Initiation Practices and Access to Higher Education for Deaf Students: The Interpreter as a Resource

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ABSTRACT

The transition from secondary school to higher education institutions (HEIs) can be a very exciting experience, but it can also represent unique challenges, making this moment a crucial event in the academic path of all students. Academic initiation practices are a tradition that exists on several universities campuses with the purpose of promoting students' integration into academic life during such an important transition.

It is important to analyse the participation of deaf students in initiation practices to higher education and the sign language interpreters' role in including them in this process. Sixteen deaf students of HEIs in the Porto region participated in this study and accepted the importance of initiation, although some interviewees were afraid they would not have enough time to dedicate to their studies, which influenced their decision not to take part in these activities. Deaf students who participated and experienced initiation rituals identified several constraints, which indicates that academic initiation practices are not adapted to the specific needs of deaf students, nor to the needs of the deaf community as a whole. HEIs are not fully aware of the need to adapt them, so that all students, regardless of their hearing ability, can fully participate and feel included at university. It is vital to provide conditions that allow the full inclusion of deaf students into the academic environment. Since Portuguese sign language is the language of these students, it is essential for them to have an interpreter who facilitates communication in both educational situations and extracurricular activities they wish to participate in, thus minimizing discrimination and promoting full inclusion.

INTRODUCTION

The transition from secondary school to higher education institutions (HEIs) can be a very exciting experience, but it can also represent unique challenges, making this moment a crucial event in the academic path of all students (Parker *et al.*, 2017). Academic initiation practices are a tradition that exists on several universities campuses with the purpose of promoting students' integration into academic life during such an important transition (Estanque, 2017). However, in some

institutions, initiation rituals have led to grave consequences, which have some calling for a ban on these academic traditions to keep students safe (Jacobs, 2014).

In Portugal, academic initiation practices are common in both public and private HEIs. On one hand, there are those who defend the initiation rituals, referring to them as 'a welcoming integration of newly arrived students' (Comissão de Educação e Ciências, 2008, p. 3). On the other hand, others label them as being controversial, as they can involve subjecting students to various humiliating situations, including verbal and physical abuse, as they are beginning their studies in higher education (Observatório dos Direitos Humanos, 2010).

In the specific case of students with special educational needs, this situation is more complex. More focus is required to understand their needs to promote their full inclusion into this new context, which includes initiation rituals. The growing number of deaf students attending universities believe that overcoming the multitude of communication barriers can help achieve equal efficiency (Abella and León, n.d.). On the other hand, the individual's personality, abilities, and life history also affect this integration process. In this regard, Oliveira (2019) developed a study to understand how to integrate and include a deaf student with low vision in higher education, as well as to identify the main difficulties experienced and how communication barriers can be overcome. The study demonstrates that "(…) despite the initial shock that the deaf young man with low vision had when he was diagnosed with Usher Syndrome, his perspective changed. He was accepting of his situation and showed interest and willingness to fight for his future. Despite all the difficulties he faced upon entering higher education, the cooperation of all stakeholders made it possible by facilitating strategies so that he felt able to attend university and achieve academic success" (Oliveira, 2019, p. 2).

Previous studies on academic initiation rituals have been conducted both in Portugal and internationally. These studies will be examined within this paper, however, the specific target group – deaf students – is the focus of this study. Estanque *et al.* (2017) sought to understand the phenomenon of academic initiation through the perspective of the various players in the higher education system, such as students, associative directors, and directors of educational institutions. According to Estanque *et al.* (2017, p. 8), "the 'chain of rituals' in which initiation is structured, is characterised by many factors. These include repetitions of rituals in space and time among a large number of individuals, involving grouping (co-presence), the creation of barriers and symbols that separate participants from the outside world, mutual focus and emotional sharing, which translate into feelings of group solidarity, collective belonging, individual emotional energy, symbolisation of social relationships and the acceptance of new norms of morality, endowed with symbolic, socialising and identity effectiveness". In fact, when viewed from a sociological and anthropological perspective, initiation is a rite of passage guided by a set of practices, uses and customs, aiming at the 'debestialisation of the freshman', with a symbolic identity resurrection in a new phase of their social life (Estanque *et al.*, 2017).

In England, academic initiation consists of younger students being invited to attend the 'Welcome Week', where they can participate in "games, sports, contests, cultural activities and different parties every night, with the aim of both welcoming the students and integrating them" (Observatório dos Direitos Humanos, 2010, p. 4-5).

In Portugal, academic initiation practices have evolved into a 'military model' (Observatório dos Direitos Humanos, 2010, p. 5) that includes situations where younger students are made to line up, keep their eyes down, respond to older students in chorus and perform tasks that require physical effort, singing humiliating songs and requesting permission for everything.

Within these rituals, older students (those who have already completed at least their first academic year of higher education and have distinguished themselves by having been through the initiation process) call themselves 'doctors' (*doutores*), which points clearly to a premature appropriation of the title of graduate they are working towards. Academic initiation practices go beyond the limits of the acceptable when implementing any action or situation that, intentionally or not, put students' mental or physical health and safety in danger, with or without the participants' consent. No situation should create any sort of risk of damage, discomfort, embarrassment, harassment, degradation, humiliation, ridicule or the intentional destruction or damage to public or private property with the only purpose of initiation or as a condition to continue as a member in an organisation (Akerman *et al.*, 2015).

