societies

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Inclusion and Well-Being Among National and Immigrant University Students in Portugal: Avenues for Participatory Research

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Abstract: In the context of European migratory flows, the inclusion paradigm gives education the responsibility of welcoming, integrating, and training students in an environment that defends humanistic values of equity, respect and dignity. In higher education, this requires institutions to implement inclusive educational policies, promote supportive cultures, and adopt practices that promote change, development, and individual and social well-being. This study examines inclusion variables and their relationship with well-being in a sample of 256 higher education students, including immigrant (n = 107) and non-immigrant (n = 149) students. Immigrant students reported lower perceptions of inclusion across policies ($p < 0.001$), practices ($p < 0.05$), and cultures ($p < 0.001$) compared to their non-immigrant peers. Furthermore, structural equation modeling analysis revealed that inclusive practices of teachers and institutions are significantly associated with the well-being of all students ($\beta = 0.33$, $p = 0.032$). These results highlight the need to implement inclusive educational strategies in both intervention and research. In this context, innovative approaches to participatory research stand out. These approaches must consider the diversity of students, create conditions that promote the well-being of the entire school community, and promote an academic environment that is agentive, relational, and empathetic, and which supports the integration of immigrant students.

Keywords: inclusive education; well-being; immigration; higher education

Academic Editor: Daniel Lee Kleinman

Received: 23 September 2024
Revised: 28 October 2024
Accepted: 3 January 2025
Published: 7 January 2025

Citation: Teixeira, M.O.; Laranjeira, M. Inclusion and Well-Being Among National and Immigrant University Students in Portugal: Avenues for Participatory Research. *Societies* **2025**, *15*, 7. https://doi.org/10.3390/soc15010007

1. Introduction

One of the biggest challenges of higher education (HE) is to guarantee the success and well-being of all students, ensuring the development of values of equity, respect and dignity. This purpose recognizes student diversity as a key factor in development and learning. In recent decades, this goal has become even more pronounced as access to HE has expanded to include groups traditionally marginalized from it, such as students of diverse nationalities, cultures, socioeconomic backgrounds, and special educational needs [1]. However, simply guaranteeing access to HE is insufficient; it is necessary to address the growing diversity of students in schools and universities as a commitment to inclusive education. Diversity encompasses a wide range of cultural, political, economic, and racial factors [2]. Addressing all these aspects of human diversity requires an inclusion perspective as part of strategic planning that involves a political project, a cultural standard, and multilevel intervention. Inclusion is not merely a general idea or a single objective but a dynamic process that requires continuous adaptation, commitment, and collaboration from everyone at all levels of the educational system [3].

Nowadays, inclusion is a priority in the educational policies of most democratic European countries and, at the same time, a foundation for sustainability within international organizations such as the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and the United Nations (UN), where inclusion is part of the Sustainable Development Goals for 2030. Portugal established inclusive education through legislation (Decree-Law No. 54/2018), which primarily applies to compulsory education, lasting 12 years, and consequently omits HE. In this sense, the OECD indicates that Portugal still lacks a national strategy to effectively monitor and evaluate inclusion in the educational system [4], particularly in HE. To address academic failure, Portugal launched initiatives such as the "Program for Promoting Success and Reducing Dropout Rates in Higher Education", coordinated by the General Directorate of Higher Education, which targets first-year students. Another initiative, the "Making Education More Inclusive in Higher Education" project, focuses on students from disadvantaged socioeconomic backgrounds. Additional projects aim to support students with disabilities and special educational needs [5]. However, by focusing on specific groups, these initiatives may unintentionally reinforce exclusion. More recently, an integrative approach was introduced through the "Program for Promoting Mental Health in Higher Education" [6]. This program aims to support institutions in developing or consolidating mechanisms for student psychological support, with particular attention to vulnerable groups, including first-year students, non-resident (national or international) students, students with specific educational needs, and students from ethnic or gender minorities. This initiative reflects an initial attempt to embrace student diversity more inclusively. Portugal still requires a comprehensive policy for inclusive education in HE. Challenges in achieving inclusion may stem from the structure of Portuguese HE, which operates within a binary system that includes both universities and polytechnics, across public and private institutions, as well as the principle of institutional autonomy (Law No. 62/2007). This autonomy grants HE institutions scientific, pedagogical, cultural, and disciplinary independence.

