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The Impact of Covid-19 on International Students in Brazil and Portugal

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ABSTRACT – The Impact of Covid-19 on International Students in Brazil and Portugal. Several studies have highlighted the importance of exploring the impact of the pandemic on the internationalisation of higher education. However, few have addressed the vulnerabilities and strategies of students involved in this type of mobility. This article examines the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on international students who have been in Brazil and Portugal, using a mixed methodology (questionnaires and interviews). The results show that the pandemic caused widespread stress and anxiety and generated additional precariousness for higher education students, especially those from the Global South. Based on the identification of these vulnerabilities and the responses of these students, we hope those higher education institutions, as well as the governments of the countries of origin and destination will also be able to find responses that contribute to a better equity between the different groups of international students, and between them and their national peers.
Keywords: **Covid-19. International Students. Student Mobility. Vulnerabilities.**

RESUMO – Os Impactos da Covid-19 nos Estudantes Internacionais no Brasil e Portugal. Vários estudos têm enfatizado a importância de se pesquisar as consequências da pandemia na internacionalização do ensino superior, mas poucos abordaram as vulnerabilidades e estratégias dos estudantes envolvidos nesse tipo de mobilidade. Este artigo examina, de forma comparativa, os impactos da pandemia de covid-19 nos estudantes internacionais que estavam no Brasil e em Portugal, utilizando uma metodologia mista (questionários e entrevistas). Os resultados demonstram que a pandemia não só provocou estresse e ansiedade generalizados, mas também gerou formas adicionais de precariedade para os estudantes do ensino superior, especialmente os originários do sul global. A partir da identificação dessas vulnerabilidades e das respostas encontradas por esses estudantes, esperamos que as instituições de ensino superior, bem como os governos dos países de origem e destino, também consigam encontrar respostas que contribuam para uma maior equidade entre os diferentes grupos de estudantes internacionais, e entre estes e os seus pares nacionais.
Palavras-chave: **Covid-19. Estudantes Internacionais. Mobilidade Estudantil. Vulnerabilidades.**

Introduction

The Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OCDE, 2013) defines an international student (IS) as one who moves to another country for the purpose of pursuing studies. This definition implies the existence of transnational mobility, meaning the movement of people across national borders. However, the pandemic crisis caused by the coronavirus (Covid-19) from late 2019 onwards had a significant impact on territorial movements, for many countries imposed exceptional restrictions on the entry and exit of individuals. The border closure measures adopted by several countries, including restrictions on air and land traffic, directly affected the transnational mobility of international students. In the specific case of Portugal, there were restrictions that even encompassed air traffic, while in Brazil, restrictions were mainly applied to land traffic.

This article presents the comparative results of two studies aimed at understanding the impacts of the initial Covid-19 control measures on IS who were in Brazil and Portugal, and how these measures influenced the conditions for these students to remain in the two countries. Based on these studies, this article seeks to answer the following questions:

1. Who were the IS enrolled in a Brazilian or Portuguese Higher Education Institution (HEI) during the pandemic?

2. What difficulties did they encounter, and what strategies did they adopt to overcome them during this period?

3. Despite the difficulties imposed by the pandemic, did they attempt to continue their academic activities in the destination country, and what was necessary to achieve this?

To this end, the article draws on the results obtained from surveys and interviews conducted with IS enrolled in HEIs in these countries as soon as the pandemic began. The topics addressed were related to the vulnerabilities of these students and the strategies they adopted during this period.

IS are often portrayed in the literature as having a sense of unlimited global mobility and without borders career aspirations (Gomes, 2022). However, the Covid-19 pandemic introduced drastic and unprecedented changes for these students, presenting them with unique challenges and restrictions to their mobility (Van der Velde et al., 2021; Moscaritolo et al., 2022). Particularly those coming from developing countries in Asia, Africa, or Latin America faced a more severe state of anxiety, social and psychological distress (Firang, 2020; Aristovnik et al., 2020), apart from additional challenges due to lower digital literacy and equipment availability, exacerbated by more intense financial problems (Aristovnik et al., 2020; Malet Calvo et al., 2022).

The results of our study confirm that the disruptions in mobility caused by the pandemic increased the precariousness and concerns of IS regarding their future, especially those from the Global South.

The experiences of these IS demonstrated the critical nature of the strategies they adopted to rebuild their lives and maintain their transnational activities within the limitations that began to be imposed. Such analysis allowed for a more comprehensive understanding of IS experiences during periods of crisis, apart from realizing that HEIs were not prepared to handle the new challenges in education that emerged from the pandemic.

The Landscape of International Student Mobility in Brazil and Portugal

In Portugal, until the Covid-19 pandemic, data from the Directorate-General for Education and Science Statistics (DGEEC) indicated a steady increase in the number of IS in higher education. While in the 2000/2001 academic year there were about 13,000 foreign students in the country, by 2010/2011 this number had risen to nearly 22,000, and by 2019/2020 to over 60,000. With Covid-19, this number experienced a slight decline in 2020/2021, falling to just over 55,000 IS. However, that year saw an increase in degree mobility enrollments[1] – from 36,000 in 2018/2019 to 47,000 in 2020/2021 –, but a sharp decline in credit mobility enrollments[2] – from about 17,000 in 2018/2019 to 8,000 in 2020/2021. This decline may be related to the fact that nearly a quarter of the exchanges conducted through the Erasmus[3] program were canceled at the beginning of the pandemic (Gabriels; Benke-Aberg, 2020). Nevertheless, from the 2021/2022 academic year onwards, these numbers began to rise again. That year, credit mobility enrollments exceeded 16,000 enrollments, and by 2022/2023, had reached almost 18.000. Degree mobility enrolments reached nearly 50,000 in 2021/2022, and almost 57,000 in 2022/2023 (DGEEC, 2024). Therefore, in 2022/2023, the total number of IS enrolled in a Portuguese HEI was close to 75,000.

