

INTERNSHIPS AND ERASMUS MOBILITY PROGRAMS AS A PLATFORM TO EMPLOYABILITY: THE PERCEPTION OF HOSPITALITY MANAGEMENT UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS OF ESTH / IPG

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Abstract

These transversal skills promoted in individuals through internships and Erasmus mobility are nowadays considered a relevant issue in terms of employability but are still not deeply researched by scientific research in Portugal, concerning the specific case of professional activities within Hospitality Management. We revise these concepts and contexts, and also their interrelations and importance, especially for the Hospitality Management education and practices.

Additionally, the present study aims to expose and discuss the points of view of a group of undergraduate students about: i) internships and Erasmus mobility programs ii) their perception of the importance of those contexts for their employability.

So, with an exploratory and a quantitative methodology, this study presents the surveyed students characterisation and explores some important aspects of their internships and mobility experiences, and also their employability expectations generated by those experiences. Besides the presentation of the main results of the ongoing survey we compare the results about the mobility experiences and the associated perception of employability with some of the results presented in The Erasmus Impact Study [1] which is a large and recent study made at a European level.

Finally, we reflect about the study limitations and the main conclusions extracted from the study. We also underline some possible implications of this work and research issues to deepen in the future.

Keywords: Skills, Employability, Higher Education, Hospitality Management.

1 INTRODUCTION

This exploratory study aims to present the perspective of Hotel Management students about their internships and academic experiences of mobility and its relation to employability.

In particular, a theoretical framework on training in different contexts such as internships, Erasmus mobility action and the transition to the labour market as a first step to employability and interdependent relationships that occur between them is initially presented.

Afterwards there is an analysis of the collected data, in particular the responses to a questionnaire on the ideas, expectations and experiences that Hotel Management students from the School of Tourism and Hospitality of the Polytechnic Institute of Guarda (ESTH / IPG) have regarding their training in those contexts and their relationship with the labour market in this area. In the context of the course unit (UC) of Quantitative Methods II during the 1st year of the degree of Hospitality Management, in 2013/2014, a questionnaire was drawn up, based on the instruments used by Melo, Martins, & Caires [2] and Caires & Santos [3]. The questionnaire was divided into four parts, which will be analysed in this work, namely the characterization of the respondent; the internship experience; the mobility experience and expectations that these experiences generate in terms of employability. To this end, the responses obtained were statistically analysed and the main results of the data analysis provided by 30 respondents will be presented in this paper.

Finally, we try to emphasize the main conclusions that can be drawn from this research, and make a comparison with other studies in this area. In addition, some limitations in this study, ideas for further studies and possible implications of this approach will be presented.

2 INTERNSHIPS, ERASMUS MOBILITY AND EMPLOYABILITY

Higher education institutions have come to strengthen the suitability of their degrees to the labour market, not only through know-how, but also know-how to-be, increasingly important in a more demanding and constantly changing society [4].

In recent years, we have seen the emergence, in many higher education institutions, of training in the tourism and hospitality industry, whose key elements are based on both a targeted holistic education for the industry, as well as a preparation for the employability of future professionals in which the training provided promotes the acquisition of skills deemed necessary by the labour market.

From the perspective of Van der Klink et al [5] work nowadays is characterized by the increasing unpredictability of the future and the uncertainty associated with it in respect of the relevant skills. These authors also stated that "these changes in the labour world have an impact on higher education. It is expected that graduates, in addition to professional skills, also have learning, social and career skills in order to ensure high employability in the long term " [5] for "the educational debate of the twenty-first century meets around the challenges of globalization and the clash between educational systems, academic qualifications and professional skills" [6].

One can ask the question "what kind of answer does higher education give to the expectations of young people and labour market needs?" [6]. To answer this question, the authors claim that it is up to the institutions to provide a good basic preparation, so that students can face a variety of challenges. The same authors argue that, to employers, appreciation comes from graduates having a "good basic training, to develop skills of superior nature, discipline and rigor of thought" [6]. As referred by Van der Klink et al [5], the combination of specific professional skills is valued to ensure short-term employment and broader ones ensure that at a medium and long term.