In most democratic European countries, including Portugal, the issue of inclusion has become more pressing due to the increasing number of immigrants. According to estimates from the Emigration Observatory, around 118,000 people entered Portugal in 2022, 51% of whom were foreign citizens. Consequently, the number of students from different nationalities in HE has doubled since 2012, reaching approximately 60,000 in 2021 [7]. Despite this growth, interventions and research targeting these groups remain limited, and available data indicate disparities in educational outcomes between first- and second-generation immigrants and national students [8]. In the regulation of HE, we also find legislation related to the status of international students (Decree-Law No. 36/2014), which updates the previous legislation from 2003 (Law No. 37/2003), along with specific regulations for students from the Community of Portuguese-Speaking Countries (CPLP), of which Portugal is a member (e.g., Law No. 18/2022), and exceptional measures for students from Ukraine (Decree-Law No. 24-B/2022).

Among international students, those from CPLP countries represent more than 50% of all international students in Portugal. The most represented CPLP countries are Brazil (27.5%), Guinea-Bissau (7.9%), Angola (6.8%), Cape Verde (5.9%), and Mozambique (3%) [9]. These countries share history, language, and legislative frameworks that facilitate mobility, particularly for HE students (e.g., Resolution of the Assembly of the Republic No. 313/2021). Special measures include favorable conditions for access to HE, such as exemptions from proving means of subsistence for residence visa applicants who are nationals of Portuguese-speaking third countries upon admission to a HE institution (Regulatory Decree No. 9/2018). Additionally, in 2022, visa requirements were relaxed for nationals of countries where this agreement is in force, provided they present a letter of responsibility signed by a citizen or

resident in Portugal guaranteeing their arrival and stay (Law No. 18/2022). Some Portuguese HE institutions, such as the Polytechnics of Castelo Branco and Bragança, have established protocols with CPLP countries to internationalize their courses [10]. As a result of these agreements, the majority of students from CPLP countries enroll in public HE institutions [7]. Many of these young people have family and friends already living in Portugal and seek a better quality of life, particularly in education and employment [11,12].

Despite these legislative measures and the linguistic and historical ties shared between these countries, adaptation difficulties [11,12] and high failure rates [10,13] persist among immigrant students from CPLP countries, particularly those from Africa. These challenges are influenced by complex cultural factors, which involve differences in the socialization of young people in European and African contexts. In these disparities, different value systems and educational cultures emerge, with varying standards of expectations and demands [14]. Some studies [8] also identify specific factors, such as financial restrictions and communication barriers between CPLP students and the academic community in Portugal. Initially, it was expected that language would facilitate adaptation. However, it often becomes an obstacle with significant academic, social, and emotional implications. Financial limitations hinder students' ability to live together, while other difficulties include issues such as climate, support networks, homesickness, finding accommodation, integrating with Portuguese peers, reactions to skin color and hair, access to healthcare, social services, and legal documentation [11].

A study on Angolan and Mozambican doctoral students at the University of Aveiro [13] confirmed that these students faced difficulties with European Portuguese, affecting their comprehension of academic content and communication with teachers and supervisors. Moreover, academic language differs significantly from the social language used in other contexts. In academic environments, this linguistic issue is often overlooked, leading students to conceal the problem (e.g., denial), resulting in a lack of understanding from the academic community, including teachers and peers. The literature on inclusive practices in HE frequently notes that students may choose not to disclose their specific needs, including undetected or invisible challenges such as financial difficulties [15] or mental health issues [16]. This reluctance often stems from a fear of judgment or stigma from peers, faculty, and staff.

Another factor that can affect the success and well-being of students is related to their motivations and objectives in choosing the courses they pursue in Portugal. Most immigrant students from African countries enroll in "business science and management" programs [10], while in the U.S., minority groups, especially Black students, tend to take ethnic studies courses. For example, three-quarters of Black undergraduate students reported taking one or more African-American-focused courses, compared to less than 20% of White or Hispanic students [2]. These findings may suggest that the choices of these young people are influenced more by social and cultural factors than by their personal characteristics (e.g., interests, skills, self-efficacy), which may compromise their motivation and learning. This topic has profound personal and academic implications. A vocational project gives meaning to both school learning and life itself. Research indicates that perceived congruence between a student's course and personal characteristics significantly contributes to well-being [17].

