

INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF
MODERN EDUCATION
(IJMOE)

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ACADEMIC AND CAREER EMPOWERMENT FOR PORTUGUESE STUDENTS WITH SPECIFIC EDUCATIONAL NEEDS

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Article Info:

Article history:

Received date: 12.11.2025

Revised date: 12.12.2025

Accepted date: 01.02.2026

Published date: 03.03.2026

To cite this document:

Martins, E., Gomes, L., Silva, V., Fernandes, R., & Mendes, S. (2026). Academic And Career Empowerment for Portuguese Students with Specific Educational Needs. *International Journal of*

Abstract:

Efforts to advance the rights of people with disabilities, particularly in education and employment, are increasing. Despite legislative progress, inclusion in higher education remains secondary in institutional priorities. This study reports on a seven-month project aimed at supporting Students with Specific Educational Needs (SSEN) at a Higher Education Institution (HEI) in central Portugal. Its specific objectives included: i) identifying the levels of SSEN's autonomy in the university environment; ii) analysing the learning strategies they used; iii) and fostering the development of skills that contribute to professional inclusion. The project was coordinated by a multidisciplinary team of professors, involving a psychologist and a social education technician, who provided individualized psycho-pedagogical and employability support (156 sessions in total). Activities focused mainly on guidance in study methods, assistance with academic assignments, definition of learning support measures, and career counselling, including networking

Modern Education, 8(29), 255-270.

and facilitation of socio-professional experiences. Collaboration with professors, institutional offices, and external partners ensured holistic support. Positive outcomes included improvements in academic performance, writing quality, organization, self-confidence, autonomy, and motivation. Employability interventions promoted awareness of accessible workplaces, job-search skills, and networking, reinforced through practical experience and customized guidance. Results indicate high engagement and satisfaction among students: 92.9% rated the support as “very satisfied”, and all students valued its continuity, with half considering it indispensable. This project demonstrates that coordinated and personalized interventions are crucial. HEI thus play a key role in empowering SSEN to participate fully, not only academically but also professionally, promoting equitable pathways toward meaningful inclusion in the system education, in the labour market and, more broadly, in long-term social participation.

DOI: 10.35631/IJMOE.829016 **Keywords:**

Higher Education, Inclusive Employability, Pedagogical Support, Students with Specific Educational Needs (SSEN)



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Introduction

Despite ongoing challenges, there is an increasing commitment with people with disabilities rights, particularly in key domains such as education and employment, which are the focus of this paper. Considering their additional demands faced, including high unemployment rates, promoting their qualification and inclusion in the labour market is a transversal concern for many countries and institutions (Fundación ONCE & ILO Global Business and Disability Network, 2019; Institute for Employment and Vocational Training, 2025).

In Portugal, Decree-Laws No. 54/2018 and No. 55/2018 guarantee all students educational inclusion, establishing measures to support learning and, at the same time, addressing the transition of Students with Specific Educational Needs (SSEN) to working life, however, focused on compulsory education. While it is important to continue improving equity throughout the Portuguese educational system, particular attention must be given to higher education, which still requires more academic research (Moreira, 2022) and specific legislative support measures, despite the development of SSEN support services in Higher Education Institutions (HEI) (Machado et al., 2020; Ziliotto, 2020). Although higher education is progressively including SSEN, research on their specific

academic and transition needs remains limited and requires legislative and pedagogical support aimed at overcoming barriers, specifically designed for higher education (Madureira, 2024).

In the labour field, relevant legislation contemplates the Law No. 4/2019, which imposes mandatory hiring quotas for people with disabilities (equal to or greater than 60% in the private and public sectors), not covered by Decree-Law No. 29/2001, which defines specific job positions in public administration. In addition, Law No. 38/2004 establishes the general basis of the legal framework for the prevention, qualification, rehabilitation, and participation of people with disabilities, while Law No. 46/2006 aims to prevent, prohibit, and punish discrimination. In this way, incentives such as supported employment, inclusive employer branding, and adaptive job supports/products (Institute for Employment and Vocational Training, 2025) are essential to foster good practices and meaningful inclusion – totally aligned with the international standards, such as 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (United Nations [UN], 2015).

