

Migration and education: A narrative approach to the experience of foreign students in Portugal

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Abstract

Non-English-speaking countries are attracting burgeoning numbers of foreign students, yet research regarding these students' experiences remains rather scarce. In line with global tendencies, Portuguese universities are seeing substantial growth in foreign student enrolment. This paper addresses the lived experiences of foreign students in the period following their arrival in a new cultural context, discussing the role that language and social support play in their adaptation. Rooted in a narrative approach, this paper is based on 41 in-depth biographic interviews. The findings indicate that the ways in which students deal with the challenges of living and studying in a foreign country are highly diverse. Nevertheless, a universal aspect of their narratives is the central role assumed by social support. Although social support has beneficial outcomes for foreign students' adaptation, if provided inadequately it can lead to less positive outcomes and even to marginalization.

Keywords: foreign students; study abroad; adaptation challenges; language obstacles; social support

Introduction

In line with the global growth of foreign student enrolment in higher education (Barnett *et al.*, 2016), Portuguese universities have in recent years experienced a significant increase in the number of migrant students in their student bodies (Nada and Araújo, 2017). Although most foreign students seek to obtain a university diploma in an English-speaking country (Barnett *et al.*, 2016), many pursue education beyond traditional destinations (Koser, 2010). This tendency confirms that higher education is becoming increasingly globalized (Unterhalter and Oketch, 2009) and that foreign students are no longer exclusively attracted to traditional destinations such as English-speaking countries (Rienties *et al.*, 2012). However, scholarly attention to the experiences of foreign students has focused predominantly on these countries, including the United Kingdom (Montgomery, 2010), the United States of America (Hendrickson *et al.*, 2011) and Australia (Sakurai *et al.*, 2010). Consequently, in most journals published in English, research regarding foreign students in non-English-speaking countries is rare (for some exceptions refer to Stronkhorst, 2005; Bessey, 2012; Song, 2013).

Historical and contextual facts might render each country's situation unique, and 'impact upon the recruitment and hosting of international students differently' (Urbanovič *et al.*, 2016: 504). For this reason, the paucity of research insights from universities in non-English-speaking countries creates a significant knowledge gap. In order to contribute to knowledge production regarding the experiences of foreign students beyond traditional destination countries, this paper draws its findings from

data collected in Portugal. Given the country's history, most of the foreign students who come to Portugal are from its former colonies, such as Angola, Brazil and Cape Verde. Nevertheless, growing rates of enrolment of students from other countries have been identified in recent years. Indeed, in 2015 students from 161 different countries were enrolled at higher education institutions in Portugal (Nada and Araújo, 2017). In this context, the main objective of this research is to understand the complex experiences of foreign students in the period immediately following their arrival in a new cultural context and the role that language and social support play in their adaptation process. Based on an in-depth qualitative approach, the narratives of 12 foreign students are analysed and discussed in light of the three main dimensions: experiences at arrival; language; and social support.

It is important to clarify that this research seeks to account for the experiences of students enrolled on a full higher education degree in Portugal (Bachelor, Masters or PhD). In other words, the case of those students enrolled on short-term exchange programmes, such as Erasmus in Europe, lies beyond the scope of this paper. Moreover, it is important to clarify that we use the terms *migrant/foreign students* to refer to our main research participants, rather than *international students*, which is the term typically used in research literature on international education (e.g. Brown, 2008; Montgomery, 2010; Ploner, 2015). The distinction between international students and foreign students is related to their initial motives for going abroad. On the one hand, both the UNESCO (2009) and the OECD (2013) regard international students as individuals who go abroad for the purpose of education. Foreign students, on the other hand, 'represent non-citizens, who are enrolled in an educational institution without necessarily crossing borders in order to study' (Aksakal and Schmidt-Verkerk, 2015: 6). If international students leave their countries for an educational purpose, whereas foreign students go abroad for a variety of different reasons, international students in fact represent a subgroup of the broader category of foreign students (OECD, 2013). Given that the idea of going abroad was not always related to an educational purpose for our research participants, the term *foreign student* provides a more accurate descriptor of the target population of this research.