Nevertheless, academic initiation practices can be framed as encouraging integration, respect, and solidarity. These practices may include welcome activities that promote a positive transition to a HEI by providing cooperative and supportive relationships between students who are just beginning this new phase and those who have previously been in the same situation. In fact, in Portugal, and as Dias, Gomes, and Sá (2019) explain, the reception of new students is traditionally ritualised and involves the organisation of an entire integration ceremony, known as *praxe*, which is proposed by their peers. It is important to stress that the practice is not an academic activity, that HEIs take no responsibility or contribute economically. However, initiation can contribute to the integration of students as long as it takes place in an environment of companionship and traditions. At no point should it be used to hide cowardice, violence or any other acts that could jeopardise the physical, moral, or financial integrity of new students (ESTeSC, 2019). The University of Coimbra, one of the oldest universities in Portugal, details in its Code of Practice that the practice of initiation aims to receive newly arrived students with dignity by welcoming them and helping them to integrate. At the University of Coimbra, the practice is carried out as part of an academic tradition and a culture inherited over centuries and generations (ESTeSC, 2019).

The transition from secondary to higher education is a significant change in young people's lives. Besides joining a new institution, they usually don't know anyone there. As concluded by Jacinto (2015), first-year students and final-year students have contrary opinions on initiation rituals, the former expressing a negative view of them while the latter do not. This could show that participation in these rituals may be the result of a lack of other forms of integration. Many students are not only moving to a new institution and meeting new classmates and course mates, but in some cases, they are also moving to a new city. These students find themselves facing a situation along with a city that is unknown to them. This means that these new students are highly vulnerable, as they may fear not being accepted by the new community. On the other hand, older students, influenced by an academic spirit and tradition, namely, initiation practices, take advantage of the younger students' vulnerable position (Jacinto, 2015). However, it is important to mention that there are other forms of integration, such as the reception of students at the beginning of the academic year and the induction week. Depending on the position of the students, the

initiation rituals can represent an integration activity for new students in HEIs or encourage exactly the opposite, their segregation.

Based on the above, and since the practice is considered a transition ritual from secondary to higher education, it is important to analyse the participation of deaf students in initiation practices to higher education and the sign language interpreters' role in including them in this process.

THE INCLUSION OF DEAF STUDENTS IN HEIS

Integration into a HEI poses a wide range of challenges for new students, which are not overcome by simply following academic initiation rituals. In other words, these challenges are not limited to integration into a new institution and meeting new classmates. This is also important, but students must learn how to cope with new teachers, new teaching and learning methods, new forms of assessment and new schedules. In fact, one study found that time management, the relationship with teachers and the change of environment has the biggest impact on the successful transition of students to higher education (Gomes, Soto and Núñez, 2019).

Therefore, integration requires the ability to perform academic activities while involving the whole community (fellow students, teachers, and the surrounding environment). Everyone should cooperate from the beginning to create greater success in subsequent academic years (Bisol *et al.*, 2010), because transitioning from secondary to higher education is accompanied by a change of attitudes and feelings, instigated by the interaction with different environments, teachers, subjects, and forms of study (Gomes, Soto, and Núñez, 2019).

In this way, entering HEIs is a challenge to all students, and challenges related to integration can affect all of them. To learn and understand new information they need to overcome their deficits from previous academic experiences, such as language deficits, inadequate studying conditions, lack of logical abilities, reading and comprehension difficulties, problems with writing, and so on.

Inclusive education is a global imperative, based on the basic value that all students have equal educational rights, regardless of any differences or disabilities (UN, 2006). In the specific case of deaf students, those who attend bilingual schools tend to strongly identify with the deaf community, because they have experienced belonging relationships, which reflects an incontestable advancement in several domains (Bisol *et al.*, 2010).

Aprilia and Balqis (2018), focusing their attention on the use of the peer teaching method, found that the existence of peers in the learning environment contributed to an increase in the self-confidence of deaf students, suggesting that they develop their self-confidence in learning situations that involve peer acceptance. This study also revealed that when teachers allow it and understand that deaf students use the language which they feel most comfortable with, this contributes to a more dynamic learning process. It is important that teachers utilise total communication; they speak, sign, and write (Aprilia, and Balqis, 2018).

Nevertheless, according to Costa (2018), in a university context, the situation is different, and students have new information to absorb. University brings many challenges for all students

depending on how they function differently from students' previous experiences in education (Bisol *et al.*, 2010). Adapting to this new reality depends on different factors, including students' personalities, as well as environmental facilitators and barriers, such as the existence of formal and informal supports (services, resources, peers, and teachers).

