The representation of mature students in governing bodies of a Portuguese university: 'We are all equal, but some are more equal than others'!?

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Abstract

With this text, we try to understand if – and if so, how – mature students are represented by and in the governing bodies of higher education institutions. With a theoretical framework that values above all the institutional dimension, we carried out thirteen semi-structured interviews with students and faculty members who are part of the various governing bodies with student representation of a Portuguese higher education institution. The data show that (i) the functioning of these bodies tends to be known only by the students who participate in them, (ii) the bodies usually react to, rather than prevent, the problems that arise, (iii) mature students are perceived as a source of 'difficulties' and 'needs', and (iv) student representation in governing bodies does not seem to fairly and equitably represent all students, and some specificities of mature students (among other underrepresented groups) seem to be made invisible.

Keywords: mature students, student representation, student participation, higher education, justice

Introduction

Widening access and participation in higher education: this is a frequently repeated expression in the literature, which reflects a growing diversity of the student population and an increase in the presence of underrepresented groups in higher education, namely

mature students, who are the focus of this work. Nevertheless, this participation may have very distinct meanings, such as being enrolled, going to classes, having the same opportunities as so-called 'traditional' colleagues, participating in the governing bodies of higher education institutions, being able to represent oneself and other fellow students on these same bodies, being part of the numerous decision-making processes that affect the life of the institution and of those who work and study there, being represented by peers who seek to advocate for mature students' specific interests, will and needs, among many others.

This work focuses on a specific form of student participation through their membership in governing bodies of higher education institutions, in which they represent themselves and other colleagues. There are, however, two aspects that need to be clarified.

Firstly, this does not mean that participation is restricted to representation. There are other forms of participation. See, for example, an engagement framework developed by Student Partnerships in Quality Scotland (sparqs) in Scotland (Varwell, 2021). It is a student partnership staircase, with four roles that correspond to increasing levels of involvement: in the first, the student is a mere 'information provider' (p. 115), who provides information through questionnaires, class discussions, emails, discussion groups, among others; in the second, the 'actor' (p. 116) collects and analyses contributions (e.g., the 'Course reps'); in the third, the student is recognised as 'expert' in learning (p. 116); in the fourth, the 'partner' participates in an 'authentic and constructive dialogue' (p. 116).

Secondly, representation, or the presence of students in governing bodies, does not necessarily constitute full participation. If deeply unequal power relations are maintained, favouring teachers to the detriment of students, the involvement of these students is merely tokenistic (Taylor & Robinson, 2009).

Even so, in the institution where we carried out this research, student representation, associated with belonging to governing bodies, is an aspect that deserves attention for reasons that we hope this text can highlight.

Research on the participation of mature students in governing bodies of higher education institutions and their representation in these same bodies is limited. In this journal, for example, several works have been published about the presence of mature or non-traditional students in higher education (e.g., Ambrósio et al., 2016; Field et al., 2012; Fleming, 2016; Lucio-Villegas, 2016; Padilla-Carmona et al., 2019), but we did not find any with the specific focus that we propose.

The literature that we know of with this focus is scarce. The one that exists does not include any work related to Portugal and tends to justify the lack of participation of mature students in governing bodies with their lack of time (McStravock, 2022), difficulties in combining work, family and study (Klemenčič, 2011), among other practical and cultural, social and emotional barriers (McStravock, 2022).

Despite the importance of ensuring 'that students with particular needs such as part-time students, mature students and international students are represented' (Rodgers et al., 2011, p. 259), it is as if participation and representation of mature students in higher education were between a rock and a hard place. On the one hand, they 'are far less likely to run for election if they have no visible role models with whom they can identify' (McStravock, 2022, p. 5). On the other hand, if 'they only represent a specific cohort of students, [this] further [disincentivises] participation amongst those from other groups.' (p. 5).

The political nature of their presence – and potential impacts – is indeed a 'hard place' in such a way that it is possible to find in the literature an essential tension (sometimes with contradictions) between the politicising or depoliticising effect of the

presence of mature students in higher education. Let us start with depoliticisation. Martin Trow (1973) stated that adults 'tend to be less highly politicised and have a more exclusively academic or vocational interest' (pp. 46-47). A similar but more developed idea was presented by Manja Klemenčič (2011):

> A diverse student body is welcoming and enriching to the HE community in many ways. In view of student representation, however, diversity poses a challenge: a more fragmented student body with weaker common bonds has more difficulties to come to consensus on common interests and speak with a united voice. Non-traditional students not only have major obligations outside the academic environment (i.e., work and family), but also tend to have a stronger vocational orientation. Thus, larger share of these students potentially adds to the de-politicisation of the student body and its representative organisations. (Klemenčič, 2011, p. 3)

In more recent work, the author reinforces this idea: 'Student movement mobilization potential has been profoundly affected by the increasing diversity of student body, which makes it more difficult to establish a collective student identity, shared grievances and shared emotions.' (Klemenčič, 2014, p. 403).

