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# Mature students' access to higher education: A critical analysis of the impact of the 23+ policy in Portugal

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**Abstract**

Increasing mature students' access to higher education (HE) is a worldwide priority. In Portugal, the 23+ policy which was launched ten years ago opened HE to these students. A critical analysis of eight years' data on the universe of mature candidates in HE in Portugal shows that this "opening" varies in inverse ratio to the social prestige of institutions and subject areas. The private polytechnics and the soft sciences display a greater receptiveness than the public universities and the hard sciences. This article demonstrates that mature students save the HEIs that are less sought-after by "traditional" students and argues for fairer access to the most prestigious HEIs and programmes.

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

There is growing interest in the access of mature students to higher education worldwide. In Europe, it has become a priority for policymakers and diverse policies have been generated. This article analyses the impact of the 23+ policy which was launched 10 years ago in Portugal to foster access to undergraduate programmes for students aged 23 or more who had not completed secondary education. The analysis is based on data provided by the Portuguese Ministry of Education and Science on the entire population of mature students who entered higher education under this policy between 2006–2007 and 2013–2014. It shows where they were accepted and unravels systematic and not inferential trends.

  

## 2 | MATURE STUDENTS IN HIGHER EDUCATION: A GLOBAL THEME

### 2.1 | Context and theoretical framework

Several issues are related to mature students' access to higher education: Universities and lifelong learning; non-traditional students in higher education; University's social responsibility (USR); widening participation in higher education; recognition of prior learning (RPL); and validation of non-formal and informal learning. Different policies have been produced and, to a greater or lesser extent, borrowed and lent (Steiner-Khamsi, 2004) by countries worldwide. They were highlighted by major international organisations such as UNESCO at the World Conferences on Higher Education (UNESCO, 1998, 2009) or its Institute for Lifelong Learning (Yang, Schneller, & Roche, 2015), the OECD (1987) and the European Commission (2015). In Europe, they were echoed in ministerial conferences on higher education. The Sorbonne Joint Declaration signed by Ministers from France, Germany, Italy and the UK contains a sentence that can be considered a harbinger of the policies that were about to be promoted: "students should be able to enter the academic world at any time in their professional life and from diverse backgrounds" (1998, p. 2). One year later, ministerial representatives from 29 countries triggered the creation of a system of credits (ECTS) (Bologna Declaration, 1999) which opened the door to RPL "regardless of whether the knowledge, skills and competences were acquired through formal, non-formal, or informal learning paths" (Leuven Communiqué, 2015, 2009, p. 3). RPL was referred to, more or less explicitly, in all these communiqués, together with the centrality of lifelong learning in the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) and the need to deepen the "social dimension" of higher education. At the conference in Yerevan (2015), the promotion of inclusiveness of higher education systems and the widening of the participation of underrepresented groups were once again considered as priorities by the EHEA's 47 countries. This implies that higher education is "equally accessible to all" (Berlin Communiqué, 2003, p. 4), provides financial help and guidance to students from socially disadvantaged groups (Bergen Communiqué, 2005), encompasses "more flexible learning pathways into and within" higher education (London Communiqué, 2007, p. 5) and reflects "the diversity of Europe's populations" (Leuven Communiqué, 2009, p. 2).

The comparison of statistics and the benchmarking of "good practices" pervade the literature. In Canada, as early as 1984, Campbell (1984, p. xi) called adult learners "the new majority", i.e., "The traditional clientele of the university had long been youth aged 18 to 24 engaged in full-time study. But today, adult learners in part-time credit courses and in formal noncredit programmes together outnumber the full-time student body." In Sweden, most students are over 25. Hence, "success in the widening of admissions has even been viewed as a problem, as it means that younger applicants may be forced to wait before being admitted to high-demand programmes" (Andersson, 2013, p. 25).

OECD's "Education at a Glance" (2015b) shows a different reality. Most entrants in tertiary education (82% and 84% on average across OECD and EU21 countries, respectively) are young adults up to 25 years of age. Amongst the 33 OECD countries, only six have shares that represent less than 75%: Switzerland (64%), Iceland and Israel (69%), Luxembourg (71%) and Denmark and Colombia (74%). On average and at the bachelor's level (ISCED 6), the first-time graduation rate amongst those aged 30 or more is 6% (EU21). However, one must stress that the higher rates of some countries–19% in Slovak Republic, 12% in New Zealand and 10% in Israel, Switzerland and Finland—"may suggest that these education systems are more flexible in terms of access to and duration of programmes and are more suitable for students outside the typical age of study" (OECD, 2015b, p. 62). EUROSTUDENT also reinforces the idea that HE remains extremely "traditional" and closed to "alternatives" in terms of access routes. In 18 EUROSTUDENT countries, at least 80% of the students enter higher education "via the regular route (upper secondary qualification or central higher education entrance examination)." In the remaining seven, this share is at least 70% (EUROSTUDENT, 2015, p. 32).

Theoretically, the sudden "attention" to mature students has been justified by four arguments: (i) Social justice and equity (Osborne, Leopold, & Ferrie, 1997; Parry, 1989), which may comprise the provision of "equal

opportunities" and the empowerment of "systemically disadvantaged groups" (Lieven, 1989, p. 162); (ii) the higher education system's transformation: Parry (1989, p. 7) called this the "catalyst argument", i.e., "a means of changing teaching and learning" in higher education; (iii) the qualification of human resources (Lieven, 1989; Osborne, Leopold, & Ferrie, 1997; Parry, 1989); and (iv) institutional survival (Lieven, 1989; Nóvoa, 2007; Osborne, 2003; Parry, 1989; Woodley & Wilson, 2002), as the decrease in the number of "traditional" candidates (Amaral & Magalhães, 2009; Buchler, Castle, Osman, & Walters, 2007), i.e., youngsters between 18 and early 20s progressing directly from upper secondary to higher education, made mature students a valuable resource to overcome financial difficulties (Castle, Munro, & Osman, 2006). This means that, in some cases, institutions are driven by "opportunism" rather than by a commitment to the promotion of social justice or change (Nóvoa, 2007).

Indeed, some authors have stressed that participation in higher education has increased but not necessarily widened (Osborne, 2003). Most higher education systems worldwide are stratified and at least binary, "typically between a more selective and a more open sector" (Schuetze & Slowey, 2002, p. 319). For this reason also, mature students have been advised to pretend that they were 18 (Amorim, 2013), or considered as "other" (Read, Archer, & Leathwood, 2003, p. 261), or "second class" learners' (Buchler, Castle, Osman, & Walters, 2007, p. 132), or "strangers in paradise" (Reay, Crozier, & Clayton, 2009), or even "unwanted students" (Alheit, 2014). What is more, they have been accepted most readily by the "more recently established universities and non-university HE" (Osborne, 2003, p. 9), the "more practice- and vocationally-oriented programs" (Schuetze & Slowey, 2002) or, in other words, those that carry the least status (Read et al., 2003).

