

## **“Everything Is So Different...”: African Students’ Voices on the Challenges of Doing a PhD at a Portuguese University**

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### **ABSTRACT**

In the scope of higher education internationalization, Portuguese universities have been receiving an increasing number of students from Portuguese-speaking countries, namely African countries, at the level of PhD studies. As highlighted in research, pursuing a PhD in an overseas context entails critical challenges for students, supervisors, and higher education institutions. Against this background, this article reports on the challenges faced by international African students attending a PhD program in education at a Portuguese university. I conducted semi-structured interviews with seven students, and results from thematic analysis show that the main challenges relate to language, integration into a different pedagogical/academic culture, adaptation to a different research culture, loneliness/homesickness, and financial difficulties. Implications of findings for institutional policy and practice are put forward.

**Keywords:** African Portuguese-speaking countries, challenges, doctoral education, international doctoral students, Portuguese higher education

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### **INTRODUCTION**

In 2017, there were 3.7 million international students enrolled in higher education across OECD countries, which was an increase of 5% when compared to 2016 (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2019). The

worldwide increasing number of international students, perceived here as those “who left their country of origin and moved to another country for the purpose of study” (OECD, 2019, p. 202), has been highly reflected in doctoral degrees (Teichler, 2017; UNESCO, 2018). In Portugal, where higher education internationalization has become a major concern in the last decade, higher education institutions (HEIs) have been receiving a growing number of international doctoral students (IDSs) mainly from the Community of Portuguese Language Countries (CPLP) due to special access regimes within cooperation agreements and protocols (Direção-Geral de Estatísticas da Educação e Ciência, 2015; PORDATA, 2019).

Research has been acknowledging that pursuing a PhD in a foreign context brings forth critical diversified challenges for students. Concerning specifically African doctoral students, the amount of research is still very limited, and in Portugal it is practically inexistent. To our knowledge this is the first study specifically focused on these students at Portuguese context and, for this reason, it may shed light on an issue that has not been a research focus.

Against this background, this qualitative case study intends to diagnose and discuss challenges faced by African students doing a doctorate at the University of Aveiro (Portugal). Data were collected through individual in-depth interviews with seven doctoral attending the doctoral program in education at the Department of Education and Psychology of the University of Aveiro (UA), and it was submitted to thematic analysis.

The article begins with a description of the contextual background concerning international student mobility toward Portugal, providing a brief overview of Portuguese policies to attract international students. Then it addresses challenges faced by IDSs as reported by literature. In the next section, the research methodology is presented followed by the main findings. The discussion section includes a summary of the most relevant findings and their implications for institutional policy and practice.

### **Contextual Background: International Student Mobility Toward Portugal**

In the last decade, internationalization has become a major concern of Portuguese HEIs. Framed by the requirements of the Bologna Process, the pressure to promote the European Area of Higher Education, and by the financial crisis, Portuguese HEIs have been placing an emphasis on the need to attract international students namely from the CPLP (Fonseca et al., 2016; França et al., 2018; Sin et al., 2019). This feature is visible in the report issued by the Ministry of Education and Science, which designs a strategy for the internationalization of Portuguese higher education. The document underlines that “university education in Portugal benefits from two particular conditions that derive from the two international spaces in which Portugal is integrated: the European Union and the Community of Portuguese Language Countries” (Ministério da Educação e Ciência, 2014, p. 11).

Specifically concerning the mobility of Lusophone students, the report recommends the creation of a CPLP mobility program and a Lusophone area of

higher education as important strategies to enhance higher education cooperation between the CPLP. This cooperation is perceived as path for Lusophone international students to access the European Higher Education Area:

Portugal is inserted in the European Union, which grants our country a central role in international relations. Many study and business opportunities arise from the expectations of the established relations with Portuguese institutions to access benefits that derive from its European status. This path will allow access to European institutions and support, markets and, naturally, to the higher education and scientific research network organised within the EU. (Ministério da Educação e Ciência, 2014, pp. 44–45)

Additionally, Portuguese language is underlined as a strategy for internationalization and cooperation between the CPLP: an “instrument of science, of culture and business spoken by 250 million people” (p. 12) and an “instrument of knowledge” having “economic value in the world” (p. 91).

