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The pandemic as a 'revelatory crisis' – the experiences of international students during emergency remote teaching in a postcolonial context

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ABSTRACT

This paper critically examines the experiences of international students during the abrupt transition to emergency remote teaching in Portuguese higher education institutions amid the COVID-19 pandemic. Drawing on 42 in-depth interviews, four focus group discussions with international students from China, Brazil, Syria, and Portuguese-speaking African countries, and 15 interviews with institutional staff, the study explores the pedagogical and structural challenges faced during this crisis. Framed within critical pedagogical theories, particularly Paulo Freire's and bell hooks' concepts of engaged and care-informed pedagogy, the analysis reveals how emergency remote teaching exacerbated pre-existing inequities and deficit narratives surrounding international students. Findings highlight the persistence of transmissive teaching models, limited institutional preparedness, and discriminatory assumptions based on nationality, which collectively undermined inclusive learning environments. The pandemic is interpreted as a 'revelatory crisis' that exposed systemic failures in international student support and pedagogical adaptation. The study argues for a transformative shift towards ethically engaging pedagogies that recognise international students as equal co-contributors to the academic community. Recommendations are offered to reform institutional practices and teaching strategies in the post-pandemic landscape, emphasising the need for inclusive, dialogic, and diversity-sensitive approaches.

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Introduction

The COVID-19 outbreak (hereafter pandemic) generated a global crisis that affected higher education (HE) and internationally mobile students in unexpected and unprecedented ways. In the first half of 2020, higher education institutions (HEIs) worldwide were compelled to abruptly cease in-person activities, triggering a mass migration of teaching and learning into the digital sphere (Eri et al. 2021), and forcing faculty and

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students to adapt to new technologies and teaching methods almost overnight. This abrupt transition was neither a planned adoption of online or distance education, nor a continuation of the digitalisation efforts ongoing in many HEIs before the pandemic (Iglesias-Pradas et al. 2021). The switch to the online environment during the pandemic has been identified by many authors (Hodges et al. 2020; Karakaya 2021; Skledar Matijević 2022), not as online education, but as emergency remote teaching (ERT). This is a crisis-driven measure, primarily defined by its reactive nature, being an unplanned, temporary shift in instructional delivery to an alternative (online) mode due to specific crisis circumstances (Hodges et al. 2020). ERT hence involved the use of fully remote teaching solutions for instruction that would otherwise be delivered face-to-face, lacking proper adaptation to online pedagogical practices with the expectation that it will return to that format once the crisis has subsided. As a result, this mode of teaching has brought numerous challenges to both students and HE staff (McDaniel et al. 2020).

This experience was qualitatively different from that of students who intentionally choose established online programmes or faculty who have been trained in online pedagogies, as such programmes are purposefully designed for online delivery, with structured curricula, appropriate digital tools, and pedagogical strategies tailored to virtual learning environments (Farnell, Matijevic, and Schmidt 2021). As a result, students often reported challenges and a general sense of dissatisfaction with ERT when compared to the usual in-person classroom settings (Fuchs 2022). While the transition to ERT disrupted the learning routines of all HE students, the impact was particularly intense for international students (Firang 2020). These students, already navigating the complexities of living and studying in a foreign country, found access to the campus and direct contact with colleagues and friends hindered by the pandemic, amplifying existing vulnerabilities (Mbous, Mohamed, and Rudisill 2024). Moving to a digital classroom posed additional academic and cultural challenges, further aggravated by the loss of face-to-face interaction with teachers and peers (Huang 2025).

Against this background, the current paper analyses the experiences of international students and HE staff during the pandemic in Portugal, focusing on the abrupt transition to ERT and its impact. While even in countries and HEIs with long-lasting traditions in welcoming international students, support mechanisms and pedagogical practices specifically dedicated to this group were not sufficient to successfully support and empower them during the challenging times of the pandemic (McDaniel et al. 2020), it is particularly relevant to understand this issue in countries less used and prepared to welcome international students. In Portugal, a catching-up country when it comes to HE internationalisation (Horta 2010), international student support was shown to be insufficient even before the pandemic (Nada and Araújo 2019). Research conducted after the outbreak has demonstrated that this support deficiency has become even more accentuated during the lockdowns, further aggravating the vulnerability international students experience as a result of these insufficient support mechanisms, as well as their feelings of dissatisfaction with their HEIs (Cairns et al. 2021b; Lyrio, Nada, and França 2023). While previous research in the Portuguese context has analysed international students concerning their overall personal, social and cultural experiences during the pandemic, studies focusing specifically on their experiences with ERT remain scarce (Aguiar, Sin, and Tavares 2023; Cairns et al. 2021b). To fill this gap, the current paper analyses in depth the impact of ERT on international students' academic and learning experiences. Rather than taking the pandemic as a past and already 'completed' experience, this study

conceptualises it as a 'revelatory crisis' (Solway 1994): a moment of rupture from which we can learn given that it rendered visible existing inequalities and structural deficiencies of HE. To this end, an overarching research question was formulated:

> How did the pandemic and the subsequent transition to ERT function as a 'revelatory crisis' that exposed pre-existing weaknesses in pedagogical practices and institutional support for international students in Portugal?

This central question is further explored in this paper through the following two interrelated sub-questions:

1. What academic and pedagogical challenges did international students and staff face during the transition to ERT in Portuguese HEIs?
2. How did Portuguese HEIs and teaching staff respond to international students' needs during ERT, and what do these responses reveal about pre-existing international student support structures?