As historical and political relationships between states are crucial to understanding the contexts within which international student mobility occurs (Börjesson, 2017; Perkins; Neumayer, 2014), it is understandable that countries such as Brazil, Cape Verde, and Angola rank among the top senders of students to Portuguese higher education institutions. Historically, the mobility of Brazilian, Cape Verdean, and Angolan students to Portugal began when these countries were still Portuguese colonies. During that period, which varied significantly among them - since Brazil gained independence in 1822, while Angola and Cape Verde only achieved it in 1975 - only a small elite had the means to study abroad, and the most "natural" choice was the metropolis (Almeida, 2004; Santos; Filho, 2012). However, with the independence of these three former colonies and the political-institutional changes that followed over the years, other social classes, not just the elite of these three countries, gained the opportunity to study abroad (Iorio; Pereira, 2018; Iorio et al., 2021). Thus, since 2008/2009, Brazilian students have constituted the largest community of IS in Portugal, followed by Cape Verdeans and Angolans (Fonseca; Hortas, 2011; Iorio, 2018).

Therefore, if we examine the students from these three national-ities (Table 1), we find that from 2019/2020 (pre-Covid-19) to 2022/2023 (post-Covid-19), although the number of Brazilian students has declined, they have remained the largest IS community in Portu-gal. Meanwhile, Cape Verdeans, the second-largest community in Portugal, have seen a steady increase over these years, and Angolans, despite a slight drop in 2020/2021, have maintained a steady increase in subsequent years.

Table 1 – IS in Portugal/ Main Nationalities

IS (N)/Year	2019/2020	2020/2021	2021/2022	2022/2023
Brazilians	21,275	18,252	17,710	19,123
Cape-Verdeans	4,679	5,401	5,399	6,495
Angoleans	3,600	3,552	4,127	5,292
Other nationalities	31,125	27,932	38,682	43,687
Total IS in Portugal	60,679	55,137	65,918	74,597

Source: DGEEC (2024).

In Brazil, the data on students suffer from a limitation: the di-versity of sources, including the records of the universities them-selves; the National Migration Registry System (SISMIGRA) — a data-base maintained in a decentralized manner by the Federal Police; and the Higher Education Census—conducted, according to Decree No. 6.425 of April 4, 2008, by the National Institute for Educational Studies and Research Anísio Teixeira (Inep), an autonomous federal agency linked to the Ministry of Education (MEC). As a result, each of these institutions presents a different number of IS.

Until the Migration Law (Law 13.445/2017) came into effect, the student visa was the only entry permit for university students, interns, and postgraduate researchers without employment contracts in Bra-zil. In 2003, for instance, SISMIGRA recorded the entry of only two people with student visas into the country, in addition to 53 scholar-ship holders and 1,168 students benefiting from the Mercosur resi-dence agreements. In other words, the number of those entering the country with student visas was very low. However, in 2009, the Federal Police recorded a significant increase in this number, suggesting a greater systematization of the data: 3,364 entered with student visas and 2,566 through Mercosur agreements, with 166 of them being scholarship holders. Although different from the Portuguese data (which refer to the stock of IS enrolled in Portuguese HEIs), the Brazil-ian data (which refer to the flow of entry of these students) show that, as in Portugal, Brazil also experienced a steady increase in the number of IS over the years. By 2018, the number of student visas issued in Brazil had reached 7,621, and those who had obtained residence per-mits to study had reached 582[4].

In 2019, according to the Higher Education Census, which refers only to IS at the undergraduate level, there were over 13,000 enrolled in a Brazilian HEI. By 2020, this number had reached nearly 15,000,

and by 2021, it was close to 17,000 (the most recent data available). Regarding the primary origins of these students, the Census data showed that students from the Americas (mainly Paraguay, Bolivia, Argentina, Peru, the United States, and Venezuela) represented half of all IS in the country, followed by Africans (notably from Angola and Guinea-Bissau) and Asians (primarily Japanese), who recorded an increase in the last year (Table 2).

Table 2 – EIs no Brasil / Principais Origens

IS (%)/ Ano	2019	2020	2021
America	49,10%	50,80%	50,70%
Africa	25,20%	23,90%	20,60%
Asia	13,30%	12,50%	15,00%
Europa	12,00%	12,40%	13,50%
Oceania	0,40%	0,40%	0,40%

Source: Data compiled from the 2019, 2020 and 2021 Higher Education Census.

Although the data sources in the two countries are not identical, it was possible to ascertain that in Portugal, Brazilian, Angolan, and Cape Verdean students constitute the largest group of International Students (IS), whereas in Brazil, they predominantly come from the American continent, possibly due to geographic proximity and agreements within Mercosur. Furthermore, a significant presence of African students is observed in Brazil, mainly influenced by the Undergraduate Student-Agreement Program (PEC-G)[5]. While Portugal exhibits a more pronounced Global South-North academic mobility, with students from former Portuguese colonies such as Brazil and the Portuguese-Speaking African Countries (PALOP), Brazil demonstrates greater Global South-South mobility, with students from South America and, also, from the African continent. These patterns suggest that the two countries have distinct dynamics of academic mobility, influenced by historical, geographical, and governmental agreements.

The Vulnerabilities of International Higher Education Students

The international student in mobility encounters a series of vulnerabilities that together make their trajectories even more challenging. For example, in addition to not being citizens of the host country, in many countries, the visa/authorization to study does not permit work. Moreover, those who do not possess international or migrant *habitus* (Brito, 2004), meaning they have never traveled to another country or emigrated, tend to be more vulnerable to unexpected situations when they find themselves far from their family and financial and emotional support networks. Therefore, we hypothesize that the fear, stress, and anxiety inherent to moving to a different country/culture may have been exacerbated by the advent of the pandemic.

