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Institutional policies and practices to improve access and success in higher education: the students' proposals

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ABSTRACT

Ensuring equal conditions of access and success for all higher education students is a challenging task for educational systems and institutions. Understanding the students' perspectives and needs regarding educational policies and institutional practices in higher education can be an important contribution to improving the quality of education. This paper aims to identify the main obstacles faced by students and their proposals for the improvement of policies and institutional practices in the Portuguese higher education system to promote access and success for all students. By using a mixed-methods approach, we gathered responses from 1,292 students enrolled in 56 HEIs. Data was analysed through content analysis with a pre-existing grid comprising three dimensions: socio-economic, educational and institutional. Descriptive statistics were carried out for the quantitative data. The results revealed socio-economic factors were the most frequently mentioned as needing improvement, followed by the educational and institutional factors. The results allow concluding that institutional practices and educational policies are directly related. Thus, the institutional and political improvement actions should be seen in a holistic and integrative way, integrating actions to enhance the students' socio-economic, educational and institutional conditions.

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1. Introduction

The democratisation of higher education (HE) includes ensuring that students with varied personal, social and cultural backgrounds have the necessary conditions for access and success. Several studies have shown the influence of socio-economic and cultural factors on access to HE (Chun and Evans 2016; Tinto 1975; Tinto and Pusser 2006; Whannell and Whannell 2015). Family education levels (Doolan, Puzić, and Baranović 2018) and socio-economic status (Duta, Iannelli, and Breen 2021; Isopahkala-Bouret et al. 2018; Triventi 2013) are significant determinants, with those in more favourable conditions more likely to enrol and complete tertiary education. Additionally, economic

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constraints are linked to higher academic dropout (Müller and Klein 2022; Richardson, Mittelmeier, and Bart 2020), limiting the academic choices for students from lower socio-economic backgrounds (Ferrão and Almeida 2019; Rego et al. 2020).

Besides the direct influence of socio-economic factors, other important considerations include student housing (Nnenna, Baldwin, and Lathouras 2020; Parameswaran and Bowers 2014), mobility patterns (Crotti, Grechi, and Maggi 2022; Versteijlen, van Wee, and Wals 2021) and institutional support (Hauschildt et al. 2021; Pereira 2019). Following this reasoning, it is crucial to gather the opinions of students on how national and institutional policies can affect their educational and social paths in HE. This will help identify areas for improvement and enhance their overall experiences.

Therefore, the purpose of this paper is twofold. Firstly, it aims to identify the key areas that students believe should be improved to foster better educational and living conditions. Secondly, it seeks to understand the variances in proposals between students from different institutional types and socio-economic backgrounds in the Portuguese context.

The Portuguese HE system is binary, including universities and polytechnics belonging to public and private sectors, comprising 102 accredited higher education institutions (HEIs) (A3ES 2024). These institutions have different levels of social and academic prestige and, consequently, distinct socio-economic profiles of the students who attend them (Tavares and Cardoso 2013). Location is also relevant, as coastal urban regions such as Lisbon and Porto are more economically developed, and HEIs are more concentrated in these two areas (Sin et al. 2021). By analysing the viewpoints of students from these different geographical areas and backgrounds, the paper provides recommendations for enhancing the students' academic and social experiences.

2. Theoretical underpinnings

Various theories and conceptual models explain students' persistence and attrition in HE, often highlighting the multifaceted nature of the academic experience (e.g. individual, institutional, organisational, cultural and economic). Although research on individual factors makes an important contribution to understanding this issue, multifactorial models have the advantage of allowing analysis, not only the association of each individual trait with academic performance and success but also the relationships between these characteristics (Sá 2018).

One of the most prominent models on the factors influencing student persistence and success in HE is the interactionist and longitudinal model of institutional influence developed by Tinto (1975, 1987, 1993), in line with Spady's (1970, 1971) theoretical model of the student attrition process. In his model, Tinto (1975, 1987, 1993) underlines that the students' degree of attachment and interaction with the academic and social environment of the HEIs determines their behaviour in terms of remaining or dropping out. The closer students are connected to the social and academic life of the institution, the more likely they are to persist in the HE (Karp, Hughes, and O'Gara 2010; Quaye and Harper 2015). This is largely influenced by the students' level of commitment to the institution and their own academic goals (Ethington 1990). Tinto's model advocates that the student's experience in HE involves a complex set of interactions with the institutional environment and that this process results from the interaction between the individual and the institution (Tinto 1975, 1987, 1993).

When students enrol in HE, they carry individual characteristics, such as family capital (e.g. socioeconomic status, parental academic background, and parental expectations) and individual traits (e.g. academic ability, ethnicity, gender, initial dispositions, and intentions to pursue HE). Such characteristics, intentions, and commitments, when interacting longitudinally with the structural and normative characteristics of the institution throughout the students' path in HE, result in different levels of interaction and integration of the individual with the institution and its organisational environment (Terenzini and Pascarella 1980; Tinto 1975, 1987, 1993). Tinto (1975, 1987, 1993) argues that commitment to and achievement of goals are crucial to a student's decision to persist or drop out of HE. Thus, in principle, the greater the individuals' commitment is to the goal of completing HE, the less likely they are to drop out (Tinto 1975, 1987, 1993). Similarly, in terms of institutional commitment, the higher the degree of integration of the individuals in the HEI is, the higher their commitment to the institution and to the goal of completing their study programme is. The interaction between these two forms and degrees of commitment, i.e. the interaction between the commitment to the goal of completing their studies and the commitment to the institution will influence their decision to persist or drop out of the HEI or even HE (Sá 2018).