In turn, some researchers [3] consider that it is up to the educational system to identify the body of knowledge and expertise that should be promoted onto students, seeking to improve their skills in the labour market.

The experiences gained, in formal learning contexts or outside them, by students, are crucial in obtaining employment [7]. The experience gained in internships, work experience during the undergraduate period, mobility experiences and extracurricular activities then developed can somehow facilitate entering the labour world. Indeed, these "experiences are generating learning, while creating networks of personal and professional knowledge which are then mobilized while looking for a job" [8].

To help substantiate this vision, the different curricula have included training in various contexts, including in internship and in mobility and / or internships contexts, mainly through the Erasmus program, in addition to the laboratory context that complements the educational system and theoretical and practical learning which characterizes the area of Tourism and Hospitality.

Thus, higher education institutions have promoted the integration of internships in the curricula of their degrees. About the integration of curricular internships as a course in different curricula, Dortch, cited by Rok [9] considers that it allows a structured apprenticeship experience in a particular field of work. According to the author, the internship enables the student to apply the knowledge learned, in today's labour world, helping to bridge the gap between theory and practice. In turn, in the opinion of Caires & Santos [3], internships are considered as educational experiences and structured as milestones in the training and preparation of students to enter the business world.

In the opinion of Dias [10], there are three positive and non-negligible effects of curricular internships at a higher education level, first, the internship allows to minimise an "integration shock" contributing to self-esteem and a more proactive posture in job search. The second effect, it allows the application of acquired knowledge in a real work environment, enabling and extending it which could be crucial to the acquisition of specific key skills for a professional performance. Finally, it improves the development of soft skills and personal qualities, which are considered requirements for enhancing employability. Given the proximity of their entry into the labour market, the internship is a unique opportunity for clarifying and questioning the various aspects related to their vocational projects, particularly with regard to which lifestyle to adopt and the career path to be followed" [3].

In addition, Rok [9] considers that the internship helps students strengthen their "marketable" personal skills, such as communication skills; time management; self-confidence and motivation to work. For this author, in the history of tourism companies of recognized value, it turns out that these are organizations that achieved success by the way their focus is given to employees, ie by how they are

recruited, they are managed, they are trained and educated and also, as they are valued and rewarded by applying a methodology for continuous learning.

According to Baum [11], the traditional models and education in Tourism and Hospitality deposit a considerable responsibility on skills development and consolidation of knowledge in internships. For Mulcahy, quoted in Baum [11], the internships process benefits the three stakeholders involved. In the educational sector, the benefit focuses on the fact that the trainees get the opportunity to learn more and more formally about the industry structure. To the sector of the tourism industry, students prove to be a precious semi-qualified source of cheap labour. Finally, for trainees because this work experience breaks the vicious cycle of job opportunities, that is, the cycle of not getting a job without having experience and cannot get experience without getting a job.

In addition to Rok [9], there are several different benefits in internships for both students, the academic community as well as for employers. For these, the author considers the resolution of the shortage of workforce; the ability to select and recruit the best students / trainees; the ability to reduce staff rotation; the use of fresh ideas and new approaches to problems that exist; and also strengthening ties with the academic community as benefits. The same author sets out as benefits for the academic community, the connection to the industry and employers; the promotion of their study plans, their degrees, their graduates and the possibility of maximising other forms of cooperation. In fact, the current trainees are the future source of human resources with qualified experience, which proves advantageous for both the industry and themselves, because, as a result, it will be an opportunity that will allow them to obtain the necessary experience to begin a professional career. Being a reality that, in many cases, the employability of graduates is powered through internships, they must, in the perspective of Rok [9] be carefully planned, organized, monitored and evaluated, so that there is rigor in pursuing them and the objectives to be achieved. The trainee must be trained in several different departments and on different tasks and multiple functions, thus enhancing a comprehensive view of the context they are in. "In addition to that, it is necessary to involve students in partnership with the exterior, which will allow a territorial knowledge (as a source of autonomy) and the development of skills that enrich their cultural and professional background, and enhance actions aimed at the recognition and validation of a professional profile under construction "[12].