Chirikov and Gruzdev (2014) also refer that:

> recent studies have shown that growing enrolment in Russian higher education has resulted in a more diverse and less motivated student body, decreased student engagement, and a lack of student participation in university governance (Popov 2009; Titaev 2012; Froumin and Dobryakova 2012). (Chirikov & Gruzdev, 2014, p. 455)

This perspective is disconcerting. Why and how do non-traditional students contribute to depoliticisation? To the decrease in student engagement? Isn't politics precisely the attempt to find consensus among the diversity of opinions, interests and perspectives? To discover 'unity in diversity', a *sine qua non* condition for improving and constructing 'a substantive, radical democracy', as Freire said (1999, p. 154, our translation). Why is a more homogeneous student body more politicised?

However, both Trow (1973) and Klemenčič (2011) contribute arguments that seem to point in the opposite direction – meaning that diversifying the student body can increase politicisation. According to Klemenčič, the involvement of minority students, through 'diversified, accessible and affordable' methods (p. 10) that effectively reach all students, 'may moderate potentially negative effects of such groups on the cohesive nature of the university environment' (p. 9). We agree, except for the verb 'may' reservations. We do not doubt that these possible adverse effects can only be counteracted through the participation of these students and all the other students.

Trow's (1973) perspective, this time, is more complex. In elite higher education institutions, says the author, governance tends to be the responsibility of 'senior professors', while in 'mass higher education' student participation gains centrality (p. 16). In the latter case, 'students, drawn from more diverse backgrounds and affected by radical political currents, challenge many of the traditional values and assumptions of the university' (p. 17). Interestingly, this radical policy constitutes a severe institutional risk: 'The breakdown of institutional governance arising out of value dissensus and fiercely politicized conflicts of values and interests tends to weaken the autonomy of an institution' (p. 18). It seems to us that more research is needed in this regard.

Simplifying and even exaggerating, we are faced with arguments of two types. First, mature students 'do not participate because they do not want to' 'or can't' – the result is the same. From this point of view, it seems that nobody prevents them. Second, as they

have other things to worry about, mature students are not involved in the academic environment, contributing to the depoliticisation of the student body.

Strongly rejecting these two types of arguments, we argue that we should not take it for granted that nobody prevents them and that they depoliticise the university and the student body. This is for two reasons: one of a more practical nature, the other more theoretical, but both dialectically interconnected, as Freire (1972) defended.

The first reason stems from the experience lived by one of the authors of this text as a mature student with a great desire to participate at various levels in the institution's governance – and with very few adequate opportunities to do so (Viterbo, 2022). And who felt that her colleagues, who were members of the faculty and university governing bodies, hardly represented her. It is a reason as fragile as it is robust. Statistically, it may not have any meaning. As a life experience, it is worth everything, 'wet' as it is with feelings, desires, dreams (Freire, 1997, p. 17).

The second reason is our theoretical position (which is also practical): what matters to us is not so much recognising and validating the specific identity of a group (e.g., mature students) nor just class stratification (Fraser as cited in Dahl et al., 2004), but the 'parity of participation', i.e., the possibility or not of 'participating as peers in social life' (Fraser, 2010, p. 16). We are not interested in the 'mental attitudes' of mature students, nor in justifying their reduced participation with their lack of time, but rather in understanding how injustice is institutionally generated (Fraser as cited in Dahl et al., 2004, p. 377). Thus, 'Overcoming injustice means dismantling institutionalized obstacles that prevent some people from participating on a par with others, as full partners in social interaction' (Fraser, 2010, p. 16).

According to Fraser (2010), 'participatory parity' encompasses three dimensions: (economic) redistribution, (cultural) recognition and (political) representation. The third aspect has received the least attention in Portuguese universities (as in many other countries). See, for example, the most recent Bologna Process Implementation Report (European Education and Culture Executive Agency [EACEA] & Eurydice, 2020): Portugal records a positive result regarding measures to support the access of under-represented groups to higher education (p. 116) and the recognition of prior non-formal and informal learning (p. 118). It does less well, however, on measures to support the retention and completion of students from under-represented groups (p. 120). Although these are not specific data on the representation of mature students in higher education (which, as we said, are scarce), one can see the effort to promote access to higher education among underrepresented groups and even the recognition of non-formal and informal learning, but less so with success in higher education. This is something that the literature has highlighted: access and success are different aspects, as well as increasing and widening participation (Osborne, 2003).

