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# ACCESSING HIGHER EDUCATION AFTER 23 YEARS OLD: OPPORTUNITIES AND MOTIVATIONS

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## Abstract

*This article reports a case study in a Portuguese public institution of higher education that aimed at characterizing the profile of the students that access the institution, through examinations for candidates aged 23 or over (M23 Access), focusing on the motivations for their entry and on their perspective of this type of access to higher education. This mixed method study used a questionnaire, answered by 180 former students. Acquisition of new knowledge, personal valorization and a professional change are among the most important reasons to access higher education. While analyzing the results, we are also able to discern the importance of implementing educational policies for adults, which, in the Portuguese case and regarding the promotion of learning opportunities for all, are still few and poorly disseminated.*

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## INGRESAR EN LA ENSEÑANZA SUPERIOR DESPUÉS DE LOS 23 AÑOS: OPORTUNIDADES Y MOTIVACIONES

### Resumen

*El artículo tiene como objetivo presentar un estudio de caso, aplicado a una institución pública portuguesa de educación superior, que tuvo la intención de caracterizar a los estudiantes que ingresaron a esta institución a partir de la prueba de acceso a mayores de 23 años, conocer las razones de su ingreso, así como su perspectiva sobre esta forma de acceso a la enseñanza superior. Se realizó un estudio, de enfoque mixto, concretado a través de una encuesta por cuestionario respondida por 180 exestudiantes. La adquisición de nuevos conocimientos, la valorización personal y el cambio profesional son los motivos más considerados para el acceso a la enseñanza superior. La lectura de datos permite poner de relieve la importancia de las políticas de educación para adultos, que, en el caso portugués, son todavía escasas y localizadas, para la promoción de oportunidades de aprendizaje para todos.*

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## ACCÉDER À L'ENSEIGNEMENT SUPÉRIEUR APRÈS L'ÂGE DE 23 ANS: OPPORTUNITÉS ET MOTIVATIONS

### Résumé

*L'article présente une étude de cas menée, dans une institution publique portugaise d'enseignement supérieur. Son objectif était de caractériser les étudiants qui ont accédé à cette institution par le biais d'un examen d'admission réservé aux plus de 23 ans et de connaître leur motivation, tout comme leur point de vue concernant ce type d'accès. Cette étude a utilisé une approche mixte, ayant recours à une enquête par questionnaire répondue par 180 anciens étudiants. L'acquisition de nouvelles connaissances, la valorisation personnelle et les changements professionnels ont été les raisons les plus envisagées pour l'accès à l'enseignement supérieur. L'interprétation des données a permis de souligner l'importance des politiques d'éducation destinées aux adultes, qui, au Portugal, sont encore rares et clairsemées, pour promouvoir les opportunités d'apprentissage pour tous.*

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## INGRESSAR NO ENSINO SUPERIOR DEPOIS DOS 23 ANOS: OPORTUNIDADES E MOTIVAÇÕES

### Resumo

*O artigo pretende apresentar um estudo de caso, aplicado numa instituição pública portuguesa de ensino superior, que teve a intenção de caracterizar os estudantes que ingressaram nessa instituição a partir da prova de acesso para maiores de 23 anos, conhecer os motivos para o seu ingresso, bem como a sua perspetiva sobre esta forma de acesso ao ensino superior. Foi realizado um estudo de abordagem mista concretizado através de um inquérito por questionário respondido por 180 ex-estudantes. A aquisição de novos conhecimentos, a valorização pessoal e a mudança profissional são os motivos mais considerados para o acesso ao ensino superior. A leitura dos dados permite destacar a importância das políticas educativas para adultos, que, no caso português, são ainda escassas e localizadas, para a promoção de oportunidades de aprendizagem para todos.*

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**A**T THE TURN OF THE 20<sup>TH</sup> TO THE 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY, THE PROMOTION OF LIFELONG LEARNING, formally signed and encouraged in the discourse and documents of the European Union (EU), as if it were a “cure” for all the problems of society, has marked the political orientations of the various European countries in general, and of Portugal in particular.

