


Article

Dealing with Diverse Cultures and Needs: How Have Higher Education Institutions in Portugal Responded to COVID-19?

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Abstract: This article seeks to provide a comprehensive analysis of the strategies implemented by Portuguese higher education institutions in addressing cultural diversity and meeting the demands of international students, particularly in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic outbreak. In methodological terms, this is a qualitative study in which more than 40 in-depth interviews were conducted with degree mobility students from Brazil, Portuguese-speaking African Countries, China and Syria, who were already in Portugal when the pandemic was declared in the country in March 2020. Through the lens of multiculturalism, which understands that higher education should be inclusive and equal for all, we found that higher education institutions in Portugal did not provide adequate support to its international student body at a time of so many challenges and uncertainties. Our data indicate that higher education institutions in Portugal need to make more efforts towards fostering a diverse and inclusive environment, whilst taking into account the complex needs of international students.

Keywords: multiculturalism; higher education; international students; diversity; Portugal



Citation: Lyrio, B.; Nada, C.; França, T. Dealing with Diverse Cultures and Needs: How Have Higher Education Institutions in Portugal Responded to COVID-19? *Educ. Sci.* **2023**, *13*, 585. <https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci13060585>

Academic Editor: Han Reichgelt

Received: 30 March 2023

Revised: 2 June 2023

Accepted: 5 June 2023

Published: 8 June 2023



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1. Introduction

The presence of international students (ISs) in higher education institutions (HEIs) has shown an upward trend in recent decades; the increase in this group is substantial compared to other transnational migration flows [1]. The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development [2] points out that currently, among its 38 member countries, one in ten students is an international student. The United States, United Kingdom, and Australia are the countries that have the highest absolute numbers [3] and are known to actively invest in the attraction of ISs. Influenced by the marketisation of higher education systems, non-English-speaking countries have also been investing to increase the number of ISs' enrolments [4]. For instance, in Portugal, data from the Directorate General of Education and Science Statistics [5] indicates that there were almost 50,000 ISs enrolled in degree mobility in the academic year 2021/2022 following the COVID-19 pandemic outbreak. This represents 11.5% of the total number of students enrolled in higher education in Portugal, which is an increase of 6% compared to the previous year. Comparatively, in the 2013/2014 academic year, the number of ISs in degree mobility did not reach 15,000 enrolments [6].

In the context of the European Union, many HEIs have recognized the importance of credit mobility for students' academic and personal development, have worked to increase the accessibility and have made variety of programmes available, such as ERASMUS+, a programme which has also been recognized for its potential to promote European citizenship and identity [7]. However, during the pandemic, the imposition of travel restrictions, border closures, and suspension of in-person classes worldwide led to the interruption of many credit mobility programs [8]. Many students were forced to interrupt their plans

to study abroad and return to their home universities, missing out on the opportunity to experience new cultures and enhance their academic skills [8]. While some HEIs have adapted their programmes for distance learning, the experience of studying in another country was significantly affected, and the challenges of the pandemic prevented many students from fully taking advantage of this opportunity [9].

Despite the pandemic, ISs in higher education settings have continued to increase which has promoted the expansion of cultural diversity among HEIs in many countries. In this paper, we focus specifically on the case of degree-seeking international students, and we understand diversity through the lens of multiculturalism, considering that this is now a reality in many HEIs and must be understood 'as a fact, rather than as an eventuality or a marginal phenomenon' [10] (p. 1593). Moreover, the COVID-19 pandemic has posed new challenges to the way cultural diversity was perceived and addressed by the HEIs and host countries. Many ISs found themselves in extremely vulnerable situations during the pandemic and faced several challenges, such as food insecurity, financial difficulties, and academic stress [11,12], having been treated as unwanted at certain times [13]. Remember, for example, when the Australian Prime Minister made a statement recommending the more than 700,000 ISs to return to their origin countries if they 'were unable to fund themselves' in Australia [14] (p. 1372).

The multiculturalist perspective allowed us to understand the dynamics of intercultural interaction in Portuguese HEIs, in which both sides—in this case, host institutions and ISs—would interact and influence each other [15,16]. Drawing evidence from more than 40 interviews with non-European students enrolled in degree mobility in Portuguese HEIs, we seek to answer the following research question: how did the Portuguese HEIs deal with the cultural diversity brought about by ISs and the disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic? Based on our analysis, we argue that the principles of multicultural education, such as dialogue between cultures [17], were not present in most of the measures put in place by the Portuguese HEIs during the global health crisis. It is important to clarify that this study was carried out in the Portuguese higher education environment because a significant portion of the literature on international student mobility still focuses on English-speaking countries, whilst evidence from other contexts is less common. Additionally, this study was founded by a national agency to promote a deeper understanding of the topic specifically in the Portuguese context. Starting from the voices and perceptions of students from culturally diverse background, we will look at how HEIs reacted to the challenges of the pandemic and sought to attend (or not) the needs of ISs. From the moment when there was a need to close their *campi* and adhere to emergency remote teaching, we seek to understand whether and how these students were supported and if their institutions actively promoted their well-being during this difficult period.

