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Intercultural citizenship in Portugal and Spain: Challenges and realities

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ABSTRACT

This study explores university students' perceptions and attitudes toward cultural diversity, civic participation, and intercultural interaction in Portugal and Spain. The study surveyed 232 students using a structured questionnaire on cultural identity, attitudes toward diversity, and civic behaviors. For both groups, primary sources of identity included ethnicity, gender, and nationality. Portuguese students emphasized language, while Spanish students emphasized religion, political ideology, and sexual orientation. Portuguese students demonstrated a heightened sensitivity to cultural diversity and an enhanced understanding of the importance of equitable access to public services, likely influenced by progressive national policies on inclusion and diversity. In contrast, both groups demonstrated limited knowledge of civic participation, underscoring the need for educational policies that enhance civic awareness, promote inclusion, and foster intercultural understanding. Civic participation was linked to inclusive attitudes and intercultural interactions, enabling meaningful engagement across diverse backgrounds.

1. Introduction

This study explores university students' perceptions and attitudes toward cultural diversity, civic participation, and intercultural interaction, with a focus on the distinct sociocultural and political contexts of Portugal and Spain. The coexistence of diverse beliefs, values, and identities in plural societies presents both challenges and opportunities, often shaped by intercultural encounters (Council of Europe, 2008; Said, 1978).

Drawing on frameworks of intercultural competence (Deardorff, 2006) and intercultural citizenship (Porto et al., 2020), this study defines diversity as both visible and invisible traits that impact social cohesion. While multiculturalism refers to the coexistence of groups, interculturalism emphasizes active engagement and dialogue (Dervin, 2016; Modood, 2013; Porto et al., 2020; Schembri, 2024). However, these encounters can also lead to alienation or conflict, requiring intercultural competence to combat ethnocentrism (Deardorff, 2006; Gimeno Sacristán, 2002; Schembri, 2024).

International organizations like UNESCO and the OECD emphasize the need for effective intercultural dialogue to prevent marginalization and enhance social cohesion (Council of Europe, 2008; Comissão Europeia, 2015). These policies advocate for the inclusion of all citizens to maintain peace and civil vitality. These policies aim to foster mutual

respect, intercultural communication, and civic participation by providing guidelines on inclusive education and promoting democratic values. As Ramos notes, globalization challenges closed identities, making them more plural and hybrid (Ramos, 2011). Furthermore, cultural traditions are integral to identity (Casabianca & Volpilhac-Auger, 2013). Intercultural citizenship involves balancing individual and collective identities within unique social spaces (Ramos, 2013).

These efforts also emphasize the need to 'living together with equal dignity' and to equip learners with the knowledge, skills, and values needed to address global challenges in an increasingly diverse world. Policies advocate for 'inclusion and participation of all citizens' as essential to maintaining 'social cohesion,' 'vitality of civil society,' and 'peace.' Public spheres must embrace cultural plurality to mitigate the dangers and conflicts that arise from marginalization, discrimination, and segregation. Ramos highlights how 'globalization and interculturality have challenged a national culture's local and 'closed' identities, making identities more 'open', plural, and hybrid' (Ramos, 2011, p. 189).

Ruiz-Ruiz et al. (2021) describe this as 'social coexistence,' a construct requiring mutual respect and active construction rather than mere existence within shared borders (Ruiz-Ruiz et al., 2021). Genuine coexistence transcends hegemony and promotes equality, addressing the psychosocial and communicative challenges of cultural interaction

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(Araújo, 2018; Ramos, 2009, 2013). Intercultural dialogue is anchored in the rights to the city and to difference, valuing integration over separation (Deardorff, 2006; Porto et al., 2020). Authors such as Appiah (2017) and Sen (2007) have challenged the static view of cultures as bounded entities, arguing that cultural identities are dynamic and shaped by evolving interactions. This perspective supports a more fluid approach to intercultural dialogue, which recognizes the continuous evolution of cultures through intercultural encounters. This dynamic understanding of cultural identities is crucial for fostering intercultural exchanges, and multiculturalism should not be seen as a barrier but as a foundation for intercultural dialogue (Schembri, 2024).

This study adopts frameworks of intercultural competence (Deardorff, 2006) and intercultural citizenship (Porto et al., 2020), defining diversity as visible and invisible traits that impact social cohesion and inclusivity. Multiculturalism refers to the coexistence of distinct cultural groups; interculturalism emphasizes active engagement and dialogue between cultures (Dervin, 2016; Porto et al., 2020), and multiculturalism recognizes individuals' identification with multiple cultures, highlighting the dynamic nature of cultural identity in globalized societies (Modood, 2013; Schembri, 2024). However, the coexistence of diverse groups can also pose challenges, such as alienation and intergroup conflict, which are influenced by cultural characteristics that hinder social cohesion (Gimeno Sacristán, 2002). Indeed, building bridges between communities and fostering a shared sense of belonging requires addressing historical issues and cultivating a culture of solidarity and cooperation. Intercultural competence involves possessing skills and attitudes that enable people to live with differences and combat ethnocentrism (Deardorff, 2006; Porto et al., 2020; Schembri, 2024). Intercultural citizenship promotes active participation in a multicultural society (Porto et al., 2020). Previous studies have shown that students who receive intercultural education are more likely to exhibit inclusive social behaviors (Deardorff, 2006; Tum, 2002).

Moscovici notes that 'People belonging to other cultures disturb us because they are like us, and yet they are not like us; that is why we can say that they are 'uneducated,' 'barbaric,' 'irrational,' etc. The 'unknown' attracts and intrigues people and communities. Fear of the stranger (or strangers) is deeply rooted in each of us (Moscovici, 2005, p. 56). Furthermore, each culture possesses practices and symbols deeply valued by its members, reflecting individual pride in one's cultural heritage. Montesquieu observed that 'people from different cultures often feel a deep connection to their traditions and values, which they consider integral to their identity', as cited in Casabianca and Volpilliac-Auger (2013, p. 13). This subjective and objective perspective underlies intercultural citizenship, where the challenge lies in balancing the individual and the collective within their unique space and time, experiencing the (inter)relations between Self and Other.

Coexistence within a society is not automatic; it requires active construction and deliberate effort from all community members. Genuine coexistence goes beyond mere coexistence within the same borders and demands engagement that transcends hegemony over others, promoting ethical values of equality (Ruiz-Ruiz et al., 2021, p. 215). Recognising the rights inherent in intercultural dialogue is crucial, as it involves people from diverse cultural, ethnic, and linguistic backgrounds and addresses psychosocial, communicative, educational, and health challenges that emerge when different cultures interact. These interactions have been extensively studied across various fields, particularly psychology, focusing on cognitive, affective, social, and behavioral factors such as acculturation stress, stereotypes, discrimination, and ethnocentrism (Araújo, 2018; Ramos, 2009, 2013).

