

AquiMeEncontro – International pupils at basic and secondary Portuguese Education System

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Executive Summary

Problem: The role of schools in the integration of international students.

Main research findings: On average, 14% of students in Portuguese school clusters (Agrupamentos de Escolas, AE) are of international origin. While in some AE this presence is diluted across classes, in others the proportion of international students exceeds 40%. How do schools manage such diversity? The AquiMeEncontro project set out to map the pedagogical practices implemented in Portuguese public schools to foster the integration of international students, and to examine some of these practices in greater detail to understand their transformative potential. From the 126 responses received from AE, findings show that 86% of integration practices are concentrated in the informal curriculum and that only 72% display a systemic character. It was also found that all school boards are aware of the issue: 92% report monitoring the effectiveness of their activities, but only 69% have organised training for their teachers and just 56% coordinate their efforts with other entities. In addition, the 13 case studies carried out highlight the diversity of approaches, particularly in curricular, socio-emotional, and intercultural domains, bringing to light an ethics of care that underpins their success.

Key policy alternatives/recommendations: The recommendations point towards sustainable, integrated measures capable of ensuring the transformation of policies at different levels of implementation (macro, meso, and micro), as exemplified by the proposed sustainability package.

Recipient: Ministry of Education, Science and Innovation | Ministry of Labour, Solidarity and Social Security | Local Authorities | Intermunicipal Commissions | School Clusters and Independent Schools

Setting the scene

Portugal faces a historic dilemma. In an ageing country with demographic decline, the cultural and linguistic diversity brought by migration is no longer an exception: it has become a structural and irreversible condition of our collective future. Between 2018/19 and 2022/23, the number of students with foreign-born parents in public schools doubled, rising from 53,000 to more than 140,000 — an increase of 160% in just five years (OECD, 2024; DGEEC, 2023). This is the new reality of the Portuguese public school system. Yet the education system still lacks a clear and coherent national strategy to guarantee the full integration of these students. The consequences are clear: migrant children and young people have grade retention rates four times higher than their Portuguese peers (CNE, 2023), face persistent language barriers, social exclusion, and an increased risk of early school leaving. Each year lost means a lot of wasted talents that could otherwise contribute to the country's development.

Regulatory framework – the law and the gap: Although the Constitution and the Basic Law on the Education System guarantee compulsory schooling up to the age of 18, Decree-Law no. 54/2018, which sets out the framework for inclusive education, does not establish specific measures for international students. Legislative provisions have addressed their enrolment and, to some extent, the teaching of the host country's language. However, what seems to be missing is an integrative logic that promotes stronger links between language teaching and other activities within both the formal and informal curriculum. Language learning must serve as the cornerstone of all learning.

Unequal integration – when territory shapes opportunity: Promising practices do exist: reception classes, peer tutoring, socio-cultural mediation, intercultural clubs, and artistic projects foster belonging and improve the academic success of migrant students. However, such measures remain highly uneven, depending on local initiative, resource availability, and often temporary funding. The absence of a concrete national strategy

generates significant disparities between schools and territories, especially when comparing urban and rural contexts (DGE, 2022).

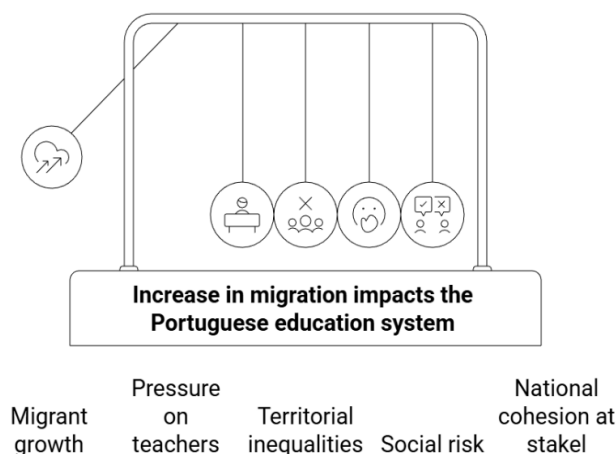
Key challenges identified: *Persistent language barriers:* thousands of students take years to achieve minimum proficiency in Portuguese, undermining learning and multiplying retention rates (Cummins, 2001; OECD, 2018; DGE, 2022); *Weak universal reception structures* (CNE, 2023; DGE, 2022); *Teacher training deficits:* around 22% of primary and secondary teachers report a strong need for continuous professional development to work in multicultural and multilingual contexts — a proportion higher than the OECD average (DGE, 2022); *High social risk:* young people without support experience exclusion and lack of belonging, making them more vulnerable to bullying, absenteeism, and early school leaving.

