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ARTIGO

SERVICES FOR STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES AT UNIVERSITIES: DIFICULTIES AND CHALLENGES

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ABSTRACT: Students with disabilities may confront numerous obstacles and challenges when reaching Higher Education (HE) and attempting to be successful in it. Disability Services Offices at universities play an important role in providing direct and indirect support for these students. This paper presents the perspectives of Disability Services Offices' staff regarding the provision of services to students with disabilities, describing the characteristics, difficulties and challenges of these offices. We collected data at 62 public university organizations in Brazil and Portugal using a questionnaire developed for this purpose. Despite the demands faced by the Disability Services Offices, signs of good progress in support for students with disabilities are increasing. Although the services play an important role, minimal autonomy and significant difficulties remain in several domains of management and intervention. We discuss necessary changes and adaptations in supporting these students at universities, considering the significant consequences of integration and success for students with disabilities. Inclusive policies that are based on equity and equal opportunities and more resources are required to guarantee the rights of all students in Higher Education.

Keywords: students with disabilities, inclusive education, disability services offices, higher education.

SERVIÇOS PARA ESTUDANTES COM DEFICIÊNCIA NAS UNIVERSIDADES: DIFICULDADES E DESAFIOS

RESUMO: Os estudantes com deficiência podem enfrentar inúmeros obstáculos e desafios ao acessar o Ensino Superior (ES) e tentar ter sucesso nele. Os serviços de apoio para estudantes com deficiência

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nas universidades desempenham um papel importante no fornecimento de apoio direto e indireto para esses estudantes. Este artigo apresenta as perspectivas dos Coordenadores dos Serviços de Apoio para Estudantes com Deficiência no que diz respeito à prestação de serviços a estudantes com esta condição, descrevendo as suas características, dificuldades e desafios. Os dados foram coletados em 62 instituições universitárias públicas do Brasil e de Portugal por meio de questionário desenvolvido para esse fim. Apesar das demandas enfrentadas pelos Serviços de Apoio para Estudantes com Deficiência, os sinais de bom progresso no apoio a estes estudantes estão aumentando. Embora os serviços desempenhem um papel importante, uma autonomia mínima e dificuldades significativas permanecem em vários domínios de gestão e intervenção. São discutidas as mudanças e adaptações necessárias no apoio a esses estudantes nas universidades, considerando as consequências significativas da inclusão e do sucesso para os estudantes com deficiência. Políticas inclusivas baseadas na equidade e igualdade de oportunidades e mais recursos são necessários para garantir os direitos de todos os estudantes no Ensino Superior.

Palavras-chave: estudantes com deficiência, educação inclusiva, serviços para estudantes com deficiência, ensino superior.

SERVICIOS PARA ESTUDIANTES CON DISCAPACIDAD EN LAS UNIVERSIDADES: DIFICULTADES Y DESAFÍOS

RESÚMEN: Los estudiantes con discapacidades pueden enfrentar muchos obstáculos y desafíos cuando acceden a la educación superior (ES) e intentan tener éxito en ella. Los Servicios de Apoyo para Estudiantes con Discapacidades en las universidades juegan un papel importante al proporcionar apoyo directo e indirecto a estos estudiantes. Este documento presenta las perspectivas del personal de los Servicios de Apoyo con respecto a la prestación de servicios a estudiantes con discapacidad, describiendo sus características, dificultades y desafíos. Los datos fueron recolectados en 62 organizaciones universitarias públicas en Brasil y Portugal utilizando un cuestionario desarrollado para este propósito. Apesar de las demandas que enfrentan los Servicios de Apoyo para Estudiantes con Discapacidad, están aumentando las señales de buen progreso en el apoyo a los estudiantes. Aunque los servicios desempeñan un papel importante, subsisten una autonomía mínima y dificultades significativas en varios dominios de gestión e intervención. Se discuten los cambios y las adaptaciones necesarias en el apoyo a estudiantes en las universidades, considerando las consecuencias significativas de la inclusión y el éxito para los estudiantes con discapacidad. Se requieren políticas inclusivas basadas en la equidad y la igualdad de oportunidades y más recursos para garantizar los derechos de todos los estudiantes de Educación Superior.

Palabras clave: estudiantes con discapacidad, educación inclusiva, oficinas de servicios para discapacitados, educación superior.

INTRODUCTION

According to the United Nations (2015), it is estimated that 1 billion people globally live with one or more physical, sensory, intellectual, or mental health impairment. Persons with disabilities are the world's largest and most disadvantaged minority. Several regulations have been guiding the effective ensuring of people's rights, particularly the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) and its Optional Protocol (UNITED NATIONS, 2006). In the CRPD, disability is defined through an ecological model in which disability is perceived as an evolving concept reflecting the interaction between the individual and social attitudes, and the physical, economic and political environment that hinders the full and equal participation of persons with disabilities in society.

