

Article

Academic Migration and Epistemological Value: Exploring the Experience of Migrant Academics in Portugal

Taísa Oliveira ^{1,*}, Cosmin Nada ¹ and António Magalhães ² 

¹ Centre for Research and Intervention in Education, Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences of the University of Porto, 4099-002 Porto, Portugal; cosmin@fpce.up.pt

² Centre for Research in Higher Education Policies, Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences of the University of Porto, 4099-002 Porto, Portugal; antonio@fpce.up.pt

* Correspondence: taisha.bbarbosa@gmail.com

Abstract: The internationalisation of higher education (IoHE) has become a prominent topic in higher education research. While there is increasing institutional and governmental commitment to IoHE, it is important to consider the actual outcomes of these processes critically. Despite the significant issues raised by the academic migration of professors, researchers, and post-docs regarding migratory trajectories and epistemological aspects of scholarly work, this area of research remains understudied. This article adopted a qualitative approach, drawing on semi-structured interviews with migrant scholars pursuing academic careers in Portugal. Our findings suggest that a complex interplay of factors influences the pursuit of an academic career by migrants, including the influence of institutional and governmental policies regarding science and the impact of marketisation of higher education institutions that have jeopardised academic career possibilities. Moreover, science and academic-related work seem to be the main drivers in pursuing an academic career for migrant scholars rather than primarily career-focused and economic strategies. Notwithstanding, our study highlighted the challenges that migrant academics face at the epistemological level, pointing out that their experiences are embedded in neocolonial logics that are further aggravated by current unequal societal arrangements related to what constitutes valid and legitimate knowledge and the power relations therein.

Keywords: migrant academics; multiculturalism; academic careers; internationalization; epistemic injustice; Portugal



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1. Introduction

This article explores the experiences of migrant academics pursuing an academic career in Portugal, focusing on the material and epistemological dimensions of their professional journey. While existing research extensively examined scholars' migration in pursuing academic careers [1–4], the epistemological dimension intertwined with these movements received relatively less attention. However, it is crucial to recognise that the epistemological dimension lies at the core of academic pursuits, as scholars primarily work on creating and disseminating knowledge.

In this study, the material dimension of an academic career refers to the tangible and observable factors that affect career development, such as entrance and promotion criteria, research funding opportunities, and work conditions, as opposed to non-material ones, such as ideas, epistemological orientation, beliefs, and values. Drawing on Marxist notions of materiality [5–7] to discuss the material elements of developing an academic career, we aim to highlight the broader economic and political conditions that shape an academic career, such as the marketisation, precarisation ingrained in global trends of internationalisation of higher education (IoHE). For instance, academic careers worldwide were affected by the marketisation of higher education (HE). Consequently, reductions in public

funding forced higher education institutions (HEIs) to resort to short-term contracts and other precarious labour practices to reduce costs [8,9]. This has profound implications for academic careers, including unprecedented challenges for scholars pursuing an academic career within this environment and under these global conditions. The epistemological aspect of pursuing an academic career delves into the dynamics surrounding knowledge construction, dissemination, and valuation within academia. Furthermore, this article acknowledges the concept of “epistemic injustice” introduced by Miranda Fricker [10], which sheds light on the intricate interplay between knowledge production and knowledge producers and how cultural and social constructs influence assessments of credibility and legitimacy within the academic realm [10,11]. According to Medina [11], instances of epistemic injustice are closely linked to assessments of credibility and legitimacy. As this author elucidates, judgments of credibility and legitimacy are intertwined with cultural and social constructs that attribute varying degrees of authority and credibility to knowledge claims and knowledge producers.

In this study, we delve into the experiences of migrant scholars in Portugal to understand the complex dynamics between knowledge production and knowledge producers, often resulting in conflicting perceptions of legitimate and valuable knowledge and its producers. Our central research question is: how do migrant academics experience their pursuit of an academic career, both at the material and epistemological levels? By emphasising the importance of material and epistemological aspects within academic careers, we aim to illuminate the intricate interplay between economic, political, cultural, and individual factors in pursuing knowledge. To accomplish this, we adopted a qualitative approach, utilising semi-structured interviews as the primary data collection method. The article’s structure is as follows: First, we present a comprehensive literature review that puts forwards the theoretical foundations of our study, including a discussion on IoHE, epistemic injustice, and the migration of migrant scholars. Secondly, we provide contextual information by examining the case of Portugal and how the dynamics of IoHE and the presence of migrant scholars unfold within the national context. Next, we outline our methods, present the findings, and then discuss the implications and a concluding section.

Our choice of Portugal as a research context is related to the increasing presence of migrants in the country, particularly migrants from former Portuguese colonies who come to pursue higher education studies, as will be discussed in the section on the Portuguese context section. This choice is valuable, as the literature broadly argues for a critical assessment of current social arrangements in relation to the colonial legacy of colonialism [12–16]. Furthermore, Portugal is a relevant case to study because the government and HEIs are making increasing efforts to internationalise [17,18]. Finally, it offers a valuable perspective beyond the Anglo-Saxon viewpoints that are often overrepresented in mainstream academic literature.

1.1. Conceptualising Internationalisation of Higher Education

The internationalisation of higher education (IoHE) emerged as a significant area of change in HEIs worldwide [18–20]. However, IoHE is a complex topic with no static or agreed-upon approach, as Stein et al. [21] noted. It encompasses various perspectives, each with different implications and political understandings. These authors offered a social cartography regarding different understandings and approaches of IoHE, including internationalisation for the global knowledge economy, global public good, anti-oppressive internationalisation, and relational translocalism.

As Stein et al. [21] explain, “IoHE for the global knowledge economy” frames HE as a central element for success in the “global knowledge economy”. From this perspective, HE is key to supporting innovation and developing a competitive workforce, fostering growth in increasingly global and interconnected economies. Specific fields, such as science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM), are prioritised due to educating students with specific goals aligned with market needs [21,22]. Moreover, the same authors highlighted that the standardisation of Western knowledge is widely accepted within this

paradigm, and expanding Eurocentric epistemological approaches is seen as a beneficial outcome of the internationalisation process. Yet, non-Western knowledge can be valued if deemed to have exchange value, such as indigenous knowledge about plants for developing new and profitable medicines. (Stein et al. [21] gave a practical example of this type of IoHE approach in a programme developed at the University of Canterbury in New Zealand (NZ) called the “21 Day International Challenge”. In this project, higher education students in New Zealand competed to develop an “innovative” and “entrepreneurial” solution to problems in “struggling communities” in the Philippines. Participants had three weeks to develop a business plan to transform people’s lives in this setting, despite having minimal knowledge about that context, community, and culture. Although students in the programme were encouraged to “listen” to people from the community, they were mainly supported and mentored by partners from the New Zealand business sector.)