Within this context, student integration must happen not only within the classroom, but also with the surrounding community, by providing circumstances that promote equal access to teaching/learning and to the social environment (Bell and Swart, 2018; Bisol *et al.*, 2010). However, social adjustment is reported as the main difficulty that deaf students experience at university, since they often face alienation and have different experiences from their peers (Marschark *et al.*, 2018). As a result, there is an increased likelihood that these students will experience feelings of isolation, loneliness and resentment that can be attributed to other peoples' lack of sign language abilities, lack of information about deaf values and culture, and negative attitudes, such as hostility noted in hearing peers.

Deaf students attending HEIs is often assumed as an accomplishment, not only for the students themselves but also for their families (Santos, 2014). Being able to overcome the obstacles, facing the demands of a culture that is not theirs, emphasises the importance of all types of support (Marconcin *et al.*, 2013).

THE PORTUGUESE SIGN LANGUAGE INTERPRETER

Within an inclusive society, all students have the right to be treated with respect and are encouraged to become independent, as well as to communicate in their language. With regard to Portugal, principles of inclusive education have been adopted according to Decree-Law No. 54/2018. This legislation establishes that "each student has the right to an inclusive education that fulfils their potential, expectations and needs within the scope of a common and plural educational project that provides everyone with participation and a sense of belonging in effective conditions of equality, thus contributing decisively to greater levels of social cohesion".

Nowadays, inclusive education also extends to higher education, where Portuguese sign language (*Língua Gestual Portuguesa*, LGP) interpreters must also be present. They act as mediators, bridging the communication gap between teachers and students, therefore there must be a collaboration between these professionals (Gonçalves, 2018). The work of the interpreters is essential in the teaching-learning process of deaf students. They not only play a crucial role in integrating a multidisciplinary educational team of various professionals, which is intended to cooperate (Gonçalves, 2018), but also in enabling the interaction of deaf students with their peers in higher education.

A recent case study revealed the experience of a deaf student who participated in initiation rituals at the start of university. The student referred to the academic initiation practices as very helpful, contributing to a very positive experience due to the creation of an environment where she established several friendships. The student added that she was considered equal to all the other students, which was an important empowerment mechanism for her (Esteves, 2014, p. 88). Nonetheless, she mentioned interaction with hearing peers as a major challenge.

For this reason, learning LGP is advocated, whether in primary, secondary, or higher education. According to the study by Pires (2015), which sought to verify whether hearing students learning LGP influences communication with deaf students and their consequent inclusion, this learning tool has a positive impact on the inclusion of deaf students and raises the non-deaf students' awareness of the importance of learning LGP. Learning it at all school levels creates a bilingual environment and improves the communication between hearing and deaf students (Pires, 2015). In addition, it stops the segregation of deaf students caused by the communication difficulties others have, as well as demonstrates the importance of diversifying the existing communication matrices, contesting the predominance of verbal/oral language (Rocha, 2012). This situation occurs with the great majority of deaf students being able to manage with a sign language interpreter's support from the very beginning of their studies. The sign language interpreter's role, regardless of the situation and context, is to facilitate communication between deaf people and the hearing community. In an academic environment, the sign language interpreter is crucial when they interact with hearing peers, and thus fosters social participation and relationships within their HEI (Berge and Ytterhus, 2015).

It is true that the number of deaf students attending higher education has been gradually increasing, but there is still a long way to go, denoting the lack of support for them to be successful (Freitas, 2021). According to Freitas (2021), despite the inclusive measures that HEI policies seek to implement, they are still unprepared to effectively include deaf students in the teaching-learning process. It is important to consider the inclusion of deaf students in broad terms. LGP interpreters are necessary to accompany deaf students in class and serve as a bridge between them and teachers, but it is equally important that they serve as a bridge between these students and their peers in general who can hear. In this way, we agree with Barbosa, Bandeira and Coelho (2017), when they state that the LGP interpreter is a mediator of communication between peers and the teacher in the classroom, that it is "important that the student feels included and integrated into the academic community, with the sign language interpreter guaranteeing the student's linguistic access to information, which is the first step of inclusion" (Barbosa, Bandeira and Coelho, 2017, p. 5).

Following the global imperative to implement inclusive education, in the last few years, the number of deaf students in HEIs has substantially increased. This progressive presence urges for sign language interpreters to be present in different academic contexts, including teaching/learning situations and social activities. This study analysed the participation of deaf students in academic initiation practices in HEIs and the role of the sign language interpreter in their inclusion.

METHOD

This study takes a qualitative approach in collecting data from a semi-structured interview that was carried out to understand the perspectives of deaf students regarding their involvement in the initiation rituals of HEIs and the role of the interpreters in this process.

PARTICIPANTS

Sixteen deaf students of HEIs in the Porto region participated in this study. They were aged 19 to 26, eleven were female students and five were male. Five students were attending their first year, three were in the second year and eight were in the third year. Eleven students had profound

hearing loss, two had severe hearing loss, one had moderate hearing loss, and two students did not provide information about their degree of hearing loss. Regarding hearing aids, four used a unilateral cochlear implant with a hearing aid, four had only hearing aids, one had only a cochlear implant, and five did not use any hearing aid. To communicate, seven students used both Portuguese sign language and spoken language, six only used spoken language, two only used Portuguese sign language, and one used written language. All participants were involved in the initiation rituals and the majority required sign language.