Thus, the combination of personal factors (e.g., goals and motivations) and contextual factors (e.g., different educational cultures, communication difficulties, financial restrictions) hinders adaptation and can lead to feelings of inferiority, loneliness, low self-esteem, and avoidance of peers and instructors. These issues are likely to negatively impact psychological well-being, mental health, and academic performance [12,13,18,19]. A study conducted in Norway [20] with first- and second-generation HE students of African origin

highlights their experiences of social exclusion in academic settings, particularly with classmates. Participants reported being isolated by their Norwegian peers during group work, who often underestimated their contributions. As a result, groups were typically segregated, with Norwegian and minority students only mixing when directly instructed by the teacher. More often, these groups consisted solely of African and other minority students. Thus, in many countries, social exclusion and discrimination against minorities remain prevalent across various contexts [21,22]. Exclusion is often perpetuated socially through jokes that ridicule and undermine minorities [23], as well as through media coverage that negatively portrays minority groups [24]. It also manifests in everyday life, including interpersonal discrimination in social, professional, and academic environments.

1.1. Inclusive Education

In contrast to social exclusion, inclusion seeks to protect the rights and meet the needs of all individuals, increasing their participation and reducing discrimination in areas such as education and employment [25]. The inclusion paradigm views differences as strengths and involves the entire school in policies that promote connections within and between the various groups that make up the school community while providing individual support to each student. Inclusion requires collective problem-solving, engaging everyone in addressing shared challenges. This perspective contrasts with the traditional approach aimed at groups with "special needs", which can unintentionally lead to the exclusion of these same groups, such as immigrant students [26]. As mentioned previously, this trend persists in Portuguese HE, where inclusion concerns are primarily directed at specific groups.

Tienda defined inclusion as "organizational strategies and practices that promote meaningful social and academic interactions among people and groups who differ in their experiences, views, and characteristics" [2] (p. 467). The concept of an inclusive school emphasizes meeting the needs of the institution and its members rather than categorizing students' difficulties.

Inclusion represents a commitment to the educational system as a whole. According to UNESCO [27], inclusion is a continuous process that seeks to respond to the diverse needs of students, increasing their participation in learning and in the broader life of the school community, thus promoting educational success. To clarify some dimensions of inclusion in HE, this study includes components of universal inclusion and well-being for all students.

1.1.1. Index for Inclusion

In the European context, the *Index for Inclusion* [3] serves as a guiding document for creating an inclusive environment in compulsory education. It organizes ideas into 70 non-hierarchical indicators distributed across three critical components that define an inclusive educational environment: culture, policies, and practices.

An inclusive culture fosters a sense of community through participation, collaboration, respect, and support for all. A culture characterized by closeness, respect, and empathy is crucial for addressing individual needs and achieving successful educational outcomes. Inclusive policies, which are the responsibility of national and local governments, set educational priorities aimed at creating a "School for All" and ensuring that student diversity is upheld. Inclusive practices, in turn, bring to life the humanistic values and principles of equity and respect outlined in these policies. These practices involve mobilizing resources to meet the diverse needs of students [28]. Educators play a key role in implementing these inclusive practices by translating policies and cultural values into strategic actions that effectively address student diversity [3].

In the Index, inclusion is not viewed as a fixed goal but as an ongoing process involving active participation from everyone [3]. The aim is to reduce learning barriers, enhance engagement, and increase participation for all students. Inclusion is a paradigm of progress, sustainability, and democratization, which necessitates the restructuring of policies, cultures, and practices within schools [29]. It is essential to build inclusive, communicative, and empathetic communities—for instance, by asking migrant students: "What can we do to better support your learning at school?". The greatest challenge of inclusion lies in ensuring the active participation of everyone in addressing collective problems and achieving development and well-being for all.

Studies reveal significant links between perceptions of inclusive education, academic difficulties, emotional factors, and academic self-concept [30]. Additionally, research shows that supportive relationships with tutors who respond to students' needs have a positive impact on learning outcomes [31]. These findings underscore the fundamental role of teachers and curricula in promoting educational inclusion and emphasize the need for research to inform educational policies and practices [27].

The *Index for Inclusion* [3] serves as an international reference guide for research, intervention, legislation, and the development of criteria defining inclusion. Its purpose is to facilitate discussions on participatory learning, involving all community members [32]. These strategies form a key component of a multicultural and participatory approach to education, aiming to understand, analyze, and harmonize perceptions within the classroom, relating to both knowledge and life itself.