At this stage, it is important to acknowledge that a significant volume of scholarship has already examined the experience of international students during the pandemic (Sin et al. 2025). However, much of this literature has been predominantly descriptive, analysing the immediate challenges faced by students – such as technological barriers, social isolation, and mental health concerns – without interrogating deeper structural and pedagogical conditions that often place these students in particularly vulnerable positions. This paper therefore aims to move beyond such descriptive accounts by offering a theoretical lens through which the pandemic is seen as an analytical entry point to examine enduring patterns of exclusion and inequality. To this end, the analysis draws upon critical pedagogical frameworks rooted in Paulo Freire (2000) and bell hooks (1994), and particularly hooks' concept of 'engaged pedagogy' (Madge, Raghuram, and Noxolo 2009), allowing us to examine how deficit narratives about international students persist within Portuguese HE and how these might have become further entrenched during ERT. Anchored in this theoretical apparatus, we interrogate the capacity of HEIs to successfully welcome diverse students and regard them as equal contributors to the learning process, rather than as inferior interlocutors or even passive recipients of Western knowledge (Du 2025; Lomer and Anthony-Okeke 2019).

To achieve this objective, we adopt a qualitative approach drawing evidence from 42 in-depth interviews with students from China, Brazil, Syria, and Portuguese-speaking African countries, complemented by four focus group discussions with international students and 15 semi-structured interviews with institutional staff, all conducted in Portugal from January to April 2022. By examining both student experiences and institutional accounts during this unprecedented crisis, this study seeks to understand how pre-existing weaknesses in inclusive pedagogical approaches and support systems manifested during ERT, and how it affected the quality of the international student learning experience.

The international student experience during challenging times

The systematic neglect of international students in HEIs represents one of the most significant failures of contemporary internationalisation (Lomer and Mittelmeier 2023;

Marginson et al. 2010). Research has thoroughly shown that, while HEIs actively recruit international students for revenue generation, they systematically neglect the provision of adequate pedagogical adaptations and support structures, falling short of promoting truly inclusive and intercultural learning environments (Nada and Araújo 2019; Tavares 2024). As noted by Gao and Liu (2023, 87), 'putting international students together in a classroom does not equate with creating cultural sharing and respect'. In fact, Lomer and Mittelmeier (2023) did not find empirical evidence that intense contemporary international student recruitment has re-shaped pedagogic practices aimed at accommodating culturally and linguistically diverse cohorts, or at recognising them as equal participants and co-contributors in the learning process. This has led to a problematic and rather unchanged *status quo*, in which long-standing issues faced by international students do not seem to encounter concrete solutions (Nada, Ploner, and Esteki 2023). In fact, a trend analysis conducted by Oduwaye, Kiraz, and Sorakin (2023) has shown no changes or improvements, over a span of 21 years, in the experiences of international students, which remain marked by sociocultural and academic challenges, language barriers, social isolation and discrimination, mental health support gaps, and financial stress and exploitation. This has further aggravated deficit perceptions of international students (Lomer, Taha, and Hayes 2023) as being in need of continuous support for supposedly lacking the skills and conditions to thrive, while the responsibility of HEIs in creating inclusive and diversity-friendly learning environments is conveniently obscured (Heng 2018).

In the context of ERT, these problematic trends concerning international students were further aggravated. As noted by Hazelkorn and Locke (2020, 131), during the pandemic 'international students have effectively been abandoned by their host countries and institutions'. For instance, international students were frequently assumed to be proficient online learners and expected to engage in class discussions without constraints, despite significant differences in access to technical infrastructure, affordability, familiarity with digital learning environments, and in digital literacy skills (Bahtilla, Hui, and Oben 2022). This created new digital challenges. The absence of visual cues in online classrooms, coupled with reduced facilitation of interaction and limited opportunities to build social rapport, created impersonal learning environments that reinforced passivity rather than fostering student agency. As a result, during the shift to ERT, pre-existing structural failures in supporting international students became even more evident, particularly concerning pedagogical practices that were insufficiently adapted to their diverse needs (Han, Chang, and Kearney 2022).

Additionally, pandemic restrictions disrupted the cultural immersion and social integration typically expected from an international mobility experience. The impossibility of face-to-face socialisation represented a major obstacle to social and cultural integration, with international students' support networks becoming rather small and primarily centred around other international students or, remotely, their families (Raaper, Brown, and Llewellyn 2022). Language barriers were amplified in ERT settings, and the practice of the local language was nearly impossible, causing great disappointment (Ellis, Jola, and Cameron 2024). In a systematic review, Sin et al. (2025) identified disruptions of support networks and social life as a major theme for international students, with mobility experiences losing their 'capacity to contribute to the process of learning about and integrating into different societies' (Cairns et al. 2021a, 180).

Towards an engaged and care-based pedagogy for international students

Against this backdrop, we argue that had international learning practices been informed by an engaged, care-based pedagogy, rooted in the critical educational theories of Paulo Freire and bell hooks, the current deficit-based perceptions of international students and the negative impact of the pandemic on their learning experiences could have been significantly mitigated. Such pedagogical approaches, centred on dialogue, empathy, flexibility, and proactive community-building, offer a powerful framework for fostering inclusive and resilient educational environments, including in times of crisis. Particularly hooks' concept of an 'engaged pedagogy', applied by Madge, Raghuram, and Noxolo (2009) to the case of international students, provides a powerful framework for understanding these students' experiences in Portuguese HE. This framework acknowledges the complex power dynamics that mark HE contexts and determines how international students are perceived. Confronting deficit narratives that so often frame and directly impact international students is essential, as well as acknowledging that HEIs should hold more responsibility towards this cohort both within and beyond the classroom. This responsibility is warranted not only on ethical grounds, but also given the substantial fees these students pay and the active recruitment strategies institutions employ to attract them. As Lomer and Anthony-Okeke (2019) argue, a truly 'ethically engaging' pedagogy must position international students as 'equals and as co-contributors' rather than subjects in 'academic deficit'. This ethical repositioning is a form of 'epistemic disobedience' against the enduring 'Eurocentric dominance and knowledge hegemony' in HE (Du 2025). It requires a decisive break from what Freire critiques as the 'banking model' of education, where knowledge is simply deposited into passive students: a model that Du (2025) argues is replicated in the relationship between the Global North and the Global South in international education. For international students, who are often positioned as passive recipients of a dominant and supposedly superior academic culture, an engaged and care-based pedagogy is fundamental to creating a truly equitable and humanising educational experience.

