



International students in Portugal as a semi-peripheral destination

Cristina Sin, Lusófona University

Orlanda Tavares, University of Minho

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Portugal as a semi-peripheral country

Position within the Global Higher Education System

- Neither a major importer of international students (like the USA or UK) nor a marginal exporter.
- Moderate capacity to both attract and send students abroad, reflecting its intermediary status.

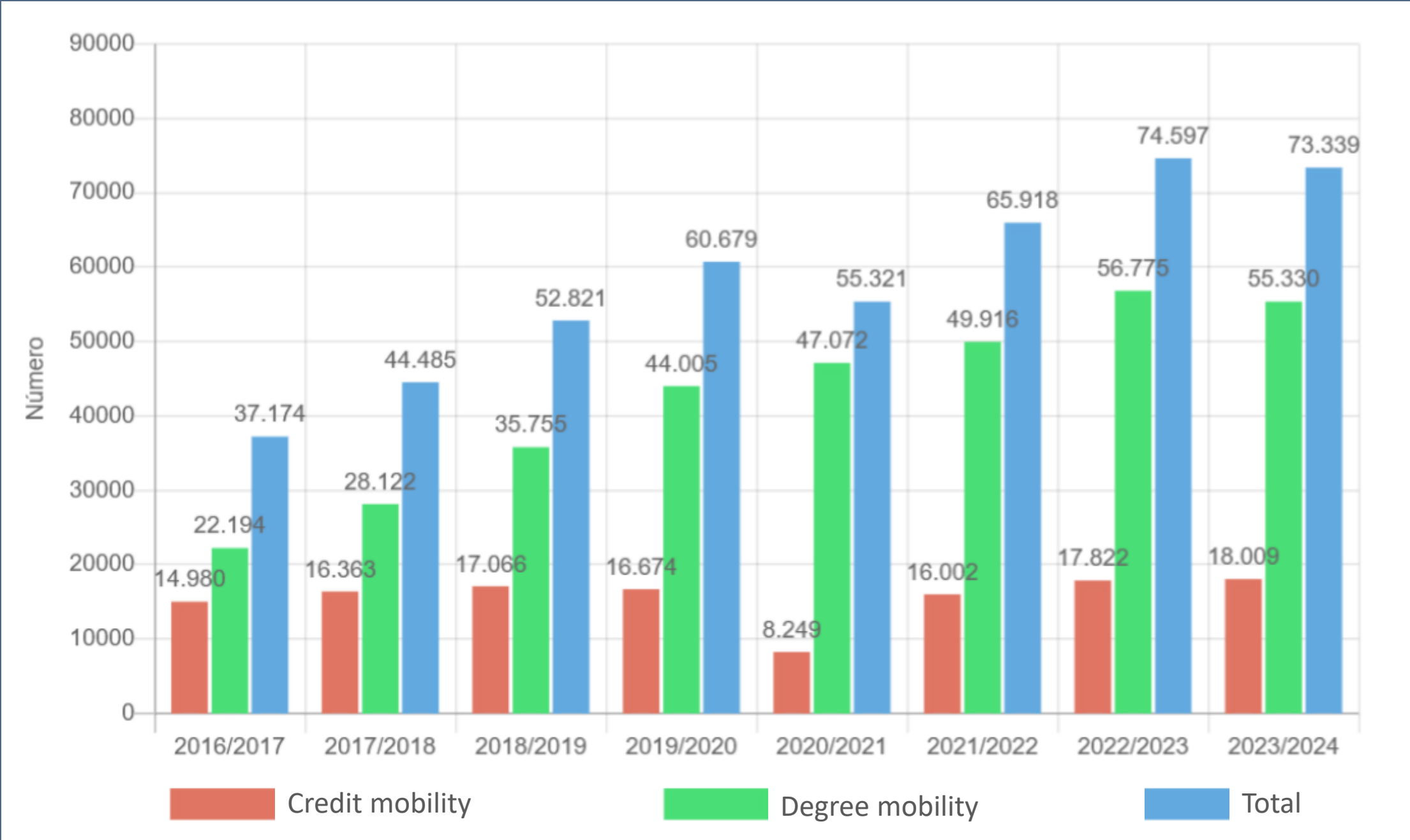
Late Policy Engagement and Strategic Rationales

- National strategy and Statute of the International Student launched in 2014.
- Delay shows lack of tradition in HE internationalisation and internationalisation mindset.
- Government motivations: reinforcing political and cultural ties with Lusophone countries and boosting HE income.