The challenges of living and studying in a foreign country

Migrating to a new country and unknown environment is a difficult process for most foreign students. Many struggle with difficulties related to language and/or acculturation, and some are concerned about visa insecurity and discrimination (Sykes and Ni Chaoimh, 2012). The multiple challenges faced by foreign students begin to develop once they come into contact with a new environment and its consequent 'strangeness'. According to Gill (2007: 171), foreign students 'often find themselves confronted directly with "strangeness" in the host country'. Moreover, foreign students often experience feelings of isolation and loneliness (Sakurai *et al.*, 2010). The myriad of difficulties faced by these students has been summarized by Toyokawa and Toyokawa (2002: 363) who noted 'culture shock, language difficulties, adjustment to unfamiliar social norms, eating habits, customs and values, differences in education systems, isolation and loneliness, homesickness, and a loss of established social networks'. In addition to culture shock, Gu (2005) has identified a 'learning shock', generally experienced by foreign students at their host universities when they encounter an unfamiliar educational culture. Indeed, previous research has recognized that the difficulties experienced universally by higher education students can be particularly

overwhelming for foreign students (Carroll and Ryan, 2007), because they must contend with the 'added stressors of second language anxiety and adapting to a new educational environment' (Smith and Khawaja, 2011: 702).

As illustrated above, coping with a new and unknown cultural context can be especially overwhelming for foreign students. The initial period of migration, when students arrive in the foreign country, can be particularly challenging as they encounter – in some cases for the first time – a different reality. As observed by Murphy-Lejeune, 'newcomers face practical demands of all sorts which put pressure on them' (2003: 105). Relatedly, Gresham and Clayton (2011) indicate that, at the beginning of their experience abroad, foreign students must deal with a set of different immediate demands, such as adjusting to a new academic environment, a new community and a new country. Social support networks consequently play a crucial role, facilitating the adaptation of foreign students 'through interaction, friendship and cultural modelling and dialogue' (Gill, 2007: 175). Indeed, a significant body of research has shown that social support plays a crucial role in the successful adaptation of foreign students (Yeh and Wang, 2000; Yeh and Inose, 2003; Baba and Hosoda, 2014; Thomas and Sumathi, 2016; Mao and Liu, 2016).

Language also represents a crucial aspect of foreign students' adaptation to a new country (Yang *et al.*, 2006; Brunton and Jeffrey, 2014). According to Kosheleva *et al.* (2015: 40), 'one of the fundamental aspects of successful training in the recipient country is knowledge of the language of studying.' In academic terms, not knowing the language of study can negatively influence students' understanding of class contents, both oral and written, which will eventually affect their grades and feelings of achievement. For Cammish (1997), language is a core problem. Zhang and Goodson's (2011) findings indicate that language proficiency has a direct impact on students' sociocultural and psychological adjustment. According to Zhang and Brunton (2007), the issue of language has an impact at both an educational and social level. The impact of language beyond academic contexts is related to the fact that low levels of language proficiency can hinder students' interactions with the local population (Masgoret, 2006). The implications of language are not limited to the academic and social experiences of students but also extend to the profound level of identity. As highlighted by Alred (2003), language is paramount in the process of identity formation. As mentioned above, most research on the experience of foreign students is conducted in English-speaking countries, which creates a significant knowledge gap in our understanding of student migration in other countries. Countries with a colonial history constitute particularly interesting case studies, given that they 'have always favoured the migration of students from former colonies' (Beine *et al.*, 2014: 41). Specifically regarding the issue of language, this knowledge gap affects our understanding of the influence that a country's colonial background may have on the integration of students who come from former colonies.

Even though previous research has shown that foreign students tend to experience an increased level of stress when studying abroad (Baker and Hawkins, 2006), research on the experience of foreign students cannot be focused exclusively on their challenges and struggles. This would lead to a continuous reproduction of the 'deficit view' (Montgomery and McDowell, 2009) that has become rather widespread among researchers interested in the experiences of foreign students. Moreover, most research literature is built on polarized constructs, suggesting that the student experience can be either positive or negative (Leask and Carroll, 2011). Addressing the experience of foreign students requires a more comprehensive lens, capable of transcending narrow binaries that describe international experiences solely in positive

or negative terms (Nada *et al.*, 2018). For this reason, rather than limiting the analysis to the struggles faced by foreign students in Portugal, this paper will additionally focus on the ways in which students deal with and tackle such struggles.

