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Improving Access and Quality of Inclusive Higher Education  
One Student at a Time

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## **EQUITY, ACCESS TO AND DEMOCRATIZATION OF HIGHER EDUCATION**

REPORT OF CURRENT POLICIES IN PRACTICES IN PORTUGAL

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**P.PORTO**

**ESCOLA  
SUPERIOR  
DE SAÚDE**

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## INTRODUCTION

Portuguese higher education is divided in a binary system that incorporates two subsystems: university education and polytechnic education. Both are taught in public and private institutions. Private higher education institutions must obtain recognition of prior public interest from the Government.

University education includes universities, university institutes and other university education establishments. Polytechnic education comprises polytechnic institutes and other polytechnic education establishments. There are currently 14 public universities, 15 public polytechnic institutes and almost 70 private higher education institutions. One of the public universities offers exclusively BSc, MSc and PhD degrees in distance learning (Universidade Aberta Open University).

*What are the main differences between subsystems?* University education in Portugal has a focus on research promotion and creation of knowledge. Polytechnic education is based on applied research and development aimed at understanding and solving concrete problems. Nevertheless, often this division is rather non-natural, as the degree of overlap between subsystems is enormous.

In 2005, a process of reform of the Basic Law of the Educational System was initiated in order to implement the Bologna Process. The European Credit Transfer System (ECTS) was introduced in the study cycles, mobility mechanisms, diploma supplement, among others. Higher education now has a new structure of three study cycles, leading to academic degrees of bachelor (3-4years degrees named Licenciatura), master (Mestrado) and doctor (Doutoramento). This structure was introduced in 2006 and fully implemented, in Portugal, from the academic year of 2009/2010. Bsc's and Msc's degrees are taught in universities and polytechnics. PhD's are taught only in universities.

In 2014, a cycle of higher studies called professional higher technical course (*Cursos Técnicos Superiores Profissionais*) not conferring an academic degree, was created. These have a duration of 2 years (120 ECTS), do not grant a Degree and are offered exclusively by the polytechnic subsystem. Most are linked to 1st study cycles, to offer the opportunity for the student get an academic higher degree diploma.

Higher education institutions have a special legal and administrative status in Portugal. They benefit from full scientific, pedagogical, cultural and disciplinary autonomy. Autonomy includes, but not limited to, determination of research, cultural and scientific activities, definition of the programs and teaching methods, use of material resources, punishment of disciplinary infractions, as well as specific conditions of entry into study cycles, the conditions of study cycles, study plans, precedence and evaluation schemes, the prescription regime, curricular transitional norms, deadlines for issuing academic documents, changes in schedules and operating regimes, or deadlines for responding to requirements.

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## METHODS

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Information and statistics have been retrieved from:

- Pordata (<https://www.pordata.pt>)
- National Institute for Statistics (<https://www.ine.pt>)
- DGES National directory for Higher Education (<https://www.dges.gov.pt>)
- INCoDe.2030 - Integrated public policy initiative aimed at enhancing digital competences (<https://www.incode2030.gov.pt/>)
- Portugal Digital (<https://www.portugal.gov.pt/pt/qc22/area-de-governo/economiatransicao-digital/portugal-digital>)
- Ministry of Science and Higher Education

## AFFORDABILITY

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Public higher education is financed mainly by the Public State's budget and also by own funds. Own funds include, but not limited to, the tuition fees paid by students, R&D projects funds, services and consulting, and donations. In 19/20 the maximum annual tuition fees for undergraduate students in the public higher education was 871,52€ which is around 1,37 times the national minimum wage. For 20/21 the maximum annual tuition fees for undergraduate students will be 697€, which is around 1,1 times the national minimum wage.

Tax benefits are granted for parents and are given through tax deductions for education expenses. Scholarships as non-repayable loan can be granted for social reasons or merit. Eligibility for scholarships awarded for social reasons is based on the income of the student and his family. For students with special educational needs (60% degree of disability) there are grants / support / subsidies or allowances for expenses related to residence, food, transport and health. In 18/19 the government granted a total of 80k social scholarships. Some HEIs offer special support for students who are experiencing special financial difficulties, in order to reduce drop outs. An example is the Emergency Support Fund created by the Polytechnic of Porto.