In the case of “IoHE for the global public good”, the importance of democratising access to HE worldwide is emphasised while critiquing purely instrumental and economic approaches to IoHE [21,22]. Higher education is understood as the primary source of the global public goods of democracy, prosperity, and knowledge. Nonetheless, this perspective does not consider the foundational models, plausibility, and legitimacy of modern institutions, e.g., HEIs, courts, legal and tax systems, and parliaments, among others, and their operating logic and their limits in achieving global goods in a broader sense [21–23]. As for “anti-oppressive internationalisation”, the approach to IoHE is “based on a commitment to work in solidarity for systemic change toward greater social justice” [21] (p. 9). This perspective challenges the critique presented in the approach of “IoHE for the global public good” by questioning what qualifies as “public” and what is deemed “good”. It also questions IoHE approaches that tend to dismiss or downplay systemic issues, such as the impact of the current, updated, and sophisticated manifestations of racism, colonialism, and imperialism that international encounters may bring to the surface [15,16,23,24]. IoHE through the lens of “relational translocalism”, as Stein et al. [21] highlighted, is an approach that emphasises “the notion that exposure to more knowledge about the systemic harms of the dominant global imaginary is necessary but insufficient for addressing problems caused by those harms, and for nurturing possibilities for knowing and being otherwise” (p. 11). (The authors used a programme in Brazil as an example of the IoHE approach through relational translocalism. This programme takes international (mostly North American students) to Brazilian “favelas” to teach them about poverty. It aims to show the students that their efforts to “make a difference” may contribute to the problem. The programme encourages self-reflection and confronts the violent and unsustainable structures within global systems that arise from their historical and political standpoint. It also highlights the contradictions in the ways that possible solutions are presented. For more information, see: <https://movimentosaudemental.org/2019/08/09/estudantes-estrangeiros-conhecem-aco-es-sociais-no-bom-jardim/> accessed on 1 May 2023). This perspective accentuates the power relations inherent in IoHE dynamics and acknowledges the complex systems of dominance embedded in them. It suggests that only reforming HE systems, which are rooted and founded upon exploitative and hierarchical relations, may not result in social justice.

These significantly different approaches to IoHE show that internationalisation is a multifaceted concept possessing substantially different political understandings. Research on this topic was also explored in various ways, such as from students’ experiences overseas [25,26], from the influence of globalisation combined with the requirements of the knowledge society [8,19,20], from governmental and institutional perspectives [18], and by framing IoHE as a means of decolonising HE [13,19].

To better articulate the complexities and nuances of the experiences of migrant scholars within the context of fostered IoHE dynamics, it is crucial to recognise the close relationship between this topic and the current dominant marketisation and neoliberal orientations of HE systems [8,27,28].

1.2. Academic Diasporas and Internationalisation of Higher Education

Huang and Welch [20] emphasised the significance of migrant scholar recruitment for IoHE worldwide, highlighting that this cannot be viewed in isolation from institutions' ambitions and strategies. From the institutional side, hiring migrant scholars may align with HEIs' strategies to increasingly compete for funding, international students, and research grants, leading to a focus on recruiting high-profile academics who may bring in research funding and increase the institution's global visibility.

For academics, as Courtois and Sautier [8] pointed out, this also may be a consequence of degraded employment conditions related to the neoliberal orientation of HE, which force precarious academics to hop from one short-term contract to another within and across national borders. The literature on migrant scholars reveals mixed experiences, with some studies exploring the potential of migrant academics as agents of knowledge transfer, interchange, and, ultimately, knowledge creation [2–4]. Others, such as Morley et al. [2], discussed international movements as counterpoints to intellectual parochialism but caution that the experiences of migrant academics are contextual, contingent, and contradictory and are rarely entirely positive or negative. Burford et al. [29] emphasised the importance of avoiding an overly romanticised view of academic mobility and drew attention to the challenges that migrant scholars face. According to these authors, these challenges include constraints and limited opportunities for career advancement, which often leads to migrant scholars feeling “stuck” in their careers, with limited options for moving out, upward, or forward. Scholars such as Pustelnikovaite [2] and Sang and Calvard [28] highlighted the complex and varied reasons why academics choose to migrate and how identity markers such as gender, ethnicity, race, and relationship status can impact mobility opportunities and willingness. Pustelnikovaite [3] study found that academics often migrate for personal and professional reasons, including seeking better working conditions, pursuing research opportunities, and improving their quality of life. Sang and Calvard [28] pointed out that women may be less likely to migrate due to gender socialisation, which may attribute more family responsibilities to them, as well as gender discrimination and limited opportunities in male-dominated fields. Meanwhile, Bufford et al. [29] raised important questions about the power dynamics that shape the mobility of scholars, highlighting the relevance of reflecting upon how broader geopolitical issues intersect with academic mobility trends.

In this article, “academic mobility” refers to professional academics' short-term or long-term movement. Therefore, we did not examine the phenomenon of international mobility of students. “Migrant academics/scholars” refers to professors, researchers, and postdoctoral fellows who move across national borders for academic-related work or to pursue and develop an academic career. It is worth noting that the quest for defining concepts such as “migrant” or “migration” raises political, societal, and historical questions. There is still much debate on the conceptualisation regarding who qualifies as a “migrant” and what is considered “migration” [16,19]. A single definition of migrant may be problematic and narrow as migrants may be defined based on foreign birth, citizenship, immigration control, an individual's subjectivity (i.e., how individuals position themselves about their migration history and process), their movement into a new country for short-term or long-term stay, or a combination of these aspects. Mayblin and Turner [16] argued that using the term “migrant” to describe someone who moves across borders can have different implications compared to other terms such as “international” or “expatriate”. The latter terms suggest a positive message and a more beneficial understanding of the international presence of the host society. In contrast, the term “migrant” may resemble a political understanding of migration as a “problem” that needs to be solved. This view may consider the presence of migrants as a potential nuisance that requires appropriate policies to control it [15,16]. For this reason, in this paper, the term “migrant academic/scholar” was intentionally used instead of terms such as “international academic/faculty/scholar” or “global talent”. This emphasises that language can denote and reinforce unequal power relations and reflects researchers' worldviews regarding their research topics.

1.3. Academic Migration, Politics of Knowledge and Epistemic Injustice

As previously described, there is no single approach to IoHE, and academic mobility through academic experience is embedded in complex entanglements of economic, social, and political domains. While HE research documented well internationalisation policies and practices in different contexts. Several countries in the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) have national policies promoting academic staff mobility; less than half of EU nations collect information on how these experiences play along and the extent to which they meet the envisioned political expectations and goals [2].