One major concern has been the increased access of students with disabilities in Higher Education (HE) (MAJOKO; DUNN, 2018; WILLIAMS, POLLARD, TAKALA, HOUGHTON, 2019). This increased diversity has produced a greater awareness of necessary adaptations, engendering new institutional resources and responses (COSTA; PIECZKOWSKI, 2020; MORIÑA; MORGADO; LÓPEZ, 2017; NOLAN; GLEESON; TREANOR; MADIGAN, 2015).

Several perspectives have guided the support of students with disabilities in recent decades (LIPKA; BARUCH; MEER, 2019), and have influenced the development of policies and provisions (VAN MIEGHEM ET AL., 2020). Currently, the social model posits that disability is caused by how society is organized rather than by a person's impairment and that differences are direct results of social, environmental, and attitudinal barriers. This model states that disabling barriers must be a dismantling process in societies, focusing on the existing gap between student's rights and practices because, as Titchkosky (2008) claimed, disability appears to be everywhere yet nowhere. Furthermore, according to the Education 2030 Framework for Action, "there is a need to address all forms of exclusion and marginalization" (UNESCO, 2017, p. 12). The social model of disability is widely accepted as the most effective way through which universities can respond to the needs of students with disabilities. According to this model, the response to disability is not about 'fixing' individuals, but rather about restructuring the environments and attitudes around them (TITCHKOSKY, 2008).

Costa and Pieczkowski (2020) point out that there is an expansion of access of students with disabilities to institutions of higher education. As a result of this increase the number of universities offering services for students with disabilities has grown considerably over the last decade worldwide. Nevertheless, not all students with disabilities receive adequate and equal level of support, enabling them to have equity of opportunity and academic success (MORIÑA, 2017). According to Laya (2020), the pedagogical dimension of equity in HE is very important to overcome the persisting inequalities despite policies enacted around the world to expand educational opportunities.

Notwithstanding the diversity of denominations for these services, many universities call these services Disability Services Offices (DSOs), a term that will be used in this research.

The missions of these offices is to promote the commitment of universitities to equity and diversity by providing services and academic accommodations to students with disabilities. In addition, these offices must provide individual counselling and assistance to students, from registration until graduation, and prepare them for their transition to the labour force (MAJOKO; DUNN, 2018; MORIÑA, 2017; MORGADO; LÓPEZ-GAVIRA, 2017).

One of the primary concerns of DSOs is identifying students' needs and satisfaction whilst simultaneously promoting high academic standards (DATTA; TALUKDAR, 2017). Despite some studies in this area, it remain the need for more comprehensive research on DSOs at universities (HOUSE OF COMMONS LIBRARY, 2020. Most investigations concerning students' experiences are limited to one or only a few universities in one country, and studies comparing countries or continents are scarce; thus, we focus on the experiences of two countries: Brazil and Portugal. The selection of these two countries is based on a common past and roots and on the sharing of the same language.

INCLUSIVE SERVICES OFFICES AT UNIVERSITIES

Access to HE for people with disabilities presents opportunities as well as challenges. Although governments tend to incorporate principles such as social justice, equal opportunities, accessibility, and universal design (ACKAH-JNR; DANSO, 2019; STIEFEL; SHIFERAW; SCHWARTZ; GOTTFRIED, 2018) in public policies, such developments have not been fast or easy.

Some researchers have focused on this challenge and have studied this 'duty', demonstrating that universities' efforts to ensure equal opportunities to students with disabilities remain insufficient; a gap remains between politic discourse and practical reality (DATTA; TALUKDAR, 2017; WILLIAMS; POLLARD; TAKALA; HOUGHTON, 2019).

The implementation of DSOs at universities was an important contribution to the inclusion of students with disabilities in HE. Although the roles of these services may differ across countries, usually DSOs welcome students, faculty, staff, and visitors with disabilities and ensure an accessible, friendly working and learning environment. According to the United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization and the World Conference on Higher Education (Paris, 5-9 October 1998), these services should provide appropriate assistance and opportunities for students with disabilities to allow them to compete on an equal footing with their peers. DSOs should assist students to access all programmes, services, and activities sponsored by the university and advice and support students in accessing classrooms and other accommodations. Finally, DSOs should be a reference point on campus, ensuring the appropriate resources and assisting students in their environmental transitions, from home to university and from university to work, promoting autonomy and developing lifelong strategies for independent management of their disabilities (UNESCO, 2017).

Despite its importance, the investigation of Lipka, Baruch and Meer (2019) points out that although many faculty members (58%) reported that they were familiar with support services at the university, there is still a lack of knowledge about these services (34%).

Some studies have focused on DSO features, such as their composition and monitoring systems. Some studies highlighted services' direct responses, such as accommodations, disclosures, documentation, and other aspects; others emphasized the experiences of isolated universities or of several universities in one country (ACKAH-JNR; DANSO, 2019; MESSIOU, 2019; STIEFEL ET AL., 2018).