Building on foundational work in interculturality, scholars emphasize that it involves more than coexistence; it signifies active, transformative engagement. Intercultural competence, according to Deardorff (2006), requires knowledge, empathy, adaptability, and skills to navigate complex cultural dynamics effectively (Deardorff, 2006). Porto et al. (2020) expand on this view by advocating for intercultural citizenship as an active form of engagement in which diverse societies

co-construct cultural understanding, promoting inclusivity and social cohesion. As Tum notes, a mutual-respect-based ethical code is crucial for ensuring harmonious coexistence and reflects the diversity found in nature (Tum, 2002, p. 64). This approach is essential in a world characterized by increased multiculturalism, intercultural relations, and cultural diversity driven by globalization and migratory flows (Ramos, 2013).

1.1. Rationale and study context

The rationale for this study stems from the increasing complexity of cultural interactions in higher education settings within the Iberian Peninsula. As European societies become more diverse, the role of university students as future citizens and professionals becomes critical in shaping inclusive environments. This research is grounded in the need to understand how theoretical concepts of intercultural competence and citizenship translate into students' perceptions and behaviors in Portugal and Spain – two countries with shared historical roots but distinct contemporary approaches to diversity and civic participation. By examining these contexts, the study aims to identify gaps in civic awareness and provide evidence-based insights for educational policies that promote social cohesion and democratic values.

1.2. Research objectives

The primary objective of this research is to analyze university students' perceptions and attitudes toward diversity, civic participation, and intercultural interaction in Portugal and Spain. To achieve this, the study addresses the following analytical aims and research questions, explicitly linked to the dimensions of intercultural competence and citizenship:

1. Descriptive Objective (Diversity): To identify students' perceptions of diversity and their awareness of the contributions of migrants to local communities.
2. Analytical Objective (Intercultural Interaction): To examine reactions to including people with different cultural and social characteristics and investigate the level of empathy and supportive behaviors towards equality and social inclusion.
3. Comparative Objective (Participation and Democracy): To contrast the knowledge and attitudes towards civic and political participation of students in Portugal and Spain.
4. Integrative Objective (Equality): To explicitly link these perceptions with the dimensions of diversity, participation, and equality to reinforce the conceptual coherence of the study.

2. Materials and methods

The decision to focus on students from Spain and Portugal is driven by these countries' unique cultural and historical dynamics, providing a rich context for studying intercultural citizenship. While Spain and Portugal share historical ties and cultural similarities, they also present distinct sociopolitical landscapes, especially regarding immigration and diversity management. This study examines how these similar yet diverse cultural and educational backgrounds influence students' attitudes toward diversity, civic engagement, and intercultural understanding. The comparative analysis between these two nations offers a nuanced understanding of intercultural citizenship within the broader European framework.

2.1. Sample and recruitment

The study's sample comprises 232 higher education students from Portuguese and Spanish institutions, with equal representation from both countries (50.9% from Portugal and 49.1% from Spain). A purposive sampling strategy was employed to ensure the inclusion of students

from diverse academic disciplines (Education, Social Sciences, and Humanities) where intercultural issues are particularly relevant. Participants were recruited through institutional email lists and virtual learning platforms at the University of La Laguna (Spain) and the Polytechnic Institute of Bragança (Portugal). Inclusion criteria required that participants be currently enrolled in a degree program and have completed at least one semester of study. Exclusion criteria included students on short-term international mobility programs (e.g., Erasmus) to focus on those more deeply embedded in the local sociopolitical context. While purposive sampling limits broad representativeness, it allowed for a focused exploration of intercultural dynamics within these specific educational settings. Most respondents were female (78.5%), with the average age being 22.18 ± 6.59 years in Portugal and 21.82 ± 5.15 years in Spain (Table 1).

When surveyed about whether their current residence coincided with their birthplace, a significant majority, 73.6% (n = 170), of students reported living away from their birthplace. This pattern holds for both Portuguese and Spanish students, as detailed in Table 2.

2.2. Study design

A quantitative approach was chosen to allow for generalizable insights into students' attitudes, facilitating comparisons between Portuguese and Spanish students on a broader scale. While a mixed-methods or qualitative approach might provide deeper insights into individual identities and social behaviors, the quantitative approach was chosen for its ability to generate generalizable findings across Spanish and Portuguese contexts.

To meet the research objectives, a structured survey was used as the primary data collection tool. This instrument facilitated data collection on variables related to cultural identity, attitudes toward diversity, and students' civic and social behaviors.

2.3. Instrument

The intercultural citizenship questionnaire was carefully designed to assess knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors related to diversity, participation, and equality. It provides a tailored instrument to effectively capture the nuanced dimensions of the study's objectives.

The intercultural citizenship questionnaire consists of 18 questions equally distributed across three main dimensions: Diversity, Participation/Democracy/Interaction, and Equality. It employs a five-point Likert scale (1: strongly disagree to 5: strongly agree) to measure students' attitudes and perceptions of intercultural citizenship. The full list of items is provided in Appendix A.

To ensure linguistic and conceptual equivalence between the Spanish and Portuguese versions, a rigorous translation and back-translation process was followed. The original instrument was translated into Portuguese by two independent bilingual researchers. A third researcher then back translated the version into Spanish to identify and resolve any discrepancies. This process ensured that the items maintained their intended meaning across both cultural contexts.

The first dimension, Diversity, evaluates knowledge about sources of

Table 1
Gender distribution.

Gender	Students		Total
	Portuguese	Spanish	
Female n (%)	100 (84,7%)	82 (71,9%)	182 (78,4%)
Male n (%)	16 (13,6%)	30 (26,3%)	46 (19,8%)
Do not say n (%)	2 (1,7%)	2 (1,8%)	4 (1,7%)
Total n (%)	118 (100%)	114 (100%)	232 (100%)
Age $\bar{X} \pm s$	$22,18 \pm 6,59$	$21,82 \pm 5,15$	$22,00 \pm 5,92$

$\bar{X} \pm s$ - average \pm standard deviation.

Table 2
Current place of residence.

I currently live where I was born	Students		Total
	Portuguese	Spanish	
No n (%)	88 (75,2%)	82 (71,9%)	170 (73,6%)
Yes n (%)	29 (24,8%)	32 (28,1%)	61 (26,4%)
Total n (%)	117 (100%)	114 (100%)	231 (100%)

identity such as ethnicity, religion, and language, and recognizes the contributions migrants make to local communities. It also examines feelings of discomfort in the presence of a new neighboring family with different characteristics, such as language or religion, and behaviors related to welcoming newcomers and fostering diversity in friendships. This dimension captures students' openness and attitudes toward embracing cultural differences in everyday interactions.

The second dimension, Participation/Democracy/Interaction, focuses on knowledge about civic rights, including voting and representation in local government, and evaluates attitudes toward inclusivity within democratic processes, a core aspect of intercultural citizenship (Porto et al., 2020). Items in this dimension were adapted from established studies on civic education in intercultural contexts. They assessed students' understanding of democratic participation and their perceptions of diverse groups' roles in these processes. This section also explores perceptions of the benefits of including people from diverse backgrounds in decision-making and political representation, as well as behaviors promoting the active inclusion of diverse individuals in work groups and communication efforts.