Also in 2014, the Portuguese Council of Ministers issued the International Student Statute (Decree-Law 36/2014) to regulate the admission of non-European international students in Portuguese HEIs, defining international students as those coming from foreign countries out of the European Union and the European Economic Area. Besides creating a new admission system for international students, it offers a special scholarship program for students from Portuguese-Speaking African countries and East Timor to secure their coming. With this aim in mind, in March 2014, Portugal approved the agreement on visa facilitation for CPLP students.

The internationalization policy of Portuguese HEIs increased pace with the publication of the Resolution 78/2016 of the Council of Ministers. The resolution, which defined guidelines aimed at the articulation between higher education internationalization policy and other public internationalization policies, gave rise to the digital platform “Study & Research” in Portugal, launched in 2016 by the Ministry for Science, Technology and Higher Education, together with the Directorate General for Higher Education, the Foundation for Science and Technology, the Secretary of State for Tourism, and Tourism of Portugal.

These and other policies have led to a progressive increase of international students in Portuguese HEIs from 2001 to 2012 (Direção-Geral de Estatísticas da Educação e Ciência, 2015). While in 1995–1996 there were 4,000 students from the CPLP, in 2011–2012 there were about 15,000. Within this, Brazilian, Angolan, Cape Verdean, and Mozambican students account for 54% of the total international student population. Historically, students from Angola and Cape Verde were the two largest groups attending Portuguese HEIs, but the participation of Brazilian students has increased in recent years to become the largest group, a result of public policies adopted both in Portugal and in Brazil to promote collaborative advanced training and research.

This overall increase in international students, which is related to the longstanding historical and cultural ties that Portugal has with Lusophone countries and with the existence of special access regimes to Portuguese HEIs

within cooperation agreements (Decree-Law 393-A/99 October 2), is observable not only at undergraduate and master's levels but also in doctorate programs. Since 2005–2006, there has been growth in the number of PhD students from the CPLP at a cumulative annual rate of almost 30%. In 2011–2012, 12.3% of total students attending doctoral programs were from the CPLP, mainly from Brazil and Angola (Direção-Geral de Estatísticas da Educação e Ciência, 2015), and in 2017, 23% of the graduated doctoral students enrolled were international and came mostly from Brazil, Angola, Mozambique, and Cape Verde (PORDATA, 2019).

### **Doctoral Education and Mobility: Challenges Faced by International Students**

The worldwide increase of IDSs has provoked a rise in studies concerning challenges of pursuing a doctorate overseas. Research has underlined that while pursuing a doctorate may be a complex and stressful endeavor for all doctoral students, IDSs face additional challenges related to the need to adjust to a whole new social and academic reality.

Languages have been pointed out as one of the main challenges faced by IDSs, which is related to the deep implications of languages and cultures in several doctoral research activities such as communicating with supervisors and peers (Hu et al., 2016; Robinson-Pant, 2009); reading literature and theorizing the research problem (Robinson-Pant, 2017); conducting fieldwork; collecting and interpreting data (Byram et al., 2020); writing the thesis and thesis viva (Doyle et al., 2017); and disseminating findings (Pinto & Araújo e Sá, 2020a). These implications stress the role of languages and cultures as research reconfiguration agents and underline the complexity of researching across languages and cultures. Studies have highlighted that poor proficiency in the language of the host institution affects doctoral work as well as interpersonal relationships, “promoting misunderstandings, mismatched expectations, and conflict between supervisors and candidates” (Winchester-Seeto et al., 2014, p. 615).

Obviously representing diverse learning and academic backgrounds, integration of IDSs into a different pedagogical and academic culture is another substantial challenge, which encompasses adaptation to different academic norms and rules concerning academic work (Laufer & Gorup, 2019), and adjustment to different teaching and learning approaches and methodologies and to supervisory approaches and styles (Manathunga, 2017). As emphasized by Wisker (2012), usually host institutions “expect students from international contexts to fit into the learning culture and practices of the host university, effectively becoming enculturated and assimilated into its beliefs and practices” (p. 286). This may lead to academic isolation and distress since students feel their prior learning and competences are not good enough to pursue the doctorate (Le & Gardner, 2010).

