" (E22).

We can see that students are not designated similarly in the consulted statutes. However, a common aspect in conceptualizing students is linked to academic performance factors. This first dimension of analysis alludes to how the statutes conceptualize students who need academic support based on their learning difficulties. All documents support this theme by classifying students based on medical evidence, specifically aspects related to "disability".

E02, E15, E20, E26—"(...) student who has physical or sensory impairments, which put him/her at a disadvantage in academic performance."

E03, E07, E13, E14, E17, E23, and E24—"(...) reason for loss or anomaly, congenital or acquired, body functions or structures."

E05 and E19—"(...) student who manifests difficulties in the learning process and participation in the academic context, resulting from limitations in hearing, vision, motor, and organic areas."

E10 and E16—"(...) limitations in hearing, vision, motor, physical health, and other domains."

The presence of functional diversity—We used this expression concerning the proposal of the Independent Living Forum (2005), which recommends a new way of designating and replacing what we usually call "disability" to describe students who need academic support and refers to the medical model of educational difficulties. This deterministic model is concerned with barriers to learning and participation, emphasizing pathologies and the classification of functional and academic challenges arising from "disabilities" or "incapacities" [16].

The influence of the medical paradigm can also be seen in three statutes, which classify students as those with learning disorders.

E01 and E15—"Dyslexia, dyscalculia, or other associated difficulties that are proven to compromise their performance in academic activities."

E18—"Present dyslexia problems that compromise adequate comprehension and production of written material."

The medical model interprets low academic performance as an individual problem, seeing the body as a machine that requires repair [29]. This perspective is related to treatments aimed at the extinction of "abnormality" and to adapt the student to the academic context, not the opposite, with educational institutions remaining unchangeable [30].

Another aspect associated with the medical model and relevant to the documents is the psychological and health factors used to conceptualize students who need academic

support. This theme provides and supports information on how the statutes conceptualize this target audience based on a specific perspective of psychological disorders and/or health problems.

E03, E07, E12, E13, E17, E21, E23, and E24—“(…) body functions or structures, including psychological ones, which present specific difficulties that, in conjunction with environmental factors, may limit or hinder their activity and participation on an equal basis with others.”

E01 and E15—“Illness, physical health problems or acquired limitations that, due to their particularity and exceptionality, create the need for adaptations or regular or systematic therapeutic measures, and limit or condition their performance and academic activities.”

E18—“...have permanent or long-term illnesses, associated with periodic and frequent treatments or aggressive treatments (radiotherapy, chemotherapy, cytostatic or similar), which produce disadvantageous conditions for their academic performance; present chronic mental illness, which severely compromises adaptation and limits the academic learning process.”

Although psychological and health functions are still related to medical categories associated with illness, they demonstrate a broadening of the concept of “disability”, encompassing academic obligations in ensuring differentiated actions for students with individual, emotional, and/or health problems. We observed the same concern in all of the statutes. Despite using different designations (SEN, ASN, Student with Learning Support, Disabled Student, and SN), they corroborate the Multilevel Approach and focus on psychological and health factors in their student statutes.

Moving away from the medical classification model, we find a broader conceptualization of their students associated with the social model in some statutes. The social factor category highlights social and attitudinal aspects as possible barriers to learning and participation.

E10, E16, E22, and E25—“(…) experience difficulties in the learning process and participation in the academic context, resulting from the dynamic interaction among environmental factors (physical, social, and attitudinal)”.

E09, E11, and E17—“for socio-emotional reasons (...), present specific difficulties in conjunction with environmental factors, to limit their learning process, activity and participation in the academic context on an equal basis with other peers.”

E06—“(…) socio-emotional, organizational, or logistical (. . .) presents learning difficulties expressed in their interaction with the environment, and that limit their activity and participation on an equal basis with others.”

The social model views the student as an integral being with limitations and potential. This perspective is based on human diversity and proposes that the environment should be accessible to everyone, avoiding physical, attitudinal, communicative, and social barriers [29]. Therefore, from a social point of view, functional diversities are not understood as students’ attributes but rather their interaction and social barriers [31].

A social model inserted in the conceptualization of students who need academic support suggests interesting advances in expanding academic support. However, we emphasize that all analyzed documents indicated the need for a report or supporting opinion issued by a specialist (physician, psychologist, speech therapist, or other) explaining the limitations and/or losses and/or “deficiency” of the student when applying for statute rights [27]. Thus, how to prove the attitudinal, communicative, emotional, financial, and/or social demands that a health report cannot confirm is unclear.

We can also see that the conceptualization of students differs from that suggested by the Warnock Report, the Universal Design for Learning, and/or the Multilevel Approach, which favors the educational view of the physician. Institutional documents still include students in their statutes, primarily those with “disabilities” and problems of an individual

nature, proven by medical reports and diagnoses. In other words, the conceptualization is still very much linked to the concept of “disability” and special education [29].

Given the above, it seems essential that HEIs advance with inclusive policies, take a broader look at student diversity, and establish evaluation mechanisms for practices and support in their documents, assessing how effective they are for the accessibility and inclusion of everyone [32].