The concept of vulnerability "emphasizes the ways in which inequalities of power, dependency, capacity, or need make some agents vulnerable to harm or exploitation by others" (Mackenzie et al., 2014, p. 6). In this sense, an IS is not equivalent to a domestic student, especially concerning their rights, sometimes their language skills – not all are proficient in the language of the host country (Albertovna Shakirova; Roza Alexeevna, 2016), and their support networks – and not all have support networks in the host country (Brooks; Waters, 2010; de Haas, 2010), which also indicates that IS do not form a homogeneous group. That is, when a student goes to another country, like an immigrant, they generally leave behind a support network in their country of origin and will tend to build a relational and/or institutional network in the host country. By support network, we refer to: 1. financial support, which may come from the family in the country of origin (thus being a distant support network), but it can also come from the HEI in the host country or friends and possibly family members residing in the host country (thus being a close support network); 2. and emotional support, which can also come from family, friends, and acquaintances, both in the country of origin and the host country. However, since the support network of IS is usually (especially in the beginning) distant (i.e., in the country of origin), they present themselves as more vulnerable than domestic students. Nevertheless, these vulnerabilities are usually situational, as they arise from a context that tends to be short-term (as long as the studies last). Therefore, although situations of greater vulnerability are inherent to the migrant condition, for IS, it may be a transient and provisional state, stemming from an intermediate and temporary situation between the present and the future (Bourdieu; Passeron, 1979).

However, the pandemic not only altered the idea of a "short-term context" and a "transitory and provisional state," given the considerable uncertainties about the outcome of the health crisis, but it also reduced these students' expectations for their future. Misca and Thornton (2021) identified a triple impact during this period: the first one is related to the diminished employment prospects for recent graduates, which could carry greater weight for those investing in their human, cultural, and intellectual capital in another country (our note); the second, related to social and peer relationships, which were negatively affected by the reduction in face-to-face contacts, with a greater impact on those far from their support networks; and the third one related to education, which, in the case of higher education students, had to be abruptly altered by the adoption of distance learning and the constant use of ICTs. Therefore, the impacts of the pandemic on IS were particularly challenging (Iorio et al., 2020; Malet Calvo et al., 2022), as they experienced an intersectionality of negative effects compared to nationals (Prinsloo; Slade, 2016). In this context, a student who did not master the language of the host country, for example, would be even more vulnerable due to difficulties in communication (Albertovna Shakirova; Roza Alexeevna, 2016), and/or one who

did not have established relational and/or institutional networks in the host country would have less support (Elmer et al., 2020).

Regarding employment, Martins et al. (2022), in a study conducted with immigrants in Portugal, concluded that pre-existing socioeconomic inequalities were exacerbated during the pandemic. Compared to natives, immigrants were more likely to lose their jobs or temporary work. Similarly, in Brazil, immigrants with little or no financial reserves were the most affected by the reduction in income, the rise in unemployment, and the increase in the prices of essential goods caused by the pandemic (Neto; Menacho, 2020). In this article, we consider that IS may also have viewed unemployment as an aggravating factor in continuing their studies in the host country, as the loss of income - whether from work, family, or personal savings - could jeopardize their stay in the host country.

Once the aspiration to migrate is followed by the necessity to have the capacity (i.e., the means) to achieve it (Carling, 2002), for students already in international mobility it would be essential to continue to have the necessary means to pursue their studies in the host country. Therefore, not only the macrosocial context (of the countries of origin and destination) but also the individual situation of each student (their mobility, financial, social, cultural, linguistic capital, etc.) dictated how each was affected by the pandemic. Furthermore, the emotional impact of an unprecedented situation further exacerbated educational inequalities (such as knowledge of ICTs) and socioeconomic inequalities (such as access to ICTs).

Thus, by establishing vulnerability as an analytical lens, we agree that "[…]we are positioned differently within a web of economic and institutional relationships" and that "[…]our vulnerabilities vary, at the individual level, in magnitude and potential" (Fineman, 2008, p. 10). Therefore, "[…]privileges and advantages accumulate within systems and can combine to create more devastating or more beneficial effects... Sometimes, the privileges conferred by certain systems can mediate or even nullify the disadvantages conferred by others" (Fineman, 2008, p. 15). As a result, we encounter individuals perpetually trapped in, "webs of interactive and dynamic advantages and disadvantages" (Fineman, 2008, p. 16).

Thus, a question that influenced IS's decision to remain in the host country even before the pandemic relates to the costs versus benefits that any type of migration/mobility entails (Mazzarol; Soutar, 2002). In other words, besides the costs of studies, housing, food, etc., these students also consider whether the social benefits - such as security, access to healthcare, transportation, access to ICTs, etc. - are advantageous for their stay in the host country (Iorio, 2018). Hence, beyond the costs of education and the expected gains from it, other attractiveness variables (and retention in the host country) are considered (Beine; Noel; Ragot, 2014). This is, therefore, a balance the student makes between the vulnerabilities/disadvantages they are exposed to in the countries of origin and destination, the advantages

they can obtain, and the strategies they will need to adopt to continue with their international mobility projects.

Methodology

This article presents the results of two empirical and exploratory studies conducted in Portugal and Brazil. Using a mixed-methods approach based on both quantitative and qualitative data, Portuguese researchers designed an online questionnaire using Google Docs, which was made available to international students and foreigners[6] enrolled in universities in Portugal between April and May 2020. To reach the largest possible number of students, the questionnaire was sent via email to higher education institutions (HEIs) in the country and to various research groups working on migration studies. Additionally, it was shared in several communities on the social network Facebook and subsequently disseminated using the snowball technique. Brazilian researchers learned of this study through a research group and replicated the questionnaire in Brazil with the authorization of the Portuguese researchers. Adapted for Brazil, the data were collected between June and October 2020, following a similar dissemination format.

Beyond understanding the sociodemographic and academic profiles of the respondents, the questionnaire included thematic indicators: the impact of COVID-19 on the students' education, work, and housing; their support networks (personal and institutional); the means of information and communication used during the period under analysis; health (physical/mental); and their future expectations. Although non-probabilistic, both studies obtained a sample of 703 valid responses in Portugal and 266 in Brazil.