DATA COLLECTION

Individual interviews were conducted to gather qualitative data from students about their perspective, their perception, and the meaning of their experience (Cohen *et al.*, 2007), allowing them "to express themselves and voice their thoughts and feelings" (Berg, 2007, p. 76). A semi-structured interview was created with specific topics to guide the data collection process.

Below we present some of the questions in the guide that concern the object of our analysis.

1. What does the initiation practice mean to you?

2. When you entered higher education, were you approached to participate in the initiation practice?

  2.1. If yes, how were you approached?

  2.2. If not, did you feel discriminated against? Why?

3. Do you consider the presence of a LGP interpreter in the initiation necessary? At all times?

4. To what extent is the LGP interpreter a facilitator of your inclusion in academia?

5. To what extent does being deaf affect the initiation experience?

6. What are the advantages and disadvantages of participating in the initiation practice?

7. Do you identify with the initiation practice of the institution you attend?

8. How do you usually establish communication with others?

9. Did the relationship you had with your mentor[1] help you feel better integrated? (Answer only if you participated in the initiation practice.)

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[1] In the Portuguese academic tradition, particularly in the initiation tradition, there is usually a student who acts as a mentor, called *madrinha/padrinho*. It is normally someone to whom the new student relates in terms of personality or with whom they build a very good relationship during the first year. This mentor is supposed to help them whenever they can during their journey in higher education.

INFORMED CONSENT

The content analysis was based on transcribed interviews, to develop categories and subcategories based on the participants' narratives and current research. Conducting research always implies that ethical aspects need to be considered. It is important to note that all students were adults, and during their participation in the study, respect for their anonymity, data confidentiality, as well as the sole and exclusive use of the information provided by them for the present study was ensured. Their voluntary participation in the study was also ensured, and they were informed that they could withdraw from participating at any time if they wished to do so, without any consequences or repercussions for them.

ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Participants gave consent prior to each interview, having been assured of data confidentiality and anonymity. The sixteen interviews were conducted in Portuguese sign language and video recorded for later transcription. All linguistic accessibility needs were addressed and met throughout the study by holding debriefing sessions, led by the first author of the study, who is fluent in sign language.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The results were presented according to three main topics, each one covering the respective categories and subcategories. The subcategories that emerged are summarised in table 1 below.

ACADEMIC INITIATION RITUALS

> *Gathering knowledge about academic culture: traditions and rules*

Participants shared the perspective that initiation rituals are a way of learning about the culture of the higher education institution. They particularly referenced the idea of relating to each other respecting a hierarchical organisation, in which younger students should obey their elders, who must convey the values of academic life. Here are some statements that confirm this.

> "When younger students enter higher education, older ones teach them about order and help them to integrate, because when they go to university, they feel lonely, and initiation rituals aim to integrate younger students." (P1)

> "(…) the elders teach what order means." (P7)

> "Older students who teach the foundations and traditions to new students transmit respect and obedience, so that in the future they can continue to convey these values." (P11)

Students also mentioned uniforms and customs used in Portugal during initiation practices in a traditional university.

> "People in university uniforms can be seen around campus." (P2)

> "People wearing academic attire (…) who are new at the university." (P13)

Table 1. *Main topics and respective categories and subcategories*

Main topic	Category	Subcategories
1 – Academic initiation rituals	- Knowing the academic culture: traditions and rules	*- Gathering knowledge about academic culture: traditions and rules*
2 – Participation and communication in academic initiation rituals	- Deaf students relate to initiation rituals applied in institutions - Strategies and types of communication - Relationships with hierarchical superiors and hearing peers - Advantages and disadvantages of initiation rituals	*- Participation and communication in academic initiation rituals* *- Communication strategies* *- Relationship with others: older students and peers* *- Participation equality in initiation rituals* *- The relationship between hierarchical members and deaf students requires a change* *- Advantages and disadvantages of initiation rituals*
3 – Portuguese sign language interpreter	- Portuguese sign language interpreter as a facilitator of integration	*- The role of the Portuguese sign language interpreter as a facilitator*

Initiation rituals were considered by most participants as a practice that is intended to promote a positive experience related to social integration. Therefore, participants considered initiation rituals as a way of supporting students in their participation in university activities and routines, as well as encouraging the development of friendships.

"From what I've heard, initiation rituals can provide support to students." (P3)

"It's a way of learning new things and participating in many activities." (P4)

"It's a way of getting to know your classmates and getting closer to other students." (P5)

"When the initiation rituals finish, those two groups (younger and older students) can get along, which facilitates integration." (P1)

These aspects are important for deaf students who are just starting a new phase in their academic life. According to the students who participated in initiation events, they were integrated into their studies and expanded their circle of friends in the HEI. One participant referred to the initiation rituals as an opportunity to socialise and have fun, on top of the aspects already mentioned.

