

## Article

# Microbiological Contamination Assessment in Higher Education Institutes

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**Abstract:** The higher education sector represents a unique environment and it acts as a work environment, a learning environment for students, and frequently, also a home environment. The aim of this study was to determine the microbial contamination (SARS-CoV-2, fungi, and bacteria) in Higher Education Facilities (HEI) by using active and passive sampling methods and combining culture-based methods with molecular tools targeting *Aspergillus* section *Fumigati*. In addition, the resistance to azole profile was also assessed. Surface samples showed a range of total bacterial contamination between  $1 \times 10^3$  to  $3.1 \times 10^6$  CFU·m<sup>-2</sup>, while Gram-negative bacteria ranged from 0 to  $1.9 \times 10^4$  CFU·m<sup>-2</sup>. Fungal contamination ranged from  $2 \times 10^3$  to  $1.8 \times 10^5$  CFU·m<sup>-2</sup> on MEA, and from  $5 \times 10^3$  to  $1.7 \times 10^5$  CFU·m<sup>-2</sup> on DG18. The most prevalent species found on both media was *Cladosporium* sp. (47.36% MEA; 32.33% DG18). *Aspergillus* genera was observed on MEA (3.21%) and DG18 (14.66%), but not in the supplemented media used for the azole screening. *Aspergillus* section *Fumigati* was detected in 2 air samples (2.22%, 2 out of 90 samples) by qPCR. When testing for SARS-CoV-2 all results were negative. The present study showed that although cleaning and disinfection procedures are done regularly due to the COVID-19 pandemic, being effective in eliminating SARS-CoV-2, surfaces were often contaminated with microorganisms other than SARS-CoV-2. This can be a result of increasing resistance to biocides, and to the wide range of environmental factors that can contribute to the dissemination of microbial contamination indoors.

**Keywords:** active and passive sampling; fungi; bacteria; azole resistance screening; *Aspergillus* section *Fumigati*

## 1. Introduction

In the last few decades, several studies were conducted to understand the impact of indoor air quality (IAQ) in public health in different environments, including residential building, shopping malls, schools, health care centers, offices, museums, libraries, temples, and churches, among others [1–7]. It was indicated that decreased IAQ can negatively affect human health as most people spend around 90% of their time indoors, mainly at home or in the workplace [8]. Due to this, IAQ has emerged and received increasing attention from international scientific community, political institutions, and environmental governances [2,8,9]. The indoor air pollution (IAP), that refers to the existence of pollutants,

such as volatile organic compounds (VOCs), particulate matter (PM), inorganic compounds, physical chemicals, and microbiological agents, can influence negatively the IAQ and are harmful to the human health [8,9].

Health effects from indoor air pollutants may be experienced soon after exposure (immediately) or, possibly, years later (long-term) [10]. The respiratory system is often the primary to be affected by the IAP effects [8]. Exposure to microorganisms, in particular, is associated with irritating effects (eyes, nose, skin), allergic reactions (asthma, rhinitis), digestive problems, infectious diseases (pneumonia, tuberculosis, Legionnaire's disease, severe acute respiratory syndrome), and toxic reactions due to the presence of mycotoxins [8,11,12]. Furthermore, it is important to take into account that immunocompromised individuals are more susceptible to acquiring infections caused by microorganisms, which can sometimes be fatal [11,13–15]. A common example is that of *Aspergillus* conidia, which can be ubiquitous and are easily dispersed in the air [16]. From the various *Aspergillus* sections, *Fumigati* is the genus most frequently associated with respiratory symptoms [17]. Another major concern regarding microbial contamination is the emergence and spread of drug-resistant pathogens that have acquired new resistance mechanisms, leading to antimicrobial resistance, making it difficult or impossible to treat common infections [18]. In fact, the development of resistance to antifungal drugs, particularly in section *Fumigati*, is a phenomenon with growing prevalence in Europe that has been associated with therapeutic failure and high mortality rates [19]. Furthermore, the co-prevalence of SARS-CoV-2 in these environments can pose a serious threat to the health of all occupants [20]. In this context, assessing the microbial contamination is a useful and important tool of prevention to microbial exposure and to guarantee IAQ [21].

The higher education sector represents a unique environment acting as a work environment for faculty members, a learning environment for students, and frequently, a home environment for students [22]. Thus, faculties comprise a high population density that spend more than eight hours per day, five days a week inside their buildings [22–24]. In addition, the higher education buildings have a very wide usage as they include lecture halls, gyms, dormitories, day care, restaurants, garden, and laboratories [23,24]. Since many outbreaks of epidemic diseases are correlated with the presence of microorganisms in the air (for example, influenza A pandemic—H1N1 2009—was frequently reported in universities in 2009), the assessment of the level of microbiological contamination, especially in crowded places at universities, should be performed regularly [25].

Assessment of microbiological contamination in HEI has previously been performed in several facilities, such as classrooms, sports hall, laboratories, rooms, entrances, libraries, cafeterias, and restaurants [21,23,24,26–34]. However, each of the above-mentioned studies at universities focused mainly on a single type of indoor environment [35]. Importantly, SARS-CoV-2 detection has been carried out in a very limited number of HEI [36], being very relevant to assess it in additional HEI and compare its levels with those of other microorganisms that might be present indoors.

The aim of this study was to determine the microbial contamination (SARS-CoV-2, fungi, and bacteria) in HEI environment by using active and passive sampling methods and combining culture-based methods and molecular tools targeting *Aspergillus* section *Fumigati*. In addition, the resistance to azole profile was also assessed in the HEI analyzed.

## 2. Materials and Methods

### 2.1. Facilities Assessed and Sampling Sites

This study was performed between July and December 2020 in ten selected facilities of Portuguese HEI, including the presidency building (PB), social services (SS) and eight faculties (HEI 1 to HEI 8). It was part of an enlarged cross-sectional study with financial support to implement an integrated approach on Occupational Health to tackle the COVID-19 pandemic and microbiological contamination assessment aiming to ensure safety in academic recovery during the pandemic crises [37].

The ten facilities under study are located in the Lisbon district and all presented different core activities depending of their purpose and graduation courses held (Table 1).

The sampling sites were chosen based on previous selection by areas of facility by the Occupational Health Services, in the scope of SARS-CoV-2 surveillance held during the 2nd pandemic wave in Portugal and before starting the 2nd semester of the academic year 2020/2021. A walkthrough survey and checklist were applied in order to prioritize the most critical workplaces/areas in relation to SARS-CoV-2 contamination. In summary, sampling sites of each facility were selected according to the following criteria: 50–80% workplaces/facilities occupation, activities performed that can lead to higher number of workers per workplace and/or without a mask (cantine) or based on workers positive serologic surveillance results (positive result for IgM+ or IgG+) [37]. All the facilities implemented a contingency plan that included working, whenever possible, in home office even concerning theoretical lectures, wearing a mask indoor and outdoor (when 2 meters distance was not possible to ensure) and workers should remain at home (quarantine) when COVID-19 symptoms arise until further diagnose.

Environmental samples (air and surface samples) were performed in each area and 6 to 25 samples were collected at each location (Table 1). Most of the sampling sites were common among all the facilities, such as offices (including human and financial resources, academic services, logistics, accounting, and acquisition department), attendance room, reception rooms, auditoriums, meals spaces, bathrooms and libraries. Although there are classrooms in almost every location, the type of classroom analyzed varied widely in all locations, including rooms for music, dance, choir, theatre and multimedia, laboratories, and gyms. In addition, in some locations, there were samples collected from student's social rooms, workshops, changing rooms and professors' room (Table 1).

