The Challenges Of Non-Portuguese Speaking Students From Global Majority African Countries In Portuguese Universities

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Masters in Psychology of Intercultural Relations

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CIÊNCIAS SOCIAIS
E HUMANAS

Department of Psychology

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Resumo

Esta tese examina criticamente os desafios estruturais e psicossociais enfrentados por estudantes africanos não falantes de português (não PALOP) no ensino superior português, através da lente da psicologia social e intercultural. Apesar dos esforços de internacionalização de Portugal, estes estudantes enfrentam barreiras sistémicas, incluindo o processamento prolongado de vistos, exclusão burocrática, marginalização linguística e apoio institucional limitado, que prejudicam a sua integração académica e bem-estar psicológico. Utilizando um desenho de métodos qualitativos, o estudo investiga o stress percebido, o sentimento de pertença e a adaptação académica através de entrevistas semiestruturadas.

Com base na Teoria da Aculturação (Berry, 1997), na Ameaça do Estereótipo (Steele & Aronson, 1995),Habitus Institucional (Reay et al., 2001) e Teoria Crítica da Raça (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995), os resultados ilustram como as estruturas institucionais perpetuam a exclusão simbólica e material, resultando numa experiência divergente dos estudantes. A hegemonia linguística reforça práticas excludentes, enquanto o isolamento social e as microagressões exacerbam o stress aculturativo. No entanto, os estudantes demonstram resiliência coletiva e agência ao formar redes de apoio entre pares e envolver-se em atos de resistência.

Esta investigação contribui para o avanço da psicologia das relações interculturais, reforçando a resiliência como um processo coletivo e culturalmente situado e destacando a interação entre o enfrentamento individual e as restrições estruturais. A tese defende uma reforma sistémica por meio de políticas linguísticas inclusivas, desenvolvimento intercultural do corpo docente e práticas institucionais participativas que centram as experiências dos estudantes marginalizados, indo além da sala de aula e reconhecendo que o sucesso dos estudantes começa antes da chegada a Portugal e é influenciado por fatores externos à sala de aula.

As conclusões contribuem para uma compreensão crítica da internacionalização do ensino superior global e sublinham a necessidade de quadros orientados para a justiça social e inclusivos no âmbito da psicologia intercultural.

Palavras-chave: Estudantes africanos não pertencentes aos PALOP, Barreiras sistémicas, Apoio institucional, Estudantes marginalizados, Psicologia intercultural, Internacionalização do ensino superior

Abstract

This thesis critically examines the structural and psychosocial challenges experienced by non-Portuguese speaking (non-PALOP) African students within Portuguese higher education, through the lens of social and intercultural psychology. Despite Portugal's internationalization efforts, these students encounter systemic barriers including protracted visa processing, bureaucratic exclusion, linguistic marginalization, and limited institutional support that undermine their academic integration and psychological well-being. Employing a qualitative methods design, the study investigates perceived stress, belonging, and academic adjustment through semi-structured interviews.

Drawing on Acculturation Theory (Berry, 1997), Stereotype Threat (Steele & Aronson, 1995), Institutional Habitus (Reay et al., 2001), and Critical Race Theory (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995), the findings illustrate how institutional structures perpetuate both symbolic and material exclusion, resulting in a divergent student experience. Language hegemony enforces exclusionary practices, while social isolation and microaggressions exacerbate acculturative stress. However, students demonstrate collective resilience and agency by forming peer support networks and engaging in acts of resistance.

This research advances the psychology of intercultural relations by enhancing resilience as a culturally situated, collective process and highlighting the interplay between individual coping and structural constraints. The thesis advocates for systemic reform through inclusive language policies, intercultural faculty development, and participatory institutional practices that center the experiences of marginalized students moving beyond the classroom and recognizing that student success begins before arrival in Portugal and is influenced by factors out of the classroom.
The findings contribute to a critical understanding of global higher education internationalization and underscore the necessity for social justice-oriented and inclusive frameworks within intercultural psychology.

Keywords: Non-PALOP African Students, Systemic Barriers, Institutional Support, Marginalized Students, Intercultural Psychology, Higher Education Internationalization.

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Introduction

Globalization has significantly reshaped higher education, encouraging student mobility and intercultural exchange worldwide. Portugal has emerged as an increasingly attractive destination for international students, especially those from Portuguese-speaking African countries (PALOP). This trend aligns with the country's strategic policies to internationalize its higher education sector, aiming to foster diversity, promote intercultural competence, and stimulate economic growth (Teichler, 2017; Sin, Tavares, & Cardoso, 2019).

Students from Portuguese-speaking African countries (PALOP) are often positioned as the "ideal" international students due to their knowledge of the language and historical ties (França, Alves, & Padilla, 2018). However, the demographic profile of international students in Portugal is diverse, extending beyond Lusophone countries to include students from non-Portuguese speaking African nations often referred to as non-PALOP students.

These students typically come from countries such as Nigeria, Kenya, and Ghana, and face distinct challenges due to the intersecting linguistic, cultural, and institutional differences (Pinto, 2021). Despite Portugal's internationalization efforts, these students face systemic and structural challenges including prolonged visa processing, bureaucratic exclusion, language barriers, and limited institutional or academic support; as well as psychosocial difficulties such as social isolation, prejudice, and identity strain, all of which undermine their academic integration and psychological well-being.

Unlike their PALOP counterparts, who benefit from shared colonial history and Portuguese language proficiency, non-PALOP students frequently encounter systemic barriers in academic, social, and bureaucratic domains (Sin et al., 2019; Pinto, 2021). The experiences of non-PALOP students have not been adequately studied.

Internationalization rhetoric often emphasizes inclusivity and intercultural exchange. Yet, the lived experiences of non-PALOP students reveal a paradox: while they contribute to demographic diversity, they frequently face marginalization and exclusion in practice (Bamber, 2016; Andrade, 2006). The gap between policy and experience necessitates a critical investigation of how these students navigate Portuguese higher education, how institutional

cultures shape their integration, and how social and intercultural psychological processes influence their well-being and academic success.

Problem Statement

Existing research predominantly focuses on international students with linguistic and cultural proximity to host countries, often neglecting students from more culturally and linguistically distant backgrounds (Smith & Khawaja, 2011; Yeh & Inose, 2003). In the Portuguese context, most studies explore the experiences of PALOP students, leaving the non-PALOP group underrepresented in scholarly discourse (Pinto, 2021).

Non-PALOP students face numerous challenges including visa acquisition delays, lack of language support, bureaucratic complexity, social isolation, and experiences of stereotype threat (Steele & Aronson, 1995; Spencer et al., 1999). Such factors contribute to acculturative stress and can undermine academic performance and psychological health (Berry, 2006). Furthermore, institutional policies often reflect implicit biases favoring students with Portuguese language skills or EU nationality, reinforcing systemic inequalities and racialized hierarchies (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995).

This invisibility within institutional narratives amplifies feelings of alienation and hinders the development of a sense of belonging which is an essential psychological need linked to motivation and success in academic settings (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Without targeted institutional reforms, these systemic barriers risk perpetuating inequity under the guise of internationalization.

Purpose of the Study

Inspired by personal experiences as a non-PALOP African student in Portugal, this research seeks to critically explore the experience and challenges faced by non-Portuguese speaking African students in Portuguese universities. The study aims to:

Illuminate the structural, bureaucratic, and psychosocial challenges impeding these students' academic integration and well-being.

Analyze how institutional policies and cultures affect their inclusion or exclusion.

Examine resilience and agency strategies employed by students in navigating systemic barriers.

Provide target- group based recommendations for noted gaps to improve institutional support and foster intercultural competence.

Through this, the research strives to bridge the gap between internationalization ideals and the reality experienced by marginalized student populations.

Main Research Questions:

The study is guided by the following research questions:

What are the primary bureaucratic, linguistic, and cultural challenges faced by non-PALOP African students in Portuguese higher education?

How do institutional structures and policies facilitate or hinder their academic and social integration?

In what ways do students exercise agency and resilience to overcome exclusion?

What institutional strategies can be implemented to promote genuine inclusion and support for these students?

Significance of the Study

This study contributes both theoretically and practically.

Theoretically, it advances intercultural psychology by contextualizing resilience and acculturation within structural and racialized power dynamics, applying frameworks such as critical race theory (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995), acculturation (Berry, 1997), and stereotype threat (Steele & Aronson, 1995). It highlights the importance of Institutional Habitus (Reay et al., 2001) in shaping educational access and experience.

Practically, the findings inform policy and institutional practice by identifying gaps in support and proposing inclusive interventions that address language justice, intercultural faculty

development, and participatory student engagement. Addressing these challenges will improve student retention, academic success, and overall well-being, aligning institutional internationalization efforts with social justice imperatives (Andrade, 2006).

Furthermore, the research has economic implications by advocating for improved international student experiences that enhance Portugal's competitiveness and sustainability as a global education hub (Teichler, 2017).

Chapter 1: Literature Review

1.1 Background

The internationalization of higher education has become a defining feature of contemporary academic landscapes, reflecting broader processes of globalization and cultural exchange. Universities worldwide are increasingly committed to attracting diverse student populations and fostering intercultural competence among faculty and students alike. However, this growth in international student mobility reveals significant disparities in experiences, particularly for students from less privileged or linguistically distant backgrounds.

The growing acceptance rate of international students into Portuguese higher education has brought increasing numbers of students from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds. While students from Portuguese-speaking African countries (PALOP) are often positioned as the “ideal” international students due to their knowledge of the language and historical ties (França, Alves, & Padilla, 2018), the experiences of non-Portuguese speaking (non-PALOP) students has not been well studied.

Despite Portugal's internationalization efforts, these students face systemic and structural challenges including protracted visa processing, bureaucratic exclusion, language barriers, and limited institutional or academic support; as well as psychosocial difficulties such as social isolation, prejudice, and identity strain, all of which undermine their academic integration and psychological well-being.

This literature review critically examines existing research on the experience, challenges and institutional responses faced by international students, with a focus on non-Portuguese speaking African students in Portuguese higher education. The review is organized thematically, highlighting trends in internationalization, barriers to integration, psychosocial impacts, and

institutional support mechanisms, concluding with a synthesis of gaps that this thesis seeks to address.

1.2 Internationalization of Higher Education

The internationalization of higher education is widely recognized as both a response to and a driver of globalization. Teichler (2017) describes internationalization as a multifaceted process encompassing student and faculty mobility, cross-border academic collaboration, and the internationalization of curricula and research agendas. The increasing enrollment of international students worldwide reflects the growing appeal of higher education as a global commodity, contributing not only to cultural exchange but also to the economic sustainability of universities and host countries (Teichler, 2017).

Portugal's higher education system has actively embraced internationalization, implementing policies designed to attract students from diverse backgrounds, particularly from its former colonies in Africa (Sin, Tavares, & Cardoso, 2019). Portuguese universities have experienced a significant rise in international student numbers, including from both Lusophone and non-Lusophone African countries (Sin et al., 2019). However, this expansion has not been accompanied by proportional institutional adaptation to support the diverse needs of these students. Sin et al. (2019) argue that while universities present a modern and international image externally, internal structures often lag in fostering genuine intercultural engagement and equitable access.

Furthermore, internationalization strategies in Portugal reveal tensions between economic imperatives and educational equity. The recruitment of international students is frequently driven by financial considerations, potentially overshadowing commitments to diversity and inclusion (Sin et al., 2019). This performative aspect of internationalization risks masking persistent systemic inequalities, particularly affecting students without linguistic or cultural proximity to Portugal.

1.3 Challenges Faced by International Students

International students face a complex array of challenges that impact their academic performance, social integration, and psychological well-being. These challenges can be broadly categorized into Structural and Psychosocial Challenges.

1.3.1 Structural Challenges

While much of the research on international student adjustment emphasizes psychosocial factors such as culture shock, loneliness, or prejudice, it is equally important to recognize the structural conditions that shape these experiences. Universities are not neutral spaces; they are embedded in broader political, linguistic, and bureaucratic systems that privilege some students while placing others at a disadvantage. For non-PALOP students in Portuguese higher education, structural barriers, especially those related to language, institutional policy, and bureaucratic obstacles, form the backdrop against which all psychosocial experiences unfold.

1.3.1.1 Language Barriers

Language is perhaps the most visible and immediate challenge for non-PALOP students. While their peers from African Portuguese-speaking countries benefit from linguistic continuity, non-PALOP students must confront the double burden of acquiring academic Portuguese while simultaneously navigating the demands of their degree programs. Ambrosio et al., (2017) observe that proficiency in Portuguese is not merely an academic skill but a prerequisite for full participation in university life. Students who lack advanced command of the language are often excluded from classroom discussions, group projects, and informal peer networks.

This problem is not unique to Portugal. Luo et al., (2019), in their study of international students in the United States, found that perceptions of limited language competence were strongly associated with poor psychological well-being and diminished peer support. However, in the Portuguese case, language takes on a particularly symbolic dimension. As Bourdieu (1991) argues, language is a form of symbolic power that confers legitimacy and social capital. PALOP students, by virtue of their shared linguistic heritage, are often afforded a smoother path to acceptance, while non-PALOP peers remain on the margins. Phillipson's (1992) work on linguistic imperialism sharpens this point by showing how language hierarchies are not accidental but historically produced. Portugal's reliance on Portuguese as the sole medium of instruction reflects its colonial legacy and continues to reinforce inequities between student groups.

Although some Portuguese universities have expanded English-medium programs in response to internationalization pressures (Sin, Tavares, & Cardoso, 2019), these remain unevenly distributed across disciplines. Non-PALOP students outside of high-demand areas such as business or engineering may find few courses offered in English, forcing them into constant linguistic negotiation. Pinto (2021), drawing on the testimonies of African doctoral students, reports that "everything is so different" when it comes to academic language, with students often feeling silenced in seminars and unable to express their intellectual capabilities. Such experiences suggest that language is not a neutral tool of instruction but a gatekeeping mechanism that structures access to knowledge and opportunities.

1.3.1.2 Institutional and Policy Constraints

Structural challenges are also embedded in the policies and strategies universities adopt to manage internationalization. França, Alves, and Padilla (2018) argue that Portugal's policies toward international students are shaped by a colonial legacy that privileges students from PALOP countries. Recruitment efforts, tuition structures, and visa facilitation often explicitly target PALOP students, effectively institutionalizing a two-tier system in which non-PALOP students receive less support. Sin et al., (2019) describe this as a tension between "external makeover" and "internal transformation." Further, Aguiar et al., (2023) shows that not even the advancement of technology has spared non-PALOP students from challenges. The research shows that non-PALOP learners report worse outcomes compared to their PALOP peers. While institutions seek to present themselves as global and welcoming, little substantive reform is undertaken to address the actual needs of diverse student groups.

This policy environment produces several disadvantages for non-PALOP students. Teichler (2017) notes that internationalization across Europe is increasingly tied to competition for global rankings, leading universities to prioritize marketable student groups over marginalized ones. In Portugal, this means institutions highlight their strong connections with PALOP countries while neglecting those without linguistic or historical ties. Lyrio et al., (2023) demonstrates that institutions responded poorly to the needs of their non-PALOP students. Gupta's (2012) notion of "structural violence" through bureaucracy is particularly relevant here: when institutional rules and policies are designed without consideration for linguistic or cultural

diversity, they create systemic barriers that are not easily attributed to any single act of discrimination but that cumulatively disadvantage particular groups.

Visa processes, residence permits, and scholarship eligibility also reflect this structural bias. PALOP students often benefit from bilateral agreements and reduced tuition rates, while non-PALOP peers must navigate higher costs and more complex immigration requirements (França et al., 2018). These differences compound over time, creating a stratified international student body in which opportunities are unequally distributed from the outset.

1.3.1.3 Academic and Bureaucratic Obstacles

Beyond language and policy, non-PALOP students also face everyday challenges embedded in the academic and administrative structures of universities. Andrade's (2006) study of adjustment factors in English-speaking universities underscores the importance of accessible institutional support, such as writing centers, mentoring, and orientation programs. In Portugal, however, such support is often limited or tailored primarily for PALOP students, leaving non-PALOP students without adequate guidance. Pinto (2021) documents the frustrations of African doctoral students who struggle to navigate administrative systems that provide little accommodation for cultural or linguistic differences.