Although this document was developed in the context of compulsory education, its core principles—such as fostering a supportive and inclusive culture, establishing equitable policies, and implementing effective practices—are universal and applicable across all educational levels. Drawing on the principle that inclusion means "Education for All" [33], this study evaluates inclusion in HE, focusing on inclusive cultures, policies, and practices, asestablished in the Index.

1.1.2. Inclusive Education and Well-Being

In recent decades, the concepts of "well-being" and "inclusion" have gained significant social relevance, particularly in the field of education. Both concepts are based on humanistic and democratic values. In Positive Psychology [34], well-being is understood as a comprehensive construct that includes cognitive processes, personality traits, positive functioning such as emotional stability and positive relationships [35], and need satisfaction—encompassing autonomy, relationships, and competence [36,37]. Subjective well-being (SWB) can be defined as the way we think and feel about ourselves [38]. An inclusive environment aims to optimize and sustain the development, well-being, and improvement of the needs and abilities of all students [39]. On the other hand, discrimination and exclusion negatively impact individuals' well-being and mental health [18,40]. Students who frequently experience discrimination and exclusion are more likely to suffer from depression, anxiety, suicidal thoughts, and antisocial behavior [40]. Factors that contribute to exclusion include feelings of failure, psychological distress, and a sense of being unwelcome among peers in both educational and social settings [18]. Despite these serious consequences, there is little research into immigrants' experiences with inclusion and exclusion and their effects on academic and social engagement [8]. The literature [41] highlights the need for further investigation into how these concepts are operationalized in school environments.

1.2. The Present Study

This study aims to analyze perceptions of inclusion (cultures, policies, and practices) and their association with well-being among national and immigrant students in Portuguese HE institutions. Using a quantitative approach and a cross-sectional design, we specifically sought to determine whether there are differences in how national and immigrant students perceive the inclusive culture, policies, and practices of their educational environments and how these perceptions of inclusion relate to student well-being. Additionally, we investigated whether the "immigrant" variable moderates the relationship between perceptions of inclusion and feelings of well-being. Based on the theoretical framework, we hypothesized that (H1) immigrant students would have lower perceptions of inclusive educational environments compared to national students, (H2) perceptions of inclusion would be positively associated with well-being for both national and immigrant students, and (H3) the association between perceptions of inclusion and well-being would be stronger for national students.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Participants and Procedures

The sample consisted of 255 higher education students (67% women, 31% men, and 2% others) from public (77%) and private (23%) institutions. In the sample, few immigrant students studied in private education, about 3%.

The participants' ages ranged from 18 to 55 years (M = 29.19, SD = 11.23, Md = 24). About 64% were undergraduate students, 26% were master's students, and 10% were doctoral students. Regarding nationality, 58% were Portuguese students and 42% were immigrants. Among the immigrant students, 55% were from Brazil, 19% were from Portuguese-speaking African countries, 19% were from European countries, and 7% were from other American countries.

This study received approval from the Ethics Committee of [Institution omitted for blind review]. Course coordinators from 30 Portuguese higher education institutions were contacted to assist in distributing the online survey link by email. Participants varied widely in their areas of study, including Natural and Physical Sciences, Social and Human Sciences, Engineering and Technology, Entrepreneurial Sciences, Services, Arts, Health Sciences, and Education. The survey was administered using Qualtrics to students who voluntarily chose to participate. After obtaining informed consent, the students completed the questionnaires anonymously, which took approximately 10 min. No incentives were given for participation, and the students were provided with the researchers' contact details if they wished to receive general research results. All survey questions required an answer, resulting in a complete data set with no missing values.

2.2. Instruments

2.2.1. Scale of Perceptions on Inclusion in the University

The Portuguese version of the Scale of Perceptions on Inclusion in the University (P-SPIU) [42,43] consists of 25 items that assess students' perceptions of the inclusive environments of their higher education institutions. It is divided into three subscales: inclusive cultures (4 items; e.g., "Everyone deserves to feel welcome in the faculty"), inclusive policies (11 items; e.g., "The university organizes learning groups to make all students feel valued"), and inclusive practices (10 items; e.g., "Teachers care about supporting the learning and participation of all students"). The students rate their agreement with each statement using a 5-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly disagree, 5 = Strongly agree). Total scores for each subscale were obtained by summing the corresponding items.