However, many HEIs are far apart from the actual implementation of an engaged and care-based pedagogy concerning international students. This gap became even more pronounced in the pandemic context and in the framework of ERT. The pandemic clearly revealed that the 'challenges of remote teaching reinforce the need for care-informed pedagogy' (Hess et al. 2022, 3). Care-informed pedagogy encourages instructors to practice empathy and consider how students' identities and experiences impact learning, incorporating students' knowledge in the learning process, and collaborating with students to remedy challenges (hooks 1994; Karakaya 2021). When students feel heard and cared for in the classroom, their participation improves, and meaningful relationships develop between instructors and peers (Fink 2013). Unfortunately, one of the dimensions that was most affected by the switch to ERT was the relational one, rendering the collaboration and connection between teachers and learners much more difficult.

The pandemic also aggravated equity concerns, as its impact and students' access to study space and equipment were stratified by race, socioeconomic class, parental status, age, gender, geography, and ability (Katz, Jordan, and Ognyanova 2025). Without a pedagogical framework of care, the mere digital transmission of educational content fails international students, leaving them feeling invisible and demotivated. As Jeyaraj

(2023) highlights, engaging with students' lived experiences and creating dialogic environments where their voices are heard becomes even more crucial under emergency conditions, albeit much more challenging. When the complex personal, biographic, and socioeconomic dimensions of students' lives are centred, as critical pedagogy demands, learning becomes meaningful because, rather than positioning students as passive recipients, it invites them to assert ownership over their education (Wink 2000).

Methods

This study adopted a qualitative, multi-method design, conducted within the framework of the research project 'Students from third countries in Portugal: challenges of integration in a (post)pandemic era', developed between 2021 and 2022. The approach combined student-centred perspectives – collected through interviews and focus groups – with institutional perspectives – drawn from interviews with HE staff. This provided a comprehensive account of both lived experiences and systemic responses in Portuguese HEIs during the pandemic. The study received ethical approval from the authors' institution and was conducted in full compliance with GDPR regulations. All participants were informed of the study's objectives and provided their written informed consent prior to participation.

Between January and April 2022, the team conducted 42 in-depth, semi-structured interviews with degree-seeking students from China (N = 12), Brazil (N = 10), Syria (N = 10) and Portuguese-speaking African Countries (N = 10: Angola 3; Cabo Verde 1; Guinea-Bissau 2; Mozambique 2; São Tomé and Príncipe 2). Recruitment combined purposive and snowball techniques following a maximum-variation logic, seeking diversity by study cycle, HEI, region, age and gender. Eligibility criteria required students to be enrolled in a degree programme at a Portuguese HEI, and to have arrived before the official announcement of the pandemic in Portugal (March 2020). Interviews averaged 90 min; and they were mostly conducted remotely (during the very few interviews conducted in-person, these took place within campus, while public health rules in force at the time were carefully adhered to, namely concerning social distancing and the use of face masks). Most interviews were conducted in Portuguese, while some Syrian and Chinese participants opted for conducting the interview in English. The final sample consisted of 25 women and 17 men, ranging in age from the 20 to 50+, mostly enrolled in master's programmes. The interviews focused on students' lived experiences during the pandemic, centring their own voices and the meanings they gave to their trajectories (Nada 2023), and qualitatively exploring the main academic and social challenges they faced.

Four focus group discussions were held in Lisbon, Porto, Coimbra and Covilhã (~90 min each). The Lisbon focus group was conducted in-person at the authors' institution, while carefully observing public health rules in force at the time, and included six students from Brazil, Angola, Guinea-Bissau and China. The other three focus groups were conducted online: Porto (five students from Brazil, China and São Tomé and Príncipe), Coimbra (three students from Brazil and China) and Covilhã (four students from Guinea-Bissau). Sessions were conducted in Portuguese; except for Coimbra where one Chinese participant responded in English, and the moderator alternated between both languages as needed. For the focus groups, participants were required to have arrived

in academic years 2020/2021 or 2021/2022, so after the official announcement of the pandemic. Gender balance was achieved and, as with the interviews, master's students predominated. The focus groups aimed to understand why these students chose to move to Portugal during the pandemic, exploring their motivations, expectations, and the challenges they faced in pursuing their studies. In both interviews and focus groups, students' experiences with ERT were explored, including the academic and social challenges they faced and the strategies they employed to navigate online learning.

Additionally, the study also incorporated 15 semi-structured online interviews with key staff members across a range of Portuguese HEIs. These participants included international office staff, academic coordinators, lecturers, and other professionals directly engaged in student support. The inclusion of institutional perspectives proved essential for two reasons. First, it provided insights into how HEIs themselves perceived and responded to the needs of international students during the pandemic, including the constraints under which institutional actors were operating. Second, it highlighted potential mismatches between student experiences and institutional narratives, thereby shedding light on structural barriers and the adequacy of pre-existing support mechanisms.