The third dimension, Equality, addresses knowledge about irregular migrants as individuals residing in a country without official authorization or legal documentation. This dimension examines their access to public health and education, empathy toward underrepresented groups, fears about cultural changes that affect local identity, intervention behaviors in response to injustice, and active support for equality in social participation. These items evaluate students' commitment to promoting equitable inclusion and addressing inequalities in diverse social settings.

The questionnaire was developed using established frameworks for intercultural competence and citizenship, primarily drawing on Dear-dorff (2006) and Porto et al. (2020). These frameworks emphasize the importance of assessing attitudes, awareness, and behaviors related to cultural diversity and civic engagement. Specific items, such as scenarios involving a new neighbor with different cultural characteristics, were inspired by prior studies (Ramos, 2011) to assess openness to and discomfort with cultural differences in everyday life. This approach aligns with established practices in intercultural research, offering insights into students' readiness to engage with cultural diversity.

The questionnaire's reliability was assessed using Cronbach's Alpha, yielding high internal consistency of 0.931 for the Spanish version and 0.914 for the Portuguese version. These results confirm the tool's robustness in measuring attitudes and perceptions related to intercultural citizenship across both linguistic contexts.

2.4. Data collection procedures

The survey was meticulously designed to address the study's critical areas of interest, using clear, concise questions to minimize misunderstandings and reduce response bias. Data were collected anonymously to protect participants' confidentiality. Each participant provided informed consent after being thoroughly briefed on the study's objectives and their right to withdraw at any time.

The European Scientific Institute Ethics Committee (ESI) granted ethical approval for the study, Intercultural Citizenship: Challenges and Realities, under resolution code ESI 2024/015. The committee reviewed and approved the research methodology, confirming its adherence to the principles outlined in the Declaration of Helsinki and compliance with international research ethics standards.

2.5. Data handling and statistical analysis

Data were managed and analyzed using IBM SPSS Statistics (version 27.0). Prior to analysis, data were cleaned to identify outliers and ensure consistent responses. Missing data (less than 2% of total responses) were handled using pairwise deletion, as they were determined to be missing completely at random (MCAR). Assumption checks for non-parametric tests were conducted, confirming that the data met the requirements for categorical analysis.

Chi-square and Fisher's exact tests were employed to determine the relationship between cultural identity and civic participation. Fisher's exact test was specifically used when more than 20% of the expected frequencies were less than 5. The significance threshold was set at $p < 0.05$ for all analyses. To interpret the practical significance of findings, effect sizes were calculated using Cramér's V (for tables larger than 2x2) or the Phi coefficient (for 2x2 tables). Cramér's V values were interpreted as follows: >0.10 (small), >0.30 (medium), and >0.50 (large) (Cohen, 2013). Post-hoc comparisons, where applicable, were conducted using adjusted standardised residuals to identify specific cells contributing to significant associations.

3. Results

Table 3 shows the reactions of Portuguese and Spanish students to a hypothetical scenario in which a new family moves in next door. The table highlights notable differences in discomfort levels across various scenarios, with significant associations observed between country of origin and reactions to diversity.

Overall, Portuguese students reported greater discomfort compared to their Spanish counterparts, particularly in scenarios where the family "spoke a different language", "had a different religion", "were refugees" or "were a homosexual couple". In all these scenarios except "they were refugees," the responses showed significant associations with students' country of origin, suggesting that Portuguese students were more defensive and cautious.

Interestingly, the only scenario in which Spanish students exhibited greater apprehension – albeit not statistically significant – was "they were fans of a football club".

Table 4 characterizes, and Table 5 summarizes, the feelings and behaviors of Portuguese and Spanish students regarding diversity. Overall, students from both countries agreed that they enjoy interacting with people from different backgrounds, strive to make newcomers feel welcome regardless of their origin, and maintain friendships with individuals from diverse backgrounds.

Table 4 characterizes Portuguese and Spanish students' feelings and behaviors toward diversity. Overall, a broadly positive attitude is observed in both countries. The vast majority of students reported

enjoying meeting new people (93.1%), striving to make newcomers feel welcome (87.9%), and maintaining friendships with people from diverse backgrounds (92.2%). These findings indicate a high level of openness to diversity and intercultural coexistence among the students surveyed.

Despite this generally positive trend, statistically significant differences between countries emerged in two of the three items analyzed. Portuguese students showed higher agreement than Spanish students regarding making newcomers feel welcome ($\chi^2 = 7.33$; $p = 0.018$; $V = 0.18$) and having friends from different backgrounds ($\chi^2 = 8.95$; $p = 0.008$; $V = 0.20$). In both cases, the effect sizes were small, suggesting that although the differences are statistically significant, their magnitude is limited. For the item "I like to meet different people," no statistically significant differences were found between the two groups, reinforcing the notion of a broadly shared positive attitude toward diversity.

Table 5 complements these findings by summarizing the main statistically significant differences between Portuguese and Spanish students across several dimensions. Within the diversity domain, Portuguese students reported higher levels of discomfort in specific situations, such as interactions with people who speak a different language and with homosexual couples. Although statistically significant, these differences showed small effect sizes (V ranging from 0.23 to 0.25), indicating that the reported discomfort is relatively modest and coexists with generally positive attitudes.

Also within the diversity dimension, Portuguese students demonstrated higher agreement with welcoming newcomers, consistent with the results presented in Table 4. In the participation and equality dimensions, Portuguese students displayed higher levels of civic knowledge, particularly regarding voting rights, knowledge of city council representatives, and access to healthcare. Including effect sizes (Cramér's V) provides a more nuanced interpretation of these results. For instance, although several associations are statistically significant, most exhibit small to medium effect sizes, suggesting that national differences may have limited practical impact in certain everyday scenarios. However, the large effect size ($V = 0.52$) for knowledge of city council representation highlights a substantial gap in civic awareness between the two student populations, warranting targeted educational intervention.

However, because the conditions for applying the Chi-square test were not met, Fisher's exact test was used to analyze the data. The analysis revealed that behavioral responses, such as welcoming newcomers and having friends from diverse backgrounds, were significantly associated with the student's country of origin. The findings indicate that Portuguese students exhibit slightly more welcoming behaviors toward diversity than their Spanish counterparts, though the differences are not substantial.

The graph in Fig. 1 shows the results of the characterisation of students' knowledge of people's participation in democracy.

Table 3
Characterization of reaction to the presence of a new neighboring family.