Table 1: Description of the 12 research participants

Student	Country of origin	Home country official language	Reason for migrating	University	Gender
Aiko	Japan	Other	To 'run away' from her life	Minho	Female
Alfonso	Spain	Other	To do a Masters in sports science and work as a coach	Porto	Male
Amivi	East Timor	Portuguese	Came to Portugal with a religious order, wanting to become a nun	Minho	Female
Brenda	USA	Other	'Not really for a good reason'	Porto	Female
Chang	China	Other	To learn Portuguese in a non-degree course	Coimbra	Male
Corina	Moldova	Other	To reunite with her husband who had previously migrated	Lisbon	Female
Jaidev	India	Other	To do a PhD in arts with a scholarship from the Portuguese government	Porto	Male
Laina	Laos	Other	To do a PhD in sociology with a European scholarship	Minho	Female (transgender)
Naim	Turkey	Other	To be a volunteer within the European Voluntary Service	Lisbon	Male
Rita	São Tomé and Príncipe	Portuguese	To do a Bachelor in dentistry	Coimbra	Female
Tânia	Angola	Portuguese	To do a Masters in international relations proposed and funded by her employer	Lisbon	Female
Valéria	Brazil	Portuguese	To do a PhD in science education required for academic career promotion	Coimbra	Female

Methods

This research is anchored in the narratives of 12 foreign students in Portugal. The selection of these students was conducted purposefully (Braun and Clarke, 2013), based on the *maximum variation* sampling technique (Koerber and McMichael,

2008). This sampling technique was employed with the objective of embracing the diversity and complexity of migration narratives of foreign individuals studying in Portugal. Establishment of the necessary criteria to achieve maximum variation is in fact the 'trick' of this sampling technique and lies in the 'ability to identify the relevant variations of participants' (Campbell, 1999: 542). With this in mind, a set of criteria was established, including nationality, geographic origin, language and gender, which resulted in a highly diverse participant set comprised of 12 students with different national, ethnic and linguistic heritages. Furthermore, the participant set was gender-balanced and students were enrolled in different institutions (four public Portuguese universities selected according to their number of foreign students and total number of students), and in different faculties and study cycles (Bachelor, Masters and PhD). Given the central role played by language in the life of foreign students, this factor was also considered in the process of selecting participants for this study. Hence, the participant selection process was guided by the intention to include students both from Portuguese-speaking countries and from countries where Portuguese is not an official language. Table 1 provides a visual representation of the diverse set of research participants that resulted from the use of the maximum variation sampling technique. Participants were identified through personal contacts or social media and were asked to participate in the research only if their profile was suitable to the aforementioned criteria, in order to achieve maximum variation. All participants signed an informed consent form, and pseudonyms were assigned in order to ensure anonymity.

Considering that 'the discussion of the perceptions, experiences, and learning processes within international contexts is developing, but the process is difficult to describe, interpret, and conceptualize' (Erichsen, 2011: 111), we assumed that evidence regarding students' experiences in Portugal would not be readily available in their minds. Therefore, rather than simply collecting data through a question-and-answer interview process, we encouraged students to reflect upon their own migratory experiences. As such, data were not simply *collected* but *constructed* through the interaction between participants and the researcher (Riessman, 2001). In this sense, each student was invited to an unstructured interview in which he or she was required to recount his or her story of arriving and living in Portugal. These interviews were subsequently transcribed and, rather than sending students the resulting transcripts, they were invited for a second interview to discuss the text in depth. The researcher would read parts of the text aloud, following the storyline created by students themselves during the first interview, pause, and ask students to develop on particular aspects of their stories, challenging them to question the meanings they attached to their experience as foreign students in Portugal. In total, 41 biographic interviews were conducted with an average duration of two hours. These interviews resulted in 12 extensive narratives focused on the experience of living and studying in Portugal.