Data originating from these sources were transcribed, anonymised, and subsequently coded in MaxQDA. The analysis focused on how pedagogical arrangements, support systems, and broader inequalities intersected during ERT, triangulating student narratives with institutional perspectives. In fact, the existence of three data collection moments provided an enhanced understanding of how the pandemic affected teaching and learning in Portuguese HE. First, the 42 international students who were interviewed arrived in Portugal before the pandemic and hence experienced, first-hand, the uncertain environment caused by this disruptive event and the abrupt switch to ERT. Second, students participating in the focus group discussions decided to move to Portugal after the outbreak of the pandemic and, even if they were not taken by surprise by this event, they were also subjected to ERT due to the unexpected prolongation of pandemic contention measures. Third, the interviewed HE staff provided insights on the institutional perspective and the (un)available mechanisms to adapt and support international students during such challenging times. The integration of these three data sets enabled a form of methodological triangulation that enriched the analysis by illuminating the same experience from multiple perspectives. While student narratives provided accounts of lived experiences of disruption and adaptation, focus groups generated collective sense-making and revealed some shared patterns of experience among international students, while staff interviews offered institutional perspectives that provided a more complex understanding of students' accounts. A thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2013) of all these data enabled the systematic identification of recurrent patterns, tensions, and contradictions, allowing us to move beyond individual or isolated experiences, and identify more systemic patterns. In this analysis, special emphasis was placed on the interplay between teaching practices, support structures, and wider issues of inclusion and diversity within Portuguese HE.

Findings and discussion

This section provides a comprehensive analysis structured around two central themes that emerged from the intersection of our empirical findings and the existing literature

on student mobility in general, as well as more specifically on mobility during the pandemic period. The first theme centres the pedagogical and academic experiences of international students in Portugal more broadly, not specifically linked to the challenges of the pandemic and ERT. The second theme then delves into the profound impact of the global health crisis on the international student experience. Critically, we interpret these findings through the lens of an engaged and care-informed pedagogy, examining how the absence of dialogic practices, the persistence of deficit narratives, and the failure to even acknowledge the presence of international students, let alone position them as equals and co-contributors, manifested in both pre-pandemic and ERT contexts.

A critical look at institutional practices for the inclusion of international students

Before understanding the impact of ERT on international students' learning experiences during the pandemic – which constitutes the focus of the subsequent section – it is important to understand their perceptions of the broader pedagogical and institutional landscape in Portuguese HEIs. The findings presented in this section will therefore draw upon participants' reflections on their experiences within Portuguese HE more generally, encompassing both pre-pandemic and pandemic periods, focusing on issues that predate and/or transcend the ERT context.

The analysis of data collected from students reveals that some pedagogical practices that they found problematic during ERT were also in place before the pandemic. In other words, the problems students encountered during online learning were not necessarily novel products of the crisis, but rather amplifications of existing shortcomings that characterised Portuguese HE prior to March 2020. Therefore, the crisis-driven shift to ERT did not only disrupt the delivery of education but also exposed a series of latent pedagogical and structural weaknesses within Portuguese HEIs that demand further examination. One Brazilian student's account is particularly illustrative of this issue:

> I thought it was going to be a much more critical type of study – that illusion you have before coming to Europe, thinking it will be a much more critical kind of education, with much higher quality. But when I got here, I felt the opposite. I felt it was very restraining. It was passive – a passivity that I found very strange at first. The way students are passive in class: the teachers would talk about interesting things, interesting topics, and nobody reacted. (Tatiana, PhD student, Interview)

This perception resonates directly with what Freire (2000, 72) describes as the fundamental flaw of 'banking education': the transformation of students into 'receptacles to be filled by the teacher', rendering learning 'an act of depositing' rather than a collaborative construction of knowledge. The 'passivity' that so 'strangely' struck Tatiana embodies a pedagogical culture that, as Freire argues, serves to 'anaesthetise and inhibit creative power' rather than foster the critical consciousness that both he and bell hooks consider essential to liberatory education.

This account clearly illustrates the systematic absence of an engaged pedagogy, which should have 'political and strategic intent, linking histories and biographies with issues of culture, power and politics' (Lavia 2007, 297), rather than remaining confined to instrumental instruction. This perception of teaching as a one-way, transmissive flow of information to

passive recipients was noted by other participants. For instance, another Brazilian student criticised the lack of space for students to engage in debates during lessons:

> I also really missed the debate, so the teachers would arrive, and they would use those two hours of class only to explain their subject, their content. There wasn't much space for us to talk, for us to ask questions, for us to debate. (Mafalda, master's student, Focus Group, Lisbon)

Our research participants' expectations of critical education reflect their anticipation of what Freire terms 'problem-posing' education: a dialogic pedagogy that fosters critical consciousness. Instead, they encountered a transmissive model that reinforced student passivity. This lack of space for debate and dialogue during classes is, in fact, incompatible with the promotion of an engaged pedagogy and will render international students' voices and contributions even less visible.

Another student from Brazil considered that the problems she faced as an international student in Portugal were not necessarily linked to ERT, but to the academic culture in Portugal more broadly, whose characteristics were transferred to the online environment:

> Well, regarding teaching, what was a problem in-person remained a problem online … and what was a solution in-person also [worked] online. A teacher who was open to dialogue remained open to dialogue [also] online. But a teacher who was closed to dialogue would talk the whole time and we just had to listen. [… This is] one of the things that alarmed me here, […] the difficulty in opening a dialogue, because if I start from the assumption that my student doesn't know, that I'm the one who knows, I'm the one who holds the knowledge, then I don't let them speak. (Tamiris, master's student, Focus Group, Coimbra)

This participant's observation underscores a critical point: the difficulties she articulates – absence of dialogic engagement, the persistence of lecture-based transmission of knowledge, and closure to student voice – were endemic features of the pedagogical culture she encountered upon arrival in Portugal, not alterations produced by the rushed shift to online delivery. The pandemic, in this sense, did not fundamentally modify the core pedagogical model but exposed its existing limitations with renewed clarity. In the next subsection we will examine in more detail how ERT specifically exacerbated these pre-existing conditions, transforming latent weaknesses into acute challenges for international students.

