

# THE CONTRIBUTION OF THE ERASMUS+ PROGRAMME TO UNIVERSIDADE PORTUCALENSE - A CASE STUDY

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## Abstract

A case study on the impact of the student mobility aspect of the Erasmus+ Programme at the Universidade Portucalense Infante D. Henrique, located in Porto, Portugal, is presented.

The methodology used in this case study relies on a documental analysis, focusing on the doctrinal framework and European Union documentation, targeting the last seven-year framework of the Erasmus+ Programme (2014 to 2021).

A brief historical overview of the program is also presented - from its appearance to the present and future mission -, addressing the highly debated question of the European identity and the impact of The Bologna Process in the current academic context.

This case study relies on internally collected data between 2014 and 2021, considering the surveys carried out by the institution.

Please note that this regional private University has prepared its operations for mobility policies since 1987 and has records of them since 1995.

Keywords: Erasmus; Student Exchange; European Union.

## 1 INTRODUCTION

The university is an amazing creation of the medieval spirit, and many of the universities born in the Middle Ages remain to this day [1] International student mobility, visible today in the academic context thanks to the Erasmus+ Programme, was already, at that time and in a way, already existent, since in the medieval construction it was not conceivable for a literate person to ascend to a high position without having gone through another center of knowledge - the cultural education of the most well-born counted on a stay in a foreign culture center for a few months. Also today, students who have had an experience of at least six months of internationalization have doubled their employability possibilities according to various statistics.

In this context, universities, without being the only possible point, are predominantly the centers of student mobility in Europe. Among the countries of the European Union, the Erasmus+ Programme is considered a vehicle for consolidating the democratic, social, and human values enshrined in the institutional Treaties - the most diverse Union documentation promotes the same *Erasmus* spirit.

The Universidade Portucalense Infante D. Henrique, located in the city of Porto, Portugal, was early associated with this aim and is an example of the growing adherence to this project of mobility and democracy that the European Union continues to successfully develop.

Through a doctrinal framework and European Union documentation by document analysis methodology in the case study, it is intended to make known the contribution of the Erasmus+ Programme in this regional private university, which prepared its operation for mobility policies from 1987 and has records of them since 1995.

The case study analysis will refer to the last seven-year framework of the Erasmus+ that recently ended - between 2014 and 2021, which results are presented on the assessment, both by the institution and by the students, based on data and mobility numbers collected as a result of surveys carried out by the institution.

## 2 BRIEF APPROACH TO THE HISTORY OF THE ERASMUS+ PROGRAM

Given the need for improvement in the European educational context arising from the Joint-Study Programs [2, p. 83], the program of cooperation actions between universities [3, p. 24] in force since 1976 [4, p. 21] and tailored for student and professor exchange [5, p. 53], appears on June 15, 1987,

due to the initiative of the association French student AEGEE [5, p. 53], its leader Franck Biancheri and other figures of the time [6, p. 101] the Erasmus Programme - the acronym for the European Region Action Scheme for the Mobility of University Students (in Portuguese, *Plano de Ação da Comunidade Europeia para a Mobilidade de Estudantes Universitários*) that honors Erasmus of Rotterdam, the Dutch philosopher from the 15th and 16th centuries known for his travels in Europe [4, p. 21] and rejection of dogmatism, characteristics perpetuated in the ideology of this program which, at the time, promoted the exchange of students and professors [7, p. 37].

The overall objective of the Erasmus Programme is to support, through lifelong learning, the educational, professional, and personal development of people in the fields of education and, mainly after 2014, training, youth, and sport, in Europe and beyond, thus contributing to growth, sustainable development, quality employment, and social cohesion, as well as stimulating innovation and strengthen European identity and active citizenship [8].

The program had an exponential increase in countries and students participating in its first decade [2, p. 84], but this growth was accompanied by difficulties in materialization [3, p. 25] arising from its implementation [5, p. 53], which led the Socrates [7, p. 37] Programme to host it in 1995. Related to the Greek philosopher and with a similar purpose of improving the European educational context [4, p. 21], it was composed by other comprehensive and multidisciplinary educational programs [2, p. 84] such as Minerva (related to distance learning), Grundtvig (dedicated to adult education), Comenius (directed to basic education and secondary), among others [7, p. 37]. Here, for about eleven years, the Erasmus Programme was included in the programmatic phases of Socrates I (between 1995 and 1999) and II (between 2000 and 2006) [5, p. 54], where it benefited from greater scope and simplification of student mobility, and greater administrative efficiency [4, pp. 21–23].