Housing for students is currently an important problem in Portugal, particularly in areas with strong demographic pressure, such as Lisbon and Porto. The government has created a program called +Superior whose objective is to provide scholarships to students with low income to study in higher education institution located in regions with less demographic pressure. Also, there is an ongoing strategy to increase the number of affordable housing for higher education students, based on the National Program for Higher Education

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Student's Housing (PNAES). The current number of affordable beds for students is around 15k and the objective is to increase 12k for the next years until 2023.

## ACCESSIBILITY

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The major route to access to higher education is the National Access Competition. This route is responsible for more than 90% of the entrance in higher education. It includes special quotas, particularly for candidates from the Autonomous Regions of Azores and Madeira, Portuguese emigrants, military and people with physical or sensory disabilities. This means that there are a number of vacancies in access to higher education that are reserved exclusively for candidates from certain groups. If candidates who comply with these conditions are not placed via the dedicated channels, they are included under the general competition. There are special local competitions for degrees in the special areas, such as cinema, music and theatre. Private institutions have their own institutional competition.

There are also Special Regimes for entrance in higher education, which includes specific access conditions for citizens associated with Diplomatic Missions and Portuguese civil servants in official mission abroad, to officers of the Armed Forces, to scholarship holders of PALOP (Portuguese Speaking African Countries), diplomatic missions accredited in Portugal, practitioners of high-performance sports and the natives of Timor.

Special quota and competition were created because not all candidates are truly equal in the access to higher education. The special quota and competition aim to correct imbalances in society through measures that benefit a certain group. For example, special quota for candidates from Madeira and Azores has been established to fight against potential isolation that could occur due to the distance from Portugal mainland to the islands. In general terms, this form of distribution of candidates allows students with lower grades to enter ahead of others with higher grades. At first this may seem unfair, considering the principle of equality and recognition of merit; however, such perceived discriminations are admissible because they are considered to be positive. Measures of positive affirmation are used in several countries around the world.

Finally, there are local special competitions, covering those over 23 years of age, holders of Diplomas Technical Specialization (CET), the Professional Superior Technicians (TeSP), the holders of other higher education courses, graduates who are candidates for Medicine and international students. These further increase the range of accessibility of candidates to universities and polytechnics. Higher education institutions have the institutional autonomy in the selection process.

A final comment regarding the special competitions for candidates with physical or sensory disabilities. Currently, specialized support to students with special needs occurs in less restrictive school environments. This means that support can take place in regular schools, although there are still structured teaching units, units in regular education and special education institutions. Every region in Portugal have access to special support

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teams that have specialized professionals and material resources that facilitate collaboration between schools and families. These pioneering nationwide support centers lead to an increase in the number of students with disabilities in the higher education system.

## PARTICIPATION

In 19/20 the number of students in higher education was 384391: 313416 in public higher education institutions (polytechnic=118672 vs. universities: 194744) and 70975 in private institutions (polytechnic=21320 vs. universities: 49655). Majority are females: 207681 vs. 176710 males.

The regions with more students are Lisbon and surroundings (141439) and the northern region, including Porto (127922). Center, including Coimbra, has 83730, Alentejo has 16856, Algarve has 8581, Madeira has 3288 and Azores has 2575 students. 17254 are enrolled in professional higher technical course, 220859 in BSc, 123387 in MSc, 19951 in PhD and 2940 in other degrees, including ceasing PhD programs and specializations. The areas with most students are business, administration and law (n=84911), engineering and related fields (n=79624) and health and social protection (n=59239). Comparing with past year, there is an overall increase of around 5% in polytechnics and 3% in universities.

26,1% of the population aged 25–64 have a higher education degree (2019 data; 14,8% of those aged 55–64 and 36,9% of those aged 25–34), which is below 31,4% in the European Union (22,4% of those aged 55–64 and 39,2% of those aged 25–34).

## QUALITY

Law no. 38/2007, 16 August, approves the new legal regime for the quality of higher education. Accreditation for all degrees and institutions in the public and private sector are provided by the Agency for Higher Education Assessment and Accreditation (A3ES), which was created by the Portuguese government through Decree-Law no. 369/2007, 5th of November. A3ES has the mission of evaluating and accrediting higher education institutions and their study cycles, as well as ensuring the performance of the functions inherent to Portugal's insertion in the European higher education quality assurance system, and consequently the promotion of an internal institutional culture of quality assurance.