Moreover, this student's observation astutely identifies a core assumption of a flawed pedagogical model: that students are empty vessels who 'don't know,' while teachers are the sole possessors of knowledge. This assumption, as she emphasises, hinders dialogue and maintains hierarchical power relations that are antithetical to an engaged pedagogy. Students' perceptions of a deficient teaching model are also acknowledged at the institutional level. For instance, a practitioner from the international office of a public polytechnic highlighted precisely the need for pedagogical reform:

> It's a continuous learning process for everyone, including the teachers as well. I think this involves a lot of learning and also a change in what teacher training is. Because teacher training has also been changing and has to transform itself. There has to be an adjustment in teaching practices, I think so. [They] need to be updated a lot to face reality. This is a very big challenge in HEIs, it's the challenge of updating the teaching staff and their practices. (International Office Practitioner Public Polytechnic 1)

A certain resistance to pedagogical change is deductible from this account, since the research participant sees this issue as a 'very big challenge' for HEIs. This description reveals individual and institutional factors that may impede the adoption of engaged

pedagogy. As hooks (1994) acknowledges, implementing this pedagogy places significant demands upon educators in terms of authenticity, commitment, and self-actualisation. Furthermore, a Pro-Rector from a public university described how established, non-interactive teaching methods can become entrenched over time, creating a 'pedagogical inertia' that is difficult to change:

> [Teachers] accustomed to teaching subjects for 40 years to the same mass of students that comes in every year. [… Even] the pages are already a bit yellowed, then they just make some photocopies of the yellowed pages, and suddenly they look new. […] Obviously there are always more dynamic professors with the capacity for annual innovation in their subjects, but there is also some effect, let's say, of dulling and lethargy, of conservatism in the teaching of subjects. (Pro-Rector Public University 2)

This institutional context of pedagogical 'conservatism' is precisely what research participants identify as problematic, particularly when compared with teaching practices in their home country. This 'conservatism' represents more than mere methodological stagnation: the metaphor of the 'yellowed pages' being photocopied year after year illustrates the perception of knowledge as static and unchanging, denying the dynamic, lived realities that diverse students bring to the classroom.

Moreover, student participants also noted that teachers may present biased views and attitudes towards certain groups of international students:

> The master's degree here is different from the master's in Brazil. […] The attitude of the teacher in the classroom in Brazil, the tendency is that teachers don't start from the assumption that the student doesn't know, whereas here I have realised that the starting assumption is that the student doesn't know, especially if they are Brazilian or African. (Tamiris, master's student, Focus Group, Coimbra)

From the perspective of Freire, this differential treatment based on national origin represents a particularly insidious manifestation of what he identifies as a core characteristic of the ideology of oppression wherein the teacher 'presents himself to his students as their necessary opposite', and 'by considering their ignorance absolute, he justifies his own existence' (Freire 2000, 72). This differential treatment based on nationality is also deeply rooted in a deficit narrative that positions certain international students, particularly those from the Global South, as inherently lacking in knowledge and competence (Lomer and Anthony-Okeke 2019). This participant's observation that this assumption applies 'especially if they [students] are Brazilian or African' exposes the racialised and postcolonial dimensions of this deficit construction, revealing how Eurocentric epistemologies continue to shape pedagogical relationships (Ploner and Nada 2020). Moreover, when presuming deficit is specifically targeted at students from the Global South – it reproduces what hooks (1994, 39) identifies as the 'politics of domination' within the educational setting, transforming the classroom into a site where colonial hierarchies are enacted rather than contested.

Besides their inherent colonial roots, such situations can also be attributed to the academic staff's lack of awareness of diversity issues and insufficient training in specific pedagogies to teach diverse groups of students. Indeed, this issue was corroborated by one of our HE staff participants, a teacher, who noted an absence of institutional guidelines for integrating international students and adapting to their diverse needs, explaining that solutions are often left to the teachers' discretion:

> I have never had, that I can remember, any guidance on what to do specifically with these [international] students. On the other hand, no one has ever asked me if I wanted to receive them. Therefore, they appear […] and from the moment they appear to me, I have to decide what to do with them. But we don't have, that I remember, any specific orientation about this. (Teacher Public Polytechnic 1)

The particular phrasing used by this research participant ('what to do with them') is particularly revealing, framing international students as problems to be managed rather than as valued members of the learning community. hooks (1994, 15) highlights that an engaged pedagogy must care 'for the souls of students', recognising them as 'whole human beings' whose complex lives and experiences enrich rather than burden the learning community. The absence of institutional guidance visible in this account reflects a systemic failure in what Fisher and Tronto (1990) identify as the first component of care: attentiveness – the capacity to notice and respond to students' needs. Without institutional frameworks for recognising and valuing diversity, care practices become impossible in the educational setting.

Indeed, in light of this lack of guidance and training, teachers often develop their own strategies to deal with the diversity of international students. The same research participant describes his strategy concerning international students who do not speak Portuguese, enrolled in degrees that are, nevertheless, fully taught in the Portuguese language:

> If we are talking about students who are not proficient in Portuguese, many of them really don't know any Portuguese at all and, therefore, when I receive students who don't know Portuguese, naturally, they don't go to classes, they're not going to do anything there. They don't understand. And so, what I end up arranging with them is a specific type of assessment, where I normally suggest they do research and present their work in English. And I support them and then discuss the work with them. (Teacher Public Polytechnic 1)

This individual practice of adapting to the needs of students who do not speak Portuguese underscores the lack of a systemic, institutional strategy to address the linguistic diversity of the student body and ensure alignment between students' linguistic skills and the language of teaching. In this context, solutions are again left to the discretion of individual faculty members. While commendable as an individual effort, this pedagogical practice is also illustrative of the exclusionary character of such individual ad-hoc 'solutions', which assume, from the outset, that these students will 'naturally' not participate in classes, given that 'they don't understand' them, and hence require some form of separate engagement and evaluation. This takes place, however, outside of regular class dynamics, on the margins of the main educational offer. This often leads to the almost complete isolation of international students and a lack of interaction between them and the local academic community, jeopardising the overall quality of their experiences. Moreover, this relieves institutions of responsibility for creating truly inclusive learning environments, representing a clear failure in institutions' capacity to take ownership for meeting diverse care needs and doing so effectively (Fisher and Tronto 1990).