Laufer and Gorup (2019) further highlight the consequences of such institutional neglect in their study of international doctoral student dropout. They describe how many students feel like "invisible others," marginalized by both peers and administrators, and eventually choose to abandon their studies. The bureaucratic complexity of enrollment, thesis submission, or visa renewals, when compounded by linguistic barriers, can become overwhelming. Gupta's (2012) insights into bureaucratic inefficiency apply here as well: what may appear as mere "red tape" functions as a structural mechanism that produces unequal outcomes by disproportionately burdening those least equipped to navigate it.

The lack of flexibility within academic structures also limits opportunities for integration. Reay et al.'s (2001) concept of institutional habitus is useful in understanding this phenomenon. Universities implicitly expect students to adapt to dominant norms of communication, learning, and social behavior, but these norms are rooted in local cultural assumptions. For non-PALOP students, whose backgrounds may diverge significantly from the Portuguese academic model, this creates an uneven playing field. Instead of valuing diversity as

a resource, the institution reproduces existing hierarchies by rewarding those whose cultural capital aligns with the mainstream.

1.3.2 Psychosocial Challenges

If structural barriers set the conditions for international students' experiences, psychosocial challenges capture how those barriers are lived and felt on the individual level. For non-PALOP students in Portuguese universities, these challenges often manifest as isolation, stress, identity conflicts, and struggles with belonging. Importantly, these psychosocial dimensions cannot be removed from the structural context discussed earlier: linguistic exclusion, bureaucratic red tape, and unequal policies create the circumstances under which emotional strain and identity struggles emerge.

1.3.2.1 Culture Shock and Acculturative Stress

Culture shock remains one of the most frequently cited psychological challenges among international students. Ayub et al.'s (2024) model describes the stages of adjustment—initial excitement, crisis, gradual recovery, and eventual adaptation. While many international students move through these stages with varying degrees of difficulty, non-PALOP students often face deeper and more prolonged crises because of the structural disadvantages highlighted earlier.

Berry's (1997, 2006) acculturation framework adds nuance here by emphasizing that adaptation outcomes depend both on the strategies chosen by students and the openness of the host society. Integration is the most adaptive strategy, but it requires institutional and social spaces that value diversity. In Portugal, where universities often default to privileging PALOP students, non-PALOP peers encounter limited pathways to integration, leading to elevated acculturative stress. Smith and Khawaja's (2011) synthesis of international student experiences shows that language barriers, lack of institutional support, and discrimination are primary drivers of such stress conditions that align closely with what non-PALOP students encounter.

Pappa et al., (2020) study of international doctoral students in Finland illustrates how stress can become tied to one's scholarly identity. Students who felt unsupported reported diminished confidence in their academic capabilities, leading to a sense of professional alienation. Non-PALOP students in Portugal may experience a similar erosion of identity, especially when their struggles are dismissed as individual failings rather than structural issues.

1.3.2.2 Belonging, Loneliness, and Isolation

The need to belong is a basic human motivation (Baumeister & Leary, 1995), and its absence has profound psychological consequences. Chataway & Berry (2021) address loneliness among non-PALOP African students in Portugal. For non-PALOP students, belonging is often elusive. While PALOP peers benefit from linguistic and cultural continuity, non-PALOP students must work harder to establish social connections. These dynamic produces what Pinto (2021) describes as feelings of estrangement, where students perceive themselves as perpetual outsiders in both academic and social spaces.

Research on international students consistently shows that loneliness and isolation are among the most significant challenges. Andrade (2006) highlights that students who form supportive peer networks adjust more successfully, yet such networks can be difficult for non-PALOP students to access when language and cultural familiarity determine group membership. Luo et al. (2019) confirm this pattern, showing that perceived language competence is strongly linked to psychological well-being and peer support. When students feel silenced by linguistic inadequacy, they are less able to form the connections that buffer against loneliness.

Weidman's (1989) model of undergraduate socialization emphasizes the role of peer and faculty interactions in shaping students' academic identities. For non-PALOP students, reduced access to these interactions not only diminishes belonging but also limits professional development. Marangell et al., (2018) argue that host institutions must actively foster a culture of inclusion, rather than assuming social integration will happen organically. Without such efforts, the burden of adjustment falls disproportionately on already marginalized students.

1.3.2.3 Prejudice, Stereotype Threat, and Discrimination

Psychosocial challenges also stem from prejudice and the internalization of negative stereotypes. Allport's (1954) theory of prejudice helps explain how subtle biases shape daily interactions, even when overt discrimination is absent. For non-PALOP students, these biases may surface in the form of lower expectations from professors, exclusion from group work, or microaggressions tied to language competence.

Steele and Aronson's (1995) work on stereotype threat is particularly relevant. When students are aware that others may perceive them as less capable, whether because of language, nationality, or race, the anxiety of confirming those stereotypes can directly impair performance. Spencer et al., (1999) showed this effect in mathematics for women, but the principle applies broadly: for non-PALOP students, the very act of speaking in Portuguese in class may carry the weight of stereotype threat, reinforcing silence and disengagement.

Critical race theory (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995) encourages us to see these dynamics not as isolated incidents but as embedded in systemic inequities. Franca (2025 addresses the difficulties that Chinese students face including discrimination, language and integration. The privileging of PALOP students in policies and classroom dynamics reproduces historical hierarchies, leaving non-PALOP peers doubly disadvantaged. When viewed through this lens, discrimination is not simply interpersonal but structural, and its psychosocial impact is cumulative.

1.3.2.4 Identity Negotiation and Scholarly Confidence

For many non-PALOP students, studying abroad involves renegotiating not only social roles but also academic and professional identities. Laufer and Gorup (2019) describe how international doctoral students who feel unsupported often begin to question their place in academia, sometimes leading to dropout. Pinto's (2021) work similarly highlights how African students in Portugal reported struggles with academic voice and legitimacy, often concluding that "everything is so different" in ways that undermined their confidence.

This identity negotiation is further complicated by Hofstede's (2001) cultural dimensions. Students from collectivist or egalitarian societies may find Portuguese academic culture's emphasis on hierarchy and independence unsettling. When institutional habitus (Reay et al., 2001) fails to recognize these cultural differences, students are pressured to conform to norms that are not their own, exacerbating stress and self-doubt.

1.4 Coping, Resilience, and Empowerment

Despite these challenges, many students find ways to adapt and cope. Masten's (2001) concept of resilience as "ordinary magic" suggests that even in adverse conditions, students often draw on everyday strengths to persist. Such strengths include friendships, religious communities, or personal determination. Ungar (2013) reminds us that resilience is shaped by context, meaning that what is adaptive for a student from one cultural background may differ from another.

Zimmerman's (1995) theory of psychological empowerment provides a final lens for understanding coping. Students who feel they have some agency, whether by shaping their learning environments, forming supportive peer groups, or accessing mentorship, are better equipped to withstand psychosocial stressors. Unfortunately, when institutions are rigid and unresponsive, opportunities for empowerment are scarce, leaving resilience as an individual burden rather than a shared responsibility.

1.5 Theoretical Framework

The complex experiences of non-Portuguese speaking African students in Portuguese higher education necessitate an interdisciplinary theoretical framework that captures both the structural and psychosocial dimensions of their integration. This study adopts an integrative approach, drawing primarily from social and intercultural psychology, critical education theory, migration studies, sociology, and education, shed light on how individuals adapt to new environments, how institutions reproduce inequality, and how students negotiate resilience and belonging in contexts not designed for them. The frameworks clarify how individual adaptation processes are embedded within broader institutional and socio-political structures that shape inclusion and exclusion; I expound on the theories below.

1.5.1 Acculturation and Cultural Adjustment

Berry's (1997) model of acculturation provides a useful starting point. He identifies four strategies through which individuals adjust to new cultural contexts. The strategies are assimilation, integration, separation, and marginalization. For many international students, integration is ideal, as it involves maintaining one's cultural identity while also participating in

the host society. Yet for non-PALOP students in Portugal, structural barriers such as language and policy constraints often make this pathway difficult, leaving them more vulnerable to marginalization. Berry (2006) later emphasized that acculturation is not just a matter of personal choice but also of structural opportunity: when institutions fail to support diversity, students are more likely to experience acculturative stress.

Ayub et al.'s (2024) concept of culture shock complements Berry's work by highlighting the emotional stages of adjustment, from initial enthusiasm to crisis, gradual recovery, and adaptation. These frameworks underscore that non-PALOP students' struggles are not simply personal shortcomings but predictable outcomes of entering environments where institutional support is uneven and where cultural distance is wide.

Smith and Khawaja's (2011) review of international student experiences reinforces this point, showing that language barriers, lack of social networks, and weak institutional support are among the strongest predictors of stress. For non-PALOP students, these stressors are amplified by their outsider status in a system historically geared toward PALOP peers.

1.5.2 Belonging, Socialization, and Identity

If acculturation theory explains broad patterns of adjustment, belonging theory helps to capture the lived experience. Baumeister and Leary (1995) argue that the need to belong is a fundamental human motivation. In the university setting, the absence of belonging undermines not only well-being but also academic engagement. Weidman's (1989) model of undergraduate socialization highlights the importance of peer and faculty interactions for shaping students' sense of place in the academic community.

International student research echoes these ideas. Pappa et al., (2020), in a study of doctoral students in Finland, found that when institutions failed to acknowledge or support students' scholarly identities, stress and alienation intensified. These findings suggest that for non-PALOP students, institutional neglect does more than create academic difficulties; it threatens identity development and erodes confidence in their role as legitimate members of the scholarly community.

1.5.3 Prejudice, Stereotypes, and Structural Inequities

Beyond socialization lies the question of prejudice and power. Allport's (1954) theory of prejudice remains a foundational explanation for how bias shapes interpersonal relations. Later work, such as Steele and Aronson's (1995) notion of stereotype threat, shows how awareness of negative stereotypes can impair performance. Spencer et al., (1999) demonstrated this effect in mathematics for women, but the principle extends to other groups: when non-PALOP students are seen as outsiders or less capable, the psychological weight of those perceptions can undermine achievement.

Critical Race Theory in education, as advanced by Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995), shifts the focus from individual prejudice to systemic inequality. It reminds us that disparities in Portuguese higher education are not just about interpersonal bias but about historical and institutional legacies that privilege some students over others. This connects directly to Bourdieu's (1991) idea of language as symbolic power. Portuguese proficiency is more than a tool for communication; it is a form of cultural capital that determines legitimacy and access. Phillipson's (1992) critique of linguistic imperialism further highlights how language hierarchies are historically produced and institutionally maintained, creating enduring asymmetries between PALOP and non-PALOP students.

1.5.4 Cultural Dimensions and Institutional Practices

Cultural psychology also reminds us that adaptation depends on deeper value systems. Hofstede's (2001) dimensions of culture, such as power distance and individualism versus collectivism, help explain why mismatches between students' expectations and institutional practices can create friction. For instance, students from collectivist societies may find Portuguese universities' emphasis on individual autonomy disorienting, just as those from low power-distance cultures may be unsettled by hierarchical academic relationships.

At the institutional level, Reay, David, and Ball's (2001) concept of institutional habitus explains how universities implicitly reproduce social hierarchies by favoring students whose cultural backgrounds align with dominant norms. For non-PALOP students, whose cultural and linguistic capital may not match the institutional habitus, integration becomes more difficult.

Gupta's (2012) discussion of bureaucracy as structural violence is relevant here: rigid administrative systems, presented as neutral, often reproduce inequalities by disproportionately burdening students unfamiliar with local norms.

1.5.5 Resilience and Empowerment Perspectives

Despite these barriers, international students are not passive victims. Research on resilience emphasizes their capacity to adapt in the face of adversity. Masten (2001) describes resilience as "ordinary magic," suggesting that many students draw on everyday protective factors like peer support, coping strategies, cultural identity to persist. Ungar (2013) extends this by arguing that resilience is context-dependent: what counts as adaptive in one cultural setting may differ in another. For non-PALOP students, resilience might involve building alternative networks outside the university or negotiating hybrid identities.

Zimmerman's (1995) theory of psychological empowerment adds another layer, suggesting that adaptation improves when students feel a sense of control and agency within their environment. For institutions, this means that creating conditions that enable student voice and agency is not just supportive but crucial for equitable integration.

1.5.6 Pre-Migration Expectations and Motivations

Anticipatory Socialization theory (Merton, 1957; Weidman, 1989) posits that individuals construct mental models and expectations about future roles before direct experience. For international students, anticipatory socialization shapes perceptions of the host academic environment, influencing preparedness and initial adaptation. Non-PALOP students often arrive with optimism tempered by incomplete or idealized information about Portuguese higher education, which affects their early experiences and coping strategies.

The Push-Pull Theory of Migration (Lee, 1966) provides a macro-level understanding of students' decisions to migrate. "Push" factors such as political instability, limited educational infrastructure, and economic challenges in home countries motivate migration, while "pull" factors like perceived safety, academic quality, and scholarship opportunities attract students to Portugal. This theory contextualizes student mobility within global inequalities and development dynamics.

1.5.7 Cultural Adjustment and Institutional Dynamics

The experience of entering a new cultural context often results in Culture Shock (Ayub et al.,), characterized by emotional disorientation and uncertainty. This initial phase is frequently followed by Acculturative Stress (Berry, 2006), reflecting the psychological burden of adapting to new social norms, language demands, and potential discrimination. Berry's (1997) Acculturation Strategies model further categorizes individual responses as integration, assimilation, separation, or marginalization, offering a nuanced lens to examine how students approach identity and belonging.

Institutions themselves embody cultural logics and expectations, conceptualized as Institutional Habitus (Reay, David, & Ball, 2001). This framework reveals how dominant institutional norms may implicitly exclude or disadvantage students lacking cultural capital aligned with the host context. In Portuguese universities, institutional habitus often privileges Lusophone cultural capital, complicating the experiences of non-PALOP students including lower school fees and more scholarships.

The Power Distance cultural dimension (Hofstede, 2001) provides insight into the varying expectations of authority and hierarchy. Portuguese academic environments tend to exhibit lower power distance compared to many African contexts, affecting student-teacher interactions and adjustment experiences.

1.5.8 Language, Belonging, and Structural Inequalities

Language functions as both a tool for inclusion and a mechanism of exclusion. The concept of Linguistic Hegemony (Phillipson, 1992) highlights the dominance of Portuguese in institutional settings, which acts as a gatekeeping force marginalizing non-fluent students. Language barriers limit access to academic content, social networks, and support services, directly impacting students' sense of belonging.

Belonging Theory (Baumeister & Leary, 1995) emphasizes the fundamental human motivation to form meaningful social connections. Non-PALOP students often face invisibility and exclusion, undermining their psychological need for acceptance and contributing to acculturative stress.

A Critical Race Theory (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995) perspective situates these experiences within historical and contemporary structures of racial and cultural inequality. It problematizes institutional practices that reproduce colonial legacies and systemic favoritism towards PALOP and European students, perpetuating racialized hierarchies and symbolic violence.

1.5.9 Coping, Resilience, and Student Agency

Resilience is conceptualized as the capacity to adapt and thrive in the face of adversity (Masten, 2001). Coping theories (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984) differentiate between problem-focused and emotion-focused strategies, both employed by students to navigate academic and social challenges.

Self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997) plays a pivotal role in academic motivation and persistence, with language proficiency and supportive faculty enhancing students' belief in their capabilities. Furthermore, Student Agency (Archer, 2000) acknowledges students' proactive role in shaping their educational trajectories through resistance, peer support, and advocacy.

This theoretical framework foregrounds the interplay between individual psychological processes and structural constraints. It situates the experiences of non-PALOP African students within global migration patterns, cultural adjustment processes, institutional power relations, and strategies of resilience and agency. Together, these perspectives inform the study's methodological approach and analytical focus, guiding an inquiry that seeks to move beyond deficit models towards a socially just understanding of intercultural relations in Portuguese higher education.

1.6 Summary

The existing literature establishes that internationalization has significantly transformed higher education globally and within Portugal, with increased student mobility from diverse

cultural and linguistic backgrounds. However, a critical examination reveals that this internationalization often privileges students from linguistically and culturally proximal backgrounds, notably PALOP countries in the Portuguese context (Sin et al., 2019; Pinto, 2021).