The Portuguese higher education policy considers that, besides being a system for the masses, higher education should also be diversified, both in terms of educational institutions and educational fields, as well as in terms of profile of students and candidates. Based on a discourse and on an understanding, with a strong external influence, such policy preconizes that all individuals should have access to lifelong learning and creates conditions for replacing the *ad hoc* examination, Extraordinary Examination for Assessing Capabilities of Accessing Higher Education Degrees (EEACAES – Exame Extraordinário da Avaliação de Capacidades para Acesso ao Ensino Superior) for individuals over 25 years of age who do not hold a higher education degree but who completed upper secondary education (ISCED 3),<sup>1</sup> through an examination for “Over 23 year-old individuals” (M23 – Maiores de 23 anos – Specially Adequate Tests to Evaluate the capability

<sup>1</sup> Translator's note: Considering the International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED), upper secondary education, or ISCED 3, is the level attended by students aged 15 to 17 years, when there is no age-grade distortion.

of individuals over 23 years of age to attend higher education), as stated on the Decree-Law number 64/2006, of March 21st.

Hence, this and other measures aim to promote the participation of non-traditional candidates in lifelong learning activities, stimulating the engagement of citizens.

## THE CONTEXT OF EDUCATIONAL POLICIES IN PORTUGUESE HIGHER EDUCATION

Before we direct attention to the changes that Decree-Law 64/2006, of March 21, introduced in the Portuguese higher education system, we need to look at the previous educational policies to understand the current ones.

Education in Portugal developed from a higher education system for the elite to a system directed to the masses. This change, although phased, took place in the last three decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and was carried out in three stages: in the sixties and until 1976, the higher education system expanded; from 1977 to 1986, during the *numerus clausus* phase, the number of students that accessed the higher education system was limited; from 1987 until the late nineties, education was massified through the implementation of a General Access Examination (PGA – Prova Geral de Acesso), which was short lived, and the revocation of the minimum grade system, which was restored in the following years.

These changes, at the end of the twentieth century and the beginning of this one, should be taken into consideration in the light of the international context that sought to establish a “European Higher Education Area”, as this was one of the objectives of the so-called Bologna Process. Increasing competitiveness, mobility (internationalization) and employability were the central objectives of the Bologna Declaration signed by 29 European countries in 1999.

Compliance to the Process resulted into a new HE organizational model: 3 levels of study; the implementation of a comparable and transferable system of credits (European Credit Transfer System – ECTS) and, among others, the recognition of experiences acquired outside the formal education system.

Along with these three phases, we can identify a fourth one, which started in 2005/06 and has sought not only to broaden but also to diversify the educational offer, the public and inclusive nature of the institutions themselves (BARROS; LOPES, 2015).

The Portuguese higher education system went from access restricted to a small group of individuals, who were characterized by their social “belonging”, age and gender, to opening its doors, welcoming individuals from different social classes, from various paths of life and with lower schooling levels.

The Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development – OECD (2007<sup>2</sup>, cit in SEIXAS, 2010) highlights this transition and expansion of the

Portuguese higher education system at the end of the previous century. In the 1970s only four public universities were members of the higher education system located in the districts of Coimbra, Lisbon and Oporto. Over the past 20 years, this network has spread throughout all districts and autonomous regions of Portugal.

This exponential growth was also reflected in the number of students enrolled in higher education, which were about 50 thousand in the academic year 1970/71, and about 158 thousand students in the 1990/91 school year. Moreover, the growth trend continued until 2003, when the number of enrollments reached 400 thousand. There was a small retraction in the 2016/17 school year, when enrollment dropped to 360 thousand students (DGEEC, 2017a).

Despite the country's significant effort, this positive trend is not synonymous with a higher rate of active/employed graduates when compared to the European average; rather it is a recognition that the government must continue to make educational policies a priority.

## THE M23 MEASURE

Since 2005, Portugal has sought to introduce some changes in the higher education system, which were based on a lifelong learning approach. To this end, it encouraged the entry of “new public”, namely through the creation of alternative access routes.

