Fostering Social Dimension of Higher Education

Strategically positioned in a region of multiple social, environmental, economic and cultural characteristics, the Leiria Polytechnic recognizes inclusion as one of the primary values of its action as a teaching institution. This prioritization takes place in terms of its internal dynamics, and in relation to the national and international communities, along with other equally structuring values such as "cooperation", "responsibility", "Innovation" and "critical and "entrepreneurial thinking". The Polytechnic of Leiria has shown a proactive leadership in promoting initiatives and projects in partnership, which place the social dimension as a priority at both the policy and practice levels.

The reality imposes a constant requirement: inclusion is built! As the system generates multiple mechanisms that create inequality, injustice and discrimination, institutions, particularly those of an educational nature such as Higher Education Institutions and in the scope of their training functions, scientific research and knowledge and innovation sharing, set the strategic pace in the fight against exclusion. This fight guarantees equal rights and opportunities, but also access to and promotion of educational success. HEIs will not be able to overcome inequalities by themselves but they can and should be a relevant part of the solution, as examples of equity and diversity. Multiple examples of good inclusion practices generated in and with the Polytechnic of Leiria can be shared, and all with a common denominator: the students. In an increasingly multicultural and heterogeneous society of which the academic communities are a strong reflection, and in which individual differences have more and more visibility and power, integrating the principles of inclusive education into the agenda of all leaders and stakeholders poses major challenges and opportunities for sharing, cooperation and negotiation. The latter help "overcome barriers that limit the presence, participation and achievement of learners; respond to the diversity of the needs of each and everyone, with a focus on those who have traditionally been excluded from learning opportunities (in A guide for ensuring inclusion and equity in inclusion, UNESCO).

The Polytechnic of Leiria chose to aim the training workshop mainly at undergraduate and master's students in the areas of teacher education and training, social education and also in the area of accessible communication. However, the call was extended to technicians and other internal collaborators. In total, the Workshop had 12 participants. The CRID - Resource Centre for Digital Inclusion, at the School of Education and Social Sciences of the Polytechnic Institute of Leiria, was chosen as the place to promote this moment of reflection and collection of contributions generating a commitment to the consolidation of change in the academia.

Brainstorming was highlighted as a tool for collecting information and intervention that, through encouraging the participation of students with their ideas and proposals, allowed the gen- • eration of alterna-

tives in the search process for solutions, in a quiet and less formal environment, contributing for the implementation of improvements considered relevant. The brainstorming was complemented by continuous, voluntary and collaborative feedback from the actors, allowing the flow of information between the partici-

The collaborative interaction between all the actors is one of the most promising paradigms that emerged in the postmodern age.

pants and the mediating team. This involvement of the students in the Workshop was an intentional and conscious choice. The goal was to give voice to those who are 'raison d'etre' of an educational institution such as the Leiria Polytechnic: the students. Their contributions have been systematised into a set of ideas, which also include a critical view of how inclusion has been tied in with day-to-day dynamics.

The increasing number of students with Special Educational Needs (ENEE) in recent years at the Leiria Polytechnic posed challenges to the entire academic community, while at the same time giving more visibility to the specific needs of this group: this was reflected in the participants' discourse. However, it also included references to situations of social and / or economic disadvantage of international students from South America and China, among others. Those references included those coming to higher education in adulthood through alternative access routes, with careers and family responsibilities, but who are committed to the requirement of lifelong learning in terms of employability.

In this process, the participants emphasized the humanist formation recommended by the Leiria Polytechnic, which has sought to ensure the necessary dynamics for inclusion through a systematic balance between the requests of groups with specific realities and the resources of the Leiria Polytechnic. Simple examples of these resources are the adaptation of various formats pedagogical materials, training in Portuguese language, part-time statutes (student athlete, student worker, among others), cultural, sports and wellness offers, services doctors, and the versatility of meals in bars and canteens.

In this context of accelerated and constant change, the c hallenges of equity and sustainability that are placed on the knowledge society did not go unnoticed in our discussions. These lead the participants to point out some ideas that they consider fundamental for the construction of a better future in the academic environment of the Leiria Polytechnic • and its relationship with the surrounding community and with society itself. In particular, the policy of alliances with other HEIs and collaboration with other social, cultural and economic actors is based not only on the sharing and transmission of knowledge, but also on its exemplary task of developing a critical and ethical citizenship that promotes the improvement of quality of life of the students in particular (sensitive areas listed: urban mobility, security, housing supply).

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