**Table 1.** Developed activities, areas sampled and samples number in each facility.

Study Site	Developed Activities/Graduation Courses Held	Assessed Areas	Surface Swabs (for SARS-CoV-2)	Surface Swabs (for Fungi and Bacteria)	Air Samples
PB	Presidency services that support the HEI in the activities common to the institution	Communication Office (Doorknob)	1	1	0
		Communication Office (Ventilation grids)	1	1	
		Drivers Reception (Counter)	1	1	
		Entrance (Touch screen and money)	1		
		Entrance (Buttons)	1	1	
		Lunchroom (Microwave and Coffee machine)	1	0	
		Lunchroom (Refrigerator)	1	0	
		Lunchroom (Ventilation grids)	1	1	
		Human Resources (Coffee machines)	1	0	
		Human Resources (Access card)	1	0	
		Human Resources (Staplers and stamps)	1	0	
		Human Resources (Ventilation grids)	1	1	
		Financial Resources (Staplers and stamps)	1	1	
		Human and Financial Resources (Windows)	1	0	
		Human and Financial Resources (Doorknob)	1	0	
		Financial Resources (Ventilation grids in operation)	1	1	
		Reception 1 (Printer)	1	0	
		Reception 2 (Table)	1	0	
		Acquisition Department (1st floor) (Windows)	1	0	
		Acquisition Department (1st floor) (Keys and card)	1	0	
		Acquisition Department (1st floor) (Ventilation grids in operation)	1	1	
		Male Bathroom (1st floor) (Doorknob and Faucets)	1	0	
		Female Bathroom (1st floor) (Doorknob and Faucets)	1	0	
		Corridor (1st floor) (Printer)	1	0	
		Academics, Quality and Planning Department (Mobile air conditioning equipment)	1	0	

Table 1. Cont.

Study Site	Developed Activities/Graduation Courses Held	Assessed Areas	Surface Swabs (for SARS-CoV-2)	Surface Swabs (for Fungi and Bacteria)	Air Samples
SS	Social services that implement the school social action policy and the provision of support and benefits to students who attend the institution	Lunchroom (Table)	0	1	
		Lunchroom (Microwave, Refrigerator)	1	1	1
		Lunchroom (Door)	1	1	
		Waiting Room/Classroom (Coffee Machine)	1	0	
		Waiting Room/Classroom (Coffee Machine, PC and eraser)	0	1	1
		Waiting Room/Classroom (Table)	1	1	
		Reception (Counter)	1	1	
		Reception (Door and Water Machine)	1	1	1
		Bathroom (Doors and Faucets)	1	1	
		Bathroom (Floor)	0	1	1
		Attendance Room (Table and Acrylic Protection)	1	1	1
		Accounting (Printer)	1	1	
		Accounting (Doors)	1	0	1
		Accounting (Floor)	0	1	
HEI 1	Health sciences and technologies for the exercise of skills in the field of disease prevention and health promotion, diagnosis and therapeutic intervention and rehabilitation	Logistics (Door and Window)	1	1	1
		Accounting/Provisioning (Printer, Door and Stapler)	1	1	1
		Academic Services (Printer SA and Printer corridor)	1	1	1
		Reception (Door, Handrail and Balcony)	1	1	0
		Bar (Chairs and Door)	1	1	1
		Library (Printer and Computer)	1	1	1
		Lunchroom (1st floor) (Fridge and microwave)	1	1	1
		Lunchroom (2nd floor) (Fridge and microwave)	1	1	1
		Corridor (1st floor) (Printer)	1	1	0
		Bathroom (1st floor) (Doorknobs, Door and Flush toilet)	1	1	0
		Office (Mouse, Keyboard, Light switch, Door and Doorknob)	1	1	0
		Corridor (2nd floor) (Printer)	1	1	0
		Bathroom (2nd floor) (Doorknobs, Door and Flush toilet)	1	1	0
HEI 2	Accounting and business technicians to perform administrative and financial accounting activities of national organizations	Financial Services (Printers and Stapler)	1	1	1
		Professors Room 1 (Printers and Computers)	1	1	1
		Professors Room 2 (Printers, Computers and TV control)	1	1	1
		Cafeteria/Bar (Counter and Tables)	1	1	1
		Auditorium (Handrail, Light switch and Door)	1	1	1
		Student's Social Room (Door, Fridge, Microwave, Faucet, Coffee and Machine)	1	1	1
		Library (Printer and Computers)	1	1	1
		Human Resources (Printer, Door, Acrylics, Counter and Light switch)	1	1	1
HEI 3	Classic engineering areas and in the area of renewable energies, acoustics, environment, hygiene and safety, urban rehabilitation, biomedical engineering and management	Library (Computer, Printer and Doorknob)	1	1	1
		Lunchroom 1 (Faucet, Doorknob, Chair, Table, Microwave, Coffee machine and Faucet)	1	1	1
		Lunchroom 2 (Microwave, Toaster, Kettle, Doorknob, Door, Table and Chair)	1	1	1
		Bar 1 (Microwave, Refrigerator, Handles, Cash register and ATM)	1	1	1
		Workshop (Machine, Doorknob and Door)	1	1	1
		Bar 2 (Cash register, Control, Fridge and Microwave)	1	1	1
		Organic Chemistry Lab 1 (Scale and Faucets)	1	1	1
		Organic Chemistry Lab 2 (Equipments, Door and Doorknob)	1	1	1
		Inorganic Chemistry Lab (Computer, Doorknobs, Equipments, Micropipettes and Refrigerator)	1	1	1
		Canteen (Faucets, Counter, Acrylic and Cash Register)	1	1	1
		Auditorium (Doorknobs, Door, Table, Chair and Eraser)	1	1	1

Table 1. Cont.

Study Site	Developed Activities/Graduation Courses Held	Assessed Areas	Surface Swabs (for SARS-CoV-2)	Surface Swabs (for Fungi and Bacteria)	Air Samples
HEI 4	Theater and cinema, including conducting research activities, experimentation and artistic production	Library (PC, Windows and Tables)	1	1	1
		Canteen (Chairs, Table, PC and Doorknob)	1	1	1
		Bar (Counter, Napkin Holder, PC, Coffee Machine and Table)	1	1	1
		Grand Auditorium (Doorknob, PC and Chairs)	1	1	1
		Small Auditorium (Scenic Interpretation Studio) (Door, Table, Doorknob and Chairs)	1	1	1
		Computer Room (Switch, Mouse, PC, Keyboard, Door and Doorknob)	1	1	1
		Workshop (Doorknob, Tables, Lockers and Equipment)	1	1	1
HEI 5	Teachers, and other educational agents with a high level of cultural, scientific, technical, and professional preparation	Bar/Cafeteria (Cash Register and Counters)	1	1	1
		Science Laboratory (Physic-Chemical) (Chairs, Scales, Faucets and Handle)	1	1	1
		Student's Social Room (Microwave, Faucet, Windows and Chairs)	1	1	1
		Theatre and Choir Room (Switch, Door, Doorknob, Windows, Tables and Chairs)	1	1	1
		Changing room/Dressing room (Doors, Doorknobs, Faucets)	1	1	1
		Gym (Doors, Doorknobs, Table, Chair, Equipment)	1	1	1
		Ceramic Workshop (Tables, Chairs, Faucets, Eraser, Doorknob, Door)	1	1	1
		Dance Room (Doorknobs, Doors, Eraser)	1	1	1
HEI 6	Artistic, technical, technological, and scientific training for music professionals	Music Room (Switch, Piano, Doorknob, Window and Chairs)	1	1	1
		Grand Auditorium (Chairs, Tables, Piano and Tripods)	1	1	
		Small Auditorium (Chairs, Tables, Piano and Tripods)	1	1	
		Library (Computers and Tables)	1	1	
		Academic Services (Printer, Doorknob and Cabinets)	1	1	
		Corridor (Printer)	1	1	
		Academic Services (Customer Service) (Acrylic, Pens, Coffee Machine and Tables)	1	1	0
		Lunchroom (Microwave, Tables, Chairs, Refrigerator, Doorknobs and Switch)	1	1	
		Choir Room (Chairs, Tables, Piano, Eraser, Switch, Door and Doorknobs)	1	1	
HEI 7	Social communication, including the areas of audiovisual and multimedia, journalism, advertising and marketing, and public relations and business communication	Music Room (Eraser, Tripods, Acrylic, Door, Doorknob, Switch and Piano)	1	1	
		Bar (Chairs, Tables, Cash Register, Acrylic, Counter and Calculator)	1	1	
		Study Room (Food and coffee machines, Chairs and Tables)	1	1	
		Corridor (Printer)	1	1	
		"Home Food" Space (Microwave, Water machine, Tables and Chairs)	1	1	
		Auditorium (Door, Doorknob and Chairs)	1	1	0
		Academic Services (Tables, Switch, Chairs, Acrylic, Printer, Stapler, Hole Puncher, Door and Doorknob)	1	1	
		Library (Tables, Chairs and Acrylic)	1	1	
		Multimedia Warehouse (Printer, Computers, Keyboards, Mouse, Barcode reader, Microwave, TV and Chairs)	1	1	

Table 1. Cont.