In Portugal, the sociodemographic profile of the students who responded to the questionnaire was as follows: 450 (65.4%) identified as female, 242 (34.4%) as male, and only 1 (0.1%) did not respond to this question. In Brazil, 142 (51.8%) identified as male, 127 (46.35%) as female, and 5 (0.1%) preferred not to answer. Therefore, in relative terms, the sample in Portugal had a higher percentage of women (65%), while in Brazil, there was a more balanced distribution between the two genders (Figure 1).

**Figure 1 – Percentage distribution of questionnaire respondents by gender**
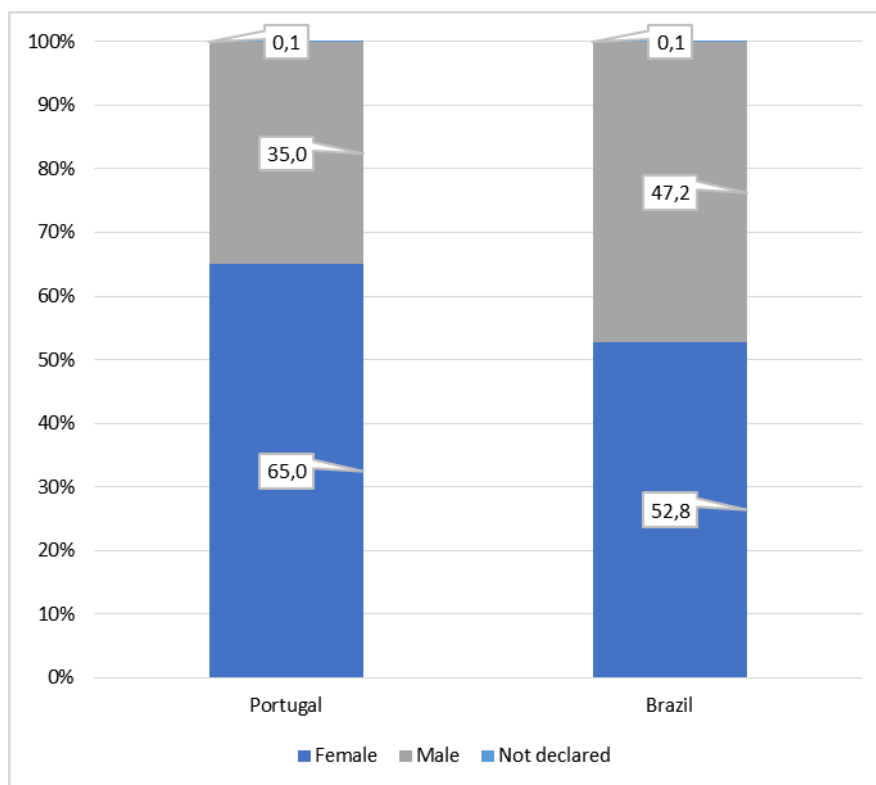
Source: Original research data.

In Portugal, the majority of survey participants were between 18 and 29 years old (64.7%). In Brazil it was similarly to Portugal, 59% were also between 18 and 29 years old.

In both countries, the questionnaire was previously approved by the respective ethics committees. For quantitative data analysis, the SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences) software was used in Portugal, and the Tableau Public platform was used in Brazil.

Regarding to nationality, although Brazilians were overrepresented in Portugal, the sample included 56 different nationalities, with the results aligning with the previously mentioned DGEEC statistics. Thus, 61% of these students were Brazilian, 16% were from the PALOP (Portuguese-speaking African countries), 15% were from one of the 27 European Union (EU) countries, and 8% were from other countries (Figure 2).

Figure 2 – Origin of international students who responded to the question-naires in Portugal
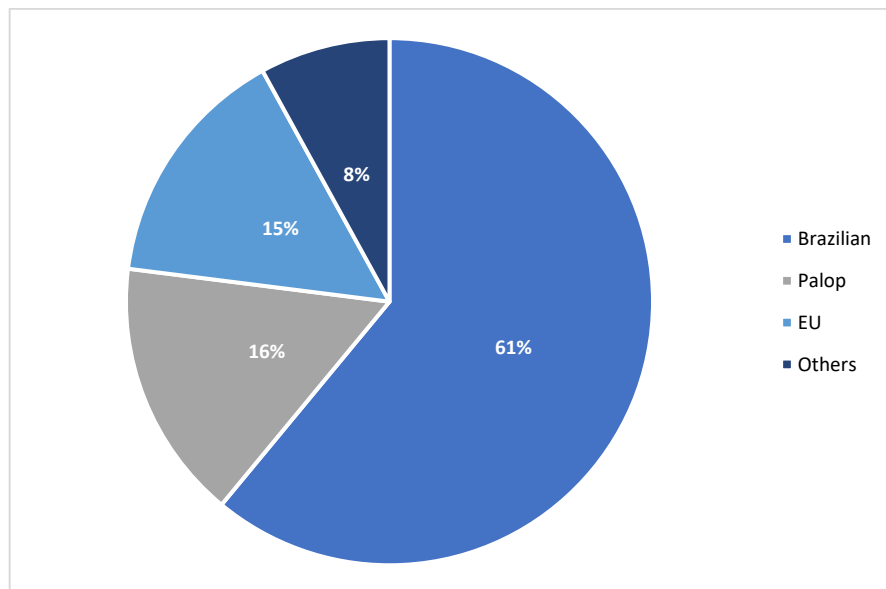
Source: Original research data.

In Brazil, the sample included 50 different nationalities, with the majority (44.7%) coming from South America, 18.4% from African countries (46% of them from the PALOP), 15.8% from Central Ameri-can and Caribbean countries, 12% from the EU (42% of them from France), and 8.6% from other countries (Figure 3). The relationships with Mercosur, of which Brazil is a part, are not reflected in a larger number of international students originating from the region: they represent only 16% of those from South America. The Americas, viewed as a whole, constitute the largest contingent of international students present in Brazil, totaling 65.4%.