The political dilemma: Portugal has made clear commitments: at the international level, the Convention on the Rights of the Child (UN, 1989), the Incheon Declaration (UNESCO, 2015), the European Pillar of Social Rights (European Commission, 2017), and the Sustainable Development Goals, particularly SDG4 and SDG10. At the national level, the *Profile of Students at the End of Compulsory Schooling* (Ministry of Education, 2017) enshrines diversity and citizenship as core competences. The country is thus at a decisive crossroads. Either it turns diversity into a driver of social cohesion, educational success, and national prosperity, or it will continue to reproduce inequalities that waste talent, erode social cohesion, and compromise the collective future. The school integration of migrant children and young people is no longer merely an educational issue: it is a strategic question for the social, economic, and democratic sustainability of the country. These factors do not operate in isolation but in sequence, reinforcing one another and exacerbating inequalities. **Figure 1** provides a metaphorical synthesis of this domino effect.

Just like a Newton's cradle, the increase in migration triggers successive effects across the

entire education system: it places pressure on teachers, amplifies inequalities, generates social risks, and threatens national cohesion.

Figure 1: Impacts of increased migration on the portuguese education system



Key findings

Objectives: Building on the key challenges identified in the previous section, the *AquiMeEncontro* project sought to contribute to the analysis of policy measures for the integration of international students in the Portuguese education system, viewed through the lens of the integration practices that public schools and school clusters have been able to implement. It also aimed to contribute to the development and strengthening of instruments designed to support the reception and integration of international students, operationalised through initiatives in training and education. Specifically, it set out to: (i) contribute to the analysis of policy measures for the integration of migrants and refugees in the Portuguese education system, drawing on the integration practices implemented by Portuguese public schools; and (ii) contribute to the knowledge base and reinforcement of instruments for the reception and integration of migrants and refugees, operationalised through initiatives in training and education.

Methodology: To achieve these objectives, a methodological roadmap was designed and structured in three stages:

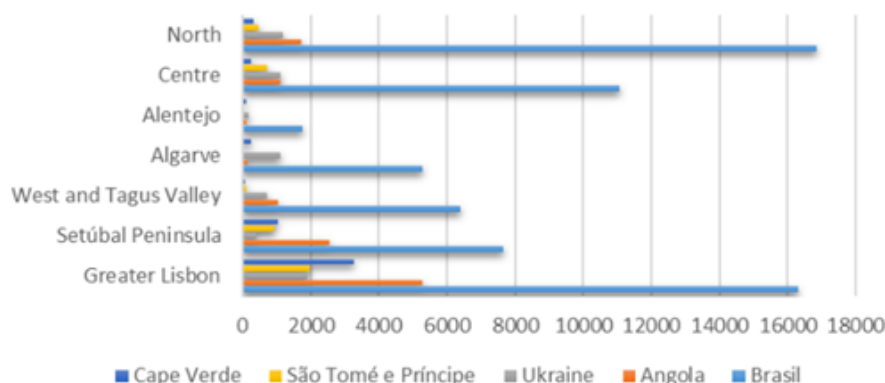
- A literature review; The design and administration of a questionnaire addressed to the leadership of schools and school clusters in mainland Portugal; Results of 13 case studies, and administrative data provided by the Direção-Geral de Estatísticas da Educação e Ciência (DGEEC). From the questionnaire, out of a universe of 811 public schools and school clusters, 126 responses were obtained (15.53%).

Results: Overview of international students enrolled in the Portuguese Education System in the 2022/2023 school year

In the 2022/2023 school year, a total of 140,343 international students from 189 different nationalities were enrolled in the Portuguese Education System, both in the public and private sectors. In 2023/2024, this number increased to 144,595. The nationalities with the highest prevalence in the Portuguese Education System are Brazilian (65,862 students – 5.47%), Angolan (12,180 students – 1.01%), Ukrainian (6,591 students – 0.55%), São Tomé and Príncipe (5,586 students – 0.46%), and Cape Verdean (5,494 students –

0.46%). Their distribution across the NUTS 2 regions is shown in **Figure 2**.