Based on this understanding, in 2006 the Program of the XVII Portuguese Constitutional Government established the conditions to replace the “ad hoc exam” by an examination for those aged over 23 years, which assessed their capacity to attend a higher education program, with or without having completed secondary education (BEATO, 2014; LOPES; 2014; BARROS; LOPES, 2015).

The M23 measure, commonly referred to as “M23 examinations”, was developed to promote lifelong learning opportunities for adults who were detached from the education system (Decree-Law 64/2006). M23 examinations include the assessment of knowledge and skills, based on theoretical tests (general and specific knowledge) as well as practical tests, such as the evaluation of the candidate's curriculum vitae and motivation through an interview. These examinations distinguish between candidates who have completed upper secondary education (ISCED 3) (for whom a specific knowledge test will be applied, in the area corresponding to the degree they wish to apply for), and candidates who do not hold a secondary education diploma or have not completed their secondary education. In this case, candidates have to take a general knowledge eliminatory examination.

Some institutions in Portugal have developed preparatory courses (with tuition fees), for the achievement of the general and specific knowledge examinations.

These examinations, designed to evaluate the knowledge and skills of individuals with irregular or incomplete school paths, determine who can apply to higher education through the “Special Access Regime”.

As stated by Barros (2011, 2013), this measure introduced a number of changes in the Portuguese higher education institutions, such as an increase in “new public”, the so-called non-traditional adult students (CORREIA; MESQUITA, 2006), who introduced greater heterogeneity in student composition regarding social background, age, life experience, qualification, among others (LOPES, 2014).

The M23 measure was first applied in the academic year 2006-2007 and has remained until today (2018), representing from 6 to 10% of the students enrolled in the first year and for the first time in public higher education, as can be seen on Table 1. The data also shows that, contrary to the increase in enrollment in the first years, since the academic year 2012-2013 there has been a decrease in enrollment, a trend similar to that of the general access regime. This is associated with a lower birth rate, which results in fewer young people, and simultaneously with an economic and emigration crisis that may justify the decline of non-traditional students in higher education. Therefore, in accordance with what Lopes and Barros (2016, p. 92) suggest, we can conclude that “these statistical data reflect a social and demographic conjuncture which has an impact on the panorama of higher education”.<sup>3</sup>

**TABLE 1**  
**NUMBER OF STUDENTS ENROLLED IN PUBLIC HE IN THE 1ST YEAR, FOR THE FIRST TIME, THROUGH M23 EXAMINATIONS FROM 2006 TO 2014**

ACADEMIC YEAR	GENERAL REGIME	OVER 23	% M23
2006-2007	51,218	4,257	8.3
2007-2008	59,354	6,039	10.2
2008-2009	60,290	5,373	8.9
2009-2010	60,827	4,960	8.2
2010-2011	63,915	5,520	8.6
2011-2012	59,426	6,142	10.3
2012-2013	54,068	4,068	7.5
2013-2014	52,101	3,363	6.5
2014-2015	51,466	4,749	9.2
2015-2016	51,171	4,594	8.9
2016-2017	51,348	4772	9.2

Source: DGEEC (2017b).

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This case study has sought to have a careful, particular and in-depth look at a specific reality, with impact and relevance in a particular educational context (SAUNDERS; LEWIS; THORNHILL, 2012; YIN, 2014) – Instituto Politécnico de Leiria

<sup>3</sup> In Portuguese: “estes dados estatísticos traduzem uma conjuntura sociodemográfica que impacta no panorama do ensino superior”.

(IPLeia – Leiria Polytechnic Institute). With a quantitative methodology, the study used a systematic process of collecting observable and quantifiable data to develop and validate knowledge (FORTIN; VISSANDJÉE; CÔTE, 2009). Therefore, this research assumes that the vast majority of the information collected can be classified and translated numerically (VILELAS, 2009), although it is possible to include more descriptive and textual data, that is, with a focus on the interpretation of its content.

Adopting a quantitative method and resorting to the qualitative one, this study defined its research question in the following way: What are the reasons and perceptions of IPLeia graduates about their entry into higher education through M23 examinations?