The original version of the scale [43] was developed in Spain and has a hierarchical structure composed of 34 items, organized into three first-order dimensions (cultures, policies, and practices) and six second-order subdimensions (cultures: building communities and establishing inclusive values; policies: developing a school for all and organizing diversity support; practices: orchestrating learning and mobilizing resources). In the Portuguese adaptation of the scale [42], 9 items were removed due to low psychometric properties, and only the first-order factors emerged. Both the Spanish and Portuguese versions demonstrated evidence of construct validity and internal consistency, with Cronbach's alpha coefficients ranging from 0.79 to 0.89 in the original version [43] and from 0.78 to 0.92 in the Portuguese version [42].

2.2.2. Flourishing Scale

The Flourishing Scale (FS) [44] is a unidimensional measure composed of eight items intended to assess the overall construct of subjective well-being by examining different aspects of positive functioning, such as positive relationships, feelings of competence, and a sense of meaning and purpose in life (e.g., "I lead a purposeful and meaningful life"). The participants rate each item on a seven-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (Strongly disagree) to 7 (Strongly agree). By adding the scores of all items, the total score can range between 8 and 56. In Portuguese samples of HE students [17], the scale exhibited favorable psychometric properties, including strong internal consistency ($\alpha = 0.88$) and evidence of convergent validity.

2.2.3. Sociodemographic Questionnaire

A sociodemographic questionnaire was developed for the present study, which included questions on gender, age, current academic degree, type of institution, nationality, and immigrant status.

2.3. Data Analysis

Multivariate descriptive statistics were conducted, including the calculation of range, means, and standard deviations for each subscale. Pearson's correlations were used to assess the direction and strength of the relationships among the study variables. In general, correlations are categorized as weak or small if they fall between 0.10 and 0.30, moderate between 0.30 and 0.50, and strong if they exceed 0.50. *T*-tests were employed to identify mean differences in the study variables between national and immigrant students. The effect size was calculated using Cohen's *d* with values of approximately 0.20 considered small, 0.50 moderate, and 0.80 or above large [45].

We used structural equation modeling (SEM) with latent variables to examine the relationships between perceptions of inclusion in the university (including culture, policies, and practices) and students' subjective well-being, employing the maximum likelihood (ML) estimator. The fit of the measurement and structural models was assessed using several criteria: the chi-square to degrees of freedom ratio (χ^2/df), which should be lower than 5 for an acceptable fit; the comparative fit index (CFI) and the Tucker–Lewis index (TLI), both of which should exceed 0.90; the root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) with a 90% confidence interval (CI), which should be lower than 0.10; and the standardized root mean square residual (SRMR), which should be lower than 0.08 [46–48]. Standardized regression coefficients (β) and their corresponding *p*-values were calculated to determine significant effects.

3. Results

3.1. Descriptive Statistics and Correlations

Table 1 displays the results of the descriptive analyses for the scales. The data indicate that all scales were sensitive to individual differences, with mean values reflecting moderate perceptions of inclusive environments and moderate to high levels of well-being. Bivariate correlations revealed strong associations between the subscales of inclusion, as well as moderate associations between inclusive cultures, policies, and practices with well-being. All correlations were statistically significant at $p < 0.001$.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics and bivariate correlations among the study variables.

Variable	Range	*M*	*SD*	1	2	3
1. Inclusive Cultures	4–20	14.50	3.37	1		
2. Inclusive Policies	11–55	36.04	9.42	0.74 ***	1	
3. Inclusive Practices	12–50	37.28	7.69	0.68 ***	0.78 ***	1
4. Well-being	11–56	43.46	9.25	0.32 ***	0.35 ***	0.37 ***

*** $p < 0.001$.

3.2. Group Differences

As depicted in Table 2, immigrant students reported lower perceptions of inclusive cultures ($p < 0.001$), policies ($p < 0.001$), and practices ($p = 0.023$) compared to Portuguese students. Effect sizes ranged from small to moderate.

Table 2. Group differences in study variables between national and immigrant students.