2. Multiculturalism in Portuguese HEIs: Towards a More Inclusive Perspective

In a very preliminary approach, we can define multiculturalism as 'the coexistence of cultural forms or groups characterized by different cultures within modern societies. Multiculturalism can also be considered as a way of describing cultural differences in a transnational context' [18] (p. 26). In addition to the existence of diverse cultural forms in the same space, multiculturalism takes inclusion and social equity as essential elements for the construction of a successful society [19]. In this sense, multiculturalism is inserted into the daily life of universities in the globalized world [20]. A multicultural education can be understood as 'the right of students to receive education in an equal and tolerant manner regardless of race, religion, age, gender, culture, disability, and ethnic identity' [21] (p. 2). In addition, a multicultural education fosters the culture enrichment of HEIs' student community and support the conservation and growth of cultural pluralism [17]. Therefore, in this paper, we consider that along with the presence of different ISs groups in the academic environment, it is important to analyse how fully integrated they are in their HEIs and host societies.

For [22], the history of multicultural education has its roots in the 20th century with the development of black, ethnic, and multi-ethnic studies, intergroup education, civil rights, women's rights, and student activism movements. Considering these aspects, for [23], the educational perspective of multiculturalism must be part of the mission of the HEIs as an essential element for teaching and learning.

A quick look at the missions of the prominent HEIs in Portugal is enough to confirm that the rhetoric of multiculturalism is there and, at least at the discursive level, seems to be highly valued. The University of Lisbon (<https://www.ulisboa.pt/>, accessed on 14 February 2023), for example, indicates on its website that it embraces 'the responsibility of making the city of Lisbon one of the great European capitals of culture and science, University of Lisbon receives every year more than 9500 international students'. Likewise, on the University of Porto (<https://www.up.pt/portal/pt/>, accessed on 14 February 2023) website, one of the key highlights of the first page is linked to 'applications open for international students 2023/2024', and a news reports that, once again, University of Porto has attracted more than 2000 mobility students.

Despite this obvious focus on attracting ISs, it is important to question the extent to which these institutions actively integrate these students and ensure their well-being, especially during the critical period of the COVID-19 pandemic. Drawing on the ideas of [24] and [10], we question whether Portuguese HEIs are able to absorb the various ISs groups into their 'institutional fabric' [24] (p. 21), or whether they perpetuate 'institutional mechanisms of discrimination and exclusion' [10] (p. 1593).

According to [10], often ISs are seen and treated by their HEIs as problems in need of solutions, which through a multicultural lens can be interpreted as an assimilationist logic, since this group is expected to adapt, 'while host universities can simply remain unchanged' (p. 1594). This view can be very harmful to the promotion of a truly multicultural academic environment, considering that the values mentioned previously—inclusion and social equity—would not be respected.

Ref. [25], in turn, draw attention to the fact that the recognition of the existence of assimilationist attitudes within dominant cultures can reveal the dynamics of racism and discrimination present in each location, thus stimulating the debate and the construction of more positive policies aimed at articulating relationships among various groups. We believe that by highlighting the need to develop measures that promote a more multicultural environment within the Portuguese HEIs, this paper contributes to enhancing this institutions' potential to become truly international and open towards diversity.

The concept of multiculturalism is often criticized due to the conceptual inconsistencies embedded in its own construction. 'Interculturalism' emerges, in this context, as a potential alternative. However, the dialectic juxtaposition of interculturalism and multiculturalism remains a contentious issue. Ref. [26] propose that 'multicultural' pertains to the recognition and understanding of various cultures' unique characteristics, while 'intercultural' signifies mutual appreciation and enrichment brought about by heightened intercultural engagement. This distinction is mirrored in the semantic composition of the two terminologies, with 'multi' indicating mere cultural plurality, whereas 'inter' suggests a degree of interaction.