HIGHER EDUCATION AND INCLUSIVE EDUCATION POLICY IN BRAZIL AND PORTUGAL

In line with international guidelines, the two countries signed the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNITED NATIONS, 2006), with greater attention being paid to the inclusion of students with disabilities in HE.

Since 2003, Brazil has been developing legislative measures to create adequate responses to the needs of students with disabilities entering higher education. Although in Portugal there is no specific legislation, as a state member of the European Union, Portugal has followed the guidelines to ensure the right to an education for persons with disabilities. In the absence of general legislation, Portuguese universities have developed specific regulations to protect and promote the rights of students with disabilities. One major consequence was the founding of the work group to support students with disabilities in higher education (GTAEDES). This work group provides services, promotes inter-agency and experience exchanges, and develops rationales for joint initiatives and resources (MELO; MARTINS, 2016).

According to Melo and Martins (2016), although most institutions in both countries provide services for students with disabilities, significant difficulties persist in the inclusion of students. The existence of legal norms in Brazil and the development of statutes and regulations in Portuguese institutions have not yet allowed for educational systems to be considered truly inclusive.

There are policies and legislation that ensure the access and permanence of students with disabilities in Brazilian HE as well as a budget for actions that promote and guarantee access for these students in federal public universities; however, many universities have not yet put into practice what is required by law. In fact, and despite the unquestionable advances of inclusive policies in Brazilian HE, the pedagogical guidelines for students with disabilities remain incipient constrasting to what is established for basic education, in which there is a wider structure of services and resources available to students (MELO; MARTINS, 2016). A similar situation occurs in Portugal, in which students with disabilities find several obstacles in HE (MARTINS ET AL., 2015).

Considering this, we ask: how are these support services organized for students with disabilities in public universities in Brazil and Portugal? Who are the professionals who ensure this support? Who are the students who apply for these services? How is the support structured and what resources do they have? What are the difficulties and challenges?

The goals of the present study are to characterize (1) Disabled Services Offices in public universities in Brazil and Portugal, (2) DSO functioning, and (3) coordination features. Difficulties and challenges are analysed to propose broad guidelines to improve their effectiveness and contribute to the inclusion and success of these students.

METHODOLOGY

This research was conducted in the context of a project involving two partners, Brazil and Portugal. This study is exploratory, transversal, and comparative, using quantitative data analysis from an online survey, reaching a more extensive number of professionals in a larger geographic area.

Participants and procedures

Professionals from Brazilian and Portuguese DSOs at public universities funded by the central government participated in this study. To have an office that provides services to students with disabilities was considered an inclusive criterion.

After developing and adapting a questionnaire in both countries on the existence of DSOs in public HE institutions, an email was sent for all public universities that met the defined criteria. The email was sent to the coordinator or responsible person in each DSO requesting their participation in the online survey.

We informed the purpose of the study and the anonymity and confidential nature of the answers.

Two groups of DSO coordinators participated: the first comprised 54 Brazilian professionals, and the second comprised 8 Portuguese coordinators. Both samples reflected most the countries' public support services, despite the number of Portuguese DSO responses being relatively small (representing 87% of DSOs in Brazil and 75% of DSOs in Portugal).

Instrumentation, data collection, and data analysis

Four different stages were followed: (1) preliminary survey construction, (2) assessment by external judges/evaluators (researchers in the field of Inclusion in Higher Education), (3) pilot test, and (4) language adaptations.

For the development of the preliminary survey, we used as a reference the literature on inclusive education and policies (e.g., FOTIM, 2011). Three experts (i.e., two special education teachers and one psychologist) were asked to evaluate the surveys' final contents (e.g., grammar, syntax, and locations). The final version was applied in two Brazilian universities (pilot test).

Although both countries speak Portuguese, another pilot test was applied in Portugal with two special education experts, and the suggestions, regarding European Portuguese, were also considered.

Three major subjects were addressed: (1) DSO organization, university and service characteristics (e.g., name, financial resources, and accessibility); (2) DSO functioning (e.g., team, selection process, advisory services, formation, projects, and partnerships); and (3) coordination characteristics (e.g., gender, age, academic formation, experience, and perceptions about the). The survey included a mixture of closed and forced choice questions (20 questions), Likert scales (44 items), and opportunities to comment.

The surveys were sent by email to Portuguese and Brazilian universities that had DSOs (an inclusion criteria of the research).

To observe the ethical standard principles, the researchers informed all participants of the objectives and relevance of the study. Participants provided their informed consent to participate in the study. The principle of confidentiality of information was observed and the participants were assured of this. All documents related to the participants were kept in a designated folder in a safe place. The right to opt out of the study was offered with no restrictions for the participants. They were also reassured that they would not be affected by their statements and that all their remarks would remain confidential.