The students' integration referred to by Tinto (1975, 1987, 1993) is the degree to which the student shares and adopts the normative attitudes and values of the peer group and the rest of the academic community. The more effective this integration is, the stronger the student's commitment to their personal goals and the HEI is (Pascarella and Terenzini 2005).

In the various revisions that Tinto (1987, 1993) made to his own model, he focused on the importance of financial resources and on the role that communities external to the institution (e.g. family, work, and the community) play in students' decisions to stay or leave (Valentine et al. 2009). More recently, Tinto (2011, 2012) argued that there are some characteristics of the classroom environment that promote student success, including expectations, student support from the HEI, which include academic, social, and, in some cases, economic support, frequent assessment and feedback to students, and student engagement (Sá 2018).

Moreover, Tinto and Pusser (2006) highlight the influence of institutional support on the efforts that students put into their learning path and, consequently, academic performance and success. This support takes on various forms, namely academic, social and financial support that the institution provides, communication with students, and, finally, academic and social activities and involvement inside and outside the classroom (Sá 2018).

Recent research has focused on the influence of socio-economic and cultural factors on access and success in HE. Family educational levels (Doolan, Puzić, and Baranović 2018) and socio-economic status (Duta, Iannelli, and Breen 2021; Isopahkala-Bouret et al. 2018; Triventi 2013) continue to influence access and success with a higher probability of students with more favourable conditions to enrol in HE and, simultaneously, a higher tendency to access more socially and professionally prestigious study programmes. In terms of dropout, although students may interrupt their study programmes to enter the labour market, especially when financial support is more limited (OECD 2022), research in the Portuguese context indicates a relationship between dropout and the students' economic conditions (Ferreira and Fernandes 2015; Richardson, Mittemeier, and Bart 2020).

In addition to the direct influence of socio-economic factors, student housing (Nnenna, Baldwin, and Lathouras 2020; Parameswaran and Bowers 2014), mobility patterns (Crotti, Grechi, and Maggi 2022; Versteijlen, van Wee, and Wals 2021) and institutional support (Hauschildt et al. 2021; Pereira 2019) are also important.

A study conducted by Nnenna, Baldwin, and Lathouras (2020) showed that the lack of access to suitable accommodation may have implications for students' trajectories and that, on the contrary, students who have access to stable accommodation with adequate conditions generate better educational outcomes vis-a-vis those who do not have stable accommodation. The authors also highlighted the cost of housing as the most important need for students (Nnenna, Baldwin, and Lathouras 2020).

In the Portuguese context, particularly in Lisbon and Porto (the two biggest Portuguese cities), the growing economic inflation and the increase in tourism have affected private housing rental prices. This reality has an impact that also needs to be analysed in the specific case of HE. According to the Student Accommodation Observatory (2021, 2022), there is an increase in prices, matched with a decrease in the number of rooms available for student accommodation. It can be a challenge for students' educational paths, particularly those who are economically disadvantaged and displaced from their areas of residence of origin. In this context, some strategies have been implemented by the Portuguese government, such as the investment in the requalification and construction of residences for HE students, to be concluded by 2026 (National Plan for Higher Education Accommodation 2022).

The perspective of student housing as an educational space brings into focus the analysis of the study conditions provided by the characteristics of the accommodation (Parameswaran and Bowers 2014). In a context where students' autonomous work is encouraged and valued for academic and training development, these seem to be important clues about ways of extending educational spaces and ways of learning for students. The pedagogical support conditions provided by peers in the case of shared student accommodation or the influence of housing conditions on well-being and mental health are aspects addressed in student housing research (Card and Thomas 2018; Dazkir 2018). Studies highlight the importance of accommodation for well-being and the educational path, emphasising that the higher the satisfaction with accommodation is, the higher the academic adaptation is (Vasilenko et al. 2020), as well as better mental health conditions (McIntyre et al. 2018). The results of these studies broaden the focus placed on issues of student housing. If, on the one hand, economic issues are a central aspect to take into account when considering access to housing, on the other hand, the impact on students' health and well-being, as well as on their adaptability to academic life, also emerge as pivotal.

In Portugal, students from institutions who are outside their home geographical area seem to indicate the highest level of accommodation-related expenses (Cerdeira and Cabrito 2018).

The availability and accessibility of transport is also an important dimension that can influence access and success in HE. Kenyon (2011) underlines that the need to choose more financially accessible transport restricts young people's choice, highlighting that the quality of the means of transport and travel may even limit their performance. The time spent travelling may put students who use public transport, due to lack of economic conditions to use other means of transport, in an inequitable situation. However, the costs associated with travel are not linear, varying, for example, according to the type of transport

selected, the distance travelled or the availability of parking (Cerdeira and Cabrito 2018). These results reveal that factors linked to mobility and transport used by students can have a relevant effect on the democratisation of access and academic paths in HE.

EUROSTUDENT data based on students' reports show that public support does not always suffice to meet the needs of young people's academic paths (Hauschildt et al. 2021), while non-repayable support (e.g. grants, scholarships) is associated with students who are more economically disadvantaged and promotes the adequate continuation of their careers when entering the labour market (Hordósy and Clark 2018).