Also according to Rok [9], nowadays and globally, the tourism industry is facing problems to attract and retain qualified professionals. Therefore faced with this reality, it is expected that employees pay attention and support trainees as they become more familiar with the industry and with the work processes, as well as it is expected that current employees who strive for respect and dedication by those who are now beginning their careers and want to thrive in this industry.

Nowadays, and contrary to what happened in the past, "a degree should not be seen as something that ensures employment in this particular area, but rather as a wealth of knowledge, skills, values and attitudes towards the labour world that allow better performance in the profession one has chosen and / or is building" [6]. According to Saúde [13], the globalization of the economy, internationalized and strongly interdependent, and the emergence of new organizational models, which are characterized by constant and rapid need to respond to change, may be referred as promoters of nature and content changes in occupational structures, such as the level of qualifications of the workforce, the dominance of versatility and integration of functions and the instability and precariousness of ties.

In another perspective, the experiences of mobility, Erasmus being the most widespread and the one that fits the vast majority of higher education students, was established in 1987 and can be defined as an inter-university support program for the mobility of students, teachers and Higher education staff, between the member states of the European Union and associated countries. In the variant of educational mobility, it allows students an academic experience for a period of time between 3 to 12 months and aims to provide a comprehensive view on Europe and of different people, cultures and societies.

According to the study's findings on the impact of the Erasmus program in employability and skills of students in higher education [1] the major reasons that makes a student to choose a mobility program focus on the opportunity to live a new experience, meet different people, promote language proficiency, develop soft skills and enhance their employability in international terms. In fact, the transversal skills considered important by employers are those that are developed abroad during Erasmus, because about 70% of students who were a part of this mobility program show they have better employability skills, even considering that "according to their personality traits these students have a greater predisposition to employability even before they leave to go abroad" [1]. In fact about

81% of the students realize the improvement of their skills upon return to their home country, surpassing their own initial expectations.

For about 64% of employers, a professional experience in international terms is considered important at the time of recruitment. Apart from that experience, almost all employers, that is 92% according to Brandenburg [1], seek and give importance to soft skills such as openness and curiosity to new challenges, decision making, problem solving, self-confidence and tolerance towards others.

It should also be noted that the mobility experience generates a medium-term impact, as well, as the unemployment rate of graduates who have made a mobility program is 23% lower five years after their graduation [1].

Although more and more young people have further education, their employability prospects are reduced and uncertain. "With longer and longer educational paths, the transition to the labour market tends to be later on. Plus the difficulties in terms of the job integration in a labour market that, constrained by the economic downturn, shows having less ability to create new jobs" [7]. As supported by Sousa [14], the non-linearity between the training system at the top level and the characteristics of the labour market has been consolidating in Portugal and has been revealing new gaps that may, in addition to other reasons, motivate and lead to an increased difficulty in entering the employment and work system these days. Of course, many reasons justify it and, in particular, may explain the big change concerning other generations in the past, in what concerns the inclusion in the job system, as well as the instability one feels when becoming a part of it. "Indeed, the passage from the educational context to the labour world is no longer a long and complex process that began to affect young people with low educational qualifications, but quickly generalized to the more educated youth population" [8].

Despite the existence of difficulties, there are indicators showing that the difficulties presented to graduates are lower compared to other audiences and the possibility of employability is higher. This is underlined by Sousa [14], for whom the candidates for this level of education attach significant importance to its attendance, in order to increase employment opportunities and access to a skilled job.