Study Site	Developed Activities/Graduation Courses Held	Assessed Areas	Surface Swabs (for SARS-CoV-2)	Surface Swabs (for Fungi and Bacteria)	Air Samples
HEI 8	Dance	Academic Services (Printer, Doorknob, Acrylic and Table)	1	1	0
		Dance Reception (Doorknob, Computer, Telephone and Keys)	1	1	
		Professors Room (Doorknob, Printer, Switch, Flush toilet, Table and Chairs)	1	1	
		Atrium Dance Studio (Bar and Sound System)	1	1	
		Dance Studio 1 (Bar and Sound System)	1	1	
		Dance Studio 2 (Bar and Sound System)	1	1	
Total			106	92	48

The samples were collected mainly in the morning and during normal activities, except for HEI 1, where the samples were collected in two days, one of them in the afternoon. In all facilities, the cleaning method applied was based on cleaning and disinfection recurring to bactericide and virucide, bleach and multipurpose detergent. Most of the sampling sites (56.8%) registered between 1 to 9 workers to follow the contingency plans. However, the accurate number of workers was not possible to obtain due to workers quarantine in the same day of the assessments to comply with contingency plans.

## 2.2. Samples Collected and Assays Performed

Air samples of 600 L were collected using the impinger Coriolis  $\mu$  air sampler (Bertin Technologies, Montigny-le-Bretonneux, France) with a flow rate of 300 L/min collected into a conical vial containing 5 mL Buffer NVL (NZY Viral RNA Isolation kit (MB40701) component) (Figure 1). Surface samples were collected by swabbing the areas of each sampling site, using sterile cotton swabs moistened in Buffer NVL (SARS-CoV-2 assessment) or sterilized water (fungi and bacteria assessment). A 10 cm  $\times$  10 cm square stencil, disinfected between samplings with a 70% alcohol solution was used (ISO 18593: 2004) to allow quantification. On some surfaces with common characteristics, such as surfaces material and cleaning procedures, composite samples were performed (swabbing different surfaces with the same swab) [38] (Figure 1).

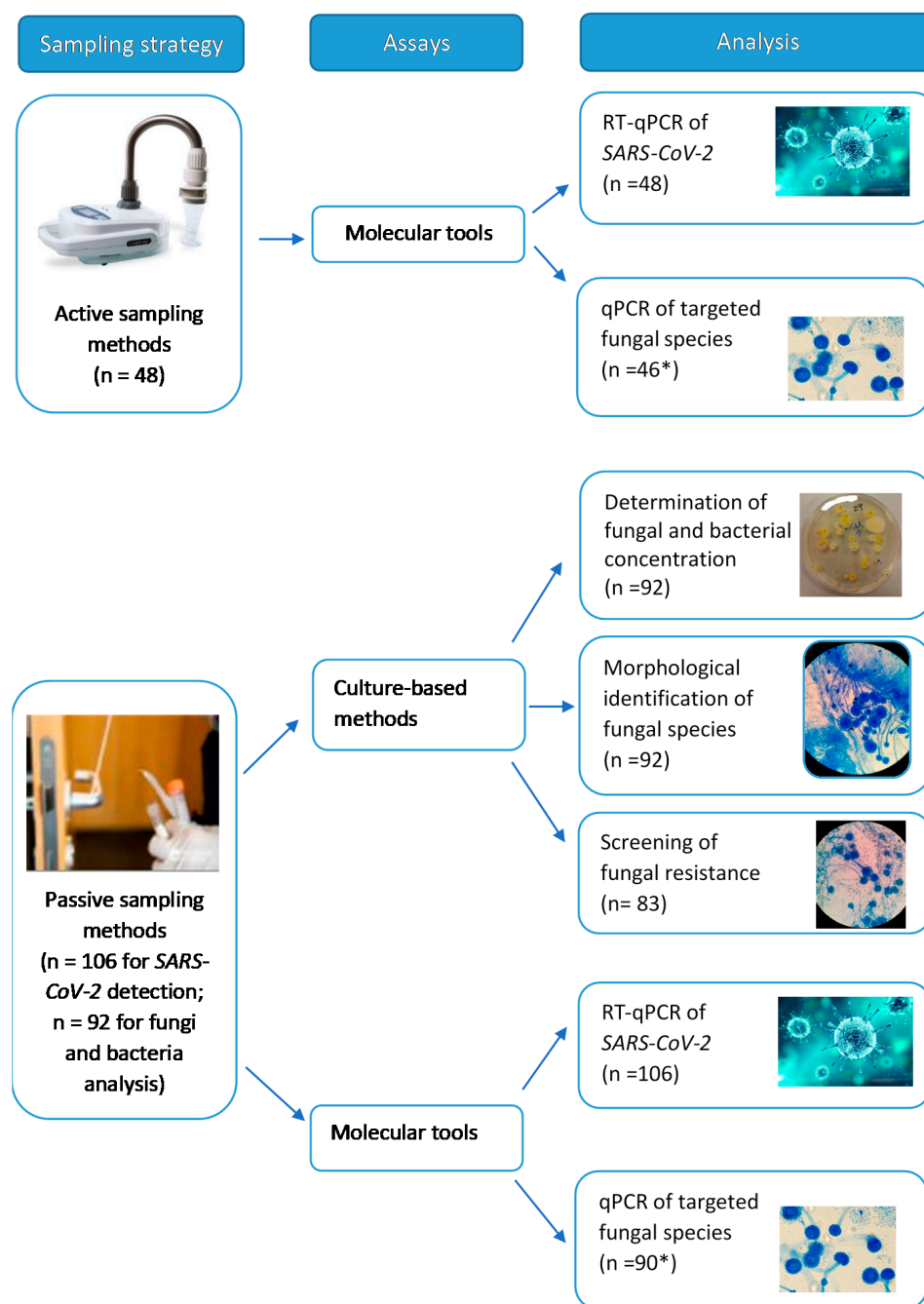
Culture based methods were applied only in surface samples. Every swab was later extracted with 1 mL of 0.1% Tween<sup>TM</sup> 80 saline solution (NaCl 0.9%) for 30 min at 250 rpm on an orbital laboratory shaker (Edmund Bühler SM-30, Hechingen, Germany) and plated onto the selected media. Four different culture media were used in order to enhance the selectivity for bacterial and fungal growth, as follows: 2% malt extract agar (MEA) with 0.05 g L<sup>-1</sup> chloramphenicol media, and dichloran glycerol (DG18) agar based media, for fungal characterization; Tryptic Soy Agar (TSA) with 0.2% nystatin, for total bacteria assessment; and Violet Red Bile Agar (VRBA), for Gram-negative bacteria.

Antifungal resistance was also screened by inoculating 150  $\mu$ L of the samples on Sabouraud dextrose agar (SDA) supplemented with 4 mg/L itraconazole (ITR), 2 mg/L voriconazole (VOR), 0.5 mg/L Posaconazole (POS), or SDA alone (as control) (adapted from the EUCAST guidelines [39]).

All the inoculated plates were incubated at 27 °C for five days for fungal growth (four days regarding azole resistance screening) or for seven days at 30 °C and 37 °C for bacterial growth and for Gram-negative bacterial growth, respectively. After the incubation period, quantitative (colony-forming units—CFU·m<sup>-2</sup>) results for fungi and bacteria were obtained. When colony overgrowth was observed due to fungi with fast growing rates (*Mucorales*, *Chrysosporium sitophilum* and *Trichoderma* sp.), making it impossible to count colonies, the median of all colony values obtained in all locations of the same facility was assumed. Fungal species were also identified microscopically using lactophenol cotton blue mount



procedures. Morphological identification was achieved through macro and microscopic characteristics [40].



**Figure 1.** Sampling strategy adopted and assays applied. \* Lack of extracts quantities in two samples to perform the assay.

Air samples obtained by impinger were also analyzed by molecular detection of *Aspergillus* section *Fumigati*. Procedures and reactions were performed as previously reported [41].

