The Feeling of Belonging and Inclusion in a European Outermost University

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Authors' contributions

This work was carried out in collaboration among all authors. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

Original Research Article

ABSTRACT

It is our wish to describe the development of a transnational research project, aiming to enhance the feeling of belonging and inclusion, as a way of improving student and staff's wellbeing, particularly at a university of a European outermost region, Madeira. Even though similar studies have been carried out in other four European universities, this paper is only focused on the University of Madeira.

The multiple case study method was used [1-3], based on documentary analysis, surveys and focus group techniques [4] for the collected data triangulation.

Inspired in "Impact Gaps Canvas" [5] and the "Six Conditions of Systems Change" [6], the paper wishes to convey a quick view about the process and the results in terms of policy recommendations to improve the feeling of belonging, at the University of Madeira, expecting it has a positive impact on student and staff experience and quality of learning and teaching, according to the literature review.

Keywords: Belonging; inclusion; wellbeing; higher education institution.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Better Education through Long-term Investment into Inclusiveness and Student & Staff Wellbeing (BELONG) is the name of a research project financed by the European Commission (grant no. 2021-1-SK01-KA220-HED-000023528), involving five European Higher Education Institutions (HEI): Central European University (Austria), Comenius University (Slovakia), Masaryk University (Czech Republic), Nottingham Trent University (United Kingdom) and University of Madeira (Portugal). But this paper is only about the project development focused on the University of Madeira.

The purpose of this study was to understand the level of belonging students and staff feel towards their university and its consequences for their mental health to come up with policy recommendations to improve that sense of belonging.

The 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 the University of Madeira, and additional applicable legislation, on what concerns research with human participants, animals and/or personal data.

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. Our effort focuses on making everyone an aggregator element of the sense of belonging to reduce feelings of exclusion and loneliness, because we believe that "The experience of belongingness can protect against the adverse effects of loneliness, including depression, anxiety, and a range of physical health problems" [7].

2. METHODOLOGY

In our university, we began the project by translating from English to Portuguese 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 Wellbeing, Inclusiveness and Belonging. No one can live alone. What we are depends on interpersonal relationships. Hence, Baumeister and Leary [8] mention that "Human beings have a pervasive drive to form and maintain at least a minimum quantity of lasting, positive, and significant interpersonal relationships" (p.497).

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. And 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.

Using different data collection instruments, whether quantitative or qualitative, was a way to strengthen the results of the research we proposed. "For these and other reasons, it is important that case study researchers be familiar with the full range of case selection techniques available, both quantitative and qualitative. While choices may depend on personal preferences and skills, a basic understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of different techniques is vital to ensure the selection of suitable cases for the project at hand" [9].

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

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1 The Challenge

Institutional and regulatory obligations in defining social identity and wellbeing are fundamental because they guide us on the group's mission in the medium term. This requires the notion of belonging. "Sociability presupposes personal identity and social recognition. The idea of belonging implies changing, establishing, reinforcing or modifying attitudes" [10]. Ultimately, it is the creation of a social identity and the importance of that "social identity to health and well-being is reflected in evidence showing that greater identification with a social

group is linked to higher levels of self-esteem, greater psychological well-being, and a range of positive health outcomes" [7].

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 Wellbeing, Inclusiveness, and sense of Belonging in the institution, according to Fig. 1.

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

Then, trying to x-ray the feeling of Wellbeing, Inclusion, and sense of Belonging in the academic community, we've launched surveys both to the students and the staff (see Figs. 2, 3, 4, 5, 6 and 7), followed by interviews to students, staff and experts in focus group formats.

Of the 459 students who responded to the survey, 285 are female and 120 are male, with the average age range being 22. 245 of the students are, in the sense of stable union, single. 33 students declared themselves as bisexual and 14 as homosexual. Of the overall number of students, 394 are UMa students, with 15 being international students. Most of the students are undergraduate students. With average entrance to university, the students presented 14 values. The average attendance was recorded as 4 years.