Non-PALOP African students face distinct challenges including linguistic exclusion, acculturative and bureaucratic stress, social isolation, and institutional neglect. These challenges are compounded by structural barriers embedded in Institutional Habitus and power hierarchies (Reay et al., 2001; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). Psychosocial impacts such as stereotype threat and lack of belonging further impede their academic integration and mental health (Steele & Aronson, 1995; Baumeister & Leary, 1995).

While universities have implemented support programs and policies, gaps remain in their responsiveness and cultural sensitivity, especially regarding language justice and faculty intercultural competence (Deardorff, 2006; Pinto, 2021). The literature calls for a shift from performative internationalization toward inclusive frameworks that center marginalized student voices and promote equity (Phillipson, 1992; Andrade, 2006).

Notably, the experiences of non-PALOP African students in Portuguese higher education remain underexplored, representing a significant research gap. This study addresses this gap by providing a comprehensive analysis of their lived experiences, institutional challenges, and coping strategies within a social and intercultural psychological framework as well as their recommendations based on the real challenges they experienced and gaps they noted.

Chapter 2: Methodology

2.1 Research Design

This study employed a qualitative research design to explore the lived experiences of African students (non-PALOP) from non-Portuguese speaking countries in Portuguese higher education institutions. Given the exploratory nature of the research questions, qualitative methods were selected for their strength in capturing rich, contextualized, and nuanced data (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Specifically, semi-structured interviews were conducted to elicit detailed narratives about participants' academic, social, and bureaucratic challenges, as well as coping strategies and perceptions of institutional support.

A qualitative approach was chosen because the focus of the research lies not in measuring experiences numerically but in understanding how individuals interpret, navigate, and make meaning of their realities within a specific sociocultural and institutional context (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The unique challenges faced by non-PALOP students, including, but not limited to bureaucratic hurdles and feelings of social exclusion, cannot be adequately captured through surveys or numerical data alone. Instead, they require attention to lived experiences, personal narratives, and the subtle dynamics of adaptation that emerge in everyday academic and social life.

The decision to use structured open-ended interviews provided a balance between guiding the conversation toward relevant themes and allowing participants the freedom to express their unique experiences in depth (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015). This approach aligns with the study's interpretivist epistemology, highlighting the co-construction of meaning between researcher and participant (Hiller, 2016).

Qualitative research aligns particularly well with the study's goal of giving voice to underrepresented populations. Non-PALOP students in Portugal are often less visible than their PALOP counterparts, as Portuguese-speaking students from former colonies are generally the focus of institutional advancement opportunities (França et al., 2018; Sin et al., 2019). As a result, the voices of students from Anglophone or Francophone African countries are underrepresented within both academic research and policy discourse. By prioritizing personal narratives, this study seeks to rectify that imbalance and foreground the perspectives of those whose challenges are often overlooked.

Another reason for using a qualitative design is its capacity to capture complexity. The challenges faced by international students are rarely straightforward. They intersect across structural, linguistic, and psychosocial issues, and they are different depending on the student's background, the institution they attend, and the resources available to them. For example, while bureaucratic procedures such as visa renewals may represent primarily structural obstacles, they often spill over into psychosocial territory by producing stress, uncertainty, and feelings of marginalization (Gupta, 2012). A qualitative framework allows for exploration of these intersections, showing how institutional and cultural dynamics influence the lived realities of students.

The study also drew inspiration from traditions within cultural psychology that emphasize context, interpretation, and the co-construction of identity in relation to culture (Berry, 1997; Hofstede, 2001). International students do not experience challenges in isolation; rather, they navigate them through resilience, belonging, and adaptation (Masten, 2001). A qualitative design therefore provided the flexibility to examine how structural and psychosocial challenges are interpreted through participants' cultural lenses and how these interpretations shape their coping strategies.

A further justification for qualitative research is its exploratory nature. While there is substantial literature on international students' adjustment in English-speaking contexts (Andrade, 2006; Smith & Khawaja, 2011), much less is known about students from non-PALOP backgrounds in Portugal. This relative lack of research underscores the need for an open, exploratory approach that prioritizes discovery over hypothesis testing. The qualitative design, particularly through semi-structured interviews, made it possible to uncover themes that might not have been anticipated at the outset, thus generating new insights and contributing to the limited body of knowledge on this population.

Critical self-reflection is another hallmark of qualitative study that influenced the choice of design. As a researcher engaging with participants from similar cultural and linguistic backgrounds, I was aware that my positionality might both facilitate access and shape interpretations. A qualitative framework not only allowed space for this self-reflection but also required it, ensuring that the research process remained transparent and sensitive to issues of bias, power, and representation (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

The qualitative design was also pragmatic. The study was conducted during a period in which many students were dispersed geographically and balancing academic and personal demands. Online platforms such as Zoom and WhatsApp proved to be flexible tools for data

collection, enabling participation without imposing additional burdens on students' already complex schedules. This practical consideration further reinforced the appropriateness of a qualitative design, which is adaptable to diverse contexts and participant needs.

Finally, the choice of qualitative research reflects an ethical commitment to valuing participants as co-constructors of knowledge rather than subjects of measurement. By inviting students to narrate their experiences in their own terms, the study honored their agency and acknowledged the legitimacy of their perspectives. This ethical orientation is especially important when working with populations that may feel marginalized or overlooked by host institutions.

In conclusion, the qualitative design was methodologically appropriate and philosophically aligned with the study's aims. It allowed for in-depth exploration of experiences that are both personal and shaped by larger institutional structures. It provided flexibility to capture unexpected themes, while ensuring reflexivity and ethical sensitivity. Most importantly, it created space for non-PALOP students in Portugal to articulate their realities and, in doing so, contributed to a deeper understanding of the complex interplay between structural barriers and psychosocial adaptation in higher education.

2.2 Participants

Participants were purposely recruited to target non-PALOP African students enrolled in Portuguese universities. All participants came from Anglophone African nations, specifically Kenya, Ghana, and Nigeria, and thus represented groups that are typically less visible in the Portuguese academic landscape, where internationalization strategies often prioritize students from Portuguese-speaking countries (França et al., 2018; Sin, et al., 2019).

The age range of participants was 18 to 40 years, a range that reflects the demographic profile of many postgraduate international students in Europe. This stage of life is often characterized by competing demands: academic advancement, financial responsibilities, and in some cases, family commitments. Such factors can increase the challenges of adjusting to a new cultural and institutional environment, making this group a particularly important population to study.

In terms of academic level, the sample included undergraduate, master's and doctoral students. This diversity of academic stages was intentional, as structural and psychosocial challenges may differ depending on students' position in the academic ladder. For example,

master's students often face intense coursework requirements and shorter program durations, while doctoral students navigate longer-term projects that involve more independent research and, in many cases, closer working relationships with supervisors. Including the three groups therefore enriched the sample by highlighting similarities and differences in experiences across academic levels (Pappa et al. 2020; Laufer & Gorup, 2019).

Recruitment was carried out using a criterion-based sampling strategy, with the goal of reaching students most likely to provide valuable insights into the research questions. Due to the relatively small size and dispersed nature of this population, recruitment was conducted primarily through WhatsApp groups that are commonly used by African students for peer support and communication. This method facilitated access to a hard-to-reach demographic while respecting their digital social networks.

These groups are commonly created by students themselves as spaces for sharing information, coordinating practical matters, and providing support to each other. They therefore represent important social infrastructures that make up for the limited formal support often offered by host institutions (Luo et al., 2019).

The use of WhatsApp groups for recruitment was both practical and strategic. Practically, it allowed access to participants who may be dispersed across different universities and cities within Portugal, ensuring diversity in institutional experiences. Strategically, it facilitated engagement with students in a space where they already felt comfortable and connected. This approach helped reduce barriers to participation and may have fostered greater openness during the interviews, since participants were approached through networks they trusted rather than unfamiliar institutional channels.

Targeting students who had been in Portugal for differing amounts of time was purposeful. Students in their first months of study often experience cultural shock in its initial form (Ayub et al., 2024), which can be intense but temporary. Those who had been in Portugal for at least a year, the study sought to ensure that participants had moved beyond initial adjustment and could reflect more holistically on both structural and psychosocial challenges. Interviewing students who had been in Portugal over varied amounts of time gave insights into whether the situation and process of visa issuance for instance had changed within the same countries. This allowed the data to capture not just first impressions but also the longer-term processes of adaptation, resilience, and negotiation (Berry , 2006; Ungar, 2013).

A total of 15 participants were recruited, reflecting a range of academic levels (undergraduate, master's and doctoral) and representing various countries of origin including Nigeria, Ghana, and Kenya. All participants had spent at least one academic semester studying in Portugal, ensuring sufficient exposure to the academic environment and institutional processes under study.

Although the sample size of 15 participants may appear small, it is consistent with the aims of qualitative research, which emphasizes depth over breadth (Creswell & Poth, 2018). In qualitative inquiry, small but information-rich samples allow for detailed exploration of lived experiences and the identification of thematic patterns across narratives. Moreover, the inclusion of participants from three different national backgrounds and different academic stages provided sufficient variation to capture a range of perspectives, while still allowing for meaningful comparison across cases.

Demographically, the group was relatively homogeneous in terms of region of origin, but this was intentional given the study's focus on non-PALOP African students. This focus is important because, unlike PALOP students, non-PALOP students do not share linguistic or colonial ties with Portugal, and thus often face distinct challenges related to language acquisition, social integration, and institutional navigation (Pinto, 2021). By narrowing the participant pool to this specific group, the study was able to highlight the particular barriers that might otherwise be hidden in broader accounts of "international student" experiences.

To summarize, the participant group consisted of 15 non-PALOP students from Kenya, Ghana, and Nigeria, aged 18-40 years, pursuing either Undergraduate, master's or doctoral degrees in Portugal. They were recruited through WhatsApp groups, ensuring access to authentic voices embedded in existing student networks. The purposive sampling strategy, the requirement of at least one semester of academic experience, and the diversity in academic stage all contributed to a dataset capable of generating deep, nuanced insights into the lived realities of this under-researched student population.

Table 1

Demographic Characteristics of Study Participants

Participant ID	Sex	Age Range	Country of Origin	Academic Level	Duration in Portugal
P1	Male	25–30	Kenya	Master's	< 1 year
P2	Female	31–35	Kenya	Master's	< 1 year
P3	Male	31–35	Kenya	PhD	> 2 years
P4	Male	31–35	Nigeria	Master's	> 1 year
P5	Male	31–35	Nigeria	Master's	> 1 year
P6	Male	25–30	Nigeria	Master's	> 1 year
P7	Male	20–25	Kenya	Undergraduate	< 1 year
P8	Female	35–40	Ghana	Master's	> 1 year
P9	Male	25–30	Nigeria	Master's	> 1 year
P10	Male	25–30	Ghana	Master's	< 1 year
P11	Female	25–30	Nigeria	Master's	> 1 year
P12	Male	18–20	Kenya	Undergraduate	< 1 year
P13	Male	21–25	Kenya	Undergraduate	< 1 year
P14	Female	18–20	Kenya	Undergraduate	< 1 year
P15	Female	25–30	Nigeria	Master's	> 1 year

Note: All participant names were anonymized to protect confidentiality. The participants were from 10 different universities, public and private, from Lisbon and the center of Portugal.

2.3 Data Collection

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews conducted via Zoom to accommodate participants' geographic dispersion and scheduling constraints. Semi-structured interviews were selected because they offer a balance between consistency and flexibility. On the one hand, they provided a framework that ensured all participants were asked about key areas relevant to the research, such as bureaucratic processes, academic expectations, language

barriers, and experiences of social belonging. On the other hand, the open-ended nature of the questions allowed participants to describe their experiences in their own words, introducing new themes and perspectives that might not have been anticipated in advance (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

To respect participants' privacy and comfort, video was disabled during interviews, and only audio was recorded with explicit consent.

The interviews followed an interview guide that addressed key topics including migration motivations, academic challenges, language barriers, bureaucratic experiences (e.g., visa, housing, social integration, institutional support, and coping mechanisms). Open-ended questions encouraged participants to provide rich, detailed responses, while follow-up prompts ensured clarity and depth.

Audio recordings were transcribed verbatim, and all identifying information was removed during transcription to ensure anonymity. Transcripts were then cross-checked for accuracy against recordings.

2.3.1 : Interview Guide

The interview guide was developed following review of existing literature on international student adjustment and the specific challenges associated with studying in non-Anglophone contexts (Andrade, 2006). Questions were organized around four broad themes:

a) Sociodemographic characteristics and Background of participants.

The goal of this theme was to understand the background of participants to see if there are other factors that could influence their answers or explain differences and similarities in experience.

b) Pedogeological differences

The goal of this theme was to examine the pedogeological differences and if this impacts self-esteem and self-efficacy and map the academic environment specifically.

c) Adaptation and specific challenges

The goal of this theme was to explore the specific challenges faced by the students and gather recommendations that may be useful in coming up with solutions.

d) Institutional support

The goal of this subtheme was to explore the perception of institutional support, the role this may play in students' well-being and to make note of suggested strategies that can be implemented by institutions.

These domains were informed not only by empirical research but also by theoretical perspectives such as Berry's (1997, 2006) acculturation framework and Baumeister and Leary's (1995) theory of belongingness, which emphasize the interplay between external structures and internal coping strategies. The interview guide also left space for participants to raise issues that they personally found significant, ensuring that their voices remained central to the process.

2.2.1 Interview Procedures

All interviews were conducted remotely using Zoom. The decision to use online platforms was partly practical due to participants being in different cities across Portugal, and scheduling flexibility was essential given their academic workloads and to ensure anonymity and privacy. Remote interviewing also allowed participants to join from familiar, comfortable environments, which may have encouraged more open discussion (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Each interview lasted between 35 and 50 minutes, with the variation reflecting differences in the depth of participants' responses. The interviews were conducted in English, which served as the common language of communication for the participants as it was the official language of their host country, and the language of their prior education and the lingua franca among African international students in Portugal. Conducting interviews in English therefore reduced linguistic barriers and enabled participants to articulate complex ideas without the additional strain of using a language they may not be fully comfortable with.

With consent, all interviews were audio-recorded and later transcribed verbatim. During transcription, attention was paid not only to the words spoken but also to hesitations, emphases, and other features that contributed to meaning making. Notes were also kept during and immediately after interviews to capture non-verbal cues, contextual details, and early reflections that might later inform analysis.

2.3 Data Analysis

Data analysis was conducted using thematic analysis approach, following Braun and Clarke's (2006, 2012) six-phase framework: familiarization, coding, theme development, review, definition, and reporting. This approach was selected for its flexibility and suitability in identifying patterns within qualitative data. Since the purpose of this study was to examine the structural and psychosocial challenges faced by non-PALOP students, thematic analysis offered a systematic way of identifying recurring patterns while remaining attentive to the nuances of individual experiences.

2.3.1 Preparation of the Data

After each interview, audio recordings were transcribed verbatim to produce accurate textual records. After transcription, participants were invited to review their transcripts for accuracy, this step reinforced the collaborative ethos of the research and enhanced credibility.

The anonymized interviews were transcribed using the help of Otter.ai (https://otter.ai/) initially which is an encrypted AI-powered platform for transcription. Caution was taken to exclude the introduction part of the transcripts where the participants may have shared personal identifying information. Recordings were then deleted after transcription.

Each transcript was then edited while listening to the audio to make sure all the information recorded was accurate and doublechecked against the audio recordings.

All transcripts were anonymized, with pseudonyms such as Participant 1 replacing participant names and sensitive details being removed. The anonymized transcripts were then imported into MAXQDA, which provided a structured environment for coding and retrieval. Using MAXQDA facilitated both organization and transparency in the analytic process, allowing the progression from raw data to thematic categories to be carefully documented.

Initial coding was inductive, allowing themes to emerge naturally from participants' narratives, while also being informed by relevant theoretical constructs such as acculturation theory (Berry, 1997), stereotype threat (Steele & Aronson, 1995), and institutional habitus (Reay, David, & Ball, 2001).

To ensure objectivity and reduce researcher bias, a peer debriefing process was employed. A PhD student specializing in Sociology independently reviewed a randomly selected subset of transcripts and applied codes according to the established coding framework. The concordance between the independent coder's themes and the researcher's codes was high, demonstrating coding reliability and enhancing the credibility of

the analysis (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Discrepancies were discussed and resolved collaboratively to refine the thematic structure.