The aim of this work is to explore the impact of pedagogical and employability support for SSEN, as part of a funded project, developed at a HEI in central Portugal, between January and July 2023. The general objective was promoting the well-being, academic success, autonomy, and development of skills that facilitate the academic and professional inclusion of SSEN. By addressing these challenges and highlighting effective practices, this study also seeks to raise awareness about this underserved population and to inform the development of more effective inclusive policies. Given the specific characteristics around employability (mainly sought out by students in the final year of their degree) and the possible greater difficulties inherent in the process of adapting to higher education (first year students), most of this project activities were centred on the psycho-pedagogical area (73.7%), compared to the employability cases (26.3%). These values refer exclusively to the cases analysed.

Literature Review

The literature review addresses two main themes: the role of higher education in fostering inclusive learning environments and supporting SSEN in their transition to employment, and the broader relationship between employability and social responsibility.

It should also be mentioned that our research aligns with other projects, in higher education and at other levels of education, emphasized the vision of a more inclusive society, committed to supporting SSEN and ensuring that their rights – educational, social, and professional – are truly respected.

Inclusive Education and Transition to the Job Market for SSEN in Higher Education

Inclusive education aims to embrace human diversity and ensure the fulfilment of fundamental rights for all individuals, highlighting the essential role of the State, educational institutions, and society. The right to education encompasses the proper identification of individual needs and the adoption of appropriate responses to guarantee equal conditions for access to and participation in education, free from any discrimination action. So, the principles of non-discrimination and respect for diversity underpin both the organization and foundational assumptions of an inclusive educational system. They

also extend to all related goods, services, and facilities, which must be accessible to everyone. The aim is to foster equality of opportunity and, consequently, enable the full exercise of citizenship and a dignified life for all (Almeida et al., 2018).

In higher education, research highlights that institutional, pedagogical, and attitudinal barriers for SSEN persist (Hitches et al., 2025; Hokai & Silva, 2024; Kuriakose & Amaresha, 2024). Although there is still no specific legislation for this educational level, efforts have been made to establish support services for SSEN, to promote adequate care (Machado et al., 2020; Ziliotto, 2020). Among these initiatives is the creation of statutes for such students within Portuguese HEI, that include positive compensatory measures to students' academic paths by acknowledging context specificities and the need for individualized intervention (teaching support, assessment methods, completion timelines, pedagogical resources, and assistive technologies). These statutes, which are periodically reviewed to reflect historical and social changes, do not in themselves guarantee an inclusive educational process. However, they give visibility to these students, formalize institutional responsibilities, and create more favourable conditions for inclusion (Ziliotto, 2020).

A scoping review of international studies (primarily European) demonstrates that students with learning difficulties in higher education face a complex set of interconnected academic and psychosocial challenges, negatively affecting academic performance, self-confidence, motivation, and overall well-being. These challenges increase the risk of social isolation and university dropout. Although HEI have implemented various support measures, these services are often fragmented, insufficiently coordinated, and limited in their impact. There is a critical need for holistic, student-centred approaches that address not only cognitive challenges but also the emotional and social dimensions of students' experiences (Kuriakose & Amaresha, 2024).

While existing disability and wellbeing support services benefit many students, they frequently lack individualisation, clear communication, and accessibility, which restricts their effectiveness. These findings are based on a study involving 60 undergraduate students with current or previous experience accessing accessibility and wellbeing support services at a metropolitan university in Australia. Students emphasise the importance of personalised, empathetic support (Hitches et al., 2025), combined with continuous psycho-pedagogical and teaching interventions, to promote persistence and successful completion of higher education (Hokai & Silva, 2024).

Further evidence underscores concerns regarding dropout among students with learning difficulties, which could be mitigated through genuinely inclusive institutional policies. These concerns are further illustrated by a Brazilian internship report based on 15 hours of observational practice, which documented psycho-pedagogical support measures, teacher-focused interventions, and the academic challenges faced by students. Ongoing improvements in inclusive practices depend on listening to students and engaging all stakeholders in the inclusion process (Hokai & Silva, 2024).