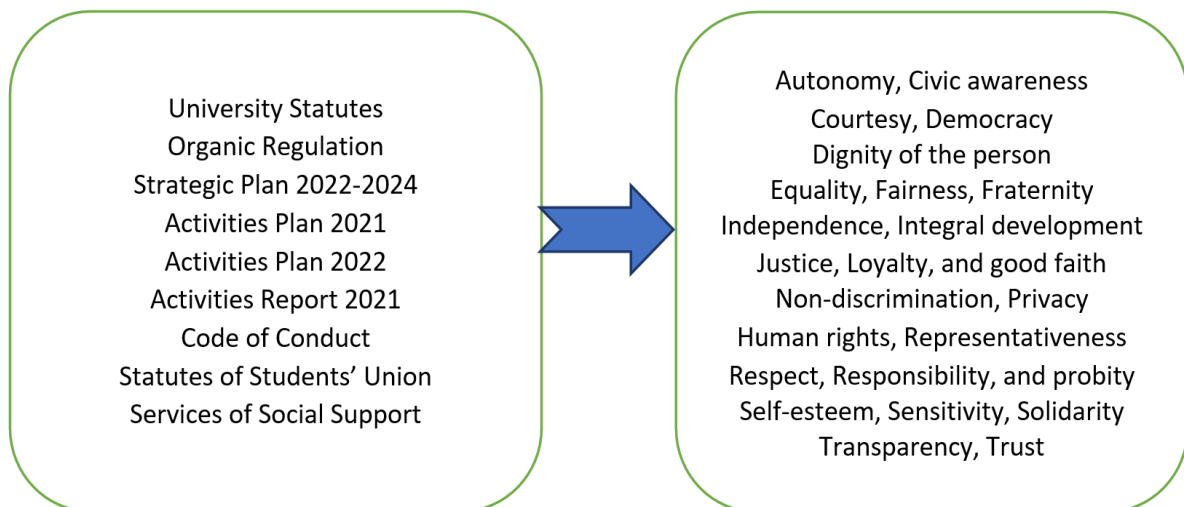**Fig. 1. Declared institutional political intentions and the claimed values**

WHAT 459 STUDENTS THINK AND WHO ARE THEY?

Average age: 22 years old
Average university entrance grade: 14 points
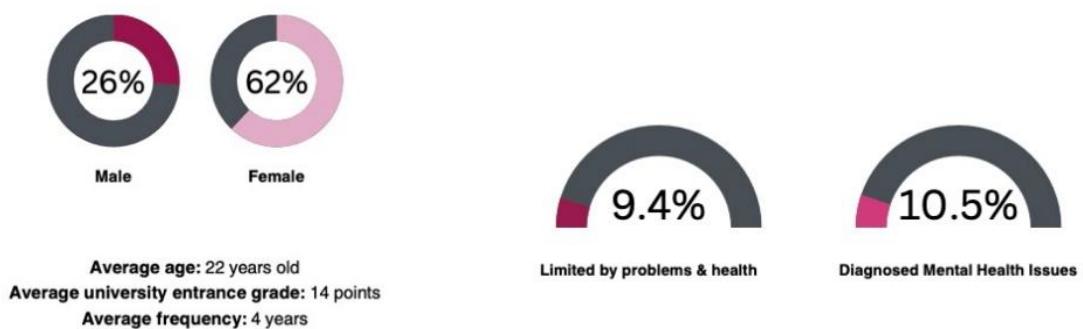Average frequency: 4 years

Fig. 2. UMa students survey

The academic performance of the students is considered positive. Of the 459 students, 43 report having limitations due to health issues. Students feel understood, connected to the staff, welcomed at UMa, 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. Students believe that the choice of UMa in their academic path was positive and consider that the experience they get at UMa is positive.

The feeling of being at UMa is considered by students to be positive. Belonging to UMa is considered by most students as something positive. But 24 students answered that they do not feel they belong to the institution. In aspects related to personal life, students answered that they rarely miss company and that they rarely feel abandoned and isolated.

Sense of belonging to UMa

Sense of importance in UMa

Fig. 3. UMa students sense of belonging

On the social level, the students said they felt neither satisfied nor dissatisfied. On the family level, they said they felt very satisfied. But in the academic life, they described themselves as not very satisfied. In health, in general, they said they were very satisfied. But in specifically mental health, there was an average response between not very satisfied and very satisfied.

Considering the specific period of survey data collection, half of the students responded that they felt anxious during some days of the last two weeks. 42% responded that they had felt a lack of control during some days in the past two weeks. Regarding disinterest, 47% reported

feeling this way during some days of the past two weeks. And regarding feeling depressed, 44% of the students reported feeling this way for a few days out of the last two weeks.