2.3.2 Coding Process

Thematic analysis proceeded in several iterative stages. Initially, I engaged in immersive reading, repeatedly reviewing the transcripts to become familiar with the breadth and depth of the material. During this stage, I made handwritten notes in the margins and highlighted striking phrases that appeared to reflect important aspects of the participants' experiences.

Next, I undertook initial coding, breaking down the data into smaller segments and attaching descriptive labels. At this stage, coding was intentionally broad and inclusive. For instance, a statement about "waiting months for a residence permit without clear communication from the authorities" was coded under both bureaucratic delays and lack of institutional support. Similarly, reflections on "feeling invisible in class discussions" were coded as academic exclusion and psychosocial marginalization.

Following initial coding, I moved into focused coding, examining connections across participants and clustering related codes together. This stage involved collapsing overlapping codes and beginning to identify broader categories. For example, the initial codes, visa delays, complex paperwork, and lack of clear communication were grouped under the broader theme of bureaucratic obstacles.

2.4.3 Development of Themes

The transition from codes to themes was guided by both the frequency of codes and their interpretive significance. While commonly repeated ideas were important, attention was also paid to experiences that, though less frequent, provided rich insight into the structural and psychosocial issues non-PALOP students encounter.

Through repetitive review and refinement, five overarching themes emerged:

1. Bureaucratic Obstacles – encompassing challenges with visas, residence permits, and institutional paperwork.
2. Language Barriers in Academic Spaces – highlighting the impact of Portuguese-medium instruction on comprehension, participation, and assessment.
3. Social Isolation and Belonging – reflecting feelings of exclusion, marginalization, and limited integration into Portuguese society.
4. Discrimination and Stereotyping – capturing subtle and overt forms of bias experienced in classrooms, workplaces, and social settings.

Resilience and Coping Strategies - illustrating how students drew on peer networks, faith, and personal determination to navigate difficulties.
Proposed strategies - this noted student informed and need-based suggestions that may offer insights for institutions and inform intervention programs.

Each of these themes reflected an intersection of structural and psychosocial dynamics. For example, bureaucratic obstacles were not merely technical issues but had profound psychosocial effects, leading to anxiety and uncertainty about students' futures. Similarly, language barriers were structural in origin yet deeply shaped students' confidence, identity, and sense of belonging in academic spaces.

2.4 Linking Themes to Theoretical Frameworks

The thematic analysis was not conducted in isolation but informed by the theoretical frameworks outlined in the literature review section of this study. Berry's (1997, 2006)

acculturation model provided a lens for interpreting how students balanced maintaining their cultural identities while adapting to Portuguese academic and social structures. Baumeister and Leary's (1995) belongingness theory shed light on the psychological consequences of exclusion and the critical role of peer support networks. Meanwhile, structural perspectives on international student mobility (De Wit et al., 2015) put into perspective the bureaucratic challenges as manifestations of broader systemic inequalities rather than isolated administrative issues.

By integrating participants' narratives with theoretical perspectives, the analysis offered both an insider-driven and theory-driven understanding of the lived experiences of non-PALOP students.

2.5 Ethical Considerations

Ethical integrity was central to every stage of this study, from the initial design through recruitment, data collection, and analysis. Working with international students, particularly those from non-PALOP backgrounds, requires a careful, respectful, and transparent approach because they may already experience forms of marginalization. There were several ethical principles that guided the research, most especially informed consent, confidentiality, voluntary participation, data security, and researcher positionality.

Ethical approval was secured from the institutional review board prior to data collection. Participants received detailed information about the study's aims, procedures, and voluntary nature.

2.5.1 Informed Consent

Participants were provided with a clear explanation of the study's purpose, objectives, and methods before agreeing to take part. This information was shared in writing and reiterated verbally at the point of recruitment. Given that recruitment occurred through WhatsApp groups, an additional step was taken to ensure clarity: potential participants were sent a detailed information sheet electronically, which outlined what participation would involve, the expected time commitment, and the use of data. Consent was then obtained in writing through signed forms submitted electronically. Participants were given the opportunity to ask questions before agreeing.

Written informed consent was obtained electronically before interviews commenced and verbatim at the end of the interviews

This approach ensured that consent was both informed and voluntary, consistent with ethical standards in social science research (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Special care was taken to emphasize that participation or lack thereof would not affect their standing in their academic programs, their relationship with the university, or their membership in student networks.

Voluntary Participation and Right to Withdraw

Participation in this study was entirely voluntary. Throughout the study, students were reminded that they could withdraw at any point without providing a reason and without any negative consequences. This was particularly important given the vulnerable status of international students, who may sometimes feel pressure to comply with institutional or authority figures (Smith & Khawaja, 2011). By affirming their right to withdraw and repeating this assurance during the consent process, the study sought to reduce any sense of obligation or coercion.

2.5.2 Confidentiality and Anonymity

Protecting participants' privacy was a priority throughout the project. To preserve anonymity, numbers, students were assigned participant IDs such as P1, P2 and identifiable information from transcripts was redacted. Any information that could indirectly identify participants, such as the specific program, supervisor, or city of residence, was either generalized or removed during transcription.

In the Findings chapters, quotes are attributed only to a number and a broad academic level, e.g., "Doctoral student, Nigeria", avoiding details that might compromise confidentiality.

The use of WhatsApp as a recruitment channel also raised ethical considerations about privacy in digital spaces. While messages within the groups are not public in the strict sense, participants were asked to only express interest directly, not within the group. They were also assured that their contact details would not be shared. In addition, communications with participants outside the group setting were conducted individually to maintain discretion.

2.5.3 Data Storage and Security

All data was stored securely in a password-protected laptop, with backups kept on secure cloud accounts in the school Microsoft cloud. Data storage complied with university guidelines to ensure security. Audio recordings were transferred immediately from recording devices to secure storage and deleted from the devices themselves. Transcripts and notes were likewise stored in protected folders accessible only to the researcher. Following standard practice, data will be retained for a fixed period as required with university guidelines before being destroyed.

2.5.4 Power Dynamics and Vulnerability

An additional ethical concern involved the power dynamics inherent in research involving international students. Non-PALOP students in Portugal often contend with visa uncertainty, language barriers, and exclusion from mainstream institutional support (Ambrósio et al., 2017). These vulnerabilities risk making them more cautious about sharing negative experiences, especially if they perceive that criticism might have repercussions.

To ease this, the researcher emphasized that the study was entirely independent of universities' administrative structures and that all data would remain confidential. Interviews were conducted in a conversational, participant-led manner, allowing students to steer discussions toward the issues they felt most relevant. This approach is in line with calls for ethical sensitivity when working with participants who may experience multiple levels of marginalization (Ungar, 2013).

2.5.5 Researcher Identity and Reflexivity

Reflexivity was also a central component of ethical practice. The researcher shares a regional background with participants, being African and familiar with the broader cultural and educational contexts of Kenya, Ghana, and Nigeria. This cultural proximity had both advantages and disadvantages. On one hand, it fostered trust and rapport, encouraging participants to speak more openly about sensitive issues. On the other hand, it carried the risk of over-identification, where the researcher might project personal experiences onto participants' narratives (Berger, 2015).

To mitigate this, I regularly revisited the transcripts to ensure interpretations were grounded in participants' actual words rather than my own expectations. It was also a key reason why I allowed the participants to review the transcripts and make corrections where necessary. Peer debriefing with academic colleagues further strengthened the trustworthiness of the analysis, as discussing emerging themes with others helped surface blind spots and alternative readings.

Several strategies were employed to enhance the stringency and trustworthiness of the analysis:

Credibility was achieved through member checks (inviting participants to review their transcripts and summaries of emerging themes) helped confirm that interpretations accurately reflected their intended meanings.

Dependability by maintaining a clear audit trail, documenting each step from transcription to coding and theme development, ensured the process was transparent and replicable.

Confirmability through reflexive journaling minimized the risk of unchecked researcher bias by explicitly recording assumptions and decision-making throughout analysis.

Transferability, While the findings are not intended to be statistically generalizable, providing descriptions of participants' contexts and experiences allows readers to assess the extent to which insights may be relevant in other non-PALOP student contexts.

2.5.6 Ethics Approval

Finally, the research was conducted in accordance with the ethical guidelines of the hosting university ISCTE. Approval was sought and obtained from the university's research ethics committee prior to data collection. The committee reviewed the study design, recruitment methods, consent process, and data management protocols to ensure compliance with ethical standards for research involving human participants.

Chapter 3: Results / Findings

This chapter outlines the findings from the study. It begins by outlining participant

demographics and descriptive quantitative measures, followed by thematic qualitative results derived from semi-structured interviews. The presentation avoids interpretation, focusing on clear, evidence-based reporting.

3.1 Participant Demographics and Quantitative Overview

Fifteen students from non-Portuguese speaking African countries (non-PALOP) participated in the study. Participants ranged in age from 18 -40 years and included undergraduate, master's and doctoral candidates from Nigeria, Ghana, and Kenya. Table 1 summarizes key demographic information.

3.2 Qualitative Themes

Thematic analysis of interview transcripts revealed six major themes that capture the breadth and depth of participants' experiences:

3.2.1 Structural challenges

3.2.1.1 Visa Delays and Legal Uncertainty

Most participants described prolonged and opaque visa processes that delayed their academic registration and access to essential services. Delays ranged from several weeks to months, creating legal limbo and anxiety. Participants repeatedly emphasized long visa wait times that caused anxiety and disrupted academic progress.

Visa and residence permit challenges emerged as one of the most consistent structural barriers for participants. The interviews with participants for this study highlighted in this theme included long waiting periods, lack of clear communication from SEF, unequal treatment compared to PALOP students, and the psychological stress of legal precarity.

Participants described long delays in visa processing, which often extended well beyond the official timelines. For many, this meant months of uncertainty during which they could not fully participate in academic or social activities. Participant 13 from Kenya mentioned that the visa process took a year, costing her valuable time, money and being a detriment to her studies. They said, “And it was wastage of time, because I wasted all that. I wasted the whole of 2023

had to come, 2024 to start again, the to start fresh, to pay again, and all that. So it was not smooth, and I felt like giving up."

Another issue that surfaced repeatedly was lack of clear guidance. Students expressed frustration with inconsistent instructions from immigration offices, sometimes receiving conflicting requirements or being asked to resubmit the same documents multiple times. These inefficiencies not only prolonged the process but also created feelings of helplessness.

Participant 2, a Kenyan student talked about having to deal with receiving new document requirements not mentioned in the beginning of the process. She said, "But this felt like it was a multiple step process, yeah, and then at one point we found out that the wanted a criminal record certificate that was within three months, yeah. So at it was like the multiple hurdles at any one point in the process that you know could prevent you from getting, I mean, sending the correct documents, yeah."

Beyond bureaucratic inefficiency, students felt there was a notable disparity between the treatment of non-PALOP and PALOP students. Several participants contrasted their own struggles with the relatively smoother processes experienced by their Angolan or Mozambican peers. The lack of close ties between Portugal and their countries makes the visa application even more complex in many cases. Participant 12 from Kenya recalled: "Then afterwards, I went to the embassy in Portugal in Kenya for further authentication of the all the documents that I had then after they authenticated I had to send the documents to Mozambique, the Embassy of Portugal in Maputo via sent them there." This sense of unequal treatment reinforced perceptions of structural discrimination embedded in immigration policies.

Taken together, these findings illustrate that visa and legal issues for non-PALOP students go beyond administrative inconvenience. They represent a structural barrier that disrupts academic continuity, fosters inequality between student groups, and imposes a heavy psychological burden. Lack of efficient communication between the embassy and the applicants aggravates the situation further. Participant 1, a Kenyan student says, "But I would mention that the only like, the only part that I felt maybe uncomfortable the process, is how the embassy that were processing my visa was like, they are. They were not so responsive." It heightens the sense of uncertainty that is already present in many non-PALOP visa applicants.

3.2.1.2 Financial Challenges

Financial pressures were a central concern for participants. They talked about issues such as limited access to scholarships, expensive education, high living costs, restrictions on employment, and the emotional weight of financial insecurity. These structural barriers shaped not only students' academic participation but also their overall well-being during their time in Portugal.

A recurring frustration was the high cost of education for international students in Portugal. Several participants noted that while PALOP students benefited from state-sponsored scholarships or bilateral agreements, non-PALOP students were largely excluded from these schemes. This disparity forced them to rely on personal or family resources, often at great sacrifice. The issue that arose from most of the participants was that the cost of education is way more than their home countries. Participant 10 from Ghana said, "and about the cost of education, it's relatively expensive than in Ghana, because in Ghana and citizen of Ghana, like regular students, it's not that expensive."

The lack of institutional financial support was compounded by the high cost of living in Portugal, particularly in urban centers where most universities are located. Participants frequently described struggling to cover rent, tuition fees, transportation, and daily expenses. Participant 11 from Nigeria stressed the difficulty in finding affordable housing. He said, "I think because if you're a student, you have a student from a non European country, you have a different budget, and someone from, like, a richer country, it was hard, it was definitely hard, kind to Find a place that was within my budget." The burden was intensified by currency exchange rates that made financial transfers from home countries insufficient or unstable.

Restrictions on employment further exacerbated these challenges. Students explained that, unlike some European contexts where international students can take on part-time work, non-PALOP students in Portugal faced legal and practical barriers to employment. Even when opportunities arose, bureaucratic requirements or employers' reluctance to hire international students left them unable to supplement their income. Participant 13 from Kenya recalled, "So for instance, during the summer time I was not in school, and it was quite hard for me to get a job. So as an international student, you feel like it's hard for you to survive here if you don't have good, supportive system." Even though, legally, she could work, finding a job was not easy.

These accounts resonate with existing literature on international student mobility, which shows that financial insecurity can limit participation in academic and social life, increase attrition risks, and heighten vulnerability to exploitation (Beech, 2018). In the Portuguese context, the structural privileging of PALOP students through scholarship and support systems further entrenches disparities. This leaves non-PALOP students navigating a landscape of inequity with limited institutional recourse.

Taken together, the findings suggest that financial strain is not merely a background condition but a core structural barrier. The high cost of education, high costs of living, and limited opportunities for legal employment intersect to create an environment of persistent insecurity for non-PALOP students. These challenges not only constrain their academic engagement but also impose emotional burdens that affect their sense of belonging and resilience.

3.2.1.3 Language Barriers and Academic Exclusion

Despite some programs being offered in English, Portuguese dominated lectures, assessments, and group interactions. Non-fluent students frequently felt excluded from discussions and group work. Portuguese language dominance in academia excluded many students from full participation. This reliance on Portuguese created barriers to learning, communication, and integration, which participants described as exhausting and demoralizing.

Several students emphasized the difficulty of following lectures. Even when the lectures were taught in English, they mentioned experiencing language barriers due to some lecturers not being fluent in English. Participant 4 from Nigeria recalled, “I'm not getting the best value because I don't speak the language. Some of the professors are not fluent also, so it's more of a self study for me than actually learning from the school, you know? So they just provide me the materials give me a deadline for presentation or exams.” This left some feeling excluded from meaningful participation in class and undermined their confidence in their academic abilities.

For some, the inability to communicate fluently in Portuguese carried symbolic implications. Participants described feeling invisible or undervalued in classrooms and social spaces where Portuguese was the default language. It was also an issue in social settings especially where they were amongst multiple Portuguese speaking peers. Participant 15 said, “There was barely any way to relate to them (Portuguese speakers) because they wouldn't even speak to you. Because once we are out of class, everyone changes back to Portuguese and speaking Portuguese and all that.” These experiences contributed to a sense of marginalization, as if their presence as non-PALOP students was unrecognized to the university community.

These difficulties resonate with the broader literature on international student mobility, where language often functions as both a practical obstacle and a marker of symbolic power (Bourdieu, 1991). Prior research has shown that while linguistic challenges are common across many international contexts, they are particularly acute in countries where English is not the dominant language of higher education (Luo et al., 2019). In Portugal, the historical prioritization of PALOP students, who share Portuguese as a first or second language, increases the sense of exclusion experienced by non-PALOP students (Ambrósio et al., 2017).

Taken together, these findings show that language barriers are not simply technical hurdles but structural and symbolic issues. They restrict access to learning and institutional services while also reinforcing social hierarchies between PALOP and non-PALOP students. The result is an ongoing struggle to gain full recognition as legitimate members of the academic community.