Global statistics show that academic migration is increasingly relevant in different regions. According to Carvalho et al. [17], the number of migrant scholars is a key indicator of internationalisation for HEIs, as evidenced by its use in rankings such as Times Higher Education. In the United Kingdom (UK), migrant academics represent 30% of the UK's academic workforce [3,4]. In the Asian HE landscape, South Korea, Japan, and China have implemented national strategies to attract migrant academics to their HEIs [20]. Lee and Kuzhabekova [30] suggested that peripheral countries such as Kazakhstan often hire migrants to increase research outputs.

Regarding epistemology, [10] coined the concept of epistemic injustice to describe injustices arising in knowledge production and distribution. According to her, epistemic injustice aims to address structural arrangements where the capacity of certain speakers to produce knowledge considered “worthy” is impacted, reduced, or denied by how they are perceived [10,11,31]. Fricker's [10] argument moves between the lines of epistemology, ethics, and justice, emphasising the relevance of the interplay between the *who* and the *what* regarding knowledge production. Specifically, the *who* refers to the knowledge agent/subject, while the *what* pertains to the outcome of their knowledge production. The academic literature on epistemic injustice highlights the relevance of examining the relationship between epistemological value and social identity and the contextual perception of that identity [10,11]. For instance, it is common to challenge the validity of women's epistemic claims by labelling them and their argument as “emotional”, “subjective”, or “personal”, while men's claims are quite often labelled as “objective”, “neutral”, and “universal” [32,33].

According to Catala [31], migrant scholars are highly susceptible to a specific type of epistemic injustice: linguistic injustice. Being perceived as “speaking with an accent” can lead them to be viewed as “less competent, skilled, intelligent, and credible” (p. 333). However, the issue of speaking with an accent cannot be isolated from the context in which it takes place. The context is a critical factor as migrants position themselves and are positioned within a larger geopolitical, societal, and academic ecosystem [1–3,34].

Mignolo [34] emphasised the importance of geopolitical positioning in knowledge production, revealing the interconnection between knowledge producers' positionings and global geopolitics. He argued that the current global epistemic system is influenced by epistemic hierarchies that value certain forms of knowledge (and certain knowledge subjects) as more legitimate and valuable than others. These hierarchies tend to favour knowledge produced per Western parameters, thereby favouring those who possess dominant Western identity markers (such as being male, white, and Western-educated) [34,35]. As the author pointed out, epistemic hierarchies are deeply entrenched within academic institutions and perpetuated through dynamics that are reinforced through language use, citation practices, and disciplinary boundaries. Mignolo [34] suggested that one possible way of challenging epistemic hierarchies is when historically marginalised knowledge subjects and production practices produce knowledge that does not assume/assimilate dominant epistemic hierarchies and practices but modifies the geopolitical understanding of what topics and subjects that may be considered epistemically valid. (Mignolo's provides an example of Linda Smith, a Māori anthropologist, as particularly noteworthy because of her unique approach to knowledge production. Rather than studying Māori people as an outsider, Smith practised and produced knowledge as a Māori individual and from a Māori perspective, drawing on her own lived experiences and cultural heritage. This approach

challenges the dominant Western paradigm of knowledge production and highlights the importance of diverse perspectives in producing a more comprehensive understanding of the world).

1.4. Internationalisation of Portuguese Academia and the Presence of Migrant Scholars

Carvalho et al. [17] noted that the Portuguese government had primarily driven the main policies aimed at IoHE of Portuguese academia. However, little is known about institutional initiatives aimed at promoting IoHE. Despite many policies being implemented in recent decades to internationalise Portuguese academia, many aspects of their effectiveness remain largely unknown. For example, the extent to which institutional efforts influenced the recruitment of migrant scholars remains unclear. The aspect of IoHE that received significant attention and is considered central to policies aimed at internationalising Portuguese academia is the attraction of international students [25,26]. Despite the impact of these policies and other factors affecting Portuguese HEIs, such as the significant increase in and diversification of student bodies in recent decades, the expectation that having a more diverse student population would result in a more diverse teaching and research faculty has not been realised [17].

Yet, there was a steady increase in the representation of migrant scholars since 2015, with them making up 4.2% of the total teaching staff of HEIs in Portugal in 2021/22 [17]. Nonetheless, the complete picture of migrant scholars working in Portuguese HEIs is not fully grasped by these statistics. The national statistics agency for Education and Science only annually delivers official teaching staff data. It does not release the same comprehensive data about the number and situation of researchers. In Portugal, academic career structures are legally divided into two main categories: teaching and research careers. Even though a scientific research career was formally established by Decree Law 129/99, few researchers are formally pursuing their careers under this legal status [9]. Most researchers working in academia in Portugal are hired through temporary fellowship contracts which offer limited labour rights [9]. A study evaluating national policy programmes (the programmes evaluated were Science Program, Welcome II, Researcher FCT, and Scientific Employment Stimulus (2017–2018). From 2018 on, only 300 contracts were considered for the study) that were launched aiming at hiring researchers for public HEIs in Portugal between 2012 and 2018 found that 72% of valid applications were from academics with Portuguese nationality and 28% were from foreign-born academics originating from 91 countries, mainly: Spain (7.2%), Italy (4.4%), Brazil (3.1%), the UK (2.2%), France (1.4%), India (1.2%), and Germany (1.1%) [36]. This statistic shows that although migrant academics are not highly represented in teaching staff, they are more significantly represented in research staff.

Since 2007, the National Funding Agency for Science and Technology (FCT) (the Foundation for Science and Technology (FCT) was established in 1997) launched programmes to hire more PhD graduates and improve Portugal's outcomes in the global research arena. However, these programmes offer temporary contracts, not solid career paths [9]. Yet, these policies resulted in a significant increase in the number of PhD graduates in Portugal. However, having more doctorate holders in the country was not accompanied by HEIs' capacity to absorb them [9,27]. Furthermore, in the Portuguese HE system, hiring professional academics for teaching-only positions is possible without requiring them to go through a competition. According to the law (Decree-Law no. 448/79, of November 13—Art. 15.), this is allowed under exceptional conditions, enabling HEIs to hire academics on fixed-term contracts and establish them as invited staff, leading HEIs to often resort to these precarious work arrangements to avoid opening tenured vacancies. From the point of view of HEIs, these strategies may temporarily fix their human resources needs. From the workers' point of view, however, this may be one of the few opportunities to work in academia, despite its precarious and uncertain conditions [9,27,37].

