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Including diversity through cooperation

Alice Ribeiro, Lília Aguardenteiro Pires*

*University of Porto, Praça Gomes Teixeira, Porto, Portugal
Faculty of Letters, University of Lisbon, Alameda da Universidade, Lisbon, Portugal*

Abstract

In this article we describe the experience of several Portuguese Higher Education Institutions (HEI) that in the midst of a legislative void regarding the inclusion of students with special education's needs, try to work their way into the inclusion of those students through cooperation.

We will focus on how that cooperation came into being, the shape it took and describe in detail the work done by the group to promote accessibility to information and information systems, raise awareness to the issue of inclusion of diversity in HEI specially the inclusion of students with special education's needs and to finish mentioning the difficulties faced and the line of action planned for the future.

Keywords: disability services, accessibility in Higher Education Institutions; accessibility to information

1. Introduction:

Diversity has been gradually becoming an issue for Higher Education Institutions in Portugal. If we go back 25 to 30 years, we could describe the "typical" student as follows: male or female, aged 18 to 25, abled bodied and Portuguese. Students from Portuguese speaking countries were more easily found in HEI in Lisbon, but were also very few and a student with disabilities was actually very hard to find.

In a short period of time, HE witnessed a profound change in many respects. Today, a typical class has more women than men, ages that vary from 18 to 60 and more, students come from very different social and cultural backgrounds (the latter due mainly to international exchange programs) and consequently having different mother tongues, and also students with disabilities.

This rapid change made it difficult for Institution to give a swift effective response to the problems these changes bring, considering that legislation is still waiting to be updated and so, up to this day, there isn't still a law in Portugal that regulates the attendance of students with special education needs in Higher Education, as well as

* Alice Ribeiro Tel.: +00 351 226 077 117 Lília A. Pires Tel.: +00 351 217 920 023
E-mail address: malice@letras.up.pt / lilia@fl.ul.pt

legislative measures to guarantee an effective inclusion of diversity in this level of education. So far what is available to the former mentioned students is special rules to present their application both to HEI and to scholarship for the attendance of undergraduate and postgraduate courses.[1] [2]

Pressured by students with special education needs that - due to support given in other levels of education - start coming to University in higher numbers every year, and considering this legislative void, HEI were forced to find solutions to meet the needs of these students.

And the answer comes first from a group of disability service offices, that have been working as an informal group, since 1998, and in 2004 signed a protocol of cooperation in order to provide better solutions for the problems felt by these students. Therefore, the GTAEDDES – Grupo de Trabalho para o Apoio a Estudantes com Deficiências no Ensino Superior (workgroup for the support of students with disabilities in HE) was officially established: a workgroup constituted by disability service offices of different HEI nationwide.

The group is in fact a community of practice [3], aiming at finding collaborative solutions to deal with:

- lack of information, knowledge and ability of academic communities to deal with diversity;
- low levels of accessibility to HEI infrastructures: buildings, information and learning systems
- reduced numbers of students with special education needs enrolling in HEI

2. Some History

By the end of the 1980's and during the 1990's HEI began to offer services that dedicated to the support of student with disabilities. In view of all the barriers these student had to face in the Universities. These services mostly offered accommodations to minimize those barriers and thus make life a bit easier for them[1]. As Burgsthaler [4] explains "accommodations is grounded in the medical model of disability. In this model, a professional typically identifies an individual's functional limitations or "deficits" and prescribes adjustments that allow this person to participate to some degree in the "normal" environment" The intervention of services was then centered on fitting diversity into the so called "normality". Soon it was clear to everyone – student and services – that it wasn't enough. The model of intervention being adopted also did not help the necessary awareness among the whole academic community, not only within a particular HEI, but at a national level.

Those interests and problems brought a set of disability service offices together in order to try and find solutions to the particular problems they were facing, but also to serve as a pressure group to make authorities produce the necessary legislation and apply long needed measures to include diversity at university level.

As previously mentioned, GTAEDDES started to work as an informal group since 1998 and formally since 2004, with the following HEI:

- Universidade de Trás-os-Montes e Alto Douro
- Universidade do Minho
- Universidade do Porto
- Universidade de Aveiro
- Universidade de Coimbra
- Universidade de Lisboa
- Faculdade de Letras da Universidade de Lisboa
- Faculdade de Ciências da Universidade de Lisboa
- Universidade Técnica de Lisboa

- Universidade de Évora
- Universidade dos Açores
- Instituto Politécnico de Leiria.