Figure 2: Distribution of the five most prevalent nationalities by NUTS 2 region

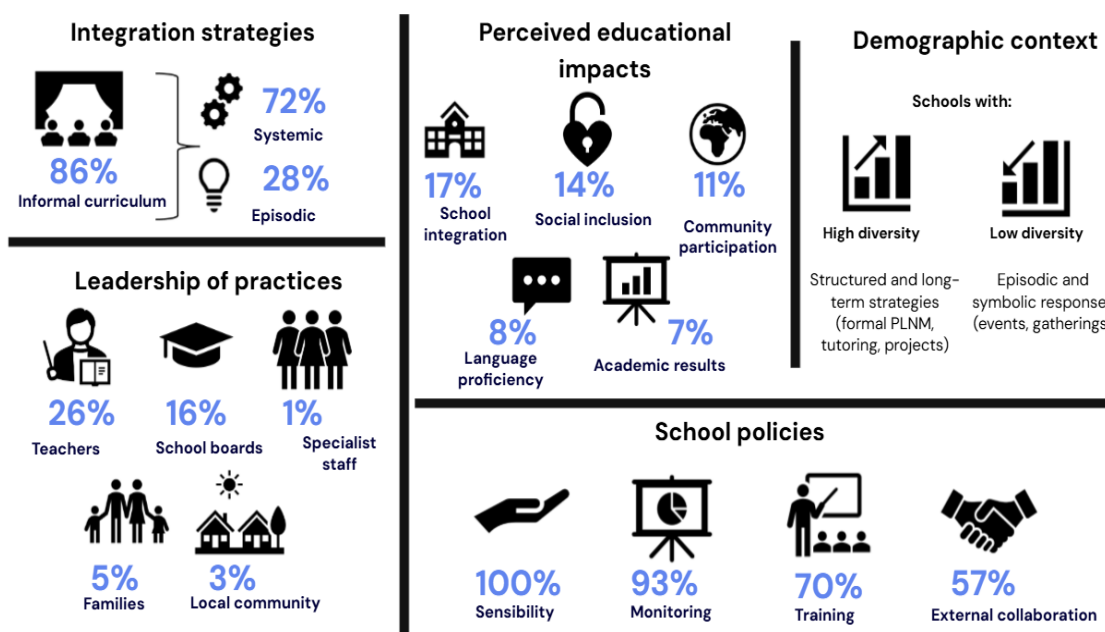


Integration of international students: evidence from the survey

Schools mobilize a wide range of strategies to support the integration of international students, including initial reception, the teaching of Portuguese as a Non-Native Language (PLNM), peer tutoring, cultural mediation, artistic projects, and socio-emotional initiatives. The survey results, summarised in **Figure 4** below, show that these

practices are distributed across different dimensions: integration strategies, perceived educational impacts, leadership of practices, demographic context, and school policies. A joint reading of the data highlights not only the diversity of responses but also their structural limitations, such as the prevalence of initiatives within the informal curriculum and the episodic nature of many actions.

Figure 3: Survey results on the integration of international students





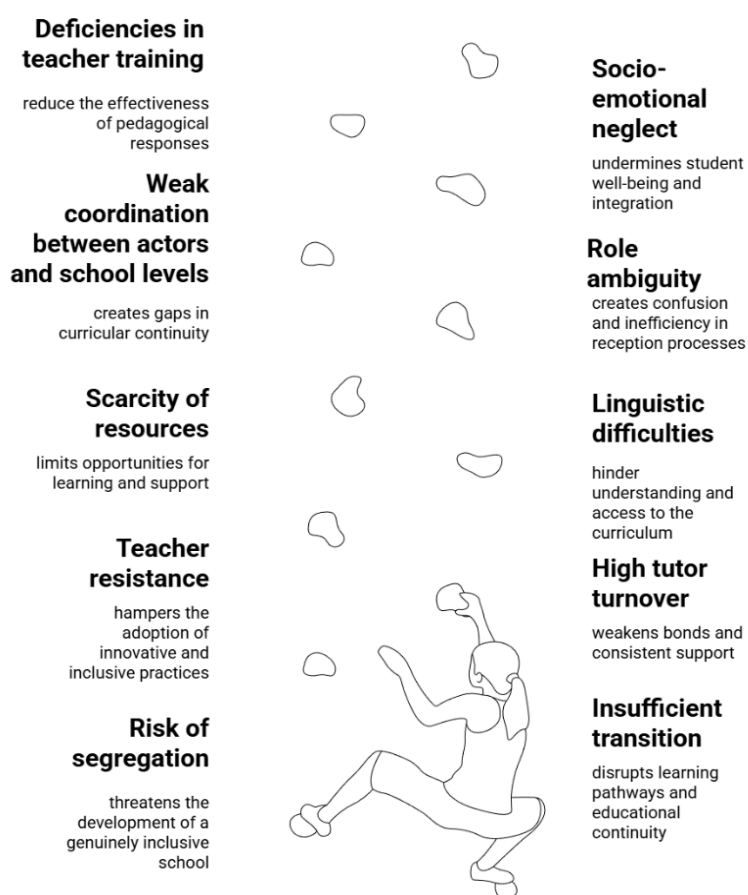
Happy practices in the integration of international students in Portuguese schools