Quantitative data were imported to Statistical Package for Social Sciences V. 26 (IBM SPSS) and an analytic presentation using descriptive statistics (e.g., means, standard-deviation, range, and percentages).

RESULTS

Disability Services Offices Organization

Concerning the characteristics of the DSOs, it is important to note that they started in the late 1980s in Portugal, and, in Brazil, they appeared nearly a decade later (1999). The offices' mean existence years reflects these differences (Brazil: Max = 17, M = 5.67, SD = 3.19; Portugal: Max = 28, M = 9.63, SD = 9.62). Both countries indicated specific regulations for their offices' support and functioning (Brazil = 61.10%, Portugal = 87.50%).

Regarding services' reporting structure, no office reported being completely autonomous. In general, in both countries, the services were more dependent on the faculty (Brazil: 72.8%) and Principal's Office/Rectory Services (Portugal: 37.5%). The results revealed low levels of autonomy to decide and develop projects. Another important condition was having a specific budget: in Brazil, most services (55.6%) had their own budget; in Portugal, the majority (75%) did not have specific financial resources allocated.

With respect to facilities' accessibility, the Portuguese coordinators were more optimistic regarding their range of services (Yes = 62.5%) than the Brazilian coordinators (Partial = 68.5%). Concerning internal accessibility, the opinions were positive and in agreement, evidencing the existence of accessibility conditions in universities in both countries. Nevertheless, it should be noted that some respondents continued to report difficulties with accessibility (Brazil, Partial = 44.4%; Portugal, Partial = 25%). A minority reported that students with disabilities did not have enough accessibility accommodations (e.g., access ramps, elevators, adapted classrooms; Brazil, No = 7.4%; Portugal, No = 12.5%).

Disability Services Offices Staff Demographics

Most office coordinators were women (Brazil = 83.3%; Portugal = 87.5%), and some coordinators had some disabilities (Brazil = 13%; Portugal = 12.5%). Regarding their qualifications, most had a PhD (Brazil = 51.9%; Portugal = 75%), primarily in social sciences (Brazil = 64.8%; Portugal = 75%) and humanities (Brazil = 14.8%; Portugal = 25%). They had specializations in the area of special education (Brazil = 79.6%; Portugal = 50%), vast HE teaching experience (Brazil, M = 19.06 years; Portugal, M = 21.6 years), and experience as members of the DSOs (Brazil, M = 8.44 years; Portugal, M = 6.28 years) (Table 1).

Table 1- Coordinators' profile characteristics

Characteristics	**Brazil (*n* = 54)**		**Portugal (*n* = 8)**	
	n	***%***	***n***	***%***
Male	9	16.7	1	12.5
Female	45	83.3	7	87.5
Disabilities condition	7	13	1	12.5
Specialization	10	18.5	2	25
Master	16	29.6	0	0
PhD	28	51.9	6	75
Specialized Formation	43	79.6	4	50
Experience with Disabilities	43	79.6	7	87.5
Managing experience	47	87	6	75
	Min (Max)	***M (SD)***	**Min *(Max)***	***M (SD)***

University' Years Employment	1 (30)	19.06 (10.19)	8 (29)	21.63 (6.74)
Coordinator's Service Years	0.1 (9.8)	8.44 (7.70)	0.25 (18)	6.28 (5.76)

Notes: Min (Minimum), Max (Maximum), *M* (Mean), *SD* (Standard Deviation).
Source: Table prepared by the authors

Globally, the DSOs in Brazilian universities employed larger and more diversified staffs (M = 6, SD = 5.29, Min = 1, Max = 24) than those of Portuguese offices (M = 3.43, SD = 2.37, Min = 1, Max = 8) (Table 2).

Table 2 - DSO Professionals

Specific Formation	**Brazil (*n* = 54)**			**Portugal (*n* = 8)**		
	%	***M***	***SD***	**%**	***M***	***SD***
Special education teacher	46.3	0.77	1.00	37.5	0.88	0.99
Psychopedagogue	77.8	0.25	0.65	87.5	0	0
Sign Translator	24.1	2.77	2.94	75.0	0.14	0.38
Translator Guide	94.4	0.08	0.56	87.5	0	0
Braille Reviser	79.6	0.25	0.62	75.0	0.38	0.74
Psychologist	63.0	0.58	1.04	25.0	1	0.82
Social Worker	66.7	0.71	1.70	50.0	0.57	0.79
	M	***SD***	**Min (Max)**	***M***	***SD***	**Min (Max)**
Staff	6	5.29	1(24)	3.43	2.37	1(8)

Notes: M (Mean), *SD* (Standard Deviation), Min (Minimum), Max (Maximum).
Source: Table prepared by the authors

Concerning special education resources, participants noted that sign translators (Brazil: *M* = 2.77, *SD* = 2.94; Portugal: *M* = 0.14, *SD* = 0.34), special education teachers (Brazil: *M* = 0.77, *SD* = 1.00; Portugal: *M* = 0.88, *SD* = 0.99), and psychologists (Brazil: *M* = 0.58, *SD* = 1.04; Portugal: *M* = 1.00, *SD* = 0.82) were the most common professionals working in the DSOs. In Brazil, there were also psychopedagogues working in DSOs (*M* = 0.25, *SD* = 0.65) (Table 2).