## 2.2 | Empirical evidence from previous research

Empirical research relying on data on mature students' access to higher education has provided useful evidence on the type of institutions that welcomed these students. Gallacher (2006) ascertained that in Scotland's four higher education sectors students aged 25 or more who did not have "traditional" qualifications mostly attended "further education colleges" and, to a lesser extent, "post-1992 universities", being almost absent from "ancient" and "1960s universities." Andersson (2013, p. 40) found that in Sweden "older applicants" applied for "shorter, part-time, distance courses, and courses at university colleges" rather than universities and prestigious institutes. He countered the assumption that "non-traditional" students were driven by the ease of admission to these courses, favouring instead the possibility of combining, for instance, a part-time course with family and work. In Portugal, Amaral and Magalhães (2009, pp. 168, 169) analysed the first two years of the 23+ policy implementation and concluded that: (i) It produced a substantial increase in the number of mature students entering higher education, (ii) the "more traditional and well-established" universities recruited fewer mature students than the other HEIs, (iii) the public polytechnics and the private HEIs recruited mature students to "compensate for the loss of traditional students", sometimes as a "last opportunity to avoid closure" and (iv) relying on an increase between the first and the second year, the public universities were "dedicating more attention to mature students." Did this "attention" continue to increase in the following years? Or is it rather that, as stressed by the literature, mature students are unwelcome in the most prestigious HEIs? In addition to institutional prestige, is the prestige of the subject areas also linked to greater or lesser openness to mature students? This is the focus of this research which analyses the publicly-available databases provided by the Portuguese Ministry of Education and Science from 2006–07 to 2013–14.

The Portuguese case is relevant for the following reasons: First, Portugal has a seven-century tradition of élitism in higher education; second, the longest European dictatorship in the 20th century maintained it as a privilege, especially for men; third, the Portuguese population has the lowest share of tertiary education attainment in EU21, albeit with one of the highest increases in the tertiary education rate over the period 2000–2013. In this context, the 23+ policy, launched in 2006, significantly changed mature students' access to higher education, multiplying the pass rate by 20. Furthermore, with the availability of annual databases, one can know the number of places and candidates, the pass rates and the universe of first enrolments in all HEIs and undergraduate programmes.

## 3 | THE PORTUGUESE CASE: A LONG STORY OF INEQUALITIES AND ELITISM

### 3.1 | Forty years countering more than seven centuries of "élitism"

The foundation of the University of Coimbra, one of the world's oldest universities, dates back to 1290. The following seven centuries perpetuated an élitism that began to be thwarted only by the Carnation Revolution in April 1974 which put an end to 48 years of dictatorship (1926–74). The democratising effect can be seen in the number of graduates before and after this Revolution. During the *Estado Novo* (from the 1940s to the 1970s), the percentage of the adult population (aged 20 or more) with higher education was under 1%, mostly penalising women. The change between the 1970s and 1980s is clear, with growth that has extended until today. The 1990s represent a *volte-face* in terms of gender, since, for the first time, the percentage of women in higher education was higher than that of men. In the last Census in 2011, 16.9% of women and 12.4% of men had graduated. Between 1940 and 2011, the number of women with higher education increased from 44,000 to nearly a million. Among men, the increase was far less, although still significant: From 25,000 to almost 0.7 million. Following the Revolution, according to Amaral and Magalhães (2009) and Magalhães, Amaral and Tavares (2009), the higher education system in Portugal saw a sometimes uncontrolled expansion up to the mid-1990s. After that, there was a decrease in total enrolments which mainly affected the private sector. Since the mid-2000s, access has been somewhat diversified. Nonetheless, although the gross participation rate of 18–24-year-olds increased from 7% to over 40% in the 20 years after 1974, the rapid massification of the higher education system says little or nothing about the democratisation of access for mature students.

### 3.2 | An education gap: The highest share of adults with no upper secondary education on par with the highest increase in tertiary education rates

Even though Portugal was one of the first European countries to legislate on compulsory education, its backwardness in comparison with other countries has been reported since the mid-19th century (Nóvoa, 2005). The reasons behind this are: The bureaucratisation and centralisation of education and the inability of the élites and the indifference of parents (Nóvoa, 2005). Paraphrasing Bernstein (1970), one may say that the Portuguese education system has been somehow compensating for society, but not enough to reach the schooling levels of other countries. Actually, this is a self-fulfilling condition because educated people seek further education and training more often and give greater and better support to their children's learning (Amorim, 2015).

OECD (2015a) statistics show that the Portuguese share of 25–64-year olds with no upper secondary education is almost triple the EU21 average (60% against 22%), significantly higher than Spain and Italy (44% and 42%, respectively). Furthermore, since the year 2000, this rate has decreased by only 2.3% per year, i.e., below the European average of 3.3%, even though Portugal, whose starting point (81% in 2000) was the highest in the EU21, and Greece have the greatest differences (over 20%) between the last and the first year. On the other hand, Portugal (together with Luxembourg and Poland) has one of the highest increases in tertiary education (above 6%, whilst the EU21 average is 3.7%). However, in 2013, it registered the lowest proportion of tertiary education attainment in EU21: 19%, significantly below the 30% of the EU21 average. The combination of these two indicators shows whether the countries are reducing the number of those with no secondary education and/or increasing participation in higher education. The data reveal that Portugal is the only country with a majority of adults with no upper secondary education (60%) and, at the same time, the one "where tertiary attainment has grown faster than low attainment has fallen" (OECD, 2015a, p. 3). As long as RPL devices enable either (i) the completion of basic and secondary education (ISCED 1, 2 and 3) by adults through processes of Recognition, Validation and Certification of Competences (Amorim, 2015), or (ii) access to higher education for candidates with no upper secondary education through the 23+ exams, what the OECD data seem to show is that an increase in

higher education attainment does not rely upon "non-traditional" students. If this were the case, the reduction in the number of those with no secondary education should be greater.

## 4 | RESULTS: THE STATUTORY "OPENING" OF HE IN PORTUGAL

### 4.1 | From 1967 to 2005: Admission reserved for extraordinary candidates

In Portugal, the first "educational experiments" related to access to higher education for candidates with no upper secondary education began with the 1967 Decree-Law no. 47587. The designation "ad hoc exams" appeared 12 years later with the 1979 Decree-Law no. 198. It underlined the "justice" of institutionalising access to over 25-year-olds who, not having the "required school qualifications", showed the "minimum indispensable skills" and the "ability, experience and maturity" to succeed in higher education. In 1994, through Ministerial Order no. 122, the designation was changed to Extraordinary Exam of Capacity Assessment for Access to Higher Education (EEACAES). This "extraordinary" way of entering higher education comprised three phases: A nationwide written Portuguese language exam, an interview and a specific exam. The data[1] show how exclusionary it was. Between 1997 and 2004, 66.4% of candidates failed the Portuguese language exam. In the ten years between 1995 and 2004, only an approximate annual average of 600 applicants had access to higher education through these exams (see Table 1).