Concerning SARS-CoV-2 assessment on air and surfaces, the procedures used for sample inactivation, RNA extraction and detection were as previously submitted [37]. In each analysis, a positive (a SARS-CoV-2 positive sample) and a negative (water) sample were included. Moreover, in order to detect possible PCR inhibitors, an internal control was added to each PCR reaction (TATAA Universal RNA Spike I).

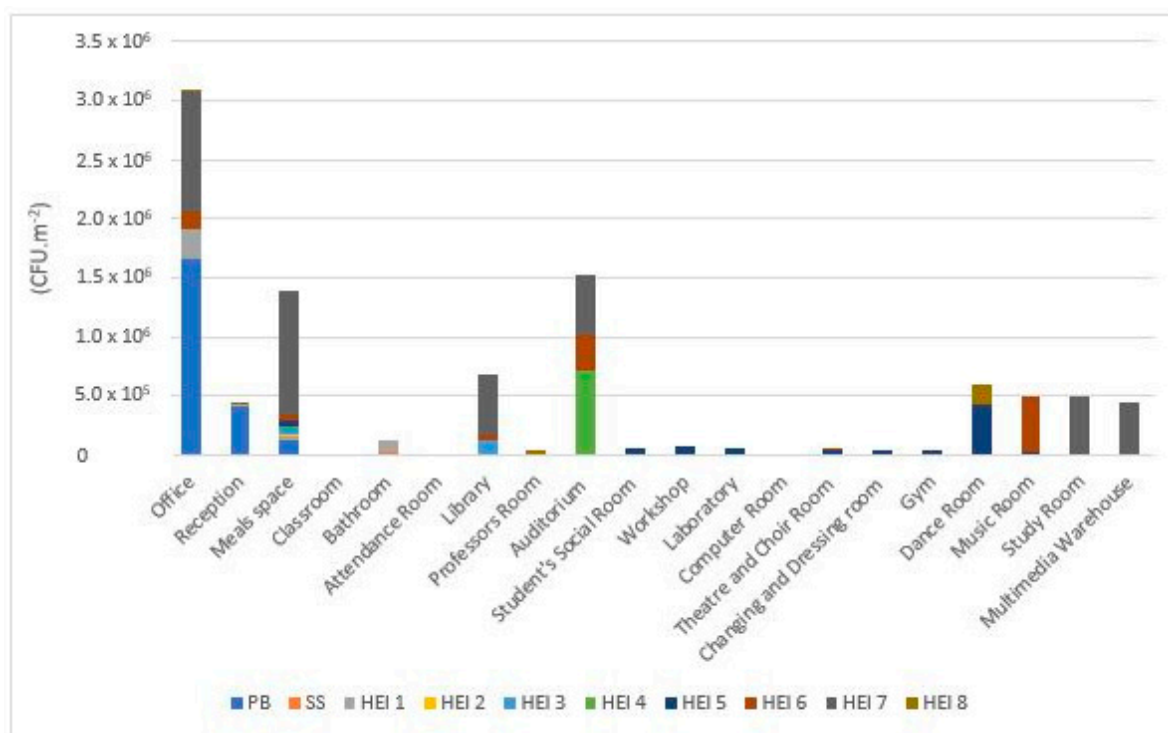
### 2.3. Statistical Analysis

Data were analyzed using SPSS statistical software, V26.0 for windows. The results were considered significant at the 5% significance level. To test the normality of the data, the Kolmogorov–Smirnov test was used. To characterize the sample, frequency analysis (n, %) was used for qualitative data. To study the relationship between bacterial and fungal counts and resistance to azoles and *Aspergillus* section, Spearman’s correlation coefficient was used, since the assumption of normality was not verified.

## 3. Results

### 3.1. Viable Microbial Contamination

Surface samples showed a range of total bacterial contamination between  $1 \times 10^3$  (classroom and attendance room) and  $3.1 \times 10^6$  CFU·m<sup>-2</sup> (offices). The highest median value (or total values in the case of classroom, attendance room, computer room, changing and dressing room, gym, study room and multimedia) was  $5 \times 10^5$  CFU·m<sup>-2</sup> (study room) and the lowest was  $1 \times 10^3$  CFU·m<sup>-2</sup> (classroom and attendance room). Gram-negative bacteria in surface samples ranged from 0 to  $1.9 \times 10^4$  CFU·m<sup>-2</sup> (laboratory) with a highest median value of  $9.5 \times 10^3$  CFU·m<sup>-2</sup> in the laboratory (Figures 2 and 3).



**Figure 2.** Total bacteria in surface swabs.

Total bacterial contamination found in different facilities ranged from  $3.8 \times 10^4$  (HEI 2) to  $4 \times 10^6$  CFU·m<sup>-2</sup> (HEI 7), with the highest median value found in HEI 7 ( $5 \times 10^5$  CFU·m<sup>-2</sup>) and the lowest median value found in Social Services ( $2 \times 10^3$  CFU·m<sup>-2</sup>). Gram-negative bacteria ranged between 0 to  $3 \times 10^4$  CFU·m<sup>-2</sup> (HEI 3), with a highest median value of  $4 \times 10^3$  CFU·m<sup>-2</sup> (HEI 3) (Figures 2 and 3).

Fungal contamination on surfaces ranged from 0 to  $1.5 \times 10^5$  CFU·m<sup>-2</sup> (offices) on MEA, and from 0 to  $1.8 \times 10^5$  CFU·m<sup>-2</sup> (professors room) on DG18. The median values (or total values in the case of classroom, attendance room, computer room, changing and dressing room, gym, study room and multimedia) ranged from 0 to  $5.9 \times 10^4$  CFU·m<sup>-2</sup> (changing and dressing rooms) in MEA, and from 0 to  $9.1 \times 10^4$  CFU·m<sup>-2</sup> (professors room) in DG18 (Figures 4 and 5).



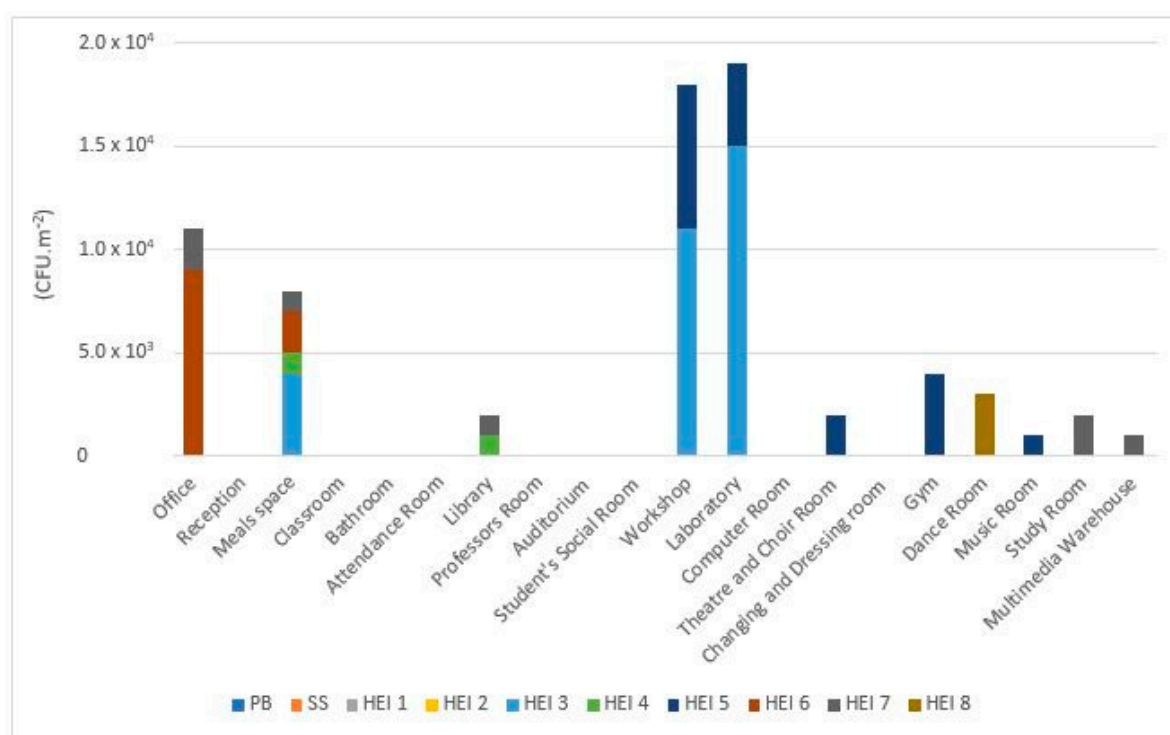


Figure 3. Gram-negative bacteria in surface swabs.