To sum up, HE students' experience is shaped by internal and external influences that affect their path in HE and academic results, leading, ultimately, to their persistence or dropout. It is, thus, critical that students find an institutional environment that promotes their integration, listens to their needs and provides support (e.g. academic, social, financial and psychological) throughout their path. To this end, HEIs should seek to acknowledge and analyse students' needs and proposals at (i) the educational level (pedagogical, curricular and educational resources) (Myllykoski-Laine et al. 2022; Sá 2020); (ii) the institutional level (academic services, integration of 1st-year students, medical and psychological support, and sports and cultural offers) (Hauschildt et al. 2021; McIntyre et al. 2018; Pereira 2019); and (iii) the socio-economic level (financial support in terms of food, housing, transports through grants and other instruments) (Duta, Iannelli, and Breen 2021; Müller and Klein 2022; Richardson, Mittelmeier, and Bart 2020).

Considering the needs of students and the support provided, listening to students' voices on their academic and living conditions can be an important element of reflection and promote the implementation of actions capable of improving the paths of young people and contributing to increased access and success in HE.

3. Methodology

3.1. Sample and data collection

This study is part of a larger project investigating students' living and study conditions. The project encompassed students enrolled in the 2022/2023 academic year at HEIs located in the areas of Porto and Lisbon, attending first-cycle, second-cycle and integrated master's study programmes. According to official data, there were approximately 128,000 students enrolled in HEIs in the area of Lisbon and around 85,000 in the area of Porto (DGEEC 2024). Excluding credit mobility students and those enrolled in advanced study cycles, the population was estimated at 111,800 students in the Lisbon area and 75,500 in the Porto area. With the support of the students' unions from those two areas, participants were recruited to complete an online cross-sectional survey, including multiple-choice and open-ended questions, covering aspects of their living conditions, study conditions, and mobility patterns. The response rate was 3,44%.

The current paper specifically analyses responses to two open-ended questions: *'In your opinion, what actions do you think the institution you attend and, in particular, the Social Services, could take to improve your living and studying conditions?'* and *'From your perspective, what could be done in terms of public policies to improve access, persistence and success of HE students?'* Students could choose to respond to both questions, only one or neither.

After data cleaning, the total sample size for those two questions was 1,292 unique students, while the sum of the responses to each question was 1,481, being 706 for the first and 775 for the second. This is because 189 students answered only the first question, 289 students answered only the second question, and 1,003 students answered both questions, as shown in [Table 1](#). We considered each of those 1,481 responses as one reference.

[Table 2](#) shows a characterisation of the sample. Participants were enrolled in different HEIs ($n = 56$). The majority of students (62%) attend institutions located in the area of Porto, in public HEIs (75%), and in universities (81.7%). Regarding gender, most students (65.6%) are female. As for the respondents' age, the majority (85.9%) are younger students aged up to 24.

In terms of the disciplinary areas, most participants are enrolled in Health (18.6%), Engineering (17.2%), Business Sciences (12.3%), Social and Behavioural Sciences (12%) and Law (9.9%). Although the distribution of the number of references by the different scientific areas is not similar, we stress the importance of the various scientific areas of the study programmes existing in the HEIs represented in the sample, that is, independent of the disciplinary areas and study programmes, students responded to the open-ended questions of the survey.

Regarding the sources of funding to support their HE attendance, the majority of students mention family resources (61.6%), followed by grants (19%) and personal funds (16.4%). A smaller group of participants mention loans (1.9%).

Data collection was carried out in compliance with the code of research ethics of the researchers' institution. Fieldwork took place between the months of January and June 2023. Participants were fully informed about the study's goals and objectives and asked to provide their consent. They were assured of the voluntary nature of their participation, the anonymity of their data, and their right to withdraw at any time during the study.

3.2. Data analysis

A content analysis (Amado 2013; Bardin 2011; Bauer 2002) was conducted with the support of NVivo® software. After an initial exploration of the data, we established three primary dimensions: socioeconomic factors, institutional factors, and educational factors, in line with established methodological approaches (Bardin 2011; Creswell 2012). As the analysis progressed, additional categories and subcategories emerged (Bardin 2011; Creswell 2012). The categorical system used for this analysis is depicted in [Table 3](#).

4. Results

4.1. Institutional practices

Private or institutional practices are created by organisations for institutional use (Pollack Porter, Rutkow, and McGinty 2018), that is, the way things are organised in

Table 1. Distribution of student responses by question.

	Responded to Question 1	Did not respond to Question 1
Responded to Question 2	1003	289
Did not respond question 2	189	0

Table 2. Description of sample.