These data confirm that the difficulties faced by international students are not isolated incidents but may constitute symptoms of a generally unprepared system for welcoming diverse students. Scholars in critical internationalisation studies argue that this is often a feature, and not only a 'bug', of systems where the presence of international students is

valued for its economic or reputational benefits, while the necessary work of intercultural pedagogical adaptation is neglected (Liu and Qian 2023; Lomer, Taha, and Hayes 2023).

Emergency remote teaching and its impact on students and institutions

In line with Iglesias-Pradas et al. (2021), our research findings reveal a consensus among both students and institutional actors that the transition to ERT was a rushed reaction to an unprecedented crisis, which brought significant pedagogical challenges, often compromising the quality of the international students' learning experience.

Interviewed HEI staff acknowledged the reactive nature of this shift, framing it as a necessary, yet unplanned response. One teacher from a private university noted that, in an internal study conducted at her institution, the transition to online learning was not so well received by international students:

> The institutions responded by transitioning online […] there was that massive shift to virtual teaching. […] However, it was not that well received by international students. (Teacher Private University 1)

This excerpt highlights that the shift to online teaching was not a planned transition but an improvised response with limited consideration for its pedagogical implications. This sentiment of re-action rather than pro-action was a common thread, confirming that Portuguese HEIs, like their global counterparts, were thrust into a new mode of education delivery under pressure (Fernández-Batanero et al. 2022).

An instructor from a public polytechnic with experience in planned distance education explicitly distinguished between this modality and ERT. He noted that the common practice in many institutions was to simply replicate online the existing in-person method, which is fundamentally different from the principles of planned distance education (Skledar Matijević 2022). This observation underscores how the shift to online teaching was not pedagogically informed but driven by an institutional logic focused on maintaining business as usual, rather than on developing meaningful learning, leaving little room to consider alternative approaches or the specific needs of diverse student populations.

> And in fact, we here have adhered to distance learning, I don't even know exactly, maybe for about 15 years now. […] What we saw with the pandemic is that the same type of pedagogical organisation that was operating with the in-person system was kept but replacing the in-person classes with synchronous [online] classes, while even keeping the same schedule. Now, strictly speaking, this is not distance learning. It is what has in fact been called 'emergency remote teaching' or something of the sort. And, therefore, these are different operational logics. (Teacher Public Polytechnic 1)

These different operational logics and the rushed character of the shift to ERT had a direct and tangible impact on the quality of instruction, illustrating the profound failure of these emergency measures to provide even minimally meaningful learning experiences, as students found themselves facing significant technical and pedagogical barriers. Specific concerns with international students, already scarce in Portuguese HEIs (França, Nada, and Lyrio 2025), were pushed further into the background, since the main objective was plainly to continue delivering courses and avoid the cancellation of the academic semester. The fact that the simple transposition of pre-pandemic teaching methods to an online format was insufficient is confirmed by numerous international student

accounts. For instance, a Chinese student described the difficulties of attending classes online while he was in China:

> At the beginning of my master's, I was in China … and I attended the online classes, almost all the classes [online] for about a semester. […] The teachers were using a very outdated projector, which made it impossible to see what was on the board […] because there were teachers who preferred writing on the board instead of using PowerPoint […] so it was impossible to understand anything. (Benício, master's student, Focus Group, Lisbon)

Without the relational dimensions (Hess et al. 2022; Karakaya 2021) that make students feel heard, valued, and connected to their instructors and peers, learning can become not only ineffective but actively demoralising, as illustrated by another student's powerful account:

> In my experience of attending classes remotely or online, I think that in terms of learning, the experience I had was very, very poor. It was very poor. In terms of performance, it was so weak. That's why I don't like it. I don't like distance learning. If it's to have a distance course, I would rather not have that course at all. (Ussumane, master's student, Focus Group, Covilhã)

Besides reinforcing the existence of a certain pedagogical 'conservatism' in Portuguese HE, as described in the previous section, these accounts also illustrate a core challenge of ERT: the lack of appropriate technological infrastructure and the absence of pedagogical training for instructors hitherto unfamiliar with online teaching. This was a global phenomenon, with faculty often left to find their own way with limited institutional support (Hebert et al. 2022), leading to inconsistent and frequently ineffective pedagogical practices. The attempt to simply transfer traditional transmissive methods to online platforms, without consideration for how this affects student learning (particularly for students connecting from different continents), demonstrates institutional failure in the most basic dimension of care: attentiveness to students' actual learning conditions and needs. The result was often an online learning experience that students found useless and frustrating, and where interaction was limited:

> First of all, I hate Zoom classes. I don't like them. We were the first students to use Zoom for lessons, but I don't like this way of learning because it's just the teacher talking and us listening, there's no interaction between people. (Melissa, Chinese master's student, Interview)

While affecting the quality of their learning, this lack of meaningful human interaction further fostered the social isolation that contributed to the well-documented mental health crisis among HE students during the pandemic (Fruehwirth, Biswas, and Perreira 2021). At the same time, it is important to underline that monologue-like classes in which only the teacher is talking while students are listening and interaction is scarce, were already an issue highlighted by international students in regular classroom settings and is hence not specific to ERT contexts, as highlighted in the previous section.