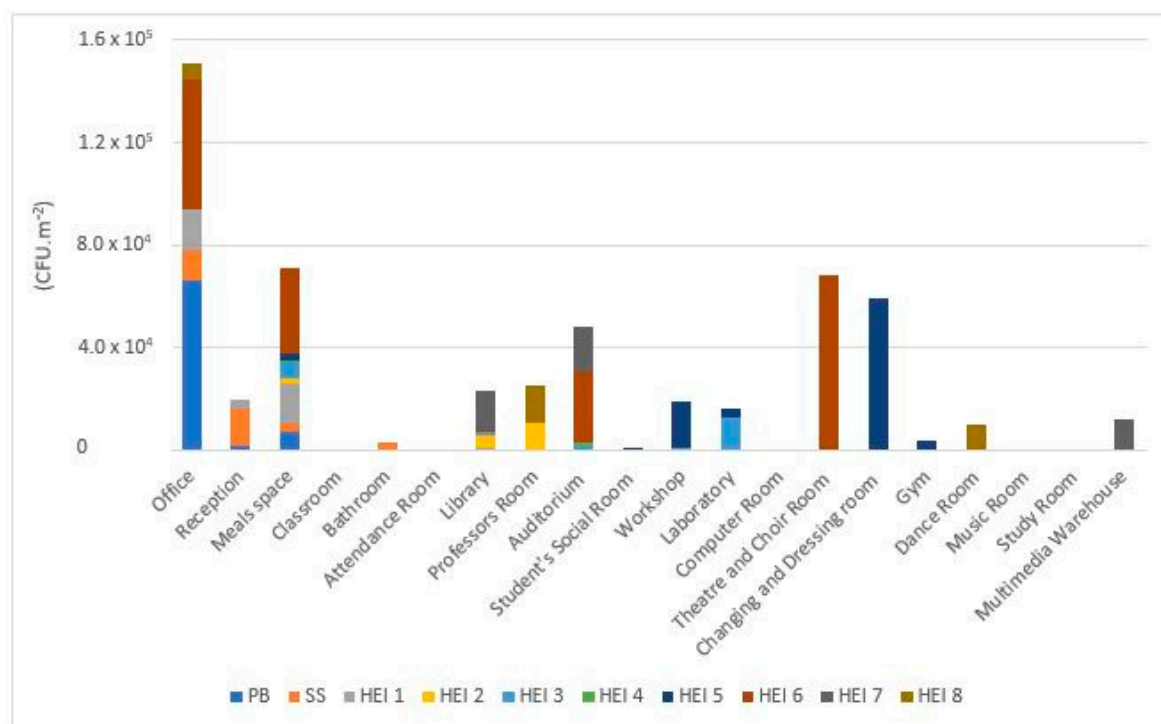


Figure 4. Fungal contamination in surface swabs on MEA.

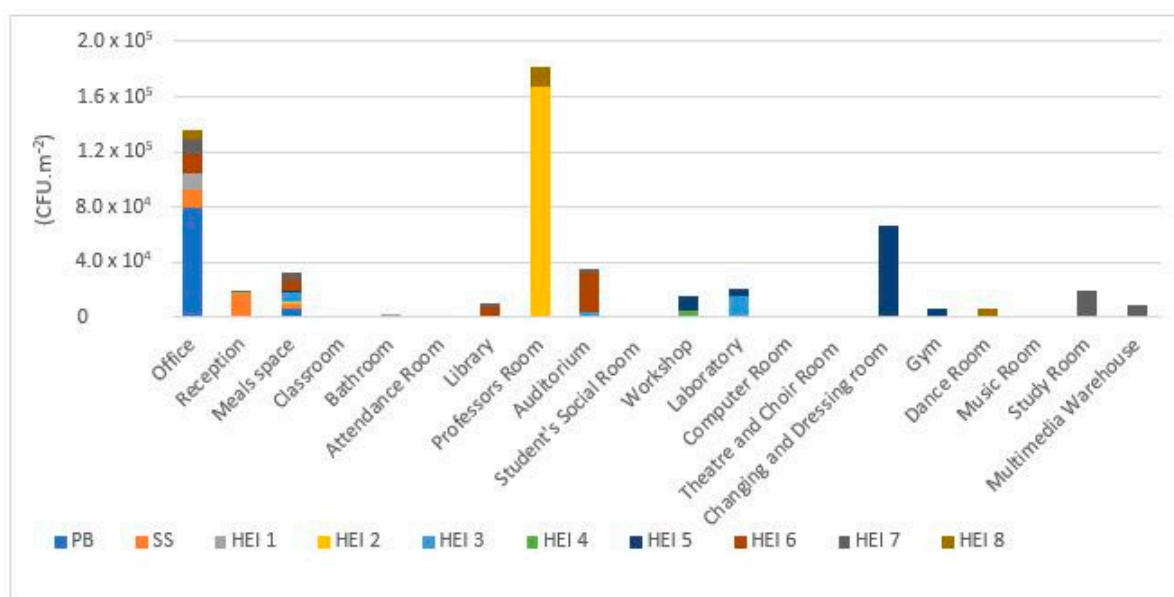


Figure 5. Fungal contamination in surface swabs on DG18.

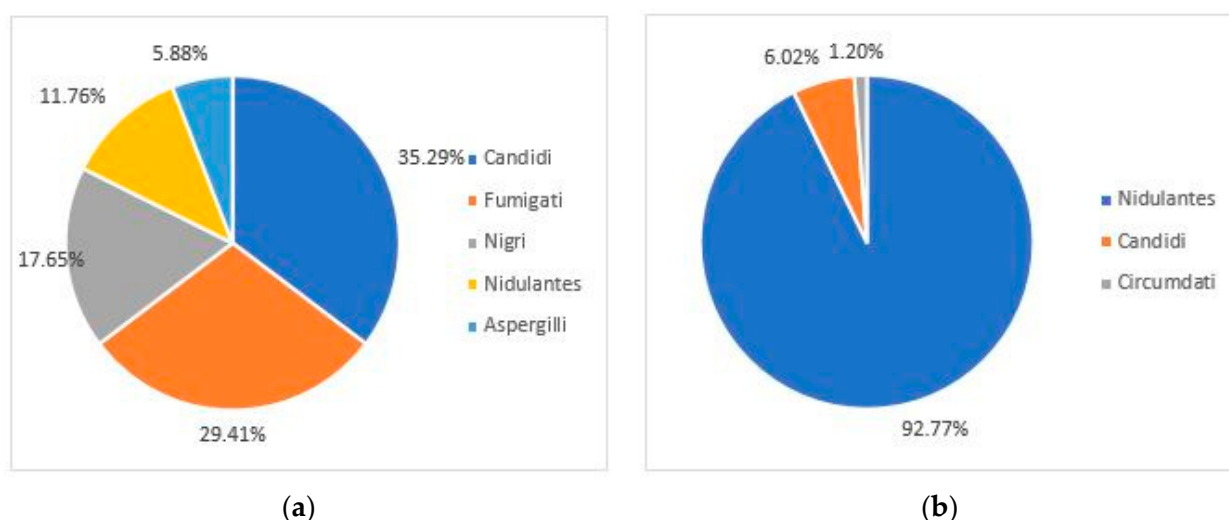
Fungal contamination found in different facilities ranged from  $2 \times 10^3$  (HEI 4) to  $1.8 \times 10^5$  CFU·m<sup>-2</sup> (HEI 6) on MEA, and from  $5 \times 10^3$  (HEI 4) to  $1.7 \times 10^5$  CFU·m<sup>-2</sup> (HEI 2) on DG18. The median values on MEA ranged between 0 (HEI 4) to  $3.1 \times 10^4$  CFU·m<sup>-2</sup> (HEI 6), and from 0 (HEI 4) to  $8 \times 10^3$  CFU·m<sup>-2</sup> (HEI 6) on DG18 (Figures 4 and 5).