	N° of references	% of references
Geographical area		
Lisbon	561	37.9%
Porto	920	62.1%
Gender		
Female	972	65.6%
Male	499	33.7%
Age		
Between 17 and 20 years old	634	42.9%
Between 21 and 24 years old	636	43.0%
Between 25 and 28 years old	85	5.8%
29 years old or more	123	8.3%
Education Sector		
Private Polytechnic	54	3.6%
Public Polytechnic	217	14.7%
Public University	884	59.7%
Private University	326	22.0%
Scientific area		
Informatics	85	5.8%
Teacher/Trainer Training and Educational Sciences	34	2.3%
Mathematics and Statistics	47	3.2%
Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries	24	1.6%
Law	146	9.9%
Health	273	18.6%
Business Sciences	181	12.3%
Engineering and Related Techniques	253	17.2%
Social and Behavioural Sciences	177	12.0%
Humanities	75	5.1%
Social Services	17	1.2%
Life Sciences	64	4.4%
Architecture and Building	33	2.2%
Physical Sciences	24	1.6%
Veterinary Sciences	8	0.5%
Environmental Protection	4	0.3%
Personal Services	2	0.1%
Information and Journalism	22	1.5%
Financial support		
Family support	912	61.6%
Study grant	282	19.0%
Merit-based grant	12	0.8%
Personal funds	243	16.4%
Bank loan	28	1.9%
Grant for attendance of students with disabilities	4	0.3%

an institution. Within the context of this study, institutional practices refer to the pedagogical tools and curricular resources provided by institutions.

The factors most frequently mentioned as aspects of institutional practices that require improvement were the socio-economic, followed by the educational and, to a lesser extent but also significantly, the institutional factors. Table 4 shows the description and number of references included in each dimension.

Overall, the references focusing on socio-economic factors concern mostly grants ($n = 305$), housing ($n = 198$) and tuition fees or other academic costs ($n = 147$). With regard to grants, the majority of the students' proposals are favourable to the increase of the amount of the grants provided or the improvement of the criteria for their attribution. As one student from a public university comments, HEIs should 'take into account the lower incomes of families and weigh the figures when awarding grants' (R_32¹).

Table 3. Categorical system of content analysis of the students' proposals.

Categories/Subcategories	Description
Institutional Practices	
Educational factors	This category includes students' proposals that relate to the pedagogical, curricular and study conditions dimensions. These references may be directly linked to or influence socio-economic factors.
Curriculum	This subcategory includes students' proposals related to the study workload, curricular offer, online classes and preparation for the labour market.
Pedagogical component	This subcategory includes students' proposals regarding teaching practices, teaching and assessment methods, pedagogical support and interaction with teachers.
Study conditions	This subcategory includes students' proposals regarding infrastructures, material support and class schedules.
Support in the transition to the labour market	This subcategory includes students' proposals that relate to labour integration promoted by HEIs (e.g. partnerships with employers, support in job search, support in building projects).
Institutional factors	This subcategory includes students' proposals that relate to the quality of academic services (e.g. better service, more availability, better conditions).
Institutional strategies for adjusting and disseminating support	This subcategory includes students' proposals that relate to institutional strategies to adjust the support for students (e.g. support for students with special needs, personalised student support, student needs assessment, guidance and counselling services, giving voice to students) and dissemination of support (e.g. publicising grants, facilitating access to support, lack of information).
Integration of 1st-year students	This subcategory includes students' proposals that relate to academic integration of 1st-year students (e.g. integrating international students, improving student integration, promoting integration events).
Cultural and sports activities	This subcategory includes students' proposals that relate to cultural and sport activities (e.g. availability of sports activities, organisation of cultural and leisure activities).
Academic services	This subcategory includes students' proposals that relate to the quality of academic services (e.g. better service, more availability, better conditions).
Medical and psychological support	This subcategory includes students' proposals that relate to medical and psychological support for students (e.g. increased number of appointments, increased availability of mental health support service, price of appointments).
Socio-economic factors	This category includes students' proposals related to socio-economic factors (e.g. allocation of study grants and other types of grants, food costs, transport costs, support for specific cases of students).
Food costs	This subcategory includes students' proposals that relate to factors linked to food costs (e.g. price of the social meal, access to the social meal).
Housing	This subcategory includes students' proposals that relate to student accommodation (e.g. rental costs, rental difficulties, student residences).
Student support	This subcategory includes students' proposals that relate to support specifically targeted at students (e.g. international students, students' workers, displaced students, protocols with external organisations and loans).
Grants	This subcategory includes students' proposals that relate to study grants (e.g. selection criteria, scope of grants, grants amount, transparency in awarding) and other grants (e.g. merit-based grants, emergency grants, employment grants).
Fees and other direct costs	This subcategory includes students' proposals that relate to tuition fees (e.g. amount of tuition fees, the existence of tuition fees) and other costs related to academic activities (e.g. costs of bureaucratic processes, exams, diplomas, certificates or internships).
Transport costs	This subcategory includes students' proposals that relate to transport costs (e.g. transport prices, transport support or discounts).
Educational policies	
Access policies	This category includes students' proposals that relate to policies on access to HE (e.g. exams for higher education access, number of vacancies, type of selection for access to HE).
Employment policies and youth retention	This category includes students' proposals that relate to employment policies and the retention of young people in the geographical area where

(Continued)

Table 3. Continued.

Categories/Subcategories	Description
	they attend HE (e.g. promoting employment, articulation between higher education and the labour market).
Institutional organisation policies	This category includes students' proposals that relate to HE institutional organisation policies (e.g. decentralisation of HEI, increased HE funding, equality of opportunities, the Bologna process, internationalisation).
Academic success and retention policies	This category includes students' proposals that relate to policies for success and retention in HE. It is divided into proposals related to socio-economic, institutional, functional and educational factors.