If we had to summarise the state of play in just one idea, we would say that research has also focused mainly on these students' access to higher education. The over-23 policy, for example, has promoted, since 2006, the access of mature students to higher education, albeit with differences between institutions, areas of study and prestige of institutions (Amorim, 2018). Despite these differences, an effort to recognise experiential learning can be admitted: the entrance tests include a curriculum assessment, an interview, and a written test. Also, there are institutions that more or less appeal to the life experience of the candidates (Tonin, 2018).

This does not mean that redistribution and recognition are resolved; far from it. As far as we know, the social class of students who attend higher education has yet to be precisely known, nor is the possible impact that the over-23 policy has had at this level (Amorim, 2018). Little is also known about the recognition of prior learning, either when

these students are selected (through exams defined by each institution) or throughout their courses, in lessons and at assessment times. Even so, representation is the aspect that has received less attention. So far, we have not found any study in the Portuguese context that refers to it.

Returning to Fraser (2010), representation is par excellence the political dimension of justice. The other dimensions also have a political nature, so much so that the first model defined by Fraser was only two-dimensional, composed of redistribution and recognition. The author later realised that the political constituted, even so, a dimension in itself, making her model three-dimensional, i.e., adding representation to the previous dimensions.

According to Fraser (2010), representation encompasses three levels, which correspond to an equal number of levels of 'misrepresentation', understood as 'political injustice' (p. 18). At the first level, 'representation has the straightforward sense of political voice and democratic accountability' (Fraser as cited in Nash & Bell, 2007, p. 76). At this level, when the 'political decision rules wrongly deny some of the included the chance to participate fully' (Fraser, 2010, pp. 18–19), 'ordinary-political misrepresentation' (p. 19) occurs.

At the second level, 'representation is a matter of social belonging' (Fraser, 2010, p. 17), i.e., who counts as a member? Who is included and who is excluded? The corresponding injustice is called 'misframing,' which means that 'the community's boundaries are drawn in such a way as to wrongly exclude some people from the chance to participate at all in its authorized contests over justice.' (p. 19).

The third level is meta-political and refers to democratising the 'process by which the frameworks of justice are drawn and revised.' (Fraser, 2010, p. 26). At this level, injustice is called 'meta-political misrepresentation', with the effect of excluding the 'overwhelming majority of people from participation in the meta-discourses that determine the authoritative division of political space.' (p. 26)

Therefore, based on the perspective of teachers and students who are members of a Portuguese university's governing bodies, this work aims to understand the representation process of mature students. Although it is fundamental to understand the perspective of mature students, this study privileges the institutional perspective, i.e., the way governing body members see the topic. This option has at least three justifications: the first is the experience of one of the authors of this text, as we said before, which shows us the difficulty of participating, despite her desire to do so, and the feeling of not being adequately represented by and in the said governing bodies. The second has to do with the fact that this research was carried out as part of a Master's degree, so the time available required making choices and focusing on what we wanted to know the most. The third is theoretical: like Nancy Fraser (as cited in Dahl et al., 2004, p. 378), we argue that 'justice pertains *by definition* to social structures and institutional frameworks. It follows that individual problems become matters of justice if and when they cumulate into a pattern that can be traced to a systemic cause.'

Inspired by this author, we could ask at least one question related to each of the three levels of representation: 1) Do the existing procedures and mechanisms 'accord equal voice (…) and fair representation in public decision-making to all members' (Fraser, 2010, p. 18), namely mature students? 2) Do the 'boundaries of the political community wrongly exclude some who are actually entitled to representation' (p. 18), i.e., in our case, mature students? 3) Is it democratic or is it being democratised 'the process by which the frameworks of justice are drawn and revised' (p. 26), i.e., 'new democratic arenas for entertaining arguments about the frame' exist or are being created (p. 26)? These are our research questions, which we will try to answer based on our data.

Methodology

This is a first exploratory study, of a qualitative nature and with a critical approach. It was submitted and approved by the Ethics Committee of our Faculty and took place in a Portuguese higher education institution. The selection of the governing bodies obeyed only one criterion: to have student representatives in their constitution.

To better understand the topic, and after the signature of the informed consent and clarifying any doubts that might exist, we conducted semi-structured interviews with thirteen governing body members: eight students and five faculty members. These bodies are all those that, in this institution, have student representatives.

