



# Non-traditional Access to Higher Education – An Evolution in Portugal

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In Portugal the **access to Higher Education (HE)**, comprising Universities and Polytechnic institutions, can be achieved by **several dedicated “doors”**. Besides the “*National Admission Process*” that accounts for the largest number of candidacies and vacancies and constitutes the regular pathway, there are a number of other processes, such as particular admission processes and special regimes, **created as a result of the effort to open Higher Education to more and different publics**. Gateways have been built based on the profiles at entrance, identifying, in particular, **Non-Traditional Students**, in particular **older than 23 years that have now a dedicated via** on the “*Special Admission to HE*” (SAHE) that has its set of vacancies established on a yearly basis by each university, and targets candidates (**M23 regime**). **As a case study, this work pretends to bring up the major changes between past and present protocols of the SAHE, i.e., “ad-hoc examinations” and the actual M23 regime.**

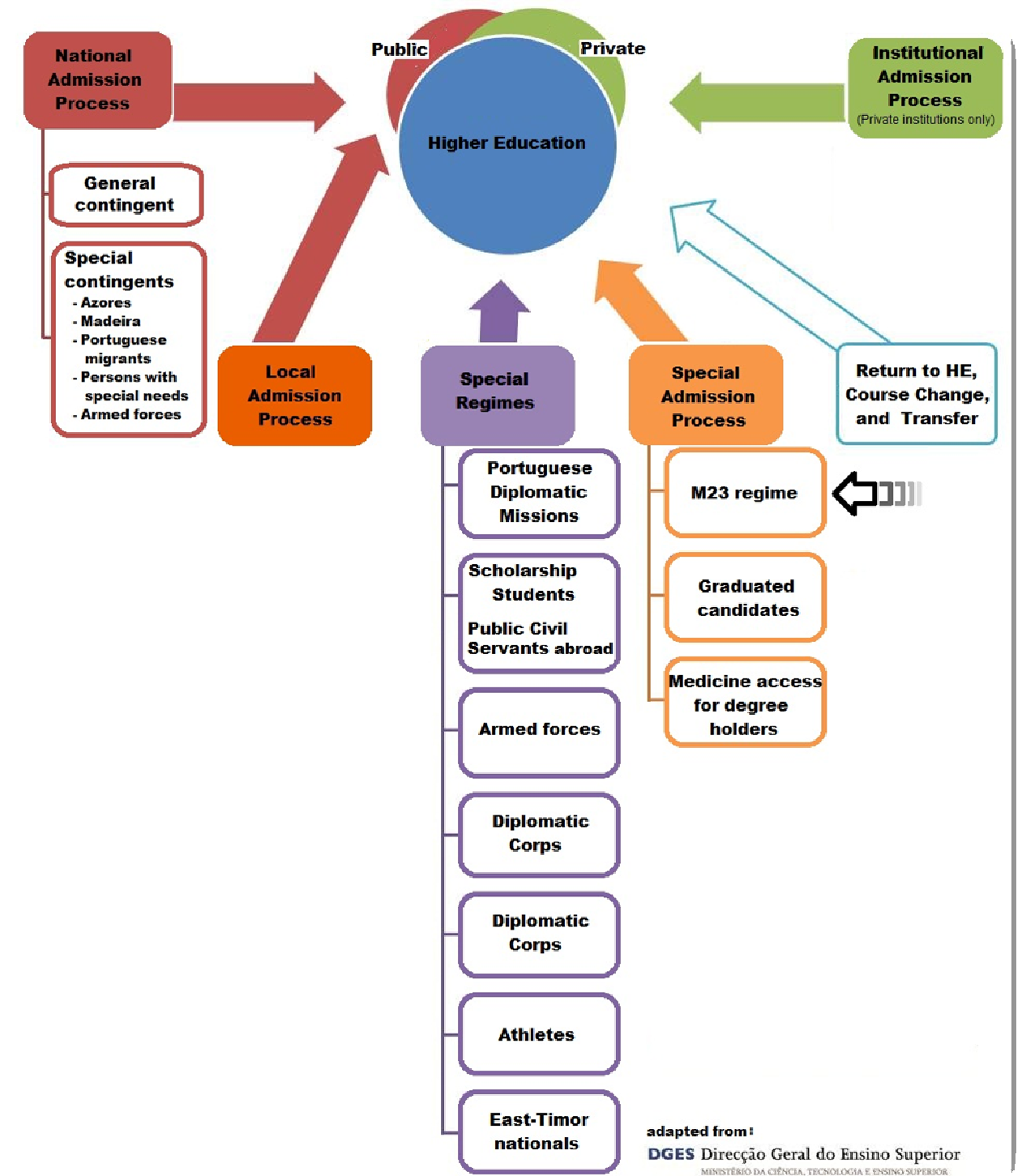
## “Ad-hoc examinations”

From 1979 to 2006, admission of NTSs to Portuguese HE could occur by two possible ways: a traditional one (for the general contingent) and a non-traditional access route for those that could fulfil special specifications under the “Cf. Law-Decree N<sup>o</sup> 198/79”. **The non-traditional route required the candidate to pass a set of written exams called “ad-hoc examination”** (short from “Exam to Evaluate the Ability to Access HE”, a liberal translation of “*Exame Extraordinário de Avaliação de Capacidade para Acesso ao Ensino Superior*”), implemented as a consequence of “pedagogical experiences” [1]. **The “ad-hoc examination” was intended to enable access to HE to those who were older than 25 years and did not have the minimum qualifications required.** These applicants had to demonstrate the necessary fundamental knowledge to attend a HE course, as well as show ability, experience and maturity to qualify as a candidate.