### 4.2 | Since 2006: The 23+ Policy

Within a broader reform aimed at the democratisation of higher education and access to science which granted "substantial autonomy" to HEIs and widened "the social basis for the recruitment of students" in the period 2006–2010 (Heitor & Horta, 2014, p. 240), Decree-Law no. 64/2006 changed the conditions whereby mature students entered higher education in Portugal. The minimum age was lowered to 23 and the exams began to be defined by each HEI, giving much more space to RPL. This "small" change made a significant difference in the number of mature students in higher education. A comparison between the current and former means of access shows that 20 times more candidates gained access through the 23+ exams in 2006 than through EEACAES' in 2003, the last date for which data are available (see Figure 1). It must be stressed, nonetheless, that success in the 23+ exams fell by half after seven years, with a particularly steep decline since 2010, maybe as an effect of the financial and economic crisis, whilst EEACAES numbers remained stable over time. However, even at its lowest point, more than ten times the number of candidates gained access to higher education through the 23+ exam than through EEACAES.

**TABLE 1** (Non-)success in the former exams of access to HE (1995–2004)

| | 1995 | 1996 | 1997 | 1998 | 1999 | 2000 | 2001 | 2002 | 2003 | 2004 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| No. of candidates | 3785 | 3659 | 3589 | 3170 | 3387 | 3956 | 3658 | – | – | – |
| Sat the Portuguese language exam (PLE) | – | – | 3026 | 2762 | 3009 | 3459 | 3180 | 3227 | 3794 | 3360 |
| Failed in PLE | 2259 | 2005 | 1956 | 1720 | 1929 | 2178 | 2045 | 2287 | 2539 | 2489 |
| Fail rate in PLE (%) | – | – | 64.64 | 62.27 | 64.11 | 62.97 | 64.31 | 70.87 | 66.92 | 74.08 |
| Passed in PLE | 931 | 1127 | 1070 | 1042 | 1080 | 1281 | 1135 | 940 | 1255 | 871 |
| Pass rate in PLE (%) | – | – | 35.36 | 37.73 | 35.89 | 37.03 | 35.69 | 29.13 | 33.08 | 25.92 |
| Passed in specific exam | 446 | 540 | 575 | 584 | 632 | 702 | 647 | 578 | 732 | – |

*Sources*. DESUP (2000) and Simão et al. (2005, p. 148), own calculations.

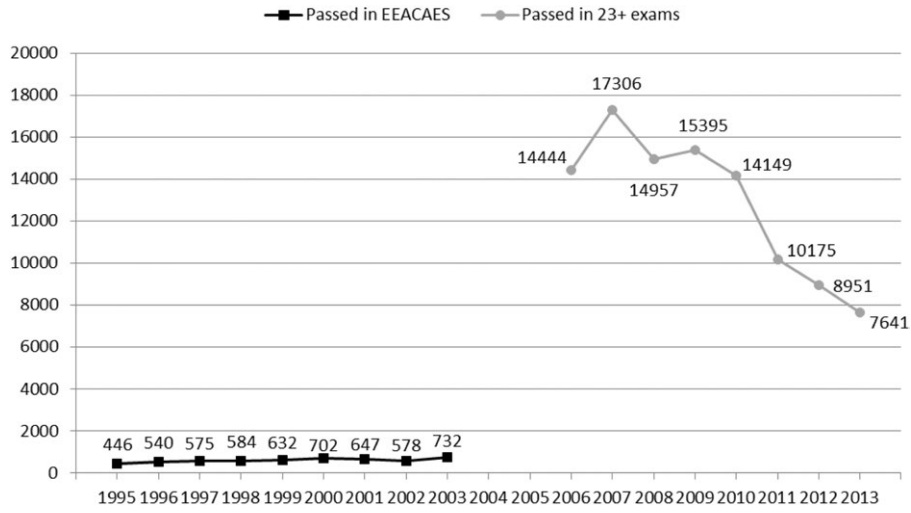


**FIGURE 1** Number of candidates passed in EEACAES and 23+ exams (1995–2003, 2006–2013). *Sources*. DESUP (2000), DGEEC (n.d.c), and Simão et al. (2005, p. 148).

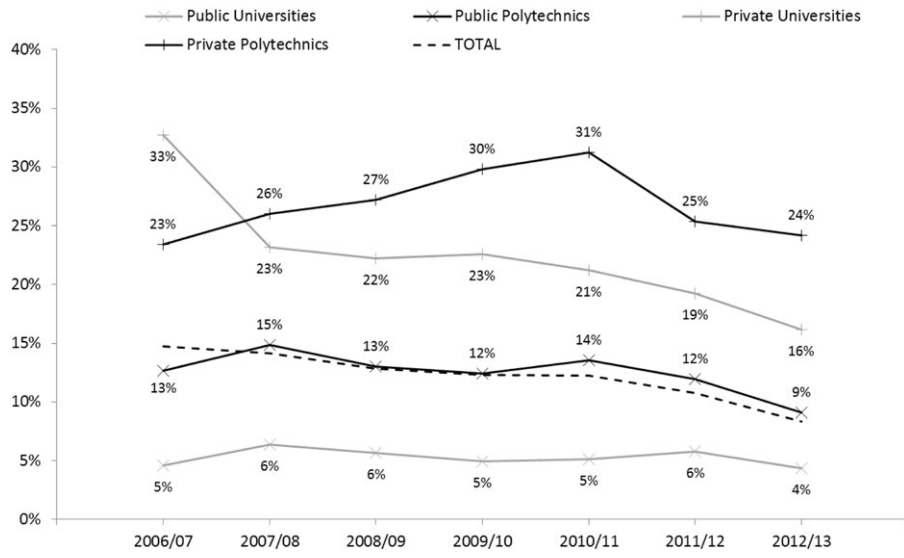


**FIGURE 2** Percentage of 23+ entrants in the four types of HEIs (2006–2007–2012–2013). *Source*. DGEEC (n.d.c).

## 4.3 | Differences in the four types of HEIs

Since the launch of this access route, the proportion of 23+ entrants (in relation to the total number enrolled in the first year for the first time) in private higher education was three times higher than in the public sector (24% and 8%, respectively). Among the four types of HEIs, and, as shown in Figure 2, the private polytechnics registered the highest percentage of 23+ entrants, with the exception of the first year when the private universities registered the record figure of 33%. The lowest rates have consistently been in public universities, with percentages four to six times lower than in private polytechnics. In the last year, the overall rate was roughly half the initial percentages (8% to 15%).

The fewer number of mature students may have very diverse explanations. They may be interested in alternative offers such as part-time, close to home, professional curriculum and online programmes which polytechnics and private universities provide with greater flexibility. Nevertheless, the pass rates[2] in the 23+ exams show that "choice" is also (if not mostly) on the side of the HEIs: 48% in public universities, 63% in public polytechnics, 81% in private universities and 92% in private polytechnics (DGEEC, n.d.c; own calculations). However, they enter higher education both through the 23+ special access route and the general entry system, which implies that those who complete upper secondary education take the national access exams and obtain a mark that gives them access to higher education.