Similarly, Valente [7] states that the most qualified young people, despite not being immune to the recent deterioration of working conditions, they still have advantages over the lower-skilled young people, because their education level allows them to reduce the likelihood of being unemployed and also increases their wages. "With lower barriers to international mobility, particularly in Europe, these new generations today are also more available for international mobility, already being a significant part and still growing in this recent Portuguese emigration" [7]. The author stresses that in a context of this nature we are all less employable, even the best prepared, "because employability is not only a product of individual features but also contextual factors whose impact on the probability of an individual getting or keeping a job, regardless of their skills, credentials or social status is great" [7], regardless of the professional area or industry, whether in hotels or others.

We cannot fail to present the considerations of Tymon [15], about the potential problem of conceptualising employability, as there is a lack of consistency about the meaning of the term and consequently on how to measure the same. However, the author introduces us the perspective of Yorke, who understands employability as a set of accomplishments, skills, understandings and personal attributes that make graduates more likely to become employed and successful in their chosen profession, which benefits themselves, the workforce, the community and the economy in general.

As internationally recognized, tourism and hospitality are considered high-growth sectors. Of course, an industry of this scale requires human resources, which are vital to succeed in providing tourism services. In fact tourism has a key contribution to the European economy generating 10% of GDP - Gross Domestic Product and employing over 10 million people. Currently, in Portugal, this activity is very relevant and predictably its importance will come to be emphasized in the near future because the employment estimates point towards a very significant growth in employment opportunities in the sector, 19,6% more specifically in 2025 [7].

3 METHODOLOGY

In the academic year of 2013/2014 and as a part of the course (UC) Quantitative Methods II of the 1st year of the Hospitality Management degree, a questionnaire was designed on the ideas, expectations and experiences that the students of the Hotel Management degree at the School of Tourism and Hospitality of the Polytechnic Institute of Guarda (ESTH / IPG) have or had regarding internships, Erasmus mobility and labour market in this sector.

This questionnaire was based on the tool used in the study by Melo, Martins, & Caires [2]. The questionnaire was divided into four parts, namely: characterization of the respondent; the internship experience; the mobility experience and expectations that these experiences generate in terms of employability. In addition, a questionnaire version was made available online through the Google Drive tool, whose link was later sent, in May 2014, to all 111 undergraduate students of Hotel Management, through an email that requested the collaboration of those students and was supported by a database provided by the Internship and Career Office (GESP) of ESTH / IPG.

This yielded 30 responses to the questionnaire, 19 (63%) were female respondents. The mean age of participants in the exploratory study was 23.3 years with a standard deviation of just five years and minimum age 18 and maximum age 46 years old, whose age distribution can be seen in Table 1.

Table 1: Age distribution

Age	Frequency	Percentage	Cumulative Percentage
[18, 23[16	53%	53%
[23, 28[10	33%	87%
28	4	13%	100%
Total	30	100%	

The period in which the questionnaires were collected, eight (27%) were in the 1st year, 10 (33%) in the 2nd year and 11 (37%) in the 3rd year, with one no answer. In addition, three (10%) study and are simultaneously employed, all in Portugal and they have been working in the area of the degree.

The responses obtained in the 30 questionnaires collected were treated statistically using a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet, and the analysis of these results is presented in the following section.

4 RESULTS

We discuss the main themes in this exploratory study: the internship experience; the mobility experience and expectations that these experiences generate in relation to employability.

Of the 30 respondents 25 (83%) had already performed some curricular internships, varying the number of internships carried out between 1 (40%) 2 (32%) and 3 (28%). The duration of the internships was essentially 2 months (37%) or 3 months (54%). Portugal was the country where, of course, there were more internships (53%), immediately followed by Spain (23%), although there are also three (6%) references to other countries, particularly in the second internship, including Ireland, India and Hungary, and 8 (17%) no answers. Of these students, 22 (88%) indicated that the activities developed were in accordance with the internship plan.