Moreover, it is crucial to acknowledge that the global trend of marketisation in HE resulted in a tangible consequence of deteriorating working conditions and increased

precariousness in academic work, which is also evident in Portugal [9,27]. According to Ferreira [9], more than 95% of all research activities in Portugal are carried out under precarious labour conditions. Carvalho et al. [27] suggested that working conditions in Portuguese academia are going through an “uberisation” process, in which a significant share of workers hold short-term or no contracts at all, as in the case of scholarship holders. This landscape indicates that the Portuguese HE system follows a global pattern in which precarity became the rule rather than the exception in shaping academic careers [8,37]. Yet, as noted by Burton and Bowman [37], precarity is also rooted in structures, policies, and social norms that produce vulnerability as part of one’s living and working conditions. In this sense, migrant scholars seeking an academic career may encounter precarious structural conditions that may be aggravated by other types of inequalities associated with their migrant status, as well as systemic inequalities related to gender, race, class, language, nationality, epistemology, and other factors that may intersect with their pursuit of an academic career [1–4].

2. Methods

This article employed a qualitative research approach, utilising semi-structured interviews as the primary data collection method. Two rounds of interviews were conducted in April 2022. The first round of interviews was designed to explore the material aspects of academic careers, which encompass tangible and structural elements that significantly shape and influence the trajectory of an academic’s professional journey. These elements include key factors such as work opportunities, job security, salaries, and funding opportunities. We focused on these specific elements within the Portuguese higher education system to gain a comprehensive understanding of the practical realities and contextual nuances that impact academic careers in this setting. Moreover, given the limited availability of literature on academic careers in Portugal, the objective was to gain insider knowledge of the local academic context and learn about the informal and tacit practices within the system. For the first round, participants were selected based on their expertise in national academic careers and participation as leaders in trade unions and/or associations in Portugal, not based on their migration status. The interview guide included questions about participants’ academic pathways, perceptions of the evolution of academic careers, the Portuguese HE system and its internationalisation processes, and perceptions of diversity in academic careers, especially regarding the presence of migrant academics. Due to their different purposes, participants who took part in the first round did not participate in the second.

In the second round, interviews were conducted with migrant scholars currently working in Portugal. This phase aimed to go beyond the material dimension of academic careers and explore the epistemological dimension of migrants’ experiences in Portuguese academia. Additionally, considering that many immaterial, informal, and unwritten “rules” can influence an academic career, we also interviewed an academic who could not find an academic job. The main reason for including this profile was to investigate the complexity of inclusion and exclusion processes in pursuing an academic career. Participants were asked about their careers in academia, their perceptions of the Portuguese HE system and career structures, and their experiences—material and epistemological—as migrant academics, in this context.

Concerning the demographic profile of participants, migrant participants (second interview round) came from four different countries: France, Italy, Brazil, and Cape Verde. All migrant participants had temporary research contracts that required them to teach a limited number of hours. Attention must be paid to the fact that they were not on tenure-track paths, despite holding lecturer positions. One participant had teaching responsibilities but no formal contract with the institution. Another participant had already left Portugal without formal contracts with any Portuguese HEI. His interview focused on his academic pursuit in Portugal and his reasons for leaving. Participants belonged to different academic fields i.e., humanities and arts, social sciences, and natural sciences (academic

fields were classified according to the Frascati Manual). Table 1 below presents the full socio-demographic details of the participants:

Table 1. Participants' sociodemographics.

Pseudonym	Gender	Interview Round	Age	Birth Country	Career Position	Academic Field
Sofia	F	1st	46	Portugal	Senior Researcher	Social Sciences
Nuno	M	1st	43	Portugal	Senior Researcher	Natural Sciences
Pierre	M	2nd	39	France	Junior Researcher	Humanities and Arts
Clarisse	F	2nd	48	Italy	Senior Researcher	Humanities and Arts
Isabela	F	2nd	48	Brazil	Senior Researcher	Social Sciences
Lucas	M	2nd	43	Cape Verde	Junior Researcher	Social Sciences

Before the start of the interviewing process, all participants were provided comprehensive information regarding the research goals, and they gave their informed and voluntary consent to participate. Yet, our research encountered ethical challenges regarding the protection of participants' anonymity due to the limited presence of migrant scholars in Portuguese HEIs. The disclosure of certain information, such as combined data on birthplace, academic field, and university could potentially lead to the identification of participants. To protect their anonymity, demographic information was negotiated individually. Four broader categories were proposed: birthplace, academic position and field, and university (by region) that participants could accept, reject, or modify. Additionally, we ensured the suppression of specific university names to safeguard participant identities further.

The interviews were conducted in Portuguese (it is important to acknowledge that since the original interviews were conducted in Portuguese, there is a possibility that the subtlety of the language may be "lost" in translation. Linguistic differences exist between spoken languages, and it is not possible to guarantee that 100% of the meaning is conveyed when translated to a different language. However, in order to attempt to minimise translation losses and biases, all the excerpts provided in this article were double-checked by all authors. One author is a native speaker of Brazilian Portuguese, one is native of European Portuguese, and another is C2 proficient in European Portuguese) and were transcribed in full. To comply with European legislation, the data collected during the study were securely stored and protected according to the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR). This included measures such as limiting the duration of data retention to only as long as necessary and ensuring that the data were anonymised and kept confidential throughout the research process.

To analyse our data, we employed the inductive thematic analysis method proposed by Braun and Clarke [38]. This approach allowed us to generate themes and patterns directly from the data without relying on pre-existing theoretical frameworks or assumptions. The thematic analysis of our interviews was conducted using NVivo software, which facilitated the exploration of relationships between interviews and the efficient review of coded excerpts. Given the adoption of an inductive approach, we initially generated broader and numerous codes to capture the main elements that were present in the data. Then, we gradually refined and narrowed down the codes as we extensively engaged with the interviews and critically reflected upon them in conjunction with existing literature. This iterative process led us to identify and develop the thematic categories discussed in the subsequent section. NVivo software was instrumental in organising and analysing the data, ultimately enabling us to draw meaningful insights from the interviews.

3. Findings and Discussion

3.1. Pursuing an Academic Career in Portugal: Balancing the Promise of Scientific Growth with the Reality of Precariousness

The research participants in this study provided different migrant and academic profiles and varying lengths of stay in Portugal. Pierre, from France, moved to Portugal in his youth; Isabela, from Brazil, moved early in her career; Lucas, from Cape Verde, moved

to pursue HE; and Clarisse “ended up” in Portugal because she could not find an academic position in her home country, Italy.