I would be upset if a new family moved in next door to mine	Response	Portuguese n (%)	Spanish n (%)	Total n (%)	χ^2 (df)	p	Cramér's V
Speak to me in another language	Agreed	20 (16.9%)	5 (4.4%)	25 (10.8%)	12.46 (2)	0.002	0.23
	Indifferent	12 (10.2%)	6 (5.3%)	18 (7.8%)			
	Disagreed	86 (72.9%)	103 (90.4%)	189 (81.5%)			
He had a different religion from me	Agreed	17 (14.4%)	3 (2.5%)	20 (8.6%)	11.64 (2)	0.003	0.22
	Indifferent	11 (9.3%)	7 (6.1%)	18 (7.8%)			
	Disagreed	90 (76.3%)	104 (91.2%)	194 (83.6%)			
They were "fanatics" of a football club	Agreed	25 (21.2%)	27 (23.7%)	52 (22.4%)	5.30 (2)	0.071	0.15
	Indifferent	13 (11.0%)	24 (21.1%)	37 (15.9%)			
	Disagreed	80 (67.8%)	63 (55.3%)	143 (61.6%)			
Were they refugees?	Agreed	16 (13.6%)	5 (4.4%)	21 (9.1%)	5.93 (2)	0.052	0.16
	Indifferent	10 (8.5%)	11 (9.6%)	21 (9.1%)			
	Disagreed	92 (78.0%)	98 (86.0%)	190 (81.9%)			
Were they a homosexual couple	Agreed	16 (13.6%)	3 (2.6%)	19 (8.2%)	14.30 (2)	0.001	0.25
	Indifferent	12 (10.2%)	4 (3.5%)	16 (6.9%)			
	Disagreed	90 (76.3%)	107 (93.9%)	197 (84.9%)			

χ (p) – Chi-square test of statistical independence (significance level).

Table 4
Characterising feelings and behaviors toward diversity.

Diversity Item	Response	Portuguese n (%)	Spanish n (%)	Total n (%)	Statistic	p	Effect Size
I like to meet different people	Agreed	110 (93.2%)	106 (93.0%)	216 (93.1%)	1.94 (χ^2)	0.425	0.09
	Indifferent	8 (6.8%)	6 (5.3%)	14 (6.0%)			
	Disagreed	0 (0.0%)	2 (1.8%)	2 (0.9%)			
I make newcomers feel welcome	Agreed	110 (93.2%)	94 (82.5%)	204 (87.9%)	7.33 (χ^2)	0.018	0.18
	Indifferent	6 (5.1%)	18 (15.8%)	24 (10.3%)			
	Disagreed	2 (1.7%)	2 (1.8%)	4 (1.7%)			
I have friends from different backgrounds	Agreed	114 (96.6%)	100 (87.7%)	214 (92.2%)	8.95 (χ^2)	0.008	0.20
	Indifferent	4 (3.4%)	7 (6.1%)	11 (4.7%)			
	Disagreed	0 (0.0%)	7 (6.1%)	7 (3.0%)			

χ (p) – Fisher's exact test of independence statistic (significance level).

Table 5
Summary of main statistically significant findings.

Dimension	Variable	Comparison	Result	Effect Size (V)
Diversity	Discomfort: Different Language	PT vs ES	PT > ES discomfort	0.23 (Small)
Diversity	Discomfort: Homosexual Couple	PT vs ES	PT > ES discomfort	0.25 (Small)
Diversity	Welcoming Newcomers	PT vs ES	PT > ES agreement	0.18 (Small)
Participation	Knowledge: Voting Rights	PT vs ES	PT > ES knowledge	0.29 (Small-Med)
Participation	Knowledge: City Council Reps	PT vs ES	PT > ES knowledge	0.52 (Large)
Equality	Knowledge: Health Access	PT vs ES	PT > ES knowledge	0.21 (Small)

The findings indicate that students studying in Portugal support universal participation in elections more than their counterparts in Spain. Despite this difference, both groups share similar perspectives on the participation of cultural outsiders after several years of residence. Notably, a significant knowledge gap was identified among students in Spain, with many unaware of how electoral processes function. The question assessing voting eligibility focused on students' factual knowledge about civic rights rather than their attitudes or affective perceptions of political participation. As a result, the analysis highlights

levels of expertise rather than value-based responses to civic participation.

The Chi-square test of independence ($\chi^2 = 20.065$; $p < 0.01$) revealed that knowledge about participation in elections was significantly associated with the student's country of study.

When examining knowledge about councilors representing different groups (ethnic, religious, linguistic), Fig. 2 highlights stark contrasts between the two countries. Among students in Spain, 78.1% ($n = 89$) reported they “did not know”, indicating a lack of awareness. Conversely, students in Portugal demonstrated more significant variability, with 35.6% ($n = 42$) selecting “do not know” and 39.0% ($n = 46$) choosing “unsure”. These responses distinguish between students who lack awareness of such representation (“do not know”) and those who believe it does not exist (“no”).

The Chi-square test of independence ($\chi^2 = 63.267$; $p < 0.01$) confirmed a significant association between knowledge of individuals' participation in local government and the country of study. Fig. 2 provides insights into students' factual knowledge regarding councilors' affiliations, emphasizing their civic awareness rather than affective attitudes toward democratic participation or inclusivity.

Table 6 highlights Portuguese and Spanish students' feelings and behaviors regarding democratic participation and interactions with individuals from different backgrounds. Most students in Portugal (79.7%, $n = 94$) and Spain (84.2%, $n = 96$) agreed that participating with people from diverse backgrounds in local decision-making processes is beneficial. According to the Chi-square test of independence, these results were not significantly associated with the students' country of study.

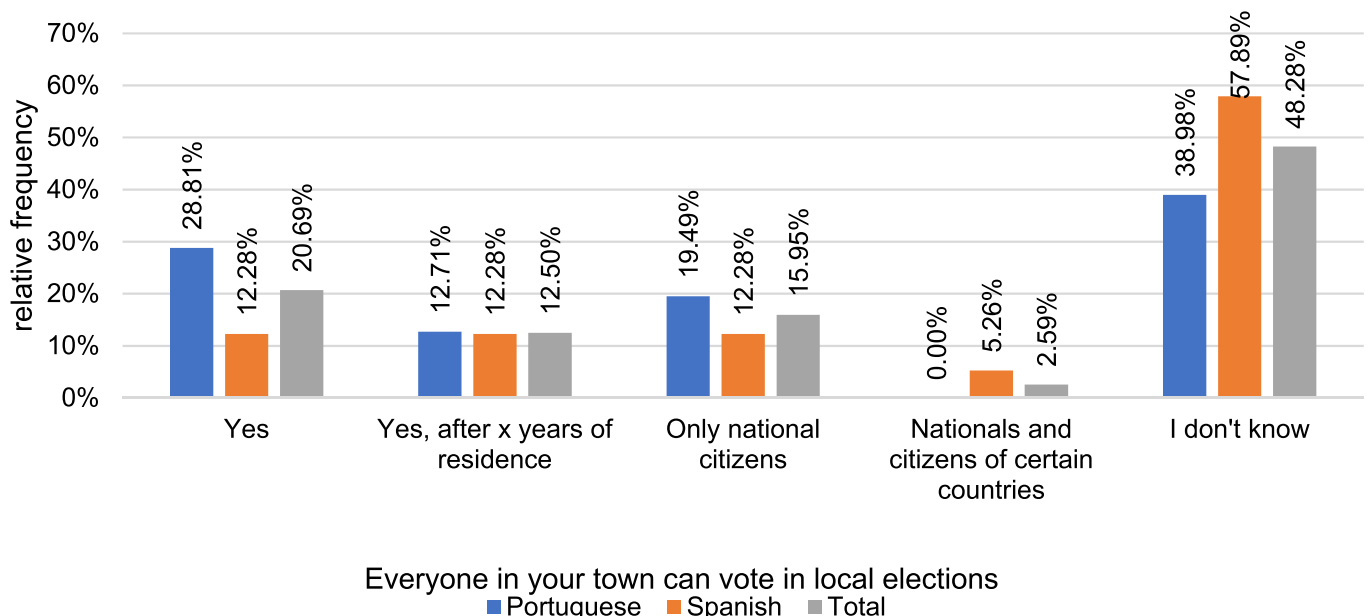


Fig. 1. Characterising knowledge in democratic participation.