In terms of the degree of satisfaction with their internships, in a Likert scale, with five points (which goes from 1 Very dissatisfied to 5 - Completely satisfied), students were globally satisfied in several internships, with an average of 4.04 in the 1st internship, 4.54 in the 2nd internships and 4.17 in the 3rd internship, and that the degree of overall satisfaction seems to be superior in internships made after the first, as seen on Table 2.

Table 2: Satisfaction level regarding internships

Level of satisfaction	1 st internship	2 nd internship	3 rd internship
1	1	0	0
2	1	0	0
3	1	0	0
4	14	6	5
5	7	7	1
No answer	1	2	1
Total	25	15	7

Among these students, 80% also indicated that they found it difficult to get the necessary guidance during internships, 92% considered that the activities carried out during internships required levels of knowledge appropriate to the year/semester they had attended and it lived up to their expectations regarding the acquisition of new knowledge and practical experience. It is also noteworthy that 28% reported having received a proposal to work in this area, after making their internship.

In terms of internships and its relation to employability it was clear in the results that 29 (97%) of respondents consider that the environment of a curricular internship enables the interaction with various professionals and the exchange of knowledge and experiences, as well as agree with the idea that an internship expands the vision of the labour market. All of the respondents indicated that an internship expands the vision about the way the structure of a company is organised and an internship is important for the performance of the future professional. Also unanimously, these students showed agreement with the fact that this experience is or may be important for employability.

With regard to Erasmus mobility and its relation to employability it was found that 26 (87%) of respondents consider this program important for employability in the area. However, only 8 (27%) of respondents participated in an Erasmus mobility academic action, taking place in Lithuania (4, 50%), Poland (2, 25%) and Spain and Hungary (1 in each, 12.5%). The duration of these programs were 4 months (26%), 5 months (38%) and 6 months (38%), respectively.

With regard to the assessment of this experience, and with a Likert scale with 5 points (1 Very negative to 5 Very positive), these respondents considered it generally positive or very positive, both in academic and professional, personal, social and cultural terms, albeit less striking at a professional level, as can be seen in Table 3. This is corroborated by the values of the respective averages: 4.5, 3.8, 4.6, 4.75 and 4.5.

Table 3: The Erasmus experience evaluation at various levels

Rate	Academic	Professional	Personal	Social	Cultural
1	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%
2	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%
3	0%	25%	0%	0%	13%
4	50%	38%	38%	25%	25%
5	50%	13%	63%	75%	63%
Not applicable	0%	25%	0%	0%	0%

Of the respondents who have not yet made any Erasmus mobility, 18 (82%) said they would like to participate in one.

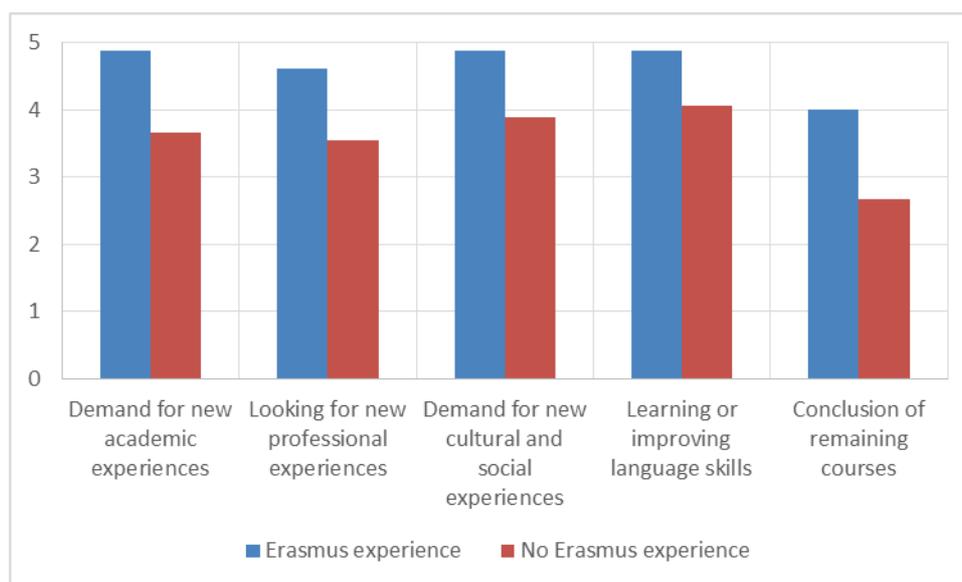
On the other hand, 26 (87%) respondents who have already been a part of an Erasmus action program or that showed interest about participating in one ranked from 1 to 5 the importance they attach to various reasons or motivations for participating in an Erasmus action, with results shown in Table 4. Mostly the degree of importance assigned was high or very high, both in the search for new academic experiences and professional, cultural and social terms as well as for learning or language improvement, which is the one that has the highest average, 4.87.