"Besides feeling included, it is also a way of having fun…" (P1)

PARTICIPATION AND COMMUNICATION IN ACADEMIC INITIATION RITUALS

The second main topic has four categories. The first one aims to find out if students can relate to the initiation rituals performed at the institution they attended. Out of 14 responses, eight participants found issues with the rules applied at their institution:

- the rituals are performed daily and become tiring ("… the initiation rituals are performed on a daily basis, it gets tiring." (P1));
- they can take place at night ("… sometimes it is at night, which is complicated for me." (P2));
- participation in the rituals implies less study time and, in some cases, also influences it ("As I live far away, I wouldn't have much time to study. I would rather concentrate on my studies, as my aim is to finish my studies without postponing them." (P8)).

Six participants felt intrigued by the initiation rituals of their institution. Despite not feeling motivated to join in themselves, they felt they were "lighter and less violent" (P11).

Based on what they had heard, many participants stated that they didn't feel motivated or able to take part. Although there are positive aspects, there are also negative aspects, such as feeling humiliated with things they are encouraged to do.

"I've seen negative and positive things in the initiation practices of this university. Some things are funny, but others are horrible. I'm intrigued by them and would be interested in taking part, but then I think to myself 'what if they hurt me?' Being deaf could make it even worse, so I prefer to keep myself safe." (P8).

This shows that, despite recognising important aspects such as integration in the academic environment and getting to know others, perceptions regarding some of the practices involved are rather negative. These perceptions are spread by the media, as well as testimony of other students.

Some students admit that they observe initiation rituals from the outside but do not participate or understand the logic of these practices.

"Younger students are forced to wear a university t-shirt and cardboard ears, and have names written on their t-shirts. But I really don't understand the point." (P12)

"I don't know what the initiation rituals are for." (P10)

However, one student who participated in initiation rituals claimed that these practices facilitate social integration and avoid the isolation that can particularly affect deaf students.

"Initiation rituals are very important because I'm deaf, and when I joined university, I was the only deaf person there (…) and it helped me meet people and make friends. These new people helped me in classes. My classmates supported me because they can hear and have more access to information." (P9)

The fact that some students did not relate to initiation rituals may stem from the knowledge they have about these practices based on the information they receive, whether from the media or the testimony of other students.

"After finding out about some challenges given to students, I don't identify with it." (P6)

"I don't know if it's true or not, but I've heard that if you give up on initiation rituals you have to give up on university too and that is a huge drawback." (P10)

"I've heard plenty of stories related to initiation rituals… I don't know if they are true or not." (P2)

Even though initiation rituals can be presented and used to welcome and integrate new students, these organised activities cannot always be described as something that promotes personal development, contributes to intellectual curiosity and socialisation, nor identity construction (Caldeira *et al.*, 2015). As mentioned earlier, the initiation rituals for academic life are a way of welcoming new students, but sometimes there is abuse of the students' authority. This deviation, particularly by older students, does not necessarily lead to more fun. It establishes a dynamic that causes discomfort among students and does not contribute to their sense of inclusion.

COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES

Students' participation in initiation rituals is often prompted by older students as the new students arrive at university. In our sample, eight of the sixteen participants were approached by members of the university's rituals committee or peers they already knew. Seven participants stated that no one invited them to participate, and one did not answer.

Regarding the communication strategies used, three participants described older students approaching them using Portuguese sign language. This fact demonstrates the importance of teaching LGP at various levels of education, as it enables communication between hearing students and deaf students and makes the latter feel integrated as members of the community.

Two participants were asked to look at older students speaking slowly so that they would be able to lip-read; one participant was approached by older students using the Portuguese sign language interpretation service, and the other two were approached through writing and gesture or mime, which are other communication strategies that can help integrate deaf people into academic rituals.

Out of a total of sixteen students, nine were approached to participate in initiation rituals, but only seven took part in them. These seven students all reported lip-reading as the most used communication strategy. They explained that to do so, they had to maintain visual contact with older students, and they were positioned in the front row.

"As I'm deaf, I could look straight ahead (…) It was necessary to change a lot of things, but it had already been decided on the 'veterans' (older students) council that people with special needs, in wheelchairs, deaf, autistic, etc. always had to occupy the front row." (P4)

"I can look straight at the older students and try to understand some things." (P5)

The use of body language, gestures and written text were also mentioned as alternative communication strategies when lip-reading did not work.

"Sometimes older students come up to me trying to explain what is going on. If I don't understand, they write it down on paper or a mobile phone." (P16)

"In my case, I read lips or have to use mime, which is something I have done since I was a little girl." (P8)

Although these communication strategies were used to integrate students into a 'new family', participants would rather communicate in sign language.

"I would love it if I could use Portuguese sign language, but I know it's difficult (…) but it would be great if everyone knew basic Portuguese sign language. It would be a dream." (P8)

Out of the seven students who were not approached to participate in the initiation rituals, two felt negatively about the way they were received and welcomed. One of the students emphasised that he was not motivated to participate, claiming it was a form of discrimination (P1) and another was never approached to participate despite wanting to participate (P10).