Regarding housing, the students' proposals are towards the creation of more student housing spaces, particularly low-cost student accommodation, and the reduction of housing prices, both in student residences and private housing. Respondents also mention the improvement of the conditions of the student residences (e.g. infrastructure, internet access and acoustic conditions). A student from a public polytechnic states that HEIs need to 'increase the number and conditions of student residences, as the existing ones are deteriorated' (R₆₄). Students who mention tuition fees or other academic costs place the focus of their proposals mainly on reducing or eliminating this payment. Understandably, this is mentioned more frequently by students enrolled in private HEIs, given the higher amount of tuition fees in private HEIs: 'Ideally, tuition fees in private HE should have a limit, as is already the case in the public sector. Private HEIs should not be allowed to charge exorbitant amounts for exactly the same study programmes as public HEIs' (R₁), a student from a private polytechnic. Still regarding socio-economic factors, other factors were mentioned, such as food costs (n = 130), transport costs (n = 106) and student support in specific cases (e.g. displaced students, students with special educational needs, etc.) (n = 102). The students' proposals are to decrease or eliminate the costs associated with food and transport. According to respondents, these costs are a very significant part of the expenses associated with HE. As these costs are aggravated in the specific cases of students displaced from their geographical areas of origin, international students, and working students, the students' proposals regarding the creation of specific support are also an important part of the references. As a student from a public university mentions, HEIs should 'provide benefits and grants for displaced students. Their expenses are very high' (R₁₀₆).

Although the educational dimension is not central in the topics analysed in this paper, when asked about the possibilities of improving HEIs' functioning, students addressed, in a very representative way, factors related to study conditions (n = 206), the pedagogical component (n = 113), curriculum (n = 11) and support in the transition to the labour market (n = 9). These aspects seem to have a relevant impact on educational paths and, at the same time, have an influence on the socio-economic conditions available

Table 4. Description of categories related to student proposals about the institutional dimension.

Categories	Number of references
Socio-economic factors	744
Educational factors	156
Institutional factors	125

Source: Authors' production.

to students. The costs of educational resources (e.g. materials, books) or class timetables that influence the cost of travelling and food for students have an impact on the costs associated with attending HE. Concerning the study conditions, the students' proposals relate to the infrastructure available at the HEIs on the one hand and to the educational materials on the other. The suggestions are to improve existing study facilities, create study spaces or extend opening hours, as the example of this respondent from a public university shows: 'Improving infrastructure and creating study spaces on campus' (R_93). Suggestions were also made to provide a free supply of materials and educational resources, such as books or photocopies, as well as improve support in the acquisition of compulsory technical materials required in study programmes in specific areas (HEIs should 'cover more students and subsidies to purchase books that are part of the bibliography of the curricular units' (R_218), a student from a private university).

Regarding the pedagogical component, students highlight proposals related to the improvement of teaching and learning methods, assessment methods, availability and support of teachers, class timetables or the possibility of online classes. These two last factors, in particular, are considered by students as aspects that can enhance the improvement of economic factors, since the possibility of distance learning or the organisation of teaching timetables according to the students' needs, avoiding, for example, travel to attend only one class, can reduce travel or food costs. Concerning curriculum, students' proposals focus on updating study programmes and contents, as well as increasing the offer of internships and complementary training, as a way to improve the possibilities of integration in market labour (HEIs should 'update study programmes to meet labour market needs' (R_396), a student from a private polytechnic). To a lesser extent, students mention difficulties in the transition to employment and suggest a greater link between HEIs and the labour market: 'HEIs should have partnerships that guarantee work experience for all students who finish a study programme. Entering the labour market without work experience is an almost impossible mission' (R_135, public university).

As to institutional factors, the students' proposals relating to institutional strategies for adjusting and disseminating support ($n = 40$), followed by proposals relating to academic services ($n = 37$), and medical and psychological support ($n = 31$). The students suggest, on the one hand, greater dissemination of information about the support that exists (e.g. 'Actions to publicise scholarships, where they explain where we should look, how we can apply and how they work (R_82), a student from public university) and, on the other hand, greater attention to and personalisation of institutional support (e.g. 'There should be a much greater concern on the part of the Faculty for students on an individual and specific level, especially given all the vicissitudes of recent years that may have caused major personal problems and substantial changes in the way we live. [...] The concern [of HEIs] with [students'] financial and personal lives could be essential so that students who don't have all the conditions feel more integrated (R_758), a student from public university). With regard to academic services, the majority of students propose improving the speed with which these services respond (e.g. 'Faster academic services processes' (R_428, student from public polytechnic) and extending opening hours for students (e.g. 'The dimensions of the services are not adequate for the number of students who need the' (R_180), student from public university). The students also propose the

improvement of medical and psychological support, namely in terms of the availability of appointments, the latter being especially emphasised in the students' proposals in terms of mental health support. A student from a public polytechnic suggests that their HEI should 'provide more accessible psychological support' (R_22), while a colleague from a public university states that HEIs should 'facilitate access to psychological support, [as] 'there are months-long queues for the first appointment and a high fee for them' (R_260).

4.2. Educational policies

Educational policy is a sort of public policy outlined to attain the goals of the educational system in areas such as education and students' health (Sarghini, Talebi, and Hoseinzade 2023). Within the scope of this study, public policies regard broad measures to promote access to HE.

Students' proposals about what could be improved in terms of educational policies to enhance students' access and success in HE focus on four types of policies. Those related to success and persistence in HE are the most representative, followed by policies for access and/or promotion of access to HE, youth employment and people retaining policies and, with fewer references, institutional organisation policies. Table 5 below displays the description and number of students' references in each category.