Disability profile of students attending the Disability Services Offices

The students who accessed the services displayed some similarities. In both countries, the most frequent disabilities were physical disabilities (Brazil, *M* = 21.01, *SD* = 34.66; Portugal, *M* = 5.62, *SD* = 5.73), visual impairment (Brazil, *M* = 12.47, *SD* = 35.32; Portugal, *M* = 1.87, *SD* = 2.97), hearing impairment (Brazil, *M* = 9.77, *SD* = 16.04; Portugal, *M* = 1.25, *SD* = 1.36), multiple disabilities (Brazil, *M* = 2.91, *SD* = 5.58; Portugal, *M* = 0.25, *SD* = 0.53) and cognitive disabilities (Brazil, *M* = 1.54, *SD* = 3,56; Portugal, *M* = 0.12, *SD* = 0.23). In Portugal, other problems were also designated, such as psychiatric diseases (*M* = 4.5, *SD* = 6.46), dyslexia (*M* = 4, *SD* = 5.35), chronic diseases (*M* = 2.38, *SD* = 4.07) and neurological diseases (*M* = 0.75, *SD* = 1.75).

Disability Service Offices Functioning

Generally, Brazilian participants expressed a more positive appreciation of the DSOs' functioning, considering the pedagogic advisory to lecturers and directors regarding accessibility and inclusion (90.7%), teaching project development (monitoring, mentoring, and volunteering) for academic support of students with disabilities (85.2%), provision of assistive technology resources (83.3%), continuing training on accessibility and inclusion for faculty and non-teaching staff (81.5%) and outreach project development (extra-institutional partnerships for the development of inclusion) (81.5%). Regarding services provided less often, Brazilian coordinators mentioned domains related to specialized attention to students with disabilities (57.4%).

Portuguese respondents noted as the more successful endeavours the development of learning projects (monitoring, mentoring, and volunteering) for academic support of students with disabilities (87.5%), research projects development (87.5%), pedagogic advisory for lecturers and directors regarding accessibility and inclusion (62.5%), and specialized attention to students with disabilities (62.5%). The services less frequently provided by Portuguese DSOs were related to community partnerships (25%) (Table 3).

Table 3 - Services support domains and partnerships provided by DSO

Support domains	Brazil (*n* = 54)				Portugal (*n* = 8)			
	No		Yes		No		Yes	
	n	%	*n*	%	*n*	%	*n*	%
Selection Processes	12	22.2	41	75.9	5	62.5	3	37.5
Pedagogic Advisory	5	9.3	49	90.7	3	37.5	5	62.5
Continuous Formation	10	18.5	44	81.5	4	50	4	50
Assistive Technological Orientations	10	18.5	43	79.6	4	50	4	50
Assistive Technological Access	9	16.7	45	83.3	4	50	4	50
Accessible Material Production	16	29.6	38	70.4	2	25	6	75
Specialize attending	22	40.7	31	57.4	3	37.5	5	62.5
Teach Projects Development	8	14.8	46	85.2	1	12.5	7	87.5
Research Projects Development	11	20.4	43	79.6	1	12.5	7	87.5
Outreach Project Development	9	16.7	44	81.5	6	75	2	25

Source: Table prepared by the authors

The offices of both countries stated they were involved in consistent partnerships, although professionals from Brazil noted internal cooperation (e.g., between colleges and university' services; 85.2%) and the Portuguese noted more external cooperation (e.g., associations, high schools, local government services; 75%).

In general, efforts were made to ensure that the services provided by DSOs were adequate for students' needs. The data revealed that Brazilian DSOs seemed to be better equipped to include students than the Portuguese offices. Globally, several resources were noted to be missing (Brazilian: translator guide, 90.7%; Braille reviser, 75.9%; accessible transport, 54.7%; Portuguese: translator guide, 87.5%; Braille reviser, 75%; and accessible transport, 100%). Regarding insufficient resources, Brazilian respondents noted several to be unsatisfactory (technological resources, 69.8%; sign language translator, 55.6%; and audio resources, 53.7%). Portuguese coordinators indicated accessible furniture (62.5%) and digital didactic resources (37.5%) as insufficient. Participants considered various types of resources to be enough (Brazilian: sign language translator, 31.5%; Braille resources, 31.5%; accessible education materials, 31.5%; Portuguese: technological resources, 75%; didactic resources, 62.5%; and audio resources, 50%).