In this sense, the transition to the job market is a crucial stage in the construction of this group's life project, and training institutions must play an active role in supporting future professionals in this developmental task and in the career/rehabilitation counselling. Such actions are aligned with the National Strategy for the Inclusion of Persons with

Disabilities 2021–2025, in accordance with Principles of the European Pillar of Social Rights, that advocates everyone should find answers to access qualification levels that facilitate social inclusion. It is not too much to emphasize that, with appropriate methodologies, inclusion also in higher education is possible, which has a positive impact on improving employability (Machado et al., 2020). So, the strategy seeks to ensure the SSEN rights regarding equal opportunities (including gender equality) and access to the labour market, promoting the individuality, self-determination, dignity, and inclusion.

These issues have been, already, addressed over time in other important documents, like the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UN, 2006) – Article 27, which refers «the right of people with disabilities to work, on an equal basis with others [...] in a labour market and work environment that is open, inclusive and accessible to people with disabilities»; and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (UN, 2015), already mentioned, which particularly includes the goal 8 – decent work and economic growth. It should be noted that there are several studies (e.g., Rahim et al., 2024) proving the relationship between decent work and well-being, mediated by work engagement of people with disabilities.

Inclusive Employability and Social Responsibility

Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) links education and the work world, unlocking the potential of young people and adults for a better future. However, around 267 million young people are not in employment, education, or training (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization [UNESCO, 2022]).

Equally worrying is the data pointing that about 16% of the world's population, about 1.3 billion people, currently experience significant disability (World Health Organization [WHO], 2024). Particularly in the EU, approximately 100 million people have some disability, with devastating consequences. The European Commission (2024) indicates that only half of people with disabilities have a job (a scenario that differs from people without disabilities, given that 3 out of 4 people are employed); 28.4% of people with disabilities are at risk of poverty or social exclusion (vs. 17.8%); only 29.4% (vs. 43.8%) complete a higher education degree; and 52% feel discriminated in this scope.

In Portugal, a significant difference between the employment rates of people with disabilities (65%) – with additional barriers in women – and people without disabilities (79.7%) remains, although this has decreased over the years. Similarly, unemployment among people with disabilities (14.7%) continues to be higher than that among people without disabilities (9.1%). Reference entities in the country have identified that there is also no significant increase in the hiring of this population (7% of placements of people registered as unemployed in 2024); and a low prevalence of workers with disabilities in the private sector (0.72% in companies with more than 10 employees) and in the public sector (3.2%), but with reports of gradual increases. Related to the risk of poverty or social exclusion, the data is consistently higher in the households of people with disabilities, worsening with the severity of the disability. There has been a decrease (in 2023) in complaints of discrimination on the disability or aggravated health risk, but this may indicate not an improvement instead a loss of confidence in the existing mechanisms (Observatory of Disability and Human Rights, 2024).

Summarily, there is still a strong prevalence of workplace ableism/discrimination among young people and young adults with disabilities, which demands for research and effective solutions, to reduce barriers and improve facilitators, in attitudes, knowledge, awareness and accessibility, that is comprehensive and integrated policies (Atobatele & Okonkwo, 2024; Breaz, 2020; Lindsay et al., 2023; Morris et al., 2024; Nevala et al., 2019; Observatory of Disability and Human Rights, 2024; Ramos, 2022; UNESCO, 2022).

Beyond higher education, research consistently identifies persistent barriers to labour market participation for people with disabilities, including discrimination during work placements, challenges within classroom teaching, and limited access to work experience during schooling, which have been documented in international peer-reviewed studies, involving individuals with intellectual disabilities aged 16–68 years (Nevala et al., 2019). In response to these challenges, vocational guidance must extend beyond traditional models and align with policies that promote accessible and inclusive environments, which include the strategic use of technology to support skill development and workplace integration (Atobatele & Okonkwo, 2024). Supporting this perspective, evidence from a professional counselling programme involving adults with disabilities shows that participants reported high levels of job satisfaction and positive workplace relationships six months after programme completion, with most indicating that the intervention was decisive in securing employment (Breaz, 2020).