In order to clarify and answer the central question, we defined objectives which served as a motto for the actions developed during the study and for the expected results (RAYMOND; CAMPENHOUDT, 2005).

In this regard, based on the contextualization of M23 measure in Portuguese higher education, we considered the following objectives:

- To analyze the students' school path prior to their entry into IPLeia through M23 examinations;
- To characterize the reasons that led the students who entered IPLeia through M23 examinations to choose a certain academic course;
- To find out whether, after completing the degree at IPLeia, students would apply again through M23 examinations.

## RESEARCH SETTING AND PARTICIPANTS

Since 2008, IPLeia has provided students over 23 years old with the possibility to enter higher education courses through M23 examinations.

Recognizing the relevance of analyzing the motivations and perceptions of graduates and the courses they chose, we selected students who entered IPLeia through M23 examinations from 2008/09 to 2013/14.

Table 2 summarizes the student population selected, highlighting students with electronic addresses in the database, through which we made contact.

**TABLE 2**  
**IPLERIA GRADUATES WHO ENTERED THROUGH M23 EXAMINATIONS**

ACADEMIC YEAR	TOTAL OF GRADUATES	TOTAL OF GRADUATES WITH EMAIL
2008/2009	32	19
2009/2010	86	34
2010/2011	156	110
2011/2012	157	128
2012/2013	127	118
2013/2014	138	128
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>696</b>	<b>556</b>

Source: Authors' elaboration.

Of the 696 students identified, 556 were contacted by an electronic message. The participants were chosen for convenience, that is, in a non-random way, and are part of the elements that comprise the study universe (FORTIN, 2009; PRODANOV; FREITAS, 2013), which is represented here by IPLeria graduates in higher education, between 2008 and 2013, who entered IPLeria through M23 examinations and who had authorized the institution's academic services to use their email.

The message was sent on June 29, 2016, contained a brief description of the study and its objectives, and ensured participants' anonymity and confidentiality. The email included an access link to an electronic questionnaire to be answered by July 15, 2016. Up to that date, 117 responses were obtained.

It should be noted that many of the emails sent were not actually delivered to their recipients. It is assumed that the time lag between when participants enrolled at IPLeria (and filled out the form with their personal data) and the time the questionnaire was sent resulted in many of the e-mail addresses having been deactivated or changed.

Given the small number of responses obtained in the first phase, a second email was sent on July 21st, requesting a response by July 31st and clearly stating "If you have already answered the questionnaire, please ignore this message" in order to avoid repeated answers.

In this second mailing, an additional 64 responses were obtained, which means the total number of questionnaires completed was 181. Of those, 180 were validated; one was considered null due to inadequate information.

## DATA COLLECTION INSTRUMENT AND PROCEDURES

We used a questionnaire survey for our data collection, since the number of participants did not allow for personalized interviews. We considered that a questionnaire survey could adequately substitute the personalized interviews without jeopardizing the validity of the facts in question (COUTINHO, 2018).

The questionnaire was constructed according to our theoretical framework. It consisted of systematically and carefully prepared questions of various types.



The questions were grouped into four major sections, in order to interconnect questions of the same themes/areas. In the first section, general questions allowed for the characterization of the participants and asked for simple answers related to concrete subjects (PARDAL; LOPES, 2011): age, gender, nationality, place of residence, and number of people in the household. The second section of the survey aimed to characterize the participants' school path before entering higher education, and was followed by a third section, whose objective was to collect data on the bachelor's degree attended by the respondents at IPEiria. Associated with the academic course is inevitably the professional path, established through the questions in the fourth section of the questionnaire, which allows the characterization of the professional activity before and after completing the teacher education program.<sup>4</sup>

After the four sections were created, the questionnaire was validated by specialized technicians, namely by a specialist in the subject (content validation) and by a specialist in the construction of questionnaires (apparent validation), in order to ensure that the questions were adequate for the study's content objectives. Taking into consideration the suggestions of the specialists, we made some changes in the initial questionnaire, and proceeded to a pre-test phase. A pilot test was then applied to two people who had the characteristics of the participants, in order to assess the effectiveness and relevance of the survey instrument: we evaluated question comprehension and the type of responses requested (FORTIN, 2009). No additional changes were made since the questionnaire was well accepted and understood in the pilot test.