Variable	National (n = 149)		Immigrant (n = 107)		$t^{(df)}$	*D*
	M	*SD*	*M*	*SD*		
Inclusive Cultures	15.15	3.04	13.59	3.61	$3.76^{(254)}$ ***	0.48
Inclusive Policies	37.64	9.08	33.81	9.48	$3.27^{(254)}$ ***	0.41
Inclusive Practices	38.09	7.53	36.15	7.80	$2.01^{(254)}$ *	0.25
Well-being	43.66	9.08	43.17	9.52	$0.41^{(254)}$	0.05

* $p < 0.05$. *** $p < 0.001$.

3.3. Structural Equation Modeling

The fit indices for the measurement model indicated an adequate fit to the data (CFI = 0.92, TLI = 0.91, RMSEA = 0.06, 90% CI [0.05, 0.06], SRMR = 0.05). All factor loadings were significant ($p < 0.001$) and exceeded 0.50.

Subsequently, a structural model was examined to assess the effects of inclusive cultures, policies, and practices on well-being across the entire sample. This model also demonstrated an adequate fit (CFI = 0.92, TLI = 0.91, RMSEA = 0.06, 90% CI [0.05, 0.06], SRMR = 0.05). As shown in Table 3, in this general model, only the relationship between inclusive practices and well-being was statistically significant ($\beta = 0.33$, $p = 0.032$).

To investigate the moderation effect of immigration status, we conducted a multi-group analysis. Table 3 presents the regression coefficients from the unconstrained model for both national and immigrant groups. For the Portuguese group, the effect of inclusive practices on well-being remained significant ($\beta = 0.45$, $p = 0.02$), whereas none of the effects were significant for the immigrant group. Since this difference could suggest a moderation effect, we then tested a constrained model, in which the path coefficients were set to be equal across groups. The chi-squared difference test between the unconstrained and constrained models indicated no significant differences ($\Delta\chi^2 = 2.78$, $\Delta df = 3$, $p = 0.43$), suggesting that the relationships between the variables did not differ significantly by immigration status.

Table 3. Unstandardized path coefficients and standard errors: structural general model and unconstrained multigroup model.

Effects	General		National		Immigrant	
	B	***SE***	***B***	***SE***	***B***	***SE***
Inclusive Cultures → Well-being	0.19	0.25	0.45	0.35	0.30	0.54
Inclusive Policies → Well-being	−0.04	0.25	−0.32	0.35	0.15	0.39
Inclusive Practices → Well-being	0.66 *	0.31	0.90 *	0.39	0.07	0.56

* $p < 0.05$.

4. Discussion

This study aims to analyze perceptions of inclusion—encompassing cultures, policies, and practices—among both national and immigrant students and examine their relationship with well-being. Today, immigrant students represent a significant proportion of the student population at Portuguese universities [9]. Understanding inclusion variables is particularly relevant due to the existing gaps in inclusive policy planning for HE in Portugal, highlighting the need for effective strategies that address the diverse needs of all students.

The data indicate that immigrant students reported lower average perceptions of inclusive cultures, practices, and policies compared to their national peers, as hypothesized in H1. These results highlight weaknesses in the integration process of immigrant students into Portuguese HE. The challenges of integration are well documented in the literature, particularly concerning academic, social, emotional, and financial factors [20–22]. The report on the profile of PALOP students (the acronym for Portuguese-Speaking African Countries) in Portuguese HE highlights that "many interviewees say they feel distant from student life and university culture" [10] (p. 67). The same report describes how students often experience their reception with feelings of prejudice, discrimination, and racism. Furthermore, language barriers can pose significant obstacles, especially for students from CPLP countries who may not have anticipated such difficulties. These results underscore the need for a comprehensive inclusive education policy in HE that involves decision-makers and all members of the institutional community (e.g., directors, professors, association leaders, and psychologists).

The data also support H2. The results indicate associations between students' well-being and their perceptions of inclusive cultures, policies, and practices. However, in the SEM analysis, only inclusive practices had a significant association with subjective well-being. This finding aligns with the existing literature demonstrating that inclusive environments positively impact well-being [41,49], emphasizing the importance of practices in implementing the full framework of the inclusive paradigm. This result underscores the importance of implementing initiatives such as the Program for Promoting Mental Health in Higher Education [6], which aims to contribute to the development of socio-emotional skills among all students. By benefiting from such initiatives, students perceive themselves as part of an educational environment that cares for and addresses their needs, which reflects in their well-being.

