

SPECIAL EDUCATION AND INCLUSION IN THE CONTEXT OF HIGHER EDUCATION IN MOZAMBIQUE: a study on Virtual Learning for students with Hearing Impairment at Eduardo Mondlane University

EDUCAÇÃO ESPECIAL E INCLUSÃO NO CONTEXTO DO ENSINO SUPERIOR EM MOÇAMBIQUE: um estudo sobre a Aprendizagem Virtual de estudantes com Deficiência Auditiva na Universidade Eduardo Mondlane

EDUCACIÓN ESPECIAL E INCLUSIÓN EN EL CONTEXTO DE LA EDUCACIÓN SUPERIOR EN MOZAMBIQUE: un estudio sobre Aprendizaje Virtual para estudiantes con Discapacidad Auditiva en la Universidad Eduardo Mondlane


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ABSTRACT:

This study investigates inclusive education in higher education in Mozambique, focusing on the virtual learning of students with special educational needs, especially those with hearing impairment at Eduardo Mondlane University (UEM). The study used documentary analysis and interviews with 27 students with hearing impaired on virtual learning environments. It presents, as a result, among others, the presence of weaknesses of the guiding policies of inclusive education in Mozambique, marked by the absence of specific provisions on virtual learning for students with special educational needs, a fact that encompasses UEM's inclusive education strategy.

KEYWORDS: Inclusive education; Hearing deficiency; Mozambican higher education; Eduardo Mondlane University.

Introduction

In the Mozambican context, Inclusive Education (IE) is recognized as a fundamental principle that aims to ensure that all students, regardless of their abilities, disabilities or specific characteristics, have equal access to educational opportunities. The effective implementation of IE in higher education in Mozambique, in particular, is essential to promote equity and diversity within educational institutions. In this context, it is worth noting the introduction of various political and institutional reforms, included in the international protocols to which the country is a signatory. Despite the efforts made, there are still significant challenges in guaranteeing truly inclusive education (Nhapuala & Almeida, 2016; Reginaldo, 2016, 2020; Soniva, 2021).

Eduardo Mondlane University (UEM), the largest and oldest higher education institution in Mozambique, has implemented several administrative and pedagogical measures based on its IE Strategy, launched in 2018, based on the direction of the policies implemented in the educational field in the country. However, despite advances in access to higher education - undergraduate and postgraduate - and the implementation of permanence actions, UEM faces the challenge of serving students with Special Educational Needs (SEN), enabling them to have adequate access to resources and support for a more effective learning experience.

Furthermore, with the increased use of platforms and Virtual Learning Environments (VLE), especially after the restrictions imposed by Covid-19 (Cherinda, Rosário & Maluleque, 2021; Nhancale, 2022), there is a need to assess how these technological tools are being used to promote the inclusion of students with SEN, such as hearing impairment/deafness. This need is pressing, given the significant increase in the number of students with SEN entering UEM and the prevalence of discriminatory and non-inclusive teaching practices (UEM, 2017a; Samboco, 2020).

In this context, this study seeks to explore and critically analyse the virtual learning experience of students with hearing disabilities at UEM. By examining the challenges faced, the existing inclusive practices and the gaps to be addressed, the study aims to contribute to reflections on IE and its interface with the Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) adopted in the teaching-learning process at UEM.

In order to meet the objectives of this study, a qualitative methodological approach was adopted, allowing for an analysis of the policies that guide IE in higher education in Mozambique and an in-depth understanding of the experiences of

hearing-impaired students in virtual learning. Twenty-seven (27) hearing-impaired students from UEM were randomly selected as participants in the study, taking into account criteria of accessibility and expression of interest. The semi-structured interviews were conducted individually with the participants, providing a space for them to express their perceptions of virtual learning, which allowed for a more comprehensive understanding of IE dynamics in the specific context of UEM.

In addition to the introductory section, this article uses a narrative review to discuss IE in Mozambique's education policy, with greater emphasis on the higher education subsystem. Within this framework, the study points out the main milestones and challenges of IE in Mozambican Higher Education and then looks at virtual learning for hearing-impaired students at UEM. Finally, the main findings and future lines of research arising from this study are presented in the form of concluding remarks.

Inclusive Education in the context of Educational Policy in Mozambique

At the heart of this research is the concept of "Inclusive Education" which, according to Lopes et al. (2020), results from the various strategic forms and interpersonal and socio-pedagogical efforts to deal with beings who are different from what is considered human normality. This is a relatively new movement, given "the long period of exclusion that many historically marginalized minorities have experienced" (Lopes et al., 2020, p. 18), although it has been widely researched in recent years.