Albeit we understand this perspective, in this paper we opt for the term 'multiculturalism'. Numerous scholars have dismissed the conceptual merit of interculturalism, viewing the interaction between cultures as integral to the philosophy of multiculturalism [27]. For instance, ref. [28] argue that interculturalism lacks the potent political discourse needed to intellectually overshadow multiculturalism. Additionally, ref. [29] envisions a reinvigoration of the concept of multiculturalism and rejects the notion of interculturalism as a viable alternative. Ref. [30] further notes that multiculturalism should be regarded not as an issue, but potentially as a solution to cultural diversity. In this sense, we consider [24] definition to be particularly compelling, as it signifies that multiculturalism, rather than interculturalism, is a more comprehensive concept, being 'a normative critique of the institutional arrangements of the public sphere that are seen as injuring or depriving a cultural minority

of its rights'. It is this understanding of multiculturalism that we mobilize in the current paper to analyse the experiences of international students in Portuguese higher education.

Within this multicultural perspective, the literature review regarding what was done related to ISs in the context of the pandemic showed that the rights of this group were often not ensured. Ref. [31] investigate the experiences of Chinese students in the United States. The authors indicate that due to increasing Sinophobia, the psychological distress, thoughts of suicide, and symptoms of depression and anxiety have increased significantly among Chinese students. Many participants in this research experienced uncomfortable situations, such as hearing curses on the street or being ignored by university colleagues who previously treated them well. Similarly, ref. [32] observe an increase in racism against Chinese students in the United Kingdom, leading to a feeling of insecurity among these students to continue living in the host country. In the Australian context, ref. [33] carried out a study with more than 5000 ISs from 119 countries, revealing that more than 70% of the participants lost their jobs or part of their work shifts. Many also reported that they were no longer able to pay for essential needs, such as food, and over twenty students were evicted, having been forced to resort to homeless shelters.

In this sense, these different scenarios demonstrate that the physical and psychological well-being of ISs was frequently not a priority for some HEIs and host countries. Ref. [34] recommend that HEIs should increase their support for students, providing help so that they could protect themselves from the virus and know how to face it psychologically. They also suggest that host universities must develop 'innovative strategies to improve the psychological well-being of the students as well as expand the existing student counselling facilities' (p. 6). Along the same lines, ref. [35] indicate that in order to maintain the sustainability of the HEIs, institutional measures should include good leadership in their institutes, in addition to efforts related to the financial security of students and their psychological well-being.

Regarding the elements mentioned above that confer an adequate agency among the HEIs to promote an efficient assistance to ISs, we comprehend that such perspective is in line with the multicultural approach. The scholarship on how HEIs and host countries dealt with COVID-19-related requests and respond to ISs' needs, highlights a mismatch between these two responses. Countless cases of racism against ISs, or accounts of ISs' inability to continue paying for their studies, and consequently, having to give them up in the moment of greatest difficulty, illustrates how HEIs failed in ensuring inclusion and respect for ISs.

In most of papers analysed, we could identify a very strong negative impact of the health crisis on the ISs' lives. We highlight the US, British and Australian contexts, as they are the nations with the largest contingents of ISs, but the literature on the challenges and adversities faced by the ISs during the pandemic were analysed in different contexts. For example, in Turkey [36], Denmark [37], South Korea [38], Canada [39], and in Portugal [12,40–42].

However, there are some cases of relative success in promoting multicultural education during the pandemic that also should be mentioned. Ref. [43] investigates the pandemic measures in the Chinese education sector. The author points out that HEIs in this country were quick to migrate to emergency remote teaching, in addition to the fact that professors received adequate training to adapt to the new type of teaching. On the other hand, he identifies that large universities are better able to provide a higher quality remote teaching than smaller ones.

Ref. [44] analyses how elite HEIs in the United States (Stanford and Cornell) and the United Kingdom (Cambridge and Oxford) dealt with ISs, focusing on institutional responses during the beginning of the pandemic, where there was no *modus operandi* for the universities. The author discusses the reality of Asian students and more specifically from Singapore, noting that while domestic students were instructed to leave *campi* immediately, ISs were welcome to remain in their dorms. Additionally, Ye highlights the dissatisfaction of ISs regarding the lack of compatible information about the measures they should take.

In an open letter from the international student body at the University of Oxford, students point out that market logic has been superimposed on students' well-being.

3. Methods

3.1. Population and Sample

This article stems from the study entitled 'Students from third countries in Portugal: challenges of integration in a (post)pandemic era' funded by the Fund for Asylum, Migration and Integration (FAMI). The main objective of this study was to analyse the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on ISs' learning and socialisation experiences. To this end, 42 in-depth interviews were conducted with degree mobility students from Brazil, Portuguese-speaking African Countries, Syria and China. The choice of the first two groups of students is connected to the colonial ties between Portugal and these countries, which strongly marks ISs' mobility flows to the country. Among the 49,916 new ISs enrolled in 2021/2022, 32,012 came from just four countries: Brazil (16,377), Guinea-Bissau (6185), Cape Verde (5335) and Angola (4115), making up over 64% of ISs in degree mobility in Portugal [5]. Chinese students were included in the study due to the significant growth of this group in Portuguese universities in recent years, together with the increase in the racial attacks they have been facing, being often identified as the culprits for the origins and spread of COVID-19 [45]. The choice of Syrian students was based on the need to develop more studies on the inclusion in higher education of students coming from areas of conflict [46], which is an especially under-studied area in the Portuguese context [47]. Out of the 42 respondents, 25 were women and 17 were men, ranging from young students in their 20s, to older students, such as 40 and 50+.