Some higher education institutions in Portugal, such as the School of Health of P.PORTO have their own quality management system, certified by NP EN ISO 9001. The application of the management principles of this norm in a Higher Education Institution provides a culture of continuous improvement of processes, including teaching, learning management and services.

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## ICT

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The global understanding in Portugal is to promote and disseminate the use of ICT in higher education and other sectors. There is an ambitious national action plan fostering the digital transition called Portugal Digital, which includes improving people's digital skills, transforming companies and transforming the public sector as whole, including the Simplex program (simplifying processes in the public administration). The IN-CODE.2030 is the national program for digital skills that aims to promote inclusion and generalization of the access to digital technologies for information, communication and interaction, train young people in digital literacy and skills for education and lifelong learning, improve the necessary digital skills for better jobs and economy and improve research in several digital areas, such as AI, big data, computational biology, photonics, advanced computing, automate learning and cybersecurity.

So far, the mainstream type of teaching in higher education is classroom format. This has changed with the COVID-19 pandemics, which caused a rapid transformation of lectures to distance learning, with a surprising success and engagement of all stakeholders. At the medium term, it is possible that more degrees engage in blended and distance learning courses.

The Portuguese Foundation for Science and Technology has one unit (FCCN National Scientific Computing) dedicated to managing and planning the national science network digital infrastructure. This unit assures a high quality of communication and digital services nationwide. One of such services is the national platform called NAU that gives support to MOOC's.

Furthermore, the current "Legislature Contract" between the Portuguese government and the Public Higher Education Institutions for 2019-2023 includes a commitment that all degrees, including those in humanities and social sciences, should have mandatory data science and processing courses. The understanding is that there are cross-sectional skills that are crucial for the future in all areas: soft skills and ICT and data skills are examples.

The Polytechnic of Porto is highly engaged in training teachers and providing resources for distance learning, both for degrees and short courses for continuous education. There is one specialized unit called E-IPP that provides the necessary tools and skills to support this digital transition in teaching and education.

## CONCLUSIONS

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In Portugal higher education is gaining a relevance never before achieved. Currently it is the depository of multiple and diverse individual and collective expectations. Despite Portugal was much behind the European countries regarding the higher education degrees in the population, it is steadily getting closer each decade, although some of the efforts have been compromised following a deep economic crisis.

The expansion of the Portuguese higher education system was and still is fundamental to narrow social differences. It's giving equal opportunities for each individual that are not so determined by their starting point in

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the economic and social structure. It's changing the role of woman in society as they are at the moment the majority in higher education. It's giving opportunities to the inhabitants of the most peripheral regions. It's also important to distributing wealth in an equative way (as a consequence of giving people in social and economic disadvantage the opportunity to access better jobs) and to accelerate economic growth and competitiveness with improved products and services based in science and technology.

However, despite these positive effects, this evolution is not without problems. Low qualification levels persist, even among the population of young adults. Despite the improvements and modifications in the access to higher education, the system is still privileging the access by younger students, in the continuation of secondary education, with a low capacity to attract older students, part-time students and students from underrepresented socio-economic groups. The effort that has been made has not allowed us to recover our delay in qualifying the population, in particular the active population, which continues to have low levels of training, especially for the older age groups.

Another structural problem is the chronic underbudget of higher education and the differences of budget distribution of universities compared to polytechnics, which particularly affects the bigger institutions in the polytechnic subsystem. This is a problem that in the long-term may affect the quality of the qualifications. A low-cost expansion may create an illusion of increased qualification, but it will result in an erosion of the quality and relevance of learning. This will further stimulate inequalities in which the most favored will be able to obtain quality training, while the others they will be left out of the system, defrauding their efforts and expectations.

Also, despite the improved digital infrastructure, sometimes it seems that there is more offer than demand. For example, Portugal has an enormous capability for distance learning and b-learning degrees, that could easily reach PALOP countries, as well as a favorable policy in this matter. However, this kind of education is still scarce and higher education institutions are not taking full advantage of the existing conditions