Limitations

This study has provided an in-depth insight into the types of student designations and conceptualization needing academic support in twenty-six Portuguese HEIs statutes. An important limitation of this study is the documentary nature and the statutes. Although they are official documents and reflect the discourses circulating in Portuguese universities and polytechnic institutes, the statutes are insufficient to deeply understand how the academic community perceives these students. In this sense, future research should focus on studying the statutes’ impact on the discourses circulating in HEIs regarding students needing academic support.

4. Discussion

In recent decades, inclusive education has experienced some changes in identifying higher education students who need academic support. In the official documents of the Portuguese HEIs, we find different ways of designating these students: SEN, ASN, Student with Learning Support, Disabled Student, and SN. However, when we analyze the conceptualization of these designations, we perceive common aspects mainly associated with the medical model of “disability”.

By using the medical model to classify students in institutional statutes, HEIs fail to meet numerous student demands that are difficult to diagnose, such as emotional, attitudinal, financial, and social problems, which can affect the student throughout his/her academic career. The prevalence of this medical approach not only creates additional barriers to accessing inclusion support resources within HEIs but also perpetuates stereotypes and stigmas associated with disabilities. Moreover, by privileging the medical model, universities and polytechnics may only support students with a medical diagnosis. Ultimately, this results in missed opportunities to adapt their physical and educational infrastructures to comprehensively accommodate diversity and practice accessibility and inclusion for all.

The predominance of the medical model does not appear to be unique to Portugal, as we observed that several countries adopt different approaches to conceptualizing students in need of academic support. For instance, in the United Kingdom, a student is deemed to have SENs if they encounter learning difficulties requiring specialized educational interventions. In the United States, eligibility for inclusive education requires a clearly outlined disability, while in Australia, eligibility for government support hinges on a documented disability that significantly affects learning [33].

Some authors argue there is a great importance in the designation and conceptualization of students, such as the possibility of creating adequate interventions and the development of legislation in the inclusive education field. They also warn that by rejecting an education for specific student groups, there is a danger of diverting attention to the segregation and oppression experienced by these students, who have permanently been excluded from the educational context [10].

Other authors consider the existence of negative naming biases linked to labels and educational policies of segregation, as well as blaming the student for his/her difficulty, removing the responsibility of HEIs for their accessibility and inclusion [29].

Although the designations have changed over the years, the meanings of the discourses behind the words continue to denounce a certain amount of confusion, controversy, and criticism, making it necessary to expand our dialogue to avoid prejudices and stereotypes. Inclusive education supports the abandonment of the designation of students and promotes a concept based on implementing different actions for different students [34].

Inclusive education does not propose ignoring functional diversities, as students may demand different institutional responses. Rather, it suggests covering student diversity and its corporeal, psychological, cultural, social, and political dimensions [30].

We can find inspiration in the experiences of other countries that, despite the challenges they encounter, have transcended the medical paradigm. Notable examples are Canada and Sweden, renowned for their innovative approaches to fostering academic inclusion. Both nations prioritize the establishment of academic environments that are genuinely inclusive, catering to the unique needs of all, regardless of specific medical diagnoses.

In Canada, promoting inclusion and diversity is a key priority in the education system. By acknowledging the individuality of each student and celebrating their diversities, HEIs exhibit a strong commitment to institutional practices that address contemporary demands for equity, diversity, and inclusion. Students receive support through specialized educational programs and adaptable teaching methodologies crafted to ensure that every student has the opportunity to realize their full academic and personal potential [35].

Similarly, in Sweden, the education system is characterized by an inclusive approach that aims to tailor the school environment to accommodate the needs of every student, without discrimination. This involves implementing support measures, such as providing additional resources and adopting inclusive pedagogical practices, which strive to ensure full participation and equal opportunities for all students. These experiences demonstrate that it is feasible to surpass the medical model and construct genuinely inclusive educational systems, where every student is valued and their needs are comprehensively addressed.

With this in mind, we propose that Portuguese HEIs, when drawing up and updating their institutional documents, should not worry about the difference between students and the need for medical proof of that difference, and instead focus on implementing accessibility and inclusion practices for their students. We understand that everyone needs support during the teaching–learning process. However, we know that students may need to extend this support throughout their academic career. HEIs must be prepared to welcome and support the diversity of their target audience.

We propose that practices for accessibility and inclusion be aimed toward supporting academic, psychological, and health singularities, as well as social and attitudinal factors already guaranteed in the statutes. Nonetheless, they should also consider economic, housing, cultural, locomotion, gender, social, and/or any other issues that may constitute fundamental and indispensable elements in the conditions of accessibility and the process of student inclusion in higher education.

It is essential to point out that throughout history, higher education has never been available to everyone, and for many years, it was oriented toward the social elites [36]. Educational policies and social movements have enabled access to an increasingly diverse public with different academic demands [37,38]. Therefore, student diversity in HEIs presents itself as an excellent opportunity to rethink and/or expand educational support at the higher education level and strengthen the permanence of these students until the conclusion of their learning.

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