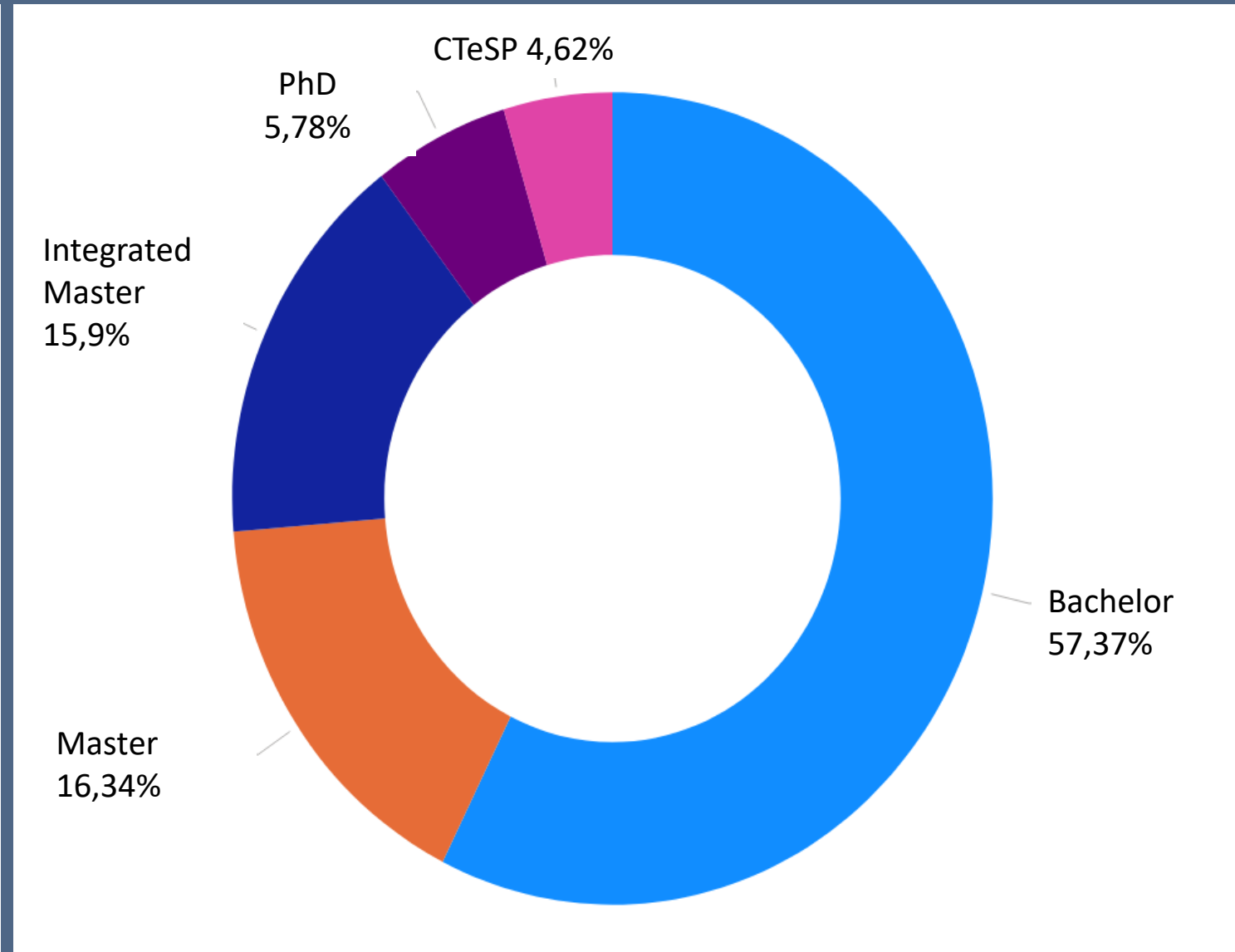
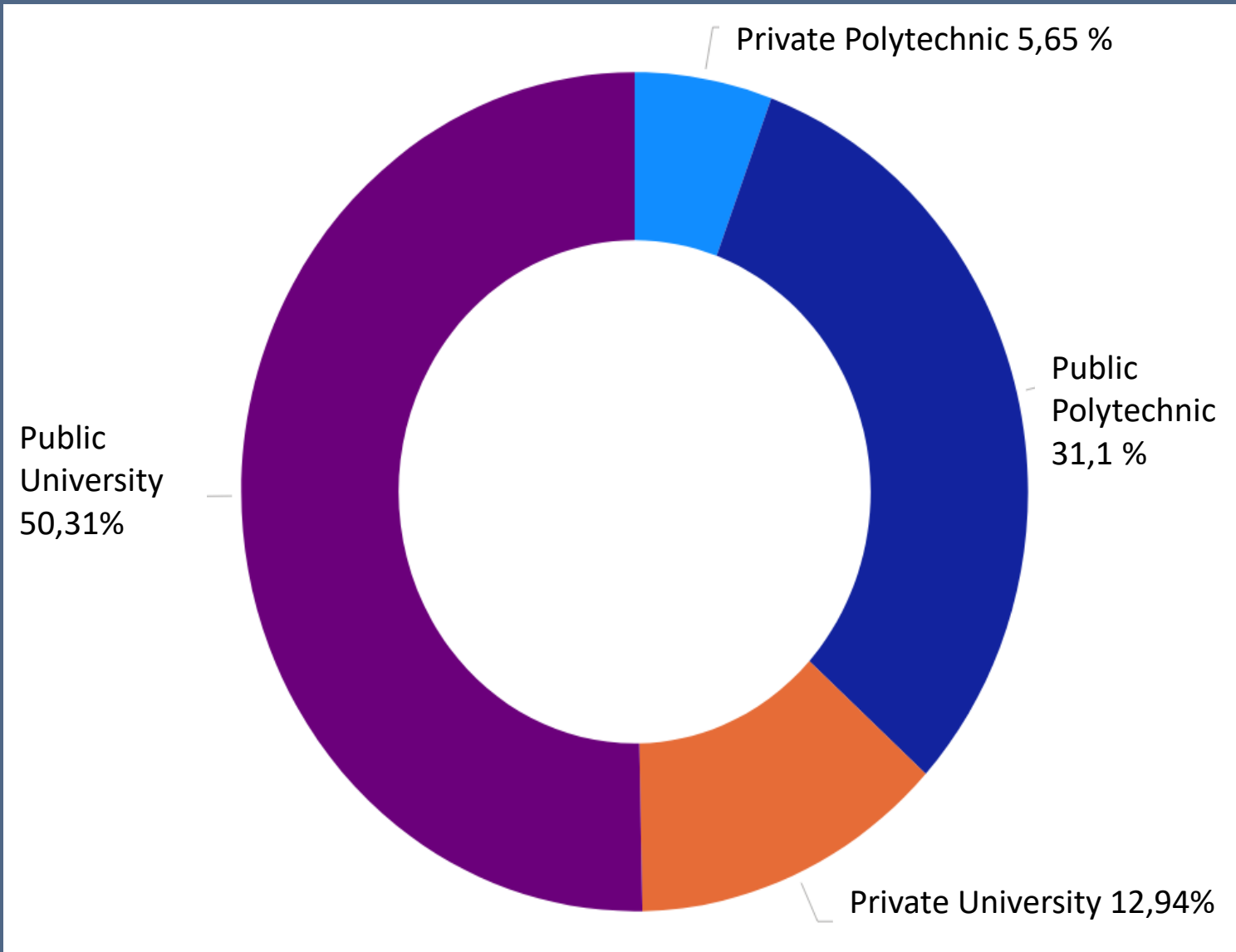
Comparative Advantages and Constraints