A look at the age of higher education students enrolled in the different years of bachelor's degrees (ISCED 6) and integrated master's degrees (ISCED 6 and 7) shows that 34.6% are over 23, regardless of the entry régime or their age at the time of entry (see Table 2). In the private sector, the proportion of those who are either over or under 23 is even, whilst, in the public sector, older adults represent about a third of the total. These adults are mainly under 30. There are fewer adults in their 30s (6.45% against 23.62%) and even fewer 40-year olds or older (4.54%). Although all higher education students are adults, and despite the policies seeking to promote lifelong learning in higher education, these data show that the older the adults, the lower their number attending higher education. As regards age, higher education is very far from reflecting the diversity of the Portuguese population.

## 4.4 | Differences in the social prestige of HEIs

Of the 20 institutions with over 5% of mature students, 15 are polytechnics and five are universities (see Appendix A). These universities have specific characteristics: The *Universidade Aberta* (2015) is the only public e-learning university and it trains students who, for various reasons, could not begin or pursue university studies earlier; the universities of Azores, Madeira and Évora are far from densely populated cities; and the University of Algarve offers a variety of evening Polytechnic programmes in which the 23+ entry rate is 40%. Most of these institutions (12 out of 19) have enrolment rates that are equal to or under 75%. But all the most prestigious universities have a 23+ entry rate that is below 5%. They are mainly in Lisbon, Porto, Coimbra, Aveiro and Braga and host "traditional" students (with enrolment rates above 91%).[3] It must be stressed that some 23+ students are not "non-traditional" but "post-traditional" or "highly-traditional" students, i.e., graduates and post-graduates. This is because the Decree does not prohibit this "non-traditional" route for these students for whom there is another specific access régime, although the "spirit of the law" consecrates "the right to access to HE of individuals who, having not completed a secondary course or equivalent, prove that they are able to attend HE" (p. 2054).

It is true that there are institutions with high enrolment rates which have a 23+ entry rate that exceeds the minimum threshold of 5% set by the Decree-Law. The best example is the Lisbon School of Nursing which is a polytechnic HEI (100% and 5.86%, respectively). It is also true that some institutions with low enrolment rates have 23+ entry rates that are below 5%. They are the Polytechnic Institutes of Castelo Branco (51% and 4.49%, respectively) and Leiria (68% and 4.20%). However, it seems significant that the institutions below 5% have an average enrolment rate of 93% and those above this threshold have an average enrolment rate of 64%. Yet the

**TABLE 2** Percentage of HE students of different age groups (2013/2014)

| | % ≤22 | % 23–30 | % 31–39 | % 40+ | *N* |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Public universities | 68.90 | 21.66 | 5.08 | 4.36 | 132071 |
| Public polytechnics | 66.49 | 23.37 | 6.62 | 3.52 | 73175 |
| Private universities | 54.80 | 29.55 | 9.29 | 6.37 | 34066 |
| Private polytechnics | 50.32 | 29.79 | 12.37 | 7.52 | 12092 |
| Total | 65.40 | 23.62 | 6.45 | 4.54 | 251404 |

*Source*. DGEEC (2015), own calculations.

number of public HEIs that are between the 5% and 20% limits and the number of those that are below the minimum threshold (5%) are almost even (19 and 14, respectively) (see Appendix A). But in the private sector, more than half the HEIs (42 out of 79) have 23+ entry rates that are above the maximum threshold (20%) and up to 83%, whereas a minority of 27 HEIs is within the limit and only 10 (12.66% of all private HEIs) are under 5% (see Appendix B). Taking as an example two extreme cases, those of a public university and a private polytechnic, in the first case, the 23+ exam has had no effect on the number of admitted students (see Figure 3). On the contrary, they have always been an almost invisible minority in comparison to the large majority admitted through the general entry system. In the case of the private polytechnic, the 23+ policy was crucial in ensuring its survival. As from the academic year 2004–05, enrolments had entered a steady decline which was countered in the first year of the 23+ exam (2007–08) and led to record numbers in 2010–11 and 2011–12. The 23+ entrants also ensured that in the following two years overall enrolments did not fall to a record low (see Figure 4).

## 4.5 | Differences in the social prestige of subject areas

In order to know if there are differences between subject areas, all 1361 programmes provided in Portugal were analysed and their proportion in each area by 23+ entry rate was calculated. This rate was divided into four intervals: (i) Below the 5% threshold defined by the Decree-Law, (ii) between 5% and 20%, (iii) above the statutory limit of 20% and (iv) above 50%.

Figure 5 indicates that the most restrictive area for access of 23+ entrants is "Sciences, Mathematics and Computer Science", with three quarters of the programmes (101 out of 139) showing a rate below the statutory minimum (see interval 1). "Education" is the most accessible, as half the programmes meets the limits (interval 2). However, even in this area, the share of 23+ entrants is below 5% in one third of the programmes. In all areas, there is a small minority of programmes (between 2% in "Arts and Humanities" and 8% in "Social Sciences, Business and Law" and "Education") in which 23+ entrants represent the majority of the intake (interval 4). In addition, about a quarter of the programmes in "Social Sciences, Business and Law" and "Services" has 23+ entry rates

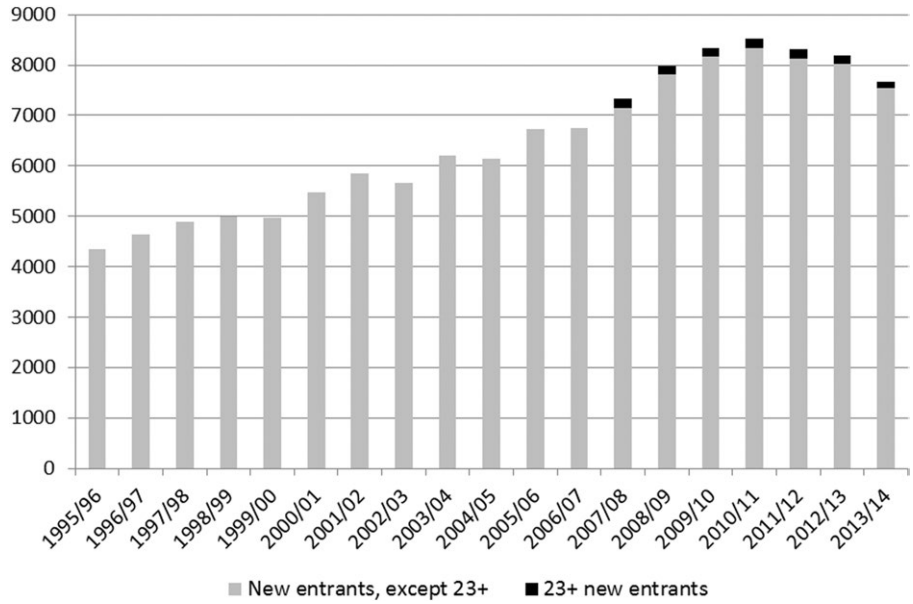


**FIGURE 3** Number of entrants in a public university (1995/96-2013/14). *Sources*. DGEEC (n.d.a; n.d.b; n.d.c); GPEARI (2008; n.d.); MEC (n.d.), own calculations.