3.2. Research Technique/Instruments

Participants were recruited using the snowball technique and the main requirement for them to be interviewed, in addition to being enrolled in a programme that confers a degree in a Portuguese HEI, was that they must have had arrived in Portugal before the pandemic was officially announced in the country (March 2020). Thus, among our participants, we have undergraduate, master's, and doctoral students, enrolled in diverse programmes throughout the country. The interviews had an average duration of 1.5 h, and were all audio-recorded and later transcribed verbatim. Most were conducted on Zoom and some face-to-face, according to the preference of the research participants. The language used in most interviews was Portuguese, however, on some occasions Syrian and Chinese students felt more comfortable being interviewed in English, and the research team allowed them the possibility to use that language.

3.3. Research Analysis

Thematic analysis was conducted on the data, considering the pertinence of this method to identify, analyse and interpret patterns of meanings [48]. The software for qualitative analysis MAXQDA was used to organise the data and classify 'elements according to their similarities and by differentiation, with subsequent regrouping, depending on common characteristics', [49] (p. 683). In the current paper, we focus on three analytical themes: 'How the university dealt with the pandemic and with the students', 'Role of the university in students' integration in Portugal' and 'Meaning of well-being for students and promotion of well-being by HEIs'.

3.4. Ethical Considerations

Finally, it is important to note that all participants signed an informed consent, in which they were informed about the research objectives and the anonymous nature of their participation. Fictitious names are used in this manuscript to ensure anonymity. It was also clarified that respondents could stop the interview at any time or not answer any question they did not feel comfortable with, in addition to the possibility of withdrawing consent at any time, as well as requesting access, rectification, or deletion of their personal data. The

study was approved by the Ethics Committee of the University Institute of Lisbon and is compliant with GDPR.

4. Results

4.1. Initial Institutional Reactions to the COVID-19 Pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought several challenges to ISs and HEIs around the world. To understand these challenges in the Portuguese context, the first question that guides our analysis is how did your institution deal with the pandemic and with international students' needs? At a first glance, many participants' accounts depict a positive view of Portuguese HEIs, in the sense that the actions that they took as a response to the pandemic were appropriate, and the switch to emergency remote teaching was swift:

The university's reaction was very quick. As soon as we had a positive [COVID] case at the university, the next day we closed the university and stopped all classes. (Clara, Chinese IS)

I think it [the university] handled very well. They were very quick, after a week they had already put everything in place, they had already organized everything in relation to online classes, to Zoom. (Sheila, Syrian IS)

They were always very agile. Really. They were always very organized too. [. . .] in the first few weeks we were the first in the entire university to have people in isolation because our professors came into direct contact with [COVID] patients. So, they dismissed us, we started immediately the online [classes]. (Helen, Mozambican IS)

These accounts indicate that, in light of the health emergency, their universities were quick to react and arrange online classes, so that their courses would not be compromised. Other students highlighted the institutional compliance with the new health recommendations and regulations, which increased the students' perceptions of being in a safe environment:

I think they handled it well [. . .] and tried to follow the recommendations regarding the number of people, regarding the use of a mask, hand hygiene. [. . .] I think that regarding the pandemic issue [the approach of the university] was a very positive thing, the performance and what they could do to continue with the activities and for our safety as well. (Manuela, Brazilian IS)

However, some of the Chinese students we interviewed questioned the readiness of the first actions taken by their institutions. For instance, a student pointed out that her university took a long time to take the first steps regarding measures to combat and contain COVID-19, which may have placed the student body in unnecessary danger through potential exposure to the virus.

I think the university's reaction was a little late. For example, in the first phase of the pandemic, the university did not [. . .] act immediately. For example, enforcing restrictions [. . .] wearing masks and keeping [social] distance. Additionally, we, the Chinese students, I think we were the first ones to wear masks and at that time we had to endure some comments [because of that]. (Melissa, Chinese IS)

In this account, Melissa highlights that she had different expectations for the way the university should have initially reacted to the pandemic. This was a feeling shared by many Chinese students who were enrolled in Western HEIs, as they would compare the reaction of their university to how HEIs in their home country responded to this unprecedented situation (França, Gaspar and Mathias, 2022). Given China's prior experience with previous health crises involving respiratory infections (SARS and MERS), upon the outbreak of the pandemic, the Chinese government enforced wearing masks in all public spaces. As she indicates that the Chinese students adopted the use of face masks even before it was made officially mandatory by the Ministry of Health in Portugal. In the context of Sinophobia, this early masking behaviour contributed to the increased visibility of these students, exposing

them to uncomfortable situations and micro-aggressions [45]. This illustrates how different cultures can have different understandings and expectations of the same phenomenon.