3.2.1.4 Unequal Access to Institutional Support

Participants' experiences with institutional support varied significantly. Students, particularly those affiliated with funded programs such as Erasmus+, reported receiving substantial assistance, which facilitated faster visa processing and smoother access to residency cards. These forms of support often included dedicated orientation sessions, language training, and administrative guidance, helping to mitigate some of the bureaucratic hurdles commonly faced by international students.

However, this supportive infrastructure was not universally available. Many non-PALOP students outside these funded or specialized programs found themselves navigating complex bureaucratic processes alone, facing delays and confusion without institutional guidance. This disparity created a divergent experience within the international student community, where access to formal support services largely depended on program affiliation or funding status. Consequently, unequal access to institutional resources exacerbated feelings of isolation and stress among unsupported students, highlighting significant gaps in university policies aimed at equitable student integration.

In addition to immigration, financial challenges, and language barriers, participants highlighted the absence of adequate institutional support as a major barrier to their academic and personal adjustment. While universities in Portugal often advertised services such as orientation sessions, counseling, and integration programs, these were frequently described as either inaccessible or poorly adapted to the needs of non-PALOP students. This is mostly because the orientation programs meant to guide students and ease them into their studies happen during the first week of the Semester where most non-PALOP students have not yet arrived in Portugal due to visa delays. The students entirely miss out on the orientation program, arrive frustrated and need to dive into academic recovery.

A common issue was the limited support from schools throughout the application process. After schools issued acceptance letters, they rarely followed up or offered assistance in the visa application process. Students had to navigate alone and when there were delays, figure out what to do about their studies, which would already be underway by the time they received their visas. When asked how the schools could assist, Participant 15 from Nigeria responded, “Yeah, I think I've heard of schools who write directly to the embassy to expedite action in terms of their students and visa delays, but my school does not offer that. So if there is, if there is a

channel that international students can use to approach the school, to write directly to the embassies in their countries, to extend their actions on issuing visas."

Participants also reported gaps in academic support services. For instance, students who experienced delays in visa applications were left behind because of a lack of infrastructure to support online learning. Even when they were able to attend online classes, schools don't have the infrastructure to support online exams so they ended up having wanted entire semesters in some cases. Participant 12 from Nigeria talked about this, saying, "So I think they should invest more on online teaching. This will help students, those students with issues to do with visas, not to be not to be left behind, and this will help them, at least, because if we had, like, they had invested more of online teaching to an extent that I can, I can be able even to do an exam before I come here, because something to do with this visa, it's that's not my, okay, that's not my issue."

Another difficulty concerned access to counseling and mental health services. While some universities offered counseling, the services were either delivered only in Portuguese or were limited in scope, making them inaccessible for non-PALOP students who preferred to communicate in English. Participants described feeling unsupported during periods of stress and isolation, noting that the absence of culturally sensitive services compounded their difficulties. Participant 11 from Nigeria mentioned lack of mental health assistance as one of the things that could be improved. "Yeah, the therapy that the school gives is non existence." he said.

Beyond specific services, students spoke of a broader sense of institutional neglect. Several reflected on feeling "invisible" in comparison to PALOP peers, who were perceived as receiving more attention and structured support from both administrative staff and faculty. This perception reinforced feelings of exclusion and deepened the challenges of navigating life in Portugal. This can be frustrating for them as Participant 14 points out. "So you find that sometimes maybe the frustration makes you feel stressed for a while, until maybe you get whatever you're looking for, like for me when I was getting the NIF I was really frustrated, and you find that there's nothing you can do, but just try the next day, if you fail today."

These findings are in line with earlier research showing that higher education institutions often develop support systems that reflect the needs of majority or historically connected student groups, leaving others underserved (Pinto, 2021). In the Portuguese case, the historical and linguistic ties with PALOP countries appear to shape institutional priorities, reinforcing disparities in access to resources (França et al., 2018).

Taken together, participants' experiences suggest that institutional support for

non-PALOP students is insufficient, fragmented, and linguistically exclusionary. This lack of targeted assistance compounds the difficulties posed by visa insecurity, financial strain, and language barriers, leaving students to rely on informal coping strategies rather than institutional mechanisms. In this sense, institutional gaps represent not only practical shortcomings but also a failure of recognition, signaling to non-PALOP students that they are peripheral rather than integral members of the university community.

3.2.2 Psychosocial Challenges

3.2.2.1 Cultural Adjustment and Identity Negotiation

For many participants, adjusting to Portuguese culture was a slow and often difficult process. Beyond the structural barriers of visas, finances, and language, students described a deeper challenge: finding their place in a cultural environment where they felt marked as outsiders. This theme encompassed struggles with adapting to unfamiliar social norms, negotiating their identities as African students in a non-PALOP context, and balancing cultural retention with integration.

A common difficulty was the feeling of cultural distance. Several participants spoke about the contrast between their home environments and the social practices they encountered in Portugal. Everyday interactions, such as classroom dynamics, food choices, or ways of forming friendships, underscored this sense of difference. Participant 10 said, “I think it's a different environment and different culture, so I'm just trying to adapt to like, Yeah, but it has been a slow process.” Most participants echo her sentiments showing it is not an easy adjustment.

Students also highlighted the difficulty of negotiating their identities in a context where they were frequently categorized in simplistic or homogenizing ways. Unlike PALOP students, who were sometimes assumed to share a “natural” connection to Portugal through language and history, non-PALOP students felt doubly marginalized, both as Africans and as outsiders to this privileged category. Participant 8 from Ghana said, “There was something people repping their countries, and I was so excited that I was going to be able to also kind of join in some of these activities. Unfortunately for me, I was not able to join any of such activities because of what I initially mentioned and the language also being a barrier, which I didn't expect.” Even when programs are in English, some find themselves excluded.

The emotional weight of cultural adjustment was significant. Students reported feelings of dislocation, loneliness, and a persistent awareness of being "different." For some, this awareness extended beyond the university into broader Portuguese society. Participant 1 from Kenya explained; "Only at some point , at some point you may feel lonely because, oh, maybe people, maybe you are walking with a group of Portuguese students, and they start speaking in Portuguese. Then you see or you feel as being left out."

These experiences align with Berry's (1997) theory of acculturation, which suggests that migrants experience stress when host environments are unwelcoming or exclusionary. They also connect to Baumeister and Leary's (1995) work on belonging, which emphasizes that the human need for connection is undermined when individuals are denied recognition or treated as peripheral.

Overall, the findings reveal that cultural adjustment for non-PALOP students is not a matter of simple adaptation but of ongoing negotiation under unequal conditions. Participants were expected to assimilate into Portuguese norms without comparable efforts from institutions or society to recognize their cultural identities. This lack of symmetry made adjustment less about mutual exchange and more about navigating the tension between cultural survival and social acceptance.

3.2.2.2 Experiences of Perceived Discrimination and Microaggressions

Discrimination and microaggressions were recurring themes in participants' accounts, shaping both their academic and social experiences in Portugal. While few described overt racism, many recounted subtle forms of exclusion and stereotyping that created feelings of marginalization and invisibility within the university and in wider Portuguese society.

Some participants highlighted institutional exclusion, particularly in areas where opportunities seemed unevenly distributed. They felt that they didn't have the same access to resources as their fellow international students. African students seem to be the most affected by this inequality. Participant 15 talked about this bias, saying, "I did apply for the hostel, which I was denied as well. So whatever, whenever it's competitive, I think they would naturally favor the Portuguese. I think Africans will come last in their Pecking order."

Experiences of exclusion also extended to peer interactions. Some participants explained that Portuguese students rarely welcomed them into group work or social circles, preferring to remain within their own cliques. Participant 15 puts it best, “Portuguese people for me click, there is literally almost no way for you to penetrate into that clique unless you actually speak Portuguese. And I speak no Portuguese.” This created barriers to integration and reinforced their sense of being outsiders in academic settings.

Faculty interactions also carried elements of judgment and exclusion. One participant described professors as overly formal and sometimes dismissive, making them feel incapable and undermining their confidence in academic settings. “And I think I did book office hours when I was struggling in the first semester, but for me, it did not work, because, yes, I went to be the lecturers, but it just seemed like they didn't understand what I was saying. So after, I think, after two trials, I just gave up because, I mean, there was no point.” Said Participant 15.

Others reflected on the lack of academic support as a more subtle but equally powerful form of exclusion. Participant 11 explained that professors would fail to provide guidance, which contributed to a sense of being unsupported and unwelcome. “But I'm going from having, like, a lot of support in six student services and career services, to, like, almost zero, and having to hunt professors down, having to, like, schedule when I'm on campus to coincide with my then advisor, like having her just ghost me.”

Finally, several participants linked these experiences to emotional consequences. Students were under constant stress due to exclusion and uncertainty which made it difficult for them to focus on their studies. Participant 3 recalled, “Because when you, when you're applying, and you have all these difficulties, you have a lot of uncertainties. You have to get this. And uncertainties, will I get it? Will I not get it? And stuff, especially if you do not have a support system.”

These findings are consistent with Allport’s (1954) analysis of prejudice, which emphasizes the cumulative effects of subtle bias on minority groups. They also connect to Steele and Aronson’s (1995) concept of stereotype threat, as participants’ awareness of being judged or excluded undermined their academic confidence. In the Portuguese context, these narratives demonstrate how institutional neglect, peer exclusion, and subtle faculty biases intersect to create a psychosocial environment in which non-PALOP students feel undervalued.

Taken together, the accounts show that while overt hostility was not common, everyday discrimination and microaggressions had significant psychosocial effects. They contributed to

feelings of invisibility, lowered self-confidence, and heightened stress, reinforcing the broader sense of non-PALOP students as outsiders in Portuguese higher education.

3.2.2.3 Social Isolation and Reliance on Diaspora Networks

A recurring theme in the participants' accounts was the difficulty of establishing meaningful social connections during their studies in Portugal. Although most students anticipated some degree of adjustment, many expressed surprise at the extent to which they felt isolated, both in academic and everyday life. Unlike PALOP peers, who often had access to pre-existing cultural and linguistic networks, non-PALOP students were frequently left on the margins.

One source of isolation was exclusion in academic group work. Participants reported that Portuguese students tended to cluster together, leaving international students, especially those less confident in Portuguese language, feeling sidelined. This reinforced the perception of being outsiders within their own learning environments. Participant 5 spoke to her experience with her classmates when dealing with group assignments. "Or maybe they don't trust the maybe they don't trust the what word would I use now? They don't trust the intelligence of the minorities or the black minorities, so they tend to want to be clustered amongst themselves."

Beyond the classroom, participants described limited opportunities to form friendships with Portuguese peers. Campus events and activities were often conducted exclusively in Portuguese, and when non-PALOP students attempted to join, they were met with indifference or polite dismissal. The absence of inclusive programming left many feeling that integration was neither expected nor facilitated. Participant 8 responded when asked about participating in extra-curricula activities in school. "Not at all because, I mean, most of the emails that were sent for some of the activities were in Portuguese. What it meant was that it was not for the English speakers, because when you go, you will not be able to understand what was happening."

In response, students turned to peer-led initiatives for support. WhatsApp groups, African student associations, and informal networks became vital channels for both practical and emotional assistance. These networks helped newcomers navigate administrative challenges such as SEF appointments or housing searches, while also providing spaces to share frustrations and encouragement. Participant 3 talked about the informal diaspora networks he is part of. "We have an organization from Africans. And also, I have a WhatsApp forum for Kenyans, which

have also helped me tremendously to really integrate, integrate and feel home away from home." Friendships often remained confined within African circles, which left participants with a sense of comfort but also of missed opportunity for intercultural exchange.
Some students reflected that while they felt supported by fellow Africans, they rarely developed genuine connections with Portuguese peers.

These findings support Baumeister and Leary's (1995) assertion that belonging is a fundamental human motivation and illustrate how the unmet sense of belonging needs can hinder adjustment. They also align with Reay, David, and Ball's (2001) notion of institutional habitus, which emphasizes that higher education environments actively shape, and sometimes constrain, opportunities for connection. In the Portuguese context, the reliance on peer-created spaces both demonstrates resilience and reveals institutional shortcomings in supporting intercultural integration.

Taken together, the accounts show that social isolation among non-PALOP students was not a matter of individual preference but was structured by linguistic, cultural, and institutional boundaries. While informal networks provided essential coping mechanisms, they could not substitute for the deeper integration and recognition students sought within the host society.

3.3.3.4 Psychological Well-being and Resilience

Chronic stress, anxiety, and feelings of marginalization were common, especially during initial semesters. Students collaborated through peer support groups, online platforms, and cultural practices. Stress and anxiety were common, with peer support serving as a key coping resource.

Participants frequently discussed the psychological toll of their experiences in Portugal. Stress, anxiety, and feelings of demotivation were common, often linked to visa insecurity, financial pressures, and the cumulative weight of social isolation. Yet, alongside these difficulties, many also emphasized resilience strategies and support networks that allowed them to endure and, in some cases, grow from these challenges.

One prominent theme was the link between bureaucratic and financial stressors and mental health. Students described the emotional burden of uncertain visa renewals and the struggle to manage living expenses without stable funding. These pressures left some feeling

distracted from their studies and constantly on edge. Participant 8 talked about how stressful the process of visa application was compared to that of her PALOP peers.

The combination of academic workload and limited support systems also contributed to psychological strain. Several participants explained that the expectation to perform at a high academic level while navigating language and cultural barriers created constant pressure. This sense of being under scrutiny or needing to prove their worth was described as exhausting. Participant 5 talked about dealing with adjustment issues which affected her grades. “Yeah, the strain of moving to a new country sure did affect the fact that I came in with the fact that I had to understand the lecturer’s accent, yeah, the fact that I needed to acclimatize to renew learning procedures.”

Loneliness was another recurring factor that shaped participants’ well-being. Without strong ties to Portuguese peers and in the absence of family, students often felt isolated. Some reported that this loneliness deepened into sadness or demotivation, particularly during moments of academic difficulty or cultural misunderstanding. Participant 5 explained, “I think some people are struggling as well, missing home and dealing with loneliness and dealing with the fact that people don't relate with them as they should, yeah.”

Despite these struggles, participants also demonstrated resilience. Many drew strength from religious faith, peer networks, or personal coping strategies developed over time. WhatsApp groups and friendships with fellow non-PALOP students were described as lifelines, offering both practical advice and emotional solidarity. Participant 10 mentioned getting help from Nigerian faculty members. “And so, yeah, so I think they are. We're able to, I'm able to relate more with them than Nigerian professors or faculty, you know, they are more friendly, they are more open to are willing to help.”

These accounts echo Masten’s (2001) idea of “ordinary magic,” where resilience arises from everyday coping mechanisms rather than extraordinary acts. They also align with Ungar’s (2013) emphasis on the role of cultural and social contexts in shaping resilience. In the case of non-PALOP students, resilience was less about overcoming individual weakness and more about finding collective strength within supportive networks.

The findings suggest that non-PALOP students experience significant psychological strain during their studies in Portugal, driven by structural and social challenges. At the same time, their resilience demonstrates agency and adaptability, revealing how students carve out spaces of belonging and self-worth even in the face of systemic exclusion.

3.4 Student Recommendations

During the final portion of each interview, participants were asked to share concrete suggestions for improving the experiences of non-PALOP international students in Portuguese higher education. Summarized below, these recommendations reflect first-hand insight into the needs and practical support that could ease academic and social integration for Non PALOP Students.

3.4.1 Language and Academic Support

Students advocated for structured, low-cost Portuguese courses, ideally offered in summer or early-semester sessions and focused on both conversational and academic language. They also suggested bridging or complementary classes to help students adjust to local pedagogical styles and academic expectations. P8 noted: “since we it's good for people to learn the language and be able to move around, if we can also have some free Portuguese classes that is organized in the school during the first semester of the program, I think that will be also great.”

These ideas align with research showing that targeted language programs and academic support enhance international students’ adjustment and performance (Luo et al., 2019; Ambrósio et al., 2017).

3.4.2 Immigration and Legal Assistance

Many emphasized the need for a dedicated university office or integration center to guide students through visa, residency, and tax-number (NIF) procedures. Suggested measures included clear, step-by-step documentation in English, help scheduling appointments with AIMA/SEF, and stronger university liaison with embassies to reduce visa delays.