Students' proposals regarding policies for success and persistence in HE relate to improving policies that affect the socio-economic support provided to students, and educational and institutional conditions. Concerning socio-economic factors, the students suggest 'creating more scholarships or trying to make the existing ones cover more students' (R_20, private university) and 'create laws to limit the prices of rooms rented to displaced students' (R_106, public university). The students' suggestions also relate to improving educational factors, for example through policies that promote 'more and better pedagogical training for ES teachers' (R_114, public university). Policies for improving institutional factors are also mentioned, particularly with regard to promoting more individualised support (e.g. 'Better analysis of each process and no standardised decisions for all cases' (R_105, public university) and medical and psychological support for students (e.g. 'More investment in the health service, namely by hiring more psychologists, aiming to reduce waiting times for an appointment (R_799, public university). These factors, which were also proposed by students for improving institutional practices, are described as suggestions for enhancing students' success and persistence in HE. This overlapping of factors in the students' proposals, regarding both institutional practices and educational policies, reveals their importance for students' educational paths, but also how improvement actions need to simultaneously be carried out at the level of institutional policies and practices for effective improvement to take place.

Table 5. Description of categories related to student proposals about the political dimension.

Categories	Number of references
Academic success and retention policies	1,103
Access policies	100
Employment policies and youth retaining	69
Institutional organisation policies	33

Source: Authors' production.

Regarding access policies, the students' proposals are directed towards improving the conditions of access to promote higher motivation to attend HE. Thus, suggestions related to the selection criteria for enrolling in HE are mentioned, such as the existence or weight of final secondary school exams as a form of access to HE. Students reflect on the importance of considering vocational and transversal competences to access HE, as opposed to considering only the grade obtained in secondary education ('placement methods should be more focused on the competences rather than just grades' (R_85), student from a private university). Other students also mention the equity in the preparation processes for the national exams, which consequently calls into question the equity in the processes of access to HE. Higher articulation between secondary education and HE ('access to HE starts with encouraging students in secondary schools [...]. Improving access to HE is about improving the learning in secondary education' (R_243), student from a private polytechnic). The improvement in the information provided to students for accessing this educational level (e.g. on programmes and forms of access) is also proposed by students, although to a lesser extent.

Regarding the proposals related to youth employment and policies to retain graduates in the geographical area of the HEI, students consider issues related to job offers and salaries obtained by young people with HE degrees in the country, suggesting an increase in job offers and income (HEIs should 'encourage young people to settle with good job offers and opportunities' (R_55), student from a public polytechnic). Students also advance suggestions to improve the skills developed in HE to match the skills needed in the labour market, which could enhance young people's employability processes ('design new study programmes related to the market needs, namely new skills, and eliminate those that have no professional output and thus channel funding where it is needed' (R_221), student from a private university). A closer articulation between HEIs and the labour market is also part of the students' proposals regarding the improvement of employment policies, aiming towards greater adequacy of training and, simultaneously, an increase in internship offers and subsequent placement in the labour market.

At the level of institutional organisation policies, students propose to change some policies or structures governing the HE system, such as the Bologna process or the Legal Regime of Higher Education Institutions. Issues related to the decentralisation of HEIs are also pointed out by students, who propose the creation of increased opportunities to access HE outside the country's large cities ('it is essential to invest in HEIs outside the big cities to improve conditions and, consequently, increase the distribution of students across the country' (R_41), student from a public polytechnic). Some students also propose increasing the budget allocated by the State to HE. Listening to students to support political decision-making is another suggestion some students make in terms of institutional organisation policies ('increased valuation of young people in public decision-making' (R_63), student from a private university).

When comparing the differences between groups, there are significant differences in students' proposals regarding success and retention policies in HE according to the education system ($\chi^2(3) = 7,832, p = .049$). Students from polytechnics are more likely to propose policies that promote access and retention in HE using policy actions related to socio-economic factors (e.g. reduction of tuition fees, increase of grants) (64%) than their colleagues from universities (57%). With regard to the scientific areas of the courses attended by the respondents, there are also differences between the groups (χ^2

(3) = 9,502, $p = .023$). Regarding the differences between scientific areas, students in the areas of Natural Sciences, Health, Engineering and Mathematics seem to make more proposals regarding policy actions aimed at increasing success and retention in HE by improving functional factors (e.g. infrastructure, food services and transport services) (20%), as compared to students in the areas of Social and Behavioural Sciences, Humanities and Arts (15%). Student responses also differ when compared by source of funding for HE attendance (χ^2 (3) = 27,264, $p < .001$). Students who do not have a grant for attending HE also make more proposals for policy action to promote success and retention in HE by improving socio-economic factors (69%) compared to peers who have other funding sources, such as family resources (49%).

5. Discussion

The students' proposals highlight the importance of improving educational processes in HE in an integrated and longitudinal way, including changes in institutional practices and public policies. As can be seen from the results presented, the factors mentioned by students as suggestions for improving institutional practices and public policies were (a) integrated, with factors that influence each other contributing, in the students' view, to the improvement of their academic path; and (b) longitudinal, with factors that influence different stages of the educational path, from access to HE to the transition to the labour market.

