

## The feeling of belonging and inclusion in a European outermost university

### Abstract

Belong project aims to enhance the inclusivity of teaching as a way of improving wellbeing and creating a sense of belonging of students and teachers. We expect this will have measurable positive impact on student experience and quality of learning. In this article, the effort is to understand the feeling of belonging and inclusion of students and staff in a European outermost region, and this work focuses on this region.

We aim to describe the development of the transnational project of Belong, as far as it concerns the University of Madeira (UMa). Inspired in *Impact Gaps Canvas*<sup>1</sup> and the *Six Conditions of Systems Change*<sup>2</sup>, our team wishes to convey a quick view about the process and the results. The multiple case study method was used and survey and focus group techniques were used.

This research project was approved by the Ethics Committee and the Data Protection Officer of the University of Madeira. Anonymity and confidentiality were guaranteed and respect the recommendations of the Declaration of Helsinki, the European Union, the World Health Organization, the General Regulation for Protection of Data, the Code of Conduct of Universidade da Madeira and additional applicable legislation, on what concerns research with human participants, animals and/or personal data.

### Introduction

Formally starting in May 2022, with a face-to-face meeting in Bratislava (Slovakia), and later, in September 2022, refined in Brno (Czech Republic), in terms of tasks, task groups and timescales, we may say that the research project was launched in each national HEI, soon after this second meeting.

In the University of Madeira, we began the project by translating all documents (surveys and interviews guides for students, staff, and experts), adapting them to our reality when necessary, and by collecting all institutional documents directly or indirectly appealing to Well-being, Inclusiveness and Belonging.

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<sup>1</sup> Papi-Thornton, D., 2018. *The Impact Gaps Canvas: Tackling Heropreneurship*. Available at: <https://tacklingheropreneurship.com/the-impact-gaps-canvas/> [Accessed 5 September 2022].

<sup>2</sup> Kania, J., Kramer, M. and Senge, P., 2018. *The Water Systems Change*. FSG.

The application of the surveys to students and staff was made during the period scheduled for all the partner institutions. 459 students (out of 3503) and 161 members of teaching and non-teaching staff (out of 379) answered. The three focus groups (staff, students and experts) followed the interviews guide, after the agreement through the consent form. The selection of these groups was made according to the criteria established by the general and local coordination of the Project.

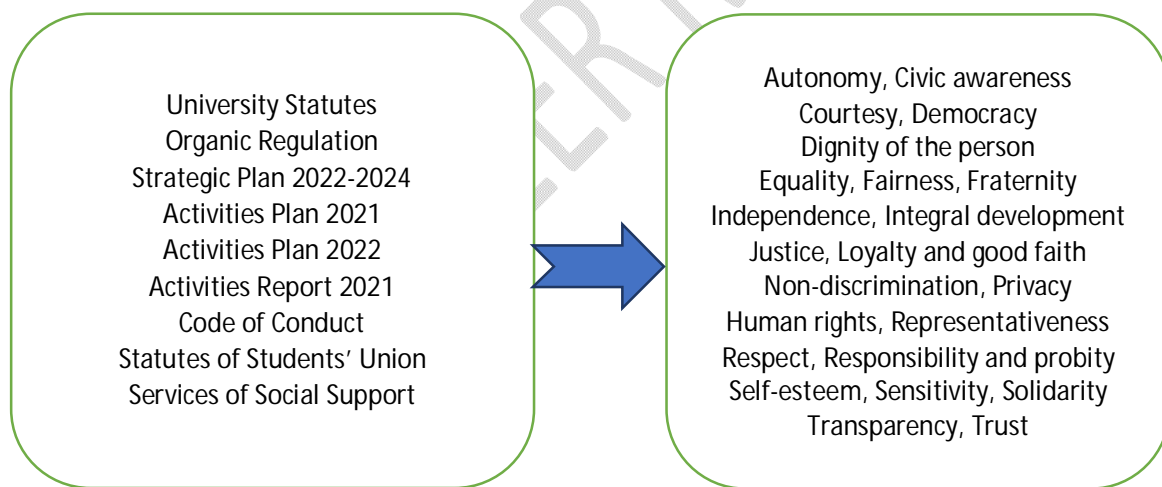
Taking into account the knowledge we've got from this research project, we propose an Action Plan based on five axes: General support, Communication, Interculturality and Policies.