The analytical process followed the guidelines of thematic narrative analysis (Riessman, 2005). The main analytical goal was to draw 'on individual cases primarily to represent themes across the sample' (Shukla *et al.*, 2014: 12). Therefore, with this thematic narrative analysis we sought to identify 'common themes or conceptual manifestations among the stories collected as data' (Polkinghorne, 1995: 13). These common themes were considered in light of the theoretical contributions provided by the research literature dedicated to the experiences of foreign students. Although students approached a multitude of different themes pertaining to their migratory experiences, only a few themes could be presented in detail in this article. Selection was hence conducted based on the importance that students attached to some

issues, to the detriment of others. For instance, most students ascribed a high level of importance to the issue of language, both in academic and wider societal contexts, and to the social support they received as foreigners living and studying in a different country. They also reported difficulties with their arrival in Portugal, especially in the first few months, hence the themes that were selected for discussion and further analysis were inspired by these issues. Consequently, the specific dimensions related to students' experiences discussed in this paper are as follows:

- the period of arrival in Portugal and its challenges
- language struggles
- the role of social support in the adaptation of foreign students.

Arrival in Portugal

The 12 narratives suggested that the experience of arrival in Portugal is highly nuanced, and felt in different ways by different students. For some, their initial moments in the host country did not seem to constitute a challenging experience, whereas for others even trivial tasks and day-to-day activities proved difficult. For instance, Alfonso, a male Masters student from Spain, referred to *simple facts* with which he was familiar back in his home country but not in the new context:

The first time I came, for instance a simple fact such as knowing where is the supermarket, a store for household items, a drugstore, I didn't know. They are very basic things which back home ... I knew [where] I needed to go.

Another participant, Valéria, a female PhD student from Brazil, spoke about a different way of experiencing arriving in a foreign country. Due to the low level of 'perceived cultural distance' (Galchenko and van de Vijver, 2007: 182) between Portugal and Brazil, this student appeared to feel at home from the very first day in Portugal:

This old part of [the city of] Coimbra is identical to the old part of my city. Therefore, I virtually felt at home, it felt like I was walking through the old part of [my city], São Luís. I didn't have any shock.

In fact, the notion of arrival in a new country being marked by cultural shock (Brown and Holloway, 2008) was not fully supported by the narratives presented here. In some cases, students did not appear to have experienced any cultural shock. Naim, a male Masters student from Turkey, observed 'When I arrived in Lisbon I thought: "This looks like a city from Turkey". For me, living in Portugal was not very difficult because, even though is not the same as Turkey, it's alike'.

In the case of Naim, the harshness of moving to a new context also seemed to have been alleviated by the fact that his entry to Portugal was mediated by a non-governmental organization (NGO) that welcomed him within the framework of the European Volunteer Service:

My experience is different from other students because, before I arrived, I already had a room, given that the organization took care of that. They picked me up at the airport ... we went to this place and they told me: 'This is your room, this is your bed, tomorrow at this time you come here and you will do this ...'. It was easy. For me, to live in Portugal was a soft transference, a soft entrance.

Naim was not the only student who experienced a *soft entrance* in Portugal. Other students, even without belonging to any organization, did not seem to experience many difficulties during the arrival period. Based on his extensive array of previous international experiences, Jaidev, a male PhD student from India, was ready to make contact with a different culture:

I did not really feel any cultural shock ... I cannot really speak about a cultural shock because it has to do also with my [personal] history, my experiences in different cultures and different types of cities. So I was just open to new experiences.

A different experience was shared by Amivi, a female Bachelor degree student from East Timor: 'At the first moment, I was alone, I was studying and I was feeling very lonely ... This happened for a month, afterwards, I started to create friendships with other colleagues'. Even though Amivi had already lived in Portugal for several years, when she enrolled in university and moved to a different city she struggled with loneliness.

It is particularly noteworthy how Amivi referred to friendship as a means of combatting the loneliness that tends to affect most international students (Lin and Kingminghae, 2014). Indeed, most of the narratives analysed here show that, through friendships and social support, students can overcome the difficulties associated with their transition to Portugal. According to Sawir *et al.* (2008: 172), 'relations with locals might be the key to moving forward on loneliness'. Interestingly, most of the students appeared to have established some form of contact with people living in Portugal prior to their arrival, receiving support from them in the initial period of their sojourns. For instance, Laina, a female transgender PhD student from Laos, was welcomed by a fellow co-national who was already studying in Portugal: 'My friend [from Laos] helped, I got help from him because I did not know anything, I didn't even know how to manage to walk from the place where we lived to the university'.