H3 is partially supported. Although the moderation effect has not been fully confirmed, the data suggest that inclusive practices are more strongly associated with the well-being of national students compared to their immigrant peers. This conclusion aligns with research by Erdal [50], which indicates that experiences of discrimination and exclusion can undermine an individual's sense of belonging and limit their ability to fully engage in their communities, workplaces, and schools. Studies involving HE students in Portugal also highlight the communication and participation challenges faced by immigrant students, which can hinder the effectiveness of inclusive practices by teachers and peers [10,11]. The data point to the need to build an educational community in HE, united by the paradigm

of inclusion, which must be enshrined in explicit policies that guide and sustain practices, bringing the community together around the success of all its members. Achieving this requires changes in procedures (e.g., pedagogy, methodology) as well as in structures (e.g., departments, leadership, legislation) and values, including organizational culture, attitudes, and intentions [51].

4.1. Avenues for Participatory Research

While this study provides quantitative insights into the inclusive educational experiences of immigrant and non-immigrant students, participatory research approaches could allow for a more nuanced exploration of students' experiences and perspectives regarding inclusion. By actively involving students in the research process, these approaches can foster a deeper understanding of the complexities of their educational journeys, encourage critical reflection, and empower participants to share their unique insights. Furthermore, participatory research can facilitate the co-creation of knowledge, leading to more relevant and actionable insights that can inform inclusive practices and policies in HE.

Innovative participatory research approaches have significant potential to enable the active participation of immigrant student communities and to create an empathetic, inclusive relational environment that engages the entire academic community. These approaches should consider the personal, cultural, and social diversity of students while promoting collaboration between school administrations, teachers, and support services. All of these participatory research approaches may include (1) Community-Based Participatory Research (CBPR), an approach that emphasizes equal partnership among researchers, students, faculty, and support staff, and allows immigrant students to identify issues, design interventions, and evaluate results, incorporating cultural knowledge into the research process [52]; (2) Participatory Action Research (PAR), which combines research with action, involving participants in identifying problems, collecting data, and implementing solutions, which can be cyclical (planning, action, reflection), allowing for continuous adaptation and making—ideal for facing challenges such as language barriers or social integration in educational environments [53]; (3) Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR), which is a specific form of PAR and focuses on young people as agents of change, empowering immigrant students to lead research projects on issues that interest them—in addition, it can promote skills leadership and giving students a platform to express concerns and propose solutions, such as improving school policies or increasing cultural representation in the curriculum [54,55]; (4) Participatory Methodologies (e.g., Photovoice, Lego® Serious Play®) encompassing visual tools such as photography to help students document and communicate their experiences—Photovoice, for example, allows students to express challenges and positive aspects of their environment, particularly benefiting those facing language barriers; this approach can promote empathy among educators by providing a vivid portrait of students' realities [56–58]; (5) Participatory Design, a collaborative and iterative approach that involves stakeholders in the development of interventions or programs, ensuring that they are user-centered and culturally appropriate (for example, students can collaborate in the design of language support programs or cultural exchanges that promote integration) [59]; (6) Deliberative Dialogues, i.e., structured conversations that bring together diverse stakeholders to discuss complex issues such as discrimination, cultural inclusion or mental health; listening and mutual respect are emphasized here in building consensus and creating a more inclusive school environment [60]; (7) Peer Research, an approach that involves training students as co-investigators to carry out research with their peers, leveraging the trust and knowledge they share—it is more appropriate to collect authentic data about the experiences of immigrant students and empower them by directly involving them in the research process [61]; (8) Storytelling and Narrative

Inquiry (e.g., Digital Storytelling), an approach that collects and analyzes personal stories to understand experiences and perspectives, enabling immigrant students to share their stories through various mediums—provides valuable insights into their challenges and successes, informing policies and practices that support their needs and validate their experiences [62,63].

All strategies indicated aim to: (1) empower students by involving them as co-researchers, thus ensuring that their voices are heard and allowing them to share experiences of discrimination and contribute to solutions such as language support programs and cultural sensitivity workshops; (2) adapt intervention strategies that are context-specific and capable of addressing diverse cultural and linguistic needs, such as specific language support initiatives; (3) improve inclusive practices by identifying communication and participation barriers, thus helping to improve teaching methods and peer interactions to better meet students' needs; (4) promote a culture of inclusion, fostering continuous dialogue between students, teachers and administrators, which helps to break stereotypes and build mutual respect, creating an environment where diversity is valued; (5) sustain well-being initiatives, relying on continuous feedback from students, allowing for a continuous improvement of strategies, increasing the likelihood of long-term success and commitment to inclusion efforts; (6) inform policy and institutional change based on evidence from participatory research that can drive policy change, improve support services, and ensure successful practices are adopted more widely; and (7) improve overall well-being by addressing the academic and social aspects of student life, thereby promoting personal growth, positive relationships, and a supportive educational environment.