### 1. The challenge

Trying to map the challenge (the problem), we started with an exhaustive document analysis (desk research) of the most important regulatory institutional documents, searching for all references linked to the issue of Well-being, Inclusiveness and sense of Belonging in the institution, according to Figure 1.

**Figure 1**

*Declared institutional political intentions and the claimed Values*



In a transversal dimension, the official discourse of the University of Madeira appeals to the values that underlie its mission: well-being, inclusion and a sense of belonging, and this is clearly mentioned in the different documents and institutional regulations.

Then, trying to x-ray the feeling of Well-being, Inclusion and sense of Belonging in the academic community, we've launched **questionnaires** both to the students and the staff (see Table 1 and Table 2, in the Appendix), followed by **interviews** to students, staff and experts in **focus group formats**.

The student's survey was answered by 459 students (out of 3503). In general, students feel understood, connected to the staff, welcomed at UMa, and respected by peers

and staff. Most students feel that they are important to the institution in some way. But 41 responded that they do not feel important to the institution and 24 students answered that they do not feel they belong to the institution. Most students reported that they have a positive mental health status. But 48 responded that they are diagnosed with mental health problems. The mental health problems most reported by students were, respectively: anxiety, depression, eating disorders, ADHD, autism, schizophrenia, alcohol, and bipolar disorder. Considering the specific period of survey data collection, and during some days of the last two weeks, half of the students responded that they felt anxious, 42% responded that they had felt a lack of control and 47% reported feeling disinterested.

Analyzing the survey staff 161 members of teaching and non-teaching staff (out of 379) answered. Most of the staff feel understood as a person in the institution and very well connected to other staff and to students. They feel positively welcomed at UMa, respected by students, other staff, middle managers and top managers. And also most of the staff state that they feel a sense of belonging at UMa. Only one member said he/she does not feel a sense of belonging at all, and 8 stated that they don't feel much of a sense of belonging. 12 staffs stated that they have been diagnosed with mental health problems. The mental health problems most often cited by the staffs were depression, anxiety, burnout, and schizophrenia. In academic life, 38% feel very satisfied. But, considering the specific period of the survey data collection, and during some days of the last two weeks, 46% of the staff described feeling anxious.

In a more intimate **focus group** approach, the three groups (students, staff and experts) referred some reasons why part of the community does not feel either included or with a sense of belonging to the university, in spite of several measures taken by this HEI. Figure 2 tries to make a snapshot about those reasons.

Bureaucracy and heavy teaching load  
 Demotivation due to difficulties in the career progression  
 Demotivation due to the evaluation method  
 Discrimination and rejection for nationality or age  
 Isolation due to the lack of team-work  
 Increasing number of students in the classes  
 Lack of recognition of the value and work of each one  
 Lack of engagement of the community by the Rectorship  
 Lack of identification with the institution's objectives and values  
 Lack of information and communication  
 Lack of interaction with others, due to lack of time  
 Lack of means provided by the State  
 Lack of preparation to effectively carry out the inclusion of international students  
 Physical separation of the Campus from the Rectorship  
 Problems of psychological and mental health  
 Reduced number of non-teaching staff representatives in the General Council  
 Students' withdrawal and school failure  
 Xenophobic situations