Considering the same specific time of data collection, 33% of the students revealed feeling cheerful during the last two weeks for more than half of the time. When it came to feeling relaxed, 29% responded that they had felt this way for less than half the time in the past two weeks. With regard to feeling active, 27% responded that they had only been in this state for less than half the time in the past two weeks. Thirty percent reported feeling rested only for less than half the time in the past two weeks. On the issue of interest, 26% of the students have felt in this state for more than half the time of the last two weeks.
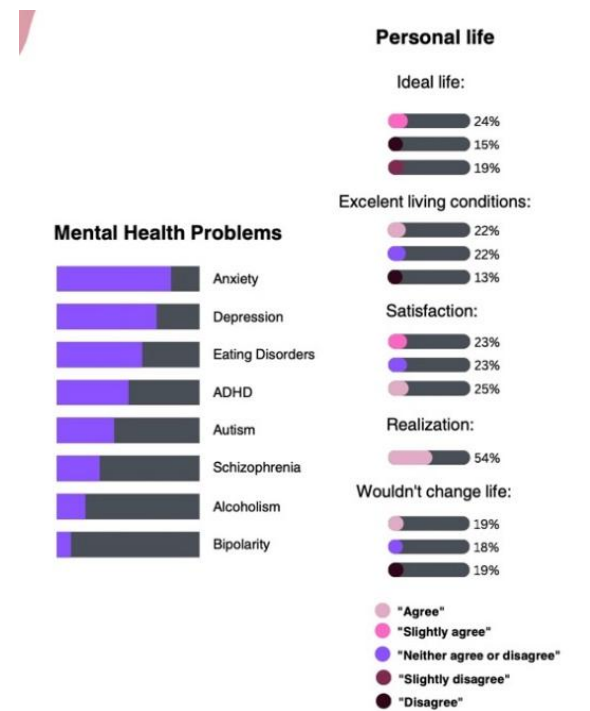
Fig. 4. UMa students personal life

In more aspects of personal life, 24% of the students slightly agreed that they have an ideal life and between 15% and 19% answered neither disagree nor slightly disagree. Regarding having an excellent living condition, there was a tie in the students' responses between neither agree nor disagree and agree, adding up to 22%. 13% of the students disagreed. On the topic of satisfaction, 23% of the students neither agreed nor disagreed that they felt this way, as well as 23% said they agreed slightly. 25% agreed,

uniquely. On the aspect of achievement, 54% of the students reported feeling positively fulfilled. On the question of changing life, there was a tie on almost all of the variables proposed.

About the interviews, they "are one of the most common sources of data in case study research. With the interview, the researcher can probe for underlying causes, explore individuals' perceptions and experiences, and obtain in-depth information on processes" [11].

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. The way we see ourselves depends heavily on the environment that surrounds us and the interpretation we make of that context. As Oyserman, Elmore & Smith [12] say: "One way of thinking about the self is that it is the answer to the question, 'Who am I?' Specifically, the self is a way of organizing and interpreting the information we receive from the environment and from within ourselves in order to answer this question" (p.444).

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: 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 previous 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 staff's survey, 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 previous two weeks, 46% of the staff described themselves feeling anxious.
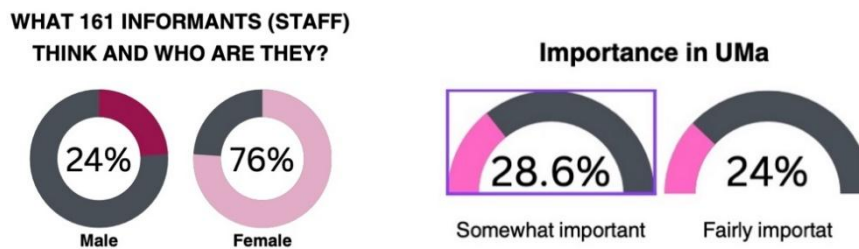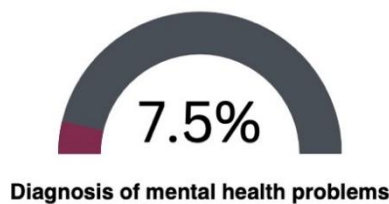

Fig. 5. UMa staff Survey

Fig. 6. UMa staff diagnosis with mental health problems

Mental Health

Answering to "in the past two weeks have you felt":

Anxious: 46%
Lack of control: 64%
Disintrested: 52%
Depressed: 65%

● "Some days"
● "Never"

Personal life

Ideal life: 39%

Excelent living conditions: 36%

Satisfaction: 48%

Realization: 48%

Answering to "in the past two weeks have you felt":