Regarding fungal distribution 10 and 9 different fungal species were observed, on MEA and DG18, respectively. The most prevalent genera found on both media was *Cladosporium* sp. (47.36% MEA; 32.33% DG18), followed by *Penicillium* sp. (40.94%) and *Aspergillus* sp. (3.21%) on MEA, whereas on DG18 were *Aureobasidium* sp. (28.97%) and *Penicillium* sp. (20.67%).

*Aspergillus* genera was observed on MEA (3.21%) and DG18 (14.66%) (Table 2). There were found 5 different *Aspergillus* sections on MEA, being *Candidi* the most prevalent ( $6 \times 10^3$  CFU·m<sup>-2</sup>; 35.29%), followed by *Fumigati* ( $5 \times 10^3$  CFU·m<sup>-2</sup>; 29.41%), *Nigri* ( $3 \times 10^3$  CFU·m<sup>-2</sup>; 17.65%), *Nidulantes* ( $2 \times 10^3$  CFU·m<sup>-2</sup>; 11.76%) and *Aspergilli* ( $1 \times 10^3$  CFU·m<sup>-2</sup>; 5.88%). On DG18 there were found 3 different *Aspergillus* sections, being *Nidulantes* the most identified ( $7.7 \times 10^4$  CFU·m<sup>-2</sup>; 92.77%) followed by *Candidi* ( $5 \times 10^3$  CFU·m<sup>-2</sup>; 6.02%) and *Circumdati* ( $1 \times 10^3$  CFU·m<sup>-2</sup>; 1.20%) (Figure 6).

Table 2. Fungal species distribution in surface swabs after inoculation onto MEA and DG18 media.

MEA		DG18	
Fungi	n (CFU·m <sup>-2</sup> ); %	Fungi	n (CFU·m <sup>-2</sup> ); %
<i>Cladosporium</i> sp.	$2.51 \times 10^5$ ; 47.36	<i>Cladosporium</i> sp.	$1.83 \times 10^5$ ; 32.33
<i>Penicillium</i> sp.	$2.17 \times 10^5$ ; 40.94	<i>Aureobasidium</i> sp.	$1.64 \times 10^5$ ; 28.98
<i>Aspergillus</i> sp.	$1.70 \times 10^4$ ; 3.21	<i>Penicillium</i> sp.	$1.17 \times 10^5$ ; 20.67
<i>Rhizopus</i> sp.	$1.40 \times 10^4$ ; 2.64	<i>Aspergillus</i> sp.	$8.30 \times 10^4$ ; 14.66
<i>Aureobasidium</i> sp.	$1.20 \times 10^4$ ; 2.26	<i>Chrysosporium</i> sp.	$1.10 \times 10^4$ ; 1.94
<i>Alternaria</i> sp.	$8.00 \times 10^3$ ; 1.51	<i>Fusarium</i> sp.	$3.00 \times 10^3$ ; 0.53
<i>Chrysosporium</i> sp.	$5.00 \times 10^3$ ; 0.94	<i>Chrysonilia</i> sp.	$2.00 \times 10^3$ ; 0.35
<i>Phoma</i> sp.	$3.00 \times 10^3$ ; 0.57	<i>Mucor</i> sp.	$2.00 \times 10^3$ ; 0.35
<i>Acremonium</i> sp.	$2.00 \times 10^3$ ; 0.38	<i>Acremonium</i> sp.	$1.00 \times 10^3$ ; 0.18
<i>Chrysonilia sitophila</i>	$1.00 \times 10^3$ ; 0.19		
Total	$5.30 \times 10^5$ ; 100		$5.66 \times 10^5$ ; 100



**Figure 6.** *Aspergillus* sections distribution in surface swabs after inoculation onto (a) MEA and (b) DG18.

### 3.2. Azole Resistance Screening

Positive fungal growth on at least one azole supplemented media was observed for 10 fungal species. *Cladosporium* sp. was the most abundant species in all three azoles (64.71% on ITR; 65.49% on VOR; 53.33% on POS). *Penicillium* sp. was also found in all three azoles, being the second most prevalent species in two of three azoles (14.79% on VOR; 22.22% on POS). *Chrysosporium* sp., *Chrysonilia sitophila* and *Mucor* sp. were also presented in all three azoles. *Alternaria* sp. and *Aureobasidium* sp. were only observed on ITR and VOR. *Acremonium* sp. and *Rhizopus* sp. were only detected on VOR and POS, respectively (Table 3).

**Table 3.** Fungal distribution in azole-supplemented SAB media from surface swab samples.

	SAB	ITR	VOR	POS
Fungi	n (CFU·m <sup>-2</sup> ); %	n (CFU·m <sup>-2</sup> ); %	n (CFU·m <sup>-2</sup> ); %	n (CFU·m <sup>-2</sup> ); %
<i>Acremonium</i> sp.	1.10 × 10 <sup>4</sup> ; 3.44	0.00	1.00 × 10 <sup>3</sup> ; 0.70	0.00
<i>Alternaria</i> sp.	1.00 × 10 <sup>3</sup> ; 0.31	2.00 × 10 <sup>3</sup> ; 3.92	1.00 × 10 <sup>3</sup> ; 0.70	0.00
<i>Aspergillus</i> section <i>Candidi</i>	2.00 × 10 <sup>3</sup> ; 0.63	0.00	0.00	0.00
<i>Aspergillus</i> section <i>Fumigati</i>	3.00 × 10 <sup>3</sup> ; 0.94	0.00	0.00	0.00
<i>Aspergillus</i> section <i>Nidulantes</i>	5.00 × 10 <sup>3</sup> ; 1.56	0.00	0.00	0.00
<i>Aspergillus</i> section <i>Nigri</i>	8.00 × 10 <sup>3</sup> ; 2.50	0.00	1.00 × 10 <sup>3</sup> ; 0.70	0.00
<i>Bipolaris</i> sp.	3.00 × 10 <sup>3</sup> ; 0.94	0.00	0.00	0.00
<i>Aspergillus</i> section <i>Circumdati</i>	1.00 × 10 <sup>3</sup> ; 0.31	0.00	0.00	0.00
<i>Aureobasidium</i> sp.	9.00 × 10 <sup>3</sup> ; 2.81	0.00	6.00 × 10 <sup>3</sup> ; 4.23	0.00
<i>Chrysonilia sitophila</i>	1.00 × 10 <sup>3</sup> ; 0.31	3.00 × 10 <sup>3</sup> ; 5.88	4.00 × 10 <sup>3</sup> ; 2.82	1.00 × 10 <sup>3</sup> ; 2.22
<i>Chrysosporium</i> sp.	2.20 × 10 <sup>4</sup> ; 6.88	9.00 × 10 <sup>3</sup> ; 17.65	1.30 × 10 <sup>4</sup> ; 9.15	8.00 × 10 <sup>3</sup> ; 17.78
<i>Cladosporium</i> sp.	1.93 × 10 <sup>5</sup> ; 60.31	3.30 × 10 <sup>4</sup> ; 64.71	9.30 × 10 <sup>4</sup> ; 65.49	2.40 × 10 <sup>4</sup> ; 53.33
<i>Mucor</i> sp.	1.30 × 10 <sup>4</sup> ; 4.06	2.00 × 10 <sup>3</sup> ; 3.92	2.00 × 10 <sup>3</sup> ; 1.41	1.00 × 10 <sup>3</sup> ; 2.22
<i>Penicillium</i> sp.	4.40 × 10 <sup>4</sup> ; 13.75	2.00 × 10 <sup>3</sup> ; 3.92	2.10 × 10 <sup>4</sup> ; 14.79	1.00 × 10 <sup>4</sup> ; 22.22
<i>Rhizopus</i> sp.	3.00 × 10 <sup>3</sup> ; 0.94	0.00	0.00	1.00 × 10 <sup>3</sup> ; 2.22
<i>Ulocladium</i> sp.	1.00 × 10 <sup>3</sup> ; 0.31	0.00	0.00	0.00
Total	3.20 × 10 <sup>5</sup> ; 100	5.10 × 10 <sup>4</sup> ; 100	1.42 × 10 <sup>5</sup> ; 100	4.50 × 10 <sup>4</sup> ; 100

### 3.3. Molecular Detection

Regarding SARS-CoV-2, all the environmental samples preformed presented negative results. *Aspergillus* section *Fumigati* was detected in 2 samples (2.22%, 2 out of 90 samples) (Table 4).