Regarding coordinators' perceived difficulties (Table 4), both groups agreed on several concerns regarding DSOs' conditions and resources. Brazilian professionals noted the lack of enough professionals (87%), specialized teachers (66.7%), and teachers' support (62.3%) to be the most problematic areas.

Table 4 - Professionals perceptions concerning DSO difficulties

Perceived Difficulties	Brazil (*n* = 54)				Portugal (*n* = 8)			
	No		Yes		No		Yes	
	n	%	*n*	%	*n*	%	*n*	%
Work Conditions	25	46.3	28	51.9	4	50	4	50
Insufficient Professionals	6	11.1	47	87	5	62.5	3	37.5
Faculty training on inclusion	17	31.5	36	66.7	0	0	8	100
Insufficient Financial Resources	27	50.9	26	49.1	5	62.5	3	37.5
No student involvement	39	73.6	14	26.4	5	62.5	3	37.5
Lack Teachers' Support	20	37.7	33	62.3	6	75	2	25
Insufficient Institutional Support	44	83	9	17	8	100	0	0
Partnership's Difficulties	44	83	9	17	5	62.5	3	37.5
Assisted Technology Resources	25	47.2	28	52.8	5	62.5	3	37.5
Professional's Interaction Difficulties	50	94.3	3	5.7	8	100	0	0

Source: Table prepared by the authors

Portuguese professionals considered the more relevant insufficient domains to be the need for faculty training on inclusion in higher education (100%), work conditions (50%), and number of professionals, financial resources and no student involvement (37.5%) (Table 4).

DISCUSSION

Considering the stated questions, the study reveals that there are some similarities and differences in the functioning of these services in the countries under analysis. Although the conditions in the two countries are not identical, one may consider that the groundwork for achieving success and a socially-just life project is being developed. Without data, it is not possible to know whether initiatives are really making a positive difference to these students' lives.

As in other studies, the access to HE for people with disabilities presents difficulties as well challenges and opportunities (DATTA; TALUKDAR, 2017; GRIMES; SOUTHGAT; SCEVAK; BUCHANAN, 2019; MESSIOU, 2019; MORIÑA, 2019; STIEFEL; SHIFERAW; SCHWARTZ; GOTTFRIED, 2018; VAN MIEGHEM; VERSCHUEREN; PETRY; STRUYF, 2020).

Although there is a significant evolution, it seems that "expansion has not effectively democratized this level of education, which historically evidence marks of selection and exclusion" (COSTA; PIECZKOWSKI, 2020, p. 3). Inclusive education is an on-going process that must offer quality education to all students, respecting diversity and eliminating all forms of discrimination (UNITED NATIONS, 2007); therefore, HE must continue to develop a wide range of services to meet students' needs. These services may include counselling and specialized academic tutoring in addition to the accommodations and assistive technology that DSOs provide (NOLAN; GLEESON; TREANOR; MADIGAN, 2015).

About the general characteristics of the services, there are significant differences between Brazilian and Portuguese realities, from the nomenclatures used to identify the services to specifics related to structure and organization. This result is corroborated by the different designations we have found in the literature for these support services (COSTA; PIECZKOWSKI, 2020).

The implementation and development of DSOs' organization are more recent in Brazil than in Portugal. These results contrast with the existence of a central policy defined in Brazil and not in Portugal (MELO; MARTINS, 2016). Concerning financial resources and autonomy, the reality is somehow different in the two countries: unlike Brazil, in Portugal, most services do not have their own budgets. This is a significant issue because the growing recognition of DSOs' roles and the increasing number of students with disabilities in HE demands more substantial and specific budgets to promote more effective services. This aspect is particularly important, considering that the principles of inclusion need to be diffused and incorporated into educational policies, as disability cannot be conceptualized only as a limitation in the subject, but fundamentally due to the precarious physical and social structures (COSTA; PIECZKOWSKI, 2020).

Overall, the accessibility to services and internal spaces (i.e., where services occur) were evaluated as positive. The results indicated that in both countries, there has been an increasing awareness of services that overcome existing barriers that have hampered the access, permanence, and success of students with disabilities in HE. However, some barriers remain, highlighting the continuing challenge of accessibility issues in HEIs. These data were corroborated in several investigations (ACKAH-JNR; DANSO, 2019; FOTIM, 2011; MESSIOU, 2019; MORIÑA, 2019; NDLOVU; WALTON, 2016; PRIYANKA; SAMIA, 2018).

According to FOTIM (2011) DSOs must provide appropriate assistance and opportunities for students with disabilities to enable those students to compete equally with their peers in academic environments. It is also important that services assist students to obtain access to all programmes, services and activities sponsored by universities. In both countries, HEIs have designated a disability coordinator for these services, a common situation in other countries. Notably, Parker (2000) previously advocated for the need and importance of a coordinator responsible for disability issues at universities. He also recommended the development of a code of ethics to promote the best practices.