Besides the perception that HEIs were slow to take the necessary actions to contain the spread of the virus, other students from the same university highlighted the lack of organisation and support to prepare teachers for a different and, to many, unknown form of teaching:

'It [online education] was not very good because the professors said that the university did not help them much and they had to find their own way [to teach]. [. . .] Some professors chose Teams, others chose Zoom, because there was no right way [to do it at the time]'. (Livia, Chinese IS)

Across the dataset, however, accounts of students who were satisfied with the first actions taken by Portuguese HEIs are more. Nevertheless, it is important to recall that, in a multicultural campus, it is crucial to understand the diverse needs of different groups of students and develop institutional support structures capable of answering to those needs [50], even in emergency situations, such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

4.2. Student Support Mechanisms

Many respondents reported that, after the outbreak of COVID-19, they frequently received emails with a very diverse content, including contents, such as encouraging the practice of sports or recreational activities or simply encouraging them to take care of their physical and mental health:

They sent emails to do yoga classes, and other online classes. However, it was not something for international students, it was for everybody. I also think that I am not [any] different because I am an international student, Brazilian. (Roberta, Brazilian IS)

Besides the acknowledgement of supportive messages from her institution, it is interesting to observe how students made sense of their IS identity. For Roberta, the fact that she is Brazilian may not fully entitle her to the international student status at her HEI. In her view, students considered international are usually European:

So, this is funny, because I do not even know if they see me as an international student. Are Brazilians international students? To them, I mean. [. . .] I might be unfair [in saying this], but I do not know if the [international] office has a role [in my experience], I do not feel that it does anything or, if it does, I am not part of it. However, I really feel that way, that international students are Europeans. From other countries maybe. [. . .] I do not believe I am seen as an international student. (Roberta, Brazilian IS)

Potentially, the shared Portuguese language (despite its variations), together with the post-colonial ties between Brazil and Portugal raise questions about Brazilian students' international status in her institution. In other words, a certain level of cultural proximity [51] between home and host country seems to create a certain familiarity and a sense of not being 'international' enough. At a closer look, it is possible to observe that this feeling contains a critique of the way her HEI treats different international students. In her understanding, being an international student entitles one to targeted measures and support provided by the international office which she, as a Brazilian and non-European student, does not seem to access.

Another Brazilian student indicates that, whilst he received many informative emails, when he actually needed direct support from the institution, his request was denied.

Regarding support, I think there were a lot of emails, many informative. However, at a certain point, I sent an email requesting financial support. Either financially or a discount on enrolment fee due to the complicated situation I was experiencing in relation to the Euro-Real [exchange rate]. [. . .] Additionally, I got 'no' in response. So, there was no support. (Duarte, Brazilian IS)

Other Brazilian participants that we interviewed referred to the exchange rate as a significant challenge in ensuring their financial sustainability in Portugal. Many came

to Portugal with a certain amount of savings to cover their living expenses. However, these savings were significantly reduced when, as a result of the political and economic instability in Brazil, together with the impact of COVID-19 on the world economy, it became much more expensive to buy euros using the Brazilian currency. However, as illustrated in this account, when these students requested financial support from their university, or at least a reduction of the tuition fee, no support was provided. This lack of support at the institutional level placed Duarte in a very challenging situation, pushing him to even consider giving up on his HE degree and returning to Brazil. Similar to Duarte, other ISs found themselves in extremely challenging situations, as narrated by Tatiana, to which HEIs remained oblivious or they even took measures that further increased international students' vulnerability:

At my university there are several different faculties. For example, at my faculty, they increased the tuition fees for international students in the middle of the pandemic. [. . .] they approved this increase in tuition fees in the 2019 Plan. However, they enforced it in the middle of the pandemic, in 2020. [. . .] Additionally, then many international students dropped out because they were already in the pandemic. [. . .] They did not have a job, they did not have any stability, and the faculty still increases the tuition, which is already more expensive [for international students]? (Tatiana, Brazilian IS)

This account indicates a lack of concern and empathy towards the international student body on behalf of this HEI, which decided to enforce a previously planned increase in ISs' tuition fees during the hardest stages of the pandemic. This period coincided with generalised lockdowns in which many ISs working in part-time or precarious contracts lost their jobs and struggled to cope with their living expenses. Even though none of our research participants gave up on their studies and returned to their home countries, according to this student's account, many others dropped out.