In the case of Aiko, a female Bachelor degree student from Japan, support came from a Portuguese man whom she had dated online, even though their virtual relationship ended before her arrival: 'When I arrived, my ex-boyfriend waited for me at the airport and took me directly to my student residence. He had arranged everything already: residence, university, the documents for the visa'. Aiko's initial adaptation to this new context was evidently eased by the support she received from her ex, a local, who prior to her arrival had already arranged accommodation and taken care of the bureaucratic burdens. According to Baker and Hawkins (2006: 21), if students 'are fortunate enough to have family or friends waiting for them as they arrive at the airport to begin their studies and assist them in acculturating to their new surroundings, then they are already "connected"'. Rita, a female Bachelor degree student from São Tomé and Príncipe, enjoyed a similar experience, as she was welcomed by her relatives. When she arrived, Rita did not have to worry about accommodation, given that her sister, who was already living in Portugal, had already rented a place for her and her twin sister:

In Lisbon, we were welcomed by an uncle and our sister came to meet us here in [the city of] Coimbra, where we already had accommodation, she had already rented it for us. When we came to Coimbra we only needed to install ourselves.

These excerpts reveal considerable diversity of experiences regarding the arrival of foreign students in Portugal. Whereas some experienced a feeling of familiarity in the

host country, others felt rather disoriented in their new environment. Not all narratives were consistent with previous research literature, which tends to ascribe numerous difficulties to the initial phases of students' sojourns (for instance, Murphy-Lejeune, 2003; Gresham and Clayton, 2011). The narratives presented here provide a more nuanced view of foreign students' arrival in a foreign country, indicating that factors such as cultural proximity, the presence of relatives in the host country and previous international experiences can help mitigate the stress of arriving in a new country.

The influence of language in the adaptation of foreign students

As mentioned above, the participant set included students from Portuguese-speaking countries as well as students from countries where Portuguese is not an official language. This methodological choice was rooted in the assumption that students who come from Portuguese-speaking countries might experience fewer difficulties in dealing with the social and academic requirements of their sojourns, given that they are native Portuguese speakers. In contrast, students who are not native speakers of Portuguese would be expected to experience greater difficulties during their sojourns. However, this assumption was sustained only partially in the narratives of the participants. For instance, one of the students from a Portuguese-speaking country did in fact struggle with language difficulties: East Timorese Amivi observed that 'When I was in the 12th grade, it was forbidden to speak Portuguese [in East Timor], it was forbidden for [a total of] 25 years'. Consequently, in spite of coming from a country in which Portuguese is now an official language, Amivi did not know how to speak the language during her childhood, and most of her Portuguese skills were acquired when she was already living in Portugal. Amivi's case reveals that not all students who come from countries in which Portuguese is an official language speak it fluently, and for some of these students language can actually constitute a barrier to their successful social and academic adaptation.

With the exception of Amivi, those students who were born in Portuguese-speaking countries assigned minimal importance to the linguistic aspect of their international sojourn. For instance, in the narrative of Tânia, a female Masters student from Angola who came to Portugal early in her childhood, language was not even mentioned. Valéria, a female PhD student from Brazil, appeared to have experienced some difficulties in understanding European Portuguese. In spite of these small difficulties, she deemed her adaptation to have been a fast and easy process: 'In terms of language, there are always some difficulties but I adapted rather quickly ... I did not have big adaptation crises'.

However, the narratives belonging to students who came from countries where Portuguese is not an official language revealed that language poses numerous challenges and at several levels. For Chang, a male Masters student from China, 'The language brought even more difficulties because I was not able to express my thoughts, my meaning. Because of the fact that I did not speak well, there were some difficult situations.' A similar remark about the difficulty of expressing oneself was made by Brenda, a female Masters student from the USA, who said: 'I feel like my personality just doesn't come out as much and I have a hard time.' She speaks here of identity, focusing on the difficulty in bringing her personality to life in a foreign language. This confirms that language is a significant factor in the development of students' self-identity (Gill, 2007).

Difficulties in expressing oneself also represented an issue for Aiko. She perceived language to be responsible for structuring the thought of a particular nation. Therefore, communicating across nations is challenging as the people involved in the communication process lack a common ground:

When I speak, the thought and the Japanese system are present and, with my level of Portuguese, it is difficult for people to understand ... In the case of, for instance, a Spaniard or a Pole, it is more accessible because they already know the [European] history, they know more or less, you have the same basis, philosophical or ethical.