In fact, as part of a company's sustainability or social responsibility strategy, a comprehensive approach must be adopted regarding people with disabilities (Fundación ONCE & ILO Global Business and Disability Network, 2019). The management of diversity and inclusion in the workplace is also a factor for organizations staying competitive (Singh, 2023).

This implies that both society and the workplace must be more responsible for inclusion, ensuring equal conditions and participation in the labour market, while fighting against discrimination. Thus, we will work towards promoting quality jobs and incomes that allow for a dignified and independent life. We mustn't forget that having a job provides personal value and a sense of usefulness, particularly for people with disabilities. Therefore, in addition to employers' awareness of the skills and limitations of people with disabilities, the development of tailored training and adapting roles to the type of disability is essential, as well as promoting health in the workplace, including preventive measures and ergonomics. The use of technologies, including telecommuting, can also be a beneficial factor for inclusion (Ramos, 2022).

So, companies, with empathy, companionship, mutual help and adaptation, need to be well informed and understand that they should hire people on the basis of their abilities, the real need for their services (not out of charity or assistance) and the contribution to the organization. Add that stakeholders (including the State) have only an effective role if there are collaboration and partnership between everyone, to a more inclusive future (Gomes et al., 2022).

We analysed the implementation of a funded project for SSEN at a HEI with established practices in this area. This analysis highlights the value of studying such projects as potential inspiration for similar local and international initiatives.

Methodology

Was conducted an exploratory qualitative study with 19 participants identified as SSEN from a HEI in central Portugal, comprising two schools within the same institution. In total, the project included 156 support sessions. The participants majority (n=16; 84.2%) were undergraduate students (from social sciences, arts, and economics programs), one was a master's student in engineering (n=1; 5.3%), and two were recent graduates (n=2; 10.5%). The sample was predominantly female (n=14; 73.7%). Students presented a range of specific needs, such as deafness, dyslexia and dysorthography, and mental health issues (Table 1).

Table 1: Summary of Support Provided to Students

No. of Sessions	Type of Support	Issues Addressed	No. of Students/No. of Sessions	No. of Students Accompanied	of Completed
41	Employability Support	Visual impairment Hearing impairment Dyslexia and dysorthography Mental health issues	1/6 2/8 1/9 1/10	5a)	5
117	Psycho-pedagogical Support	Sensory and behavioural issues Learning difficulties Dyslexia Dyslexia and dysorthography Hyperactivity and Attention Deficit Mental health issues Academic guidance/vocational counselling	5/1 2/2 1/3 1/5 1/6 1/7 1/11 1/12 1/17 1/18 1/29	16	14b)
156			19/156	21	19

Notes:

a) Two additional cases were reported by university offices but did not attend.

b) After assessment, two cases did not fit the type of support provided by the project (were forwarded) but included three students who stopped attending sessions.

Source: Table by the Authors

The work carried out began with an assessment of the students' personal and social functioning profile, based on an interview and the use of standardized instruments evaluating intellectual and personal skills, as well as professional vocation when applicable, which was framed within the scope of the evaluation conducted by the institution's office for SSEN (e.g., Wechsler Intelligence Scale; Raven's Progressive Matrices; and the Changes – Cognitive Flexibility Test by Seisdedos). It should be noted, however, that the primary focus of the project was not diagnostic assessment, as diagnoses had been established prior to students' entry into higher education, but rather the provision of individualized psychological and educational support tailored to their identified needs. Observation and follow-up records/reports were also used (based on regular support sessions), as well as feedback from students (also include a satisfaction questionnaire) and professors. The satisfaction questionnaires and recording grids were developed for this study and pre-tested. Throughout the process, ethical requirements were guaranteed, including informed consent.