In conclusion, participatory research can be a powerful approach for implementing inclusive educational strategies that improve the well-being of all HE students. By involving students directly in the research and intervention processes, it ensures that the strategies developed are relevant, effective, and sustainable, leading to a more inclusive and supportive academic environment for everyone.

4.2. Limitations and Directions for Future Research

There are some limitations in this study. Firstly, although the sample was heterogeneous, it was a relatively small convenience sample, which limits the generalizability of the results to the broader population of HE students. The small sample size may also explain the lack of a significant moderation effect of immigration status. Future research should use a larger sample to better detect interactions or moderation effects.

Secondly, the cross-sectional design of this study presents another significant limitation. Cross-sectional data capture only a single snapshot in time, making it difficult to establish causal relationships. Longitudinal studies would be more suitable for exploring these dynamics as they could provide insights into how immigration status and inclusive environments interact and influence student well-being over time.

Finally, the use of self-report measures presents another important limitation. Self-reports can be subject to bias [64] and may not fully capture the complexity of educational environments. To address issues of inclusion versus discrimination more comprehensively, it is crucial to incorporate diverse voices through participatory research approaches, including other sources of information, such as the perceptions of professors and college administrators, as mentioned previously.

Future studies could explore the psychological mechanisms through which inclusive environments influence students' well-being by examining dimensions such as psychological needs and personal and vocational projects. Understanding these mechanisms would provide deeper insights into the processes underlying the relationship between inclusive education and well-being. Future research could further examine perceptions of inclusion

through participatory research across different types of HE institutions (public vs. private; university vs. polytechnic). Given the autonomy of institutions, comparative analyses could yield valuable insights into how inclusive education is operationalized across settings and identify contexts where targeted interventions are most needed.

5. Conclusions

The data from this investigation suggest that inclusion encompasses the entire school community, promoting a climate conducive to development and well-being, with particular attention to immigrant students. In the current context of universities, there is an expectation for inclusive educational policies that renew the aims of HE by incorporating diversity and the humanistic values of equity and social justice. These policies should also enhance educational support services, focusing on both infrastructure and human resources, with an emphasis on training for inclusion that involves the entire educational community. The potential of participatory research approaches within the educational community, along with cultural proximity networks, is also emphasized. The quality of these practices, which integrate intervention and research, will depend on the active participation of everyone, and must address academic, professional, social, and emotional domains. By embracing diversity as a strength, inclusion promotes personal development and fosters positive relationships among students, between students and teachers, and within the entire community.

Author Contributions: Conceptualization, M.O.T. and M.L.; methodology, M.O.T. and M.L.; validation, M.O.T. and M.L.; formal analysis, M.O.T. and M.L.; investigation, M.O.T. and M.L.; resources, M.O.T. and M.L.; data curation, M.O.T. and M.L.; writing—original draft preparation, M.O.T. and M.L.; writing—review and editing, M.O.T. and M.L.; visualization, M.O.T. and M.L.; supervision, M.O.T.; project administration, M.O.T.; funding acquisition, M.O.T. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Funding: This work received Portuguese national funding from FCT—Fundação para a Ciência e a Tecnologia, I.P, through the Research Center for Psychological Science of the Faculty of Psychology, University of Lisbon (UIDB/04527/2020; UIDP/04527/2020) and DOI identifier https://doi.org/10.54499/UIDB/04527/2020 e https://doi.org/10.54499/UIDP/04527/2020.

Institutional Review Board Statement: This study was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki and approved by the Ethics Committee of Faculty of Psychology of University of Lisbon (protocol code RAPI20221104csjl&msaf) in December 2022.

Informed Consent Statement: Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in this study.

Data Availability Statement: The raw data supporting the conclusions of this article will be made available by the authors on request.

Acknowledgments: We would like to thank José Egídio Oliveira for his valuable support throughout this work.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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