In the Mozambican educational context, policies aimed at implementing IE are recent, although since colonial times there have been movements concerned with the education of people with SEN, especially those caused by disability (Nhapuala & Almeida, 2016; Reginaldo, 2016, 2020; Samboco, 2020; Tomo, 2022). It should be noted, however, that since the first National Education System Law (SNE), approved in 1983, IE has been based on the approach of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). An example of this is the definition given in the Strategy for Inclusive Education and the Development of Children with Disabilities 2020 - 2029 which, by referencing UNESCO (1998), conceives IE as a process of development of the regular school, as a whole, aimed at the educational reception of all children, young people and adults, respecting their physical-intellectual, cultural, social, linguistic, racial, religious and other diversities.

In general, the political instruments that guide the Mozambican education system show that IE emerges linked to the right to education, enshrined in the constitutional texts of 1975 (art. 34), 1990 and 2004 (art. 88), the latter revised in 2018 without, however, introducing changes in relation to the right to education (Moçambique, 2004). In this context, it is important to note that it was with the 1990 Constitution and Law No. 6/1992, of May 6, that IE was formally introduced in Mozambique, as an integral part of the Strategic Plan for the Education Sector 1997 - 2001, conceived by the then Ministry of Education in 1998, under the slogan "Combating exclusion and renewing the school" (Lopes et al., 2020; Soniva, 2021).

At the time, the IE approach defended values such as the inclusion and participation of all children and young people in the mainstream education system, including people with disabilities, taking the appreciation of the specificities of each individual, starting from real to imminent knowledge, as the core of inclusion. This vision sought to respond to the calls raised at the world conference on SEN, which produced the Salamanca Declaration (1994), progressively followed by the Dakar (2000) and Incheon (2015) Declarations. In particular, the Incheon Declaration, which took place in South Korea in May 2015, sets out to ensure equitable, quality IE between 2015 and 2030, as well as promoting lifelong learning opportunities, being transformative and universal, inspired by a humanist vision of education and development based on human rights (Soniva, 2021).

The assumptions and guidelines of these declarations, to which Mozambique is a signatory, are evident in the most recent reform of the SNE in Mozambique, through Law No. 18/2018, of December 28. Although this policy does not provide a definition of IE, it is concerned with clarifying that the Mozambican education system is considered inclusive when it: (i) recognizes that all individuals can learn; (ii) recognizes and respects differences in individuals: age, gender, ethnicity, language, disability/incapacity, social class, health status; (iii) allows teaching structures, systems and methodologies to meet the needs of all; (iv) is part of a broader strategy to promote an inclusive society; (v) is a dynamic process that is constantly evolving; and (vi) should not be restricted or limited by large classes, type of school infrastructure or lack of material resources (Mozambique, 2018).

Since the formal introduction of IE in 1998, various political and institutional reforms have been carried out in the various educational subsystems, including higher education. A corollary of these reforms is the training of personnel at all levels, the creation of IE resource centres and the mobilization of the masses in awareness-raising campaigns (Lopes et al., 2020). In this way, it can be seen that the context of IE

in Mozambique is intrinsically linked to educational policies that seek to guarantee equitable access and active participation for all students, regardless of their individual characteristics.

However, although significant progress has been made in promoting inclusion in the Mozambican education system, there are still considerable challenges, especially in the context of higher education. Thus, it becomes crucial to analyse the specific advances and challenges of IE in this context in Mozambique, exploring how policies and practices are being implemented to ensure that all students, including those with hearing impairments, have equal access to quality educational opportunities.

Progress and challenges of Inclusive Education in Higher Education in Mozambique

Mozambique is still searching for its own IE model, taking into account the most successful experiences at a global level and the singularities of the education system (Nhapuala, 2014). This is mainly due to the fact that Mozambican higher education is relatively new, although it was introduced during the Portuguese colonial administration, with the creation of the University of Lourenço Marques which, in May 1976, was renamed Eduardo Mondlane University (Mandlate & Nivagara, 2019; Samboco, 2020).

When discussing the challenges of IE in the Mozambican context, Nhapuala (2014) points out that even with the most recent political reforms, aimed at guaranteeing equal opportunities for all citizens to access education, regardless of their specific characteristics and needs, IE is still carried out under the command of individual laws, the higher education subsystem being no exception. In the same manner, Nhapuala (2014) adds another challenge, which is the scarcity of human, material and financial resources capable of responding to the desire for IE in higher education.

In his study, Matemulane (2015) via Lopes et al. (2020) raises, among other challenges, the need to invest in the training of specialists and the continuous training of existing human capital, so that there is in-depth research into the particularities of students with SEN and the actions that should be implemented.