Results and Discussion

Referral of SSEN and Psycho-pedagogical Support Sessions

The activities (developed from January to July 2023) were conducted by the professors' team (resources allocated to the HEI) and the psychology and social education technicians (service providers), who directly supported SSEN, also included coordination with professors, analysis, and identification of architectural barriers in the schools involved, and potential employers/community partners collaboration. They were responsible for the production of materials, as well as the preparation, monitoring, and evaluation of the work. The students' demand for the support provided stands out, in conjunction, as mentioned, with existing services at the institution (office for SSEN and another to support employability) and referral by professors.

The individualized psycho-pedagogical support was focused on study methods, learning difficulties support, and preparation of academic assignments guidance (research, idea synthesis and organization, writing practice, text revision, and reading aloud). Additional support was offered for oral presentations, internship-related tasks, and digital skills development. Over time, students demonstrated greater engagement, responsibility, and rigor in their academic work, with noticeable improvements in writing quality, organization, and formal presentation.

This personalized intervention enabled the assessment and definition of appropriate learning support measures for each student, in close coordination with professors, to ensure the effective implementation of learning support strategies. Examples of these measures are adjustments to assessment methods, the provision of accessible materials, extended time for examinations, and individualized guidance sessions aimed at strengthening students' self-regulation and study organization skills.

Students additionally reported increased autonomy, self-confidence, and motivation, which contributed to higher levels of classroom participation, improved peer interaction, and a stronger willingness to seek support when needed. These outcomes reflected significant personal and academic development.

In the literature, a scoping review demonstrated that students with learning difficulties face complex and interrelated academic and psychosocial challenges during higher education. Difficulties in reading, writing, and spelling not only compromise academic performance but also impact these students' self-confidence and motivation, increasing the risk of social isolation and academic negative experiences. HEI have implemented different support services and measures (assistive technologies, curricular adaptations, and additional time for assessments, etc.) but still fragmented and often insufficient to comprehensively address specific needs. It is essential to address these students' perceptions and take a more holistic approach that considers cognitive, emotional, and social dimensions (Kuriakose & Amaresha, 2024).

Another study (Hitches et al., 2025) highlights that, while HEI's support services help many students, they often fail to fully meet the needs of students with disabilities due to a lack of individualization, accessibility issues, and limited empowerment. Students emphasized the need for more personalised and empathetic support, clearer communication, and simpler processes. That could make university support more inclusive, responsive, and student-centred.

A report about inclusive practices at a HEI, focusing on psycho-pedagogical support, teacher interventions, and the challenges faced by students with disabilities, highlights growing mental health concerns and the need for continuous, structured actions to ensure that inclusion goes beyond access, enabling SEN to complete their studies successfully (Hokai & Silva, 2024).

Employability Support Sessions

In terms of employability support, the intervention developed resulted in: i) awareness of organizations/companies for the employment of people with disabilities, including information on legislation and services to support hiring (e.g., digital flyer; when necessary, was sent a report for the employer, with the consent of the person being supported); ii) career/rehabilitation counselling, developing self-knowledge and active job search skills (e.g., help with curriculum and cover letters; searching for employment opportunities; contacts with potential employers/networking; preparing for job interviews), monitoring all the process; iii) creation of a theoretical-practical employability support manual (physical and online available in the institutional repository – for audio reading –, as well as a braille version); iv) paid socio-professional experience; v) direct contact with company managers (for a visit and possible internship); and vi) contact with a City Hall to pursue a supported employment measure.

In consensus with the literature, a systematic review on the effectiveness of rehabilitation interventions for people with intellectual disabilities, focused on employment, transition to the labour market and functioning, facilitators indicated were secondary education with work experience and personal support services, supported employment (while sheltered work did not have this effect), job coaching, an adapted work environment, as well as family and business support. The barriers highlighted were discrimination in work experience, difficulties in classroom teaching and the lack of work experience during schooling (Nevala et al., 2019).

About career counselling, another analysis highlighted its crucial role in overcoming the barriers faced by people with disabilities in the labour market, in the sense that personalised interventions improve skills, self-sufficiency and independence. Vocational guidance in these cases goes far beyond traditional career counselling and must be combined with the policies that guarantee the creation of accessible and inclusive environments (also harnessing the potential of technology). This is a necessary transformation that allows people with disabilities to be celebrated for their unique contribution (Atobatele & Okonkwo, 2024).