Besides the need to adapt to different pedagogical cultures, IDSs may have to adjust to different research and knowledge cultures that are highly challenging and complex (Doyle et al., 2017). Research has shown that often students' scientific cultures and previous research backgrounds are not taken into account

by host institutions and supervisors who do not acknowledge that these students work and research in culturally inflected ways and choose culturally and contextually inflected areas to intervene in (Manathunga, 2011, 2014). Hence, IDSs are required to adjust to different knowledge traditions and to new modes of research execution and knowledge development activities (relationship between theory and empirical work in regard to concepts, research methods, and tools; Kidman et al., 2017; Robinson-Pant, 2009; Wisker, 2012).

Difficulties in integrating different pedagogical, academic, research, and knowledge cultures intensify IDSs' feelings of loneliness and homesickness (Jairam & Kahl, 2012; Janta et al., 2014). Naturally, feelings of solitude are related to separation from families and friends, but research has shown that these feelings become more accentuated by a sense of invisibility in the host university, which hinders students' integration in the academic community (Dang & Tran, 2017; Walsh, 2010). Hence, some studies highlight that it is important to integrate doctoral students in research projects, research groups, and peer support groups that may help them feel integrated and connected, hence minimizing feelings of isolation (Kumar & Johnson, 2019; Stracke & Kumar, 2014; Tran et al., 2017).

Financial difficulties, which hinder adaptation to a new academic environment and affect academic attainment, have been highlighted in studies focusing on international students whether at the undergraduate, master's, or doctoral level (Ambrósio et al., 2017). Specifically concerning IDSs, a few studies have highlighted precarious financial situations related to self-funding, short-term contracts, small grants from home institutions or countries, and financial dependency on supervisors, which cause "financial distress" (Laufer & Gorup, 2019). The lack or insufficiency of financial support affects doctoral students' academic success and timely completion of their doctoral degree (Pappa et al., 2020; Zhou & Okahana, 2019).

In Portugal, studies focusing on the challenges faced by IDSs are almost inexistent. With the aim of exploring the experience of doing a doctorate at a Portuguese HEI, and focusing on four doctoral programs in the area of the humanities and social sciences, Araújo e Sá et al. (2020a) interviewed IDSs from African Portuguese-speaking countries, national doctoral students, supervisors, and directors of doctoral programs. Although the study was not specifically centered on IDSs, the findings show that, for these students, languages and cultures affect the supervisory relationship, the development of a researcher identity, and the construction and dissemination of knowledge. The fact that these African IDSs do not speak the Portuguese European language variety and lack competences in English impacts communication with supervisors, acquisition of the language of the discipline, research dissemination, and thesis writing. In this context, students feel impelled to use the European variety to comply with imposed linguistic norms. Similarly, Pinto and Araújo e Sá (2020b), in a study that aimed to shed light on what it means to research across languages within doctoral education in the perspective of national and international students and supervisors, concluded that CPLP international students' linguistic, cultural, and academic heterogeneity is perceived as problematic for the doctoral work and the supervisory process. The authors concluded that these representations reinforce

feelings of loneliness and anguish and do not allow IDs to draw upon their own cultural knowledge and academic background in their doctoral studies. Along the same lines, and focusing on CPLP doctoral students (from Angola, Brazil, Mozambique, and East Timor) and their supervisors, Pinto (2020) concluded that students face diverse difficulties related to the need of respecting European Portuguese in thesis writing, to differences between educational systems and teaching and learning approaches, and to different communication and relational cultures.

While it is undeniable that some of these challenges, identified in different contexts, describe those faced by international students pursuing undergraduate and master's degrees, some of them take on specific contours related to the professional aims and learning objectives of a doctoral journey.

## **METHOD**

### **Research Design and Institutional Context**

This article intends to address a research gap in Portuguese context by answering the following research question: Which challenges do doctoral African students face when pursuing a PhD in education at the UA? To address this question, I performed a qualitative case study in the Department of Education and Psychology (DEP) at UA in 2018. Participants comprised doctoral students not only from African countries but also from Brazil and East Timor. For this article, only African students' voices are analyzed and discussed.