"I felt sad because no one at university motivated me to participate in initiation rituals. I felt there was no motivation nor interest, and I think they forget, and that is discrimination." (P1)

"When I joined university, I thought people could think 'Look, there's a new student, let's go talk to her', but that never happened, and I thought it was weird." (P10)

Studies have shown that academic success is determined by students' experiences in their first year. To help overcome students' difficulties in adapting, institutions should provide knowledge at the same level as for hearing students (Bisol *et al.*, 2010). As stated by Ferreira *et al.* (2001), this period also depends on the way the student faces that development stage depending on their personality, abilities, and life history. The number of deaf students in HEIs is very low and they often lack support (Bell and Swart, 2018). Some studies have reported a gap in academic achievement between students who can hear and those with hearing impairments (e.g., Bell and Swart, 2018; Marschark, 2006).

RELATIONSHIP WITH OTHERS: OLDER STUDENTS AND PEERS

As previously mentioned, in many universities, the relationships between younger and older students are based on hierarchical principles of academic initiation rituals. Generally, participants considered the existence of a mentor to be an important aspect of the integration process. However, they pointed out that the lack of flexibility in choosing an academic mentor hindered the integration process.

"I couldn't ask for the mentor I wanted." (P4)

"I had a mentor who was attending the Portuguese sign language course. I chose her because of her studies, so she could give me more information and because she could communicate with me in Portuguese sign language, but she didn't encourage me to participate in initiation rituals that much." (P1)

The use of two distinct languages creates a communication gap between deaf students and older students and peers in the absence of an interpreter.

In general, participants identified factors that could be easily overcome by those who manage the committee of initiation rituals, who should try to understand how deaf people feel and reflect on solutions to integrate them. According to the participants, older students should adapt themselves and work to influence other students, both older and younger. Learning sign language was mentioned as a strategy that should be implemented and used among students in HEIs to facilitate the integration of deaf students.

"(...) to understand the identity, language and culture of the deaf community." (P5)

"If they had wanted, they could have asked me to teach them." (P3)

"It is a way for hearing people to feel more connected to deaf people, to know the deaf community better." (P7)

Speaking the same language is a central issue.

"I had a university classmate with profound deafness who participated in initiation rituals at the same time as me. I continued but she gave up due to those barriers..." (P4)

It seems that the common issue throughout this discussion was that hearing people lack information about deaf people, including sign language, culture, and identity. This results in participants experiencing many obstacles and having to develop communication strategies, which however do not guarantee the establishment of relationships with fellow students. This barrier influences whether students accept and participate in initiation rituals or withdraw from them.

"I feel deaf people are forgotten about. In my case, I felt left out because they forgot to adapt initiation rituals." (P9)

"I gave up initiation because I asked to attend initiation rituals with others on the Portuguese sign language course, not people on my own course, because it would make it easier for me to communicate, but my request was denied. I gave up because I felt discriminated against. Portuguese sign language is my language." (P1)

While some feel they can't keep up, others were persistent.

"I gave up and left." (P12)

"I only participated in initiation rituals for two days." (P13)

"In the beginning, it was very difficult because I didn't know my coursemates (...) but then in class I was able to make friends with them because I already knew them from the

initiation rituals. And about a month later, I knew people better, I went to dinner parties where they wrote down everything so I could understand." (P15)

"I was able to overcome things because I asked my classmates." (P4)

Deaf students may accept these difficulties as a natural part of the initiation process. One participant referred to the communication constraints as a natural event in initiation rituals.

"Academic initiation rituals are between older students, called 'doctors', and younger students." (P5)

PARTICIPATION EQUALITY IN INITIATION RITUALS

Although initiation rituals are intended to help new students adapt into HEIs, this goal is not always achieved. The line between promoting social integration and causing humiliation can be blurred in initiation rituals (Estanque, 2017), especially for students with an impairment or disability.

"'Doctors' should have more respect. I was discriminated against because he didn't believe that I was deaf and then made fun of me." (P4)

"There were times when we had to sing, everybody was singing, and I was silent, I did nothing. I tried to ask if I could follow the songs in sign language, but they said it was pointless because nobody would understand anything, and I felt discriminated against." (P1)

One of the rules of the rituals is that new students are not allowed to look directly at the older students ('doctors'). This is a major communication constraint for deaf students.

"I would have to look at their faces, not down, as hearing people do. If they forced me to look down, I would feel discriminated against because I can't hear." (P12)

"I saw a deaf student in initiation rituals who was not allowed to look at the ritual leaders. Some students don't mind being looked at, but others do. It depends on how sensitive and understanding they are." (P8)

Two participants suggested that the deaf community should meet and discuss with universities how best to promote accessibility and participation in all university activities, including initiation rituals. This would result in adapting the environment to students and not the other way around.

"I wanted initiation rituals to be the same for deaf people as for hearing people, but that doesn't happen, and I think they leave deaf students aside, and to me, that is discrimination. It is necessary to bring both communities together." (P10)

"I think deaf people could come together and discuss the best way to participate and adapt initiation rituals, then deliver a proposal to the university rituals committee... if people are receptive, they no longer discriminate against a deaf person because they're deaf... but I also think deaf people do nothing to change the situation..." (P8)

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN HIERARCHICAL MEMBERS AND DEAF STUDENTS REQUIRES A CHANGE

Realising that there is still much to do, participants call for those in charge to develop a greater understanding to avoid situations that may cause humiliation. The individual experience of each student is affected by the conditions at a HEI. These experiences are different because realities are different. For instance, different courses attended by deaf people have different procedures that strictly change the communication between students during academic initiation rituals. It is necessary to reflect on the ultimate goal of academic traditions. Rules must be adapted to deaf students so that they can participate equally with hearing peers. The deaf community is a minority community that is increasingly accessing HEIs, and this indicates future changes in academic initiation rituals. We are currently witnessing a period of change. The greater the number of deaf students participating in initiation rituals, the more institutions will be faced with the need to adapt.