Figure 3 – Origin of international students who responded to the question-naires in Brazil
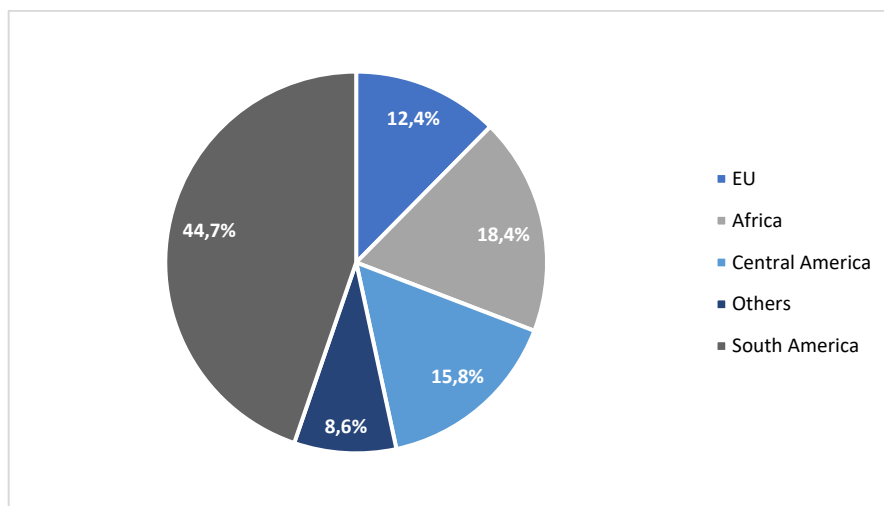
Source: Original research data.

The collection of qualitative data involved conducting in-depth, semi-structured online interviews with students who were already in international mobility. The qualitative approach provides more detailed information about people's experiences, considering various individual narratives. This allows for a deeper analysis of the diversity of experiences, which is difficult to obtain through quantitative analysis (Dal-Farra; Lopes, 2013). Twenty-two interviews were conducted in Portugal between September 2020 and January 2021, and twenty-four interviews in Brazil between May and October 2021.

The interview guide was also structured by themes: Education; Physical and Psychological Well-being; and Support - during the pandemic - and concerns about the future. In both countries, the average duration of the interviews was one hour. In both Portugal and Brazil, after anonymizing and transcribing the interviews, problematized categories were identified for analysis.

The sociodemographic profile of the interviewees was as follows: in Portugal, there were 15 female students and 7 male students, with diverse nationalities - Brazilian, Angolan, Guinean (from Guinea-Bissau), Argentine, Colombian, Italian, Spanish, Chilean, and Cape Verdean - and in Brazil, there were 14 female students and 10 male students, from countries such as Argentina, Benin, Colombia, Cuba, Ecuador, Iran, Mexico, Mozambique, Nicaragua, Peru, Democratic Republic of Congo, Dominican Republic, Syria, and East Timor.

Results and Discussion

As soon as the pandemic was declared, one of the first public health measures taken was the closure of public spaces, with only those selling so-called "essential goods" (such as supermarkets) remaining open for an extended period. . Consequently, in both Brazil and Portugal, educational institutions were among the first to close, and everyone, not just students, found themselves "forced" to rely much more on the use of ICTs. Not only did communication with family and friends become dependent on ICTs, but so did studies, research, and often the purchase of goods and services.

Thus, the main vulnerabilities that all students, but especially international ones, faced were related to the fact that not everyone was prepared to use ICTs in the way they were now required for remote learning; additionally, not everyone had equal access to these ICTs. *Technical failures* of these technologies, sometimes due to weak Internet connections or sharing these connections, impacted the quality of online classes and ended up being more detrimental to those who had no one to turn to (support networks), such as international students.

It also relates with the continuation of the lockdown, *housing*-related issues also emerged. For international students, there was fear of sharing rooms and/or residences due to Covid-19, but there was also fear of being alone during that time. Therefore, the extension of the isolation period led to situations of fear, stress, anxiety, and depression, particularly affecting the *mental health* of these students.

Finally, the *financial problems* that began due to the pandemic impacted everyone, but international students, as they were far from their families - their main source of support according to our study - and unable to return to their home countries due to border closures, were particularly affected. Additionally, those who were self-funding their studies saw their purchasing power decrease due to exchange rate fluctuations during that period, and many, whose income came from work, lost this source of income due to the pandemic.

In this section, we will examine the influence that each of the aforementioned issues had on the participants in this study.

ICTs use, access and failures

The data indicates that in Portugal, international students had greater access to the Internet but felt less comfortable using digital tools compared to those in Brazil (Figure 4):

Figure 4 – Data on ICTs - related aspects
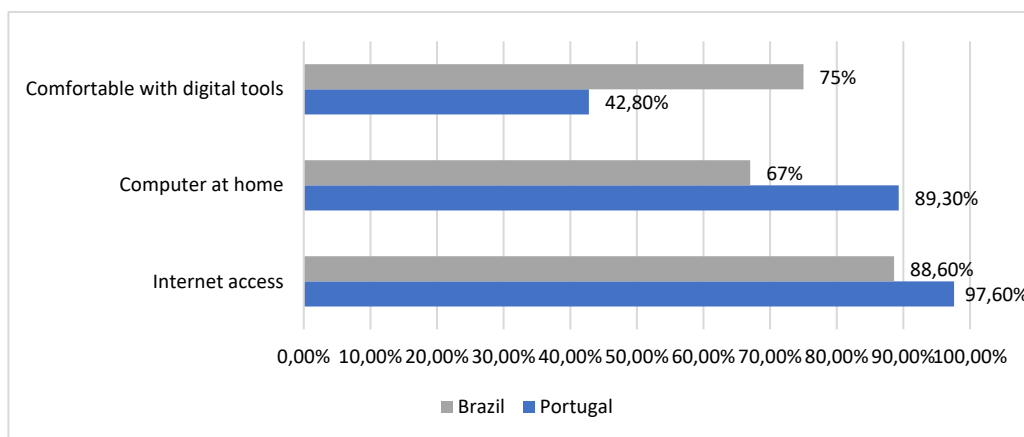
Source: Original research data.