**Table 4.** Molecular detection of *Aspergillus* section *Fumigati*.

Sample Type	CFU·m <sup>-2</sup> (in MEA/DG18)	C <sub>q</sub>
Swab	0/0	31.56
	0/0	28.32

### 3.4. Correlation Analysis

Regarding bacterial counts in TSA, significant correlations were detected with counts in VRBA ( $r_s = 0.252$ ,  $p = 0.015$ ), in SAB ( $r_s = 0.354$ ,  $p = 0.001$ ), in VOR ( $r_s = 0.235$ ,  $p = 0.033$ ) and in POS ( $r_s = 0.343$ ,  $p = 0.001$ ) and with the number of workers ( $r_s = 0.287$ ,  $p = 0.009$ ). These results indicate that higher bacterial counts in TSA are related to higher bacterial counts in VRBA, higher azole resistance counts (either in SAB, VOR or POS) and higher number of workers (Table 5).

**Table 5.** Study of the relationship between bacterial and fungal counts, azole resistance (SAB, ITR, VOR and POS) and *Aspergillus* sections (MEA, DG18) and azole resistance screening (SAB, VOR). Spearman correlation coefficient results.

		Bacterial Counts (CFU·m <sup>-2</sup> )	Fungal Counts (CFU·m <sup>-2</sup> )		Azole Resistance (CFU·m <sup>-2</sup> )				Aspergillus sp.				Number of Workers
									Fungi		Azole Resistance		
		VRBA	MEA	DG18	SAB	ITR	VOR	POS	MEA	DG18	SAB	VOR	
Bacterial counts	TSA	0.252 *	0.149	0.141	0.354 **	0.130	0.235 *	0.343 **	−0.115	0.043	0.061	−0.009	0.287 **
	VRBA		−0.008	0.235 *	0.059	0.119	0.108	0.064	−0.098	−0.022	−0.061	−0.061	−0.082
Fungal counts	MEA			0.586 **	0.494 **	0.362 **	0.485 **	0.123	0.265 *	0.169	0.129	0.110	0.226 *
	DG18				0.562 **	0.479 **	0.572 **	0.314 **	0.001	0.321 **	0.140	0.002	0.084
Azole resistance	SAB					0.478 **	0.638 **	0.289 **	0.079	−0.023	0.388 **	0.070	0.182
	ITR						0.472 **	0.360 **	0.021	0.041	0.162	−0.058	−0.112
	VOR							0.308 **	0.243 *	0.090	0.375 **	0.133	0.171
	POS								−0.182	0.163	0.079	−0.062	−0.132
Aspergillus sp.	Fungi									0.068	0.010	0.360 **	0.189
	DG18										−0.083	−0.025	−0.027
	Azole re- sistance											0.29 4 **	−0.072
	VOR												0.190

\* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed). \*\* Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Considering bacterial counts in VRBA, only significant correlation was found with fungal counts in DG18 ( $r_s = 0.235$ ,  $p = 0.024$ ), revealing that higher bacterial counts in VRBA are related to higher fungal counts in DG18 (Table 5).

With regard to fungal counts in MEA, significant correlations were detected with fungal counts in DG18 ( $r_s = 0.586$ ,  $p = 0.000$ ), in SAB ( $r_s = 0.494$ ,  $p = 0.000$ ), in ITR ( $r_s = 0.362$ ,  $p = 0.001$ ) and in VOR ( $r_s = 0.485$ ,  $p = 0.000$ ), with *Aspergillus* sp. counts, fungi in MEA ( $r_s = 0.265$ ,  $p = 0.011$ ) and with number of workers ( $r_s = 0.226$ ,  $p = 0.043$ ). These results reveal that higher fungal counts in MEA are related to higher fungal counts in DG18, higher azole resistance (either in SAB, ITR or VOR), higher values of *Aspergillus* sp. counts in MEA and higher number of workers (Table 5).

With respect to fungal counts in DG18, significant correlations were detected with azole resistance in SAB ( $r_s = 0.562$ ,  $p = 0.000$ ), in ITR ( $r_s = 0.479$ ,  $p = 0.000$ ), in VOR ( $r_s = 0.572$ ,  $p = 0.000$ ) and in POS ( $r_s = 0.314$ ,  $p = 0.004$ ) and with *Aspergillus* sp. counts in DG18 ( $r_s = 0.321$ ,  $p = 0.002$ ). These results indicate that higher fungal counts in DG18 are related to higher azole resistance (either in SAB, ITR, VOR or POS) and higher values of *Aspergillus* sp. counts in DG18 (Table 5).

Regarding azole resistance in SAB, significant correlations were detected with azole resistance in ITR ( $r_s = 0.478$ ,  $p = 0.000$ ), in VOR ( $r_s = 0.638$ ,  $p = 0.000$ ) and in POS ( $r_s = 0.289$ ,  $p = 0.008$ ) and with *Aspergillus* sp. counts—azole resistance in SAB ( $r_s = 0.388$ ,  $p = 0.000$ ),

showing that higher counts in SAB are related to greater resistance to azoles in other media, including in the *Aspergillus* sp. counts (Table 5).

Concerning azole resistance in ITR, significant correlations were detected with azole resistance in VOR ( $r_s = 0.472$ ,  $p = 0.000$ ) and in POS ( $r_s = 0.360$ ,  $p = 0.001$ ), revealing that higher azole resistance in ITR is related with higher azole resistance in VOR and POS (Table 5).

With regard to azole resistance in VOR, significant correlations were detected with azole resistance in POS ( $r_s = 0.308$ ,  $p = 0.005$ ) and with *Aspergillus* sp. counts in MEA ( $r_s = 0.243$ ,  $p = 0.027$ ) and *Aspergillus* sp. counts in SAB ( $r_s = 0.375$ ,  $p = 0.000$ ), revealing that higher azole resistance in VOR is related with higher azole resistance in POS, higher values of *Aspergillus* sp. counts in MEA and higher and *Aspergillus* sp. counts in SAB (Table 5).

Regarding *Aspergillus* section, the following significant correlations were found: (i) fungi in MEA and azole resistance in VOR ( $r_s = 0.360$ ,  $p = 0.001$ ), which indicates that higher values in MEA are related to higher resistance to azoles in VOR; (ii) higher counts in SAB and VOR ( $r_s = 0.294$ ,  $p = 0.007$ ), which reveals that higher counts in SAB is related to greater azole resistance in VOR (Table 5).

#### 4. Discussion

The IAQ in HEI is of great importance due to the impact it has on the health and performance of students, professors and staff [22–24]. Furthermore, microbiological contamination assessment is one of the main parameters that affect IAQ, since potentially pathogenic microorganisms can be disseminated as bioaerosols and via contact with contaminated surfaces [8,9,42] or through resuspension from air to surfaces [42].

It has already been previously reported that the presence of fungi and bacteria in indoor air is influenced by a wide range of factors, such as human occupancy and their activities, humidity levels, ventilation, environmental characteristics, water infiltrations, construction and decoration materials and outdoor air [11,43,44]. Due to the extensive list of factors that influence IAQ, exposure assessment to microorganisms remains a challenge to every exposure assessor/industrial hygienist [45]. In fact, as in other risk factors exposure assessment studies, the sampling approach is of critical importance to achieve an accurate risk characterization regarding microbiological agents [46]. Active methods, based on air sampling, rely within the most common methods used for samples collection. However, they may not represent the real scenario regarding the inhalation exposure, since they can only reflect the load from a short period of time (mostly minutes), corresponding to the sampling duration, thus representing only a small fraction of the microbiological contamination exposure [47–49]. Despite these concerns, the impingement method, also based on air sampling, has been the most used for the SARS-CoV-2 assessment in indoor environments [37], since it allows for longer active sampling times, thus ensuring collection of sufficient airborne viruses for detection by molecular tools [50].