Similar calls for streamlined immigration support have been documented in studies of international students facing bureaucratic hurdles in Portugal and elsewhere (França et al., 2018; Pinto, 2021).

3.4.3 Housing and Daily Living

Participants recommended assistance in finding accommodation, such as partnerships with hostels or residence halls for the first semester and collaboration with banks and the Finanças office to simplify opening bank accounts and obtaining required NIF documents.

Prior research likewise highlights housing insecurity and financial bureaucracy as key stressors for international students (Ambrósio et al., 2017; Sin et al., 2019).

3.4.4 Social Integration and Well-Being

A recurring idea was a buddy or peer-mentorship system pairing new arrivals with experienced international or Portuguese students.

Students also proposed access to a counselor or intercultural advisor to support mental health and adjustment. “I think a one on one basis of support, where people, especially international students, would be able to meet up with someone, probably a counselor, probably a student manager, whatever the terms might be. Just to help them integrate, especially for the first one year, by the second year, I feel they must have been fully integrated, so that you do not have a too much students to handle.”- P5

These recommendations echo findings that peer mentoring and mental-health resources foster belonging and reduce acculturative stress (Luo et al., 2019; Laufer & Gorup, 2019).

3.4.5 Academic and Career Development

Suggestions included support for paid internships or stipends for master’s students, help locating student jobs, and investment in online classes or flexible exams to accommodate late arrivals.

Such measures are consistent with literature showing that financial support and flexible academic delivery improve retention and satisfaction among international students (Teichler, 2017).

3.4.6 Outreach and Partnerships

Participants advocated stronger recruitment in English-speaking African countries, increased supply of English-language library materials, and formal partnerships with key stakeholders such as immigration offices, banks, and housing providers to streamline essential services.

These proposals resonate with research on how proactive institutional partnerships and resource accessibility strengthen internationalization efforts (Sin et al., 2019).

These recommendations were informed by what the students felt they needed he most and would be the most effective and impactful to their success and wellbeing.

Chapter 4 Discussion

The present study sheds light on the multifaceted and intersecting challenges experienced by non-Portuguese speaking African students in Portuguese higher education, revealing a nuanced interplay between structural barriers and psychosocial dynamics. This research contributes to existing research by shining a spotlight on the experiences of students from countries such as Kenya, Ghana, and Nigeria. Students from these and other non-PALOP countries do not benefit from the cultural and policy privileges that their PALOP counterparts benefit from. By centering their narratives, the study highlights both the institutional limitations of Portuguese universities and the personal struggles that shape international student life.

The findings of this research reveal a pattern of dual challenges: structural barriers, and psychosocial challenges. Structural issues included difficulties with visas and legal procedures, inequitable access to scholarships and financial support, language barriers in both academic and administrative spaces, and insufficient institutional support. These barriers are not new to literature. For instance, Ambrósio et al. (2017) documented the bureaucratic and financial hindrances faced by African students in Portuguese universities. Sin, Tavares & Cardoso (2019) emphasized the ways institutional structures contribute to unequal integration. However, the accounts of non-PALOP students show that these barriers result in their exclusion from the networks of privilege extended to PALOP cohorts.

The psychosocial dimensions of student life were equally concerning. Participants reported difficulties adjusting to Portuguese culture, feelings of isolation from their fellow students, experiences of discrimination and stereotyping, and significant levels of stress and anxiety tied to their academic performance. These findings resonate with Pinto's (2021) work on African doctoral students in Portugal. It highlighted loneliness and academic stress as central issues. This is similar to Smith and Khawaja's (2011) review of international student acculturation, which identified social isolation and psychological distress as common outcomes of studying abroad. What distinguishes the experiences of non-PALOP students in this study is

how these psychosocial struggles are closely tied to structural inequities. For example, visa insecurity not only created bureaucratic delays but also generated ongoing anxiety about the future. Language barriers in class did not simply make learning harder but reinforced a sense of exclusion from academic communities.

The research also invites interpretation through theoretical frameworks that foreground the intersection of structure and psychology. Berry's (1997) theory of acculturation provides a useful viewpoint for understanding the stress participants reported in navigating a host culture that offered few opportunities for meaningful integration. Rather than experiencing balanced intercultural exchange, students were often expected to assimilate into Portuguese culture with little institutional support. Similarly, Bourdieu's (1991) concept of linguistic capital helps explain how language became a form of symbolic power: Portuguese proficiency was not merely a skill but a marker of belonging, one that non-PALOP students were consistently denied. The literature on resilience also offers an important counterpoint. Masten (2001) described resilience as "ordinary magic," a set of adaptive capacities that emerge in response to adversity. Participants' reliance on WhatsApp groups, peer networks, and religious communities illustrates how resilience was collectively rather than individually constructed. This is in line with Ungar's (2013) emphasis on the contextual nature of resilience.

Taken together, these findings underscore that the experiences of non-PALOP students cannot be reduced to either cultural misunderstanding or bureaucratic inefficiency alone. Instead, they reflect a complex interaction of systemic inequalities and psychosocial strain. Together, they shape the academic and personal trajectories of international students. The discussion that follows positions these findings more fully within existing research and theory. It highlights the points of convergence with prior studies, areas of divergence, and the new insights this study offers. It also identifies the implications for Portuguese higher education policy and practice, particularly regarding creating more inclusive and equitable environments for international students beyond PALOP cohorts.

4.1 Structural Issues:

4.1.1 Visa and Legal Issues

One of the most pressing structural barriers identified in this study was the difficulty non-PALOP students faced in navigating visa procedures in Portugal. The accounts of participants revealed that these challenges were not merely logistical inconveniences but deeply consequential barriers that shaped their academic journey and psychological well-being. For many, the prolonged uncertainty of visa applications and renewals generated significant stress. It also left them vulnerable to disruptions in their studies, employment opportunities, and access to basic services.

This finding aligns with prior research documenting the bureaucratic hurdles international students encounter in Portugal. Ambrósio et al. (2017) noted that students from African backgrounds frequently experience administrative inefficiencies when dealing with migration services, with delays in visa processing sometimes extending for months. Some mentioned being stranded in their home countries while studies were already underway. They missed important academic events such as orientation and to an even more detrimental extent, exams. PALOP students often benefit from more streamlined pathways due to historical and linguistic ties. However, non-PALOP students seem to face additional scrutiny and fewer institutional protections. Pinto (2021) similarly observed that doctoral students often felt abandoned by both universities and the state when navigating these bureaucratic demands, a perception the participants of this study echoed strongly.

The psychological dimension of these legal difficulties cannot be overlooked. Visa insecurity not only disrupts academic continuity but also creates a sense of instability in students' lives. Berry's (1997) framework on acculturative stress helps explain why such insecurity becomes so stressful: uncertainty around legal status undermines students' ability to fully integrate in the host society. This insecurity feeds into broader psychosocial difficulties, such as anxiety, diminished concentration, and even social withdrawal. Students often avoid situations where proof of legal status might be requested.

From a structural perspective, these difficulties reflect what Gupta (2012) calls the "everyday violence of bureaucracy." Lengthy delays, inconsistent requirements, and lack of communication throughout the processes create a system where students feel powerless and dependent on institutions that do not adequately advocate for their interests. Such bureaucratic

challenges not only reproduce inequality but also undermine Portugal's broader goals of internationalizing higher education. França et al. (2018) argue that Portugal's policies continue to be shaped by colonial legacies. This has resulted in privileging PALOP students while leaving others to face more rigid controls. The findings of this study reinforce this view, illustrating how non-PALOP students remain structurally disadvantaged within current migration and education frameworks.

These challenges also have practical consequences for academic integration. Students who spend months awaiting documentation cannot easily secure housing, open bank accounts, or participate in paid internships. Some reported missing opportunities to attend conferences or undertake research abroad due to visa complications. Such structural barriers thus limit not only students' immediate well-being but also their long-term academic development and professional competitiveness. This aligns with OECD (2019), which has highlighted how cumbersome migration policies across Europe undermine the potential of international student mobility as a means of innovation and global collaboration.

The resulting effect of these barriers is that non-PALOP students experience a precarious form of academic citizenship. They are physically present in Portugal but legally and symbolically viewed as outsiders, constantly required to justify their stay. Bourdieu's (1991) notion of symbolic power offers a useful point of view here: legal documentation functions as a form of capital that grants legitimacy within the host society. Without stable access to this capital, students are relegated to marginal positions, unable to fully participate in academic or social life.

At the same time, students' coping responses highlight both resilience and resignation. While many found ways to manage the uncertainty, often relying on peer networks for information and advice, there was also a sense of enduring systemic neglect. Universities were frequently described as unwilling or unable to intervene. This leaves students to navigate complex migration systems alone as some participants explained. This lack of institutional advocacy reinforces what Sin, Tavares, and Cardoso (2019) identified as the "external makeover" of Portuguese universities. Institutions seek to present themselves as internationalized while failing to address the internal inequities faced by their most vulnerable students.

Visa and legal difficulties represent a critical structural barrier for non-PALOP students.

These challenges extend beyond individual inconvenience to constitute systemic forms of exclusion, rooted in both bureaucratic inefficiency and historical hierarchies of belonging. Some students suggested universities provide dedicated immigration support or collaborate with embassies to reduce visa stress. The findings underscore the need for universities and policymakers to recognize legal precarity as not merely an immigration issue but a fundamental dimension of academic inequality.

4.1.2 Financial Strains and Scholarship Inequities

Financial pressures emerged as another central challenge in the experiences of non-PALOP students. Participants described how they struggle to meet tuition fees, cover basic living expenses, and manage the hidden costs of academic life. While these difficulties are not unique to Portugal, the interviews revealed that non-PALOP students faced particularly acute inequities in access to scholarships and financial aid. Unlike PALOP students, who often qualify for bilateral agreements or targeted funding programs, non-PALOP students reported being excluded from such opportunities.

These findings mirror the broader structural patterns identified by Ambrósio et al. (2017), who found that financial instability was one of the most frequently cited obstacles for African students in Portuguese universities. PALOP students often experienced support mechanisms that partially mitigated these barriers. Meanwhile non-PALOP students in this study expressed frustration at being systematically overlooked. This suggests a two-tiered funding system that reinforces historical and cultural hierarchies of belonging. This reinforced França et al. (2018) argument that Portuguese internationalization strategies remain tied to colonial legacies, and the persistence of unequal funding opportunities lends empirical weight to this claim.

The stress generated by financial insecurity extended well beyond the material sphere. Participants reported that constant worries about money undermined their ability to focus on academic work, limited their participation in extracurricular activities, and curtailed opportunities to build social networks. The literature on international students confirms this link between financial strain and psychosocial adjustment. Andrade (2006) noted that economic hardship consistently exacerbates stress among students. Smith and Khawaja (2011) emphasized that financial insecurity is closely associated with feelings of marginalization and isolation. Within the framework of Berry's (1997) acculturation model, financial barriers represent an

additional layer of stress that limits students' capacity to engage meaningfully with the host environment.

Financial challenges also intersect with issues of empowerment and agency. Zimmerman's (1995) concept of psychological empowerment underscores the importance of having access to resources and opportunities that allow individuals to exert control over their circumstances. In the context of this study, non-PALOP students' exclusion from scholarships and institutional funding left them with little sense of agency in shaping their academic futures. Instead, many felt trapped in precarious financial arrangements, often relying on family support from abroad or taking up informal work. This dynamic reproduces inequality, as students from less affluent backgrounds are disadvantaged. Their academic performance is also undermined by the constant need to juggle competing demands.

Another dimension of financial strain was its impact on students' ability to participate fully in academic and professional development opportunities. Some participants stated that they could not afford to attend international conferences, take unpaid internships, or engage in fieldwork abroad. Laufer and Gorup (2019) have shown that such barriers contribute to doctoral attrition. Students who cannot access the same opportunities as their peers often feel marginalized and demotivated. The data from this study reinforces this concern, suggesting that inequitable access to resources may hinder not only academic achievement but also long-term career trajectories.

At the policy level, these inequities highlight a contradiction in Portugal's internationalization agenda. While universities seek to attract a diverse pool of students, financial aid structures remain discriminatory, privileging some groups while leaving others vulnerable. Sin, Tavares, and Cardoso (2019) argue that without genuine internal transformation, such strategies amount to little more than surface-level internationalization. The findings of this study support this critique, showing how structural inequities in financial aid undermine the promise of inclusivity.

Prior research provides insight into how students cope with financial adversity. Masten (2001) emphasized that resilience is often built through adaptive responses to stress. Participants in this study demonstrated resilience by forming peer networks, sharing resources, and seeking part-time work to sustain themselves. Yet, as Ungar (2013) reminds us, resilience depends on context and cannot compensate indefinitely for systemic inequities. Without

institutional reforms to expand financial support beyond PALOP students, resilience risks becoming a narrative that hides rather than handles structural injustice.

Financial strains and inequitable access to scholarships represent a profound structural barrier for non-PALOP students in Portugal. These challenges not only make their immediate academic success difficult, it also perpetuates long-term inequalities in opportunity and achievement. To solve this, students recommended partnerships with organizations to provide opportunities for paid internships to ease financial stress. Addressing these inequities requires both policy reforms and institutional recognition that financial barriers are central to the international student experience.

4.1.3 Language Barriers

Language emerged as one of the most challenging structural barriers for non-PALOP students. Participants described struggling with Portuguese in both academic and administrative contexts. They often felt disadvantaged in comparison to PALOP peers whose proficiency in Portuguese smoothed their transition. While most universities formally require proficiency in Portuguese, participants reported that the reality of learning and working in a second language extended beyond basic communication. They also thought that the availability of courses taught in English would ease their academic life. Unfortunately, their lack of proficiency in Portuguese shaped their ability to engage fully in classroom discussions, engage in research, and establish relationships with faculty and peers.

These findings resonate with Pinto's (2021) research on African doctoral students in Portugal, which highlighted language as a consistent source of frustration. Ambrósio et al. (2017) also found that international students often experience language barriers not only in academic contexts but also in dealing with administrative staff, who may be unprepared or unwilling to communicate in English. In this study, such barriers were not limited to the classroom. They extended to bureaucratic procedures, where the inability to understand forms, regulations, or official correspondence increased the stress of visa and financial challenges.

Bourdieu's (1991) concept of linguistic capital is particularly useful in interpreting these findings. Within Portuguese higher education, mastery of the Portuguese language operates as a form of symbolic power, granting students legitimacy and access to institutional resources. For non-PALOP students, limited proficiency in the language left them marginalized, often forcing

them to depend on peers or external translators. This dynamic positioned them as outsiders within the very institutions they were expected to integrate into. Phillipson's (1992) critique of linguistic imperialism also helps explain the persistence of these inequities. While universities promote themselves as internationalized, the prioritizing Portuguese creates a linguistic bias that limits the inclusivity of higher education.

The psychosocial implications of language barriers were also evident. Students reported feelings of isolation and embarrassment when they could not fully express themselves. This is in line with Luo et al. (2019), who found that international students' perceived language competence was strongly correlated with their psychological well-being and ability to form supportive networks with domestic students. In this study, language insecurity was directly linked to a reluctance to seek help from faculty which led to academic underperformance and increased stress.

Institutional responses to language challenges were described as inconsistent. While some universities offered Portuguese language courses, these were often optional, under-resourced, or poorly integrated into academic programs. Sin, Tavares, and Cardoso (2019) have argued that Portuguese universities engage in an "external makeover" of internationalization, emphasizing recruitment while neglecting internal transformation. The experiences of participants in this study confirm this critique. It supports the idea that language acquisition was treated as an afterthought rather than a central component of international student integration.

Yet, prior research reminds us, students developed adaptive strategies to manage linguistic barriers. Masten (2001) described resilience as ordinary processes that enable individuals to cope with challenges, and this was evident in participants' reliance on peer networks, self-directed study, and digital translation tools. non-PALOP students often retreat to their peers to deal with the linguistic isolation. However, as Ungar (2013) emphasized, adaptations made are reliant on context and cannot substitute for institutional responsibility. Without systemic reforms to support multilingualism and provide meaningful language training, individual coping strategies will remain insufficient to address the broader inequities embedded in the system.