Another aspect of the strong frustration expressed by our international student participants is the perception that online classes during the pandemic were a wasted opportunity to fully enjoy the benefits of international education. A Chinese student articulated this sense of a compromised experience by directly comparing her online experience in Portugal to what it would have been if she were in her home country, concluding that being in Portugal under such circumstances was not worthwhile:

> I think there was a negative impact [of the pandemic], because in the second semester, especially in the last two months, we only had online classes. And I didn't like that. […] When we study in Portugal, we want to interact and talk in-person with our master's teachers and colleagues. We don't want to study at home. If that was the case, I would have stayed in China. […] I think it wasn't worth it to be in Portugal at that time. (Clara, master's student, Interview)

Another Chinese student described how the pandemic deprived her of academic interactions that she expected to have as an international student, including practising the local language:

> Because of the pandemic, I lost the opportunity to have more contact with teachers and with Portuguese colleagues, and also with Chinese colleagues. So, in terms of my Portuguese language learning, I lost many opportunities to use it … most of the time I just received the things [learning materials] that the teachers gave me. (Patrícia, master's student, Interview)

For hooks (1994), drawing on the Vietnamese Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh, the teacher becomes a 'healer' who attends to the wholeness of students – a holistic approach that the instrumental logic of ERT, focused solely on content delivery, rendered even more difficult. The reduction of teaching to technical transmission – what this student describes as merely 'receiving the things that the teachers gave me' – embodies the educational alienation that both Freire and hooks consider fundamentally dehumanising.

These accounts reaffirm the very rationale for international student mobility, the profound value of in-person experiences during the sojourn abroad (França, Nada, and Van Mol 2025). These shortcomings of ERT vividly illustrate the loss experienced by students when international education is stripped of its physical and social dimensions, failing to provide dialogic and caring pedagogical environments. For international students, the experience of studying abroad is intrinsically linked to cultural immersion, networking, and personal growth (Tavares 2024), elements that virtual platforms were shown not being capable of replicating, especially during ERT (Collier-Murayama 2023).

Furthermore, some participants highlighted how, within the ERT context, their international student status placed them even more in a position of outsiders, due to their lack of familiarity with the local academic culture and its inherent expectations:

> I think that the Portuguese colleagues already know more or less what the expectation of a university teacher is, right? And we didn't know what that expectation was. (Mafalda, master's student, Focus Group, Lisbon)

The online environment, hence, amplified existing cultural and pedagogical barriers. Mafalda's observation, as a Brazilian student, that Portuguese colleagues know better what teachers' expectations are points to the challenge of navigating the 'hidden curriculum' of HE (Thielsch 2017). Much of this implicit knowledge is absorbed through informal, face-to-face interactions on campus, which were entirely absent in the context of ERT. The online space, by stripping away these opportunities for interaction, made the culturally embedded norms of academia opaquer and more difficult for outsiders to navigate, placing international students at a significant disadvantage. The absence of transparency about academic expectations reflects an Eurocentric assumption that all students share a common cultural framework, thereby invisibilising and marginalising those who do not.

An engaged pedagogy, by contrast, would explicitly teach and negotiate these expectations, recognising cultural differences as resources rather than deficits.

In the context of ERT, it is important also to emphasise the strain on the teaching staff, who, without prior training or adequate support, had to adapt overnight. A teacher from a public university shared her experience, highlighting the difficulties of teaching in a virtual environment without having had prior preparation to do so, and unaware of the diverse challenges that can arise in such contexts:

> We have no preparation. It is a bit like that, it is left to our discretion [to adapt]. We are assumed to be sensible people, and we are, we do our best. But I've had situations where a student is recording the class with her mobile phone and hasn't asked for permission, for example. Or they take pictures of the PowerPoints because then they translate them in the apps into the language they need. The [only] Chinese student [in the class] is always on her mobile phone, pointed at me, because she must be reading what I'm saying in those simultaneous translation programs. (Teacher Public University 1)

The same HE staff participant highlighted that such situations place teachers in uncharted territory, where their pedagogical knowledge and capacity of managing classes is shaken.

> There is a whole dimension, as well, of our exposure to an unknown world. Well, I don't mind … let [students] record [the class]! … but effectively, these are factors that create disruption to our peace of mind, even for thinking and for managing the class itself. (Teacher Public University 1)

The teacher's discomfort with students recording or translating lectures reflects an institutional culture unprepared for international students and the adaptations that they require to access learning. Notably, the Chinese student's use of translation technology – a necessary accommodation to be able to follow classes – is framed as disruptive rather than as a potential solution to an institutional failure to provide multilingual support. An engaged pedagogy rooted in care would recognise students' adaptations as resourceful and needed responses to systemic barriers and would seek to collaborate with students in finding solutions rather than experiencing their efforts as disruptive or undermining pedagogical authority. This reveals how, when operating within such institutional frameworks unprepared for diversity, even well-intentioned educators struggle to move beyond deficit framings of international students.

These pedagogical difficulties were compounded by the nature of the online environment, which often rendered students invisible to their instructors. This invisibility made it nearly impossible for teachers to adapt to diverse learning needs or foster an inclusive classroom, which are particularly relevant strategies when teaching international students (De Leersnyder, Gündemir, and Ağirdağ 2022). The same teacher described this challenge, explaining how the lack of visual cues in the online classroom meant she often did not even know who was attending the class:

> I remember being in one or two classes and, sometimes I didn't know if the student was international or not, because they wouldn't even […] turn on their cameras. […] And well, what can I say that I did? I made materials available in English, some also in Spanish, […] but I must confess that I didn't make any additional effort, especially because those students, to me, apart from that one Chinese girl, were practically invisible, non-existent. (Teacher Public University 1)

This powerful account according to which international students were 'practically invisible, non-existent' is paradigmatic of a deeper systemic issue: the institutional

invisibilisation of international students (Lomer 2017). This account also illustrates the ultimate failure in developing Fisher and Tronto's (1990) care framework rooted in institutional responsibility and responsiveness. When students are literally invisible, rendered so not only by technological constraints but primarily by inadequate pedagogical approaches, a care-based and engaged pedagogy becomes impossible.