Particularly within the group of Brazilian students, complaints about the lack of support at the financial level were rather common:

I think it [the university] handled it very badly, it did not have any measure with . . . greater focus in that sense, because it did not have any support [for students], being an extremely bureaucratic university and with little space for dialogue. The tuition fees here are a fortune for international students, (. . .) there were people who were unable to return to Brazil because of the closed airports and everything, having a cost of living here that increased dramatically because of the euro [exchange rate], without having any kind of assistance, any other kind of support or discount. (Leandra, Brazilian IS)

4.3. Academic Demands and Well-Being during the Pandemic

In addition to financial difficulties and a perceived lack of institutional support at that level, the accounts of ISs mentioned the excessive demands regarding academic tasks and a lack of flexibility with deadlines, in a moment where social and academic routines of students were strongly affected by the pandemic. According to Fabiana, at the institutional level there was no concern for the mental health of the students:

I felt that in many moments it seemed that we were not enrolled in a psychology major. Because they were looking very little at people [and their mental health]. In the most human sense. Like everyone is going through a situation that is very heavy and very difficult. You cannot demand the same things [from students], request a lot of assignments, [. . .] it is going to be difficult. (Fabiana, Brazilian IS)

Other students also perceived an excessive demand at the academic level in times of emergency remote teaching, indicating that there has been an increase in the number of hours dedicated to online classes, which, according to her, was not a good strategy for teaching and learning:

They increased class load. I do not know if it was because it was online, or because we were at home, but I think that honestly a person's concentration [online] can go up to an

hour and after an hour the person does not even . . . they do not understand anything anymore, [. . .] the [capacity to] think is no longer there. So, for me this was not a good strategy to increase the number of hours of classes, even though it was online. (Leticia, Mozambican IS)

Another student revealed that she was experiencing numerous problems in Brazil with her sick mother, in addition to financial difficulties and academic stress. Thus, she asked for the postponement of some exams that she was supposed to do at the end of the semester since she needed to assist her family. However, even with an extremely difficult situation, she did not get a positive response from her teachers and the programme she was attending:

My mother had a surgery in the pandemic context, in which I was the only person who could assist her. Additionally, a week later I would have tests. Additionally, considering that I was sleeping with my mother to take care of her in a completely exhausting routine. I even got to talk about this with my teachers, there was one teacher who did not even answer my email. [. . .] I did not have very positive feedback from them. So, I think that [overall] there was a lack of attention to all nuances of the pandemic, specifically [for] immigrants and people who were not at home and close to their family. (Leandra, Brazilian IS)

In this sense, there is a certain consensus among respondents that Portuguese HEIs failed to provide adequate assistance to ISs during the global COVID-19 pandemic. In the excerpts above, the lack of flexibility regarding academic workload during particularly challenging times increased students' anxiety and difficulties in dealing with diverse demands. When asking students about what well-being means to them and the extent to which their HEIs actively promoted it, most responses were negative:

Particularly for my needs there was nothing [in terms of concrete support]. Well [. . .] I was doing therapy weekly, and I was like, loving it. Additionally, I needed it. I am already in a foreign country alone, I had lost a granddaughter, the currency devalued, I mean, my life was not comfortable at all. [. . .] Then, when the pandemic started, which is when we needed [therapy] most, [. . .] it switched from weekly to monthly, [. . .] because the therapist was not able to handle it, then all the students wanted therapy. I think therapy is essential. (Inés, Brazilian IS)

Most of our interviews revealed that the students viewed mental health as essential for well-being. It is interesting to note that although many students refer to the constant emails from their HEIs which included diverse content (including the provision of psychological support), we found a narrative of a student needing to resort to this support who found the service to be quite insufficient during the pandemic. Additionally, in a less complex situation than the previous one, another HEI did not seem to provide adequate support:

They were not even concerned about that [promoting well-being]. There was even an episode when [. . .] I studied at a certain time and then I changed [schedules]. There was another class where I did not know the people and I did not feel welcomed. Additionally, then I sent them an email asking if I could change [back] and I said that [. . .] I was Brazilian and that I was not feeling very integrated in the group, and that in the afternoon class I knew some girls and that I was already more integrated. Additionally, then they said I could not change. I wanted to change and even saying that I was not feeling well [. . .] feeling integrated, they just ignored it and said that the deadline had passed and that they could not do anything to help me. (Manuela, Brazilian IS)

We can observe that in both cases there was an issue that needed a quick solution. However, in the second scenario, the problem could be more easily solved, since there were other timetables that the student could have attended, but there was no flexibility on behalf of the institution to accommodate this student's needs. In this case, the student herself suggested the solution, however, the rigidity of her HEI did not allow for an efficient

resolution to her problem, and she continued to feel excluded in that group until the end of the semester.