The UA was founded in 1973: it is organized into 16 departments, four polytechnic schools, and 22 research units. It offers 45 undergraduate programs, 12 integrated master's programs, 60 academic master's programs, and 51 doctoral programs (University of Aveiro, n.d.). Doctoral education and its internationalization have been a key mission of the institution and since 2006, PhD programs have been organized in 3–4 years, with a duration of between six and eight semesters, corresponding to 180–240 ECTS units (European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System units). In the first year, students attend courses and in subsequent years they develop research projects and write their thesis.

In 2017–2018, 1,132 international students attended UA, out of a total of about 13,000 students. Of these international students, 236 pursued undergraduate degrees, 373 sought master's, and 536 were enrolled in PhD programs. Fifty-seven percent of the foreign students enrolled in PhD programs were from the CPLP, mainly from Brazil ( $n = 202$ ). The remaining students from CPLP included 43 from Angola, 27 from Cape Verde, 24 from Mozambique, eight from East Timor, two from Sao Tome and Principe, and one from Guinea Bissau.

The DEP is one of the UA's departments with the largest number of doctoral students from the CPLP. In 2017–2018, 220 students studied in its four doctoral programs, and 39% were foreign students ( $n = 86$ ). Eighty-six percent of the foreign students were from the CPLP ( $n = 74$ ), as shown in Table 1.

**Table 1: Students Attending the Department of Education and Psychology's PhD Programs (2017–2018)**

PhD programs	Total no. of students	Foreign students	CPLP students
Education	128	62	54
Multimedia in Education	59	21	17
Psychology	17	2	2
Gerontology and Geriatrics	16	1	1
<b>Total</b>	<b>220</b>	<b>86</b>	<b>74</b>

The PhD program in education, the focus of this study, had the largest percentage of foreign students: 48% ( $n = 62$ ). Of these, 87% came from Portuguese-speaking countries ( $n = 54$ ): Brazil ( $n = 26$ ), Angola ( $n = 21$ ), Mozambique ( $n = 5$ ), East Timor ( $n = 1$ ), and Sao Tome and Principe ( $n = 1$ ). Hence, most of these students are Brazilian (48%) and Angolan (39%), which meets national trends (Direção-Geral de Estatísticas da Educação e Ciência, 2015).

### **Participants and Data Collection**

To identify the challenges of pursuing a doctorate at the UA in the voices of African students, I undertook a qualitative approach, drawing on semi-structured interviews with seven PhD students. Our criteria for participants included students with an active enrollment of at least 3 years in the PhD program in education, who completed their thesis in 2017–2018 or were nearly completing it, and who had different supervisors. One student had finished his doctoral studies and the other six were nearly finishing. Five were male and two were female and were aged between 33 and 60 years. Six came from Angola and one was from Mozambique. Their mother tongues were diverse: Portuguese (two students), Kimbundu (two), Nhungué (one), Umbundu (one), and Kikongo (one). The six Angolan students conducted their empirical study according to their Angolan context and the Mozambican student conducted their study per Mozambiquan standards.

Experts in the areas of internationalization, doctoral education and qualitative approaches reviewed my interview questions, which explored the relationship (e.g., hopes, expectations, concerns, difficulties, opportunities, etc.) of the doctoral students to their supervisors, etc. Overall, the interviews allowed me to understand IDSs' experiences of completing a doctorate in a different linguistic, cultural, and academic context and how this experience influenced their research work.

Following the General Data Protection Regulation of the European Union (Regulation 2016/679), I informed participants of the research objectives and how data might be used. All data was treated confidentially and anonymously. All participants signed an informed consent with the option of withdrawing from the

research at any time. I conducted the interviews in Portuguese, which lasted between 45 and 70 min. I audiorecorded and transcribed the interviews and provided the participants the transcripts for review.

### **Data Analysis**

I reviewed the interviews and performed a thematic analysis (Clarke & Braun, 2013). This iterative process combined a systematic and rigorous analysis of transcripts in comparison with the literature review. Through a peer debrief process at the end of each coding cycle, I verified and consolidated my thematic analysis. The following themes concerning challenges emerged: language, integration into a different pedagogical/academic culture, adaptation to a different research culture, loneliness and homesickness, and financial difficulties.

