Transnational higher education: diversity as challenge

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Abstract—**Despite the opportunities for intercultural exchange and diversity in higher education, HEIs continue to grapple with implementing diversity policies and establishing a culture that fosters dialogue and acceptance of diverse perspectives and modes of life. This paper analyzes important trends in the country (Portugal), highlighting key incidents and identified problems, as well as showcasing main practices that have been implemented. Furthermore, it describes the primary policy instruments adopted by one specific university – University of Minho- and provides insights into students' perceptions of discrimination and hate practices within the same institution. By examining these aspects, this work aims to contribute to the understanding of the challenges and potential strategies for Higher Education Institutions (HEI) in fostering a culture of diversity, ultimately paving the way for more inclusive and equitable learning environments in engineering education.**

Keywords—time, gender, pandemic, higher education, students

I. INTRODUCTION

Extensive research has shed light on the challenges and initiatives associated with promoting diversity in terms of gender, race, age, and nationality within higher education institutions (HEI) [1-7]. However, while there has been substantial investment in studying diversity, including ethnic and religious, there is still a limited understanding of how HEIs can prevent becoming breeding grounds for violence, hatred, and extremism based on traits such as race, gender, sexual orientation or religion. With the increasing migration and mobility between countries, the expansion of international higher education courses and institutional partnerships, and the establishment of networks involving students, faculty, researchers, and administrative staff, it becomes even more crucial to develop organizational cultures that are conscious of gender, race, religion, and other differences. Institutions must be proactive in preventing and addressing potential issues. This involves collecting information on the levels and quality of diversity within their own institutions and implementing context-specific practices that encourage participation and engagement from faculty, researchers, and students. Additionally, it also demands to adopt practices that can effectively respond to diversity goals in all the spheres of action in HEI: from teaching to research; from students to decision takers, from HE entrance, until the end of graduation. By discussing the interest in developing transformative practices, this paper presents preliminary findings from an ongoing research project focused on examining hate and violence trends in higher education institutions within a specific country, encompassing the study about the extent to which students from a particular university perceive and experience hate and violence on campus. The research includes an analysis of policy documents, a survey involving students, and interviews with both teachers, who are also responsible for student affairs, and students representing diverse religious practices, nationalities, disabilities, and non-heteronormative sexualities.

II. STATE OF THE ART

Studies indicate that selection and evaluation processes in academic institutions are still influenced by traits that are socially and culturally bounded, such as gender, age, scientific field, religion, race, nationality, disability, or illness [1-8]. Therefore, it is vital to understand the cross-effects these traits have on scientific fields, particularly in engineering, which is highly internationalized and progressively transnational in terms of courses and networking with other countries. Existing studies also emphasize the need for positive practices at the management level of academic institutions, fostering peer-to-peer relationships among students [9], as well as between students, professors, and non-academic staff. In addition, the European Commission has emphasized the importance of maintaining and strengthening the plural dimension of higher education and science. UNESCO [10,11] recommends a set of practices that include implementing effective policies and procedures to address discrimination and promote diversity within academic institutions. By adopting these practices, academic institutions, including those in engineering, can create an inclusive and supportive environment that values and embraces diversity, leading to positive educational experiences and enhanced innovation in research and development. In this context, we can name eight areas for a consistent policy approach to managing diversity within academic contexts [9,16], including community mobilization and capacity building.

III. MAJOR INCIDENTS

While many HEIs operate within existing legislation that provides legal avenues for addressing such issues, there is often a need for more explicit procedures to support and refer victims of gender-based crimes, even within institutions governed by codes of ethics that promote gender non-discrimination. Additionally, the assessment systems used by these institutions typically do not incorporate mechanisms to facilitate the reporting of complaints, such those referring to bullying, moral and sexual harassment, racism, or other forms of discrimination and exclusion. Gender-based discrimination is even more pronounced when the victim belongs to an ethnic minority and a different nationality

1) Gender

In recent times, particularly in late 2021 and 2022, there have been several formal complaints filed by students against staff members, as well as multiple instances of sexual harassment on campus, worldwide, and in Portugal. In the case of Portugal, these incidents have gained significant attention and traction through social media platforms, sparking substantial discussions about gender violence. Recently, several individuals associated with these HEI, primarily students, have come forward to share their own experiences of violence, organizing public demonstrations to raise awareness and advocate for change.

2) Gender identity and sexual orientation

In relation to sexual orientation, there are limited studies specifically focusing on HEIs. According to the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights report (2019, p.12) a majority of LGBTQIA+ respondents (58%) reported experiencing harassment in the form of offensive or threatening situations, including incidents of a sexual nature, in various settings such as work, public spaces, or online platforms. Half of the respondents (53%) reported rarely or almost never openly expressing their LGBTQIA+ identity to avoid negative experiences. The same study reveals that only one in five incidents of physical or sexual violence was reported to any organization, including the police (14%), primarily due to fears of homophobic and/or transphobic reactions.