The script included a set of questions about student representation in higher education. We asked if every student is represented or if subgroups of students 'may not feel genuinely represented – in all bodies, namely in the one to which the interviewee belonged. We also asked them to share perspectives on the 'over 23' policy, student workers and the concept of 'mature students'. Finally, we questioned how to improve the student representation process.

The interviews were fully transcribed, and the names of people and institutions (including governing bodies) were anonymised. This loss of clarity and detail is unavoidable, nevertheless, to ensure that reversing anonymisation is not possible. For this reason, we cannot provide additional data, either on the organisations or on the interviewees, such as gender, age, and study area.

We coded the name of each interviewee under the following logic: the designation 'University' indicates faculty members and students included in the constitution of two governing bodies. In turn, the expression 'Faculty Body' includes faculty members and students of four governing bodies of one Faculty. The designation 'student representative' is used for students included in these governing bodies and two student associations. The codes for the 13 interviewees can be seen in Table 1.

Table 1. Interviewees codes

1.   University_Representative
2.   University_Student Representative
3.   Student Association_Student Representative 1
4.   Student Association_Student Representative 2
5.   Faculty Body 1_Representative
6.   Faculty Body 1_Student Representative 1
7.   Faculty Body 1_Student Representative 2
8.   Faculty Body 2_Representative
9.   Faculty Body 2_Student Representative
10. Faculty Body 3_Representative
11. Faculty Body 3_Student Representative
12. Faculty Body 4_Student Representative
13. Faculty Body 4_Representative

Data analysis and discussion

Our analysis was inspired by the thematic analysis proposed by Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke (2006). We began by transcribing, reading and re-reading the interviews, identifying the main ideas; coding the text and collating extracts related to each code; organising the codes into potential themes and sub-themes; reviewing themes and sub-themes; and producing our narrative based on the data, the research questions and the theoretical framework, with particular attention to the aspects with which the interviewees showed disagreement and agreement.

Next, we present the analysis of four themes: knowledge *vs.* lack of knowledge about the functioning of governing bodies, functioning logic of governing bodies, mature students: conceptions and preconceptions, and non-mature representation of mature students.

Knowledge vs. lack of knowledge about the functioning of governing bodies

Most of the participants revealed that they were generally familiar with the structure of a higher education institution and distinguished the institutional bodies provided for in the Legal Regime of Higher Education Institutions (*Regime jurídico das instituições de ensino superior*, *Lei n.º* 62/2007, ruling namely the composition, functions and organisation, functioning and competence of higher education institution bodies) and student representative bodies, such as the Student Associations of each faculty. These Student Associations are generally affiliated with Academic Federations; some are part of the university's Senate, an advisory body.

> There are the representative governing bodies established by law and, outside these institutional bodies, there is the Student Association, which is the body par excellence for student participation that best represents the student community and plays an important role in academic life. (Faculty Body 4_Student Representative)

Among the students, the discomfort they felt while answering was evident because, although they were members of a governing body, they recognised that they did not know the governing bodies in which they did not participate: 'I can tell you about the body in which I am a member, I don't know as it is in others' (Faculty Body 1_Student Representative 2). This data is critical, given that access to information is, according to Klemenčič (2011, p. 13), 'the basis for all subsequent levels of participation'. If this does not happen, student participation is expected to be compromised. Moreover, the institutional framework is only known by those who have the opportunity to be members of governing bodies. In that case, it is expected that most students and even some staff, who do not have this opportunity, are unaware of such a framework – which most likely constitutes a significant obstacle to broader participation. In comparison, the faculty members tended to be more confident about the definition of the competencies of the governing body in which they were participating, as well as to expose an overall vision regarding the various governing bodies of the institution.

Although the organisation and its governing bodies are presented, as usual, on the institution's websites, two faculty members mentioned that higher education institutions should have a more active role in promoting this organisational knowledge, contrary to the current scenario in which, according to them, more and more students go to the Faculty to take classes, not showing much interest in participating in the extracurricular activities that the institution promotes. This is, moreover, a problem often described in

the literature. It should be said that student participation is reduced, not only among mature students but among students in general: 'the majority of students rarely get politically engaged in student protests or student governments, even if this involves only casting a vote in student elections.' (Klemenčič, 2014, p. 399).

Among the obstacles to student participation (not only mature but also young), interviewees mentioned above all the lack of knowledge about the functioning of governing bodies, the difficulty of reconciling study with extracurricular activities and the absence, markedly neoliberal, of a culture of student participation. 'Our young people were born into neoliberalism and are not used to collective participation. Students do not want to participate in these activities' (Faculty Body 2_Student Representative).