The questionnaire was then sent to participants in digital format, requesting an on-line response. This methodology seemed to be the best to deliver the survey to the graduates so that they could collaborate in a faster and simpler way, considering the fact that these participants were no longer IPEiria students and, in many cases, had moved abroad or no longer lived at the same address.

## DATA ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION OF RESULTS

The data presented and discussed in this article is focused on the first sections of the questionnaire, that is, on the identification and characterization of their level of education before joining IPEiria and on the course of their 1st cycle of higher education (undergraduate course). We also aimed not only to know the motivations for respondents to go back to school but also to learn whether the option taken then would be assumed again as an added value for each of them.

In sum, 180 individuals participated, of which 179 are Portuguese and one is French. Of the total, 97 were female and 83 were male, which shows, as Monteiro, Barros and Moreira (2015) suggest, that the target audience of the M23 examination is mostly women.

4 Translator's note: In Portuguese, licenciatura.

The subjects' ages range from 23 to 63 years. Most are aged 33 years to 42 years (86), followed by the group between 43 and 52 years old (52). Twenty-six are aged 23 to 32 years and 15 are 53 to 62 years old. One respondent selected the "other" option, indicating that he is 63 years old.

Table 1 has data on respondents' place of residence, most of whom (130) live in Leiria district/region. If we consider that the five schools of IPLeiria are located in three cities of the District (Leiria, Caldas da Rainha, and Peniche), this data indicates that IPLeiria recruits mostly population in its geographic proximity.

**TABLE 3**  
**PLACE OF RESIDENCE OF THE RESPONDENTS**

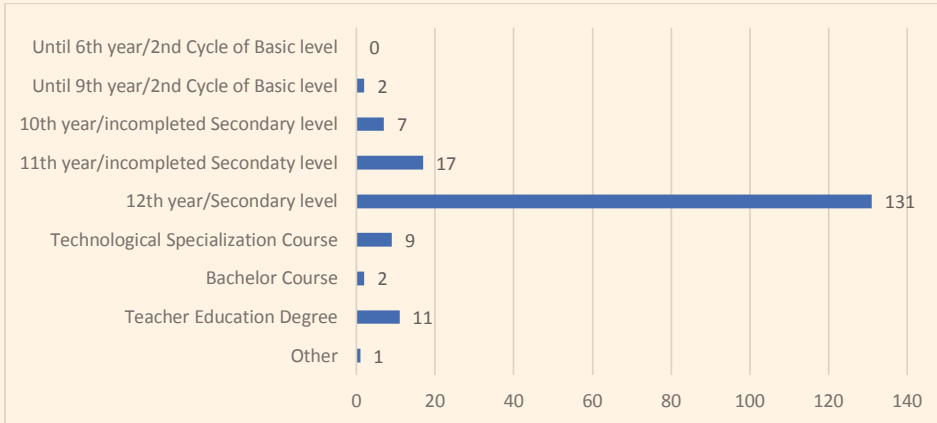
PLACE	N
Aveiro	1
Coimbra	5
Guarda	1
Leiria	130
Lisboa	19
Porto	1
Região Autónoma: Madeira	1
Santarém	17
Setúbal	3
Viana do Castelo	1
Vila Real	1

Source: Authors' elaboration.

Despite the supremacy of Leiria city, the data in this Table also shows the interest of students coming from other regions of the country, namely from districts that have other polytechnic higher education institutions, which corroborates the relevance of IPLeiria in the national panorama, the third largest polytechnic institute in the country (MANGAS et al., 2017).

With regards to the education level before entering an IPLeiria course through M23 examinations, only two respondents had not attended more than the 9th grade (3rd Cycle of Basic Education), and the majority (131) had the secondary school level (12th grade), as can be seen in Graph 1.

**GRAPH 1**  
**EDUCATION LEVEL OR EQUIVALENT**



Source: Authors' elaboration.