One common perception among migrants regarding academic careers in Portugal was the relatively high number of available postdoctoral positions, as they all pointed out. For instance, Pierre, comparing HE in Portugal to countries such as France, the USA, and Italy, mentioned that he felt “privileged” for the opportunity he was given of being employed in an HEI that provided him with a six-year research contract “to do and think of science”, with barely any supervision or control. Clarisse mentioned that she ended up in Portugal after applying for a postdoc position while completing her PhD in Italy, and she was awarded the position. Isabela, who initially moved to Portugal for her master’s degree, also acknowledged the country’s abundance of doctoral and postdoctoral opportunities. Similarly, Lucas came to Portugal for higher education and took advantage of the country’s generous PhD scholarships and the potential for an academic career. This highlights the importance of the material aspect of an academic career as it relates to the concrete reality of how scholars perceive the pool of opportunities for academic positions and how that perception relates to decisions to relocate to another country.

The perception of Portugal as a country that offers ample opportunities for postdoctoral researchers is consistent with the country’s political landscape. The government actively invested in academic research in collaboration with the Foundation for Science and Technology (FCT). For instance, a clear outcome of these investments is reflected in expanding the number of doctoral scholarship opportunities and the institution of annual national competitions that provide temporary contracts to individuals with doctorates [9,36]. Lucas, the participant who left Portugal, exemplified the government’s effort to expand the national research and scientific system through his academic experience: he was one of the beneficiaries of Portugal’s national strategy to improve its scientific production by increasing the number of PhD scholarships. As he put it:

I belong to a generation that has been severely impacted. This generation comes from scholarships and finishes with a doctoral degree but faces austerity measures and severe limitations on academic job applications.

Lucas’ excerpts shed light on a current challenge the Portuguese higher education system is dealing with, i.e., the lack of capacity to offer stable academic job opportunities for doctoral professionals, as well as the lack of articulation between government policy of funding PhD scholarships and a concomitant effort to broaden and strengthen the HEIs’ ability to absorb and profit from those doctoral-educated professionals. A recent study on the professional situation of academics in Portugal found that the labour trajectories of post-doctoral researchers in the country consist of a “long series of fellowships, fixed-term contracts, independent work, and periods of unemployment in which researchers continue to develop their scientific activities despite the absence of income” [9]. The study also noted that this widespread precarity can be found across academic fields.

As previously mentioned, despite the investment in funding doctoral scholarships, there was a lack of corresponding increase in the capacity of HEIs to accommodate these highly educated professionals [9]. Consequently, the promise of scientific growth in Portugal is juxtaposed with the challenging reality of a highly precarious academic work environment.

3.2. *Science over Salary*

One key element in the pursuit of academic careers voiced by our participants and that is also consistent with the international literature on the matter is that migrant academics’ decisions to relocate were more associated with their academic work, area of expertise/research, and science itself, rather than solo career-focused and economic-driven decisions [2–4,28,29]. Isabela, a Brazilian assistant researcher, mentioned that her area of expertise significantly impacted job possibilities when she first arrived in the country. Being a specialist in an underdeveloped field in Portugal allowed her to quickly secure a position in an HEI upon arriving there. Isabela took an unconventional career path: she started

her professional journey in a new country (Portugal) with a stable job but later decided to pursue the unstable “postdoctoral scholarship life”:

At that time [when she was pursuing her PhD], it was possible to have a partial scholarship from FCT; so, for my PhD scholarship, I continued working and even became a director at the institution I was in. After the post-doctorate and the transitional regulation (under DL no. 57/2016 in its current wording, institutions with doctoral fellows who work in public institutions or who are funded by public funds for more than three years, consecutive or interpolated, are supposed to open competitions to hire these researchers for a transition period of six years and then provide them with permanent contracts), I stayed here [her current HEI] because I couldn't balance it out. I worked long hours and had a lot of responsibilities [at my organisation], and I wanted to do research but couldn't balance it with the demanding job there. [...] I already had a permanent job and came to this rush and unstable life of the six-year jobs with termination dates.

This excerpt from Isabela, who decided to leave a stable job to pursue the “postdoctoral scholarship life”, aligns with the existing academic literature that points out that migrant scholars are more interested and motivated to conduct research and pursue a career in intellectually stimulating environments where their expertise is valued rather than solely considering economic and career-driven reasons [2–4,28,29,39]. Accordingly, none of the migrant scholars mentioned any issues related to Portuguese HEIs being less competitive in the global academic arena or offering lower salaries. For instance, Pierre mentioned that he had colleagues in another country who were the same age, had the same academic level, and earned substantially more than him. However, this disparity did not make him consider leaving Portugal, as he stated, “The salary is not fundamental to me.”. Pierre emphasised that one of the most valuable aspects of academic work lies in the realm of “human contact, meaningful dialogue, and a genuine interest” in each other's research and accomplishments. However, not being driven solely by economic concerns does not mean he was fully satisfied with his work conditions in Portugal. In fact, he expressed dissatisfaction with the absence of intellectual exchange in his institution. He went further, stating that the lack of an intellectually stimulating and exchanging environment is a huge problem for his institution and science in a broader sense.

Clarisse's case further supports the argument that scholars' commitment to academia goes beyond mere career aspirations and financial incentives. Despite facing a highly precarious situation, where she had teaching responsibilities but lacked a formal contract with the institution, she never expressed a desire to leave Portugal during the interview. Instead, she emphasised the personal and professional reasons that act as strong anchors, keeping her connected to the country even in the face of challenging circumstances:

My reasons for staying [in Portugal and academia] are not even related to my career. There was a time when I seriously considered giving up, thinking that success [in academia] would never come. But then something else happened that motivated me to stay: the students.

Interestingly, academic literature [39–42] reveals that Clarisse's motivation to remain in academia—her relationship with students and teaching responsibilities—was significantly affected and devaluated by the increasing emphasis on research and publication goals as the core elements for enabling the pursuit of an academic career.

Lucas, who is no longer in Portugal, mentioned that he left the country because he could not find an academic job and did not mention salary as an issue. From his perspective, one of the main challenges in Portuguese academia is the increasing marketisation accompanied by a perceived lack of attention to concerns related to the fundamental nature of academia and the university. He mentioned that philosophical and existential questions, such as “What is the university?”, “What is the role of the university?” and “How does the university define what is important?” are not being addressed in academic settings in Portugal. According to him, this lack of attention to foundational questions affects the

guidelines upon which an academic career is built and what he perceived as a lack of openness to epistemological diversity.

Pierre adds another element to the discussion of why migrant scholars pursue academic careers under challenging and increasingly degraded work conditions, i.e., passion for science:

My colleagues and I must easily work 60 h per week. We work too much . . . There are some weeks that are hectic, and sometimes there are no Sundays (. . .) It is good, but you must be careful . . . But because there is passion, I do not feel like it is an obligation . . . I do not have a proper boss, no one tells me what to do. There is a passion and desire to do the best possible. I have responsibilities, it is true, but no one forces me to do anything . . . If I want, I can do nothing today.