By that time other cooperation agreements were then signed between GTAEDES and

- UMIC – Unidade de Missão Inovação e Conhecimento, particularly with ACESSO – Acessibilidade para cidadãos com necessidades especiais /accessibility for citizens with special needs;
- DGES – Direção Geral do Ensino Superior - Portuguese Directorate General for Higher Education;
- INR – Instituto Nacional para a Reabilitação – National Institute for Rehabilitation

Consequently the group includes members representing several HEI, but also members from governmental organisations related both with HE policies and technological development concerning accessibility issues.

Since then, the group has targeted its work aiming those three previously described concerns and gradually making that work public through the group's official web site: <http://gtaedes.ul.pt/gtaedes/>

3. Group initiatives

3.1 BAES - Biblioteca Aberta do Ensino Superior / Open Library for Higher Education

In Portugal there are no institution (public nor private) responsible for producing accessible books / information required by HE students. Therefore every University had to produce the information needed, thus working with the printed text, converting it to digital, correcting it and introducing accessibility features.

Supported by our partner UMIC/Acesso, we created BAES In order to try and solve, to some extent, the following problems:

- low access to information – due both to information available and accessibility of data bases;
- low production capacity – to digitize and correct information, plus adapting contents – due to lack of equipment and of human resources
- difficulty in retrieving information that was being produced.
- low interest given to accessibility problems

There was also means and resources we wanted and needed to share, namely:

- accessible information collections – the result of more than 5 years' of work
- experience in producing and adapting information;
- library/information systems used in the different universities involved.

BAES is than about producing, accessing, organizing, storing and retrieving information. In short we use the information stored and produced in disability service offices, load it into a University sub-catalogue and share them, in such a way as to allow a simultaneous search of the sub-catalogues of all the partners involved in this structure. After finding the information required, only allowed users can access the full text i.e. people with difficulties to access printed text who are identified as such in the information systems of BAES partners.

The establishment of this apparently simple structure involved a team of librarians, people working in disability service offices and a team of people responsible for managing computer systems and networks. This comprehensive large team produced the necessary rules to allow cooperation between services and institutions using the information systems of universities involved in the project (systems of library management and others).

In detail the work involved in BAES was the following:

Producing information:

- equipping production units;
- establishing rules to produce/adapt information in order to make it accessible for different users and contexts of use [5]

Accessing information:

- equipping university with assistive technology (AT) products to access information;
- training students/users of BAES on the use of library management systems and information systems

Organizing, storing and retrieving information:

- building a structure to link seven universities using different information systems and library management systems;
- establishing rules to process and store on library management systems the information produced [5]
- effective introduction of all information that was not in the catalogues;
- allowing full text retrieval to identified users
- making websites accessible for information search;

On the one hand this cooperative structure has the great disadvantage of demanding a continuous and permanent effort of communication and cooperation despite the changes that inevitably occur in each University involved. But on the other hand has the huge advantage of:

- allowing every student with a print disability to access all the information available in a format that they can use;
- allowing lecturers to learn, after a quick search, what is available at a national level for their print disabled students;
- allowing the integration of new partners (both national and international) in the structure;
- allowing the development of cooperation in the production of accessible information;
- giving the possibility of developing new formats of presenting information that can be not only accessible, but can have an universal use.

Since the building of BAES we have also been involve in investigation around DAISY (Digital Accessible Information System) format and developing training session on information accessibility, project¹ funded by Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation.

3.2 - National Inquiry on inclusion of students with special needs in HEI

Organized with the cooperation of our partner DGES, a national inquiry to every HEI, public and private, was launched in 2007 inquiring on the following subjects [6]:

- characteristics of students with special educational needs attending HEI;
- which HEI had those students enrolled;
- what support /infrastructures were made available to those students;

¹ Project name: Training for editors of digital accessible information, proc.n° 105888, 2009.

- what support/accommodations were granted ;
- which HEI had regulations/policies to include students with special education needs;
- what courses were students actually attending

This work was actually very useful not only to have a state of the art on the inclusion of students with special education needs in HEI, but also to help us realize several other related issues as well as raise new interesting questions.

From the 208 HEI in the country 69% participated in the inquiry and from those who participated, only 108 reported having students with special education needs enrolled.