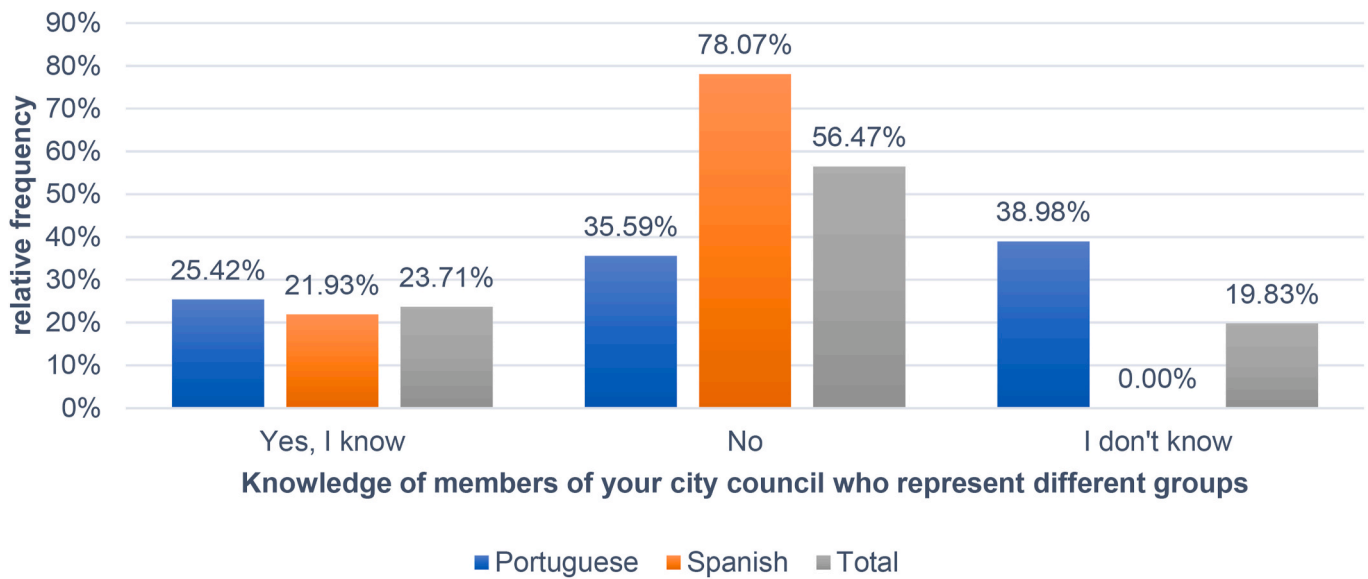


Fig. 2. Characterizing knowledge in democratic participation or inclusivity.

Table 6

Characterising feelings and behaviors towards participation in democracy and interaction with people from different backgrounds.

Feelings/behaviors	Response	Portuguese n (%)	Spanish n (%)	Total n (%)	χ^2 (df)	p	Cramér's V
Participating people from different backgrounds in local decisions is beneficial	Agreed	94 (79.7%)	96 (84.2%)	190 (81.9%)	0.81 (2)	0.667	0.06
	Indifferent	20 (16.9%)	15 (13.2%)	35 (15.1%)			
	Disagreed	4 (3.4%)	3 (2.6%)	7 (3.0%)			
People who do not share my background cannot faithfully represent me	Agreed	35 (29.7%)	19 (16.7%)	54 (23.3%)	9.34 (2)	0.009	0.20
	Indifferent	21 (17.8%)	13 (11.4%)	34 (14.7%)			
	Disagreed	62 (52.5%)	82 (71.9%)	144 (62.1%)			
When I create a group for a project, I include people from different backgrounds	Agreed	90 (76.3%)	68 (59.6%)	158 (68.1%)	7.81 (2)	0.020	0.18
	Indifferent	22 (18.6%)	39 (34.2%)	61 (26.3%)			
	Disagreed	6 (5.1%)	7 (6.1%)	13 (5.6%)			
I have met a new person who does not speak the same language and try to communicate	Agreed	95 (80.5%)	92 (80.7%)	187 (80.6%)	0.92 (2)	0.633	0.06
	Indifferent	16 (13.6%)	18 (15.8%)	34 (14.7%)			
	Disagreed	7 (5.9%)	4 (3.5%)	11 (4.7%)			

χ (p) – Chi-square test of statistical independence (significance level).

When asked whether individuals from different origins, religions, languages, or sexual orientations could be faithfully represented in the political sphere, most students in Portugal (52.5%, n = 62) and Spain (71.9%, n = 82) disagreed. However, 29.7% (n = 35) of Portuguese students agreed with this statement, indicating a notable divergence of opinion. The Chi-square test of independence ($\chi^2 = 9.335$; $p < 0.01$) showed a significant association between students' knowledge about electoral participation and their country of study.

Regarding including people from diverse backgrounds in work groups or projects, most students supported this behavior, particularly those studying in Portugal. In contrast, 64.2% (n = 39) of students in Spain were indifferent to such inclusion. The Chi-square test of independence ($\chi^2 = 7.811$; $p < 0.05$) confirmed a significant association between attitudes toward inclusion in work groups and the student's country of study.

Finally, most students in both countries reported attempts to communicate with someone who did not speak the same language. This behavior was not significantly associated with the country of study, suggesting a shared willingness to bridge language barriers across both contexts.

The graphs in Figs. 3 and 4 show the results of a study characterizing students' knowledge of equal access to health and Education.

This observation revealed that most students recognized the public health system's provision of treatment for irregular immigrants, with Portuguese students demonstrating a powerful awareness of this access. The Chi-square test of independence ($\chi^2 = 10.558$; $p < 0.05$) revealed that knowledge about equal access to healthcare was significantly associated with the student's country of study. In contrast, when assessing knowledge about access to public education for the children of irregular immigrants, most students in both countries indicated that such access is provided. As a result, this knowledge about equality was not significantly associated with the student's country of study.