Regarding the demographic aspects, most service coordinators are women. The significant majority have a PhD and their training areas are related to the social sciences and humanities; they also have special education training and experience working with people with disabilities. The professionals working in DSOs are more numerous and diverse in Brazil, ranging from one part-time administrative person to a structured office with a coordinator and a few permanent staff as well as volunteers to assist the students. In general, it appears that staff specificity depends on students' disabilities. In Portugal, some volunteers support students with motor deficiencies, namely in the displacement to the classrooms. These data were corroborated in the Foundation of Tertiary Institutions of the Northern Metropolis study (FOTIM, 2011).

It is also important to add the difficulties mentioned by both countries regarding the services' independence in defining projects that may be relevant to the success and inclusion of students with disabilities.

The results indicate that DSOs in Brazil depend primarily on faculties, and those in Portugal depend primarily on Principal's Office/Rectory Services. In Brazil, services may provide more adequate answers to the students' real needs based on the closest proximity. In Portugal, in the absence of a centrally defined policy, many Principal's Office/Rectory Services have created a common structure for the entire university.

The data also indicate that the most prevalent student disabilities in both countries are physical disabilities, visual impairment, and hearing impairment. Less prevalent are multiple disabilities and cognitive disabilities. In Portugal, other conditions are designated such as psychiatric diseases, dyslexia, chronic diseases, and neurological diseases. These findings are different from those reported by the Department of Education (PEQIS) study in which the reported conditions of students' disabilities were 31% specific learning disabilities, 18% ADD/ADHD, 15% mental illness/psychological or psychiatric conditions, and 11% health impairment conditions (RAUE; LEWIS, 2011).

It is important to note that these data reflect only the students who were supported by the DSO: many students can be resistant and choose not to disclose their disabilities for fear of discrimination; this has been noted in several studies (ACKAH-JNR; DANSO, 2019; NDLOVU; WALTON, 2016; SMITH; WOODHEAD; CHIN-NEWMAN, 2019; STRNADOVÁ; HÁJKOVÁ; KVĚTOŇOVÁ, 2015).

Regarding DSOs' functioning, although similar services are provided in both countries, we argue that DSOs must move beyond the current status to build an inclusive environment and implement technology and assistive devices to ensure inclusive learning and education methodologies and processes (VITALAKI; KOURKOUTAS; HART, 2018). For an effective delivery of the disability agenda, more awareness must be created among faculty and staff regarding disabilities issues. Furthermore, to guarantee equal opportunities in Higher Education, it is essential to incorporate the principles of inclusive education and universal design for learning in university policies and practices (MORIÑA, 2017).

Whereas in Brazil there is a greater orientation towards community partnerships and research development projects to support students with disabilities, in Portugal, the DSO scenario is to primarily respond to the availability of assistive technology resources to students and the production of materials. To fully promote inclusive and development contexts, multidisciplinary teams must be developed.

Significantly, both didactic (e.g., adapted materials and technology) and specialized professionals available to DSOs are needed. The barriers cited by coordinators to be hindering the Universal Design implementation included limited specialized staff resources to provide training in accessibility issues and the costs associated with purchasing appropriate technology. It should be noted that, also in the study by Lipka, Baruch, Meer (2019) many faculty members reported no participation in any training activity.

FINAL REMARKS

Exploring similarities and differences among services offered may provide additional understanding and guidance to help promote students' need for autonomy, academic success, competence, and relatedness. The goal of the University is to enable each student to achieve his or her academic goals (QVORTRUP; QVORTRUP, 2018). DSOs should provide programs and services designed to support and encourage the inclusion of students with disabilities into the mainstream university community. These services should assist in creating an accessible university community, where students with disabilities have an equal opportunity to fully participate in all aspects of the educational environment. DSOs should support both the teaching and learning environments through partnerships and in-service training with students, faculty, and staff.

These research findings reveal that DSOs evaluate and maintain disability-related documents, certifies eligibility for services, determine reasonable accommodations and develops plans for the provision of such accommodations, assist students in negotiating disability-related barriers in the pursuit of their education, strive to improve access to university programs, activities, and facilities for students with disabilities, and promote increased awareness of disability issues on campus. They contribute to the academic and social inclusion of students with disabilities in HEI settings. It is vital that a range of crucial supports become available to students with disabilities through DSOs and that each service take a proactive approach to identify areas that promote and ensure inclusion and academic success for all students (FOSSEY; CHAFFEY; VENVILLE; PRISCILLA; DOUGLAS; BIGBY, 2017; KIMBALL; WELLS; OSTIGUY; MANLY, 2016). Other studies noted that these services could have greater autonomy and more direct communication with university management and that they must have greater participation in disability concerns at universities (FOTIM, 2011; NDLOVU; WALTON, 2016). Another important factor is the negative perceptions of students' capacities and low expectations regarding their academic performance. Faced with these negative expectations, some students may choose not to disclose invisible disabilities for fear of being stigmatized (MAJOKO; DUNN, 2018; VLACHOU; PAPANANOU, 2018); consequently, such students may not receive the support they require, hampering their success and academic careers (ACKAH-JNR; DANSO, 2019).