This students, with reference to the Common Nomenclature for Territorial Statistic Unit III (NUTS III), study mostly in HEI of the North with 335 students, followed by the center with 231, than Lisbon with 202 and Alentejo with 28, Algarve with 12, Madeira Region with 7 and Açores Region with just 1 student with special education needs. The Coast Line seems to be more attractive with 706 students enrolled in HEI, than the interior of the country with only 102. These students were enrolled in the following areas of study:

- Law, Social Sciences and services – 29%
- Technologies – 19%
- Economy and Management – 16%
- Architecture, Art and Design – 9%
- Sciences – 8%
- Education and Teachers Training – 7%
- Health – 6%
- Humanities, Translation – 5%
- Sport and Performing Arts – 1%

Among the many issues that came up with this inquiry, the following are particularly interesting[6]:

- we realized by the answers (or lack of answer) that many HEI were not familiar with inclusion of diversity, particularly with the support and inclusion of students with special education needs. Only 4,7% of HEI that answered referred having specific services for the support of students with disabilities, the most common situation was that those particular students were directed to services of attention to students (39,1%) or to particular elements of staff or a contact person, generally not specialized on the subject of attention to diversity (17,2%).

As to the type of support offered, from the HEI that answered this question 26,8% referred having tutors and 16,2% having a personal assistant; as to accommodations concerning testing and evaluation, 59,1% mention more time allowed to take test or deliver papers and only 6% referred having assistive technology available at their institution (like screen readers, braille printers, among others)

- the numbers of students with special education needs attending HEI was very low [6] (816 students with special education needs in a universe of 376.917 [7] attending HEI on the same year)

This immediately raised a set of questions that we would like to get answers to: why are the number of students with special need so low? How much and how do HEI invest in the inclusion/support of those students? What perception do those students have of the support given by HEI? What perception staff working in disability services have of the policy (or lack of it) of HEI regarding attention to diversity.

These questions constitute the base of our present work and this experience was extremely useful for our later participation in the ENDEF – *Estratégia Nacional para a Deficiência* /National Strategy for Disability .

3.3- ENDEF – *Estratégia Nacional para a Deficiência*/ *National Strategy for Disability*

Coordinated by the INR, this strategy includes 133 measures that are to be developed between 2011 and 2013 and are divided into 5 main areas:

1. Disability and multi-discrimination;
2. Justice and the exercising rights;
3. Independence and quality of life
4. Accessibility and design for all;
5. Modernizing administration and information systems.

GTAEDDES is participating in measures that, according to our point of view, are important to the inclusion of diversity in HEI, namely:

Measure 31: producing legal framework to include students with disabilities in HEI

Measure 61: Design a set of guideline to apply the concepts of “Universal design” to the curricula of HEI;

Measure 62: Develop training courses for teaching and other HEI staff on the subject of rights of people with disabilities.

This work is just beginning and we already feel that the focus given to, at least the above mentioned measures, which we are involved in, is not exactly the most adequate to allow effective inclusion of diversity, since it is still too centered on a particular aspect: the issue of disability. Experience has shown us that it is necessary to evolve from focusing in the student to focus on the environment (human, physical and technological)[8], diversity of users and contexts of use.

4. Conclusions:

Trying to fit the experience and results of almost eight years of work in a few pages is quite a difficult task, therefore, we chose to describe in detail only those aspects we found more relevant and that were most likely to contribute to the needed inclusion of diversity in HE.

The difficulties that GTAEDDES’ members face to continue this cooperative work is to be able to divide their attention between the tasks and obligations of the University they work for and to dedicate time and attention to the work develop in GTAEDDES. Universities are short of staff and the disability service offices have a lot on their hands, so the time left is often not enough to proceed with the group activities.

Another difficulty is that in spite of all that we have accomplished and the experience gained, we are still just seen as a work group made up of different disability service offices from different and mostly public HEI and are still not acknowledged as an important partner in the definition of policies and good practices that should be applied nationally to HEI.

As to the plans for the future, we are aiming at involving CRUP – Conselho de Reitores das Universidades Portuguesas/ Counsel of Rectors of Portuguese Universities, in the GTAEDDES’ work. We believe that CRUP will become an essential partner in implementing inclusion of diversity and universal design within University, for we are sure that those two concepts are fundamental to improve quality in education and to assure that no one is excluded.

We also have plans to work with potential university students, by promoting contact with schools, and thus facilitating communications and the transition of students from one level to another. Most problems arise precisely from that transition: potential students are usually not aware of the differences between school and university regarding several important subjects like the curricula of courses they want to enroll in, workload involved, assessment, financial support offered, other support services that might be used by the student and of course what each university has to offer to students regarding inclusion of diversity.

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