Table 7 characterizes and Table 8 summarizes Portuguese and Spanish students' perceptions and behaviors of equality. Most students in Portugal (90.7%, n = 107) and Spain (96.5%, n = 110) expressed empathy toward individuals from different groups experiencing unequal treatment. According to the Chi-square test of independence, these results were also not significantly associated with the student's country of study.

When asked whether they feared that a different culture might alter their local identity, most students in Portugal (62.7%, n = 74) and Spain (55.3%, n = 63) disagreed. However, approximately 20% of students in both countries agreed with this statement. The Chi-square test of independence revealed that fear regarding the impact of a different culture

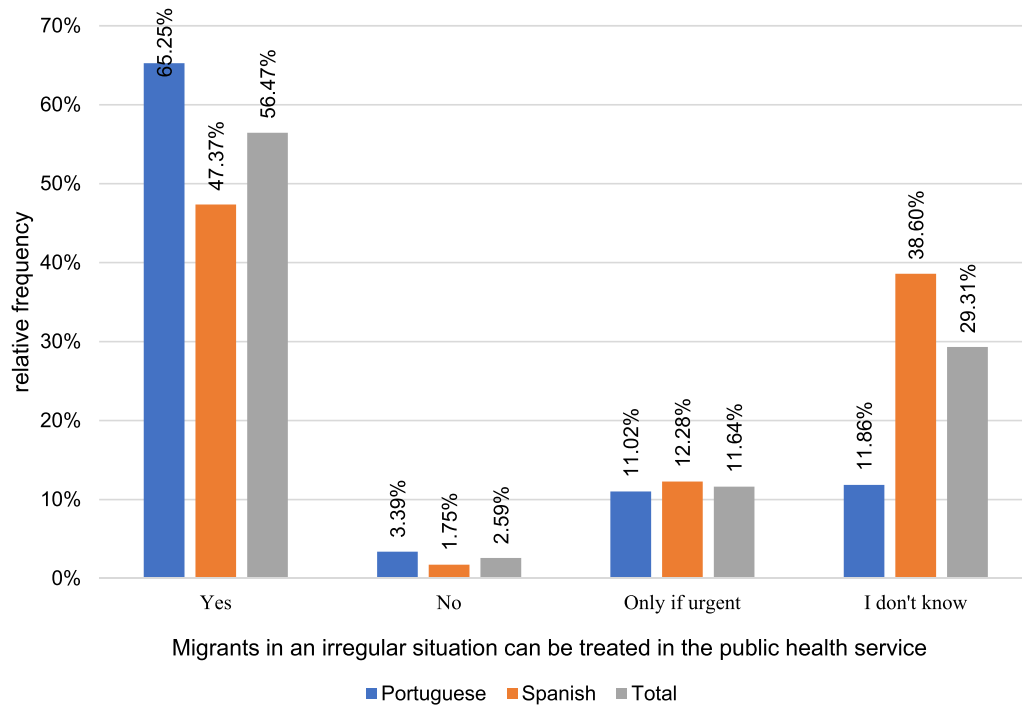


Fig. 3. Characterising of knowledge on equal access to healthcare.

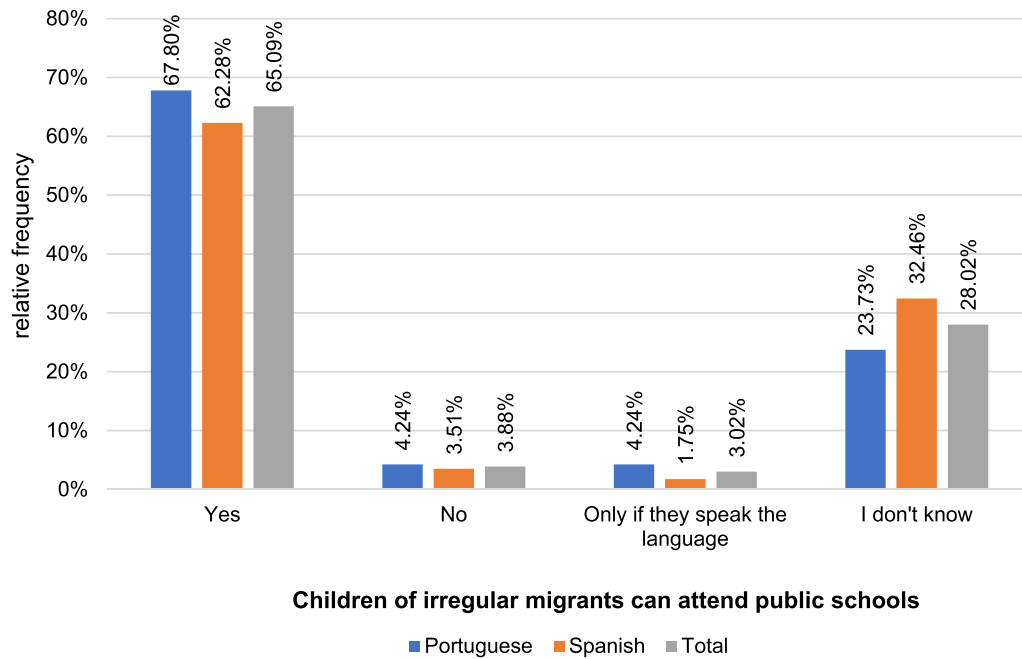


Fig. 4. Characterising knowledge about equal access to education.

on local identity was not significantly associated with the students' country of study.

In terms of intervening when witnessing unfair treatment in public spaces based on appearance, sexual orientation, religion, or skin color, most students reported they would act, regardless of their country of study. Similarly, when asked about actively supporting equality by promoting participation from diverse backgrounds in various social activities, most students in both countries indicated they made efforts to do so. This behavior was also not significantly associated with the student's country of study.

Including effect sizes (Cramér's V) across all dimensions provides a

more nuanced interpretation of these results. For instance, although several associations are statistically significant, most exhibit small to medium effect sizes, suggesting that national differences may have limited practical impact in certain everyday scenarios. However, the large effect size ($V = 0.52$) for knowledge of city council representation highlights a substantial gap in civic awareness between the two student populations, warranting targeted educational intervention.

3.1. Implications for intercultural citizenship education

This research highlights significant findings on the potential for

Table 7
Characterisation of perceptions and behaviors toward equality.

