

Inclusão de estudantes com deficiência na Universidade: Retratos do Brasil e de Portugal

Inclusion of students with disabilities in the University: Portraits from Brazil and Portugal¹

Inclusión de estudiantes con discapacidad en la Universidad: Retratos de Brasil y Portugal

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Resumo: O estudo pretende analisar o processo de inclusão de estudantes com deficiência no Ensino Superior do Brasil e de Portugal, suas vivências acadêmicas e percepção de suporte social. Para tanto, escutou-se os estudantes e aplicou-se o Questionário de Vivência Acadêmica (QVA-r) e a Escala de Percepção de Suporte Social (EPSS). Participaram nove estudantes com deficiência da Universidade Estadual Paulista (Unesp) e doze da Universidade do Algarve (UAlg). Segundo os resultados, estes estudantes apresentam uma percepção positiva acerca da sua inclusão na universidade, porém um déficit na percepção do suporte social. Assinala-se a necessidade que as suas vozes sejam ouvidas e que as instituições de Ensino Superior invistam no desenvolvimento de redes de apoio e suporte aos estudantes com deficiência.

Palavras-chave: Estudantes com deficiência; Educação Inclusiva; Ensino Superior; Vivências acadêmicas; Suporte Social.

Abstract: The study aims to analyze the inclusion process of students with disabilities in Higher Education in Brazil and Portugal, their academic experiences, and their perception of social support. To achieve this, students were interviewed, and the Academic Experience Questionnaire (QVA-r) and the Social Support Perception Scale (EPSS) were administered. Nine students with disabilities from the Universidade Estadual Paulista (Unesp) and twelve from the Universidade do Algarve (UAlg) participated in the study. According to the results, these students have a positive perception of their inclusion in the university but show a deficit in their perception of social support. There is a need for their voices to be heard, and higher education institutions should invest in the development of support networks for students with disabilities.

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Keywords: Students with Disabilities; Inclusive Education; Higher Education; Academic experiences; Social Support

Resumen: El estudio tiene como objetivo analizar el proceso de inclusión de estudiantes con discapacidad en la Educación Superior de Brasil y Portugal, sus experiencias académicas y su percepción de apoyo social. Para ello, se escuchó a los estudiantes y se aplicaron el Cuestionario de Experiencia Académica (QVA-r) y la Escala de Percepción de Apoyo Social (EPSS). Participaron nueve estudiantes con discapacidad de la Universidad Estatal Paulista (Unesp) y doce de la Universidad del Algarve (UAlg). Según los resultados, estos estudiantes tienen una percepción positiva sobre su inclusión en la universidad, pero presentan una deficiencia en la percepción del apoyo social. Se destaca la necesidad de escuchar sus voces y de que las instituciones de Educación Superior inviertan en el desarrollo de redes de apoyo y respaldo para los estudiantes con discapacidad.

Palabras clave: Estudiantes con discapacidad; Educación inclusiva; Educación superior; Experiencias académicas; Apoyo social.

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Introduction

The transition to Higher Education involves a series of new and complex challenges in various areas of students' lives. There are changes and demands related to personal, social, and academic aspects that can lead to difficulties in their inclusion in the institution and, in some cases, result in anxiety disorders, depression, absenteeism, failures, course changes, and even dropping out of Higher Education (ALMEIDA, 2007; ARAÚJO, et al., 2016; HERRIDGE, 2017).

According to Almeida (2007), the transition to Higher Education is experienced ambiguously by many students. On the one hand, there is an expectation of gaining freedom and autonomy, but on the other hand, feelings of anxiety and uncertainty regarding the challenges they encounter can also arise. Among these challenges, we can mention adaptation to the institution and the course; time management, home organization, leisure activities, and finances; autonomy for new learning; new study demands; distancing from family and friends; a new home and city; new relationships with professors and course colleagues; expectations related to the course and career path; lack of institutional and social support, as well as a lack of the student's personal resources (autonomy, responsibility, resilience, motivation, etc.). These challenges can either contribute to students' success in Higher Education or hinder the process (ALT, 2017; GRANADO, et al., 2005).

For Granado and collaborators (2005, p. 33), integration in university life is conceptualized as a "multifaceted, complex and multidimensional process that is built in the daily relationships established between the student and the institution" that is, the harmony between the student's expectations, motivations and academic skills and the Soci-ais and academic requirements of the institution, being the integration resulting from the reciprocal interaction between academic (studies) and social activities (relationships with colleagues, teachers, staff).