Happiness: 48%
Chilled out: 33%
29%

Active: 43%
Rested: 30%
20%
Interested: 39%

Wouldn't change life: 20%
27%

● "Agree"
● "Slightly agree"

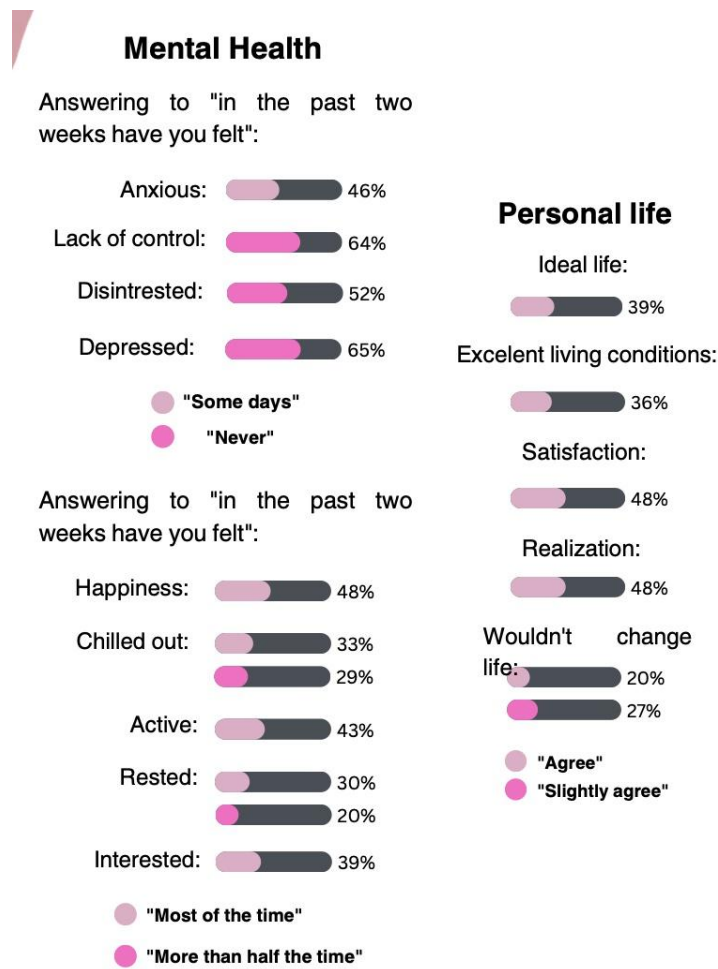● "Most of the time"
● "More than half the time"

Fig. 7. UMa staff mental health problems

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. Fig. 8 tries to make a snapshot about those reasons.

3.2 Solutions Mapping

Being aware of the problems concerning the Wellbeing, 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 Fig. 9. 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. Quoting Walton and Cohen [13], we may say "Our research suggests that a brief intervention that frames social adversity as common and transient can improve the academic and health outcomes of students who otherwise would be at risk of failure and dropout" (p.1450).

In fact, there is a concern with the student and staff's wellbeing, 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."