Most participants believed there could be greater student participation in governing bodies, if institutions were more proactive about this lack of knowledge about such a complex organisational structure and sought to find strategies to mitigate this lack of knowledge. Two examples have been suggested.

One would be the early and regular holding of clarification sessions on the existing governing bodies, their functioning, competencies and the importance of students being part of some of these bodies, such as the Council of Representatives, the General Council and the Pedagogical Council, which is the only parity governing body, i.e., it has an equal number of faculty and student representatives. 'The Pedagogical Council is a body where the presence of students is very important (...) and where pedagogical issues are discussed a lot and where very important decisions are made for the lives of students' (Faculty Body 4_Representative). To clarify the doubts that often exist about the electoral process, we think that it would be essential that these sessions occur before each election so that students are motivated to participate, either as voters or as candidates for student representatives.

Another example would be, within the scope of academic integration activities promoted by the Students' Association, raising awareness of the participation of all students in various aspects of academic life: electoral processes, student representation bodies, filling out pedagogical surveys to evaluate teachers and courses, research communities of practice, various initiatives of the University for communication with the surrounding community, among others. As mentioned by most participants, the participation rate of students in electoral processes for the constitution of governing bodies is relatively low: 'The participation rate is almost zero on the part of students. As much as the governing bodies want to streamline this issue, they cannot oblige students to participate. Students do not realise their importance and influence' (Faculty Body 1 Student Representative_1).

Functioning logic of the governing bodies

Regarding the functioning of the governing bodies, difficulties were mentioned in finding available times to bring together teachers and students, aggravated by everyone's work overload. Most interviewees view participation in governing bodies as extra work. 'The attendance that should exist in these joint meetings is soon impaired due to the overload of the professors' academic work and the workload of the various courses that the students have' (Faculty Body 3_Representative).

It is not surprising, therefore, that the governing bodies act according to a reactive and emergency logic, i.e., reacting and trying to solve one or more problems that have been reported: 'When there are problems, one acts like first-line firefighters who act in the immediate to put out the fires, so that the problem can also be solved immediately'

(University_Representative). The bodies remain passive if they are not informed that the students face one or more problems.

All participants also recognised that the COVID-19 pandemic led to better knowledge among students of these representation structures and their importance due to the numerous difficulties that disturbed daily academic life at a pedagogical and financial level. 'There was much concern for students, especially during the pandemic, because, in the face of the various problems that were arising, it almost forced the students to know which governing body they should refer to' (University_Student Representative).

We argue that the governing bodies' performance should be more active, favouring a preventive logic. However, for that to happen, other conditions would have to be verified, namely the work overload of teachers and students. Information could be more actively sought not only on existing problems in the student community, namely among underrepresented groups of students, but also on what is done well and what is worth being known and recognised. Instead of waiting passively for this information, activities could be organised to reach students more effectively, such as questionnaires or interviews with students, face-to-face or online, opening a suggestion box, setting a time such as 'coffee time' to allow students to talk informally about a wide range of academic subjects. As Day (2012, p. 40) points out, 'The "hyper-diversity" of the student body means student leaders are looking at new ways of engaging student opinion, through informal forums, surveys, focus groups and reaction [through] new media.' This 'consultation' is a fundamental level of participation (Klemenčič, 2011, p. 13).

Mature students: conceptions and preconceptions

More or less explicitly, the interviewees often saw mature students as burdened with difficulties and needs. The examples of what they supposedly lack are many and varied: adaptation, social integration, time for work, family and university, understanding curriculum content, relearning academic language, attendance at classes, participation in group or peer work, study and work habits, time devoted to autonomous work. Below, we present two excerpts, among many others that could serve as examples:

> The over 23 [students] find it difficult to integrate themselves in the face of the demands placed on them by entering higher education, and sometimes there are many difficulties. But these are my perceptions. (Faculty Body 2_Representative)

> Re-entering an academic life requires a double effort to reconcile family, work, and academic life. The relearning of another academic language, which is required in academic life from undergraduate students, makes these students reframe what they know through everyday experience through other concepts and perspectives, etc. The availability of mind and time to dedicate themselves to the academic cause is very different from that of a full-time student. (Faculty Body 3_Representative)

We agree that this group of students generally has some characteristics, of which some difficulties and specific needs are examples. However, the various deficits in the interviewees' speech outweigh the positive aspects. More than that, people not only have these deficits but also become these deficits (Amorim & Mallows, 2020). In its complexity, their identity is reduced to the 'minority' characteristic. In the interviews, disadvantages were incomparably more valued than maturity, experience, and intrinsic motivation. Interestingly, there are several examples in which even praise (or what seems to be it) is associated with reinforcing prejudice and stereotypes about mature students.