In a study conducted with 30 people with disabilities (of various types), who participated in a 3-week professional counselling program, six months later, they were questioned about job satisfaction, relationships with colleagues and superiors, and about the quality of services provided (by a social worker). The results indicated that most of participants had a positive evaluation of the program and believe that, without it, they would remain unemployed (Breaz, 2020).

Overall Project Assessment

It is worth noting the success, despite the short duration of the project, in responding to all requests. Some cases followed had not yet finished their studies, so it was also well-succeed in a preventive scope. The results are also positive in students' perceptions. The instrument used evaluates parameters such as the ease of scheduling sessions, the availability of the professionals, the importance of the support in terms of the objectives and the relevance of its continuity, on a scale of 0 to 4 (where 0 corresponds to not at all satisfied and 4 to very satisfied), with the exception of the last topic, on a scale of 0 to 5 (where 0 corresponds to not at all important and 5 to indispensable).

There was a return/participation rate of 73.7% (14 out of 19), from which the following stands out: i) the vast majority (78.3%) of respondents belong to a single school (only students from the two schools with more students identified as SSEN were supported). The predominance of one may be due to the existence of two student support offices in the areas of specific educational needs and employability, not available in the remaining ones. In addition, that school provides specific conditions and support for SSEN, about attendance and assessment regulations; ii) the highest support satisfaction level (4 - very satisfied) obtained 92.9% of responses, and there was only one student ranking at level 3 (satisfied) in each of the three evaluated parameters (Figure 1); and iii) all respondents greatly value the continuity of the project support (very important for 50% and indispensable for the remaining 50%) (Figure 2).

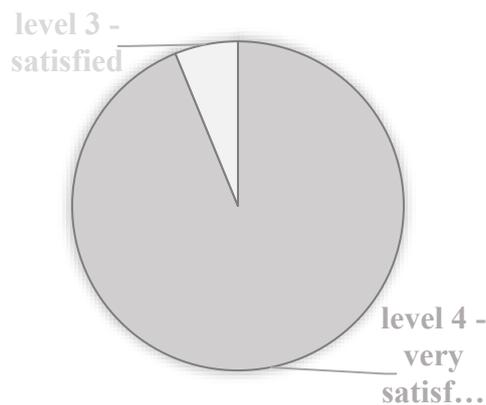


Figure 1: Students' Satisfaction with the Support (0-4)

Source: Figure by the Authors

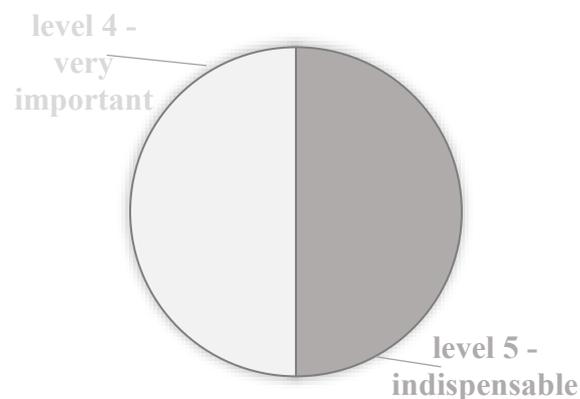


Figure 2: Students' Feedback to Relevance of Continuity (0-5)

Source: Figure by the Authors

In an open space to comments/suggestions, these issues were also emphasized, as were the difficulties overcome, and it was even mentioned that other students should be able to benefit from this opportunity: “For me, it is very important because I was able to free myself from the fear I had in the past, and it also helped me a lot with my studies, in terms of organizing my materials.”; “I am grateful for the availability and time spent helping and teaching me.”; “There are no aspects to improve. I liked the support I received, since, through the help of this project, I was able to overcome some difficulties and achieve the expected goals. It was very beneficial for me.”; “It is important to continue the support, as it helped me a lot in dealing with all the difficulties I encountered.”; “Maintain this project in the coming years, giving others the opportunity to benefit from it.”. Students also suggested the presence of professionals from the different training areas concerned to share testimonies and network. The suggestions for improvement mainly reinforce the reasons why the support is valued.