It should also be noted that 13 respondents had already attended higher education, of which two had not completed the course. Two held a bachelor's degree and the remaining subjects held a teacher education degree. One of the respondents chose "other", which indicates the attendance of an Adult Education and Training Course [Curso de Educação e Formação de Adultos (EFA)], but did not specify the level of education that this course corresponds to. The course could correspond, according to the National Agency for Qualification and Professional Education [Agência Nacional para a Qualificação e Ensino Profissional (ANQEP)], to basic education (1st, 2nd or 3rd cycles) or secondary education.

Although the majority of respondents followed traditional and continuous education paths, 7% of them had less common paths, which reflects social and economic changes in society, characterized by the risk and uncertainty of the institutions, by individuality in the (re)structuring of paths of life and by the emphasis placed on the labor market, employability and search for and continuous updating of knowledge (BECK; GIDDENS; LASH, 1994).

When participants were asked about the lag between their last year of study (lower secondary, upper secondary or higher level) and their entry into IPLeiria, the answers were contrasting. As can be seen in Table 2, nine subjects indicated that there had been no pause in studying immediately before entering higher education. Considering that these respondents were between the ages of 33 and 42 and that six of them had completed 12th grade and three had taken a Technological Specialization Course [Curso de Especialização Tecnológica (CET)], the interruption occurred not prior to the entry into IPLeiria, but at another time of their educational path, and the return to secondary education might have encouraged the progression to higher education.

Except for these participants, all the others (171) indicated that they had been out of school prior to admission to an undergraduate course through M23 examinations. It should be noted that 4 (of 171) indicated the option "Other":

two had not studied for more than 30 years, and two did not indicate an exact number.

**TABLE 4**  
**NUMBER OF YEARS WITHOUT STUDYING PRIOR TO ENTERING IPLEIRIA**

N.º OF YEARS WITHOUT STUDYING	ANSWERS
0	9
1 to 5 years	46
6 to 10 years	41
11 to 15 years	30
16 to 20 years	35
21 to 25 years	10
26 to 30 years	5
Other	4

Source: Authors' elaboration.

With regards to IPLeiria schools, the School of Technology and Management [Escola Superior de Tecnologia e Gestão (ESTG)] received the highest number of students enrolled through M23 examinations (76), followed by the School of Education and Social Sciences [Escola Superior de Educação e Ciências Sociais (ESECS)], with 63 students. The following schools received the fewest students: School of Fine Arts and Design [Escola Superior de Artes e Design (ESAD.CR)] (22), the School of Tourism and Maritime Technology [Escola Superior de Turismo e Tecnologia do Mar (ESTM)] (14), and the School of Health of Leiria [Escola Superior de Saúde de Leiria (ESSLei)] (5).

After the restructuring of higher education, which took place in 2006/2007 due to the implementation of the Bologna Process, the duration of most IPLeiria undergraduate programs changed from four to three years. The main exceptions have been the Nursing and Physiotherapy degrees (of ESSLei) and Portuguese-Chinese Translation and Interpretation (of ESECS), which still last four academic years.

In the questionnaire applied to the former students of IPLeiria, it was possible to collect data about the year of admission and the year of graduation, which allowed calculating the mean for the 1st cycle of study's completion.

The former students enrolled at Leiria Polytechnic Institute between 2006 and 2012 and completed their studies between 2009 and 2016, which results in a mean of 3.39 years for degree completion.

It is important, however, to highlight that six of the 180 students enrolled were not considered in this global mean because they had attended courses that last four years (identified above), and had stayed at IPLeiria during the minimum number of years needed to complete the degree (four years).