In this sense, the university plays a crucial role in student integration and academic success because the characteristics of the institution influence the process, persistence, and completion of the academic journey. Therefore, it is essential for universities to be prepared to address the specific needs of their students and to promote strategies that facilitate their integration within the institution and their personal, social, and emotional development (ALT, 2017).

Challenges for Inclusion: Academic Experiences and Social Support

According to Tinto (1988), satisfactory integration into the university environment would lead to greater commitment to the institution, course completion, and consequently, a lower likelihood of dropping out of the university. When entering Higher Education, each student brings with them different personal characteristics (attitudes, values, interests, etc.), family backgrounds, and educational experiences that influence their interaction within the university environment, as well as their motivations and expectations for completing their studies. In this process, it is also important to consider the characteristics of the institution (such as infrastructure, size, resources, etc.) that influence the social and academic integration of the student and their persistence in the university.

The process of integration into Higher Education refers to academic experiences, which are the situations and experiences lived by the student within the university context. These experiences also depend on the student's personal, cognitive, and social development.

This process can be described based on five dimensions: a) personal: involves the psychological and physical well-being and aspects of the person himself (autonomy, self-concept), as well as emotional aspects; b) interpersonal: involves the establishment of relationships with the family, colleagues, teachers, seeking support and involvement in extracurricular activities; c) study: involves the study skills - organization, learning resources, use of time; d) institutional: involvement with activities, colleagues and university, interest in continuing the studies and perception of the quality of services and infrastructure of the institution; e) career:

involves adaptation and satisfaction with the choice of the course and projection of career and profession (ALMEIDA; FERREIRA; SOARES, 2001; GRANADO, et al., 2005).

If, for any student entering Higher Education, this process can pose challenges, but for students with disabilities, it can be even more problematic. These challenges are often related not only to the students' personal characteristics and specific conditions of their disabilities but also because the academic environment may not provide accessible conditions (legislation, infrastructure, teaching methodologies, accessibility, attitudinal barriers, etc.). Attitudinal barriers (stigmas, prejudices, and stereotypes), lack of sensitivity, and knowledge gaps, as well as some degree of "strangeness" from the academic community regarding inclusion, can further complicate academic experiences and, consequently, the psychosocial development and academic journey of these students (CIANTELLI, LEITE, NUERNBERG, 2017; MARTINS, *et al.*, 2016; MELERO; MORIÑA, LÓPEZ-AGUILAR, 2018).

Inclusive Education in Higher Education should take into consideration not only academic success but also the quality of academic experiences and extracurricular activities (participation in research and extension groups, academic centers or associations, sports activities, institution events, meetings with peers, etc.), providing support to these students in their learning, experiences, and challenges (MARTINS, *et al.*, 2016).

According to Fernandes (2013), the development of a student's identity can be affected by psychosocial barriers, emphasizing the importance of social support from the institution and the academic community for a better academic experience and inclusion in the university environment. Research conducted has shown that academic experiences are more positive and satisfying when students receive high levels of social support. This includes indications of good inclusion in the institution, positive relationships with professors and peers, positive expectations regarding their course and profession, and a perception of physical and psychological well-being (BIALK, *et al.*, 2017; FERNANDES, 2013; SOARES, *et al.*, 2016).

The social support received from family, peers, professors, and staff is indicated in the literature as important factors for the persistence and academic success of students with disabilities in the university. Conversely, the absence of this support is understood as a negative factor that can contribute to dropping out of the university (MOREIRA; BOLSANELLO; SEGUER, 2011; MELERO, *et al.*, 2018; OLIVATI, 2017; ZAMPAR, 2015).

The construct of social support is complex and multidimensional. According to Caplan (1974), it encompasses the family core, friends, as well as informal neighborhood-based services. Thoits (1982) adds that social support should not be understood solely in terms of the availability of emotional relationships but also in terms of personal relationships that assist the individual in practical and financial solutions, in other words, the instrumental (material)

dimension of social support. According to Rodriguez and Cohen (1998), there are three types of support that one can receive from their social network: emotional support, instrumental support, and informational support. Emotional support is related to the affectionate support (e.g., from family members, close friends, romantic partners, spouses) perceived as an expression of care, concern, and affection from others towards the individual. It involves giving attention, listening to their problems, showing empathy, and being trustworthy. These are supports within the individual's social network where they find encouragement to cope with and overcome emotional difficulties or to share the joys that come from their personal achievements and successes (SIQUEIRA, 2008). Instrumental support refers to the material or practical resources that others (individuals or institutions) can provide to the individual.