> Knowledge is not hampered by having a few more wrinkles. This public may have more difficulty concerning operating memory, working memory, but this is part of the ageing process. Higher education is only adapted to ordinary students of a particular age group and needs to change urgently. (Faculty Body 1_Student Representative_1)

In the interviews, discrimination and prejudice sometimes appeared more or less disguised, even by those who defended an urgent change in higher education. Note the power of the scientific 'order of discourse' (Foucault, 1971/1999), i.e., how scientific constructs are brought as an argument of authority. We doubt that the differences between mature and non-mature students' 'operating memory' and 'working memory' are evidence-based. And even if it were, how much negative impact does a stereotype have if we can only point it out (based on what?) without doing anything to make it less disadvantageous?

Very present in these speeches is the notion of inadequacy and non-compliance... Isn't this a prejudiced view? Could it be that the difficulty of complying with 'academic rules and habits' has reasons other than idiosyncratic aspects of an individual nature? In these interviews, difficulties and needs are usually attributed to the person – to their identity as a 'minority' ('over 23', 'public', 'new public', 'these students'…), which is thus essentialised – and rarely to structural, social aspects.

> Let's put the difficulties on two levels: first, the sociability that I have witnessed in the relationship that is not always very positive between the so-called traditional students and those that appear in contests for those over 23; secondly, often these new publics, because they had a different training path, it happens that in an initial phase they have some difficulties in adapting their activities, what they produce and even their performance to academic rules and habits. I notice this difficulty. However, the academic success of some students is evident. (Faculty Body 1_Representative)

One of the most frequent examples of difficulty experienced by mature students has to do with time management and scheduling compatibility. As we see it, this structural constraint does not result from incapacity or personal inadequacy but rather from the need to combine work and family with academic life. Thus, some interviewees suggested the creation of post-work schedules in higher education institutions to promote the participation of these students:

> I believe there are currently many more student workers than in the past. I would like to see a more active intervention by these students, perhaps it is time to create an after-work schedule, to adjust the situation of this public. (Faculty Body 2_Student Representative)

Even when valued by some interviewees, the students' biographical paths were seen from a particular individual perspective, with no clear examples of awareness ('*prise de conscience*') – which is the first step in the '*conscientização*' process, as Freire (1994/2015) mentions – regarding the collective, common aspects to the diverse, unique and unrepeatable individual stories.

> These students enter a new world with very different study methods. They have already lost the habit of studying, the habit of concentrating on listening, but on the other hand they have the added value of having a greater life experience, which in my perspective it makes perfect sense to be mobilised in any area. (Faculty Body 4_Student Representative)

From our perspective, this prejudiced view of mature students, highlighting their difficulties and needs, is an aspect that deserves attention, given that this assumption of various deficits does nothing to help think about the participation and representation of

mature students in higher education. If they are perceived as less 'capable', it is likely that they will end up being made invisible.

Although less frequently, we also heard in the interviews a very different perspective of recognising what 'over 23' students bring positively and how they can enrich academic life. 'These students, after having gathered life and professional experiences, constitute an asset in enriching the diversity of the student public' (Faculty Body 1_Representative).

Non-mature representation of mature students

In the interviews, we perceived the strangeness and/or resistance with which this theme was received by the interviewees, either because they had never thought about it or because they believed that it is up to the existing mechanisms to ensure the representation of all students or even because the solution could be somewhere… in a particular institutional limbo, as we shall explain. Although the diversity of the student population is recognised, as we saw before, the responsibility is attributed to the student representatives, given their extraordinary qualities and characteristics (the discourses continue at the individual level). It is up to them to reach everyone equally.

> When the year's representatives are elected, it is always reiterated that this person must have specific characteristics and qualities: attention to the other, a relationship with the other, empathy, active listening, etc. (…) This year's representative represents the diversity of all colleagues. (Faculty Body 3_Representative)

Blaming student representatives poses several problems. We highlight two: it constitutes, firstly, an attempt to exempt the institution from that same responsibility since the issue is resolved based on the superpowers of these chosen students; secondly, it is hardly credible that these superpowers exist, that a few personal qualities are enough actually to represent all students, in their diversity.