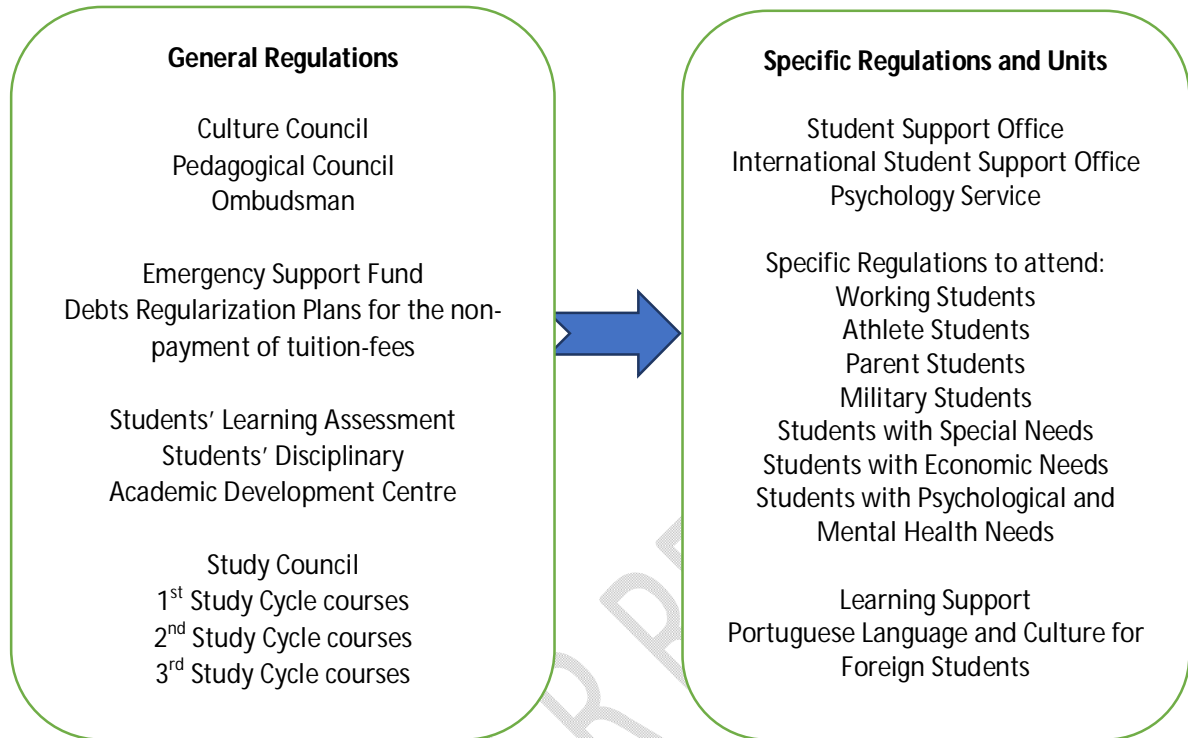
**Figure 2**  
*Mapping the problem*

## 2. Solutions mapping

Being aware of the problems concerning the Well-being, Inclusiveness and sense of Belonging, the university approved various Regulations and other measures more addressed to only respond to specific needs of students, according to the Figure 3. Some units/offices were created aiming at helping the students in their integration not only in the academy but also in Madeira. With the motto "For the persons with the persons", the university claims for a learning environment of peace and harmony, defending dialogue and reflection on the way the university works. It also stimulates the students' participation at different levels, involving them both in scientific and cultural activities, in social volunteering, intergenerational programs, sports, leisure, etc. There is a concern with the students and staff Well-being, not only of native but also of foreign people. The Code of Conduct forbids the discrimination based on race, religion, ethnics, political filiation, age, gender, sexual orientation, or familiar situation."

**Figure 3**

*General and specific measures to solve the problem (just for the students)*



Going on with the documentary analysis, to describe the solutions for the Well-being, Inclusion and sense of Belonging in a more specific way, regarding its impact on students (notice that staff is not included), we drew some concrete measures from the institutional regulatory texts. These ones, together with the measures mentioned in the focus groups, are reported on Figure 4. In fact, beyond the specific regulations and the offices created to address the issue of Well-being, Inclusion and Belonging to the institution, only addressed to the students, some other initiatives have been taken.