Going on with the documentary analysis [14], to describe the solutions for the Wellbeing, Inclusion, and sense of Belonging in a more specific way, regarding their impact on students
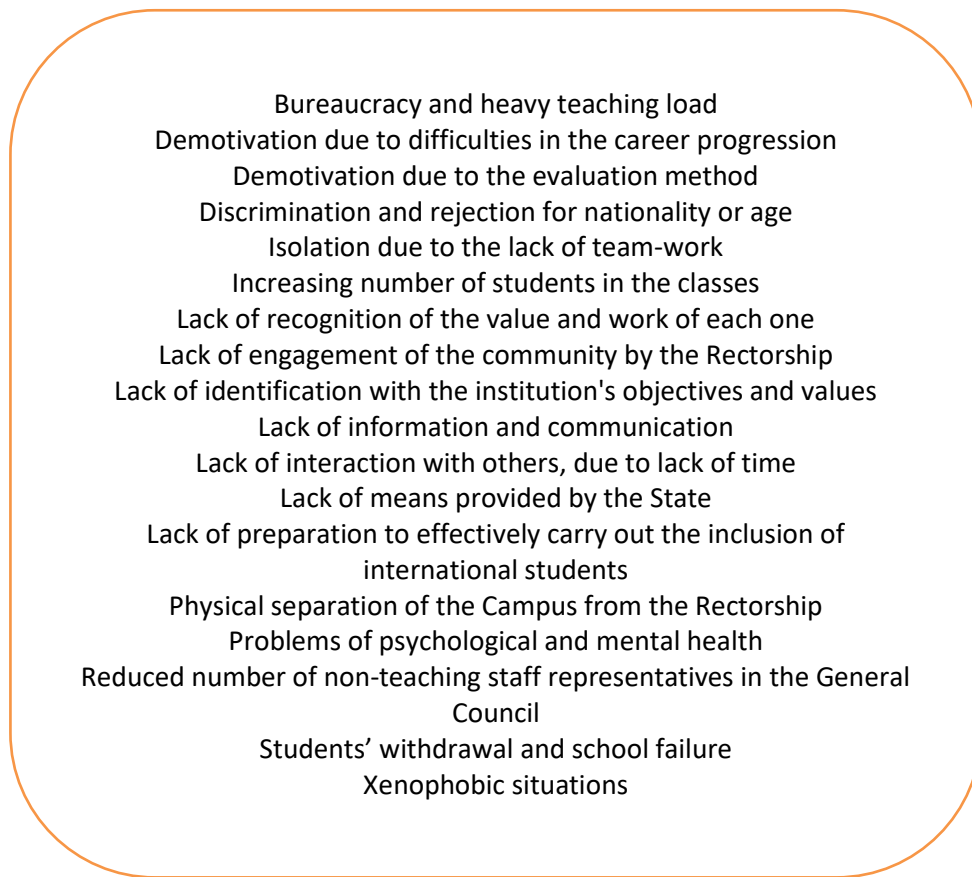
Bureaucracy and heavy teaching load
Demotivation due to difficulties in the career progression
Demotivation due to the evaluation method
Discrimination and rejection for nationality or age
Isolation due to the lack of team-work
Increasing number of students in the classes
Lack of recognition of the value 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

Fig. 8. Mapping the problem

General Regulations

Culture Council
Pedagogical Council
Ombudsman

Emergency Support Fund
Debts Regularization Plans for the non-
payment of tuition-fees

Students' Learning Assessment
Students' Disciplinary
Academic Development Centre

Study Council
1st Study Cycle courses
2nd Study Cycle courses
3rd Study Cycle courses

Specific Regulations and Units

Student Support Office
International Student Support Office
Psychology Service

Specific Regulations to attend:
Working Students
Athlete Students
Parent Students
Military Students
Students with Special Needs
Students with Economic Needs
Students with Psychological and
Mental Health Needs