> When I contact the year representative, I assume that he [*sic*] is there representing all the students, but I don't know if, in fact, there is more attention to some than to others. I'm thinking about this for the first time. These representatives are elected by peers, so from the beginning, they should represent the entire student population. I am thinking that a representative, a regular student who has completed his [*sic*] formal career without a break, might not be as sensitive to the needs of other types of students. (Faculty Body 2_Representative)

In the case of mature students, it is often a matter of representation by non-mature students. We intentionally reverse the usual logic, according to which these students are designated by what they are not, i.e., 'non-traditional', as if they were less than younger, 'traditional' peers who come straight from secondary school. Now, as mentioned by McStravock (2022, p. 9),

> Recognising this diversity means ensuring that mechanisms are in place to capture the experiences of all members of the student community and avoiding tokenism or one size fits all approaches that often favour the voices of more dominant student groups.

We could hear, however, another proposal, this one of a more collective and institutional nature, which would involve the creation of a transversal association, bringing together representatives of 'minority' students from the different faculties of the University.

> These students should unite and form a kind of transversal association, which would be constituted as a pressure group and could have the rights and duties of a student association.

> All faculties have a student association, a transversal group could be set up to commit to mobilising this public. In each faculty, there is little adult public, a group of student representatives could be created at the University level to defend the interests and difficulties of these students, as by law I doubt that this will ever be done. (University_Representative).

As we understand it, this proposal is based on a set of assumptions worth underlining. First, the responsibility remains with the students: it is up to them to unite and organise themselves. The institution remains exempt from responsibility. The professors too, to such an extent that, according to some interviewees, mature students should be interviewed instead of professors who are members of governing bodies. Secondly, if it is necessary to create a transversal association to represent these subgroups of students, it is because the student representation that currently exists does not really defend the interests of all students. Furthermore, even if it is necessary to create a new representation body, it is because it is understood that the existing ones cannot, or eventually do not want to, welcome representatives of the so-called 'minorities'. Thirdly, this association above faculties would run severe risks of hovering in an institutional limbo. It should be remembered that, in this institution, the different faculties present incomparable situations regarding the percentage of 'over 23' students. They are different contexts, so it is unlikely that this supra-institutional structure could impact each faculty.

Given the high abstention of students in the various elections and the reduced adherence to activities carried out by student associations, as stressed by the interviewees, it is not clear how this transversal association, outside the institution where they study (and having to reconcile the agendas of other students, equally overloaded) could facilitate the participation of mature students. Is this not also a question of a discriminatory solution? Instead of bringing underrepresented students to the centre of the discussion, there would be a risk of marginalising them, limiting them to their 'minority' and not promoting dialogue between these students and the rest of the student population.

This proposal deserves deep reflection. It seems to constitute an 'affirmative' policy, 'which aims to valorise devalued identities' (Fraser as cited in Dahl et al., 2004, p. 376). Fraser criticised this approach for essentialising differences between groups. Instead of 'identity politics', she defended 'status equality', since

> In some cases, claimants may need to affirm devalued aspects of their identity; in other cases they may need to unburden themselves of excessive 'difference' that others have foisted on them and to emphasize their common humanity; and in still other cases they may need to deconstruct the very terms in which common sense differences are typically elaborated. (Dahl et al., 2004, p. 377)

Would this structure guarantee equal rights to all students? Or would the political division put 'minority' students at a disadvantage? Would they run the risk of 'political death', being transformed into 'non-persons with respect for justice', becoming 'objects of charity or benevolence' (Fraser, 2010, p. 19)? In another excerpt, it is possible to perceive this paternalistic logic underlying this transversal structure: the 'minority' students should organise themselves to bring their 'difficulties and needs' (again) to the University, which will do something for their 'benefit'.

> This public should organise itself, and together with the governing bodies, it should claim and summarise these difficulties and needs so that the university can do something in favour of this public. It would be more interesting to interview members of this public rather than professors. (Faculty Body 4_Representative).

Student movements are characterised by their concern for defending the interests of all students (Klemenčič, 2011). In practice, and often, representation does not guarantee the fulfilment of the will of all students but rather that of a majority. The concepts of minority and majority also deserve critical analysis. According to Freire (1999), the true minority is the elite that remains in power, reserving, among others, the power to nominate others, namely as 'minorities':

> The so-called minorities, for example, need to recognise that they are actually the majority. The way to assume oneself as a majority is to work on the similarities among themselves and not only the differences and thus create unity in diversity, outside of which I do not see how to improve and even how to build a substantive, radical democracy (Freire, 1999, p. 154, our translation).

From this point of view, by gathering all the 'minorities' discriminated against by one or several factors – social class, 'race' and 'ethnicity', gender, and age, among others –, we obtain a majority, unitary in its diversity. Usually, and without this effort to unite, the 'minorities' do not perceive themselves as the majority they really are (Freire, 1994/2015, p. 277). In other words, if we consider not only age but other factors of discrimination, the composition of the majority and minorities will likely be mixed up.