Language barriers represent both a structural and psychosocial challenge for non-PALOP students in Portugal. They not only hinder academic success but also reinforce symbolic hierarchies that privilege PALOP students and marginalize others. To address this

issue, students suggested structured, low-cost Portuguese language classes and academic language training. Addressing these barriers requires more than offering optional language courses; it demands a rethinking of how Portuguese universities conceptualize internationalization and inclusivity.

4.1.4 Institutional Support Gaps

Beyond legal, financial, and linguistic difficulties, participants emphasized a wider sense of institutional neglect. Universities were often perceived as unprepared or unwilling to provide adequate support for non-PALOP students. Instead, these students were left to navigate the complexities of academic and everyday life on their own. The absence of tailored support mechanisms aggravated the structural barriers already discussed. This reinforced a feeling of exclusion and invisibility.

These findings echo research by Marangell et al., (2018), who argued that the development of a "host culture" within universities is critical to the integration of international students. Without intentional strategies to foster belonging, international students remain on the outside, engaging primarily in survival strategies rather than thriving academically and socially. In Portugal, this issue is further complicated by the colonial legacy that privileges PALOP students (França et al., 2018). Non-PALOP students' sense of neglect must therefore be understood not as a simple administrative oversight but as part of a deeper institutional failure that results in the existing hierarchies of belonging.

The absence of adequate institutional support was evident across several sectors. Participants reported difficulties accessing mental health services, with some noting long wait times or a lack of culturally relevant care. This aligns with Smith and Khawaja's (2011) review of international student adjustment, which highlighted the inadequacy of psychological support structures for diverse student populations. Others pointed to a lack of academic mentorship, particularly for doctoral students, who described supervision as distant or inattentive. Laufer and Gorup (2019) similarly found that weak supervisory support contributed to dropout among international doctoral students. This illustrates the point that institutional failures extend beyond bureaucratic processes into the heart of academic life.

The limited institutional response to these challenges also show a lack of alignment between universities' internationalization discourse and their actual practices. Teichler (2017)

noted that higher education institutions worldwide often adopt internationalization strategies focused on recruitment, while neglecting the necessary internal changes to support diverse student populations. Participants' accounts reinforce this critique, with many feeling that universities saw them more as sources of revenue than as members of an academic community deserving of support.

The implications of this neglect are not just administrative but also psychosocial. Baumeister and Leary's (1995) theory of the need to belong highlights that supportive institutional environments are essential for fostering social connections and academic engagement. When universities fail to provide these environments, students are left exposed to loneliness, disengagement, and reduced performance. Participants in this study described feelings of abandonment, a theme that suggests that unmet need to belong increases the other structural barriers they face.

Yet, peer solidarity was again evident in the ways students compensated for institutional neglect. Many relied on WhatsApp groups or informal mentoring from senior students to fill the gaps left by universities. While such networks provided valuable support, they also highlight the extent of institutional neglect. However, the burden of adaptation should not fall solely on students when institutions can provide more inclusive structures.

Institutional support gaps represent a profound structural barrier that amplifies the difficulties non-PALOP students face in Portugal. By neglecting to provide adequate academic, psychological, and social resources, universities inadvertently reproduce inequities that undermine their internationalization agendas. Participants suggested that institutions can offer support by creating buddy systems where they match local students with non-PALOP international ones. They can also introduce integration centers where information guides, counselling and accommodation assistance are provided. Addressing these gaps requires moving beyond surface-level strategies of recruitment to embrace deeper transformations that prioritize student well-being, inclusion, and equity.

4.2 Psychosocial Challenges

The structural concerns discussed in the previous section were interconnected with a range of psychosocial challenges. Non-PALOP students stated that their experiences were not only bureaucratic or financial issues but also in the emotional and psychological stress of

navigating life in a context where they felt socially ignored. These challenges were seen across cultural adjustment, experiences of stereotyping, and pressures related to academic performance.

4.2.1 Cultural Adjustment and Belonging

Adjustment to Portuguese society was described by many participants as a slow and difficult process. Although most students had prepared themselves as much as they could for the transition, they found the cultural realities of everyday life harder than expected. Several recounted that they felt invisible on campus. They had little contact with local students and limited opportunities for intercultural exchange. This sense of exclusion resonates with Smith and Khawaja's (2011) detailing of international student experiences, which identified belongingness as a critical but often unmet need.

Berry's (1997) reflects on the difficulty of forming connections in the host culture through the concept of acculturative stress. For non-PALOP students, the stress of adjusting to Portuguese culture was increased by the lack of interest from domestic peers. Participants noted that they were often left to socialize only with fellow international students or small cultural enclaves. This limited their integration into Portuguese society. This imbalance shows that students were pressured toward assimilation rather than experiencing true integration.

Baumeister and Leary's (1995) theory of the need to belong provides another lens for interpreting these findings. The absence of supportive social ties left participants vulnerable to loneliness and disengagement, with several mentioning that they felt tolerated rather than welcomed. Pinto (2021) similarly found that African doctoral students reported significant feelings of isolation, especially in the early months of study.

Cultural adjustment was also hindered by gaps in communication. Some participants felt that universities provided limited orientation beyond administrative basics. They suggested more comprehensive guides and orientation sessions in many areas including information on housing, healthcare, and everyday Portuguese cultural norms. This aligns with Deardorff's (2006) framework of intercultural competence, which emphasizes preparation and guided support as necessary for fostering integration. Without support, students felt left to figure it out alone, this captures the alienation many expressed.

Cultural adjustment difficulties were not simply personal struggles but reflected a lack of institutional structures to encourage belonging. Participants' calls for buddy systems, integration centers, and information resources highlight solutions universities could employ to move toward genuine internationalization.

4.2.2 Experiences of Discrimination Microaggressions

Discrimination emerged as a recurrent theme in participants' accounts. Several described encountering stereotypes regarding their language and perceived academic abilities. While not all students reported overt racism, many recounted subtle forms of discrimination such as being ignored in group work. These experiences parallel Pinto's (2021) findings, where African doctoral students often felt judged or underestimated in Portuguese academic contexts.

Allport's (1954) theory of prejudice offers a framework for understanding these dynamics. The limited contact between domestic and non-PALOP students created the perfect conditions for stereotypes to thrive. There was no meaningful engagement, which led to unchallenged assumptions about language ability, work ethic, or intellectual capacity. Steele and Aronson's (1995) concept of stereotype threat further explains how these perceptions undermined students' confidence. Several participants described hesitating to speak in class out of fear that mistakes would reinforce negative stereotypes about Africans, especially those of non-PALOP origins.

Stereotyping took a psychological toll on students' self esteem and sense of identity as evidenced in their reflections. Spencer et al., (1999) showed how stereotype threat can negatively affect academic performance, and similar dynamics were reported here. Some participants admitted that they performed below their potential because of anxiety linked to stereotyping. This sense of vulnerability was not limited to academic spaces. A few mentioned that they were discriminated against in housing searches and public services, which reinforced their sense of marginalization.

Participants recommended solutions to these challenges. These solutions include that universities invest in structured Portuguese language classes focused not only on grammar but on academic communication. By strengthening their competence in Portuguese, students felt they could counteract some of the stereotypes attached to their accents or speech patterns.
Others recommended that universities actively promote intercultural engagement initiatives such as workshops or joint projects between domestic and international students. These solutions are reminiscent of Andrade's (2006) findings that intercultural interaction is central to reducing adjustment difficulties and enhancing mutual understanding.

Students argued for the need for institutions to provide counsellors trained in intercultural issues. This would help them cope with the psychological weight of stereotyping and discrimination.

While some universities offered general counselling services, some participants felt that these lacked cultural sensitivity. This recommendation reflects the existing research on intercultural competence (Deardorff, 2006) and the need for targeted support structures.

Discrimination was experienced as an external barrier and a source of stress and anxiety for the students. Addressing it requires cultural awareness training for faculty and staff and proactive measures to empower international students to participate. The recommendation suggested by students highlights the role of universities in shaping inclusive environments rather than leaving students to navigate exclusion on their own.

4.2.3 Academic Pressure

Non-PALOP students described intense academic pressure and performance-related anxiety. Many spoke about the difficulty of adapting to new pedagogical styles, such as the greater emphasis on independent research at the graduate level. Others highlighted the challenge of finding research material as most of the literature and research materials in their institution libraries is in Portuguese.

These struggles are consistent with Andrade's (2006) work, which identified academic adjustment as one of the most difficult elements of international student life. Participants described spending disproportionate amounts of time preparing assignments compared to their peers. This is similar to findings by Pappa et al., (2020) regarding international doctoral students in Finland. The pressure to perform was intensified by the financial sacrifices students and their families had made to pursue education abroad. This created a heightened fear of failure.

Berry's (2006) stress perspectives on acculturation provide a framework for understanding these pressures. Academic stress was not experienced in isolation but was layered onto financial challenges, visa uncertainties, and cultural isolation, creating an increased sense of strain. Students described stress, reduced concentration, and self-doubt, all of which hindered academic performance.

Participants recommended several measures to ease academic adjustment. One suggestion was for universities to provide additional support to bridging gaps in pedagogy. Such support could help students adapt to the Portuguese academic style and expectations, reducing the performance gap. Others called for increased English language research materials in university libraries.

Another frequent concern was the limited communication by faculty. Participants noted that supervisors or lecturers often assumed a level of familiarity with academic work that international students sometimes lacked. Several suggested that universities provide structured mentorship or peer mentoring systems to provide guidance on academic expectations. These align with Weidman's (1989) model of undergraduate socialization, which emphasizes the importance of structured mentorship in academic adaptation.

The psychological strain of performance anxiety also ties into the fear of falling into a stereotype. Some students feared that underperformance would confirm negative assumptions about non-PALOP students, which increases their stress. Steele and Aronson's (1995) findings on stereotype threat suggest that this anxiety is not merely personal but rooted in broader social dynamics of prejudice and expectation. Addressing these pressures therefore requires institutional recognition that academic stress is tied to systemic inequalities, not just individual resilience.

Academic pressure highlights the intersection between structural and psychosocial challenges. Students' recommendations for additional support, mentorship, and academic workshops reflect an awareness that adaptation is not just an individual task but one requiring institutional involvement. Without these measures, the academic potential of non-PALOP students risks being hindered by preventable challenges.

4.2.4 Mental Health and Well-Being

The weight of cultural isolation, discrimination, and academic pressure had a direct impact on students' mental health and well-being. Several participants described increased levels of stress and anxiety. They noted that the uncertainty of their situation often left them in a constant state of worry. Others reported feelings of sadness, loneliness, or reduced self-confidence. The same issues are seen in Smith and Khawaja's (2011) review of international student adjustment, which highlighted mental health as one of the most significant dimensions of the student experience. Unfortunately, it is also the least supported.

A recurring theme was the lack of accessible and culturally sensitive mental health services. Some universities provided general counselling, however participants noted long waiting lists and limited awareness of the particular challenges faced by international students.

This finding is seen in Pinto's (2021) observation that African doctoral students often felt unsupported in managing the emotional challenges of studying abroad.

Baumeister and Leary's (1995) theory of belongingness also provides a useful lens. The absence of supportive communities and culturally aware services intensified students' vulnerability to mental health challenges. In some cases, participants said they withdrew from social interactions altogether, which compounded feelings of isolation. Luo et al., (2019) found that perceived language competence was closely tied to psychological well-being, and participants in this study echoed that correlation. Difficulties in expressing themselves in Portuguese often triggered feelings of frustration, embarrassment, and lowered self-esteem.

Students also highlighted that their well-being was impacted by the challenges of bureaucratic processes. Visa delays or financial pressures often left them unable to plan for the future, this was a source of chronic anxiety. Berry's (2006) stress perspective helps explain why such uncertainty was particularly damaging: it undermined students' sense of stability and agency in the host context.

Participants recommended several ways to improve mental health support. A common suggestion was for universities to employ counsellors trained in intercultural issues who could better understand and address the unique stressors international students face. Others recommended providing integration centers that provide academic, social, and psychological support. These suggestions reflect students' recognition that mental health is not an isolated issue but interwoven with broader structural and cultural challenges.

Students also called for more communication from universities about support services. Some noted that they were not aware of counselling options until late in their studies. This recommendation aligns with Deardorff's (2006) framework of intercultural competence, which emphasizes the importance of intentional support systems. Without targeted outreach, support services remain underutilized by those who need them most.

The findings illustrate that mental health and well-being cannot be addressed solely through individual coping strategies. While resilience is important, systemic change is required to create environments that support psychological wellbeing. Universities must therefore recognize mental health as central to academic success. They should invest in culturally informed services that respond to the realities of international students' lives.

4.2.5 Coping Strategies

Despite the numerous challenges they faced, participants demonstrated considerable innovation in dealing with the difficulties. Many described relying on peer networks, often formed through WhatsApp groups or informal gatherings, as a primary source of support. These networks provided assistance in navigating bureaucratic processes, sharing housing opportunities, and dealing with academic pressures.

Ungar (2013) emphasized that resilience is not merely an individual trait but shaped by context and access to resources. The participants' accounts illustrate this view. Resilience was fostered through collective solidarity rather than isolated effort. For example, students shared strategies for managing language barriers, such as resources for translation or informal study groups. These strategies demonstrate how resilience can be socially constructed to offer temporary relief from systemic inequities.

At the same time, participants acknowledged the limits of their coping strategies. Some expressed frustration that there was such sufficient institutional support. This reflects a concern raised by Ungar (2013), resilience should not be used as an excuse for systemic neglect. When students are forced to rely exclusively on peer support, institutions risk normalizing inadequate support structures.

Students' recommendations for enhancing coping mechanisms often focused on expanding the existing strategies into formal structures. Some suggested the development of peer mentoring or buddy systems that would pair new students with those who had already navigated the challenges of studying in Portugal. Such programs could transform informal coping strategies into institutionalized support. Other recommendations reflected a desire to systemically bridge academic gaps through complementary support classes. This would help align students' academic preparation with Portuguese expectations.

Financial coping strategies were also evident. Some students took on part-time jobs despite the strain it placed on their studies. Others suggested that universities should develop partnerships with organizations to create paid internships or student jobs. This would alleviate the financial strain and improve students' well-being. Laufer and Gorup (2019) warned that inadequate financial support often leads to doctoral attrition. The participants' recommendations highlight the urgency of addressing this intersection between structural and psychosocial resilience.

Spirituality and faith-based communities also emerged as coping mechanisms for some students. Religious gatherings provided a sense of belonging and emotional grounding, which compensated for the absence of broader institutional support.

The resilience demonstrated by non-PALOP students shows their determination and adaptability. Yet their reflections also make clear that resilience alone is insufficient. Without institutional changes to address structural challenges and provide comprehensive support, students' coping strategies could become survival mechanisms rather than pathways to thriving. The recommendations advanced by participants, peer mentoring systems, academic bridging courses, integration centers, and financial partnerships, show a desire for resilience to be supported, not taken advantage of.

This discussion has explored the many challenges faced by non-PALOP students in Portuguese higher education. It highlighted how structural barriers and psychosocial difficulties this aligns with the goals of qualitative research, it limits the ability to generalize the findings. The sample cannot fully capture the diversity of non-PALOP student experiences across Portugal.

The second is that the composition of the sample introduces boundaries. The study focused on the experiences of students from Kenya, Nigeria, and Ghana, leaving out perspectives from other non-PALOP regions such as Asia or Eastern Europe.

The recruitment method relied on WhatsApp groups created by students for support and communication. While it was effective for reaching participants, this method is likely to have excluded more isolated students who are not connected to such support networks. These students may face even greater challenges but were unrepresented in the study.

Fourth, the methodological design relied on interviews. While this provides rich, first-hand accounts, it may also be shaped by memory, perception, or social desirability. Without contributions from institutional actors or policy documents, the analysis reflects primarily the student perspective.

The researcher's positionality also requires reflection. As a researcher interested in cultural psychology and education, my interpretations were inevitably shaped by my academic background and personal experiences. Reflexivity and transparency were utilized to reduce this influence, but it cannot be eliminated entirely.

Finally, there are temporal limitations. The study was conducted during a period when Portuguese higher education and immigration systems were experiencing post-pandemic

pressures. Some of the difficulties described, such as delays in visa processing, may reflect temporary conditions rather than structural norms. However, the consistency of participant accounts suggests that many issues are systemic and enduring.