The process of examination comprehended:

- National and unique Portuguese language examination to evaluate the ability of the candidate on interpretation and expression, also accessing the cultural level (Ordinance N<sup>o</sup> 122/94);
- An interview;
- Specific exam according to the course the candidate wanted to apply.

The **Portuguese language examination tended to exclude about 70% of the candidates**, and **other 10% were eliminated** in the subsequent steps of the process [1].



## The M23 regime

In 2006 a new enrolment procedure was implemented (Cf. Law-Decree Nº 64/2006) for **mature students of age 23 and above (23NTS)**. Perhaps the most important evolutionary change is the **degree of freedom given to each HEI** to adapt their selection procedures. After successfully passing this process, the candidate can apply to one of the **places allocated for 23NTS**. These are established by the government on a yearly basis with an **upper limit of 20% of the total number of traditional students entering the first year in each HEI**.

**Table 1** - Percentage of 23NTS enrolled in the Portuguese Higher Education Institutions, in the first year, for the first time (academic years of 2006-2007 to 2009-2010).

Subsystem of Higher Education	2006-2007	2007-2008	2008-2009	2009-2010
Public	8%	10%	9%	8%
Universities	5%	6%	6%	5%
Polytechnics	13%	15%	13%	12%
Private	29%	24%	24%	25%
Universities	33%	23%	22%	23%
Polytechnics	23%	26%	27%	30%
TOTAL	15%	14%	13%	12%

Source: Office for Strategic Planning, Economic Policy and International Affairs (GPEARI), 2012.

**At the University of Aveiro**, a student enrolled through this special regime has to pass a **three step evaluation process**:

- Analysis of the candidate *curriculum vitae*;
- A set of thematic exams with the purpose of evaluating their academic skills;
- An individual interview where an appointed jury questions the candidate about his or her motivations and life history.

## Statistics from University of Aveiro

Since 2006, the first year of M23 regime, **1338 candidates applied** to a position in one of the University of Aveiro's degrees through this regime. From these, **756 (57%)** were not excluded or eliminated, therefore **were considered "apt"** (Table 2). **This percentage really makes a difference when compared with the 20% of the ad-hoc system: it almost triplicates.** Work is presently under way to test for the consistency of the M23 access, and to identify improvement initiatives on the three actors in presence: candidates, teachers, and administration. **Table 2** goes further by showing **the degree of achievement of 23NTS** on the first degree (not necessarily the first cycle) **in UA.**

**Table 2** – Year-by-year number of candidates applying to a position at the UA through M23 regime, total of candidates apt (approved after the access process), total of 23NTS that actually enrolled at the UA and concluded the 1<sup>st</sup> degree (academic years of 2006-2007 to 2009-2010)

	Nr. of Candidates	Nr. of Candidates APT	Nr. of 23NTS actually enrolled at the UA	Nr. of 23NTS that Concluded the 1 <sup>st</sup> Degree
2006-2007	124	91	81	17
2007-2008	354	199	139	48
2008-2009	435	216	146	40
2009-2010	425	250	124	27
Total	1338	756	490	132

## Success of 23NTS at the UA

If we define the **academic success** achieved by the 23NTS as the graduation rate reported to the number of 23NTS that yearly enrol at the University, **the mean success rate at UA, is of about 27%**. Nevertheless, we have to underline that *success* is a complex concept and phenomena, as it does not represent the same thing to all the authors, and should not only be related to ratios and quantitative analysis.

There are no data available on “*ad-hoc examination*” student’s success.

## Obstacles conditioning the access nowadays

**Two major types of obstacles were identified** to hinder the HEI access nowadays: **personal; and professional barriers**. Within the personal barriers **economic obstacles** are perhaps one of the most important constrains that candidates have to overcome. The enrolment in HEI is usually associated with major changes in **added living costs**, not least the high (related to personal income) **tuition fees**, seldom mitigated by any scholarship. **Difficulties related to computer literacy** important to deal with the requirements of UA’s web based submission procedures, **are particularly notice**. The other noteworthy difficulty common to most candidates lies in their **level of communication skills** that often handicaps them during the 3<sup>rd</sup> step of access, the interview, and which can have an impact on the jury evaluation.

Regarding the professional barriers, even within years of economic stability to be a worker-student is a considerable challenge. **Under an environment of economic depression, the worker-student has larger difficulty to make effective their legal rights**, without positioning him or she in arms way of put their job at risk. Often the **employers evaluate negatively any initiative** that will reduce the number of hours the employee spends at work.

## The 23NTS opinion towards the access to HEI

In order to help characterize the 23NTS' reality, as well as to contribute to improve the conditions they face in HE, there is an **ongoing research project**, promoted with the University of Algarve, entitled the **“Non-traditional students in Higher Education Institutions: searching solutions to improve academic success”** (PTDC/CPE-CED/108739/2008), funded by the FCT [2]. During this project, biographic interviews were conducted to a group of 25 23NTS to explore, among other dimensions, their **opinion towards the access process**. The **great majority** of the interviewees **consider it a just and reasonable procedure**, once they agree with the necessity of having some form of evaluation to enter HE. The 23NTS also refer **the exam(s) required as adequate and not excessively difficult**, even though some of them worked hard to prepare for examination (through specialized services). **Some testimonials underline the necessity of a more logic adjustment between the program of studies they are applying to and the exams required**. In what relates to the third step of the access process, **the interview**, there are a few voices alerting to the **subjectivity of this phase**, even though a clear majority consider it relevant and a pertinent procedure to complement the exam(s).

### Literature Cited

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