

## Distance learning in higher education – a promising modality for inclusion and valuation of persons with disabilities

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**Abstract:** *This article is based on a research whose objective was to analyse the adequacy and framework of distance learning for persons with disabilities, especially those with reduced mobility, as a measure that facilitates access to rights, in particular to higher education and personal development and professional.*

*The research has shown that distance learning is an alternative that facilitates access and continuation of studies by persons with reduced mobility. It is also a measure that contributes to the achievement of the objectives recommended in national and international instruments applicable to persons with disabilities, ensuring thus, participation, appreciation, equal opportunities, and non-discrimination, on equal terms with other citizens, translating into a set of advantages for persons with disabilities and the public interest.*

**Keywords:** *Disability, distance learning, access to rights*

### I. Introduction

Persons with disabilities have traveled throughout history, in all human societies, even in the most developed ones, towards exclusion, discrimination, stigmatization, and prejudice. The families with whom they live also feel the reflexes of this condition, with repercussions on their quality of life, [1] either because of their involvement or because of the insecurity about the future.

Thanks to greater social awareness and democratization of societies and states, this paradigm has been evolving. And in this perspective, alongside the concepts of integration

and inclusion, the allusion to the principles of equality and participation as a corollary for a new generation is recurrent today social policies and citizenship rights, based on criteria of equity, solidarity, and cohesion.

It is in this context that distance learning, due to its characteristics, appears to be an alternative modality to traditional (face-to-face) education and facilitates the access of persons with disabilities with reduced mobility to rights, namely education, and training, avoiding the disorders of dysfunctions associated with problems accessibility, especially when traveling, especially when using public transport, between the residence and educational establishments.

This article aims to evaluate the adequacy and framework of distance learning for persons with disabilities, especially those with reduced mobility, as a measure that facilitates access to rights, in particular to higher education.

For the realization of this article, we rely on bibliographic and documentary research.

### II. Evolutionary aspects of the right of persons with disabilities

#### II.I In the field of citizenship in general

The adoption of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities at the beginning of this century, also resulting from a widespread consensus of the international community on the need to effectively guarantee respect for the integrity, dignity and individual freedom of persons with disabilities and to reinforce the Prohibition of any discrimination against these citizens that

impedes their participation in society, is undoubtedly a historical landmark in the context of the recent evolution of the recognition and promotion of the rights of persons with disabilities . [2]

## **II.II In the particular field of education**

In this context, the States that signed the Convention, namely Portugal, undertake to create the conditions for persons with disabilities to access higher education, vocational training, adult education, and lifelong learning without discrimination and in conditions of equality with other citizens. [2]

In fact, the broad bases of the legal regime for the prevention, habilitation, rehabilitation, and participation of persons with disabilities in Portugal, [3] came to recognize the principle of the primacy of public responsibility, according to which it is up to the State to create the conditions for the execution of a policy of prevention, habilitation, rehabilitation and participation of the person with disabilities, also defining as a competence of the State in this domain the adoption of the specific measures necessary to ensure the access of the person with disabilities to education and inclusive education, through, namely, the allocation of adequate resources and tools for learning and communication.

In this line of recognition of rights, in 2010, the EU approved the European Disability Strategy 2010-2020, [4] choosing as a fundamental priority objective the training of persons with disabilities , defining among the eligible areas of action the education and training in a line of promotion of inclusive education and lifelong learning for students with disabilities, considering that equal access to quality education and lifelong learning will enable persons with disabilities to fully participate in society and improve their quality of life.

According to Siemens, "connectivism provides a perception of the learning skills and tasks needed for learners to flourish in the digital age." [1] Stephen Downes also recommends sharing online teaching/course materials as a

critical element in accelerating course development and making education more cost-effective. [4]

## **III. Problems associated with persons with disabilities**

Apart from the conceptual or terminological discussion on disability, we adopt here the concept established in the broad bases of the legal regime for the prevention, habilitation, rehabilitation, and participation of the person with a disability, [3] considering a person with a disability to be someone who, for a reason of loss or anomaly, congenital or acquired, of body functions or structures, including psychological functions, present specific difficulties that, in conjunction with environmental factors, may limit or hinder activity and participation on equal terms with other people.

Therefore, for the present analysis supported on the interaction of persons with disabilities and access to education, in the particular case of higher education, we consider here, in the context of disability problems, only situations of disability with loss or anomaly of functions of the body, with mobility disorders.

However, persons with reduced mobility or with another disadvantage in this area, despite the evolution registered, continue to observe a set of barriers, namely in access to public transport, in the unevenness of fixed platforms, on sidewalks, in the streets, in crossings, in signage, access to buildings, public services, to allow the enforcement of rights, under identical circumstances with other citizens.

In addition to these constraints to the exercise of citizenship rights and which constitute a social problem, others affect a larger family radius, as in some circumstances, it is the closest family members who take care of their family members with disadvantages in terms of locomotion, in daily commuting, namely in the journeys between the residence and educational establishments, with questionable reflexes, at least in terms of the independence and quality of life of families.