**Figure 4**

*Concrete measures to solve the problem (just for the students)*

Additional time for carrying out assessment tests  
Alternative dates for assessment tests  
Audio recording of teaching activities  
Creation of a Commission for Analysis and Monitoring of Students with Special Needs (CAA-NE).  
Elimination of architectural barriers and emergency aid  
Extension of deadlines for delivering assignments  
Instruction of visa processes  
Interpreter, guide dog or other; Mobility and accessibility  
Priority in any act of enrollment, choice of class and timetable  
Priority service in the canteen and cafeterias  
Programs led by Students' Union: sports programs, social programs, "Brilliant Minds", volunteering activities  
Protocol with SESARAM for (mental) health matters  
Psychological/pedagogical follow-up  
Psychology Service, with its WellBEING project and Health ambassadors  
Replacement of written tests with oral tests, or vice versa  
Right to choose places in classrooms  
Social support: scholarships, accommodation and food  
Special conditions of frequency and evaluation  
Student Life Observatory for a regular analysis of students' needs  
Student Support Office and International Student Support Office  
Supplementary pedagogical support and technical aids  
Tutorial regime by colleagues from advanced years and teachers  
WellBEING spots (various forms of expression (art, music, theater, physical education), aiming at psychological literacy

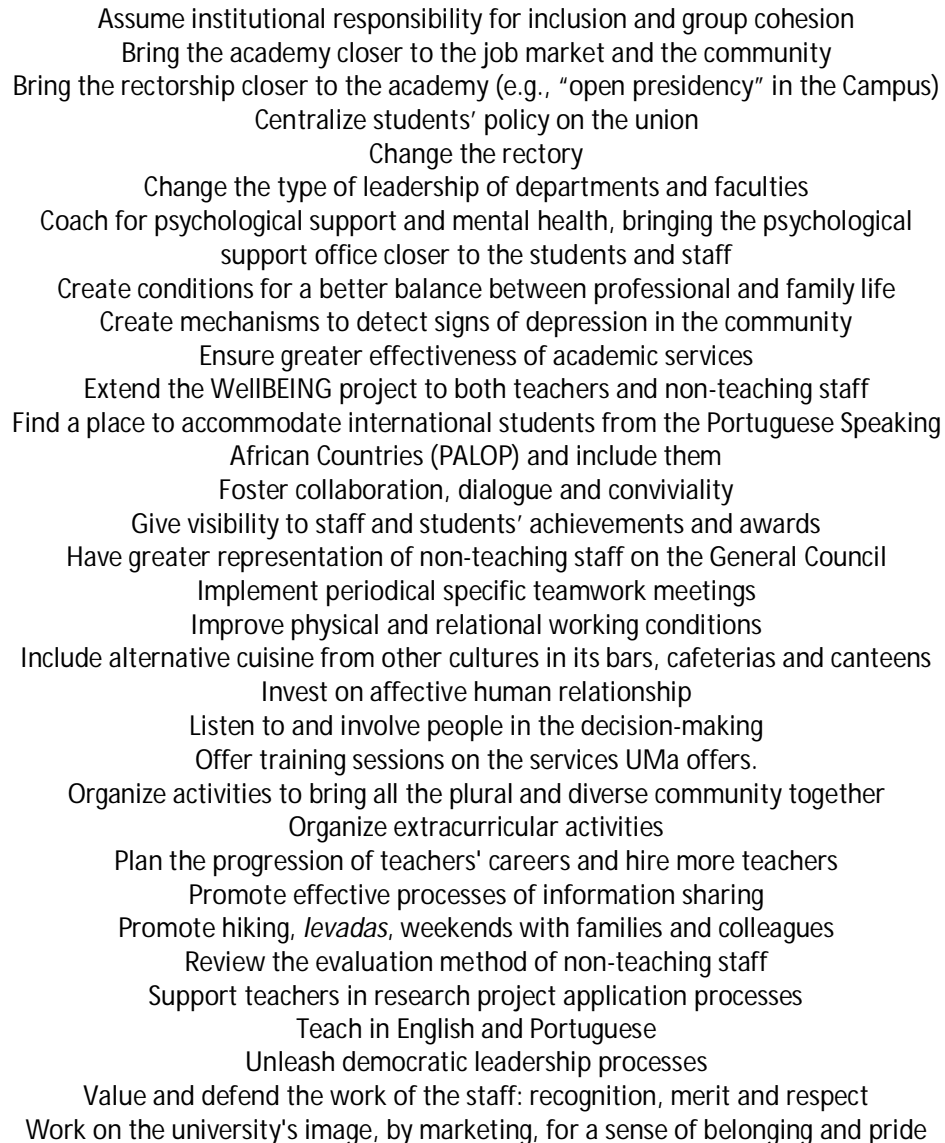
The declared institutional intentions and the corresponding regulatory documents aim to create an academic environment of Well-being, Inclusiveness and sense of Belonging, among the students. In addition, some meritorious initiatives were taken to include them and to promote their mental health, to face the existing problems.