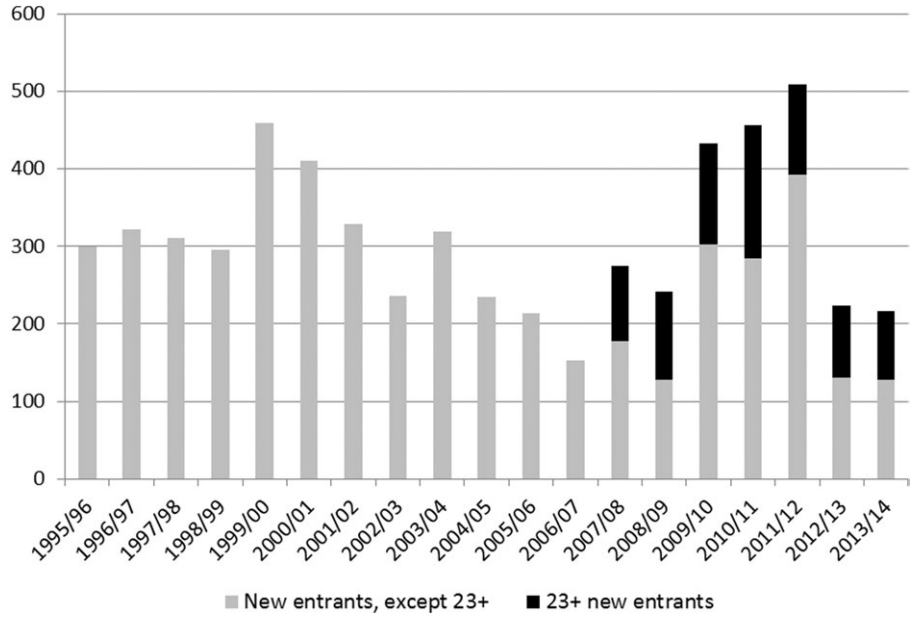


**FIGURE 4** Number of entrants in a private polytechnic (1995/96-2013/14). *Sources*. DGEEC (n.d.a; n.d.b; n.d.c); GPEARI (2008; n.d.); MEC (n.d.), own calculations.

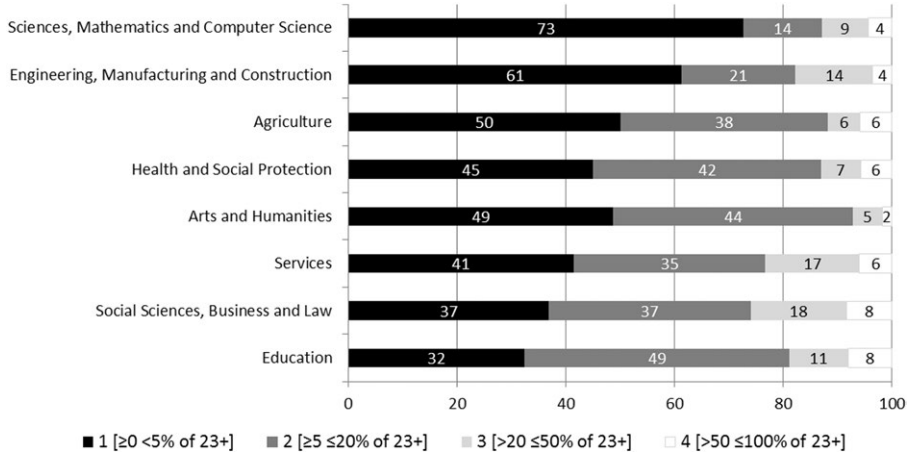


**FIGURE 5** Percentage of all the programmes provided in each subject area by intervals of percentages of 23+ (2012/13 and 2013/14). *Source*. DGEEC (2015), own calculations.

that are above the maximum threshold of 20%, whereas in "Engineering, Manufacturing and Construction" and "Education" this proportion is reached in about one-fifth of the programmes (intervals 3 and 4).

The example of one of the most prestigious universities in the country reinforces the evidence that the access of 23+ entrants to higher education is also a matter of subject area. It provided more places for 23+ entrants than the minimum of 5%, although this is an average across the whole institution. It would be very different if the requirement were applied to each faculty or programme. Furthermore, the percentage of 23+ entrants that enrolled was under this limit. The reason is that only about half of these candidates passed the entrance exams—the pass rate ranges from 18% in Biomedical Sciences to 85% in Fine Arts—and so they did not fill all the places that were

**TABLE 3** Places, candidates, pass rate and percentage of 23+ entrants in one public university (2012/2013 and 2013/2014)

| Faculties | % 23 places + for students | 23+ candidates | 23+ pass rate | Total of entrants | 23+ entrants | % 23+ entrants |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Fine arts | 11.4 | 40 | 85 | 321 | 31 | 9.66 |
| Sport | 9.2 | 62 | 56.5 | 300 | 22 | 7.33 |
| Arts | 12.1 | 181 | 68 | 1499 | 86 | 5.74 |
| Psychology and education science | 7.5 | 92 | 41.3 | 387 | 21 | 5.43 |
| Law | 6.5 | 65 | 47.7 | 466 | 22 | 4.72 |
| Pharmacy | 4.8 | 38 | 63.2 | 393 | 14 | 3.56 |
| Architecture | 4.8 | 16 | 43.8 | 280 | 6 | 2.14 |
| Economics | 13.3 | 53 | 35.9 | 794 | 16 | 2.02 |
| Biomedical sciences | 4 | 66 | 18.2 | 442 | 7 | 1.58 |
| Nutrition and food science | 2.9 | 31 | 35.5 | 141 | 2 | 1.42 |
| Dental medicine | 4.3 | 22 | 81.8 | 142 | 2 | 1.41 |
| Sciences | 5.5 | 53 | 54.7 | 1375 | 16 | 1.16 |
| Engineering | 7.1 | 51 | 39.2 | 2097 | 13 | 0.62 |
| Medicine | 0 | 0 | 0 | 513 | 0 | 0 |
| Total | 7.4 | 770 | 52.1 | 9150 | 258 | 2.82 |

*Source*. DGEEC (2015), own calculations.

initially provided. In 2012–13 and 2013–14, the 23+ entrants represented less than 3% of all admitted students. The Faculty of Fine Arts presented the highest percentage with almost 10% and the Faculty of Medicine the lowest with 0%. Among its 14 faculties, only four were above the 5% threshold. All are "soft sciences" (Alheit, 2014), whilst the "hard sciences" are at the bottom of the table, with residual percentages. This seems to be an institutional attempt to uphold prestige, which, according to this perspective, varies in inverse ratio to the proportion of 23+ entrants (see Table 3).