Practical support represents the security and peace of mind for the individual, believing that there are members of their social network willing to meet practical, utilitarian, and objective needs (SIQUEIRA, 2008). Informational support consists of information received from individuals or institutions that enable the individual to guide their actions, solve a problem, or make a decision (RODRIGUEZ; COHEN, 1988).

For Rodriguez and Cohen (1998) social support generates beneficial effects for health, both physical and mental, in a close relationship with the well-being of individuals, acting as a factor of protection and quality of life in the face of adversities. Thus, it is understood that the student with disabilities who feel loved, respected, valued, accepted and participating in a social network that cares and is interested in him, helping him to solve practical and emotional problems, will probably feel belonging, included in the university environment, participating in academic experiences and presenting a healthy physical and psychological well-being. The absence of accessible services, support, and assistance can turn the challenges that these students face in their academic journey into barriers, often insurmountable ones (LOMBARDI; MURRAY; KOWITT, 2016; FORBER-PRATT; ZAPE, 2017).

National and international research shows a high dropout rate among students with disabilities in Higher Education (BALTARU, 2019; MARTINS. *et al.*, 2016; SILVA; DORE, 2016).

In response to the difficulties and barriers experienced by students with disabilities, many universities have been creating programs and services specifically aimed at supporting and welcoming, improving accessibility, and promoting inclusion in the academic environment (CIANTELLI; LEITE, 2016; MARTINS *et al.*, 2017; SANTOS, *et al.*, 2015). Nevertheless, both in Brazilian and Portuguese universities, various studies highlight the persistence of many barriers in the journey of these students (CIANTELLI; LEITE, 2016; MARTINS, *et al.*, 2016; MOREIRA, *et al.*, 2011; MELERO, *et al.*, 2018; SANTOS, *et al.*, 2015) Unless these barriers are overcome, they will greatly

hinder the process of their identity, academic, social, and emotional development, making it difficult for them to truly feel included, accepted, and valued by the academic community.

Therefore, it is essential to understand the academic experiences of these students, listen to their voices and needs, and determine whether they feel support and social support in their academic journey in Higher Education.

Objective and Methodological Procedures

With the present study, the objective is to understand how the inclusion of students with disabilities in Higher Education in Brazil and Portugal takes place, analyze their academic experiences, and assess their perception of the social support they have. The study was structured using an exploratory, descriptive, interpretative, and comparative research paradigm with a quantitative approach.

Participants

Twenty-one students (N = 21) who self-identified as having disabilities participated in the study, with nine students from Unesp - Bauru campus in the years 2015 and 2016, and twelve students from the University of Algarve in the academic year 2018-2019 (Table 1).

Table 1 – Sample Characterization

Unesp – Campus of Bauru				UAlg			
Estudante	Age	Course	Type of Disability	Student	Age	Course	Type of Disability
B1 (Francisco ⁵)	21	Mechanical Eng.	Physical	P1 (Yasmin)	21	Management	Low vision
B2 (Lolla)	23	Psychology	Physical	P2 (Tiago)	21	Pharmaceutical Sciences.	Auditive
B3 (Pedro)	35	Meteorology	Low vision	P3 (Ana)	31	Sport	Deafness
B4 (Catharina)	23	Physics	Intellectual	P4 (Tatiana)	25	Management	Auditive
B5 (Izabel)	25	Comunicação Social	Physical	P5 (Matilde)	19	Social Education	Auditive
B6 (Jorge)	29	Ciências Biológicas	Physical	P6 (Paipoila)	20	Orthoprotésia	Physical
B7 (Roberto)	28	Design	Physical	P7 (Camila)	26	Psychology	Physical
B8 (Gabriel)	19	Civil Eng.	ASD ⁶	P8 (Miguel)	19	Language/Communication	Physical
B9 (Carla)	22	Social Communication	Multideficiência	P9 (Natasha)	22	Language/Literatures	(CP ⁷)
				P10 (Tomás)	21	Culture	ASD
				P11 (Emma)	21	Tourism	ASD
				P12 (Kátia)	20	Psychology	Physical (CP)
						Engineering	Auditive

Source: Developed by the authors (2023).

⁵ To maintain anonymity, the names presented are fictitious.

⁶ Autism Spectrum Disorder

⁷ Cerebral Palsy.