### 3. Impact gaps

Even so, there are still some fringes of the population of this HEI who do not feel well in the university. So, what is still missing to close the gap between the persisting problems and the current solutions? Some suggestions came from the 3 focus groups:

#### Figure 5

*What is still missing?*



- Assume institutional responsibility for inclusion and group cohesion
- Bring the academy closer to the job market and the community
- Bring the rectorship closer to the academy (e.g., "open presidency" in the Campus)
- Centralize students' policy on the union
- Change the rectorry
- Change the type of leadership of departments and faculties
- Coach for psychological support and mental health, bringing the psychological support office closer to the students and staff
- Create conditions for a better balance between professional and family life
- Create mechanisms to detect signs of depression in the community
- Ensure greater effectiveness of academic services
- Extend the WellBEING project to both teachers and non-teaching staff
- Find a place to accommodate international students from the Portuguese Speaking African Countries (PALOP) and include them
- Foster collaboration, dialogue and conviviality
- Give visibility to staff and students' achievements and awards
- Have greater representation of non-teaching staff on the General Council
- Implement periodical specific teamwork meetings
- Improve physical and relational working conditions
- Include alternative cuisine from other cultures in its bars, cafeterias and canteens
- Invest on affective human relationship
- Listen to and involve people in the decision-making
- Offer training sessions on the services UMa offers.
- Organize activities to bring all the plural and diverse community together
- Organize extracurricular activities
- Plan the progression of teachers' careers and hire more teachers
- Promote effective processes of information sharing
- Promote hiking, *levadas*, weekends with families and colleagues
- Review the evaluation method of non-teaching staff
- Support teachers in research project application processes
- Teach in English and Portuguese
- Unleash democratic leadership processes
- Value and defend the work of the staff: recognition, merit and respect
- Work on the university's image, by marketing, for a sense of belonging and pride

Recognizing the persistent problems, in a way partially contradicting the positive feeling conveyed, in general, by the responses to the questionnaires, the focus groups recommended the above measures (see Fig. 5).

#### 4. Conclusions

Taking into account the knowledge we've got from this research project, we propose the following Action Plan based on five axes:

##### 1. General support:

- a) Intensify publicity about the availability of psychological support, which may be offered to students and staff.
- b) Provide students with continuous training.
- c) Bring the psychological support office closer to the students and staff.
- d) Provide technical support for the submission of research projects.
- e) Offer teamwork strategies.

##### 2. Management:

- a) Hold periodic meetings between different positions in the institution, to discuss strategies and results (constantly renew action plans).
- b) Create, students together with the course directors, a virtual space for building a more democratic institution.
- c) Bring academia closer to the population and the job market.

##### 3. Communication:

- a) Open a certain type of space so that students and staff can express, even if anonymously, their opinions and other considerations regarding how they feel, institutionally and individually.
- b) Treat information as a sharing process.

##### 4. Interculturality

- a) Include non-Portuguese cuisine in canteens and bars.
- b) Organize extracurricular activities.

##### 5. Policies

- a) Centralize union policies to ensure cohesion, namely through former students.
- b) Have a physical representation of the rectorship on the Campus.
- c) Teaching also in English.
- d) Include international students and staff.
- e) Review the assessment of non-teaching staff.

- f) Ensure greater representation for non-teaching staff.
- g) Promote a culture of merit, respect and recognition.
- h) Define the institution's educational policies based on the value of its human resources.

Almost getting to the end of this article, the authors recognize this research project has been quite useful to better know the environment of this HEI and its problems in terms of Well-being, Inclusiveness and sense of Belonging, through the different voices of the University of Madeira, and how the solutions may help for the cohesion of this community. The main conclusion is that not only students need to be cared, but also the permanent staff, teaching and non-teaching staff.

We thank all the contributions freely given by the participants, either responding to the questionnaires, or saying their opinions in the focus groups.

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