Although Internet access was not considered a problem for most participants, students reported in interviews that the difficulties experienced with digital tools were mainly due to technical failures during classes. A student in Brazil noted that "[…] sometimes there were some difficulties with the Internet connection, which is not very stable where I live" (Participant 8, Peruvian)[7]; and another student in Portugal stated: "Mine [Internet], in particular, failed a lot! So, sometimes I had to either turn off the camera or miss part of the content […]" (Participant 10, Colombian).

The problems with the Internet connection were attributed to the fact that many students shared the same housing and, therefore, the same Internet connection:

The Internet at home didn't work, we were on a 150 [Mbps plan], now we're on 300, double, so it's fine. But back then, it was very bad because imagine five people in the same place, with computers on, attending classes, the Internet, whether you like it or not, didn't help much, you know (Participant 1, from Benin, in Brazil).

Also in Portugal, another interviewee mentioned: "I think the main difficulty was the Internet in my house, because when I and the three people who live here were having meetings or classes, the Internet would go down." (Participant 14, Chilean).

In Brazil, all the IS participating in the research were enrolled in public universities, which do not require any payment, unlike in Portugal. Therefore, IS in Portugal need to be able to finance their studies - either through scholarships or their own resources. Nonetheless, in both countries, universities provide basic infrastructure on campuses, such as shared computers and Internet, for free. However, with the implementation of health measures, students were prevented from using such infrastructure, and some universities provided computers and Internet access cards to students (including international students) who requested them. As explained by Participant 8, from Peru,

in Brazil: "For the students in need, who had financial problems, an Internet card was provided so they could access online classes". In Portugal, only one of the interviewees mentioned that their university also provided this type of help. The others reported the existence of broader assistance: financial (payment of tuition fees, housing, and food) and emotional (psychologists). However, as some of the interviewees mentioned: "Regarding financial aid [...]there were two opportunities when the university sought to help those who were affected by Covid, both times I tried, and both times I did not get the aid" (Participant 12, Brazilian); "I requested psychological support at the university, I even went for an initial screening, and they never called me again. The demand is very high, and the waiting list is also very long." (Participant 2, Brazilian).

Thus, there does not appear to have been a differentiated treatment between national and international students in either country concerning ICTs. In Brazil, those who needed this type of assistance received it, while in Portugal there were difficulties in obtaining any type of help. However, the fact that 89.3% of IS in Portugal had a computer at home may also indicate that most of them did not need this type of help (Figure 1).

Although access to computers and the Internet was not a problem in either country, Internet connection failures ended up affecting everyone. An interesting finding is that while in Brazil, 75% of the participants said they felt comfortable using digital tools, in Portugal, only 42.8% reported this (Figure 1). In other words, while only 25% of international students in Brazil reported difficulties using digital tools—which does not differ from the percentage of national students (Gonçalves et al., 2021) – in Portugal, we see that this problem particularly affected international students from developing countries (such as PALOP), where access to ICTs is still limited due to economic factors. According to Participant 1, who had to return to his country of origin due to the pandemic: "In Angola, we have some of the most expensive and poorest quality Internet services[...] with this whole remote learning thing, inequalities were exacerbated". As some authors had already mentioned, although it can be said that, currently, students from more disadvantaged socioeconomic backgrounds have more opportunities for international mobility, class issues still pose some barriers for these students (Iorio; Pereira, 2018; Alves; Iorio, 2021). Students from less developed regions still have lower digital skills and access to equipment, and greater economic difficulties (Aristovnik et al., 2020; Malet Calvo et al., 2022).

Housing

In Portugal, 61% of respondents were living with one or more people in rented houses or apartments when the pandemic began. In Brazil, 40% also reported living in rented apartments shared with others, indicating a common type of arrangement among these young people. However, the health crisis caused by Covid-19 affected these

arrangements, directly influencing housing costs: "In the context of the pandemic, no one wants to take in anyone new […]. Many people no longer want to share [a place] without knowing [the other person], so I thought rents would be cheaper, and there would be more offers, but it was the opposite." (Participant 4, Brazilian in Portugal).

Those living in university residences (dormitories) in Portugal were also affected, as these had to reduce the number of available places: "With Covid-19, they reduced 100 beds. Normally, it's two people per room, but with Covid-19, only one person could be in the room. They had to reduce it, and they always prioritize first-year students […]" (Participant 15, Cape Verdean). Thus, this student, who was already in her second year of undergraduate studies, had to leave the dormitory and find another place to live, which, according to her, became "much more expensive".

Students in university dormitories in Brazil, on the other hand, reported that these residences emptied out as national students returned home: "Everyone was leaving […] almost everyone left, I was almost alone in my corridor, there weren't many people in the dormitory, most went back home to stay with their families" (Participant 2, Congolese).

Thus, the loneliness that settled in the housing of some students provoked different reactions: Participant 2 decided to return to his country of origin. However, as he had difficulties attending remote classes there, due to the time difference and lack of a quiet environment, he eventually returned to Brazil. For another IS in Brazil, the loneliness caused by social isolation led to some mental health issues: "I live here alone. So, I started to feel depressed, many times I was totally depressed" (Participant 9, Iranian). In Portugal, Participant 18, from Angola, who lived in the city of Évora, decided to move to Lisbon to be close to the Angolan Consulate because she was afraid of being alone: "I didn't get along with anyone, I didn't have anyone, and it was a terrible fear […]".