Instruments

The Academic Experiences Questionnaire, short version (QVA-r), developed by Almeida, Ferreira, and Soares (2001) and adapted for Brazil by Granado and colleagues (2005), was used. The Portuguese version, which consists of 60 items, assesses how students experience university life in terms of personal, interpersonal, vocational, institutional aspects, and learning/study. Using a Likert scale (1 to 5 points), participants are asked to rate their agreement or disagreement with the presented items. The version adapted for Brazil contains 55 items.

To assess an individual's perception of the social support they can count on, the Social Support Perception Scale (EPSS) by Siqueira (2008) was used. The scale consists of 29 items: factor 1, called practical support, with 19 items (range from 19 to 76) related to instrumental and informational support, and factor 2, called emotional support, with 10 items (range from 10 to 40). The responses correspond to a Likert scale (1 to 5 points). Considering the scarcity of scales to assess social support in the university context, the EPSS was adapted, including the formulation of an initial question as follows: "When I need it, at the University I can count on someone who...", as previously used in the research by Olivati (2017).

Both instruments underwent minor orthographic modifications when applied in the Portuguese context.

Data Collection Procedure

After receiving authorization to conduct the current research at Unesp, an email invitation was sent to eleven self-declared students with disabilities who were enrolled in the years 2015 and 2016. Due to the low response rate from the students, personal and telephone invitations (via WhatsApp and/or Messenger on Facebook) were also made. Nine students agreed to participate in the study, and subsequent appointments were made to administer the instruments. The application took place from May to July 2017, with an average duration of 30 minutes, and was carried out in person at the University's Applied Psychology Center (CPA) and remotely via Skype. One of the students (B9), due to motor restrictions, completed the instruments with the aid of a computer.

At UAlg, the initial invitation, considering confidentiality issues, was extended to eighteen students by the person in charge of the Office for Support to Students with Special Educational Needs (GAENEE). After twelve students who attended the university during the

academic years 2015-2016 to 2018-2019 agreed to participate, appointments for the administration of the instruments were scheduled via telephone contact. The administration of the instruments took place in person at the GAENEE of the Gambelas campus or in rooms previously reserved at the Penha campus, from January to February 2019, and lasted an average of 30 minutes. It should be noted that one of the students (B11), due to motor restrictions, had her instruments filled out by one of the researchers, and another student (B1) had her instruments expanded.

The study complied with the ethical criteria of anonymization and voluntary participation, with participants signing the Informed Consent Form, which was prepared in accordance with Resolution CNS 466/12 of the National Health Council

Data Analysis Procedures

The data obtained through the QVA-r were organized and analyzed using Microsoft Excel software. The average for each participant was calculated in the five dimensions of the scale. The scores were inverted before data analysis, assigning the highest score to the most positive perception of inclusion in Higher Education and the lowest score to the negative perception of inclusion.

Since the instrument does not have a defined cutoff point, averages close to 3.0 were considered as perceptions tending to be negative, in line with studies already conducted using this instrument. (SCHLEICH, 2006; ZAMPAR, 2015).

The responses obtained from the EPSS were analyzed according to the criteria used by Siqueira (2008). Therefore, for the analysis of the data, the values corresponding to each factor (Factor 1 = practical support; Factor 2 = emotional support) were summed and then divided by the number of items, in order to obtain the average value for each participant.

Results

Regarding the students from Unesp, the total average scores from the QVA-r indicated that these participants have a positive perception ($M = 3.3$) of their inclusion in the academic environment (Table 2).

Table 2 -- Average Score per Dimension of the QVA-r for the Unesp Participants

Dimension	Average of Participants by Dimension									Total Average per Dimension
	B1	B2	B3	B4	B5	B6	B7	B8	B9	
Personal	3,8	2,4	3,1	2,1	2,1	4,4	2,2	2,6	2,9	2,8
Interpersonal	4,2	2,5	3,2	1,1	4,2	3,8	3,3	4,1	3,2	3,3
Career	4,1	3,3	4	2,4	3,3	4,7	2,2	2,8	4,5	3,5
Study	2,4	2,4	3,4	3	2,9	3,7	3,5	2,5	4,7	3,2
Institutional	3,7	3,2	4	2,2	3,6	3,9	4	2,9	4,6	3,6
Total Average of Participants	3,6	2,8	3,5	2,2	3,2	4,1	3	3	4	3,3

Source: Developed by the authors (2023).

In a more specific analysis, it was found that 55.5% of the students (B1, B3, B5, B6, and B9) have a positive perception of their inclusion in the academic environment, while 44.5% of the students (B2, B4, B7, and B8) show an intermediate to negative perception. Regarding the overall data of the UAlg students, the total average scores indicate that they have a positive perception ($M = 3.6$) of their inclusion in the academic environment. All students showed total averages above the cutoff score (Table 3).