Despite the discontinuation of the project’s financial support, the initiative contributed to consolidating inclusive educational and professional practices, emphasizing the essential connection between equitable learning opportunities, employability, and the pursuit of a dignified life, as outlined in the previously stated principles.

Conclusion

Despite legislative and social progress, the effective SSEN in higher education inclusion continues in a secondary position within institutional and policy agendas. The project discussed here illustrates that coordinated, integrated, and sustained measures can yield tangible and hopeful results. By accompanying SSEN from entry into higher education through the labour market transition, it was possible to foster structural self-development and strengthen autonomy through pedagogical and vocational interventions.

The findings reaffirm the crucial role of HEI as agents of empowerment and social transformation. They must not only contribute to the academic success of SSEN – since overcoming academic challenges fosters greater self-confidence and active engagement in learning, essential conditions for meaningful participation and long-term inclusion, but also play a central role in creating more equitable and inclusive pathways to employment and citizenship. Unemployment often exacerbates SSEN's social marginalization and economic exclusion.

Preparing SSEN for the future therefore requires more than academic qualification. It demands the development of personal and social skills, the dismantling of structural barriers, and the promotion of awareness and collaboration among society. The State and local authorities must implement consistent public policies and provide conditions required to consolidate inclusive education and employability. Employers, in turn, should recruit based on potential, rather than charity or legal obligation, ensuring dignified working conditions, promotion of empathetic teams and leadership, and fair progression opportunities. Sustained support to families also emerges as a decisive factor, reinforcing autonomy and social participation. Respect and non-discrimination are collective responsibilities.

This study contributes to ongoing discussions on inclusion in higher education by demonstrating how targeted support for learning and employability can generate meaningful outcomes, even within a limited timeframe. The findings suggest that longer-term and more systematic approaches are necessary to consolidate and expand inclusive practices and to enhance equitable transitions into the labour market.

Ultimately, these projects are essential laboratories for structural and lasting change. However, their continuity and expansion depend on adequate human, technical, and financial resources. Without such commitment, initiatives risk creating expectations that cannot be fulfilled. Ensuring their sustainability is therefore fundamental to advancing equity, inclusion, and social justice.

Acknowledgements: This study was developed within the scope of the Inova e Incluir IPV I2 project, funded by POCH, with reference POCH-I2-2022-01 - Skills 4 Post-COVID — Skills for the future in Higher Education.

The authors, also, would like to express their sincere gratitude to National Funds through the FCT - Foundation for Science and Technology, I.P., the Centre for Studies in Education and Innovation (Ci&DEI) and the Polytechnic of Viseu for their support.

Funding Statement: The publication received financial support from National Funds through the FCT - Foundation for Science and Technology, I.P., within the scope of the project Ref^a UIDB/05507/2020 and DOI identifier <https://doi.org/10.54499/UIDB/05507/2020>. The funding had no role in the design of the study, data collection, analysis, interpretation of results, or the decision to publish this manuscript.

Conflict of Interest Statement: The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this paper. All authors have contributed to this work and approved the final version of the manuscript for submission to the International Journal of Modern Education (IJMOE).

Ethics Statement: This study was conducted in accordance with ethical research standards and submitted for approval within the scope of funding POCH-I2-2022-01 - Skills 4 Post-COVID — Skills for the future in Higher Education. Informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to data collection. Participation was voluntary, and respondents were assured of confidentiality and anonymity. The data collected were used solely for academic purposes.

Author Contribution Statement: All authors contributed significantly to the development of this manuscript. Emília Martins was responsible for the conceptualization, methodology, and overall supervision of the study. Laura Gomes and Vera Silva handled data collection, analysis, and interpretation of results. Rosina Fernandes and Francisco Mendes contributed to the literature review, drafting, and critical revision of the manuscript. All authors read and approved the final version of the manuscript prior to submission.

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