## **RESULTS**

In this section, students' voices concerning the challenges faced in their doctoral journey at UA are brought to light. Findings are structured according to the themes of analysis. Data are presented and discussed by providing an account of students' voices, and statements are exemplified by quotations that afford fairly representative perspectives of the group. I translated all quotations from Portuguese into English. Students are identified with the letters ST followed by a number: ST1, ST2, ST3, ST4, ST5, ST6, and ST7.

### **Language**

Language was the most underlined challenge by all participants in this study. This theme refers to the difficulties the students felt working in a language that was not their mother tongue (Doyle et al., 2017; Hu et al., 2016; Robinson-Pant, 2009; Strauss, 2012), as well as challenges with Portuguese language varieties (Araújo e Sá et al., 2020b; Pinto & Araújo e Sá, 2020b), leading to misunderstandings within classroom interaction and oral and written communication with supervisors.

As described previously, only two IDSs had Portuguese as their mother tongue, and all participants spoke different varieties of Portuguese language. This brought about several difficulties that were first felt in the PhD program course units in the first year, concerning oral comprehension of the contents, which affected learning:

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... Sometimes while walking in the corridors, it looked like people were not speaking Portuguese but Spanish or another language! (ST7)

Students also felt difficulties in written and oral interaction with teachers and supervisors, which sometimes resulted in misunderstandings that affected the relationship between students and supervisors:

Sometimes I send a message to my supervisors and they ask me what I mean. They do not understand. As far as I'm concerned, the language is correct and if I send that same message to an Angolan he will understand it. (ST5)

Not having Portuguese as a mother tongue or not dominating European Portuguese was especially felt with anguish and distress in thesis writing, as illustrated in the following quotes:

Speaking Portuguese and writing in Portuguese is quite different. My thoughts are done in my mother tongue and only then in Portuguese. My linguistic spontaneity only exists when I'm using my mother tongue. Writing, grammar, spelling... this is a new learning step and every day I'm learning to write European Portuguese. (ST1)

Angola has not adhered to the Orthographic Agreement and I write for the Angolan context. My supervisors said "you have to write like a Portuguese". I replied "but I am Angolan". Anyway, we discussed this and I understood her viewpoint. (ST7)

This language constraint demands additional efforts of IDS who put in place strategies to overcome these difficulties in writing, such as using dictionaries and grammar books: "I work a lot with dictionaries and grammar books, with meanings and synonyms of words and sometimes it takes me a while to choose the best term or to write the sentence" (ST1).

The way language intervenes in doctoral research activities was also visible concerning the construction of data collection instruments that were applied in student's (home) research contexts:

When we discussed my questionnaire, I said: "Maybe in Portugal this is the correct way to ask the question, but in Angola you can't do it like that. My students will not understand." Hence, we had to change a few things in the instrument. For instance here you use the word "items" but we do not use this word; we use the word "álinea." (ST3)

As perceived by this analysis, the challenges faced by IDS in language related mainly to Portuguese language varieties, which intervened in several doctoral activities and caused linguistic insecurity. As one student put it: "Although we all speak Portuguese, we do not speak the same Portuguese. If we don't speak the same Portuguese, we don't write the same way. This is highly stressful for us" (ST4).

## **Integration Into a Different Pedagogical/Academic Culture**

Some studies have underlined that, frequently, host institutions and supervisors expect IDSs to conform to the pedagogical approaches and academic cultures of the host university (Manathunga, 2011; Wisker, 2012). This theme was present in the voices of five students who emphasized significant differences in pedagogical/academic cultures that hampered their full integration into UA. Overall, students considered the Portuguese higher education system was more demanding and their previous academic pathways were not valued. “Everything is so different...It is a different university reality. It seems that I have learned nothing from previous cycles because it’s all so new! And the level requirement is also higher” (ST2). ST5 also stated, “We have some difficulties fitting into the Portuguese education system. Angolan and Portuguese educational systems are quite different ... I always found the tasks teachers gave us very difficult” (ST5).