Between 2007 and 2014, the successor Lifelong Learning Programme hosted, while its sub-programs [7, p. 38], the aforementioned Erasmus, Grundtvig, and Comenius, as well as Leonardo da Vinci (a program dedicated to vocational training and employability in a European context) and others. Here, the Erasmus Programme was boosted with a larger budget, which resulted in an increased contribution to economic competitiveness and social inclusion [9, p. 26] and, again, in an increase in the number of participants (students and professors in mobility).

Later in 2014, and following the objectives outlined by the Lisbon and Europe 2020 Strategies [5, p. 55] - such as the promotion of education, employment, competitiveness, and other aspects in the European context [9, p. 8] -, and by the influence of the Fraternité 2020 [5, p. 54] group, the renamed Erasmus+ Programme is launched for the period from 2014 to 2020 [10, p. 14], reinforced by programs of the European Commission that, between 2007 and 2013, aimed at training, education, sport and youth [3, p. 25], and which made up the aforementioned phases and their respective scopes [5, p. 54]. Not limited to the exchange of students and teachers mentioned above, and with a broad scope - in the case of mobility, it goes beyond higher education, reaching vocational, secondary, and senior education [3, p. 25] -, the program has benefited from growing funding over the years, which is the cause and effect of its success, through general European Union financing instruments such as the European Structural and Investment Funds, and other specific ones [11] such as Horizon 2020. This reflects its impact on the daily lives of Europeans - the cohesion and tolerance visible across the European Union.[22]

A reflection on the success and continued growth of the Erasmus+ Programme, combined with the current COVID-19 pandemic, led to an increase in the budget for the period 2021 to 2027 (almost double compared to the previous period - according to the EU Press News: Erasmus+: over €28 billion to support mobility and learning for all, across the European Union and beyond), as well as the need to comply with initiatives such as the Action Plan for Digital Education (2021 to 2027) with the EU presenting a showcase for the Digital Education Action Plan and the European Education Area (until 2025) similar EU showcase for the European Education Area, which foresees that, by 2027, we will have a more inclusive, ecological, and digital Erasmus+ Programme (available at: [https://ec.europa.eu/programmes/erasmus-plus/node\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/programmes/erasmus-plus/node_en)) - focusing on eco-friendly [22] solutions such as bus and train transportation, digital solutions like webinars, online classes and an app to host the upcoming European Student Card, and several other upcoming measures.

### **3 INFLUENCE OF THE ERASMUS+ PROGRAM IN AN ACADEMIC CONTEXT**

As evidenced by its historical evolution and by the stated and achieved goals, the Erasmus+ Programme is an important and fundamental milestone in the construction of the European identity [12, p. 2] and the internationalization of higher education systems [10, p. 3] thanks to the inherent

promotion of gender equality and multilingualism [11, p. 4], the development of European higher education [11, p. 7], among others, and various documentation of European Union Law - predominantly in the soft law [13] aspect -, refers to the connection to it, considered as the "standard-bearer" of the European Union itself.

Although the European identity is discussed by several authors as to its true effectiveness - that is, if Erasmus students feel "more European" after their experience -, the experience itself influences the identity of those in it. We agree that the experience itself affects those who participate in this program, although the participant already has, in a way, an identification with the European Union and its values [12, pp. 193–195]. This justifies that the Erasmus+ Programme is not a promoter of European identity, but rather a catalyst for it [14, pp. 105–106], even though it promotes the exercise and development of European citizenship [3, p. 31]. In the words of Daniel Noversa, the mobility characteristic of the Erasmus+ Programme is seen as an "*important conceptual and heuristic tool in our analysis of the European unification process*" [15, p. 68].

It should be noted that this program played a fundamental role in the launch of the Bologna Process, and developed with it [10, p. 3].

The Sorbonne Declaration, signed in Paris in 1998 by the Ministers of Education of Italy, France, Germany, and the United Kingdom, was a political response to the need to reform European higher education at the time, affected by cultural, educational, and jurisdictional differences in each Member-state [16]. It, therefore, motivated the start of the Bologna Process with the signing of the Bologna Declaration in 1999 [17] by 29 European Ministers of Education, aimed at developing European higher education, adapting higher education to the needs of the labor market, and stimulation of mobility, and which, for this purpose, established instruments such as the curricular credit system (ECTS - Acronym for European Credit Transfer System), the diploma supplement, and the structure of degrees in cycles, as visible today [16]. As for the European Credit Transfer System, it has transparency as the basis for learning, the pillar for study programs, and student mobility.