Despite these limitations, the study offers significant contributions to understanding the experiences of a group often ignored in Portuguese higher education research. By prioritizing student voices, it highlights both the depth of their challenges and the value of their recommendations for building more inclusive academic environments.

4.3 Recommendations for Policy and Practice

The findings of this study highlight the urgent need for systemic reforms in Portuguese higher education to better support non-PALOP international students. While participants employed coping strategies, their challenges were magnified by institutional neglect and policy gaps. The following recommendations address issues at the university, policy, and cross-sector levels. They are drawn from both student suggestions and existing literature.

University-level recommendations

Universities must take greater responsibility for the inclusion and integration of non-PALOP students. Establishing integration centers on campuses would provide a centralized resource for addressing student concerns. They would offer information on accommodation, health care, financial services, and immigration. Such centers could also serve as spaces for cultural exchange which would reduce isolation and promote belonging.

Students emphasized the importance of structured and affordable Portuguese language courses for academic as well as conversational language. Summer programs or bridging classes could ensure that students are prepared as they engage in their studies. This is in line with studies showing that language competence is central to academic success and psychological well-being.

The introduction of peer mentoring or buddy systems would also be beneficial. Pairing new non-PALOP students with experienced or host peers can provide practical guidance, emotional support, and cultural orientation. This is consistent with research highlighting the role of host culture support in facilitating adjustment (Marangell et al., 2018).

Finally, universities should invest in counselling services that are culturally aware and provided in English. Given the psychosocial challenges reported by students including discrimination and performance anxiety, these services would offer crucial support in navigating the pressures of academic and social adaptation.

Policy-level recommendations

At the national level, changes are needed to address the structural barriers that non-PALOP students face. Immigration processes must become more transparent and efficient. Participants called for dedicated staff to help international students with SEF (Serviço de Estrangeiros e Fronteiras) and AIMA (Agência para a Integração, Migrações e Asilo) processes. Universities could also work together with these agencies to make the process easier thereby reducing the stress associated with visa precarity.

Scholarship opportunities should also be reformed to ensure equity between PALOP and non-PALOP students. While Portugal's emphasis on colonial ties has created advantages for PALOP students, it has marginalized non-PALOP students. Expanding funding options would show a commitment to fair internationalization. It would also strengthen Portugal's competitiveness in attracting global talent.

In addition, national authorities could partner with embassies and consulates to provide multilingual support for students navigating visa and legal procedures. For instance, participants noted the lack of English-speaking staff in some embassies. This made the process more complex. Strengthening embassy support networks could ease integration and reduce the bureaucratic burden on students.

Cross-sector recommendations

Beyond universities and policymakers, there is a need for partnerships with other sectors. Accommodation emerged as a persistent concern. Students struggled to secure affordable and safe housing. Partnerships between universities and hostels or housing providers could assist international students during their first semester. It would offer stability during the critical adjustment period.

Financial inclusion also requires attention. Many students encountered difficulties opening bank accounts, which hindered their ability to manage funds and pay for essential

services. Universities could collaborate with financial institutions and establish simplified procedures for international students, reducing barriers to financial security.

Finally, participants highlighted the importance of employment opportunities, both as a means of financial support and as a pathway to integration. Universities could work with employers to create paid internship programs or part-time work opportunities for international students. Such initiatives would alleviate financial stress and enhance employability and also strengthen Portugal's global higher education profile.

Collectively, these recommendations reflect the dual focus of this study, addressing structural barriers and also support psychosocial well-being. They highlight that effective internationalization requires more than recruitment targets. It requires coordinated, multi-level efforts to create environments in which all students can thrive, regardless of their origins.

Recommendations for Future Research

While this study has illustrated key aspects of non-PALOP students' experiences, further research is needed to broaden and deepen understanding of this population.

Future research should explore the experiences of undergraduate students, who may face unique challenges related to age, independence, and academic preparedness. Expanding the scope of research beyond postgraduate students would provide a more comprehensive picture of international student adjustment in Portugal. intersect to shape their academic and personal journeys in Portugal. The findings reveal that visa insecurity, financial strain, language barriers, and institutional neglect are not isolated obstacles but interconnected systems of disadvantage that reinforce one another. These structural barriers directly inform psychosocial struggles such as cultural isolation, discrimination, academic stress, and mental health strain. Together, they create an unstable environment in which students are often left to rely on individual strategies and peer networks instead of institutional or policy support.

What emerges most clearly is that integration cannot be achieved through recruitment alone. Universities must move beyond surface-level internationalization to implement changes that address the structural and psychosocial challenges that international students experience. Participants' recommendations, ranging from integration centers and buddy systems to immigration assistance and financial assistance, show that international students are not passive recipients of policy. They are active contributors with valuable insights into creating solutions for these challenges. Their proposals align with existing studies on intercultural

competence, resilience, and empowerment. This strengthens the case for reform that is both evidence-based and student-informed.

At the same time, the discussion has shown that Portugal's reliance on colonial legacies in shaping higher education policy produces unequal experiences for international students. While PALOP students often benefit from linguistic and policy privileges, non-PALOP students remain disadvantaged. They are caught between the promises of internationalization and the realities of exclusion. This illustrates the importance of reforming Portuguese higher education policies to embrace a more global and equitable approach.

This study contributes to an understanding of international student experiences. It shows first-hand how structural inequalities and psychosocial pressures are connected and highlights the agency of students themselves in proposing solutions. The implications are clear. Universities, policymakers, and cross-sector partners must work together to reduce barriers and encourage supportive environments. Only through such coordinated action can internationalization in Portugal move from a symbolic project to a substantial practice of equity and inclusion.

4.4 Limitations of the Study

While the study makes important contributions, several limitations must be acknowledged to position its findings responsibly.

The first is that the sample size was relatively small, comprising 15 participants. While

Comparative studies between PALOP and non-PALOP students would shed light on how colonial legacies shape the experiences of privilege and marginalization. Such research could clarify the extent to which language, policy, and institutional practices create unequal outcomes among international students.

Future research should consider broader regional diversity. This study focused on students from Kenya, Nigeria, and Ghana. However, Portugal also attracts students from Asia, Latin America, and Eastern Europe. Their perspectives should be included to highlight whether the challenges identified here are specific to African non-PALOP students or reflect wider systemic issues.

Such areas of research would not only strengthen empirical knowledge but also inform evidence-based policies in the future. This would foster a more inclusive and globally competitive higher education system in Portugal.

4.5 Contributions to Knowledge

This study makes several contributions to studies, theory, and practice in the fields of cultural psychology, international education, and migration studies.

Empirical contributions

The thesis provides one of the first qualitative first-hand accounts of non-PALOP international students in Portugal. Most of the existing research has focused on PALOP students, who enjoy linguistic and policy advantages due to Portugal's colonial ties to their countries (França et al., 2018). By centering students from Kenya, Nigeria, and Ghana, this study highlights a group that has remained largely invisible in both policy and academic discourse. The voices of these students reveal the ways in which structural disadvantage and psychosocial strain intersect and offer a nuanced perspective on internationalization in Portugal.

Theoretical contributions

The findings also provide key theoretical frameworks in cultural psychology and education. Berry's (1997) acculturation model has long been used to understand how migrants adapt to new cultures. This study demonstrates that adaptation is not only a psychological process but is also heavily influenced by structural inequalities, such as visa and legal challenges and institutional neglect. Bourdieu's (1991) concept of linguistic capital is powerfully illustrated in the ways that Portuguese language proficiency structures opportunities for inclusion. Lack of it results in exclusion.

The study also contributes to resilience theory (Masten, 2001; Ungar, 2013). It shows that for non-PALOP students, resilience is as a result of the need for peer networks and personal faith. This challenges the assumptions that universities play a central role in fostering resilience and shows the need for institutions to shoulder more responsibility.

Practical contributions

Practically, the research offers actionable insights for universities, policymakers, and stakeholders. Student recommendations are not abstract demands, they are concrete proposals that can be implemented to improve the experiences of international students. By including these recommendations within the broader literature, this study provides a roadmap for institutions to move beyond symbolic internationalization and toward real inclusion.

The thesis contributes by centering marginalized voices, extending models of acculturation, resilience, and linguistic capital, and offering evidence-based recommendations for policy and practice.

Conclusion

The experiences of non-PALOP international students in Portugal highlight the incompatibility between the aspirations of internationalization and the realities of exclusion. While Portugal positions itself as a global hub for higher education, the voices of these students reveal that internationalization is unevenly distributed. It prioritizes some groups while ignoring others. This inequity reflects not only bureaucratic challenges but also deeper historical legacies that continue to affect educational access and equity.

At the same time, the resilience and resourcefulness demonstrated by students remind us that international education is not simply about institutional systems. It is also about individual determination and community solidarity. Their coping strategies students turn to, highlight the human capacity to endure, and adapt in the face of systemic neglect. Yet, it is neither fair nor sustainable to expect students to bear this burden alone.

The broader message of this study is clear. Internationalization must be reformed into a practice of equity, not just expansion. Universities, policymakers, and cross-sector partners must move beyond recruitment and create environments where all students can thrive academically and socially. Doing so is not only a moral imperative but also a strategic one. The increased competition for talent globally relies on the ability to provide inclusive and supportive educational experiences.

This thesis shows the need for Portugal's higher education sector to embrace a more holistic and equitable vision of internationalization. It should be one that recognizes diversity, addresses systemic barriers, and actively fosters belonging. The voices of non-PALOP students provide a starting point for this change.

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APPENDICES:

Appendix A. **Table 1** Demographic Characteristics of Study Participants

Appendix B: **Table 2** Semi-Structured Interview Guided Questionnaire

Appendix B: Student consent form sample

Appendix A: Table 1

Demographic Characteristics of Study Participants

Participant ID	Sex	Age Range	Country of Origin	Academic Level	Duration in Portugal
P1	Male	25–30	Kenya	Master's	< 1 year
P2	Female	31–35	Kenya	Master's	< 1 year
P3	Male	31–35	Kenya	PhD	> 2 years
P4	Male	31–35	Nigeria	Master's	> 1 year
P5	Male	31–35	Nigeria	Master's	> 1 year
P6	Male	25–30	Nigeria	Master's	> 1 year
P7	Male	20–25	Kenya	Undergraduate	< 1 year
P8	Female	35–40	Ghana	Master's	> 1 year
P9	Male	25–30	Nigeria	Master's	> 1 year
P10	Male	25–30	Ghana	Master's	< 1 year
P11	Female	25–30	Nigeria	Master's	> 1 year
P12	Male	18–20	Kenya	Undergraduate	< 1 year
P13	Male	21–25	Kenya	Undergraduate	< 1 year
P14	Female	18–20	Kenya	Undergraduate	< 1 year
P15	Female	25–30	Nigeria	Master's	> 1 year

Appendix B: Table 2 *Semi-Structured Interview Guide*

Section	Focus / Goal	Key Questions
Introduction and Informed Consent	To introduce the study, explain procedures, and obtain informed consent.	1. Explanation of the study objectives, interview duration, and topics to be discussed. 2. Review and signing of the informed consent form.
Sociodemographic Characteristics and Background	To understand participants' demographic, educational, and personal backgrounds to identify similarities and differences among participants.	1. Can you tell me about your background, including your country of origin and educational background? 2. Is this your first time traveling outside your home country? 3. Is this your first time living away from friends and family?
Pedagogical Differences	To explore perceived pedagogical differences between higher education in Portugal and participants' home countries and how these may affect self-efficacy and self-esteem.	1. How did you hear about your academic program? 2. Why did you choose to study in Portugal? 3. What are your future academic or career aspirations? 4. What was the process like from application to acceptance and enrollment? 5. Does course delivery in Portugal differ from that in your home country? If yes, how has this affected your self-efficacy and self-esteem? 6. How does your relationship with peers differ from your home country? 7. How does your relationship with lecturers differ from your home country? 8. How would you describe the relationship between students and the institution?

		9. How have you adapted to pedagogical differences within Portuguese higher education institutions? 10. What are your perceptions of the cost of education in relation to its quality?
Adaptation and Specific Challenges	To explore participants' expectations, challenges, and perceived support needs during their adaptation process.	1. What were your expectations of studying in Portugal, and how do they compare with your actual experience? 2. What challenges have you faced from enrollment to settling in? 3. Could your institution have supported you better in navigating these challenges? If yes, how? 4. Do you think these challenges are common among all international students? 5. Are any challenges specific to students from your country or continent? 6. Are these challenges experienced differently by students from other regions (e.g., Europe, Asia, the Americas)?
Institutional Support	To examine perceptions of institutional support and its impact on student well-being and integration.	1. What challenges do you face as an international student? 2. How are these challenges addressed by your institution? 3. Do these challenges affect your well-being? 4. Are you aware of channels for communicating these challenges? 5. Do you feel socially, psychologically, and academically integrated into Portugal? 6. What institutional barriers (e.g., bureaucratic, legal, language-related) affect

		integration for non-Portuguese- speaking students? 7. Do you feel your experience differs from that of other international students? If yes, how?
Student Recommendations	To gather participant recommendations for improving institutional support for international students.	1. What strategies could institutions implement to better support students from your country? 2. Is there anything else you would like to add about your experience?

INFORMED CONSENT

This study is part of a research project taking place at **ISCTE– Instituto Universitario de Lisboa**, as a requirement for the fulfilment of the Masters in Psychology of Intercultural Relations program. The study is conducted by Faith Mukami Mutugi, email: faith_mutugi@iscte-iul.pt and supervised by Ricardo Borges Rodrigues, Email: rfprs@iscte-iul.pt who you may contact to clear up any doubts, share comments or exercise your rights in relation to the processing of your personal data. You may use the contact indicated above to request access, rectification, erasure, or limitation of the processing of your personal data.

The study aims to explore the experience of African students from non-Portuguese speaking global majority countries from application proccess to settling in.
The study aims to explore observations, challenges, institutional support and recommendations.

Your participation in the study is highly valued as it will contribute to the advancement of knowledge in this field of science, consists of a 40–60-minute interview where you will answer a few guided open-ended questions about your experience. The interview will be voice recorded, then transcribed within 1 month. The interview is anonymous, and the only identifiable data may be your country of origin and your voice recording.

The voice recording will be destroyed after 1 month from the date of recording. Within this month, you may withdraw your participation or make changes or addition to your answers, but it may not be possible to do so after data is transcribed, and the voice recording destroyed.

The transcribed version will later be analysed and coded into themes and summarized together with data from other participants at the end of the study.

Iscte is the controller of your personal data that are collected and processed exclusively for the purposes of the study, legally based on Article 6(a) *and/or* Article 9(2)(a) of the General Data Protection Regulation.

Your participation in this study is **confidential**. Your personal data will always be processed by me the interviewer and the supervisor Ricardo Borges Rodrigues who are bound to the duty of secrecy and confidentiality. ISCTE assures the use of appropriate techniques, organisational and security measures to protect personal information. All investigators are required to keep all personal data confidential.

In addition to being confidential, participation in the study is strictly **voluntary**: you may choose freely whether to participate or not. If you have decided to participate, you may stop your participation and withdraw your consent to the processing of your personal data at any time during the interview or within 1 month after the interview; without having to provide any justification. The withdrawal of consent shall not affect the lawfulness of processing based on consent before its withdrawal.

Your personal data in the form of the voice recording will be kept for one month then transcribed. Your participation will be anonymized by use a Pseudo name for the transcription. After this the voice recording will be destroyed as aforementioned. Your anonymity is assured in the study's results, being disclosed only for purposes of statistics, teaching, communication in scientific meetings, books, or articles.

There are no expected significant risks associated with participation in the study. If the interview however triggers negative emotions the interview can be paused or terminated.

ISCTE does not disclose, or share with third parties, information related to its personal data.

Iscte has a Data Protection Officer who may be contacted by e-mail: *dpo@iscte-iul.pt*. If you consider this necessary, you also have the right to submit a complaint to the Portuguese Data Protection Authority (CNDP).

I declare that I have understood the aims of what was proposed to me, as explained by the investigator, that I was given the opportunity to ask any questions about this study and received a clarifying reply to all such questions. **I accept** participating in the study and consent to my personal data being used in accordance with the information that was given to me.

Yes ☐ No ☐

_____(place), ____/____/_____(date)

Name: _____

Signature: _____