Taking the example of Medicine, one of the most prestigious courses, no place is available for 23+ candidates in any of the seven HEIs that provide this programme.

## 5 | CONCLUSIONS

Mature students, being more numerous, are increasingly visible in higher education. Yet the most prestigious institutions worldwide have been avoiding, rejecting or, at best, tolerating them (Woodley & Wilson, 2002). When announced as the "new majority", the higher education system under consideration often does not lead to a degree, and even less so in traditional universities.

As stated above, the Portuguese case deserves attention because it has different types of HEIs with very distinct social prestige and has made higher education grow at the expense of basic and secondary adult education (OECD, 2015a). The attainment of most of its adult population is therefore below upper secondary education level. So, most of the potential participants in higher education are adults with "non-traditional" qualifications. However, the selection of students for higher education has largely privileged "traditional" applicants, mostly through the general entry system in a perpetration of a long-lasting élitism.

In its first year of implementation, the 23+ policy generated a twentyfold increase in the number of mature entrants. Among the four types of HEIs, private polytechnics were the most receptive to these students, unlike public universities which have maintained extremely low quotas. The new data therefore prove that public universities' increasing attention to mature students, observed by Amaral and Magalhães (2013) in the second year, was not pursued. The initial enthusiasm has only been maintained in private polytechnics, whilst, globally, the percentage of 23+ entrants decreased from 15% to 8%. If the initial effectiveness of this policy shows how much it was needed, both for candidates and for some HEIs, the gradual loss of effectiveness indicates that it should be readjusted. Using the theoretical arguments above, one can say that this policy has been fostering the survival of the less sought-after HEIs. In terms of social justice and equity, however, many doubts persist, since the acceptance of mature students varies in inverse ratio to the social prestige of institutions and subject areas. The former means that "traditional" students occupy (almost) all the places in the highest status HEIs and the latter that the hard sciences are less receptive than the soft sciences to increasing the proportion of mature students.

Why are mature students rejected by the élite HEIs and/or programmes? The first reason may be the global competition for "excellence" (Alheit, 2014) and the ensuing attempt to select the candidates with the most "merit and potential." From this point of view, "the promotion of widening participation may be seen as incompatible with the mission of selective institutions that promote academic excellence" (Bravenboer, 2012/13, p. 122). A second reason may be the persistence of negative stereotypes about these students, frequently shared by educators, institutions and adults themselves (Richardson & King, 1998). Echoing Amaral and Magalhães' (2009) "more is different" period and the "more means worse" complaint about the Robbins Report, as described by Fulton (1998, p. 16), it seems that élite institutions believe that "different means worse" and that experiential learning cannot provide the knowledge required to succeed in the most demanding programmes. However, it is unfair that mature students cannot study in the best universities and contribute to the knowledge production process, since these institutions attract funding that allows research to be pursued. It is also unfair that the doors that are open to them are mostly those of private HEIs where tuition fees are much higher. A recent study showed that the costs—including tuition fees, other taxes, books and school supplies—in private HEIs were more than three times higher than in public HEIs (Silva, 2017).

One can argue, on the contrary, that it is also unfair that, through alternative pathways, mature students steal a march over "traditional" students and obtain places that younger students tried to obtain following at least 12 years of schooling, thus leading to a "fierce" national competition for scarce places, based on the ordering of centesimal scores (Nata, Pereira & Neves, 2014). It would be unfair, as Andersson (2013) states, for younger students to have to wait until they are "mature." However, it is also unfair that mature students can only choose the institutions and programmes that are not wanted by "traditional" students and compete for places that are not wanted by others.

Although this study is not based on socioeconomic data on the 23+ students (which are not available in Portugal), theories such as Maximally Maintained Inequality (MMI) and Effectively Maintained Inequality (EMI) help to understand the inequalities that are analysed here. MMI postulates that education expansion produces a decrease in quantitative inequalities in enrolment rates when the saturation point for the most advantaged socioeconomic group is reached (Raftery & Hout, 1993). Therefore, the expansion of higher education, namely through policies such as the 23+ one, increases the participation of under-represented groups, but even more so that of the most advantaged groups (Croxford & Raffe, 2013). In fact, the case of the public university described here (see Figure 3) shows that the expansion after 2007–08 has mainly benefited the "traditional" candidates. Yet MMI may also explain why it is only when particular HEIs have left-over capacity that they accept more than the mandated 5% of "non-traditional" students. EMI claims that, even when access to a certain level of education is universal, the socioeconomically advantaged have a privileged access to a "qualitatively better education" (Lucas, 2001, p. 1652). The higher participation of 23+ students caused by this policy has not widened access to the most prestigious HEIs and programmes. Hence, the higher education system has been maintaining inequality at a qualitative rather than a quantitative level.

Research must deepen knowledge on this under-studied topic in order to better understand the reasons behind the resistance of the most prestigious institutions and programmes and students' "choices" and related

motivations and constraints. From a comparative perspective, there are examples of policies and practices that are considered successful in spreading the enrolment of mature students across a wider range of programmes, such as: (i) The development of monitoring systems to track the progression of these students (in Portugal, no data are available on the progression and graduation of 23+ students, which is a barrier to assessing and improving the 23+ policy), (ii) the funding of HEIs to widen participation of students from under-represented groups, (iii) the provision of information, advice and guidance services, (iv) the improvement of the flexibility of the provision through part-time studies, distance learning, bridging programmes, recognition of prior learning and the modularisation of programmes (European Commission, 2014) and (v) collaboration and partnership with local communities, schools and employers in order to reach adults "who believe that HE is 'not for them'" (Osborne, 2003, p. 15).

Their access has been a priority, but very often words and deeds spawn a complex and inextricable "organized hypocrisy" (Brunsson, 2006, p. xiii). If the rhetoric surrounding mature students in higher education (Kreber & Mhina, 2005) is not accompanied by an improvement of practices and a transformation of higher education systems—the catalyst argument—, the discourse on this theme will be as eloquent and visionary as it is inconsequential and empty (Amorim, 2013). Thus, to be more effective, the 23+ policy and other initiatives aimed at increasing access to HE for mature students should explicitly prevent graduates and post-graduates from competing with "non-traditional" students. For them, specific routes should be used. Furthermore, the quota for 23+ should not refer to available places as defined by the Decree-Law but rather to the number of candidates enrolled as a way to guarantee that those places are actually occupied by them. Otherwise, we have "talk and decisions pointing in one direction" and "actions in the opposite direction" (Brunsson, 2006, p. xiv).