In turn, Samboco (2020), while recognizing the importance of introducing forms to identify students with SEN when taking entrance exams to courses offered by public higher education institutions in Mozambique, later accompanied by the introduction of a degree course in Mozambican Sign Languages and other policies to promote higher

education for all, points out that much remains to be done. In this context, it is worth highlighting the lack of systematized and reliable statistical data on the number of students with SEN in the various educational institutions, a fact that makes it difficult to design actions that guarantee their adequate attendance (Nhapuala, 2014; Samboco, 2020).

No less important is the lack of adequacy of the physical infrastructure and equipment needed for the inclusion of students with SEN in higher education (Samboco, 2020). This challenge encompasses the technological component, since ICT is currently seen as a major factor in the learning of people with disabilities and other SEN, due to its many functions.

The study by Mandlate and Nivagara (2019) points out that, as a challenge, there is no political instrument to regulate access and inclusion for people with SEN in higher education, a situation which forces each institution to create conditions for the admission, teaching and learning of students with these characteristics. This scenario makes it imperative to strengthen inclusion policies for students with SEN at this level, as a way of ensuring that this social segment can enter any higher education institution, observing the criteria established for admission or access, which must also be based on inclusion.

In fact, an in-depth analysis of the government's Five-Year Plan (2020 - 2024) shows that it is from this perspective that, in the axis referring to the Development of Human and Social Capital, the Mozambican government proposes the promotion of a quality, inclusive, efficient and effective education system that responds to the needs of human development and provides expansion and equitable access to higher and professional technical education (Mozambique, 2020).

When analysing the advances and challenges of IE in higher education in Mozambique, it is crucial to focus on the virtual learning of hearing-impaired students at UEM, as the focus of this research. On the one hand, this approach allows for a specific analysis of the experiences and barriers that these students perceive in VLEs. On the other hand, the focus on the virtual learning of hearing-impaired students at UEM allows for a survey of the institutional measures and strategies adopted by this university to promote an increasingly inclusive and equitable education for all students.

Virtual learning for students with hearing impairments at Eduardo Mondlane University: a look through the lens of Inclusive Education

Before exploring the dynamics of virtual learning for hearing-impaired students at UEM, it is essential to understand the institution's approach and understanding of Special Educational Needs (SEN) and, more specifically, hearing impairment. Understanding how UEM approaches these issues is crucial to evaluating the effectiveness of its inclusion initiatives and identifying areas for improvement that can promote a learning experience that caters for all students, in their diversity of needs and characteristics.

In general, the UEM Strategic Plan (2018 - 2028) and the UEM IE Strategy (2018 - 2022), both approved in 2017, show that the university's vision in relation to IE is based on the current of total inclusion, insofar as it proposes that all organic and academic units be prepared to respond satisfactorily and effectively to the demands of joint learning and development of students with or without SEN (UEM, 2017b). In this context, it is important to clarify that the total inclusion current, on which the UEM bases its approach to IE, advocates "the complete elimination of segregated services at all levels of education" (Lopes et al., 2020, p. 18), and proposes the creation of conditions that favour the joint learning of students with and without SEN (Hamburg & Lütgen, 2019).

With regard to SEN, UEM's IE Strategy (2018 - 2022) shows that the university embraces the concept advocated by UNESCO (1994). Within the framework of this strategy, "Special Educational Needs" means any type of learning difficulty that any student may have throughout their academic career, implying the mobilization of pedagogical, psychological and other support to remedy or overcome them. This support can be permanent or temporary, depending on the causal factors of a biological and/or environmental nature that characterize individual differences and human diversity, as the strategy in question explains.

Another relevant aspect that the UEM's IE Strategy (2018 - 2022) seeks to clarify is related to the typology of SEN. In effect, it considers SEN to be any student who has difficulties in learning independently, as a result of: (i) high abilities/gifted; (ii) disability; (iii) speech disorders; (iv) albinism; (v) psychological or behavioural disorders; (vi) developmental disorders; (vii) chronic or prolonged illnesses; (viii) traumas or phobias resulting from bullying, natural or human accidents and socio-affective deprivation; and (ix) any other situation of a racial, ethnic-cultural, linguistic, religious and political nature that may inhibit or disrupt the student's normal academic development, i.e. the acquisition of formal learning, the production of scientific knowledge and professional insertion (UEM, 2017a).

In this approach, it is possible to see that, in the light of the policies that guide IE at UEM, SEN is broken down into several, including disability in its multiplicity. However, looking at the core of this research, we highlight hearing impairment, which, according to the literature, can affect the subject's social life, given its direct interference in the development of language, speech, interpersonal communication and learning, and can impair school development, as explained by Cruz et al. (2009).