The academic literature [41–44] on academic careers further substantiates the argument that suggests that scholars often articulate their academic careers with their passion for science as a compelling reason to stay in academia.

While migrant scholars criticised Portuguese academia, it is important to note that pursuing an academic career is not necessarily precluded. Pierre was critical of his local academic environment; however, he acknowledged his “privileged” condition and was satisfied with the opportunities it opened for him. What may appear to be a contradiction at first glance sheds light on one of the specificities of academic careers compared to other careers: academic careers are simultaneously borderless and bound to a specific national context [45–47]. On the one hand, they are bounded by national HE rules. On the other, it often transcends institutional and local boundaries, as academics can be part of transnational scientific projects and networks [45]. Pierre’s experience can exemplify this. He considered himself a “travelling academic”, having moved between countries, institutions, and academic cultures. This provided him with a broad international scientific network. Having this network and broadening the intellectual activities he participates in (he writes at least one article per year for non-scientific journals) may have been an important strategy for overcoming what he perceived as a “closed, inbred and conservative” local academic environment. In the same direction, Clarisse emphasised the importance of her international networks and experiences overseas, which were important assets to her academic development. Isabela also recognised the relevance of internationalisation in evaluating an academic path but mainly perceived it in terms of publishing outcomes. Meanwhile, Lucas acknowledged the significance of publishing (mainly in English) in the current academic environment, even though his academic trajectory was not focused specifically on that. In fact, for Lucas, the internationalisation outcome to which he is mainly connected is giving back to his birthplace country what he learned while in Portugal.

Furthermore, some of the migrant scholars pointed out that geopolitical issues affected their career possibilities, despite not considering the global academic position of the Portuguese HE system as a deal breaker in their pursuit of a career. Pierre noted that Portuguese scientific production lacked recognition, stating, “we are producing things here, but nobody reads us, nobody knows who we are, and that’s just how the system is”. On the other hand, Clarisse framed the issue of Portuguese academia receiving less recognition than other academic systems as a result of the unbalanced geopolitical correlation of forces:

Let’s consider that there are universities in England and France, and they have their own indexed journals. These universities have their department journals, so a person who graduates from them publishes the same work I can do here with my colleagues but in an indexed journal. Therefore, the famous division of the world, between “North and South”, still exists . . . even in Europe, it exists.

In this sense, our interviewers’ perceptions shed light on how an academic career pursue intersects with broader geopolitical inequalities in the global academic arena. According to Goyanes and Demeter [48], academic experience gained in countries such as the US and other English-speaking countries is more valuable than that collected in other countries. This cumulative advantage may be explained through the “Matthew Effect”

concept. As Kindsiko and Baruch [47] explained, “the Matthew Effect signposts the cumulative advantage situation triggered by the role of authority in an academic (research) world; in other words, it is closely tied to the dynamics of power and geopolitical relations within academia and scientific world”. “The Matthew Effect” concept points out the fact that scholars who already possess certain privileges, such as institutional affiliations with prestigious universities, extensive networks, or prior recognition for their work, are more likely to accumulate additional benefits and opportunities over time. Their existing status and visibility give them a head start and foster the creation and distribution of continuous cycles of accumulative advantage [47,48]. On the other hand, scholars who lack these initial advantages may face significant obstacles in gaining recognition and accessing resources. They may struggle to establish themselves within the global academic system and compete equally with their more advantaged counterparts. This creates a gap between scholars already well-positioned within the academic hierarchy and those disadvantaged due to their limited access to resources, opportunities, and symbolic capital [48].

Clarisse’s reflection presented above provides an illustrative example of the “Matthew Effect”. She notes that academics from prestigious universities who may publish their work in department journals likely have access to highly valued, well-assessed journals that carry significant weight in the global academic market. Consequently, their work is more prone to gain visibility and recognition, enhancing their academic reputation and further opening doors to future opportunities. In contrast, academics without such privileges may encounter difficulties in publishing in the same journals, placing them in different geopolitical positions and limiting their opportunities for advancement. “The Matthew Effect” holds significant relevance for discussing academic paths in Portugal, as its higher education system is not centrally positioned in the scientific community or the academic publishing industry [17,18], which plays a crucial role in shaping and conditioning academic careers under the current global academic environment.

In fact, as Paasi [49] argued, the academic publishing industry is predominantly controlled by Anglophone publishers. This dynamic is subtly reflected in Clarisse and other participants’ accounts, with varying levels of critique towards this system. Pierre emphasised the increasing importance of understanding the “academic codes” that are becoming more aligned with Anglo-Saxon patterns and traditions. Isabela pointed out that the evaluation metrics and systems she was familiar with in Brazil, such as “Qualis” hold no impact when pursuing an academic career in Portugal and Europe (in the Brazilian academic system, “Qualis” refers to the Qualis Periodicals System. The Qualis system categorizes journals into different levels or strata based on their academic impact and relevance. It is used in Brazil for various purposes, including evaluating academic productivity, granting scholarships, and allocating funding for research projects. For more information, see: <https://www.gov.br/capes/pt-br>, accessed on 1 May 2023). Nuno, a Portuguese participant (as briefly mentioned in the methods section, Portuguese participants were interviewed based on their expertise regarding academic careers as leaders in academic unions/movements. This approach was taken to gain in-depth knowledge about local academic careers, as there is a paucity of literature on the topic), acknowledge that Portugal is not at the forefront of global science and recognise that although Portugal is part of Europe, they are not on the same level as countries like “England, Holland, France, Germany, or Belgium” (those were the specific countries mentioned by the participant). Nuno believed that increasing the migration of scholars from top-leading countries to Portugal would greatly benefit and enhance the quality and competitiveness of the Portuguese HE system. Yet, he felt that scholars or early career doctoral researchers from countries such as “Brazil or Iran” who come more significantly than the other nationalities mentioned (top-leading countries) to Portugal to pursue their doctoral studies do not hold the same relevance to possibly enrich the system since they “do not bring science to a superior level than ours”.

This underscores the power relations and contextual factors at play, highlighting the heterogeneous nature of knowledge production between core geographies and peripheries.

Consequently, the production of knowledge and the individuals involved in this process are inherently affected in many respects unevenly.