Quotas have been used, particularly in the Nordic countries, not only to promote the access of mature students (Quinn, 2013), but also to encourage students to start their HE at a defined age (European Commission, 2014). It is very important, however, that HEIs are committed to the promotion of the social dimension of higher education since change does not happen by the imposition of a Decree. Access cannot be disconnected from the progress and success of these students (Alheit, 2014; Osborne, 2003). Recruiting and supporting them involves additional costs and that is why some countries (e.g., UK and Ireland) use funding as an incentive for HEIs to widen participation (European Commission, 2014).

To sum up, rather than stating that mature students in HE are second chance learners, it is important to recognise that they have ensured the survival of some HEIs, as they occupy the places left vacant by "traditional" students. Yet it is premature to announce the establishment of lifelong learning universities, widened participation of under-represented students or adult-friendly HEIs. In addition, instead of perceiving mature students as a risk to the quality, rigour and prestige of HE, one should stress their power not only to "save" dying institutions, but also to contribute, with deeper approaches to studying (Richardson & King, 1998), to the improvement of the most prestigious HEIs and the enrichment of the scientific and cultural forum that these institutions represent.

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## ENDNOTES

[1]Since some data are no longer online, they were collected through a Portuguese Web Archive (arquivo.pt) and other various sources.

[2]Pass rate = (passed in 23+ exams/no. of candidates) x100.

[3]Social prestige of HEIs may have very distinct definitions, such as those used by the different rankings, the capacity to attract research funding, the quality of teaching and training provided, the employability of students, *inter alia*. Although it is likely that the prestigious institutions and programmes identified here meet all these features, in this article the enrolment rates are taken as an indicator of social prestige (see Appendix A).

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## APPENDIX A

**Percentage of 23+ students enrolled in the first year for the first time in Portuguese public HE (2012–13 and 2013–14)**

| Higher education institution | Type | Enrolled in the 1st year for the 1st time | 23+ enrolled | % 23+ | Enrolment rate[1] (%) |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| *Universidade Aberta* | University | 2202 | 727 | 33.02 | – |
| Polytechnic Institute of Portalegre | Polytechnic | 663 | 114 | 17.19 | 39 |
| Polytechnic Institute of Setúbal | Polytechnic | 1882 | 316 | 16.79 | 56 |
| National Maritime College Prince Henry the Navigator | Polytechnic | 271 | 41 | 15.13 | 55 |
| Polytechnic Institute of Beja | Polytechnic | 914 | 128 | 14.00 | 48 |
| Polytechnic Institute of Tomar | Polytechnic | 630 | 85 | 13.49 | 30 |
| University of Azores | University[2] | 1211 | 147 | 12.14 | 75 |
| Polytechnic Institute of Viseu | Polytechnic | 2018 | 179 | 8.87 | 53 |
| University of Madeira | University[2] | 807 | 56 | 6.94 | 86 |
| Polytechnic Institute of Guarda | Polytechnic | 944 | 64 | 6.78 | 42 |
| Polytechnic Institute of Viana do Castelo | Polytechnic | 1501 | 98 | 6.53 | 64 |
| University of Évora | University[2] | 2162 | 135 | 6.24 | 85 |
| Polytechnic Institute of Santarém | Polytechnic | 1139 | 69 | 6.06 | 52 |
| Lisbon School of Nursing | Polytechnic | 631 | 37 | 5.86 | 100 |
| Polytechnic Institute of Cávado and Ave | Polytechnic | 966 | 55 | 5.69 | 85 |

| Higher education institution | Type | Enrolled in the 1st year for the 1st time | 23+ enrolled | % 23+ | Enrolment rate[1] (%) |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Polytechnic Institute of Coimbra | Polytechnic | 3497 | 188 | 5.38 | 80 |
| Polytechnic Institute of Porto | Polytechnic | 6227 | 327 | 5.25 | 92 |
| Polytechnic Institute of Lisbon | Polytechnic | 4393 | 228 | 5.19 | 81 |
| Polytechnic Institute of Bragança | Polytechnic | 2272 | 116 | 5.11 | 33 |
| University of Algarve | University[2] | 2753 | 139 | 5.05 | 66 |
| University of Trás-os-Montes and Alto Douro | University[2] | 2519 | 113 | 4.49 | 89 |
| Polytechnic Institute of Castelo Branco | Polytechnic | 1313 | 59 | 4.49 | 51 |
| University of Minho | University[2] | 5235 | 220 | 4.20 | 97 |
| Polytechnic Institute of Leiria | Polytechnic | 3402 | 143 | 4.20 | 68 |
| Nursing School of Porto | Polytechnic | 581 | 21 | 3.61 | 101 |
| Nursing School of Coimbra | Polytechnic | 738 | 25 | 3.39 | 108 |
| NOVA University of Lisbon | University | 6121 | 205 | 3.35 | 100 |
| University of Aveiro | University[2] | 3720 | 109 | 2.93 | 91 |
| University of Porto | University | 9150 | 258 | 2.82 | 102 |
| University of Lisbon | University | 14363 | 388 | 2.70 | 98 |
| University of Beira Interior | University | 2553 | 55 | 2.15 | 88 |
| University of Coimbra | University | 7372 | 120 | 1.63 | 99 |
| Estoril Higher Institute for Tourism and Hotel Studies | Polytechnic | 583 | 8 | 1.37 | 102 |
| ISCTE—University Institute of Lisbon | University | 2096 | 24 | 1.15 | 103 |

[1]Enrolment rate = (enrolled students/available places) × 100.

[2]The Universities marked with an asterisk also provide programmes from the polytechnic type.

*Sources*. DGEEC (2015) and DGES (n.d.), own calculations.

## APPENDIX B

**Percentage of 23+ students enrolled in the first year for the first time in Portuguese private HE (2012–13 and 2013–14)**

| Higher education institution | Type | Enrolled in the 1st year for the 1st time | 23+ enrolled | % 23+ |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Higher Institute of Languages and Administration of Santarém | University | 29 | 24 | 82,76 |
| Higher Institute of Financial and Fiscal Studies, Porto | Polytechnic | 80 | 58 | 72,5 |
| Higher Institute of Languages and Administration of Leiria | University | 36 | 26 | 72,22 |
| Higher Institute of Advanced Technologies of Lisbon, Porto | Polytechnic | 37 | 25 | 67,57 |
| Higher School of Real Estate Studies | University | 116 | 77 | 66,38 |
| Atlantic University | University[2] | 356 | 233 | 65,45 |
| Higher Institute of Information and Administration Studies | Polytechnic | 98 | 63 | 64,29 |
| Higher Institute of Advanced Technologies of Lisbon | Polytechnic | 120 | 73 | 60,83 |
| Higher Institute of Health Studies of Alto Ave | Polytechnic | 17 | 10 | 58,82 |
| Autonomous Higher Institute of Polytechnic Studies | Polytechnic | 7 | 4 | 57,14 |
| Higher Institute of Paços de Brandão | Polytechnic | 16 | 9 | 56,25 |
| Dom Afonso III Higher Institute | University | 41 | 23 | 56,10 |
| Higher Institute of Educational Sciences | Polytechnic | 282 | 156 | 55,32 |
| Jean Piaget Higher School of Education of Almada | Polytechnic | 33 | 18 | 54,55 |
| Higher Institute of Administration Studies | Polytechnic | 90 | 43 | 47,78 |