3) Religion

While there are no known cases of hate or abuse based on religioni the country, faith, or belief within HEI campuses in the country, there have been significant incidents reported in the 2021, associated with anti-Semitism, and anti-Islamic. In 2021, instances of hate messages targeting Roma, Black, Arab, and refugee communities were found on the walls of HEI, and a refugee reception center, in Lisbon.

4) Disability and chronic illness

There are no reported cases of violence against people with disability or chronic illness in country HEI. However, it is stated that these conditions affect the chances of accessing and staying in HEI, and people suffer diverse forms of indirect exclusion, associated to the lack of resources and infrastructures.

5) Race

There are several problems with people from different races and nationalities at HEI. However, they are not so well documented. Often associated with gender, these problems are more evidenced in the context of the relationship between students, and on the relation between students and teachers [10,11,12]. In addition to being a poorly studied phenomenon within HEI, this also poses a challenge as there are few formal reports of cases within the campuses, which means that HEI may not be aware of instances of racism and xenophobia. In sum, the aforementioned incidents highlight the importance of addressing and combating various forms of discrimination and violence within and beyond HEIs, promoting inclusivity, and fostering environments that uphold respect and equality for all individuals.

IV. STEPS MADE

Information regarding the violence and discrimination in Portuguese HEI is scarce. However, recent evidence indicates that in the country, HEI have just started to incorporate diversity issues into the management of courses and the development of their students' competencies. In addition to the existing legal guidelines regarding disability and illness among students, regulations for working students, equivalence processes, and degree recognition from abroad, there has been a notable discussion and debate concerning the implementation of gender equality plans, together with debates on sexual, moral harassment and inclusivity in higher education.

V. THE CASE OF THE UNIVERSITY IN STUDY

The data described in this paper refers to University of Minho –a University located in the North of Portugal, now with about 20 thousand students, 7% of them coming from other countries. In recent years this institution has been working in the implementation of measures to tackle with different forms of violence. These include the publication of a Code of Ethics and Scientific Integrity, overseen by the Ethics Council, and other regulations that outline the rights and responsibilities of both students and professors. In 2021, a Mission Group was formed to develop guidelines for preventing and combating violence and harassment, resulting in a comprehensive report that was approved in January 2022. To support students who may experience physical or psychological violence, the university has also worked to establish a specialized support service and an email address dedicated to reporting incidents of violence within the academic community. The university has also created the Gender Equality Commission, with the mission to implement a gender equality plan specifically tailored for this institution. In addition, the university has also made an effort to develop action plans that incorporate diversity strategies in teaching in accordance with national legal frameworks, including those outlined in the Constitution and the National Strategy for Equality and Nondiscrimination 2018-2030 (ENIND). Furthermore, the university has established specialized bodies to address specific needs and concerns. The Inclusion Office collaborates with all university services and focuses primarily on supporting students with disabilities and/or chronic illnesses. The university offers psychological support to students, and holds an ombudsperson to attend student needs. Despite the aforementioned measures aimed at addressing various forms of discrimination, the

institution, like the many other at national and European context, still lacks a systematic and sustainable body of knowledge specifically targeting violence based on religion, ethnicity, and/or nationality on the campus.

VI. METHOD

The study aimed to investigate the perception and experiences of exclusion and discrimination based on various traits, such as nationality, gender (including non-binary options), ethnicity, religion, disability (both physical and mental), chronic illness, and sexual orientation (heterosexual, homosexual, bisexual, other). This exploratory study utilized document analysis, surveys, and interviews with course directors and heads of pedagogical councils. The survey was launched in May 2023 and is still ongoing. It was distributed to all students through their institutional email addresses, aiming to gather as many responses as possible. However, the response rate was relatively low at the time of analysis (Table 1), possibly due to students' infrequent use of institutional emails. Although the sample is not representative, it provides some initial insights and patterns for further investigation. Out of a total of 19,632 students, 77 responses were received, representing only 0.42% of the student population.

TABLE 1. CHARACTERIZATION OF THE RESPONDENTS

Sample	n	%
Gender		
Female	50	64,9
Male	26	33,8
I prefer not to say	1	1,3
Total	77	100
Scientific area		
Engineering	53	68
Arts	8	10
Sciences	4	5
SSH	10	13
No answer	2	4
Total	77	100
Nationality		
Brazil /Latin America	9	11,7
Spain/France	2	2,6
Iran and Turkey	2	2,6
The country	62	80,5
No answer	2	2,6
Total	77	100