Moreover, students emphasized that fitting into this pedagogical/academic culture was also challenging because different rules are at stake, for instance concerning written feedback:

I was used to do this way: when teachers asked me to correct an assignment, I had to keep his comments, the track changes. I corrected it but I kept his comments there. It is a question of respect. Because of this, I had serious problems with my supervisor. (ST5)

Different rules also apply to time management and students stated that they had to adapt to behaviors and practices concerning punctuality and work organization:

We have punctuality problems. We are always late for meetings. Nowadays I never get late when I have a meeting with my supervisors. It is a question of seriousness. Here, everything is scheduled, everything! At first, I did not realize the added-value of this. (ST2)

ST6 said, “Here we have to schedule all the tasks. Schedule and plan the work... Sometimes we, Angolans, do things the day before and Portuguese supervisors do not like this.”

Another issue emerged concerning supervisory practices. Considering that IDSs face additional challenges related to adjustment to new social and academic realities, the participants expected to have more collaboration from their supervisors. The lack of this support caused anguish and distress:

Students’ monitoring is insufficient. In the first year of the PhD, the curricular year, everything is smoother. But in the following years there is no systematic monitoring and it saddens me a lot because I wanted to receive much more. I need much more. (ST5)

In Angola, students’ monitoring is different because there is a personal commitment between supervisors and students. I do not see it here. If our supervisors had any idea about the professional and economic sacrifices

we do to be here, this would be different. We need supervisors to be present, giving us feedback regularly. (ST4)

These critical challenges, related to structural differences in higher education systems and to different pedagogical and academic cultures, hindered the students from feeling fully involved in the institution. They felt a sense of inability and that their prior learning pathways and knowledge were devalued.

### **Adaptation to a Different Research Culture**

As mentioned in the criteria of the interviewees, all IDSs were developing their doctoral research projects. This resulted in difficulties adjusting to different knowledge traditions, modes of research implementation, and knowledge development activities (concepts, research methods and tools, relationship between theory and empirical work; Kidman et al., 2017; Robinson-Pant, 2009; Wisker, 2012). When asked about the purpose of their projects, all put the emphasis on their willingness to contribute to the improvement of the teaching-learning processes in their institutions and countries. Thus, all interviewees underlined the importance of supervisors' in-depth knowledge of their provenance and research contexts. ST2 explained, "I am Angolan, I am researching Angolan reality and this means that everything in the research process must be linked to that context" (ST2). ST5 similarly stated, "It is important that my supervisors know my research context so that they know how to direct and advise me. Moreover, supervisors must know students' contexts so as to create projects that may improve those contexts" (ST5).

Besides underlining the importance of supervisors' contextual knowledge, IDSs recognized a need to adapt to different ways of carrying out the research process, emphasizing that "everything in research is very different" (ST3). One student described:

At first I had a concept of 'supervision' that is still very much what we have in Angola, linked with toughness and assessment. Here the concept is perceived differently and that forced me to read other texts, to build another concept. (ST3)

Another student detailed their need to adjust to different research paradigms and methods, namely in data collection instruments and data analysis:

I had to think about data collection and analysis in a different way. I had to learn about content and discourse analysis because I am conducting a qualitative research. I was not acquainted with qualitative research because it is not very common in Angola. (ST1)

These challenges made students look for opportunities to develop several research competences:

I was used to a different research line. That is why I attended some courses and workshops delivered by the University Library and by the research centre concerning data qualitative analysis, bibliographical

referencing, academic writing and construction of the state of the art. (ST6)

These voices reveal that IDSs aimed to intervene in their home contexts, researching in culturally inflected ways (Manathunga, 2011, 2014). This clashed with the need to adjust to different knowledge traditions and unfamiliar modes of research methods and knowledge development activities.