3.3. Epistemological Challenges: Are Migrant Academics Inserted in Multicultural Contexts?

According to most participants, HEIs in Portugal often use the presence of both migrant students and academics to promote a “discursive” narrative of institutional diversity and openness, as well as a strategy to attain better positions in international rankings, e.g., *Times Higher Education* (for more information, see: <https://www.timeshighereducation.com/world-university-rankings/2023/world-ranking>, accessed on 1 May 2023). Sofia, a senior researcher from Portugal, stated that her university often showed a map with dots indicating the country of origin of researchers during meetings. According to her, this is a strategy framed under broader IoHE actions implemented by her institution, and it is a practice that aims to deliver a message that the university is open to cultural diversity and internationalisation:

The institution shows the number of non-Portuguese researchers and international students in certain research centres. The university presents itself as having this many international students. Additionally, several disciplines are taught in English, specifically for Erasmus students. [. . .] We [academics] are encouraged to provide subjects in English, so there are many incentives and ways of presenting ourselves as an international university that welcomes people from abroad. There are professorships to recruit foreign professors to be here for a year or a few months. There are prizes for internationalisation, hence all these incentives, practices, and ways to showcase that [we] favour internationalisation. [However] at the level of teaching staff [. . .] it is not much more international than it used to be 10 or 20 years ago.

As Sofia pointed out, although institutional actors displayed statistics showing an increasing number of international students and academics, this growing presence did not seem to have been reflected in the permanent academic staff. According to Pierre, Lucas, and Isabela, from what they perceived as the institutional perspective, having more migrants pursuing academic careers in Portugal offers added value, such as the potential to boost publication outcomes and bring more international networks and projects to Portuguese HEIs. Yet, this does not mean that Portuguese scholars do not publish enough, but migrants seem to perceive that their presence is valued in this competitive/marketised aspect. As Pierre explains: “I speak four languages, and they appreciate that. [However], the publication outcomes are the most valued aspect regarding internationalisation”. Clarisse expressed her disappointment due to her perception that her cultural and academic background was underutilised and undervalued at her institution. She considered that her institution wasted the potential advantages and opportunities her (and others) migrant scholar’s perspective could bring. In fact, Clarisse felt that she was no longer seen as a migrant but rather as someone who was fully “assimilated”:

The assimilated people were those who, in Angola [and other former Portuguese colonies], managed to learn Portuguese [from Portugal] and work in a Portuguese context. In that sense, I feel assimilated because, within these assimilation dynamics, that was also a strategy to ignore the real origins of these people. So, I had to learn the language, write, and teach in Portuguese. However, I still come from another country, and I offer other things, another vision, another educational background, and another thinking structure. I consider myself assimilated because I have learned to respond to the demands of the Portuguese context, but that does not fully describe me . . . I do not feel like the other part [of me] is being valued.

Ahmed’s [50,51] work on the language of diversity shed light on how institutions can co-opt diversity rhetoric to uphold the status quo and resist meaningful transformation. In the realm of HE, as Ahmed suggested, this can entail simply increasing diversity numbers

without addressing the underlying structural inequalities that perpetuate exclusion and marginalisation and that caused the lack of diversity in the first place [51].

Lucas and Isabela, both from former Portuguese colonies (Cape Verde and Brazil), highlighted the nuanced ways in which they perceived the persistence of coloniality in Portuguese academia. Interestingly, the European participants, Pierre and Clarisse, who did not share this straightforward historical link with Portugal, also mentioned the perceived influence of colonialism in academia. Although Pierre was of French origin and relocated to Portugal when he was 12 years old, he still identified as a migrant. Despite this, he recognised that he possessed some advantages in navigating Portuguese academia due to his ability to speak Portuguese with a native accent and his initial background in France. Isabela mentioned that knowledge production, as well as the evaluation and assessment of scholars, are intrinsically interconnected with the hierarchies and historical dynamics:

There is also the issue of valorisation. Historical and cultural aspects always come into play regarding value [in academia]. For instance, Portugal colonised Brazil. Consider the following example: a person, even if they are Portuguese, who completed their undergraduate or doctoral studies in England, will likely be more valued than a Portuguese person pursuing their doctoral studies in Brazil. This clearly indicates that the historical and cultural relationship and the valuation of certain cultures over others will have an influence.

Our interviewee's perceptions of the embeddedness of coloniality in academia align with the international literature on colonialism and hierarchies of power and knowledge [12–16,21–24]. According to Mignolo [34,52] and Shahjahan [35], power and knowledge hierarchies were historically intertwined with colonial and imperialist dynamics. HE policy categories and values, such as governance, financing, and knowledge 'as capital' or commodity, derived from historically privileged geopolitical locations. From its beginning to today, these hierarchies of power and knowledge are still favoured as a metric to describe, classify, understand, and "improve" HE in the rest of the world [23,35].

Epistemic injustice may also be a phenomenon that results in a palpable consequence and manifestation that might be experienced by scholars within that historically hierarchical system. As Pohlhaus [53] argued, epistemic injustice is a phenomenon that occurs within a broader framework of cumulative advantages and unequal power relations that are entrenched in societal systems and institutions. According to this author, it is imperative to establish a systemic understanding of epistemic injustice and other dynamics associated with hierarchies of power and knowledge:

If we see wrong as being caused by an agent's failure of perception, we will seek to change the agent. However, if we see the wrong in how such an agent is utilising a system, where an agent's actions are just one part of that system, we will not only look at the actions of the individual but also at the whole system within which those actions take place (. . .). Is it best to correct the individual within the system, or are there ways of recalibrating the system so that it cannot be misused in this fashion?

This systemic approach that Pohlhaus called attention to is also connected with these powerful dynamics underlying social hierarchies in knowledge production and are also embedded and influenced by shared social imaginaries. Lélia González broadly discussed in her work how racist and colonial social imaginaries were pivotal in normalising "o lugar" (the place) that black people should occupy in hierarchical societies such as the case of the Brazilian [54]. As an illustration of prevailing societal beliefs ingrained in the social imaginary is the likely normalisation and acceptance of perceiving Black individuals or migrants from socially stigmatised backgrounds solely as suitable for subaltern job positions, such as cleaners, kitchen porters, or waitstaff. Conversely, when encountering these individuals in roles such as higher education professors or researchers, their presence may be deemed unexpected or uncommon.

Lucas's perception and reflection resonate with the literature's stand on power hierarchies in the knowledge production realm. He suggested that coloniality plays a significant role in explaining why Portuguese institutions may appear to be open to having a culturally diverse student and staff but are less receptive to embracing different epistemological positions and perspectives. To Lucas, IoHE can only be effective if it includes efforts to promote epistemological diversity. Lucas spoke from his experience as an academic who pursued an academic degree in Portugal and carried the marks of colonialism in his body, as he came from a former Portuguese colony that only freed itself from colonial domination in 1974. He acknowledged the lack of openness to epistemological diversity when he articulated that the most "meaningful" aspects of his academic journey in Portugal were mainly acquired *outside* the institutional walls.