In higher education, mature students are often 'minorities', but if associated with other 'minorities', they are likely to constitute a new majority. Examples of other 'minorities' are the following: student workers, ethnic and migrant 'minorities', disabled students, women, first-generation students, LGBTQIA+, working-class students, among others.

Final remarks

Throughout the research, we noticed some resistance – for example, in some of the interviews we did – and faced the criticism of colleagues, according to whom we should have been more concerned with participation than the representation of mature students in higher education. We accept that this criticism is only fair partly and allows us to clarify our point of view. It seems clear that participation is broader than representation. Therefore, several dimensions related to these students' participation must be considered, for example in the student association, classes, research groups, and volunteering, among many other initiatives. Furthermore, and we hope to have made this clear throughout this text, our idea is not to propose a reinforcement of the representation of mature students (among other underrepresented ones) in their absence, i.e., only non-mature students representing them in the different governing bodies of higher education institutions. We believe that it is here, moreover, that the criticism becomes unfair. We do not see participation and representation as binary either/or dimensions. On the contrary, in our institutions, representation is a very significant form of student participation in the governance of institutions. It is potentially one of the most powerful, if the experience goes beyond a still 'important symbolic integration' (Rodgers et al., 2011, p. 250) and allows them to express their opinion, discuss, vote, participate in successive decision-making… So, why are there practically no mature students with this power to represent themselves and other students (namely mature, but not only) in governing bodies? What is the reason for ignoring them, for the resistance?

We agree with Fragoso et al. (2016, p. 98, our translation) when they say that the 'over 23' policy and the consequent population diversification constituted 'a very important step towards the democratisation of higher education in Portugal'. Our data show, however, that many other steps must be taken towards democratisation. Examples

are (i) the promotion of a *de facto* knowledge of the higher education institutions and their governing bodies, (ii) a more preventive functioning logic and more diverse and appropriate forms of consultation, (iii) the demystification of prejudices concerning mature students and the fight against ageism and any form of discrimination, as well as (iv) research, reflection and discussion of student representation, without forgetting the possibility (and the obstacles) for mature students and other under-represented groups to participate as peers in university life.

It is true that, as this is an exploratory work, it has several limitations, among which we highlight two that seem most important. The first has to do with the volume of data we collected. Even though we cannot guarantee that we have reached the saturation point, they seem, even so, data worthy of attention. More research is needed on this topic, collecting more data from other institutions and listening to students (namely the under-represented).

The second (which stems to some extent from the first) concerns how much remains to be explored regarding the heuristic power of Fraser's (2010) theoretical model for understanding this topic. At this point, it is important to return to the three research questions with which we closed the introduction to this work. First, we asked whether mature students have 'equal voice' and 'fair representation' (Fraser, 2010, p. 18). With some confidence, we can say that the existing mechanisms and procedures do not accord equal voice and fair representation to mature students.

Second, we asked whether the boundaries of the political community exclude mature students. We can say mature students are wrongly excluded, although they are supposedly 'entitled to representation' (Fraser, 2010, p. 18). Nonetheless, it is unclear how boundary-setting contributes to this, as this exclusion is often justified by the mature students' lack of time, making it impossible for them to attend meetings, for example. Nor is it clear whether they are denied 'the chance to participate fully' (p. 19) (being victims of ordinary-political misrepresentation) or, more than that, whether they are excluded 'from the chance to participate at all' (misframing).

The third question concerned the more or less democratic nature of the processes for creating and revising the frameworks of justice, as well as the existence or not of spaces to think about and discuss the framework itself (Fraser, 2010). This question leaves us with even more doubts. See the example of the proposal to create a transversal structure. If it fails, for the reasons we explained earlier, what would it take to constitute a transformative movement that would demand the creation of 'new democratic arenas for entertaining arguments' about 'the process by which the frameworks of justice are drawn and revised' (p. 26)? As we said, these can be arenas other than the governing bodies.

Paraphrasing George Orwell's (1945/2011, p. 81) 'Animal Farm' famous principle, we would say (finally justifying the subtitle of this work) that we are all equal, but some are more equal than others. Mature students have some characteristics that are different from other students: age, experience, regime through which they access higher education, work… As we noted earlier, based on Freire, the 'minorities' together constitute the majority. So, what matters is not so much recognising differences (if that means ghettoising those who are different) but ensuring that everyone can fully participate (or is at least properly represented), has the opportunity to represent other students, and all are truly part of the political community that the university constitutes. This would benefit not only the underrepresented students but also the other students and the community, which would become more democratic and fairer.

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