As a concept, "hearing impairment" has not received consensus, as it has been understood in different ways, especially when compared to deafness. For example, UEM's EI Strategy (2018 - 2022) makes no distinction between one or the other, i.e. it encompasses deafness within hearing impairment and does not treat it as an isolated special educational need. Therefore, any study involving hearing-impaired students at UEM must take into account that it refers to both deaf and low-hearing students.

The position taken by UEM in its IE strategy runs counter to the approach of authors such as Freitas et al. (2017). According to these authors, the term "hearing impairment" is used in many contexts to indicate a loss of hearing or a reduction in the ability to hear sounds. Using the World Health Organization's explanation, Freitas et al. (2017) state that hearing loss is considered when there is a hearing loss that varies from mild to severe in relation to a person with normal hearing who, in general, has the ability to detect sounds up to 20 dB N.A (decibels, hearing level).

Based on this discussion, it is important to clarify that the 27 participants in this study are made up of both low hearing and deaf students, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1 - Characterization of the participants

Variables	Categories identified
Gender	Male and female
Age group	Ages between 17 and 46
Courses attended	Graduation: Agronomy and Agricultural Extension, Tourism Animation, Biology and Health, Electronic Engineering, English Teaching, Bantu Language Teaching, Statistics, Medicine and Mozambican Sign Language
	Postgraduate: Master's in Inclusive Education
Type of hearing loss	Low hearing and deafness

Source: Prepared by the authors.

As can be seen in Table 1, the participants in this study reveal a diversity of characteristics that could be explored in other studies. However, the findings indicate

that students of both sexes (male and female) took part in this study, with ages ranging from 17 to 46, most of them attending undergraduate courses.

Having discussed the previous points, we will now look at the virtual learning of hearing-impaired students at UEM. Firstly, the experiences (virtual learning environments, platforms and applications) reported by the research subjects are explored, followed by a survey of the challenges and perspectives of their virtual learning, using IE assumptions as a compass.

Studies conducted by Guambe (2022) and Cherinda, Rosário and Maluleque (2021) show that at UEM, virtual learning for students enrolled in face-to-face courses formally takes place on Moodle, internally called VULA. However, the advent of Covid-19 dictated the introduction of other Web 2.0 tools, as a way of responding to the restrictions imposed by the pandemic and ensuring compliance with the recommendations issued by the Ministry that oversees higher education in Mozambique, in this case the Ministry of Science, Technology, Higher Education and Professional Technician. It was in this context that the rectorial exhortation of March 25, 2020, established the use of platforms such as Google classes, Skype, Colibri and WhatsApp, to ensure virtual teaching and learning at UEM.

The data from the above-mentioned studies coincides with the findings of this research, in that the results of the interviews show that the participants' virtual learning is guided by various platforms and applications, most notably WhatsApp and VULA. This reveals that the virtual learning of hearing-impaired students at UEM is versatile and allows them to meet their learning needs and preferences. In this field, several authors who have looked at this issue, such as Tomaz (2020) and Pereira (2023), argue that the diversification of tools or platforms allows hearing-impaired students to adapt to different virtual learning contexts and their search for more collaborative learning experiences.

For example, one of the subjects of this research, categorized here as "Participant A", highlighted the following:

Participant A, student with low hearing
"[...] I didn't like VULA, but I started to like it the day one of the teachers created discussion groups automatically... it was an interesting activity... using Google Meet and Zoom, I also started to like making presentations virtually, because I could express myself better and without the nervousness that is inevitable in the physical presence of the teacher [...]" (Translation into Mozambican Sign Language by the authors).

Furthermore, these findings highlight the need to reflect on the complexity of some virtual learning platforms and encourage a review/reconfiguration of the policies that guide IE in educational institutions, so that they promote the development of teaching and learning strategies that favour the use of virtual tools that best meet the needs and preferences of students with hearing impairments, preventing virtual learning from generating new forms of exclusion, but rather constituting an opportunity for inclusion, as Pereira (2023) advocates.

The other aspect explored in the interview with the participants is the spaces and types of virtual learning environments. In this respect, the results show that hearing-impaired students at UEM are more likely to use virtual classrooms and online discussion forums. With regard to the types of virtual environments, the results of the interviews show that hearing-impaired students at UEM said they preferred both synchronous learning environments (in real time) and asynchronous learning environments (at flexible times). The following table (Table 2) summarizes the main platforms used and environments frequented by participants in virtual learning.