In the case of passive methods, such as the surface swabs used in this study, they allow to characterize the contamination over a longer period of time (after the last cleaning procedure), thus providing a more comprehensive picture of the real exposure [46–49]. Indeed, they have previously been used in several indoor environments [46,51–61] generally providing more detailed and complete information regarding fungal species distribution. The use of both sampling methods allows to overcome each method limitation, ensuring a more precise exposure assessment [44]. This is further reinforced with the use of culture based-methods and molecular tools. Indeed, although most of the studies performed in HEI are focused on air quality screenings [28,30,32,33,62,63], surface analyses have also been shown to be relevant, as they may also reflect the contamination in the air by resuspension depending of the activities developed indoors, thus possibly leading to increased levels in airborne concentration [57,64,65].

Previous studies have shown that, besides the sampling approach, culture media applied also influence the results obtained for fungi and bacteria detection in environments [46,56]. Regarding bacterial contamination, culture media allows for the discrimi-



nation between total bacteria and Gram-negative bacteria [56]. As expected, in our study, the contamination of Gram-negative bacteria was lower than that of total bacteria, as expected, since the latter represents the number of Gram-positive bacteria and Gram-negative bacteria. The presence of bacteria on surfaces is a common situation, especially in the most frequently touched surfaces, as their main contamination sources are the occupants and their activities [66–68]. Thus, it was not surprising that the highest total bacterial counts were found in the offices (31.8%), followed by the auditorium (15.7%) and the meals space (14.4%), which are the places with higher occupancy. In fact, the positive correlation found between higher bacterial counts in TSA and higher number of workers emphasizes this contribution.

Although bacteria are ubiquitous and generally of human origin (from skin and mucous membranes) and not harmful for health, the presence of Gram-negative bacteria is a special concern, as they may have natural resistance to antibiotics and can also produce endotoxins, which can cause respiratory symptoms [11,43,57,68].

Regarding the fungal contamination assessment, besides the use of MEA, as suggested in the Portuguese guidance for IAQ assessment [11], DG18 was also selected to be used, since this media constitutes a better alternative for colony counting, also allowing to obtain higher diversity of genera [47,69]. Contrary to these expectations in this study we have obtained more diversification of fungal species in MEA (10 different species) than in DG18 (9 species) with the same trend being observed for *Aspergillus* sections (5 on MEA; 3 on DG18).

Interestingly, in the present study, the concentration of fungi on the surfaces was lower than that of bacteria, similarly to a study on surface swabs in university facilities [23]. The most prevalent fungi found in our study were *Cladosporium* sp., *Penicillium* sp. and *Aspergillus* sp., which is in accordance with other studies based on the use of surfaces swabs as sampling approach [64,70–72].

While offices (28.5%), meals space (13.4%) and theatre and choir room (12.8%) were the areas most contaminated by fungi on MEA, on DG18 we detected higher fungal loads in professors' rooms (32.0%), offices (24.0%) and changing and dressing room (11.8%). A possible reason for the higher counts of fungi in these areas could be the fact that, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, all occupants were encouraged to open windows to prevent COVID-19 infection [20]. Indeed, evidence clearly indicated that opening windows increases the levels of fungi and other microorganisms in the air and on the surfaces as a result of the passage of outdoor air into indoors [33,42,67,73].

HEI 6 and HEI 2 have the highest counts of total fungal contamination on MEA and DG18 media, respectively. HEI 2 samples were analyzed in DG18 and are among the areas with higher contamination values, possessing a considerable concentration of fungi. However, in this building only professor's rooms were analyzed by this method. Fungal growth can be promoted in the presence of moisture, and many fungi grow easily on any surface that becomes wet or moistened, such as faucets, which are present, for example, in meals space and changing and dressing room [67,74,75].

*Aspergillus* sections, being most of them reported as mycotoxins producers (*Circumdati*, *Nigri*, *Fumigati*) [76], some with clinical relevance (*Fumigati*, *Nigri* and *Aspergilli*) [44,47,77], presented higher diversity on MEA media. Of note, while these sections were only identified in MEA, *Aspergillus* section *Circumdati* was only isolated on DG18 media, as previously reported [46]. These *Aspergillus* sections are considered indicators of harmful fungal contamination [11,77–79] and measurements should be applied to avoid their presence indoors. Furthermore, the detection of *Aspergillus* sections *Candidi* and *Nidulantes* should be emphasized due to their toxigenic potential [47,76,78].

The emergence of pathogenic fungi resistant to antifungal agents widely used in the treatment of fungal infections, which can cause therapeutic failure, has been notorious in recent years [80,81]. In this study, the screening of fungal resistance to three medical azoles was conducted. *Cladosporium* sp. was the fungal species mostly present in all three azoles (64.71% on ITR; 65.49% on VOR; 53.33% on POS), followed by *Penicillium* sp. Regarding



*Mucor* sp. and *Rhizopus* sp., they are intrinsically resistant to voriconazole, with itraconazole and posaconazole as first-line therapy [44,82]. However, in this study, we have observed the growth of these fungal species in the presence of itraconazole and posaconazole thus indicating the need to further characterize fungal resistance of those isolates [44,82].

The identification of a fungal species in more than one azole suggests a multi-drug resistance phenotype that must be further evaluated through antifungal susceptibility testing [82] by the reference microdilution method (EUCAST) [83]. A confirmed resistance phenotype would indicate the presence of azole-resistant fungal species in these settings, thus constituting a higher exposure risk, especially for immunocompromised occupants [57]. One limitation to this characterization is that reference values are defined only for *Aspergillus* sp. and *Candida* sp. [84].

Emergent antifungal resistance in *Aspergillus fumigatus* is the main cause of invasive fungal infections [77,85]. In this study, *Aspergillus* section *Nigri* was identified in one azole media (0.70% on VOR), whereas *Aspergillus* sections *Candidi*, *Fumigati*, *Nidulantes*, *Nigri*, and *Circumdati* were identified in control Sabouraud, in MEA and/or DG18. These results are in line with previous data from dwellings and hospital environment, where no *Aspergillus* species were able to grow on azole-media, despite being observed in Sabouraud, MEA or DG18 [48,54,56,57]. Of note, cryptic *Aspergillus* species might be underestimated in azole-media due to the presence of fast-growing species, such as *Chrysosporium sitophila* and *Mucorales* group [44,56,57].

Our culture-based methods allowed the identification of the *Aspergillus* section *Fumigati* in a wide number of samples, with molecular tools also detecting this section in different and in a smaller number of samples. Despite this discrepancy, it is of relevance to use both methods, as they provide complimentary information and answer different questions. Indeed molecular tools allow precise, fast, specific and sensitive detection of microorganisms. Importantly, they also can identify dead or dormant microorganisms and can discriminate toxigenic strains from regular strains within some fungal species [86]. Although culture based-methods are selective, revealing only microorganisms able to grow on a particular growth media, therefore, underestimating the total number of microorganisms in samples, these methods are crucial since the viability of bioburden is of critical importance to estimate health risks, as it affects biological mechanisms, such as inflammatory and cytotoxic responses [82,83,87]. This reinforces the idea of combining both molecular and culture-based methods [44].

As previous suggested [88] the sampling approach to assess SARS-CoV-2 included passive and active sampling methods, swabs being the most common found in the literature [88] and with increased detection when compared with other sampling methods [88,89]. Although the sampling volume from the active sampling was the one recommended [90] and the detection technique was the one widely used for SARS-CoV-2 detection [88], all the results were negative indicating the efficacy of the present measures in place on the assessed facilities. Further studies, should include a different sampling approach by using glass-fiber and PTFE filters to be employed in low and high-volume air samplers and applying samples pretreatments allowing obtain an increased virus concentrations [91].

## 5. Conclusions

The present study showed that although the regular cleaning and disinfection procedures effectively removed SARS-CoV-2 from surfaces, these remained contaminated with other microorganisms besides SARS-CoV-2. This can be a result of an increased resistance to biocides, and of the wide range of environmental factors that can contribute to the dissemination of microbial contamination indoors.

Therefore, we recommended that corrective measures should be implemented to reduce bacterial and fungal presence in surfaces to avoid contamination in the air due to resuspension. Additional studies aiming at correlating air and surfaces microorganisms' burden can be a valuable tool in finding the contamination sources.

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