In the seminal model by Tinto (1975, 1987, 1993), the author argues that the degree to which students connect and interact with the academic and social environment of the HEI will determine their behaviour in terms of staying or dropping out of the institution. When students enrol in HE, they carry a set of individual traits, such as family capital, individual attributes and previous educational experiences. Characteristics related to family capital include socio-economic status, parents' academic background and parents' expectations. This research contributes to Tinto's model (1975, 1987, 1993) by emphasising the fundamental role of educational institutions in ensuring adequate socio-economic conditions for students' needs. The students' proposals show they attach great institutional and State responsibility in ensuring their persistence in HE and, ultimately, their educational success. If, in Tinto's model (1975, 1987, 1993), socio-economic issues are highly related to the interaction between students' socio-economic backgrounds and their success and persistence in HE, the results of this study place the focus on how HEIs contribute to ensuring socio-economic conditions that promote the improvement of educational processes. Students' perspectives show that they ascribe responsibility to HEIs for ensuring these conditions, on the one hand, through financial support (e.g. awarding grants, guaranteeing student housing, providing financial support for food and transport) and, on the other hand, through the improvement of educational and institutional factors that promote the reduction of costs or the improvement of socio-economic support for students (e.g. providing free educational resources, improving the study spaces and infrastructures, offering psychological support). Figure 1 depicts the factors highlighted by the participants in this study and their connections.

Socio-economic factors, mainly those related to the high cost of tuition fees, the insufficiency of support for students' expenses and the impossibility of access to low-cost housing, are those that seem to affect more the students' academic paths, and

these factors gather the highest number of proposals for improvement from the students. Indeed, as the literature highlights (Doolan, Puzić, and Baranović 2018; Duta, Iannelli, and Breen 2021; Triventi 2013) and the results of this study corroborate, socio-economic conditions continue to have a relevant impact on the students' academic path and can generate educational inequalities in HE. The payment of tuition fees seems to be a difficulty posed to students that represents a great effort for them during their HE attendance.

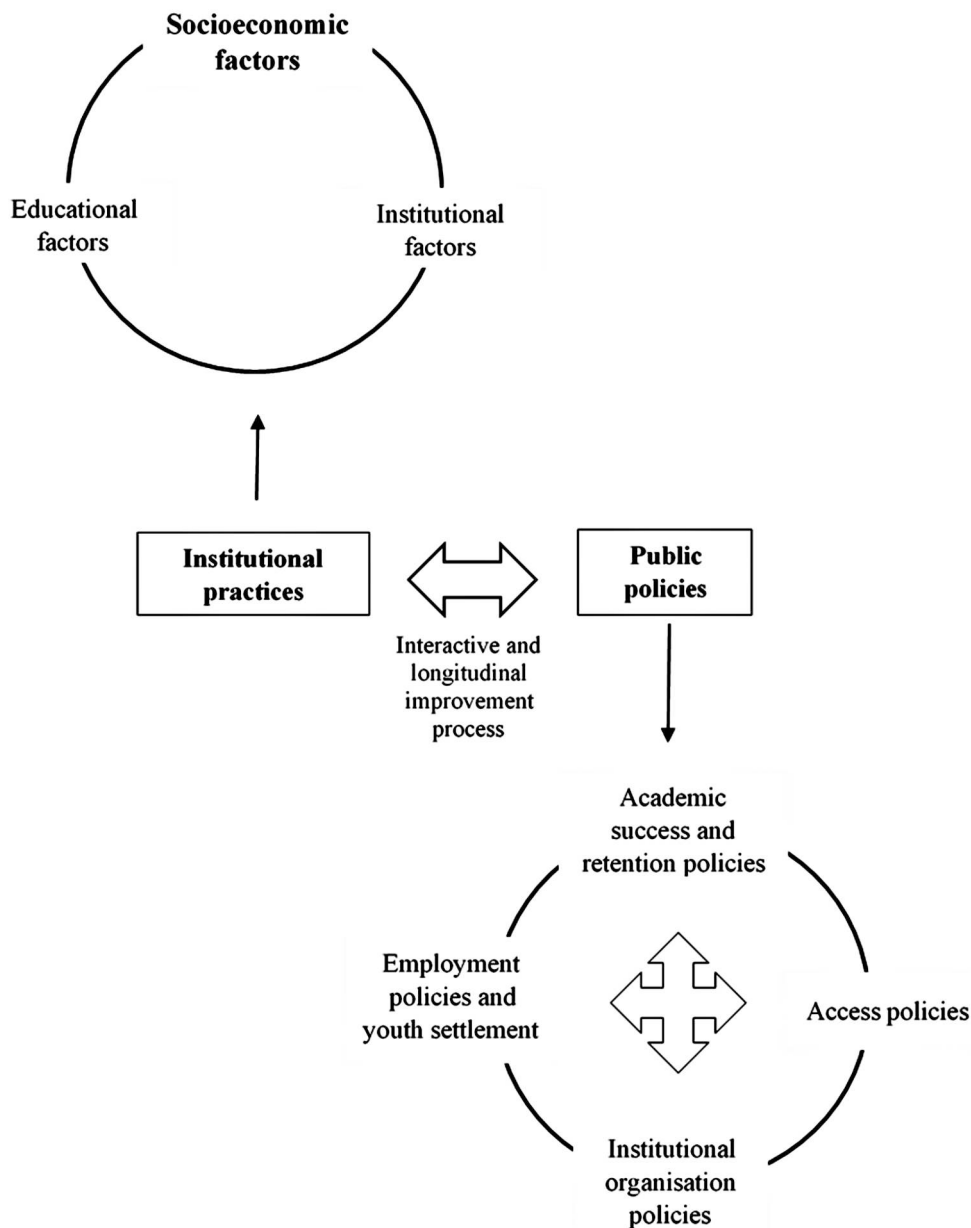


Figure 1. Synthesis of the results of the students' proposals. Source: Authors' production.