Aiko's observation is consistent with the findings of Peacock and Harrison (2009: 492), who noticed that 'although language was important in framing scope for interaction, students identified deeper cultural dissonances which formed barriers to meaningful discourse.' Yet other students, for instance Alfonso, did not refer to any language struggles: 'I am a person who likes learning languages ... I came to Porto because I wanted to learn Portuguese.' For Alfonso language acquisition was an educational goal of the international sojourn.

Naim described a similar experience:

In Turkey, you will not pay below ten thousand Turkish liras for a language course and you will not learn it that well. Because you don't need it, you are able to speak Turkish and that's it. But here it is mandatory [to be able to speak Portuguese], that is the difference.

For this student language struggles were not difficulties but rather motivations to improve his Portuguese proficiency, emphasizing how for him living abroad constitutes an extra motivation for learning the local language.

The case of Jaidev, a male PhD student from India, further demonstrated how not all students experienced challenges related to language, even if their level of Portuguese might be elementary: 'I do the same things back home that I do here, it's the same thing, we talk in English, we think in English, so for me it's not as big of a shift' (Jaidev). Interestingly, this student appears to successfully navigate the social and academic contexts in which he currently lives through the use of the English language alone.

On a less positive note, there were also cases in which not speaking the local language seemed to negatively affect students' (educational) experiences, such as Laina, a female transgender PhD student from Laos who was awarded a scholarship by the European Union. Prior to her arrival in Portugal, she was informed by the scholarship coordinator that classes would be taught in English. However, it soon became apparent that all classes were actually taught in Portuguese and so she experienced significant struggles in her academic life. Although unable to understand classes, Laina still had to attend them because her final marks were dependent on class attendance rates. This bizarre situation put this student in a difficult position and isolated her from her classmates:

I went to the classes only because I had to attend, because of the participant list ... So I stayed there in the class like nothing, I would always be at the back. When they talked about something I searched on Google and I read about that particular something they were talking about. It was so difficult for me but that's what I did, that's how I learnt during my first year of the PhD.

This episode shows the crucial importance that language assumes in academic contexts and confirms the assumption according to which 'strangers with insufficient language skills are left outside, marginalised longer than others' (Murphy-Lejeune, 2003: 104). Certainly, Laina's experiences in university contexts are marked by many linguistic struggles and the excerpts above illustrate the harshness of being forced to study in a completely unknown language.

In line with the research literature (Yang *et al.*, 2006; Brunton and Jeffrey, 2014), the findings of this section indicate that language is paramount in the life of a foreign student. The idea that native Portuguese speakers would experience fewer difficulties during their lives in Portugal was, overall, confirmed by the narratives. However, the narrative of Amivi revealed that not all students who come from Portuguese-speaking countries are in fact native Portuguese speakers. These students would also benefit from support provided by higher education institutions, not only in regard to language, but also to cultural references that are necessary for living in a foreign country.

The narratives of those students who are not native Portuguese speakers reveal a colourful array of experiences related to language, ranging from students who were able to study and live in Portugal using only the English language to students whose adaptation and academic trajectories were marked by numerous language difficulties. Considering that language proficiency appears to have an impact on students' academic performance (Smith and Khawaja, 2011), some narratives also suggest that language difficulties tend to be exacerbated in university and classroom settings, threatening foreign students' integration and academic success.

Challenges of living and studying abroad: The role of social support

Across the 12 narratives, students seemed to have received significant support from university peers and staff, as well as from members of the local community in dealing with the struggles they encountered. For instance, regarding academic support, Naim was able to rely on a colleague who was fluent in English:

My colleagues helped me a lot but only one of them knew how to speak English ... Since I had this colleague who spoke English, we shared some of the group work. During the Bachelor degree he also studied at the same institution and knew everything: the teachers and how things were run.

Interestingly, in this excerpt Naim seemed to acknowledge that having previously studied in the same institution can provide students with privileged insights regarding the way *things are run*. Receiving support from an experienced student was, therefore, important to his successful academic integration. Aiko's colleagues were also very helpful and: 'nice, all of them adults, therefore the class was normally very calm ... I had many colleagues, all Portuguese, and they liked to help me'.