According to Beck, Castillo, Fovet, Mole and Noga (2014) there are several practices that disability service offices can implement to promote access to services. For example, students could have virtual registration meetings to prevent fear of stigma. These services could develop new ways to reach students who otherwise might not seek services on their own. To satisfy students' needs they could provide information in flyers throughout the universities allowing students to review the material in a private location without the perceived presence of stigma. These services play an important role in developing a more complex understanding of diversity and inclusion across the university community. One important goal is to influence perceptions within the university, moving from a limited deficit-based framework toward a new understanding, based on the promotion and development of students' abilities.

In this sense, it is argued that these student support services can support the foundations for educational changes in "the pedagogical dimension, rooted in critical pedagogies, capacity and student-centered education, encompassing inclusive and dialogical educational processes to strengthen the nonstudent agency both to learn and to reverse accumulated educational and social exclusions" (LAYA, 2020, p. 2).

The inclusion process in HE takes time and will not be successful if the appropriate resources are not well secured (PRIYANKA; SAMIA, 2018). It is important to remember that universities cannot solve and overcome all barriers and obstacles they individually face. It is vital to develope a comprehensive policy with inclusive education guidelines for universities, considering the contributions of all parties (e.g., policy makers, HEI, teachers, students, and community) (ACKAH-JNR; DANSO, 2019; LÓPEZ-GAVIRA; MORIÑA; MORGADO, 2019; MESSIOU, 2019; VITALAKI; KOURKOUTAS; HART, 2018; VLACHOU; PAPANANOU, 2018). Laya (2020) mentions that the pedagogical dimension of equity implies more than just opening the university doors to traditionally excluded populations.

These services would benefit from further training, so that they can help promote and fullfill students' psychological needs. The training and professional competence of disability support providers is a further factor affecting students with disabilities and may lead them to become involved with support services while attending university. Lipka, Baruch and Meer (2019) also note the importance of providing faculty members with up-to-date information regarding the academic and cognitive characteristics of students with disabilities to increase the ability of faculty members to understand and help these students.

Thus, considering the paradigm of the Universal Design for Learning (UDL), HEIs should adopt a policy that incorporates the concepts and principles of Universal Design to effectively respond to the needs of all students (MEYER; ROSE; GORDON, 2014). According to the Centre for Applied Special Technology (CAST) and Rose and Meyer's considerations, UDL builds on a set of principles and strategies that focus on teaching, learning, curriculum development and other related processes, such as assessment. UDL is based on brain processes as well as information and communication technologies research and is designed to respond to individual differences in learning. This new paradigm posits that the curriculum should include alternatives to become more accessible and appropriate for individuals with different backgrounds, learning styles, abilities, and disabilities in widely varying learning contexts (MEYER; ROSE; GORDON, 2014).

Disability can affect anyone at any stage of life, becoming a defining aspect of someone's identity. As Myers, Lindburg and Nied (2014, p. 107) refer: "Disability is a human condition. As such, it logically is a part of diversity".

Implications, limitations, and further research

This work is relevant to ensure that campus administrators become more sensitive to inclusive environments in an adequate and accurately informed manner. We hope that such sensitivity will guide HEIs and practitioners in Brazil, Portugal, and other countries to develop significant strategies to best support students with disabilities in universities.

There are several limitations within this study. An important limitation stems from the objective of the study, which consisted of analysing the organizational level, rather than examining key areas in disability support provision such as disclosure and development of inclusive services. Future studies should try to collect a more diverse sample and it would have been particularly important to include lecturers and the students themselves to provide a more in-depth analysis. Further research combining students' voices and academic communities across multiple HEIs would allow for a deeper exploration of the considerations raised in this article. A second limitation can involve some response bias. Although the questions asked during the survey included a mixture of closed and forced choice questions, Likert scales, and opportunities to comment, due to the sensitive subject nature, it is possible some participants were less open to discuss their experiences than others.

The findings of this study provide insight into the role of university support services to address the needs of students with disabilities. However, further research is still needed to better serve disabled university students and understand their motivation for disclosure and use of university support services (MAJOKO; DUNN, 2018; LÓPEZ-GAVIRA; MORIÑA; MORGADO, 2019).

It is important that universities adopt an inclusive approach. This study can contribute to the dissemination of practices that may help universities to adopt the paradigm of Universal Design for

Learning by responding more effectively to the needs of all students. According to Domingo, Pérez-García and Domingo (2019), the construct of educational and social inclusion is complex and must go beyond the simple provision of services and support structures. Inclusion must go beyond the discursive domain, to guarantee the rights of all students.

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