Table 3 -- Average Score per Dimension of the QVA-r for Each UAlg Participant.

Dimension	Average of Participants by Dimension												Total Average per Dimension
	P1	P2	P3	P4	P5	P6	P7	P8	P9	P10	P11	P12	
Personal	3,2	4,4	4,5	3,4	3,7	4,5	3,1	3,8	2,3	3,5	3,2	2,5	3,5
Interpersonal	3,1	4,8	3,4	3,1	3,8	3,8	2,5	4,4	3,4	2,9	2,5	1,9	3,3
Career	4,4	5	4,3	2,8	3,1	4,5	4,3	3,5	3,7	3,5	4,8	4,3	4
Study	3,6	3,6	3,6	3,2	3,6	4,1	3,7	3,5	3,1	3,2	4,1	3,4	3,5
Institutional	4,2	4,6	3,9	2,9	3,7	3,6	4,1	3,7	3,6	4,1	3,6	3,9	3,8
Total Average of Participants	3,7	4,5	4	3,1	3,6	4,1	3,5	3,8	3,2	3,4	3,6	3,2	3,6

Source: Developed by the authors (2023).

Regarding the results obtained at Unesp with the EPSS, it is noted that for the Practical Support Index, out of the maximum scale score of 76, the participants' average was 41.4, with the lowest score being 25 for Catharina (B4) and the highest being 55 for Gabriel (B8).

Table 4 – Indices, Average Values of Practical and Emotional Support - Unesp

Participant	Practical Support Index	Average Practical Support	Emotional Support Index	Average Emotional Support	Difference Between Averages
B1	36	1,9	28	2,8	0,9
B2	39	2	23	2,3	0,3
B3	30	1,6	23	2,3	0,7
B4	25	1,3	10	1	0,3
B5	53	2,8	27	2,7	0,1
B6	39	2	21	2,1	0,1
B7	49	2,6	30	3	0,4
B8	55	2,9	30	3	0,1
B9	47	2,5	31	3,1	0,6
Average	41,4	2,2	24,8	2,5	0,3

Source: Developed by the authors (2023).

The average values for each participant allow the identification of a predominance of deficit in the perception of social support in relation to the university context, both in practical and emotional aspects. Considering the scale variation from 0 to 4 points, the average for practical support was 2.2 and for emotional support was 2.5. Despite the small difference between the averages of supports (0.3), emotional support is more perceived and less deficient than practical support in the university context for these participants (Table 4).

At UAlg, it can be observed that, regarding the Practical Support Index, from the maximum score allowed by the scale (76), the average for the participants was 48.6, with the lowest score being 25 for Tomás (P10) and the highest being 72 for Tiago (P2). Concerning the Emotional Support Index, with a maximum possible value of 40, the average score of the participants was 27.2, with the lowest score being 19 for Tomás (P10) and the highest being 37 for Tiago (P2).

Table 5 – Indices, average values of practical and emotional support - UAlg

Participant	Average				Difference Between Averages
	Practical Support Index	Practical Support	Emotional Support Index	Average Emotional Support	
P1	41	2,1	24	2,4	0,3
P2	72	3,8	37	3,7	0,1
P3	42	2,2	23	2,3	0,1
P4	41	2,1	23	2,3	0,2
P5	41	2,1	22	2,2	0,1
P6	66	3,5	35	3,5	0
P7	41	2,1	28	2,8	0,7
P8	63	3,3	34	3,4	0,1
P9	53	2,8	28	2,8	0
P10	35	1,8	19	1,9	0,1
P11	49	2,6	34	3,4	0,8
P12	40	2,1	20	2	0,1
Média	48,6	2,5	27,2	2,7	0,2

Source: Developed by the authors (2023).

The calculated average values for each participant indicate a predominance of a deficit in the perception of social support by the participants in relation to the university context, both in practical and emotional aspects. Considering that, in relation to the scale variation from 0 to 4 points, the average for practical support was 2.5, and for emotional support, it was 2.7. Despite the small difference between the averages of supports (0.2), emotional support seems to be more present and less deficient than practical support in this context.