A different testimonial is brought by Brenda, a female Masters student from the USA, who felt that her colleagues were helpful and supportive because they perceived her as some kind of a rare bird and, thus, as someone in need of extra attention:

They are more used to European students in general but an American student in Portugal is kind of a fish out of water and might potentially have no idea of what's going on, so that might have somewhat encouraged them to reach out and offer to help me.

It is noteworthy that the idea of being different from one's colleagues and, to some extent, unique, was not limited to Brenda's narrative. Chang, a male Masters student from China, also developed the impression of being somehow in the spotlight, especially due to the interest teachers and colleagues expressed in knowing more about his home country:

Since among the classmates there aren't many foreign persons, they [my teachers] are curious, they want to know more about the Chinese market, now the entire world, all the countries like to trade with China, so many colleagues are also curious about the Chinese market.

Although other foreign students were enrolled on the same programme, Chang was the only non-native Portuguese speaker. As in Brenda's case, this peculiarity led Chang to receive extra attention and support from classroom peers: 'My colleagues also helped me a lot because, in my class, I was the only one who had difficulties with the language. The other colleagues were all Portuguese or Brazilians and they helped me.'

These testimonials of being somehow the odd one out, the only non-native Portuguese speaker in a class, could be a reflection of the numbers of foreign students enrolled at Portuguese universities. As previously mentioned, most foreign students who study in Portugal come from Portuguese-speaking countries such as Brazil, Angola or Cape Verde.

In most narratives, students referred not only to academic support but also to the help they received in terms of living in a new, unknown and frequently overwhelming environment.

During this first year in Portugal I had a very good Chinese friend who had already lived in Portugal for a long time and he helped me to organize my life ... Given that he was living here for a longer time, many places that I didn't know about, many things that I didn't know how to do, I could ask him (Chang).

For newly arrived students, support from other foreign students with greater life experience can be very helpful, given that 'previous knowledge and experience is passed between "old-timers" and "newcomers"' (Montgomery and McDowell, 2009: 463). Students received support not only from university peers or friends, but also from others: Aiko, for instance, was aided by the director of her Bachelor degree programme in obtaining her work permit from the immigration office:

[The director of my programme] is very nice and likes to support students, we are lucky. When I asked her [to come with me to the immigration office] she accepted right away. There, she explained [my situation] very well, better than I could do it, she lives here for a longer time than I do.

This finding reinforces the crucial role played by social support in the life of many foreign students. According to Smith and Khawaja (2011: 703), students can feel 'emotionally deprived in their host country without their support networks from their home country'. All students recognized that their successful adaptation in Portugal was highly dependent upon the support they received from other people. The excerpts above suggest 'that a significant benefit for the participants' process of adaptation was gained by their engagement in networks of relationships' (Gill, 2007: 174). The participating students indicated that social support was crucial in coping with language difficulties and day-to-day demands, and appeared satisfied with the social support they received in Portugal. In their narratives, they used adjectives such as 'wonderful',

'nice', 'supportive', 'understanding', 'helpful' or 'considerate' when referring to the people who supported them during their stay in Portugal.

Even though most of the narratives suggested largely positive experiences of social support, caution should be taken in analysing this dimension. For instance, the intention of some local students to support their foreign counterparts may not always be rooted in a genuine interest in helping their colleagues, but in a curiosity to learn more about those they regard as different, or even exotic, as in Brenda's case. As mentioned above, Brenda's colleagues were not accustomed to having colleagues from the USA and she was perceived as a *fish out of water*. Consequently, once the novelty factor has worn off, and foreign students become 'less interesting' in the perspective of their local colleagues, their willingness to actively support them may also diminish. Furthermore, some local students could offer their support as a matter of etiquette rather than because they are actually interested in establishing a meaningful connection with their foreign peers. This situation is evident in the excerpt below:

[My colleagues] gave me their phone number to call if I had any problem, so a lot of them were really nice ... At the same time they didn't try really hard to invite me to things either, it was just kind of: 'Here is my phone number, if you ever need anything, call me'; and I never really needed anything that I felt the need to call them for and so that's just where it ended (Brenda).

Moreover, in spite of the overall positive effects of receiving support from colleagues, friends and other members of the local community, there are also some potentially negative aspects attached to this issue. According to Brenda,

Sometimes maybe you can feel like a burden, if you feel people have to explain things for you, to talk more slowly, or more simply. You don't always want people to single you out and make it clear that they are nice and helping ... Like that, it's being made even clearer that you're kind of different.