The Berlin Communiqué (EU Higher Education Ministers 2003, 4) emphasizes the role of ECTS in student mobility, international curriculum development, and the development of a currency for the global educational market at a time of rapid growth in student mobility. There was a clear implication that universities not adopting this new currency would be unable to attract students from both home and overseas markets, who will not enter programs if the resulting qualifications have limited recognition elsewhere [18, pp. 931–939].

Despite the relevance of the ECTS, there is a limitation of the current statistical distribution of the ECTS grades. It's possible to propose an alternative way to calculate the ECTS grades attribution to improve the ECTS system [19, p. 213].

In Portugal, Law No. 49/2005, of 30 August, which amended the Basic Law of the Educational System, enshrined the adoption of the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System, based on the amount of the work of the students.

In the same year, Legislative Decree No. 42/2005, of 22 February, approved the regulatory principles of instruments for the creation of the European space for higher education. The diploma established the creation of a new curricular credit system (ECTS, as mentioned above), which replaced the credit system set out in Decree-Law No. 173/80, of 29 May, which is one of the most important instruments of this European education and training policy.

Consistent with the commitments resulting from the developments of the Bologna Process, the 2005 diploma established the regulatory principles for the instruments for the creation of the European space for higher education, in which it stands out: in the organization of the curriculum by credit units that can be accumulated and transferred at the national level and international; instruments for student mobility in the European higher education space during and after training.

Article 3 of Legislative Decree No. 42/2005 defines Credit as "the unit of measurement of student work in all its forms, namely, collective teaching sessions, tutorial-type personal guidance sessions, internships, projects, fieldwork, study and evaluation" [20].

ECTS are, therefore, based on the amount of total work, not limited to contact hours only [21].

Regulation (EU) No. 1288/2013, of the European Parliament and the Council, of 11 December 2013, created the Erasmus+ Programme, the Union program for education, training, youth, and sport, to be executed in the period between January 1, 2014, and December 31, 2020 (Erasmus+ Programme - 2014-2020). Such is the relevance of an instrument for disseminating the European Union that after

the end of this 2014 to 2020 program's phase, Regulation (EU) 2021/817, of the European Parliament and the Council, of 20 May 2021, created the Erasmus+ Programme for education, training, youth, and sports, to be implemented in the period from 1 January 2021 to 31 December 2027 (Erasmus+ Programme - 2021-2027). In this follow-up comes the Resolution of the Council of Ministers No. 115/2021 [19] for the Portuguese national implementation.

#### 4 UNIVERSIDADE PORTUCALENSE – A CASE STUDY

The Universidade Portucalense Infante D. Henrique, a private university located in the city of Porto, Portugal, was early associated with this aim and is an example of the growing adherence to this project of mobility and democracy that the European Union continues to successfully develop.

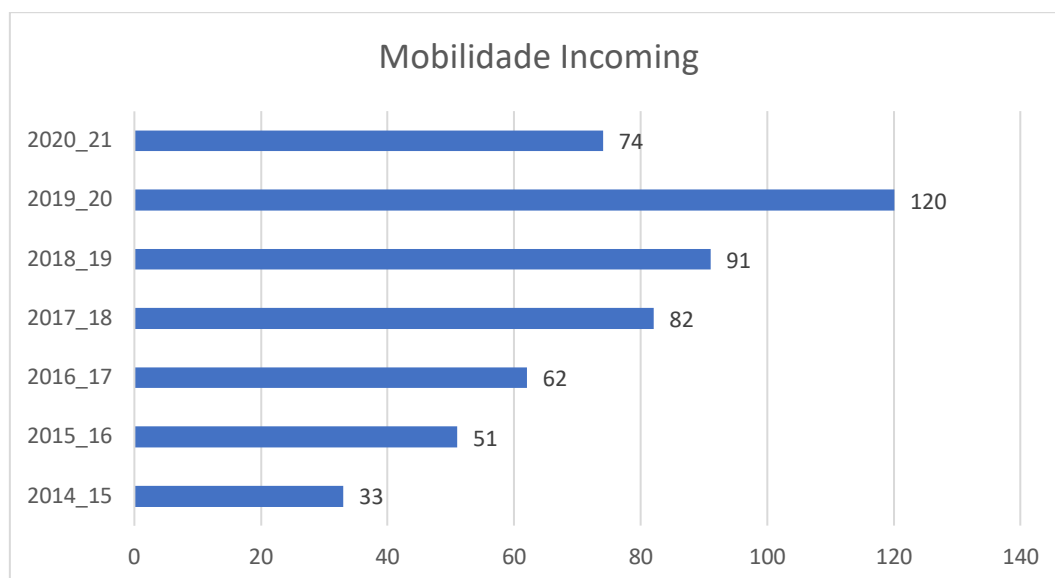
The contribution of the Erasmus+ Programme in this regional university is significant, having prepared its operation for mobility policies from 1987 onwards and with registrations since 1995.