This aligns with what many authors had already noted, namely, that those who do not have relational and/or institutional networks in the host country have fewer support networks in it (Brooks; Waters, 2010; de Haas, 2010). In the pandemic context, where social and peer relationships were negatively impacted by the reduction of in-person contact, international students who had not yet established these networks felt more isolated, as they were far from their relational and support networks in their home country, and because many were unable to return due to border closures (Elmer et al., 2020; Misca; Thornton, 2021).

The issue of housing revealed ambiguous situations: on the one hand, the International Students (IS) who managed to return to their home countries during the pandemic, or who continued living in shared accommodations, faced more problems regarding adequate space for attending remote classes - such as lack of silence - and issues with internet connectivity due to shared usage. These problems

were particularly acute for those who returned to less developed countries. On the other hand, IS who lived alone, either because their roommates had left or because they were already living alone, maintained the internet access they had previously but encountered loneliness, but were facing loneliness. Additionally, being alone triggered mental health issues, as we will discuss next.

Mental Health

In both Brazil and Portugal, most respondents indicated that the pandemic was affecting their mental health to some extent (56% and 64.6%, respectively). In both countries, the most frequently reported issues were lack of initiative, difficulty in relaxing, and insomnia. Interviewee 9, in Brazil, stated that linguistic and cultural differences (she is Iranian and of Islamic faith) exacerbated her loneliness and contributed to the onset of a depressive episode:

It was very bad. You know, for foreigners, living alone, away from their families, in a culture with a different language and religion, with different things, doing a PhD completely alone, it is very complicated.

For interviewee 7, a Brazilian national living in Portugal, well-being (or lack thereof) during the pandemic was closely linked to her culture of origin:

The residences in the historical center [of Évora] […]are structured very differently from what we are culturally used to in Brazil. For example, the rooms, the windows are very small, they are very high up, so there is no sunlight entering as we are accustomed to in our culture, this openness to see the world outside. So, this greatly aggravated… anxiety, precisely because of this structure.

In both countries, the support from some HEIs was crucial during this time. Interviewee 9, the Iranian student who brought her brother to live with her in Brazil to reduce loneliness, mentioned: "I had [the university staff] for everything, even to bring my brother here". In Portugal, however, as previously mentioned, it was not always easy to obtain such support from the HEIs. Although interviewee 5, a Brazilian student, said that "[…] the university arranged a group of psychologists to attend to people during the pandemic", according to interviewee 11, an Argentine-Italian student, "[…] a lot of people said they couldn't get an appointment". Therefore, in Portugal, even though some HEIs tried to assist their students during the pandemic, this help did not reach all those in need.

Although the reports related to mental health are highly individual, it was possible to observe that social isolation exacerbated pre-existing conditions and made it more difficult to resolve problems due to the lack of nearby support networks (Elmer et al., 2020), as well as cultural, linguistic, and religious differences.

Interviewee 3, an Ecuadorian student in Brazil, mentioned that she already had some psychological issues before the pandemic, but these worsened with Covid-19 as she became fearful of the disease's consequences for herself and her family in Ecuador (since her partner and an uncle passed away from Covid-19). So, more than focusing on

her studies, this student's goal became surviving to return to her home country and family: "I will take very good care of myself because I want to leave here, return to my country. My father is 80 years old, and I have already decided that I cannot die here because my father would be very sad".

In Portugal, fear of the consequences of Covid-19 for family members was also one of the main stress factors for students during this period:

[…] fear that something might happen to my family or to me. I didn't feel well psychologically […] I was constantly thinking that something bad could happen […]if something happens to my family in Argentina, I know I can't go back now, everything is closed. I always think about this; since the pandemic started, it has been my first concern. If something happens to my grandmother, for example, or to my mother, I won't be able to be there (Participant 8, Argentina).

As some authors have already mentioned, the pandemic exacerbated certain concerns, and this affected the mental health of many IS (Aristovnik et al., 2020; Firang, 2020).

Financial Problems

Finally, the economic crisis that arose from the pandemic also had an impact on these students, as all the issues mentioned above were exacerbated once financial problems began to be felt. During the pandemic, both students with scholarships and those who were funding their mobility projects with personal savings, family assistance, or work income, began to fear changes or losses in these sources of income.

In both countries, few IS also worked - 20% in Portugal and 18% in Brazil. However, in Portugal, the majority (73%) did not have a scholarship, with 65% being funded by their parents or other relatives, and 61.5% using their own savings. On the contrary, in Brazil, the majority (65%) had scholarships, and an even larger percentage (70%) stated that they would not have other resources to finance their stay in the country if they lost this funding, which mostly (76%) came from Brazilian funding agencies. But regardless of whether or not they had a scholarship, 63% of the participants in Brazil said they also depended on their savings, even because, although they had a scholarship, its value was not high.

Thus, with the increase in food prices during the pandemic, the value of these scholarships became even more insufficient: "To buy things, I had to order online, which made everything more expensive than usual. And prices also increased during the pandemic" (Participant 7, Cuban, in Brazil).

In addition to the reduction in purchasing power that affected the population in general, some interviewees (graduate students) in Brazil reported losing their funding: "I lost my scholarship because the internship is supposed to be done in person" (Participant 1, from Benin).

In Portugal, as most did not have a scholarship, the biggest fear was the loss of their own income or that of those who supported them, whether through job loss or an increase in exchange rate differences:

In the case of Brazilian students, we had a loss of income due to the intrinsic fact that our purchasing power is tied to the Real currency... I arrived here in Porto, and R$3,000 was 700 euros. R$3,000 now is less than 500 euros! I lost 200 euros because of Covid-19 (Participant 11, Brazilian).

As mentioned earlier, although many universities offered some form of assistance during this period, it was not enough to cover all those in need.

However, it was interesting to note that while exchange rate differences worsened the financial situation of many IS in Portugal, as most did not have scholarships and relied on their own or their families' income, most of those in Brazil, due to having scholarships funded by the Brazilian government, did not feel as affected – except for graduate students who had their scholarships cut or suspended.