4.4. Perceptions of Integration

When asked about the role of their HEIs in their integration in Portugal, most students considered that their institutions did not contribute significantly to their integration into the academic community and Portuguese society. Whether inside or outside the classroom, perceptions were quite similar, indicating that HEIs in Portugal tend to give little importance to their ISs' integration:

The role [of the university] was not that important because I tried to integrate independently from the university. The classmates did not make me feel that I was part of the group, it did not even seem that they liked the foreigners. I did not feel welcome. [. . .] That is why most of my friends [. . .] are foreigners, they are from Brazil, they could be from another country too, housemates. (Rafaela, Syrian IS)

I think the university did not play a very active role in my integration here in Portugal. (. . .) I believe that in some universities it has an important role, that they help in the relationship, in the interaction of the students. [It is important to] consider the diversity of the students, in which contexts these students left [their countries]. (Margarida, Guinean IS)

Even though integration is perceived in different ways by different ISs, there seems to be a shared understanding among our interviewees that their HEIs do not have an active role in their integration to Portugal. In Rafaela's excerpt, for example, we can see that her institution does not seem to promote a multicultural environment in which local students actively interact and are open to ISs. Likewise, Margarida points out that her institution was not concerned with providing opportunities for interaction among different students. Other students also said:

I think that for international students, the university should help more and pay more attention. [. . .] Take more care of international students because we have language difficulties. Additionally, when we encounter a difficulty, especially about different university processes, for example when making a request [. . .] we need some instructions. (Melissa, Chinese IS)

There is no mechanism to integrate students who are not nationals, apart from these freshman initiation practices. [. . . Apart] from the first weeks [when] you have a monitor who will take you through the physical spaces. [. . .] I think integration goes beyond that. [. . .] Obviously it is possible to accompany people more closely if there were interest in integrating. [. . .] There are people who live very far from the university. "Why are these people so far away?" We do not know. It is not interesting for the university to ask these people why they are living so far away. "Is it a choice? Is it because you have acquaintances and relatives there? Or is it because it was the only place you could pay? Additionally, what do we do with it? Would you like to live closer? Is it possible to do something? Is it possible to change this situation?" However, I think in this sense, integration at the university is kind of non-existing. The university in general does not know who its students are. (Paulo, Brazilian IS)

Melissa, on the other hand, identifies difficulties with communication since she does not completely dominate the Portuguese language. She indicates that Portuguese HEIs should pay more attention to IS and their needs. Finally, Paulo, despite acknowledging that his university has the practice of encouraging interaction among different students during the first weeks of classes, understands that integration is a much more complex issue. For him, being integrated into society goes far beyond superficial interaction with local people. It must do, for example, with the issue of housing and the right to the city, which his institution shows no interest in promoting, in his understanding.

In general, it is evident that most of the interviewees felt the assimilationist position in relation to their institutions. Since integration is a fundamental step in promoting well-being in the academic environment, Portuguese HEIs have demonstrated inefficiencies in dealing with the international student body during the COVID-19 pandemic. There is no doubt that this event brought a series of issues to the academic environment, however, the fact that it is an unprecedented phenomenon does not justify the lack of support that we observe through the reports of these students.

5. Final Remarks

From the students' perspective, we verified that the majority of Portuguese HEIs acted quickly when they needed to attend to the demands of the COVID-19 pandemic and switch to emergency remote teaching. With just one exception, we found that HEIs in Portugal were agile and efficient in organizing classes in the virtual environment. Our findings are in line with similar studies conducted on the impact of COVID-19 on international student mobility. Ref. [43] research, quoted earlier in the section on multiculturalism, demonstrates the readiness with which HEIs in China adopted emergency remote teaching. Nevertheless, explicit guidelines on how to navigate these new teaching and learning spaces were not available for students or teachers in Portugal, as we observed through our analysis.

Institutional communication about recommendations and available measures seemed to increase during the pandemic and was focused on diverse subjects, from providing psychological help to encouraging the student body to do physical activities and stay safe at home. Such actions are in line with the recommendations of the study of [34], on how university management answered to the needs of international students during COVID-19.