Source: Survey, to university students

In addition to the survey, data was collected through two interviews with teachers who also served as course directors and heads of pedagogical councils. A focus group with 10 undergraduate students from different scientific areas, selected using a snowball sampling method, was conducted in March 2023. The study also involved conversations with 10 students on the topic (recorded) during class intervals, utilizing snowball sampling and conducted in various university settings. Care was taken to ensure the inclusion of individuals with diverse religious beliefs, genders, sexual identities, ages, and ethnic/racial backgrounds in the discussions. Although the current sample is limited, the study provides valuable insights into the experiences of exclusion and discrimination within the university community. Future research should aim to expand the sample size and explore the identified patterns in more depth, as by giving voice to underrepresented groups, the

study contributes to fostering a more inclusive and understanding environment at the university. Throughout the text, we primarily rely on data obtained from the survey conducted, which includes responses from a considerable number of participants. Additionally, we have incorporated excerpts from interviews conducted with key stakeholders to complement the survey findings and gain deeper insights into their experiences and perspectives. The use of multiple data sources strengthens the credibility and validity of our findings, enabling us to draw meaningful conclusions and identify potential areas for improvement in creating a more inclusive and equitable campus environment.

VII. RESULTS

The analysis of questionnaire responses across various scientific fields reveals consistent trends in the perception of diversity at the university, as measured by the highlighted questions in the methods section. The majority of respondents, regardless of gender, rated the situation in the institution as either "good" or "very good" in terms of nationality.
- In terms of scientific area, Engineering received predominantly positive ratings, with the majority of respondents rating the situation as "good" or "very good".
- The overall assessment of the situation in the institution regarding nationality appears to be positive, however with some quite relevant negative ratings.

A. Evaluation about the current situation of the university concerning certain traits

In the study, students were asked to evaluate the effects of the referred traits within the institution, as described in the methodology section. The results show that, on the whole, the situation was rated positively, with respondents indicating it as "good" or "very good."

a) Nationality (being a national of another country)
The majority of respondents, regardless of gender, rated the situation in the institution as either "good" or "very good" in terms of nationality. In terms of scientific area, engineering received predominantly positive ratings, with the majority of respondents rating the situation as "good" or "very good". The overall assessment of the situation in the institution regarding nationality appears to be positive.

b) Gender (being male)
Male respondents predominantly rated the situation in the institution as either "good" or "very good" in terms of gender. In terms of scientific area, Engineering received predominantly positive ratings from male respondents. The overall assessment of the situation in the institution regarding gender appears to be positive among male respondents.

c) Gender (being female)
Female respondents predominantly rated the situation in the institution as either "good" or "very good" in terms of gender. The overall assessment of the situation in the institution regarding gender appears to be positive among female respondents.

d) Religion (having a certain type of religious practice)
The majority of respondents, regardless of gender, rated the situation in the institution as either "good" or "very good"

in terms of religion. The overall assessment of the situation in the institution regarding religion appears to be positive. Data reveals that respondents, irrespective of their gender, sexual orientation, religion, or nationality, generally have a positive perception of the institution. The majority of participants rated the institution as "good" or "very good" across different categories and scientific areas, indicating a favorable view of its overall situation. However, it is important to acknowledge that these results may vary when considering individuals' personal experiences and the specific impact of each variable on their daily lives. Paradoxically, while data concerning the overall perception of discrimination and violence at the campus might be positive, the results differ when the questions address personal experiences. Some respondents admitted that the traits under analysis are the source of negative effects in their daily life, as we will demonstrate in the following analysis, organized according to the traits under analysis. Despite the limitation of the sample, data provides relevant patterns for our understanding about the traits that are still impacting people lives in the campus.

B.Perceived effects in daily life

a)Gender (being male or female)

Examining the experience of gender (being female) on daily life, we observe differences in the reported negative effects between women and men. Among women, 20% (10 out of 49) reported some negative effects, while 4% (2 out of 49) reported experiencing a lot/many negative effects in relation to being female in their day-to-day lives. Only 1 man, out of the 26 said that being a man was a source of negative effects. Interestingly man do not report negative effects from being a female, neither women consider there are negative effects as regards being a man. These findings indicate that women may be more likely to encounter challenges or negative effects in their daily lives related to their gender identity compared to men, although they are not understood like that from their male peers. As expected, a slightly higher percentage of women in the engineering field reported some negative effects in relation to gender (be women). In any case, the overall reported negative effects are relatively low for both genders, and consistent with the qualitative findings, as teachers show concern not actually as regards the relationships between students, but in relation to teachers. They say that more information is needed about what constitutes harassment: *"I don't have many reports, and I think this is also a very... well, new thing... it's not new, but it's still not very visible in the University, there are no channels to report"* (teacher, interview)

b) Religion (having a certain type of religious practice)