| Higher education institution | Type | Enrolled in the 1st year for the 1st time | 23+ enrolled | % 23+ |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Higher Institute of Education and Science | University | 287 | 136 | 47,39 |
| Ribeiro Sanches Higher School of Health | Polytechnic | 66 | 31 | 46,97 |
| Portuguese Higher Institute of Marketing Management of Matosinhos (Aveiro) | Polytechnic | 122 | 57 | 46,72 |
| D. Dinis Higher Institute | University | 29 | 13 | 44,83 |
| Higher Institute of Intercultural and Transdisciplinary Studies of Viseu | University | 94 | 42 | 44,68 |
| ISLA—Polytechnic Institute of Management and Technology | Polytechnic | 165 | 70 | 42,42 |
| Portuguese Higher Institute of Marketing Management of Lisbon | Polytechnic | 127 | 53 | 41,73 |
| Higher Institute of the New Professions | Polytechnic | 93 | 38 | 40,86 |
| Polytechnic Higher Institute of the West | Polytechnic | 27 | 11 | 40,74 |
| Luís de Camões Autonomous University of Lisbon | University | 827 | 317 | 38,33 |
| Higher Institute of Intercultural and Transdisciplinary Studies of Almada | University | 134 | 48 | 35,82 |
| Manuel Teixeira Gomes Higher Institute | University | 134 | 47 | 35,07 |
| Jean Piaget Higher School of Health—Algarve | Polytechnic | 48 | 16 | 33,33 |
| Polytechnic Higher Institute of Gaya | Polytechnic | 119 | 37 | 31,09 |
| Higher Institute of Business and Tourism | Polytechnic | 89 | 27 | 30,34 |

| Higher education institution | Type | Enrolled in the 1st year for the 1st time | 23+ enrolled | % 23+ |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Gallaecia Higher School | University | 40 | 12 | 30 |
| Higher Institute of Entre Douro and Vouga | Polytechnic | 168 | 50 | 29,76 |
| Lusophone University of Humanities and Technologies | University | 2470 | 664 | 26,88 |
| Higher Institute of Educational Sciences of Felgueiras | Polytechnic | 41 | 11 | 26,83 |
| Higher School of Bank Management | Polytechnic | 154 | 39 | 25,32 |
| Lusíada University of Vila Nova de Famalicão | University | 183 | 46 | 25,14 |
| Higher Institute of Management | University | 180 | 43 | 23,89 |
| Jean Piaget Higher School of Health of Vila Nova de Gaia | Polytechnic | 51 | 12 | 23,53 |
| Higher Institute of Social Services of Porto | University | 103 | 23 | 22,33 |
| Jean Piaget Higher School of Technology and Management (Alentejo Coast) | Polytechnic | 19 | 4 | 21,05 |
| Higher School of Nursing of the Portuguese Red Cross of Oliveira de Azeméis | Polytechnic | 43 | 9 | 20,93 |
| Lusophone University of Porto | University | 644 | 130 | 20,19 |
| Higher Institute of Administration and Management | Polytechnic | 209 | 41 | 19,62 |
| Higher School of Music of Gaia | Polytechnic | 16 | 3 | 18,75 |
| European University | University | 864 | 158 | 18,29 |
| Portuguese Higher Inst. of Marketing Management of Matosinhos | Polytechnic | 232 | 41 | 17,67 |
| Lusíada University | University | 695 | 119 | 17,12 |

| Higher education institution | Type | Enrolled in the 1st year for the 1st time | 23+ enrolled | % 23+ |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Higher Institute of Administration and Languages | Polytechnic | 76 | 13 | 17,11 |
| Higher School of Technologies of Fafe | Polytechnic | 77 | 13 | 16,88 |
| CESPU—Polytechnic Health Higher Institute of the North | Polytechnic | 510 | 72 | 14,12 |
| Higher School of Education of Fafe | Polytechnic | 87 | 12 | 13,79 |
| Egas Moniz Higher School of Health | Polytechnic | 117 | 16 | 13,68 |
| Lusíada University of Porto | University | 523 | 71 | 13,58 |
| Miguel Torga Institute | University | 261 | 35 | 13,41 |
| Jean Piaget Higher School of Health of Viseu | Polytechnic | 53 | 6 | 11,32 |
| João de Deus Higher School of Education | Polytechnic | 78 | 8 | 10,26 |
| Dr José Timóteo Montalvão Machado Higher School of Nursing | Polytechnic | 95 | 9 | 9,47 |
| Higher School of Health of Alcoitão | Polytechnic | 173 | 12 | 6,94 |
| Fernando Pessoa University | University[2] | 1128 | 77 | 6,83 |
| São Francisco das Misericórdias Higher School of Nursing | Polytechnic | 60 | 4 | 6,67 |
| IADE-U Institute of Art, Design and nterprise—University | University | 539 | 32 | 5,94 |
| ISPA—Higher Institute of Applied Psychology | University | 373 | 22 | 5,90 |
| Higher School of Health of The Portuguese Red Cross | Polytechnic | 154 | 9 | 5,84 |
| Saint Joseph of Cluny Higher School of Nursing | Polytechnic | 70 | 4 | 5,71 |
| Maia Academic Institute—ISMAI | University | 1672 | 95 | 5,68 |
| Higher School of Technology and Fine Arts of Lisbon | Polytechnic | 54 | 3 | 5,56 |

| Higher education institution | Type | Enrolled in the 1st year for the 1st time | 23+ enrolled | % 23+ |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Higher Institute of Business Communication | University | 72 | 4 | 5,56 |
| Higher School of Arts of Porto | University | 175 | 9 | 5,14 |
| Higher National Academy of Orchestral Studies | Polytechnic | 60 | 3 | 5 |
| Egas Moniz Higher Institute of Health Sciences | University | 543 | 20 | 3,68 |
| Higher School of Art and Design | Polytechnic | 374 | 13 | 3,48 |
| Portucalense University Infante D. Henrique | University | 646 | 19 | 2,94 |
| Catholic University of Portugal | University[2] | 3435 | 85 | 2,47 |
| Higher School of Nursing of Santa Maria | Polytechnic | 168 | 3 | 1,79 |
| Vasco da Gama University School | University | 66 | 1 | 1,52 |
| Higher Institute of Health Sciences—North | University | 537 | 5 | 0,93 |
| Higher School of Arts of Porto (Guimarães) | Polytechnic | 36 | 0 | 0 |
| Higher School of Education of Paula Frassinetti | Polytechnic | 128 | 0 | 0 |
| University School of Fine Arts of Coimbra | University | 37 | 0 | 0 |

*Source*. DGEEC (2015), own calculations.