Learning Support
Portuguese Language and Culture for
Foreign Students

Fig. 9. General and specific 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
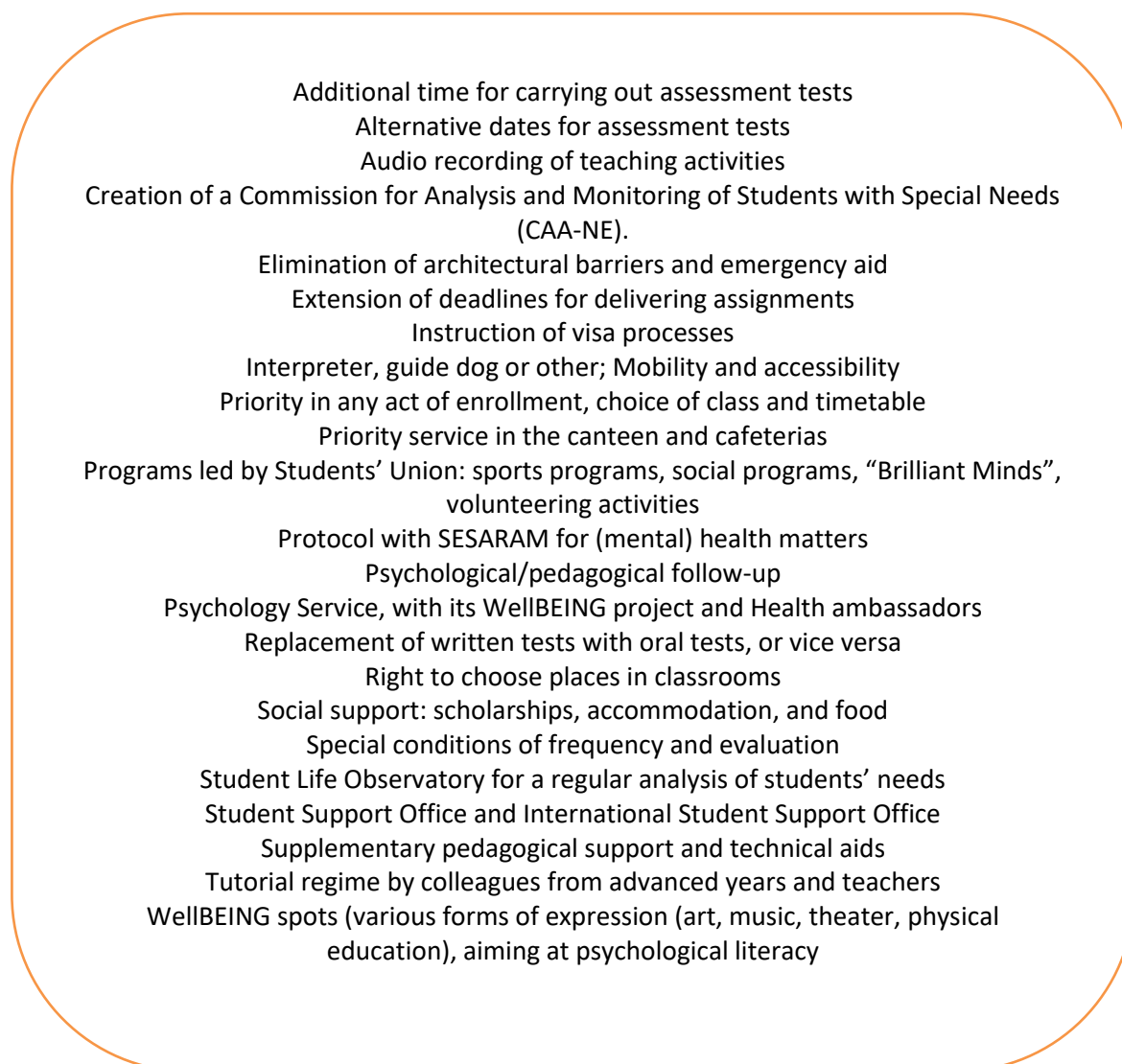
Fig. 10. Concrete measures to solve the problem (just for the students)

(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 Fig. 10. In fact, beyond the specific regulations and the offices created to address the issue of Wellbeing, Inclusion, and Belonging to the institution, only addressed to the students, some other initiatives have been taken.

The declared institutional intentions and the corresponding regulatory documents aim to create an academic environment of Wellbeing,

Inclusiveness, and sense of Belonging, among the students [15]. In addition, some meritorious initiatives were taken to include them and to promote their mental health, to face the existing problems. These initiatives should serve to consolidate the identity of everyone in the social group they belong to, but in reality, "Individuals' social identity and self-esteem depend on the status and prestige of the groups to which they belong. Group membership is thus an important aspect of personal identity, and the evaluative and emotional significance of ingroup and outgroup membership in intergroup relations has been amply demonstrated" [15].

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 rectory

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

Fig. 11. What is still missing?

3.3 Impact Gaps

Even so, there are still some fringes of the population of this HEI who do not feel well in the university. This feeling may cause situations of loneliness and isolation, anxiety, and depression. It can even make this feeling deeply physical, contributing to heart problems and obesity (notice that students refer to eating disorders in the "Order of Mental Health Problems" section of the survey). In addition, it leads to low self-esteem and confidence [7].

So, what is still missing to close the gap between the persistent problems and the current solutions? Some suggestions came from the three focus groups:

Recognizing the persistent problems, in a way partially contradicting the positive feeling conveyed, in general, by the responses to the surveys, the focus groups recommended the above measures (see Fig. 11) [16].

4. CONCLUSIONS

Taking into account the knowledge we've got from this research project, we proposed 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 paper, the authors recognize this research project has been quite useful to better know the environment of this HEI and its problems in terms of Wellbeing, 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 message here is clear: interventions that connect people to valued others, in contexts where those relationships are safe and secure, can bring a range of benefits, from enhanced health and well-being to the resolution of conflict." [7]

The main conclusion is that not only students need to be cared, but also the permanent staff, teaching, and non-teaching staff. "In sum, the social cure is a powerful force that can enhance our health and well-being, enabling us to overcome adversity and thrive in the face of challenge" [7].

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

COMPETING INTERESTS

Authors have declared that no competing interests exist.

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