In addition to statistical and documentary analysis, the project included thirteen case studies conducted in schools across different educational territories, conceived as privileged spaces for observing practices in action. These made it possible to gain a deeper understanding of how national guidelines on inclusion and diversity are translated into everyday school life, revealing successful local dynamics and practices, institutional constraints, and pedagogical strategies with a direct impact on the integration of international students. From the thirteen case studies, it was possible to highlight their effective practices but also the difficulties they faced.

This synthesis highlights the diversity of approaches (curricular, socio-emotional, intercultural, and socio-economic), illustrating innovative and context-specific responses to the reception of international students. It should be noted that the full integration of international students in Portuguese schools can be represented as an ascent: a demanding journey marked by obstacles that must be overcome in order to reach the summit of educational success. The

challenges identified in **Figure 6** are not isolated barriers, but critical points of support and tension along the way.

Figure 6: Key challenges to the school inclusion of international students, represented as obstacles to be overcome in the educational journey



Policy alternatives and Policy recommendations

Alternatives

From the inventory of successful practices, the following alternative options were identified:

- 1) **Creation of specific classes composed exclusively of international students vs. inclusion in existing classes**

Figure 5: Models of international student reception – specific classes vs. integration in regular classes, with main advantages and risks

Reception classes for international students	
Specific (only international students)	Mixed (integration in regular classes)

Useful in cases of total lack of knowledge of the language of schooling.	Promote intercultural coexistence and immediate social inclusion.
Justified in situations of collective and exceptional reception (e.g. Groups of refugees from the same geographical origin).	Require differentiated pedagogical support (PLNM, tutoring, cultural mediation).
Should be of limited duration (≤ 1 year), functioning as a transition period.	Demand additional resources (specialist teachers, support staff, materials).
Focus on PLNM and curricular adaptation in key subject areas.	Involve curricular adaptation challenges, especially for students from CPLP countries and Brazil.
Risk of segregation if prolonged or inadequately planned.	May benefit from temporary subject-specific level classes (e.g. "Turma +").

2) Strengthening the recruitment of cultural mediators vs. reducing class sizes and providing more training for teachers of classes with international students

Figure 6: Recruiting cultural mediators vs. reducing class sizes and training teachers – options and trade-offs

Response scenarios to school diversity with a focus on the holistic development of the student	
Strengthening the recruitment of cultural mediators	Reducing class sizes and training teachers
Reinforcement of reception teams, in schools with large numbers of international students.	Smaller class sizes facilitate individualised support.
Bridge of communication between school, families, and international communities.	Continuous training in intercultural education and PLNM for teachers.
Cultural and relational support for the integration of international students.	Promotion of curricular inclusion without excessive reliance on mediators.
Contribution to a school culture that is inclusive and responsive.	Interaction and socialisation primarily among peers.
Need for a clear definition of roles and limits of intervention.	Greater sustainability, but more demanding in terms of human and financial resources.