Table 2 - Tools, spaces and virtual learning environments for participants

Variables	Categories identified
Virtual learning tools used	WhatsApp, VULA (Moodle), Google Meet, Zoom, YouTube, Mail and Google Classroom
Virtual learning spaces used	Online discussion forums, virtual classrooms (video and chat) and virtual study groups
Types of virtual environments used	Virtual synchronous learning environments and virtual asynchronous learning environments

Source: Prepared by the authors.

An in-depth analysis of these findings indicates that the virtual learning experiences and preferences of hearing-impaired students at UEM denote a flexible and adaptable approach to the learning process, where they value the real-time interactions provided by synchronous virtual environments, as well as the flexibility and autonomy offered by asynchronous virtual environments, as advocated by Santos and Okada (2014) and Luangrungruang and Kokaew (2022). In this context, it is worth highlighting, as an example, the perspective of one of the students interviewed, categorized here as "Participant B", insofar as he shows his appreciation for the benefits presented by the tools, spaces and environments that enable his virtual learning, as follows:

Participant B, deaf student

"[...] for me the activities in discussion forums are more meaningful, because they allow me to explore my writing skills [...] for example in the forums created in VULA, I appreciate the possibility of reading the explanations and reacting to the opinions submitted by my colleagues, just as they do to my writings" (Translation into Mozambican Sign Language by the authors).

Furthermore, these results highlight the pertinence of formulating IE policies and strategies that favour a variety of teaching methods applicable in the virtual context, allowing the individual needs of hearing-impaired students to be met and promoting a more diverse learning experience. Likewise, this approach highlights the multiplicity of ICT's capabilities, and its applicability in promoting inclusion in the teaching-learning process that takes place in virtual environments.

In general, the assertions of the participants in this study reveal an urgent need to review and reconfigure the institutional policies and strategies that guide IE in higher education. At the same time as reviewing and reconfiguring the instruments that support IE, it is essential to adopt pedagogical practices and actions that take into account the needs, characteristics and preferences of students with SEN, making IE real, successful and, above all, based on diversity.

Final Considerations

This study has revealed how important and challenging it is to discuss IE in Higher Education in Mozambique, especially when we look at virtual learning for students with SEN, in a context where ICT is emerging with a multitude of features for the teaching and learning process. Specifically, the analysis carried out in this study shows the weaknesses in the policies that guide IE in Mozambique. These weaknesses extend to the UEM's Inclusive Education Strategy (2018 - 2022), in that it makes no provision for virtual learning for students with SEN.

Although the national and institutional policies and strategies that underpin HE in the Mozambican context do not address the issue of virtual learning, the current dynamics of HE in higher education, particularly at UEM, are marked by the use of various platforms, applications and virtual learning environments. This currently constitutes an institutional challenge that requires, among other measures, political, institutional and pedagogical reform, to prevent virtual learning from opening up space for the exclusion of students with SEN. On the contrary, the reform to be carried out should leverage IE, ensuring that the use of ICT in the teaching and learning process involving students with SEN is inclusive and based on diversity.

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RESUMO:

Este estudo investiga a educação inclusiva no ensino superior em Moçambique, com foco na aprendizagem virtual dos estudantes com Necessidades Educativas Especiais, especialmente os com deficiência auditiva, na Universidade Eduardo Mondlane (UEM). O estudo se valeu de análise documental e entrevistas com 27 estudantes com deficiência auditiva sobre ambientes virtuais de aprendizagem. Apresenta, como resultados, dentre outros, a presença de fragilidades das políticas orientadoras da Educação Inclusiva em Moçambique, marcadas pela ausência de disposições específicas sobre aprendizagem virtual para estudantes com Necessidades Educativas Especiais, fato que abrange a Estratégia de Educação Inclusiva da UEM.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE:

Educação Inclusiva; Deficiência auditiva; Ensino Superior Moçambicano; Universidade Eduardo Mondlane.

RESUMEN:

Este estudio investiga la educación inclusiva en la educación superior en Mozambique, centrándose en el aprendizaje virtual de los estudiantes con necesidades educativas especiales, especialmente aquellos con discapacidad auditiva en la Universidad Eduardo Mondlane (UEM). El estudio utilizó análisis documentales y entrevistas con 27 estudiantes con discapacidad auditiva en entornos de aprendizaje virtual. Presenta, como resultado, entre otros, la presencia de debilidades de las políticas rectores de la educación inclusiva en Mozambique, marcada por la ausencia de disposiciones específicas sobre el aprendizaje virtual para los estudiantes con necesidades educativas especiales, un hecho que abarca la estrategia educativa inclusiva de UEM.

PALABRAS**CLAVE:**

Educación inclusiva; Pérdida de audición; Educación superior mozambiqueña; Universidad Eduardo Mondlane.