Regarding the factors related to accommodation, the current rental market conditions, especially in the cities under analysis, pose problems for students. Considering the importance of housing, both for accessing HE (Nnenna, Baldwin, and Lathouras 2020) and for improving students' study and living conditions (Card and Thomas 2018; Vasilenko et al. 2020), this is a pivotal factor to consider, particularly at the level of political and institutional intervention to ensure access to housing conditions for HE students. This intervention, which is particularly important in the case of students displaced from their geographical area of origin, may involve political action to create structural and financial support for students, but also specific institutional support for displaced students, who may be more affected by this problem. Although, in the Portuguese context, some political actions are being carried out to overcome this difficulty, the results of this research show that there is still a need for strategies to improve the factors related to access and maintenance of students' housing conditions.

The food and transport factors are also very representative in the students' proposals, with the suggested improvements pointing towards the reduction or elimination of costs of food and transport but also towards the improvement of the quality of the services available to students in terms of access, convenience and availability. Overall, the findings are in line with previous literature on the aspects and conditions valued by students at this educational level (Cattaneo et al. 2018; Kenyon 2011). However, the results also add the need for attention to food services and their cost. HEIs can create institutional strategies to reduce costs and expand and improve food services to meet the students' needs.

The findings also show that students' proposals differ according to their social and academic characteristics. These differences are related, in particular, to the type of HEI and can be explained by the socio-economic differences between students accessing university and polytechnic education in the Portuguese context (Tavares and Cardoso 2013). Similarly, in terms of student success and retention policies, students with scholarships, who are, therefore, more economically disadvantaged, are the most likely to suggest policy changes related to socio-economic factors. These differences seem to reflect a diversity of needs and proposals to which educational institutions should pay attention in order to improve the students' educational experience and academic path.

6. Conclusions

This paper sought to analyse the students' proposals for the improvement of policies and institutional practices in the Portuguese HE system that may promote student access and success at this educational level.

The results allow to conclude that institutional practices and educational policies are directly related, pointing out to the fact that the processes of improving the conditions of HE students should be carried out in an integrated and interactive way. The institutional and political actions should be seen in a holistic way, integrating actions to enhance the students' socio-economic, educational and institutional conditions.

However, not all these factors have equal importance to the students surveyed. Institutional and policy intervention and improvements can be carried out primarily on the factors that seem to affect students the most, which, according to the results of this study, correspond to socio-economic factors. Priority could be given to improving student

support grants, reducing fees and improving accommodation conditions, which are the factors that students mention the most.

Students' proposals show that the support currently provided in HE does not suffice to meet students' expenses. These results are in line with other studies in this field (Hauschildt et al. 2021). The complexity of democratising access and success in HE, as can be seen, does not just involve making changes in one specific aspect but entails a holistic process of intervention in different areas of action, considering the different needs of students.

The main contribution of this study is that it emphasises and empirically highlights the critical role of institutional support, notably at the social, financial and educational levels. The significant number of HEIs involved in the study and the diversity of students' profiles also add to its contribution to the current research on this topic. Furthermore, the study is novel in ascribing a leading role to students, allowing them to put forth, in the first person, the main hurdles they face throughout their educational paths and proposals to reduce them. Convening the students' voices on the hindrances they find throughout their path in HE and the proposals they offer to mitigate these difficulties, this study may be used by HEIs to enhance students' conditions, thus providing an institutional environment that levers students' academic and social integration, performance, the likelihood that they persist in HE and, ultimately, attain success.

The importance of listening to students about their needs and proposals for improvement towards making institutional and policy changes seems essential for HE to become more adequate to its public. The results of this study showcase the importance of understanding students' needs and suggestions in different contexts and considering different dimensions of the educational experience in HE. This study can be replicated in other national and international educational contexts as a strategy for listening to students. Theoretically and empirically, educational improvement in HE is seen as an integrated and longitudinal process in which students, as key-actors in the educational process, should play a fundamental role.

This study does not go without limitations. It only surveyed students from two geographical areas of the country with specific characteristics, which may limit the results obtained. On the other hand, some educational subsystems and subsectors are less represented in this sample, as is the case of the private polytechnic HE, which may also be a limitation of this analysis. However, the results are not intended to represent the totality of Portuguese higher education students, as the study analysed a specific student population, i.e. students enrolled in HEIs located in the areas of Lisbon and Porto, and accounts only for the reality and actors' perceptions from these HEIs. Results might (and certainly would) be different if other Portuguese regions (namely inland ones) had been analysed.

Thus, further research on this topic, particularly focused on other geographical areas with diverse educational, social and cultural characteristics, is paramount to increasing knowledge about students' needs. Deepening these findings through qualitative data collection methods (e.g. interviews or focus group discussions) can also be an important factor in broadening students' views on improving HE practices and policies. Supporting policy and institutional decision-making on students' perspectives and proposals in different geographical areas and educational contexts is a relevant contribution to addressing students' concrete needs and promoting educational democratisation in HE.

Note

1. The coding of the citations is based on the number of the questionnaire (R = Respondent).

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