- Lacks highly international prestigious universities.
- Leverages alternative assets such as the Portuguese language, historical connections with former colonies, affordable living costs and safety.
- Regional hub rather than a global education leader.

CONTEXT – INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS IN PORTUGUESE HE



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Triggers of change



Demographic Decline

Shrinking youth population reduced the pool of domestic applicants (Dias et al., 2013), pushing institutions to seek international students.



Economic Crisis and Underfunding

Financial austerity and reduced state funding led institutions to pursue tuition-paying international students as alternative income streams.



Policy and Legislative Developments

The 2014 *Statute of the International Student* allowed higher tuition fees for non-EU students and more flexible admission procedures (Decree-Law 36/2014).



National Internationalisation Strategy (2014)

A coordinated governmental push aimed to double international student numbers by 2020, streamline visa processes, and promote study programmes in English.



Strategic Alliances and Market Orientation

Institutions began branding initiatives and partnerships, especially within CPLP countries and emerging markets such as China and Latin America.

Institutional Implications of Internationalisation



Strategic and Operational Shifts

- Move from passive reception to proactive recruitment
- Adoption of marketing and branding tools (social media, fairs, partnerships)



Admissions and Curricular Adjustments

- Simplified procedures and tailored calendars for non-EU applicants
- Recognition of foreign secondary diplomas (e.g., ENEM, Gaokao)
- Portuguese language courses and "year zero" programmes



Organisational Challenges

- Fragmented internal processes across departments
- Lack of dedicated international student services units (beyond Erasmus)
- Insufficient staff training in intercultural and linguistic competencies



Language Tensions

- Portuguese seen as both a competitive asset and a barrier
- Limited provision of programmes in English, particularly at undergraduate level



Cultural and Structural Resistance

- Underdeveloped market research capacity
- Need for a change in institutional mindset towards internationalisation



What is Integration?