### **Loneliness and Homesickness**

Students' feelings of solitude and distress at being separated from their families and friends emerged as a theme (Ambrósio et al., 2017). These feelings were accentuated by a certain sense of invisibility in the host university, which hindered students' integration in the academic community (Dang & Tran, 2017; Walsh, 2010). Four IDSs stated that one of the biggest challenges they had to face was related to feelings of solitude and homesickness, referring to the separation from their relatives and the lack of family support:

Yesterday I took a picture of my own shadow and sent it to my daughter: "Look, this is a man's shadow feeling lonely on a Sunday... Making this huge sacrifice and hoping that, one day, the country will appreciate that. (ST1)

ST3 corroborated this feeling, saying, "One of the disadvantages of being here is to abandon our families. I feel that I have abandoned them. Usually Angolans do not emigrate. We stay in our country. So this is very hard for us" (ST3).

These feelings were underscored by a sense of invisibility in the university and, particularly, in the department, which hampered IDSs' integration in the activities of the host academic community:

We want to be accompanied not only by our supervisors but also by the department. We have almost no participation in research and teaching activities taking place at the institution. So, we hardly feel involved with the university. It is a place where we work on our individual research projects and then go home. This is harmful for us because we are foreigners, we need to get involved in institutional initiatives. (ST5)

However, one of the interviewees, who faced loneliness more easily because he lived in a university student residence with other international students, stated that doing the doctorate at UA allowed him to be part of several research activities with his supervisor:

While doing my doctorate here, I was invited to be part of a congress scientific committee, I participated in the organizing committee of a symposium. I also participated in a meeting of teachers and had the possibility to meet several experts in my field. (ST7)

This suggests that IDSs' integration in diversified research dynamics may generate feelings of belonging to a community and, consequently, reduce critical feelings of loneliness and homesickness.

### **Financial Difficulties**

Financial difficulties related to a lack or delay, and/or insufficient support from students' governments and institutions emerged as a theme, supporting previous research (Laufer & Gorup, 2019; Pappa et al., 2020; Zhou & Okahana, 2019). Financial difficulties, namely in the costs of accommodation, were highlighted by four IDSs and were mostly related to the lack of support from home governments and institutions. ST5 said, "It becomes a little difficult because we don't always have government support. Sometimes we are all by ourselves and we must support all the costs."

Besides the total lack of financial support, some students reported several delays in their scholarships:

Frequently, financial support was late. I came to the University of Aveiro as a scholarship holder, but I almost did not take advantage of the scholarship because they didn't send the money. With several sacrifices I was able to pay for my studies. (ST6)

The lack or insufficiency of financial support posed financial problems at the family level and affected the students' academic success and even the timely completion of their doctoral degree:

It is very difficult to be here, to pay the tuition fees, to manage family life at a distance... If we do not hold a scholarship, we have to make a huge set of sacrifices. This cannot be taken lightly! We have to sacrifice the needs of our families because we need our salary to pay for everything. This affects my research work and the conclusion of my doctorate. (ST4)

## **DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS**

This study aimed to understand and discuss challenges faced by African students pursuing a doctorate at UA, giving voice to an underresearched and fast-growing student group in Portuguese HEIs. For this matter, individual in-depth interviews were conducted with seven doctoral students from Angola and Mozambique attending the doctoral program in education in UA's Department of Education and Psychology.

Results show that these IDSs faced diverse challenges. The greatest one was related to languages and linguistic backgrounds, which stresses the complexity of researching across languages and cultures. Mainly, students referred to difficulties in working, communicating, and writing in a language that was not their mother tongue and to the encounter between different varieties of Portuguese language. These difficulties affected oral and written interaction with supervisors and teachers, the construction of data collection instruments, and thesis writing,

causing anguish and distress. The second most highlighted challenge concerns IDSs' integration into a different pedagogical and academic culture: students emphasized difficulties in adapting to teaching and learning approaches and methodologies in relation to their previous academic pathways and learning backgrounds, as well as adapting to a different supervisory process. Next, adaptation to a different research culture was considered very demanding, and IDSs put the emphasis on difficulties related adjusting to different knowledge traditions, modes of research implementation, and knowledge development activities, namely concerning research paradigms and how concepts are perceived. This made them believe that their supervisors should have in-depth knowledge of their research contexts. Loneliness and homesickness, related to separation from families, was also a challenge faced by these IDSs, which was intensified by a lack of integration in the institution's research activities. Finally, IDSs were stressed by financial difficulties, related to lack of governmental support and small grants from home institutions or countries.