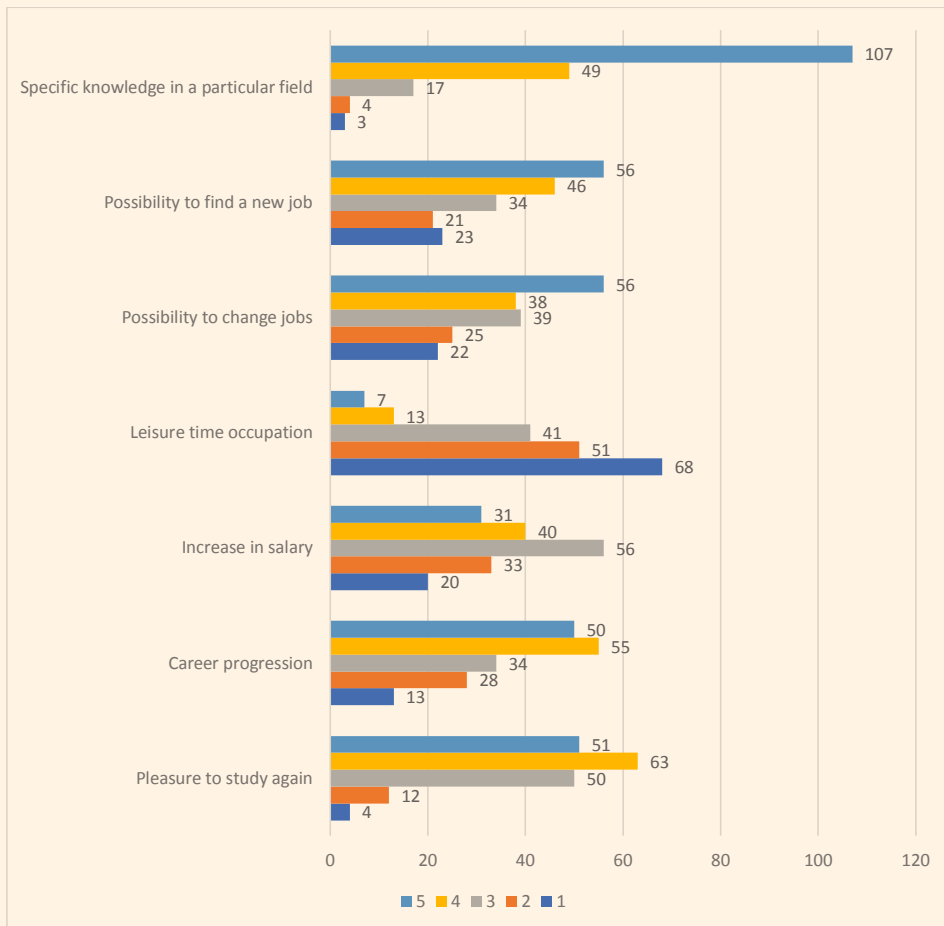
For most of the students, completing degrees within the time expected may be related to their motivations when they enrolled in higher education and particularly in the areas they chose. In order to find out the reasons that led

the 180 students to attend a specific undergraduate course, we defined seven topics for respondents to evaluate regarding their level of importance as to their decision to return to school, in some cases, as we have seen, many years after interrupting their education.

For each topic (Pleasure to study again; Career progression; Increase in salary; Occupation of free time; Possibility to change jobs; Possibility to find a new job; Specific knowledge in a particular field), respondents were requested to classify from 1 to 5, in which 1 corresponded to “Not important”, 2 to “Little important”, 3 to “Important”, 4 to “Very important”, and 5 to “Extremely important”.

Graph 2 synthesizes the level of relevance attributed by former students of IPEiria to each topic in the questionnaire:

**GRAPH 2**  
**MOTIVATION TO ENTER HIGHER EDUCATION**



Source: Authors's elaboration.

In graph above, it is possible to identify the great prominence of specific knowledge in a particular field as the main reason for attending the course chosen (107). The least relevant reason is leisure time occupation (68 assume that this reason is not important and 51 consider it little important).

As for the other five topics, we concluded that most M23 students also consider them, since “Not important” - 1 or “Little important” - 2 are less frequent answers than the others: the possibility to change jobs (47 answers in these categories), possibility to find a new job (44 answers 1 and 2), increase in salary (53 answers 1 and 2), career progression (41 answers 1 and 2), and the pleasure to study again (16 answers 1 and 2) in a total of 180 valid answers.