In other words, the good intentions behind the social support directed to foreign students can in certain cases have the opposite effect: instead of aiding students in their adaptation, some support strategies could push them towards marginalization and exclusion.

In spite of the overall positive effects attached to social support, Brenda's narrative provides an alternative perspective regarding this issue. Considering the insights offered by the 12 narratives, Brenda's narrative *per se* does not necessarily destabilize previous arguments in favour of the crucial and positive role that social support plays in the life of foreign students (Baba and Hosoda, 2014; Mao and Liu, 2016). However, her narrative contributes to a more complex understanding of social support in academic and social contexts, suggesting that a culture of abundant social support might lead to rather negative outcomes, reinforcing foreign students' outsider status (Peacock and Harrison, 2009)

Conclusion

The 12 narratives highlight a considerable range of student experiences regarding the challenges of migrating to a different country and studying in a foreign university. The students interviewed for this study reported varying experiences of migrating to

a foreign country, owing to diverse past experiences, origins and the type of support networks established in the host country. In spite of this diversity, the data indicate that receiving social support, especially in the period immediately following arrival, was paramount in the successful adaptation of all of the participating foreign students. This finding is particularly relevant in the Portuguese context, where the phenomenon of student migration has only recently assumed a prevailing role in the higher education sector. Given the fact that this tendency is rather new, Portuguese universities may not yet have developed an institutional structure capable of supporting foreign students in their educational and migratory quests (Nada and Araújo, 2018). In such a context, the support provided by members of the local community or other fellow migrants becomes paramount in the successful adaptation of foreign students. Moreover, our findings indicate that such support should not be provided from a paternalistic perspective, as this will result in foreign students' levels of belonging being weakened, and they will feel unable to become full members of their higher education institution. Instead, Portuguese universities should effect changes in their own structures in order to adequately welcome the growing numbers of foreign students who migrate to Portugal.

The way in which students position themselves regarding the issue of language is also quite diverse. Whereas some students regarded linguistic struggles as an extra motivation to improve their level of Portuguese, others succumbed to the weight of those struggles, which delayed their adaptation processes and even led to their isolation from the local community. Even though one narrative demonstrated that it is possible to successfully navigate academic and social spaces in Portugal as a foreigner without knowing Portuguese, most narratives highlighted that learning the local language can improve students' adaptation to the host country, especially as 'language learning and cultural learning mutually support each other' (Huang and Chang, 2011: 137). In this sense, Portuguese universities should promote Portuguese language courses among foreign students and also prepare their academic and non-academic staff to successfully interact with students whose first language is not Portuguese.

Some data contradicted previous research findings, especially regarding the difficulties that foreign students tend to face in the initial phases of their international sojourns (Murphy-Lejeune, 2003; Gresham and Clayton, 2011). In other words, our findings seem to contest the idea that the initial period of foreign students' sojourns is marked by numerous difficulties and even culture shocks (Brown and Holloway, 2008). The data showed that not all migrant students experience extra difficulties when moving to a foreign country. Factors such as cultural proximity, previous international experiences and the existence of support networks in the host country can result in a smoother transition to a foreign context. This finding can contribute to a more inclusive conceptualization of foreign students, capable of surpassing current deficit views (Montgomery and McDowell, 2009) and acknowledging that foreign students are individuals with complex migratory trajectories who can experience migration in highly diverse ways.

Most data are consistent with previous research literature, confirming that studying abroad can constitute a challenging experience (Campbell and Li, 2008), characterized by numerous adaptation struggles. However, this finding should not be regarded as a confirmation of the 'deficit view' that has unfortunately become quite prevalent in research dedicated to the foreign student experience (Carroll and Ryan, 2007; Montgomery and McDowell, 2009). The challenges that these students face in a foreign academic and social environment are often unrelated to individual deficits,

but instead to the ways in which host countries and universities welcome overseas students. The idea that foreign students require 'extra attention, if not remediation, of supposed "deficits"' (Asmar, 2005: 291) should be abandoned by higher education institutions and replaced with a more inclusive perspective capable of embracing the diversity and complexity of foreign students' experiences.

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