However, in many Portuguese HEIs this initial response remained rather superficial and was limited to informative emails about the initial stages of the pandemic. Several students indicated that when they actually contacted their respective HEIs with concrete requests for support, they did not get any responses, or the institutions were not able to attend to their demands. Financial, academic, and psychological support, that were requisite during the first months of the pandemic, did not seem sufficient nor satisfactory for most interviewees. Thus, our findings indicate that HEIs in Portugal fell short of ensuring the financial and psychological well-being of their student body, which according to [35] is a crucial aspect, especially in emergency situations.

Regarding the academic dimension, rather than rendering more flexible or even reducing the academic load and tasks in view of the struggles that many students' felt in their personal, professional and academic lives, in some programmes the demands increased even further. One of the students reported an increase in the number of class hours in the online environment, and another one highlighted that in there were many demands and more work to do besides the usual academic load in her programme. Our findings are in line with [41] who indicate that around 62% of the respondents in their study believed that the COVID-19 pandemic would affect the successful completion of their studies.

Our data indicates that, despite some prompt responses, Portuguese HEIs did not provide adequate support to their international student body during these challenging times. Similar to other segments of the migrant population, ISs present higher levels of social vulnerability [52]. Unfortunately, in the absence of adequate support mechanisms, these vulnerabilities were further exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. In this sense, most HEIs in Portugal seem to have assumed an assimilationist stance regarding ISs, thinking that this group should adapt to current academic norms and processes in a moment where the need for more flexibility and support was obvious. In some cases, we saw that there was no dialogue between institutions and their international students. Even when a less rigid position on the part of the institution would have sufficed, as in the case of the student who did not feel integrated into her class and asked to change timetables, the institution had no flexibility, understanding and empathy for this student. In this regard, based on theoretical insights from [24] and [10], as previously discussed, our analysis

indicates that Portuguese HEIs were unable to effectively develop multiculturalism and successfully integrate international students, and they could not prevent the perpetuation of exclusion mechanisms.

In line with the theoretical background, the present study has brought to light the fact that a substantial number of HEIs in Portugal have not made a significant effort to facilitate the integration of ISs into the local academic community and the broader Portuguese society. Our findings strongly suggest that some of these institutions are not actively fostering a multicultural environment that encourages interaction between local and international students. Previous research conducted on this topic in Portugal indicated a similar trend [10,20], which suggests that little progress has been made in recent years in promoting a more diverse, multicultural, and international campus. Overall, the majority of interviewees reported feeling a sense of assimilationist pressure from their respective institutions. Given that integration is a crucial component of promoting the overall well-being in the academic environment, it is evident that Portuguese HEIs have faced challenges in effectively managing their international student population amidst the COVID-19 pandemic. This finding is consistent with previous research conducted on the impact of COVID-19 on international students in Portugal [8,40]. On the other hand, given that this research focuses on the narratives of ISs, thus limiting itself to their own perspectives, further studies are still necessary in the Portuguese context in order to understand how different actors, such as HEIs, for example, have dealt with this period of numerous difficulties and uncertainties.

Therefore, in this article we draw on the often-ignored voices of international students [53] to understand how Portuguese HEIs dealt with the pandemic, and more specifically with the ISs. Our findings indicate that well-being, as an important element of the integration of the ISs in a new country, needs to be more systematically approached by the HEIs. Since the effective development of multiculturalism requires the promotion of social justice and challenging the current power structures that reproduce inequalities in the academic environment [23], our data indicate that the HEIs in Portugal still have to invest in the promotion of a more inclusive and multicultural environment. We hope this paper's findings can encourage HEIs and their diverse professionals to develop more effective multicultural strategies and practices.

Author Contributions: Conceptualization, C.N. and T.F.; Methodology, C.N. and T.F.; Validation, C.N. and T.F.; Formal analysis, B.L.; Investigation, B.L., C.N. and T.F.; Data curation, B.L.; Writing—original draft, B.L.; Writing—review & editing, C.N. and T.F.; Visualization, B.L.; Supervision, C.N. and T.F.; Project administration, C.N. and T.F.; Funding acquisition, C.N. and T.F. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Funding: This research was funded by The Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund (AMIF), grant number PT/2021/FAMI/706.

Institutional Review Board Statement: The study was conducted in accordance with the General Data Protection Regulation (EU GDPR) and approved by the Ethics Committee of ISCTE—University Institute of Lisbon.

Informed Consent Statement: Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

Acknowledgments: The first author acknowledges funding from the Portuguese Foundation for Science and Technology (FCT), with the reference 2022.13331.BD. The second author acknowledges funding from the FCT, with the reference CEECIND/00433/2018. This work was also supported by the Portuguese Government, through the FCT, under CIIE's multiannual funding [grants no. UID/CED/00167/2013, UIDB/00167/2020, and UIDP/00167/2020]. The third author acknowledges funding from the FCT, Norma Transitória (DL57/2016-Lei57/2017).

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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