The case study analysis addressed the last seven-year framework of Erasmus Plus that ended recently - between the 2014 and 2021 academic years, and the results on the assessment were positive, both by the institution and by the students, based on data and mobility numbers collected as a result of surveys carried out by the institution.

Also, the Universidade Portucalense Infante D. Henrique, with a view to a good reception, rapid social integration, and a successful experience of its incoming students (considered as students from higher education institutions partnering with this University in the scope of a program of international mobility – in this case, from the Erasmus+ Programme), organizes in each academic semester activities such as reception weeks, tourist and cultural visits, Portuguese language workshops, among others (at <https://www.upt.pt/page.php?p=949>), and hosts the “Buddy UPT” Program, organized by one of its student groups - UPT ESA (Erasmus Students Association) -, with the coordination of its International Relations Office. Such initiative is a volunteering opportunity given to its students, as they play a leading role in the experience of their colleagues, and also an effective method to ensure a quick connection between incoming students and the institution. On the other hand, there is an intention to concede an “internationalization at home”, allowing national and local students to share their experiences with foreign students with different and cultures, without leaving their own country.

Based on data collected and by Universidade Portucalense from its internal surveys, the University had a sustained growth in the number of incoming students from 2014 to 2020, even more so in 2019/2020. However, this trajectory was reversed due to the COVID-19 pandemic, affecting the 2020/2021 results. Below is the graph made based on internally collected data.

Table 1. The incoming students



Source: Elaborated by the author

The external dimension of the European Union educational policy in the Erasmus+ Programme is represented by all those actions of the program, which are oriented to foster the cooperation between European and third countries in the field of higher education.[4]

Even though this program covers all the Member States of the European Union, it also covers specific extensions (individual mobility and cooperation programmes) which include North Macedonia (through the EU pre-accession instruments), Iceland, Liechtenstein, Norway, Serbia, and Turkey (also through the pre-accession mechanism). This University targets other mobility instruments, such as bilateral protocols between institutions from such as Brazil, the United States of America, China, and Ukraine.

The most common incoming students' home countries are Austria, Croatia, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain, France, Greece, Hungary, Italy, Latvia, Poland, and the Czech Republic, being Spain and Poland the most representative, followed by Romania.

Nevertheless, the Universidade Portucalense is concerned with the satisfaction of its incoming students, and internal surveys about the level of their satisfaction and other aspects are made at the end of each semester, being the results collected internally. Overall, the level of satisfaction regarding mobility at this University was "very good", and the answers concerning the students' motivation in the contribution in the teaching process were mainly positive.

## 5 CONCLUSIONS

This case study, in addition to exposing a brief contextualization of the evolution of the Erasmus+ Programme and its role in the current higher education system, also demonstrates, in a certain way, the contribution and consequent benefit of the Universidade Portucalense in this successful European initiative through internally collected data, and its volunteer program.

It is worth mentioning that the Erasmus+ Programme is an instrument of citizenship that raises the objectives of the European Union itself and even goes beyond this organization, welcoming third countries, and catalyzing the European identity.

As for the Universidade Portucalense, this private university based in Porto, Portugal, has an internationalization objective [4], achieved through bilateral student mobility agreements with countries not related to the European Union, and through the Erasmus+ Programme itself -. as for the last one, this private University adhered to this program from an early age, and the results achieved in the analyzed period of 2014-2020 show a continuous, accelerated, and growing growth, although reversed in 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Considering the lifting of curfew measures in Portugal, the decrease of the number of cases, and acceleration of the vaccination process, together with the implementation of digital measures to the program until 2027 (from 2021 onwards), we predict that the Universidade Portucalense will return to a higher number of incoming students in 2021 (when compared to 2020), with a progressive increase in the following years.

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