Discussion

When comparing the overall average results between men and women at Unesp, it is observed that men ($M = 3.44$) have more positive perceptions regarding their inclusion in the university than women ($M = 2.44$), achieving higher scores in both personal ($\bar{M} = 3.2$; $\bar{F} = 2.4$) and interpersonal dimensions ($\bar{M} = 3.7$; $\bar{F} = 2.75$). In the other dimensions (career, study, and institutional), the results are similar between genders, with women having a higher average ($\bar{F} = 3.25$) than men ($\bar{M} = 3.1$) only in the study dimension. The same occurred with the students at UAlg, where men ($M = 3.9$) showed more positive perceptions regarding their inclusion in the university than women ($M = 3.5$), achieving higher scores in both the personal

dimension ($\bar{M} = 3.9$; $\bar{F} = 3.4$) and the interpersonal dimension ($\bar{M} = 4$; $\bar{F} = 3$), as well as in the institutional dimension ($\bar{M} = 4.1$; $\bar{F} = 3.7$). The career dimension was similar between the two genders ($M = 4$), and women had a higher average than men only in the study dimension ($\bar{M} = 3.4$; $\bar{F} = 3.6$), although the results were close.

Similar data was found by Soares et al. (2015) with Psychology and Computer Science students, in which, across all dimensions, men had higher averages than women. However, in the research by Granado et al. (2005) in Brazil and Fernandes (2013) in Portugal, opposite results were found, where women showed better overall results, indicating a better adaptation to higher education.

Regarding the study dimension, in the research by Oliveira and Morais (2015) with Engineering students at a federal university in Brazil, women had a higher average than men in this dimension only. Similarly, Almeida and colleagues (2001), in Portugal, found better results from women, but they showed greater difficulties in the personal dimension, as observed in the research by Schleich (2006) with Brazilian students at a public university.

It should also be noted the significant difference between men and women in the personal and interpersonal dimensions at both universities, pointing to the need for the university to promote actions that contribute to the establishment of connections, friendships, collaboration, and actions aimed at the physical and psychological well-being of these students.

Araújo et al. (2016) argue that women's social integration difficulties may be related to the fear of isolation and social rejection, as well as the valuation of close friendships and concern for the quality of these relationships, affecting them emotionally (personal dimension) and interfering in their personal relationships (interpersonal dimension). It should also be noted that the research by Almeida, Guisande, and Soares (2006, p. 513) indicates that women have more difficulties in "issues related to autonomy in relationships with others, showing more autonomy in instrumental matters related to study and daily tasks, and/or showing less investment in the relational plane." They also warn of the presence of the stereotype, still very prevalent in today's society, according to which the interest in interpersonal matters falls largely on women.

Regarding the general institutional aspects of Unesp, the students showed their highest average, with a positive perception of the resources and services that the university can offer, involving themselves with the institution ($M = 3.6$). However, Catharina (B4) and Gabriel (B8) present lower averages, indicating that both may be facing challenges in this dimension and are not receiving the necessary information or support. The students of UAlg also

showed a positive perception of the resources and services that the university can offer, involving themselves with the institution ($M = 3.8$). It should be noted that Tatiana (P4), compared to other students, presented a lower average ($M = 2.9$).

These data highlight the importance of institutions providing good infrastructure, accessibility, support services, qualified teaching staff, among other structural and human resources, which assist students with disabilities in their academic journey.

In the dimension related to career, it was observed that the students of Unesp have a positive perception of their course ($M = 3.5$). However, B4, B7, and B8 (33%) show negative aspects regarding this dimension, which may favor the dropout of these students, as happened with Catharina (B4) and Roberto (B7). These results highlight the importance of choosing the right course and university to ensure students' retention, as well as the significance of psychologists providing vocational guidance before university entry and throughout the academic journey. This can reduce potential dropouts and student distress.

At UAlg, the career dimension received the highest score ($M = 4$), indicating that these students seem to have chosen the right course, contributing to their persistence and completion of studies. However, it is noteworthy that Tatiana ($M = 2.8$) and Matilde ($M = 3.1$) scored lower compared to other students. This situation should serve as an alert for the institution to provide necessary support and guidance, to prevent these students from dropping out of their courses.

In regards to the interpersonal dimension, the majority of Unesp students (78%) display good interpersonal relationships with their peers, establishing friendships, bonds, and recognizing the importance of these in their academic journey, extending beyond the academic environment. This likely contributes to their retention in the university. However, it is noted that students B2 and B4 indicate negative aspects in this dimension, suggesting challenges in forming or maintaining interpersonal relationships within the university context.