Perceptions/Behaviours	Response	Portuguese n (%)	Spanish n (%)	Total n (%)	χ^2 (df)	p	Cramér's V
I empathize with people from different groups who feel unequally treated	Agreed	107 (90.7%)	110 (96.5%)	217 (93.5%)	3.37 (2)	0.185	0.12
	Indifferent	7 (5.9%)	3 (2.6%)	10 (4.3%)			
	Disagreed	4 (3.4%)	1 (0.9%)	5 (2.2%)			
I fear that a different culture may change the local identity	Agreed	26 (22.0%)	23 (20.2%)	49 (21.1%)	3.17 (2)	0.205	0.12
	Indifferent	18 (15.3%)	28 (24.6%)	46 (19.8%)			
	Disagreed	74 (62.7%)	63 (55.3%)	137 (59.1%)			
I intervene if someone is treated unfairly in a public space	Agreed	106 (89.8%)	100 (87.7%)	206 (88.8%)	0.75 (2)	0.688	0.06
	Indifferent	7 (5.9%)	10 (8.8%)	17 (7.3%)			
	Disagreed	5 (4.2%)	4 (3.5%)	9 (3.9%)			
I actively support the equality in social and political participation	Agreed	105 (89.0%)	98 (86.0%)	203 (87.5%)	0.50 (2)	0.780	0.05
	Indifferent	10 (8.5%)	12 (10.5%)	22 (9.5%)			
	Disagreed	3 (2.5%)	4 (3.5%)	7 (3.0%)			

χ (p) – Chi-square test of statistical independence (significance level).

Table 8
Summary of main statistically significant findings.

Dimension	Variable	Comparison	Result	Effect Size (V)
Diversity	Discomfort: Different Language	PT vs ES	PT > ES discomfort	0.23 (Small)
Diversity	Discomfort: Homosexual Couple	PT vs ES	PT > ES discomfort	0.25 (Small)
Diversity	Welcoming Newcomers	PT vs ES	PT > ES agreement	0.18 (Small)
Participation	Knowledge: Voting Rights	PT vs ES	PT > ES knowledge	0.29 (Small-Med)
Participation	Knowledge: City Council Reps	PT vs ES	PT > ES knowledge	0.52 (Large)
Participation	Representation: Faithful Rep	PT vs ES	PT > ES agreement	0.20 (Small)
Participation	Inclusion: Work Groups	PT vs ES	PT > ES agreement	0.18 (Small)
Equality	Knowledge: Health Access	PT vs ES	PT > ES knowledge	0.21 (Small)

further development of intercultural citizenship education in Spain and Portugal. However, a more systematic discussion of existing policies in both immigration and education is crucial to fully contextualize these results. Examining the impact of current policies on societal attitudes toward diversity reveals the need to strategically enhance intercultural education programs. These programs should accommodate cultural diversity and leverage it as a resource, fostering a more inclusive and empathetic societal framework.

4. Discussion

This study provides significant insights into university students' perceptions and attitudes toward cultural diversity, civic participation, and intercultural interaction in Portugal and Spain. The analysis indicates that students in both countries identify ethnicity, gender, and nationality as primary sources of identity. However, distinct cultural and educational contexts influence additional emphases: Portuguese students place greater importance on language, while Spanish students prioritize religion, political ideology, and sexual orientation.

These differences underscore the contextual factors that shape identity perceptions, as proposed by frameworks such as those of Deardorff (2006) and Dervin (2016). These frameworks emphasize that cultural and educational environments critically influence the development of intercultural competence.

Such factors are pivotal in shaping how individuals understand and empathize with diverse identities, reinforcing the importance of tailored intercultural education initiatives.

This study highlights the critical role of immigration policies, educational frameworks, and social behaviors in shaping students'

perceptions and attitudes toward diversity, civic participation, and intercultural interaction in Portugal and Spain. While the findings reveal how national policies and societal contexts may influence these attitudes, it is important to note that these observations are based on the sampled population and should be interpreted with caution for generalizability to the national context.

4.1. Diversity and intercultural interaction

Portugal's immigration policies, influenced by its historical connections to former colonies and recent progressive measures, appear to correlate with more inclusive perspectives among the sampled students. This suggests that policies may shape perceptions of migrants and their contributions to society. These policies and intercultural education initiatives align with Modood's (2013) assertion that multicultural approaches can serve as a foundation for intercultural dialogue (Modood, 2013). Conversely, Spain's regional diversity and the distinct cultural and linguistic identities of its autonomous communities lead to a more fragmented political landscape, which could potentially influence students' perceptions of identity and tolerance differently (Appiah, 2017; Sen, 2007). These differences highlight the importance of considering national and regional contexts when evaluating intercultural attitudes.

Portuguese students demonstrated greater recognition of migrants' contributions to local prosperity, with nearly half reporting familiarity with migrants who had significantly impacted their communities, compared with 36.8% among Spanish students. This distinction may reflect differences in national discourses on immigration and diversity (Ramos, 2011). However, both groups displayed discomfort related to specific differences, such as language and religion, highlighting the need for targeted educational initiatives to address these areas. Dervin's (2016) findings on intercultural discomfort support the importance of fostering empathy and inclusivity through intercultural education, as further advocated by Porto et al. (2020).

The observed differences between Portuguese and Spanish students largely reflect the distinct sociopolitical and educational contexts of each country. Portuguese students demonstrated significantly greater knowledge about irregular migrants' access to public health services ($\chi^2 = 10.558$; $p < 0.05$) and, particularly, about the representation of different ethnic, religious, and linguistic groups in municipal councils ($\chi^2 = 63.267$; $p < 0.01$; $V = 0.52$). This latter finding, with a large effect size, suggests that Portuguese national policies may have more consistently emphasized the inclusion of migrants in public services and the democratic representation of diverse groups, possibly through public awareness campaigns or the systematic integration of these topics into educational curricula. Portugal's historical connections with Portuguese-speaking countries, namely Brazil, Angola, Mozambique, Cape Verde, and Guinea-Bissau, have resulted in significant migratory flows and the creation of integration policies that recognize these communities as part of Portuguese national identity, which may have contributed to greater familiarization with cultural diversity among

students.

4.2. Participation and democratic engagement

The study also uncovered gaps in civic knowledge, particularly regarding local political representation. Fig. 2 illustrates that students in both countries lacked awareness of councilors representing diverse groups, with 78.1% of Spanish students indicating they “did not know”, compared to 35.6% of Portuguese students selecting the same response. The large effect size ($V = 0.52$) for this specific finding underscores a substantial gap in civic awareness that is statistically robust within this sample. These findings emphasize the need for enhanced civic education to promote inclusive democratic engagement. Civic education is essential for cultivating informed and active participation in democratic processes (Delors, 2010). Deardorff (2006) proposed that incorporating intercultural competence into civic education could bridge these knowledge gaps and foster greater inclusivity in political engagement.

Interestingly, while earlier discussions noted some underlying attitudes of superiority among students, Portuguese students exhibited more inclusive and proactive behaviors in social contexts. They frequently welcomed individuals from diverse backgrounds into their work groups and friendships, demonstrating significant openness to diversity. This inclusivity is associated with a deeper understanding of equality and access to public services, such as health and education, potentially highlighting the influence of progressive social inclusion policies in Portugal. These behaviors contrast with attitudes of superiority and emphasize the potential impact of tailored educational initiatives in fostering intercultural citizenship.