From my educational background in Portugal, I have learned a lot from my teachers, who were also very important in shaping who I am today and taught me much about critical thinking. [. . .] But, honestly, most of the debates we had on issues of race, history, colonialism, white supremacy, and even power [. . .] and most of my discussions about epistemological decolonisation and epistemic racism, much of what I learned and internalised from the point of view of decolonisation of thinking, I took from my African and Brazilian colleagues. [. . .] We educated ourselves through [de-colonial] literature that we accessed outside the academic walls.

The strength of dominant social imaginaries in HE settings was also visible in the account of Isabela, a Brazilian assistant researcher who also had teaching responsibilities in which encounters between her, as a lecturer, and Portuguese students often lead to surprise:

Many Brazilian students say they are amazed that I am a professor here. They do not expect that. And when I hear [from Portuguese students]: "Professor, are you Brazilian?" [. . .] Why? What is the matter? There are so many Brazilians with an academic career and many who have studied here. So, what would be the problem? And as a matter of fact, I have teaching responsibilities [as a researcher], but I am not a professor, I do not have a permanent contract. And this makes a big difference as I am not in the same situation as some of my colleagues [who are on tenure-track paths as professors].

Puwar's study [55] presented an insightful discussion on the dynamics that arise when individuals from racially or/and socially marginalised groups assume positions of authority in spaces that have historically and conceptually been "reserved for specific types of white masculinities" (p. 31). She emphasised the corporeal aspect that must be considered regarding who occupies specific spaces and positions, e.g., the role of an HE professor. These dimensions become apparent when individuals whose bodies do not conform to the norm in those spaces take up positions that are not "reserved" for them (p. 34).

Isabela's experience resonated with Puwar's analysis when she pointed out that her Portuguese students express surprise upon realising their professor is Brazilian. Through Puwar's analytical lens, this occurrence might reflect the sense of strangeness that arises when individuals challenge preconceived notions and expectations (a Brazilian holding a position as HE professor is probably uncommon in the student's social imaginaries). Furthermore, Puwar argued that institutions possess implicit and unspoken rules that are organised around racial, gendered, and, we could additionally consider, colonial spatial understandings. These structures, shaped by gender, race, and colonialism, may lead to the perception of certain bodies, particularly those that deviate from the expected (e.g., non-Portuguese) or normative (e.g., non-White) identities, as intruders in these spaces. In Puwar's words, "different bodies belonging to 'other' places are, in one sense, out of place as they are 'space invaders'" (p. 33).

In that sense, certain individuals occupying certain positions, such as a professor in HE, may be perceived as a "threat" to the status quo. Isabela may have been perceived as a "space invader" in that encounter with students but did not report feeling marginalised

as a result. She found that her inclusion in Portuguese academia went smoothly, and she was able to blend in and understand how the system works overtime. While the “space invader” concept may not fully apply to Isabela’s experience, it still is a powerful tool for understanding the complex in-/exclusion dynamics within academia.

4. Conclusions

This article examined the pursuit of academic careers in Portugal by migrant scholars, with particular attention to the material and epistemological elements of their experiences in an academic setting where IoHE was actively fostered. Our research revealed that migrants pursuing academic careers in Portugal face a multitude of factors that shape their experiences. In response to our research question, “How do migrant academics experience their pursuit of an academic career, both at the material and epistemological levels, in Portugal?” we found that the pursuit of an academic career for migrant scholars is highly influenced by institutional and governmental policies regarding science and technology. Migrant scholars seem to take advantage of the “pool of opportunities” regarding post-doc positions. However, this opportunity meets a highly precarious environment where postdocs develop their academic path mostly under uncertainty and the lack of job security. Geopolitical positioning emerged as a factor influencing the trajectory of an academic career in Portugal, placing migrant scholars at a heightened risk of experiencing epistemic injustice. This risk arises not only from the limitations of how far scientific outcomes produced in Portugal can reach but also from the linguistic abilities of scholars, as none of the participants were native English speakers. In a way, some participants acknowledged that the unequal power relations that domain hierarchies in the knowledge production realm put those pursuing an academic career in Portugal in an unfair position. Interestingly, and echoing international literature on migrant scholars, neither these geopolitical inequalities, and the fact that HEIs in Portugal offer lower salaries and have a less recognised HE system, emerge as a central element influencing migrants’ decisions to relocate. In fact, our findings suggest that migrant scholars’ decisions to relocate and pursue their academic careers in Portugal appear to be based on scientific motivations related to the academic field, their area of expertise and research, and a commitment to advancing scientific knowledge rather than a purely career-focused strategy or economic considerations.

Regarding epistemological experiences, challenges related to power relations and the long-lasting effects of colonialism through coloniality seem to impact the experiences of migrants, particularly those from former colonies. A colonial logic, based on the naturalisation of exploitative and unilateral relations, appears to be symbolically reflected. Additionally, migrant scholars from former colonies also pointed out what they perceived as a sort of instrumentalisation of their presence since they did not understand why African scholars were barely represented in academic staff but were much more broadly present in the student body.

Based on the analysis of the participants’ experiences, it did not appear that the dynamics and initiatives of IoHE in Portugal were accompanied by institutional engagement in reflecting on the challenges and potentialities of multiculturalism, nor in how IoHE may reproduce colonial mechanisms of inequality and exclusion [25,26]. As Bhambra [12,13] suggested, researchers and HEIs should broaden the discussion on migration and internationalisation by fully engaging with those who migrate to Europe while acknowledging the long historical connections they may have with Europe. By connecting histories and politicising migration, it becomes necessary to question the role of colonialism and coloniality in shaping academic mobility and how they may contribute to or perpetuate unequal epistemic and social relations. This approach can potentially foster more nuanced perspectives on multiculturalism in HE, internationalisation, academic migration, and epistemic (in)equality.

Finally, our study presented some limitations. Firstly, it is important to acknowledge that this exploratory study was conducted as part of a larger project. Second, we acknowledged the homogeneity of the participant group in terms of their research positions. As stated, all participants were researchers (four senior and two junior), and no tenure-track

professors were represented in the study. This restriction in participant profiles may impact the study's ability to capture a comprehensive range of perspectives and experiences related to the phenomenon under investigation. On a more positive note, this study can be helpful to HEIs to design their IoHE initiatives in an inclusive way and to open debates regarding multicultural encounters that these internationalisation initiatives may bring, as well as an active effort to promote an ethical encounter between scholars possessing different social identity markers and social backgrounds.

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