To ensure ideal socialisation conditions for deaf students in HEIs, institutions must acknowledge factors that affect their full integration and promote authentic and effective communication strategies to guarantee the same access rights. In addition, the process of integrating deaf students, and hearing students, does not necessarily have to involve initiation practices. There are other practices within HEIs that are organised by interest or social groups, such as societies, like of theatre, robotics, math, and so on.

To overcome the gaps in deaf students' integration and participation in academic life, students, teachers, peers, and the community must work together from the beginning of higher education studies (Dinis and Almeida, 2005).

ADVANTAGES AND DISADVANTAGES OF INITIATION RITUALS

Initiation ceremonies, considered as customs, have some positive aspects, such as the opportunity to socialise and have fun. These events are organised by the students themselves and provide opportunities to better integrate into academic life. However, there are also disadvantages. Since initiation ritual committee members are mostly hearing students, practices are oriented to hearing students.

"(...) impossible for me to communicate in my language and so I don't join in." (P14)

In some situations, deaf students are even forced to take part in activities that are not suitable for them.

"(...) to sing, which is difficult for deaf people." (P7)

Students consider that there is still violence, although this happens on a smaller scale due to the changes that have been made to initiation rules.

"More first-year students are participating because initiation rituals are more light-hearted and less violent." (P11)

"(…) as a negative point, I would highlight the violence that initiation rituals involve." (P13)

"(...) over-the-top jokes and heavy consumption of alcohol." (P2)

Initiation rituals take place every day in some higher education institutions (P1, P13), reducing the amount of time students can dedicate to their studies and their personal life. This leads to students feeling less willing to participate or not taking part at all.

"It's tiring." (P1)

"As a first-year student, I wasted a lot of time on initiation rituals, I didn't study enough, and that negatively impacted my studies. I gave up because I thought it was only once a week..." (P14)

"I was asked if I wanted to participate in the initiation rituals, but I said no. Personally, I need time to study (...) although I do think that it is a positive thing to do." (P3)

The study participants expressed that the fact that initiation rituals take time from their personal activities and can involve excessive alcohol consumption, and sometimes violence, makes them less appealing. Furthermore, deaf students face difficulties regarding communication/language, which negatively affect their experience. The limited use of communication in LGP means these students cannot fully experience the initiation rituals unless conditions are adapted to better suit their needs.

This raises the question of whether deaf students should adapt to the system, or the institutions should adapt to them. Currently, there are no appropriate responses for these students. Abreu (2013), paraphrasing Fernandes and Almeida (2007), states that HEIs have a responsibility to develop favourable welcome conditions for students with special needs, considering their specific needs and inclusion concepts which should also be extended to the social level.

The role of the Portuguese sign language interpreter as a facilitator

The third main topic refers to the relevance of the Portuguese sign language interpreter as an integration facilitator, highlighting their importance in academic initiation rituals. Having a Portuguese sign language interpreter present in HEIs is regarded as positive by most of the participants because it allows deaf students to access information around them.

"The presence of interpreters in higher education is very positive, both in and out of classes, because it guarantees access to communication." (P1)

"(…) he [the sign language interpreter] could help promote students' integration, but hearing classmates can also have this role… their role in supporting inclusion, I think, depends on each interpreter, and also on the classmates." (P13)

To ensure that deaf students can participate in social contexts, a Portuguese sign language interpreter facilitates communication with hearing individuals, working in different contexts and adapting situations and characteristics to enable the deaf community to understand.

"I have low vision, so I needed an interpreter to support me and explain initiation rituals to me. An adaptation was needed... I needed to be accompanied by an interpreter during initiation rituals." (P2)

Thirteen participants considered the presence of a Portuguese sign language interpreter indispensable, acknowledging that they should be there in relevant situations, such as meetings, auditorium sessions, 'baptism' ceremonies and other rituals.

"(...) because at those times, there are a lot of people, so deaf students miss information." (P14)

"I think the presence of an interpreter is important when 'veterans' are speaking, or at the baptism ceremony, because in my case, I had no interpretation and I felt sad because I knew important things were being said and I didn't understand anything." (P1)

"If older students adapted the initiation rituals, the presence of an interpreter would not be necessary." (P14)

"I would like to be like hearing students and wear an academic uniform, but adaptation is necessary, so deaf people can participate. That could be achieved through the presence of an interpreter." (P15)

From the analysis of the participants' comments, we can conclude that the interpreter facilitates access to communication.