Strategies

To combat these vulnerabilities, IS developed strategies aimed at ensuring their stay in the host country and the continuation of their studies:

To combat social isolation, some IS in Portugal strengthened their online contact networks, primary with people in their home countries (80%). In this regard, 69% of the survey participants in Portugal started having daily contact with family members (including significant others), with 97% using WhatsApp, which may indicate that these students had not yet established a support network in Portugal.

In Brazil, the remote contacts of the IS there also intensified. Of these, 61% said they had daily contact, and 70% emphasized that this contact was mainly with family and friends in their home countries, primarily through messaging or video calls. In this country, some IS chose to return to their home countries (which was not always beneficial due to the residential conditions in those countries), and, as mentioned, one participant managed, with the help of her HEI, to have her brother come to live with her.

In both countries, some IS also began engaging in physical activities, cooking, reading, watching movies, series, and listening to music as a way to keep their minds healthy: "We managed to be very creative! We cooked a lot, enjoyed the sun that was around at that time […] we did physical activities […] we did Pilates […] it was online […]. That's what saved me! (Participant 18, Brazilian, in Portugal).

With the increase in online communication, there was a need to improve internet access. As a result, students had to contract more powerful services, which required additional financial expenditure. However, in Brazil, students with more precarious financial conditions received assistance from their HEIs, especially regarding com-

puters and internet access necessary to follow remote classes This, however, was not mentioned by participants in Portugal. Although IS in Portugal mentioned the existence of some assistance, it was not sufficient to cover all students who requested it.

Thus, the individual financial situation of each IS directly influenced the strategies they adopted to continue their studies and stay in the host country. For example, the strategy of Participant 12, Brazilian, who was in Portugal, was to switch from an engineering course to one in languages and international relations because it was cheaper:

The tuition fees were increasing […] and despite Covid-19, the college, the university decided to maintain this increase […].There is no permanent assistance for international students; they provided emergency aid because of Covid-19 […]. But I, for example, couldn't get it […] I tried but I couldn't.

Overall, the interviewees said they managed to continue their international mobility projects despite the uncertainties and insecurities brought about by the pandemic. In other words, when balancing the financial and psychological costs of their academic advancements during the pandemic with the potential benefits in the future (Mazzarol; Soutar, 2002), most of these students chose to create strategies that allowed them to continue their international studies.

Conclusions

The results of both investigations demonstrated that, following Covid-19, IS faced a sudden set of challenges that brought to light the asymmetries within a group that is not homogeneous. For instance, the forced adaptation to a new scientific-technological paradigm, which is here to stay, does not depend solely on the student's willingness or ability, but on the knowledge and access each one had and has to the necessary tools for using these technologies. In this regard, we observed that not all IS had the knowledge, equipment, and access they needed, and even those who did have these resources could not guarantee the quality of their Internet connection, as it depended on their context (housing) and financial barriers (whether they could afford a more powerful data package). Therefore, beyond the individual knowledge of each student regarding ICTs, this issue was directly influenced by the socioeconomic conditions of these students, as well as the capacity of each HEI to assist them.

Alongside issues related to ICTs, the pandemic weakened social relationships and support networks, increasing anxiety and stress among these students, and highlighting the need for HEIs to implement measures specifically designed to support them. Although it was observed that HEIs implemented administrative and didactic strategies that attempted to address the specific difficulties experienced in each country, such measures were not sufficient to minimize asymmetries and address existing structural inequalities.

The scale and diversity of participants in the research in both countries allowed for the identification of different types of adjustments that students had to make, both within and outside the acade-

my, in order to continue their mobility projects. While the crisis triggered by Covid-19 presented a complex problem, despite the differing social and economic realities of the countries of origin and destination, it was possible to highlight a set of illustrative aspects of the similarities and differences, in terms of vulnerabilities and strategies, that affected IS in both Global South (Brazil) and Global North (Portugal) HEIs. However, we found that IS from Global South countries were more vulnerable in certain aspects (such as access to ICTs and financial difficulties).

Therefore, to mitigate the negative effects that emerged or were exacerbated by the pandemic on IS, it is important that both HEIs and the governments of the countries of origin and destination produce integrated and collaborative responses.

Notes

[1] "[…] enrolled in a Portuguese higher education institution, who completed secondary education in a foreign country and whose aim is to obtain a diploma." Information available at: International Mobility in Higher Education: Enrolled in a degree mobility situation in 2015/2016 (DGEEC, 2024).

[2] "[…] Study or Internship modality, for a certain period, with the purpose of obtaining academic credits, subsequently recognized by the institution of origin to which they belong." Information available at: International Mobility in Higher Education: Registrants in a credit mobility situation in 2015/2016 (DGEEC, 2024).

[3] Established in 1987, the Erasmus Programme is an inter-university support for mobility of students and teachers in Higher Education between Member States of the European Union and associated States, which allows students to study in another country for a period of between 3 and 12 months.

[4] The entry visa is the document that guarantees the foreigner the expectation of entry into Brazil for a short-term stay (art. 13, Law 13.445/2017). The residence permit guarantees the stay in Brazil for research or study purposes, among others (art. 30, Law 13.445/2017).

[5] PEC-G is a federal government program that offers higher education opportunities to citizens of developing countries with which Brazil has educational and cultural agreements (PEC-G - Ministry of Education (mec.gov.br), accessed on 08/10/2023. Currently, 70 states are eligible, 29 from Africa, 26 from Latin America and the Caribbean, 9 from Asia and 6 from Europe.

[6] According to the OECD (2013), foreign students are those who are not citizens of the country in which they are enrolled and where the data is collected, although they may be long-term residents or even have been born in those countries. International students necessarily imply movement between two countries.

[7] Some of the quotes from the interviewees in Brazil are freely translated, as the interviews were conducted in the language in which the students felt most comfortable (generally Spanish, but also English and Portuguese). In Portugal, all interviews were conducted in Portuguese.

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