4.3. Equality and access to services

Portuguese and Spanish students expressed empathy for equitable treatment and supported behaviors that promote equality, providing a strong foundation for future initiatives to foster social inclusion and cohesion. Portuguese students' better-informed perspectives on public service access reflect the impact of national social inclusion frameworks. These findings align with Tum's perspective that interculturality entails coexistence and mutual appreciation of cultural differences (Council of Europe, 2008; Said, 1978).

While the findings reveal general trends in students' perceptions of cultural diversity and civic participation, they should not be interpreted as definitive representations of each national context. Spain and Portugal exhibit significant internal cultural diversity, and these results reflect the attitudes of the sampled populations rather than universal perspectives. Recognising the internal diversity and fluidity within societies is essential, avoiding essentialist or overly generalized interpretations (Cantle, 2012; Modood, 2013).

The results underscore the need for enhanced intercultural understanding and for civic education policies that emphasize inclusivity and empathy. To address observed gaps, educational initiatives should incorporate intercultural training programs, modules on democratic rights and responsibilities, and experiential learning activities designed to foster empathy toward diverse cultural and social groups. These programs should be tailored to align with each country's sociopolitical contexts and curricular frameworks, ensuring they cultivate globally conscious and socially engaged citizens.

The observed differences in identity sources, attitudes toward migrants, and dispositions toward civic participation underscore the impact of each country's unique sociocultural and political contexts. Portugal's emphasis on progressive immigration policies and intercultural education appears to foster more inclusive perspectives and greater recognition of migrants' contributions to local communities. Conversely, Spain's regional diversity and complex political landscape (shaped by autonomous communities with distinct cultural and linguistic identities) may influence students' perceptions of identity and tolerance toward newcomers. Additionally, variations in civic education curricula and the

prominence of discourse on civic rights and responsibilities may contribute to the observed differences in civic knowledge and attitudes.

These findings provide a valuable foundation for understanding intercultural citizenship within European contexts. They highlight the critical role of educational strategies in bridging civic knowledge gaps and promoting intercultural competence. Future research could build on these insights through longitudinal and mixed methods approaches, offering a deeper understanding of the evolving perceptions of cultural diversity and civic engagement among university students.

These findings underscore the need for systematic discussions of immigration and education policies in both countries. Such talks should consider how these policies influence societal attitudes toward diversity and inclusion. Strategic improvements in intercultural education programs should leverage cultural diversity as a resource, fostering a more inclusive and empathetic societal framework.

4.4. Strengths and contributions of the study

This study is distinguished by several strengths that enrich its contribution to the field of intercultural citizenship. Firstly, its cross-national comparative design between Portugal and Spain offers a nuanced understanding of how distinct sociopolitical and educational landscapes in Southern Europe influence students' perceptions of diversity and civic engagement. Secondly, methodological rigor is ensured by the use of a validated instrument with high internal consistency, standardized data collection procedures, and the application of appropriate statistical tests, including effect sizes (Cramér's V), guaranteeing the robustness and transparency of the findings (Cohen, 2013). Additionally, the thematic relevance of the study is undeniable, focusing on intercultural citizenship and diversity in higher education, a topic aligned with current European policy debates on social cohesion and democratic participation. Finally, by providing empirical evidence from an under-researched context, the study offers valuable insights for educational policymakers seeking to foster inclusive and globally conscious citizens.

4.5. Limitations and future research

Despite its contributions, this study presents several limitations that should be acknowledged to ensure methodological transparency and guide future research.

The purposive sampling strategy and the focus on specific higher education institutions in Portugal and Spain limit the generalizability of the findings, reflecting the perceptions of the sampled populations rather than all university students in both countries.

Furthermore, the gender imbalance in the sample, with a predominance of female participants (78.5%), may influence reported attitudes and behaviors, as gender has been shown to influence perceptions of diversity and civic engagement.

The reliance on self-reported data via a questionnaire may introduce social desirability bias, leading participants to provide responses they perceive as more socially acceptable, particularly on sensitive topics such as intercultural interaction and equality.

The cross-sectional nature of the study provides a snapshot of attitudes at a single point in time, limiting analysis of how these perceptions evolve over time and the establishment of causal relationships.

For future investigations, longitudinal and mixed-methods approaches with larger, more diverse samples are recommended to deepen understanding of evolving perceptions of cultural diversity and civic engagement among university students.

4.6. Policy-oriented recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, we formulate the following policy-oriented recommendations to strengthen intercultural citizenship in higher education. It is crucial to integrate intercultural training and

civic education modules into the curriculum to address identified knowledge gaps, especially in democratic participation and political representation. Additionally, priority should be given to experiential learning through activities that promote empathy and practical intercultural engagement, enabling students to develop competencies for navigating diverse contexts.

The contextual adaptation of interventions is fundamental, ensuring they align with each country's specific sociopolitical and curricular frameworks, thereby guaranteeing their effectiveness and relevance in fostering globally conscious and socially engaged citizens.

While the findings reveal general trends in students' perceptions, they should not be interpreted as definitive representations of each national context. Spain and Portugal exhibit significant internal cultural diversity, and these results reflect the attitudes of the sampled populations rather than universal perspectives. Recognising the internal diversity and fluidity within societies is essential, avoiding essentialist or overly generalized interpretations (Cantle, 2012; Council of Europe, 2008).

5. Conclusions

The findings suggest that intercultural education policies in both countries may already be contributing to greater social inclusion. However, they must be continually adapted to address the changing sociopolitical landscape and the needs of diverse student populations. Most students in both countries demonstrated supportive attitudes, indicating that existing educational frameworks have likely contributed to promoting inclusion and intercultural understanding.

The observed differences in sources of identity, attitudes toward migrants, and dispositions toward civic participation reflect the influence of each country's unique sociocultural and political contexts. Portuguese students generally showed greater openness and proactivity toward inclusion, while Spanish students demonstrated greater tolerance for diversity in their immediate environments. These findings, supported by the reported effect sizes, emphasize the importance of considering local sociocultural factors when designing interventions.

Regarding equal access to public services, Portuguese students were better informed and more positive, which aligns with the impact of Portugal's social inclusion policies. These results provide valuable guidance for future research and practical actions to strengthen intercultural citizenship. Portuguese students demonstrated this understanding through their responses, which highlighted their recognition of the role of equality of public services in fostering social inclusion.

CRedit authorship contribution statement

David Pérez-Jorge: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Methodology, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Elza Mesquita:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Ilda Freire-Ribeiro:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Supervision, Investigation, Funding acquisition, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Itahisa Pérez-Pérez:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Visualization, Supervision, Project administration, Formal analysis, Conceptualization.

Studies involving human participants

This study was approved by the European Scientific Institute Ethics Committee (ESI 2024/015). All participants provided written informed consent. The research complies with the Declaration of Helsinki and

guarantees anonymity, confidentiality, and voluntary participation.

Data availability statement

The data supporting this study are not publicly available due to participant privacy restrictions, but are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

Declaration of the use of AI

The authors used artificial intelligence tools to assist with language editing and to improve the readability of the manuscript. The authors take full responsibility for the content of the manuscript.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ssaho.2026.102839>.

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