Some of the challenges match those already identified in other studies on African students attending undergraduate and master's degrees at Portuguese HEIs (Ambrósio et al., 2017; Semedo, 2010). Nevertheless, in this study, those challenges assumed specific configurations associated with pursuing a doctorate, which marks the transition from a student to a scholar. Acknowledging and understanding these challenges is highly important since they may hinder a successful international doctoral experience, as shown by research in other contexts (Laufer & Gorup, 2019).

These findings underline the need for an institutional reflection and for shared dialogues on the policies, practices, and beliefs concerning the mobility of CPLP doctoral students to UA. These discussions could involve university management structures, the doctoral school, the directors of PhD programs, supervisors and teachers, directors of research centers, and students. Such a holistic reflection would allow the UA "to better understand the root causes of difficulties and, therefore, better target resources, mitigate distress to international candidates, and reduce pressure on supervisors" (Manathunga, 2014, p. 623). The voices of IDSs in this study suggest that a greater root cause of challenges is the lack of knowledge regarding students' cultural contexts, research traditions, and educational backgrounds. Thus, it is important that the host institution acknowledges "the cultural, historical and linguistic knowledge that international students bring to their studies" (Kidman et al., 2017, p. 1210), holistically deconstructing the widespread idea that (linguistic, cultural, pedagogical, research) heterogeneity is problematic and an arena of "deficit discourses" (Robinson-Pant, 2017).

Concerning language heterogeneity, it is essential to acknowledge that for many of these students, Portuguese is their second language and that they speak different varieties of Portuguese. Therefore, it is crucial to discuss the imposition of language standards and the perception of European Portuguese as the "default referent" (Seidlhofer, 2001), and how this contributes to the reinforcement of an epistemological hegemony of the academic space (Strauss, 2012). If European Portuguese is to be considered the "default referent," then HEIs should a priori

assess IDSs' language skills and provide them with opportunities to improve them.

Regarding the heterogeneity of pedagogical and academic cultures, it is important to recognize that as outsiders and academic apprentices, IDSs have different educational backgrounds and pathways and are not familiar with the Portuguese academic system. Students and supervisors (concerning supervisors, see Pinto, 2020) consider this a deficit when responding to the academic demands and conventions in “Western” host institutions, causing feelings of incapacity. Hence, it is crucial to acknowledge and value IDSs' previous learning, knowledge, and competences while providing opportunities for the acquisition of new ones (Manathunga, 2011; Tran, et al., 2017).

As to the heterogeneity of research cultures, while it is true that IDSs are expected to adjust to new modes of research development, HEIs should be prepared not only to provide research training but also to discuss the influence of IDSs' cultural, educational, professional, and personal backgrounds on research approaches (Tran et al., 2017) and be more unprejudiced regarding culturally inflected ways of constructing knowledge (Wisker, 2012). It is necessary that HEIs develop strategies to support IDSs to conduct field research in their home country using new research approaches. Hence, there is a need for negotiation on what counts as knowledge globally (Manathunga, 2017), as a way of breaking academic imperialism and contributing to knowledge innovation and plural perspectives in research.

Loneliness and homesickness are accentuated by the perception of heterogeneity as problematic. In order to minimize these feelings, HEIs should employ approaches to integrate IDSs in institutional academic and research dynamics, contributing to the creation of a feeling of connectedness and belonging to the host institution. For instance, doctoral programs and supervisors may enhance relationship opportunities with peers by creating doctoral students groups and tutoring groups; by integrating IDSs in research projects and in community-based projects; and by encouraging and guiding IDSs to attend conferences and research meetings (Doyle et al., 2017; Marangell et al., 2018; Tran et al., 2017).

Hence, this study suggests that a way of assisting IDSs in overcoming challenges when pursuing a doctorate at Portuguese HEIs is to open up institutional “dialogic spaces” (Robinson-Pant, 2009) where heterogeneity and different ways of thinking, learning, and researching may empower all those involved—students, supervisors, teachers, researchers, institutions—by allowing reciprocal learning.

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