There is still, in our view, another factor that inhibits free access to rights that is embodied in the stigma of voluntary participation of the individual. As Capucha and others refer, "the citizen with a disability is accepted as a member of society, but it is primarily his responsibility (...) the burden of adaptation and the effort to overcome partial or total difference". [5] This means that the non-participation of some persons with disabilities in the educational and training path, namely at the level of higher education, can be based on this set of reasons described here.

It is essential, therefore, for the emergence and development of a rehabilitation policy that provides access to means and instruments that promote equal opportunities and that allow persons with disabilities, namely, with reduced mobility, to have access to rights, to their personal and curriculum enrichment. It is here that distance-learning can be a promising tool.

#### **IV. From classroom teaching to distance learning**

As is well known and already mentioned by others, distance learning has recently had a notable impact in Portugal due to the emergence and risk of consequent territorial dissemination of the COVID pandemic<sup>19</sup>, a situation that led to the need to confine the population to prevent an increase in contagion situations and the number of infected persons, within the scope of protecting and promoting the health of the population and, on the other hand, the need to continue the curricular plans in most educational establishments. [6] However, the situations of reduced mobility of persons with disabilities also deserve particular attention taking into account the need for access to the rights that assist them, about participation, non-discrimination, and equal opportunities, namely, about access to education, professional development, and employment. In other words, distance learning is also a promising training modality for persons with disabilities to continue their studies, taking into account the obstacles encountered in the access routes

between residence and school and family disorders as a result of the necessary conciliation of times and support.

With the evolution of information and communication technologies and the development of the Internet, conditions were created for the implementation and dissemination of distance learning in Portugal, as an alternative or in conjunction with face-to-face education, the modality of which has so far, Higher education has been confined to the Open University, but, due to the new legal regime for distance education, the field of action in this field is now open to all higher education institutions.

Torres and Fialho refer that education and technology have always gone together and that "The technology of education is a reflection of the mental model of people of the new millennium, inserted in the frantic context of lack of time, in a rush not to leave the place (...)". [7] This being also one of the reasons given for the accommodation of some, although it is not possible to generalize, there are others, such as the disorders associated with travel by persons with disabilities with reduced mobility that we cannot ignore.

The partial combination or total transition of the face-to-face distance learning process requires investment by the promoters in the acquisition and availability of the equipment and cutting-edge means necessary for such adoption. Still, on the other hand, it enhances the flow of information. interested parties, namely the most vulnerable and at a more considerable physical disadvantage, generating returns for the promoting entities, with the advantage of the information being made available 24 hours, if they create virtual communities that bring students closer together, thus not losing the humanization of the educational act and, for; therefore, the calls remain for a long time after the completion of the courses. [8]

Regarding virtual communities as a result of distance learning, Siemens says that it is not in traditional courses and schools that one can find the satisfaction of knowledge needs, self-sufficiency, and permanence of knowledge, but through a shared network, of a particular community with whom we interact, [9] pointing

Downes the dynamics of networks as an intrinsic characteristic for the discovery of new knowledge, in which the creation of connections is a fundamental function. [10]

According to one of the Siemens principles of connectivism stated, the promotion and maintenance of connections are essential to facilitate continuous learning [9], which presupposes the existence of connections between the members of any student class, which is what gives us the teaching to distance.

## V. Public policies and national initiatives to support persons with disabilities in the field of education and training

In addition to the support instruments listed in the framework of the rights of persons with disabilities recognized nationally and internationally, the Portuguese government [11] has been pursuing a policy of promoting the valuation of citizens based on the training of the Portuguese, boosting the use of tools and technological means that allow curricular enrichment and promote employability, particularly in the areas of digital technologies, and to stimulate distance learning in higher education institutions with the definition of goals to be achieved in this domain, such as the recent change in the new legal regime. of distance higher education, [12] the guidelines for a strategy of technological and business innovation for Portugal for the period 2018-2030 [13] and the National Initiative Digital Skills e.2030, Portugal INCoDe.2030. [14]

## VI. Conclusion

In terms of concluding the general lines of this article, we note that, from their combination, it seems to us that a higher-level training initiative aimed at facilitating access for persons with disabilities to education and training, constitutes a national goal in the framework of public policies to promote equality and non-discrimination in terms of citizenship rights and to implement the strategic challenges

of the government, which are highly recommended for the coming years.

As a result, it follows from this:

- a) in the interests of persons with disabilities:
  - greater choice;
  - better time management;
  - reduction of road accident risks;
  - reduction of constraints (accessibility);
  - more flexibility in the management of family activities;
  - more empowerment of people;
  - less dependence on the family;
  - reduction of travel costs;
  - more quality of life; and
  - more personal and professional fulfillment.
- b) in the public interest:
  - increasing people's training;
  - valuing people;
  - fulfillment of goals and commitments;
  - higher effectiveness of public policies;
  - reduction of context costs;
  - a higher level of valid citizenship rights; and
  - expansion of teaching in Portuguese.

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