In Portugal, the interpersonal dimension had the lowest average ($M = 3.3$) compared to the other dimensions. It is noteworthy that students P7, P10, P11, and P12 (33.3%) show negative aspects in this dimension, which likely contributes to their lack of participation and inclusion in the university environment. However, it should be highlighted that the vast majority of the students (66.6%) exhibit good interpersonal relationships, indicating a generally positive environment for social interactions and relationship building among most students.

These findings highlight the need for actions by educational institutions to foster healthy social interactions among peers and teachers, aiming to stimulate interaction

and bonding, particularly in the initial years of university courses. The role of psychologists in supporting incoming students is thus underscored. They can assist in welcoming and integrating students, providing information about the course structures, and facilitating discussions for reflection on professional choices (MOURA; FACCI, 2016). This approach is crucial for enhancing the university experience for new students, ensuring they feel included and supported as they navigate the challenges and opportunities of university life.

In the study dimension, despite the general data indicating a positive perception ($M = 3.2$), B1, B2, B5, and B8 (44.5%) exhibit negative aspects in terms of skills, study habits, time management, learning strategies, and study organization, while B3, B4, B6, B7, and B9 (55.5%) display appropriate aspects in this dimension, ensuring satisfactory academic performance.

For the students at UAlg, although Tatiana, Natasha, and Tomás (P4, P9, and P10) have averages close to the cutoff score, in general, they reveal positive aspects in this dimension ($M = 3.5$). It should be noted that Natasha and Tomás are students with Autism Spectrum Disorder, which in most cases leads to difficulties in time management, study, and routine. Therefore, it is crucial to support these students so that they feel more secure, confident, and are able to keep up with their learning. These results also highlight the need to provide students, before their entrance into university, with strategies that aid learning, organization, and autonomy, fostering their transition to higher education and their successful permanence at the university. It is also important to promote, within the university, support networks that enhance the teaching and learning of these students, emphasizing the role of the psychologist in this regard.

Finally, the dimension that most showed deficits in the inclusion of students at Unesp was the personal dimension ($M = 2.8$). Only three students, Francisco, Pedro, and Jorge (B1, B3, and B6) (33.3%), had positive perceptions regarding their physical and psychological well-being, such as having emotional stability, optimism, decision-making, and autonomy.

At UAlg, overall, students showed positive perceptions regarding their physical and psychological well-being, such as emotional stability, optimism, decision-making, and autonomy. However, two students, Natasha and Kátia (P9 and P12), had very low averages (respectively $M = 2.3$ and $M = 2.5$), demonstrating a negative perception regarding their physical and psychological well-being. Once again, the role of the psychologist in higher education institutions is essential for students to feel included and belonging to the university environment, progressing socially, personally, emotionally, and academically.

When comparing the results of this study with those of Zampar (2015), who identified the perceptions of the inclusion of a group of five students with disabilities at a Brazilian public university using the QVA-r as well, it was found that the Unesp results have lower average scores in all five dimensions of academic experiences. This outcome signals a greater challenge for adaptations and dissatisfaction among these students. The comparison of UAlg's results with Zampar's (2015) research also shows lower average scores in most dimensions, except for the personal dimension, which was more positive. It is noteworthy that in both studies, despite differing cultural realities, the dimensions that received the highest scores from the students were the career and institutional dimensions, while the most deficient were the personal and study dimensions. Similar results were found among the Unesp students in this research.

In relation to the EPSS (Escala de Percepção de Suporte Social), the results found at Unesp and UAlg are similar to those found in Olivati's (2017) research with students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) in higher education. In this research, a deficit was also identified in the perception of social support by participants in relation to the university context, both in practical and emotional aspects.

Note that only three students at UAlg, Tiago (P2), Papoila (P6), and Miguel (P8), showed positive results both in the perception of practical social support and in emotional support, meaning that only 25% of the students with disabilities at this university believe they receive adequate social support. Meanwhile, at Unesp, only Roberto (B8), Gabriel (B9), and Carla (B10) showed more positive results, but only in emotional support, which means that 66.6% of the students with disabilities at this university consider that they do not receive adequate social support. Additionally, when comparing the overall results of the students from Unesp with those from UAlg, it is evident that the latter showed more positive results regarding social support. This fact may be related to the support provided by the Office for Student Support with Special Educational Needs (GAENEE) of this institution. In addition to granting the Status of Students with Special Educational Needs, this office works with faculty members and management bodies of the Organizational Units/Departments to reduce disadvantages and respond to the needs of students. It provides support throughout their academic journey, identifies technical aids/support products, promotes awareness and training actions within the academic community, seeks to eliminate architectural barriers on campuses, and ensures the application and compliance with the Statute of the Student with Special Educational Needs. The lack of a dedicated support and assistance center for students with disabilities at Unesp, as already exists in some Brazilian federal institutions through accessibility centers, may have contributed to the results found.