Integration

Adjustment to the environment of the institution, both academic and social
(Tinto, 2000)

Academic Integration

Successful participation in educational activities and adaptation to teaching methods



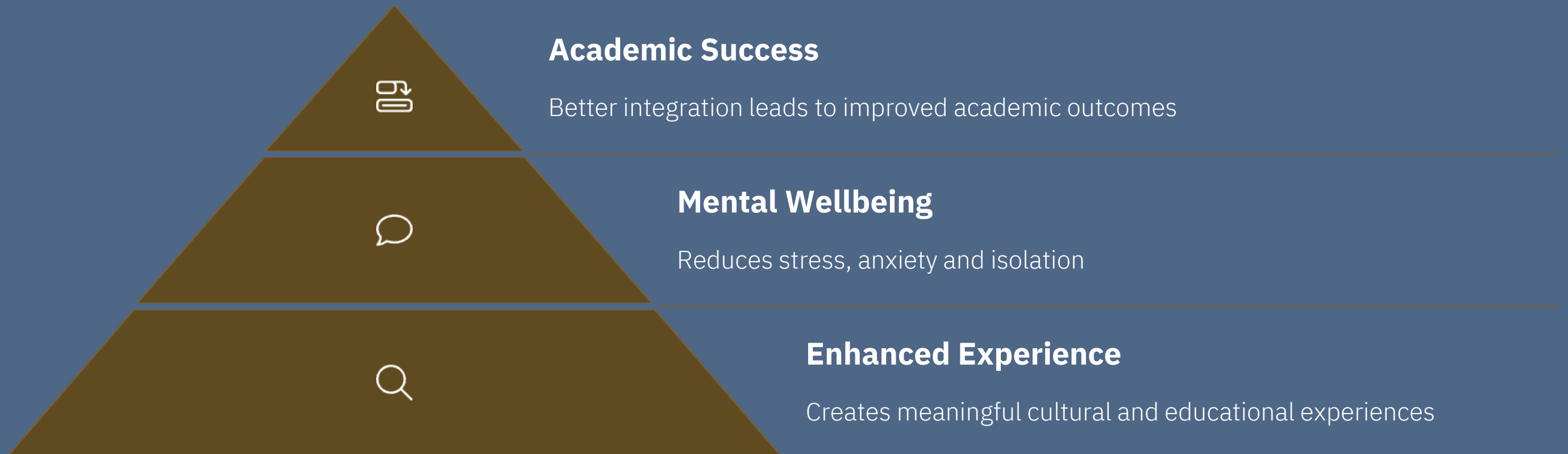
Social Integration

Building relationships with peers and feeling part of the university community
Connectedness” (Tran & Gomes, 2017)

Cultural Integration

Understanding and adapting to Portuguese cultural norms and practices

Why Is INTEGRATION important for international students?



Challenges for international students

International students face unique challenges



Culture and Lifestyle

Culture shock
Adapting to new ways of living, communicating, thinking



Lack of Support Networks

Distance from family and friends
Loneliness and homesickness



Language

Language barriers



Discrimination and Racism

Self-esteem and adaptation



Financial difficulties

(Brown & Jones, 2013; Gopalan et al., 2019; Khanal & Gaulee, 2019; Li & Gasser, 2005; Nada & Araújo, 2019; Neto, 2019; Poyrazli & Lopez, 2007; Rivas et al., 2019; Thompson & Esses, 2016; Van Mol, 2019; Van Mol & Michielsen, 2015; Zhou et al., 2008)

Experiences of international students in Portugal

The **admissions system** lacks effective strategies to assess and meet the needs of international students, resulting in significant challenges and possible failures during studies in Portugal (Nada & Araújo, 2019)

- Unstrict admission requirements, not adequately evaluating candidates
- Lack of requirement to prove language proficiency (for non-Portuguese speaking students)
- Misinformation about the language of instruction
- Transfer of responsibility to students

I also had a teacher who, due to my difficulty in understanding the words, said: “With this level of Portuguese you cannot study in the Master’s programme”. I got upset and I wanted to ask her: “I paid tuition, if you think that I don’t have the capability to be in this programme, why the director accepted me then?”
(student, China)

All the classes were conducted in Portuguese and I was so sad. I did not expect anything like that. I can say I was quite disappointed with the school system because I was told in the application that all classes will be conducted in English. (student, Laos)

(Nada & Araújo, 2019)

Experiences of international students in Portugal

Lack of adequate institutional support (Nada & Araujo, 2019; Sin & Tavares, 2019; Wilks & Neto, 2016)

- Insufficient welcoming and orientation strategies for international students
- Insufficient support structures or mechanisms specifically aimed at students outside exchange programs (such as Erasmus)
- Institutions often delegate responsibility to students for overcoming academic difficulties.