In addition to the reasons presented in the questionnaire, we also left a space open for respondents to include other reasons students found relevant to their decision. Seventeen graduates answered this question in diversified ways, but it was possible to identify some common reasons. The most pointed out reasons were related to interest in the field and personal and professional valorization, aspects that reinforce the answers given to the previous question. Other reasons were included by these former “M23” students related to the connection between their studies and their personal/professional life, such as the geographical proximity of the institution to the place of residence and the possibility to attend a course in post-work hours.

Increase in knowledge, contact with other professionals and the possibility of salary increase were also mentioned as reasons for their decision to enter IPEiria.

The question “Would you apply again through M23 examinations?” obtained 90% positive responses and 10% negative ones, which allows us to conclude that the respondents were satisfied with the M23 Examinations to access higher education.

The reasons that those respondents presented to apply again through “M23” examinations were the following:

**TABLE 5**  
**REASONS TO REPEAT THE EXPERIENCE OF ACCESSING HIGHER EDUCATION THROUGH M23 EXAMINATION**

REASONS		NUMBER OF ANSWERS
1	Good access form	43
2	Beneficial to proceed studies	29
3	Easy and fast	21
4	Good access to enter higher education without taking national examinations	15
5	The fulfillment of a dream	15
6	Change in professional life	13
7	Progressive way to return to school	11
8	Way of acquiring prerequisites for the teacher education program.	11
9	A lot of new knowledge	10
10	Good experience	9
11	Change in personal life	6
12	Motivation	6

Source: Authors's elaboration.

From the 12 reasons presented, the respondents valued most the way to access higher education (43), that is to say, they underlined the advantages of M23 examinations and the advantages of using M23 to return to school after an interruption (29) without taking the national examinations traditionally required from any student who wishes to enroll in higher education (15).

These results highlight the valuation of the flexible nature of the “M23” examinations, which translates into greater equity in the access to higher education by adult students detached from the education system (TONIN; AMORIM; MENEZES, 2016).

Through these examinations, adults obtain the prerequisites to access a teacher education program (11) and, therefore, progressively return to school (11).

The value of knowledge is highlighted, as the respondents demonstrate their pleasure in the acquisition of new knowledge (10). Monteiro, Barros and Moreira (2015, p. 133) also emphasize the relevance of this fact, considering that “These life experiences tend to be advantageous in enhancing new learnings that result first and foremost from practical work orientation that focuses on problem solving”.<sup>5</sup>

M23 examinations are also extremely important for the realization of a dream deferred (15) and consequently for a change in one’s professional life (13), which increases their motivation to embark on a such a demanding challenge (6).

Oliveira (2007), Pereira (2009), Soares, Almeida and Ferreira (2010), and Lopes (2014), which are studies on M23 paths, pointed to an increase in knowledge, career progression and personal realization as factors highly valued by students over 23 years old who gained access to higher education.

## FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

After more than a decade of the enactment of Decree Law 64/2006, there is an evident need for further discussions on the access to higher education through M23 examinations, in order to better know the student target of this measure, focusing on actions that lead to the success of these students and, consequently, to greatly benefiting their professional careers through academic training.

The present study reveals that the students who joined Leiria Polytechnic Institute [Instituto Politécnico de Leiria], a Portuguese public institution of higher education, through M23 examinations took this decision to increase their knowledge, aiming at professional changes and even personal changes, recognizing this opportunity as the possibility to realize a lifelong project (dream).

It is also clear that M23 examinations were considered the fastest and most accessible way to enter higher education by adults who have been out of the educational system, since they can be admitted into the academic world without taking national general examinations.

<sup>5</sup> In the original: “Estas experiencias de vida tendem a ser rentabilizadas para potenciar as novas aprendizagens, resultantes preferencialmente de trabalhos com orientação prática, centrados na resolução de problemas”.

This study not only fulfilled the purpose to characterize the students over 23 years old of IPLeiria, presenting their motivations and views on the choice they made, but also highlighted the importance of this measure of education policy for promoting lifelong learning, in order to meet the goals set by the OECD and the European Union regarding the creation of opportunities for all, and the diversification of educational systems, in particular of higher education. However, it is education institutions are asked to keep a special, watchful eye in order to know all the students, to meet their specific needs, to contribute to their academic success, and to the personal valorization of each student.

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