Final Considerations

The present study had the overall objective of understanding the process of including students with disabilities in Higher Education in Brazil and Portugal, analyzing their academic experiences, and their perception of social support. The results showed that the inclusion process of students with disabilities in Higher Education in both countries has many similarities, with challenges to be overcome towards inclusive, equitable education that respects the diversity of students attending Higher Education. Many challenges are still experienced by students with disabilities in Higher Education. Issues related to accessibility, lack of social support, as well as the stigma, stereotypes, and prejudices they may still encounter, contribute to difficulties in both access and academic success for these students.

However, it is noteworthy that, even in different cultural contexts and in the presence of accessibility barriers in both universities, the students who participated in the study have a positive perception of their inclusion in the academic environment, with a particular emphasis on the career and institutional dimensions. This indicates that they seem to be content with their choice of course and profession, as well as the institution they study at, factors that contribute to their staying in university and completing their courses. It should be noted, however, that the personal and interpersonal dimensions were the most deficient among students from both countries, indicating the need for these institutions to promote actions that foster the development and quality of academic experiences, a sense of belonging, and the creation of emotional bonds and friendships within the academic community.

It is urgent for Higher Education institutions to listen to the voices of these students throughout their academic journeys, allowing them to share their experiences and needs. It is particularly important for institutions to invest in creating or improving support networks and social and emotional support in both aspects (practical and emotional support), creating opportunities for students to feel more welcomed and a sense of belonging in that space, ultimately leading to better academic, personal, and social performance (HERRIDGE, 2017; YSSEL; PARK; BEILKE, 2016).

The study confirmed the deficiency in the social and emotional support provided by institutions to these students. The presence of a support service appears to contribute to better outcomes for students, indicating that initiatives such as the creation of support offices and actions carried out by these services help them face challenges and obstacles, meet their needs, and consequently, promote a better academic experience, retention, and inclusion in the university (ALT, 2017; CORY, 2011).

Furthermore, it is important to implement effective actions that encourage students to engage in extracurricular activities, contributing to the promotion of their autonomy, self-determination, and psychological well-being (BIALKA, *et al.*, 2017).

Guided by an inclusive and socially responsible model, Higher Education institutions should take measures to enable education for all, ensuring the rights of everyone with equality and equitable opportunities.

In this regard, it is also important to carry out awareness and information campaigns that maximize accessibility in all its aspects, particularly in eliminating attitudinal, methodological, and architectural barriers. Furthermore, institutions should strive to ensure that academic experiences extend beyond the academic environment, as the lives of these students are often limited to classrooms (BIALKA, *et al.*, 2017; ZAMPAR, 2015).

In this context, psychologists can play a crucial role by facilitating support groups and collaborating in the creation of support networks for these students. They can promote practices that focus on active listening, critical and reflective awareness, and the empowerment of these students towards their emancipation and self-determination. This can lead to improved academic, personal, and social performance and, consequently, successful retention of students with disabilities in the university (HERRIDGE, 2017). Equally important is the role of psychologists in promoting awareness and consciousness-raising activities about inclusion, disability, and accessibility, with the aim of dismantling attitudinal barriers and stereotypes that are still prevalent in our society regarding disability (CIANTELLI, LEITE, NUERNBERG, 2017; BIALKA *et al.*, 2017).

The present study has some limitations. Given the small sample size and self-reported data, the results need to be interpreted with caution. Another limitation could be response bias, as participants may have been less open to discussing their experiences due to the sensitive nature of the subject matter. Future research should aim to obtain a more significant and diverse sample since this study was conducted in only two institutions, and therefore, the results cannot be generalized to other universities. It would also be interesting to delve into the study skills, motivations, and expectations of these students before entering Higher Education, as well as the demands placed on them by professors in different courses and their relationship with these professors. Research that combines the voices of students and the entire academic community in various Higher Education institutions would allow for a deeper exploration of the issues raised in this article.

Future research should also investigate the experiences of students who drop out of Higher Education and focus on the analysis of teaching attitudes and practices to explore ways to promote retention and inclusion in that environment.

Finally, it is expected that this study will contribute to the creation, development and provision of support services for students with disabilities in the various institutions of higher education in Brazil and Portugal and that the challenges in these two realities are overcome, towards unifying verses that are truly inclusive.

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