Conclusion

Our data show that pre-existing structural weaknesses in institutional support systems for international students were clearly exposed and dramatically amplified during the pandemic and the abrupt implementation of ERT, magnifying decades of institutional invisibilisation. While the transition to ERT presented universal challenges, our analysis clearly shows that international students were disproportionately affected when compared to local students. Already navigating the complexities of studying in a foreign country, international students faced diverse academic, social, and cultural barriers that were amplified in the digital classroom, where they were either invisible or exposed to pedagogies unadjusted to their needs. What the pandemic rendered visible was not merely technical or logistical unpreparedness, but rather the systematic epistemic violence embedded in rigid pedagogical structures that, lacking empathy, flexibility, and a commitment to community-building, position international students as outsiders and deficient subjects rather than equal co-creators of HE knowledge. Ultimately, the pandemic constituted a 'revelatory crisis' (Solway 1994), one that might not have created new forms of educational injustice but intensified existing ones to the point where they could no longer be obscured by the routines of in-person instruction. The crisis stripped away the mediating social and spatial contexts that had partially masked the persistence of systemic inequities, further justifying the need for a shift towards an engaged and care-based pedagogy. This means valuing every student not as a resource to be managed or a problem to be solved, but as a whole person with a rich and valuable biographical trajectory (Nada et al. 2023), capable of co-constructing the very knowledge they seek abroad, and recognising their rich lived experiences as central to meaningful learning processes.

Theoretically, our findings contribute to critical internationalisation scholarship by demonstrating that engaged pedagogy and care-informed practices, as articulated through Freire's and hooks' contributions, are not merely beneficial additions to international student support but rather ethical imperatives for disrupting the colonial logics that continue to structure most HEIs (Ploner and Nada 2020). This revelatory function of the pandemic crisis holds particular potential for understanding how emergency situations can serve as critical lenses for examining the otherwise normalised violence of everyday pedagogical practices in postcolonial HE contexts. The paradox our analysis reveals is particularly striking: Portuguese HEIs – like many others in postcolonial contexts – actively recruit international students following a neoliberal logic, therefore systematically failing to transform the pedagogical and institutional structures necessary to provide these students with the dialogic, humanising education they seek abroad. This represents one of the core failures of contemporary internationalisation (Lomer and Mittelmeier 2023; Marginson et al. 2010): the commodification of international student presence divorced from genuine commitment to inclusive pedagogy and intercultural learning. ERT exposed this commodification with striking clarity, as institutions prioritised

continuity over quality, maintaining revenue streams while abandoning any efforts of care-informed and culturally responsive pedagogies.

Moreover, our analysis indicates that, while ERT was the immediate cause of students' dissatisfaction, the pandemic-induced transition to the online environment not only created new challenges but also amplified existing ones. The lack of systemic strategies for addressing international students' needs and the existing teaching culture in many institutions – characterised by research participants as traditional, lecture-based, and non-interactive – was simply transferred to the online environment. This renders visible another systemic failure – that clearly precedes the pandemic crisis – in adapting to the needs of these students and placing them at the centre of the teaching process. Our analysis shows that international students are still framed, in Portuguese HE, as in other postcolonial contexts, as problems to be 'managed' rather than as valued interlocutors. This framing reinforces the dehumanising dynamic that both Freire and hooks identify as antithetical to genuine education. For Freire (2000, 74), the banking approach to education treats students as 'marginals' who must be 'integrated' and 'incorporated' into the existing structure, rather than recognising that it is the structure itself that must be transformed.

Looking forward, our analysis offers both theoretical and practical pathways for this much needed transformation. Theoretically, the paper advances the application of Freirean and hooksian frameworks to the specific context of international HE by demonstrating how the concepts of banking education, engaged pedagogy, and care-based practice illuminate not only individual classroom dynamics but systemic institutional failures that transcend national and crisis contexts. While previous applications of critical pedagogy to internationalisation have remained largely abstract, this study grounds these theoretical commitments in the empirical realities of international students navigating both a global pandemic and entrenched institutional cultures resistant to dialogic transformation. For Freire (2000, 84), authentic education must be 'constantly remade in the praxis' – a perpetual process of critical reflection and transformative action. Similarly, hooks (1994, 10) insists that 'strategies must constantly be changed, invented, reconceptualised to address each new teaching experience'. The pandemic, understood as a revelatory crisis, provides precisely the kind of rupture that both authors suggest is necessary to expose the contradictions embedded within existing structures and to mobilise the collective will for change.

Practically, this demands that HEIs move away from 'opening doors while failing to provide the necessary conditions for learning and social belonging' (França, Nada, and Lyrio 2025, 9). The mere recruitment of international students for revenue generation needs to move towards what Lomer and Anthony-Okeke (2019) term 'ethically engaging' pedagogies that position these students as equals and co-contributors. This requires the creation of participatory structures through which international students can have their voices heard within the classroom and actively contribute to curricular and pedagogical decision-making. In this context, HEIs should adopt a more systematic, care-based and inclusive approach. This entails equipping their institutions with academic and non-academic staff that are thoroughly trained on diversity issues and care-based pedagogies. Genuine integration of international students demands more than goodwill: it requires institutional commitment to offer a meaningful learning experience to all students, as well as institutional mechanisms capable of identifying and zealously counteracting discriminatory and exclusionary practices.

Furthermore, the analysis provides an expanded understanding of how emergency situations can serve as catalysts for exposing systemic inequities, offering HEIs an opportunity to transform their approaches from revenue-focused international student recruitment to the *de facto* inclusion of diverse students. These insights are particularly timely as, after the pandemic, HEIs are now struggling with pressing new challenges, from artificial intelligence (Akinwalere and Ivanov 2022) to geopolitical uncertainties (Hazelkorn et al. 2022) and the overall reversal of the internationalisation agenda (Douglas 2021). These demand innovative teaching and institutional strategies and a better adaptation to the needs of diverse students, including international students, if HEIs are to remain important actors in forming future generations of workers and citizens, and contributing to more equal and just societies.

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