A difficulty within the university is having a formal structure, because we have not yet managed to organize ourselves internally to say that we have such competences and that the people who work there have a broad knowledge which spans from application to registration, from the point of view of what we tell them and how we communicate with them. (Head of Academic Affairs, Institution)

(Sin & Tavares, 2019)

I just went to my first class and I thought it was strange that, as an international student, I never got anybody saying like: 'Would you like to go to an orientation or learn more about the university or talk to other international students?'. Nothing. So maybe they don't do that for Master's students or they don't do it at all. (student, EUA)

(Nada & Araujo, 2019)

Experiences of international students in Portugal

Academic challenges (Ambrósio et al., 2017; Pinto, 2021; Sin & Tavares, 2019)

- **Language**, including for students from Portuguese-speaking countries
- Different **academic and pedagogical culture**
- **Gaps in** prior academic knowledge
- Perception of **lesser value attributed to the language, knowledge and practices of other countries**, especially non-European ones

I must confess in that class I understood absolutely nothing. I could not take any notes because the teacher spoke very quickly. At that time, frequently people spoke to me and I had to ask them to speak a little slower so that I could understand... (Student, Angola)
(Pinto, 2021)

there we have a different kind of teaching: teachers come, they speak and we write everything they say. Here teachers speak, speak, speak, put the slides and we take notes of what we think is important. There it was not like this, even at university....it was more like us making photocopies, studying those, doing exams, and so on. Here it is more complicated
(Focus group with PALOP students)
(Sin & Tavares, 2019)

There was an academic shock: none of what was being done there [in Brazil] was valued here (...) inside academia, there is a certain resistance towards Brazilian students.
(Nada & Araujo, 2019)

Experiences of international students in Portugal

Prejudice and Discrimination

(Ambrósio et al., 2017; Nada & Araujo, 2019; Sin & Tavares, 2019)

- “Cultural daltonism” in the face of diversity (Nada & Araujo, 2019)
- Perceptions of racial or ethnic discrimination by teachers and colleagues
- Classroom exclusion (e.g. lack of interaction with peers).

When I enter the classroom and sit nobody speaks to me. Only if I speak to anyone, he or she speaks to me. Until now. We may even work together, but when they see me on the street they act as if they don't know me. (Student, Cape Verde)

(Ambrósio et al., 2017)

[[The teacher during class, when we discuss practical examples in Law], she would not ask any dark-skinned person questions, she would mainly ask the white students ... the black ones, the darker ones, she wouldn't ask. [...]] We were all [in class] and she asked a Portuguese, the student answered, then there was a Timorese, she passed on to a Portuguese [ignoring the Timorese], then there was another Timorese and, again, she passed on to a Portuguese. (student, East Timor)

(Nada & Araújo, 2019)

Recommendations for institutions



Rigorous and Inclusive Admissions Process

Require proof of proficiency in the language of instruction, whether Portuguese or another language, to ensure that students are prepared to follow the course.

Provide clear and accurate information about the language of instruction during the application.



Initial Support and Guidance

Implement Tutoring and/or Mentoring Programs to offer support immediately after the arrival of ISs, and beyond, assisting with administrative processes, accommodation and cultural adaptation.

Specific orientation sessions for ISs, covering academic, linguistic and cultural aspects.

Offer support through dedicated institutional contacts for emergencies or practical questions.

Recommendations for institutions



Academic Preparation

Establish a “zero year” or preparatory courses in critical areas (e.g. mathematics, physics) to level knowledge requirements.

Apply initial diagnostic tests to identify specific difficulties and offer targeted support , e.g., reinforcement in fundamental subjects.

Offer Portuguese (or European Portuguese) courses, including reading, writing and text interpretation practices.



Develop Multicultural Policies

Promote institutional strategies for diversity and inclusion, ensuring equal treatment, regardless of origin.

Train staff to become sensitive to cultural diversity.

Peer ISs and local colleagues to foster cultural exchange and facilitate social integration.

Celebrate cultural diversity through activities that create an inclusive and multicultural environment.



Organization and Monitoring

International office dedicated to EIs, with teams with linguistic and intercultural skills.

Mechanisms to regularly monitor and evaluate integration policies, ensuring that they are effective and tailored to students’ needs.

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