In terms of the impact of religion on daily life, data highlights some variations between women and men. 17 people (22%, out of 76) said they did not want to answer this question, and only one women said that she had experienced some negative effects related to her religious practices. When considering the effect of scientific area, women in the engineering and social sciences and humanities fields reported the highest percentage (3%) of negative effects due to religion. These results could indicate that women are slightly more likely to experience challenges or negative effects in their daily lives due to their

religious beliefs compared to men, nevertheless, the total percentage is relatively small to generalize this idea. As regards this specific topic, qualitative data is consistent with the idea that students do not feel at easy to speak about this topic – especially if considering that the majority of academic population is Christian-catholic. It also reveals the relative invisibleness of the issue at institutional level.

c) Disability (being disable or having a chronic illnesss)

When examining the impact of disability or impairment on daily life, data indicate that both women and men generally reported minimal negative effects. Among women, 8% (4 out of 49) reported some, or several negative effects, while among men, no significant negative effects were reported. This information is corroborated by the interviews conducted, both with students with disabilities and decision-makers who, though, do not consider this a worrying situation since they believe that colleagues protect their mates with chronic illnesses, as "*In relation to students with disabilities, I see positive discrimination. There is indeed... at the peer level, there is a concern to help them, in other words, there is that awareness, and that is indeed very positive.* " (teacher, course director, engineering). However, students claim that there are insufficient facilities within the University to promote active participation in academic life for people with disabilities, as *"It has few or poor access points, for example, for wheelchair users"* (Student).*"The school lacks accessibility for people with disabilities" (Student).*

d) Sexual orientation

Regarding sexual orientation, the data shows minor variations between women and men (1 man and 1 women), even both from engineering. This suggests that individuals in the engineering field, regardless of their gender, might face slightly more challenges related to their sexual orientation compared to other scientific areas. Students refer to it in more frequency than teachers interviewed: "*I believe there is still violence against those who do not identify with the two main genders...*" (student).

e) Age (being of certain age)

Analyzing the impact of age on daily life, we observe differences in the reported negative effects between women and men. Among women, 8% (4 out of 49) reported some negative effects, while 2% (1 out of 49) reported experiencing a lot/many negative effects due to their age in their day-to-day lives. On the other hand, among men, none reported any negative effects. These findings suggest that women may be more likely to encounter some challenges or negative effects in their daily lives related to their age, compared to men.

f) Nationality

A significant percentage of students at the University are international, particularly in master's and doctoral programs. This trend indicates the challenges faced in managing people with different nationalities. Having born in a certain country is considered by 8% of the women (4 out of 49), as a source of negative effects (place of birth). Among the respondents, 33 females and 16 males provided information about their nationality. More women said that they experienced challenging effects from their nationality. The same conclusion is obtained through interviews, as students say that:" *My life here would be much better if part*

of the population didn't hate women coming from that country based on stereotypes and archetypes " (student). Indeed, the information obtained through interviews with students and decision-makers, particularly in the context of engineering, including the student ombudsman, highlights that decision-makers consider events that occur between professors and students to be very relevant, but they consider diversity among students even more important, as they perceive more difficulties at this level. For example, they believe that the limited language skills of some professors contribute to additional difficulties for foreign students. Similarly, they consider that both professors and students still have stereotypes regarding how they perceive and treat people of other nationalities.

VIII. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Overall, the data suggests that while there are some variations in the impact of nationality, age, religion, disability, and sexual orientation on the daily lives of women and men, the overall negative effects reported are relatively low. However, it's important to remember that even small percentages of negative effects reported can still have an impact on individuals' well-being. Thus, creating inclusive and supportive environments that address the unique needs and challenges of individuals based on their gender, religious beliefs, disabilities, and sexual orientations is crucial for promoting equality, diversity, and a positive daily life experience for all [10-16]. Data indicate that especial importance should be placed on women's experiences at the university, particularly from an intersectional perspective that considers the persisting gender stereotypes in STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) fields, as well as the evident challenges faced as regards age, nationality, ethnicity and race. It is essential to highlight that in engineering, these issues hold significant relevance, not only due to the field's social importance but also because of the increasing emphasis Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) are placing on internationalization, and the need to attract foreign people to the country.

IX. CONCLUSION

This working in progress contributes to the ongoing debate on the transnational aspect of higher education by examining European policies and institutional challenges associated with promoting gender, ethnic, and religious diversity in higher education. The data presented highlights the pressing need for higher education institutions (HEIs) to address violence and implement comprehensive Gender and Diversity Equality Plans. One key issue identified is the absence of mechanisms to facilitate complaints within the quality assessment systems of these institutions. This poses a significant challenge for individuals who experience violence, as they may encounter barriers in reporting incidents and seeking appropriate support [17, 18, 19]. Overall, the data emphasizes the need for collaborative efforts between institutions, students, staff, and relevant stakeholders to create a culture of equality on campuses. These preliminary results also highlight the need to cross

research methods, to mitigate possible bias concerning the evaluation of the living contexts.

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