The importance of having an interpreter in the classroom was affirmed by all participants. They recognised the dual role of the interpreters: they interpret but they also contribute to raising the community's awareness of deaf people's needs. Opinions were divided though regarding the inclusion of deaf students in academic social life. They found that it depends on the interpreter's personality (P9, P15). Some participants believed that the interpreter contributed to peers' awareness in some way.

"The interpreter also accompanies me in group projects, and it helps me feel more included in the group." (P12)

For three participants, the interpreter did not contribute to their inclusion. One of the participants stated the interpreter should not interfere with relationships between students, arguing that it is up to deaf students to establish their own friendships. Participants also mentioned that, not long ago, deaf students relied more on the help of interpreters, however, they need to be independent and include themselves in their community.

"Deaf people need to get used to the fact that society is mostly made up of hearing people. It is not the interpreter's responsibility to integrate and include deaf people in class." (P15)

"We, deaf people, should make a bigger effort to raise awareness among fellow students, so they can see our difficulties and understand our needs." (P8)

Three participants stated that they would prefer to have interpreters because they believe that initiation rituals have the same importance as classes. If possible, they would choose to have interpretation in all situations.

"An interpreter acts as a communication bridge. If there isn't one, then there will be barriers, and access to information will be lost, which would affect me." (P11)

"I think it is important for the interpreter to participate in initiation rituals with the deaf student and not only to translate in classes, because it is important that they know the deaf student very well." (P6)

"It is also important that the interpreter knows how to interpret in other contexts, such as healthcare, as this widens their knowledge of reality and increases their awareness, which contributes to the inclusion of deaf people." (P15)

"For me, it's the same as classes, these [initiation rituals] are moments when the interpreter should be present." (P12)

Formal support from interpreters in initiation rituals is not currently defined in HEIs. An interpretation service is not included even for events where an interpreter is crucial, such as the baptism ceremony, the awarding of insignias (*imposição de insígnias*), meetings with the academic mentor or academic committee, academic songs, and other activities. For deaf students, the important step in their academic life that is the start of university depends on the individual availability of an interpreter, which means their full access to the initiation rituals is not guaranteed.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

The last decade saw an increase in the number of deaf students entering HEIs, mostly due to political and social measures that were implemented to promote inclusive education (Anjos *et al.*, 2018; Freitas, 2021; Santos *et al.*, 2015). Although data are not yet available to assess the number of students with special educational needs (SEN) who enrolled in HEIs, specifically deaf students, the Directorate-General for Education and Science Statistics (DGEEC) reported that in the 2017/2018 academic year, 1644 students with SEN had enrolled in HEIs. Within this group, 91.5% enrolled in public education (n=1504) and 8.5% in private education (n=140) (DGEEC, 2018).

Initiation rituals as an academic tradition are recognised as an integration mechanism. Participants accepted the importance of initiation, although some interviewees were afraid they would not have enough time to dedicate to their studies, which influenced their decision not to take part in these activities. Deaf students who participated and experienced initiation rituals identified several constraints, which indicates that academic initiation practices are not adapted to the specific needs of deaf students, nor to the needs of the deaf community as a whole. HEIs are not fully aware of the need to adapt them, so that all students, regardless of their hearing ability, can fully participate and feel included at university.

In fact, participants reported that communication with others becomes a challenge in the absence of a sign language interpreter and affects how deaf students experience their academic environment. This, in turn, influences how they adapt to the institution and their peers. Some students found ways to deal with these difficulties, by using various communication strategies and

being resilient, thus influencing how they adapted. They became more independent and learnt to work around obstacles. However, other students chose not to participate in situations that made them feel excluded, discriminated against and/or inferior. On one hand, being in an environment where communication is carried out without a sign language interpreter requires a lot of effort from these students; on the other hand, the presence of an interpreter can interfere with relationships between newer and older students.

Some students suggested readjustments to initiation traditions and activities to overcome the difficulties they experienced. It is worth emphasising that, although some institutions are open to gradually make this change to include deaf students, others seem less so, which leads to students dropping out of initiation rituals. In this sense, intervention by the institution is considered fundamental to ensure equal educational opportunities and integration in the academic community.

From the participants' perspective, it is clear that their integration/adaptation to higher education is influenced by several factors, including personality (being self-sufficient and proactive, and having good time management skills), having the appropriate human resources (Portuguese sign language interpreter in initiation rituals), and the behaviour and attitudes of their peers (awareness of the deaf community). Despite reports of students taking the initiative to participate in initiation rituals and making every effort to be understood and to understand via various communication strategies, such as writing and lip-reading, it seems that there is a lack of institutional preparation to integrate students with different needs into initiation activities. A changing attitude towards a more inclusive model implies the availability of resources, such as catering for sign language interpreting services in the activities of the HEI, including initiation; organising support from hearing people who know Portuguese sign language; giving more information and spreading awareness about the deaf community; considering readjustments in initiation traditions and activities, so that all students, regardless of their needs, can enjoy the same experiences. It is vital to provide conditions that allow the full inclusion of deaf students into the academic environment. Since Portuguese sign language is the language of these students, it is essential for them to have an interpreter who facilitates communication in both educational situations and extracurricular activities they wish to participate in, thus minimising discrimination and promoting full inclusion.

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