3) Providing more teacher training on curricular differentiation vs. organising support schemes for teachers with a research and happy practice-sharing dimension

Figure 7: Teacher training in curricular differentiation vs. collaborative and research-based support

Teacher capacity-building strategies for the integration of international students	
More training in curricular differentiation	Support schemes with research and practice-sharing
Formal reinforcement of short courses and workshops.	Promotion of communities of practice and collaborative networks among teachers.
Theoretical updating in differentiation methodologies.	Valuing the teacher as a researcher of their own practice.
May be unattractive for teachers with long experience.	Greater relevance and motivation, responding directly to everyday school problems
Risk of accumulating training that is poorly adapted to real contexts.	Production and dissemination of "happy practices" that can be replicated in other contexts.
Limited impact if not accompanied by institutional support.	Requires active coordination of departments and reduced teaching loads for supervision.

Recommendations

The proposed recommendations, stemming from the results obtained and reported in the e-book of Case Studies (Mouraz et al., 2025), constitute pathways for transformation and should be worked on in conjunction with

schools and other levels of the educational system administration, ensuring both rationality and emotional balance among the actors involved.

Macro level - National public policy configuration / Central Administration

1- The official designation of students arriving in schools should be *international students* as used in higher education. The symbolic weight of *immigrant* is heavier than the cosmopolitan *international*.

2- Training of both senior and middle leaders to explore, through inter-school and network-based intervention projects, the local space to design curricular offers tailored to international students.

3- Periodic dissemination of successful practices in the integration of international students in schools, notably through the creation of an Observatory on the Integration of International Students.

Meso level - Configuration of regional and local policies / Regional and local administration and educational institutions

4- Within the framework of the decentralisation of education competences, it is proposed to establish, at local government level, of support networks and resources between schools/groups with geographical proximity and other partners (public, associative and private) that operate in the same communities.

5- Development of a monitoring protocol for the integration practices of international students in Portuguese schools, in collaboration with local authorities.

6- Creation of a reception handbook in each school, that constitutes one of the management tools of the School/Group of Students,

describing the welcoming processes in their different phases, the actors involved and their responsibilities, and that can, in a short version, be translated into the languages of the international students that the school welcomes.

7- Assigning responsibility for supervising curricular work with international students to department coordinators, whose teaching loads should be reduced in line with the additional responsibilities.

8- Reconceptualization of the PLNM, in order to function as a gateway into the curriculum, articulated with core subjects and ensuring sustainable academic and social integration.

9- To establish links between reception programmes for children and pupils and those offered by the same schools to their adult family members. Such partnerships deepen collaboration with migrant communities, reducing fears and developing effectively shared solutions.

10- Strengthen the training of teachers and non-teaching staff to enhance their agency and foster academic optimism (Lelieur, Vanhoof, & Clycq, 2024).

11- Design schemes for the active participation of students in the planning and implementation of the inclusion of their international peers in schools, thereby promoting the inclusion of all.

Micro level - Configuration of local practices / Educational institutions and their agents

12- Develop joint learning initiatives – project-based activities that enable students of all nationalities to participate on an equal footing.

Conclusions

Investing in national policies for the inclusion of international students is a forward-looking strategy that prevents early school leaving, reduces inequalities, and values the talent of children and young people who already form part of Portugal's present. The adoption of a structured policy, sufficiently co-owned by

schools to be sustainable, turns diversity into a driver of innovation and equity.

The analysis shows that, despite the plurality and innovation of local practices for the integration of international students, many remain episodic and dependent on individual initiative, which undermines their continuity. Gaps also persist in coordination across

governance levels, in systematic monitoring, and in external school evaluation, which limits their effectiveness and replicability.

It is therefore proposed to establish a **Sustainability Package**, structured around four pillars:

1. Systematic local diagnosis, conducted by municipalities in partnership with schools and community actors, supported by multidimensional indicators related to individuals (educational success, sense of belonging ...) and to entities in the territory (intercultural initiatives...).

2. Local Barometer for Educational Integration (LBEI), designed as a regularly updated local observatory, enabling the monitoring key issues of inclusion. (Under

development by the project team, with a planned release in June 2026).

3. External school evaluation with a specific dimension on the integration of international students, ensuring accountability and fostering the local sustainability of inclusive practices.

4. Systemic sustainability, guaranteed through multiannual funding (anchored in a local governance structure) and stable mechanisms of multilevel governance (micro, meso, and macro).

This package strengthens the articulation between schools, local territories, and national policies, serving as a strategic instrument to ensure equity, continuity, and innovation in responding to the growing cultural and linguistic diversity of Portuguese schools.

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