Table 4: Degree of importance of the reasons and motivations for applying for an Erasmus program

	1	2	3	4	5	Not applicable	No answer	Mean
Demand for new academic experiences	0%	4%	4%	19%	62%	8%	4%	4.57
Looking for new professional experiences	0%	0%	8%	38%	42%	8%	4%	4.39
Demand for new cultural and social experiences	0%	0%	0%	23%	65%	8%	4%	4.74
Learning or improving language skills	0%	0%	0%	12%	77%	8%	4%	4.87
Conclusion of remaining courses	0%	15%	27%	15%	27%	12%	4%	3.64

However, conclusion of remaining courses arises as a reason or motivation for which the emphasis was not as high, with the lowest average, 3.59, although this situation is more significant in the case of those who have not had an Erasmus experience, as can be seen in Graphic 1.

At the same time, participants who have already been a part of an Erasmus mobility attribute, in general terms and in relative terms, a greater importance to the reasons and motivations mentioned than those who have not yet participated but still want to do some kind of mobility. In terms of the expectation that an internship experience generates concerning employability, 100% of respondents believe that companies/hotels give priority to those who already had the experience of having an internship.



Graphic 1: Comparison on the level of importance assigned to some reasons or motivations for carrying out an Erasmus program among those who already participated in one and those who did not

In addition, regarding the degree employability, both in Portugal and abroad, most consider this level of employability high, although mostly abroad, as can be seen in Table 5. By using the t-test, with a significance level of 5 %, it is concluded that there is a statistically significant difference between the averages.

Table 5: Level of degree employability in Portugal and abroad

Level of employability	Portugal		International	
	Frequence	Percentage	Frequence	Percentage
1	0	0%	0	0%
2	2	7%	0	0%
3	9	30%	1	3%
4	15	50%	19	63%
5	4	13%	10	33%
Total	30	100%	30	100%
Mean	3,7		4,3	

Yet, in terms of the level of the degree employability in Portugal, the average does not differ much between students who took part in an Erasmus experience and those who didn't. The same applies to the level of the degree employability abroad. Nevertheless, even if slightly, the average for Portugal is higher than for those who did not have an Erasmus experience (3.63 *versus* 3.60) and the average abroad is superior to those who had an Erasmus experience (4.4 *versus* 4.2).

5 CONCLUSIONS

From the research and the analysis, we can verify the increasing importance that training in internships' context and Erasmus mobility experience has for employability, as well as training and teaching and learning processes, particularly in the degree of Hotel Management.

We are aware that the size of the respondent group is small, but in terms of enrolled students it has a representation of about 27% and at the level of students who had an Erasmus mobility experience it is about 25%. However, we tried to understand how students and graduates of the Hotel Management degree evaluated the internship experience; the mobility experience and expectations that these experiences generate concerning employability.

From the results obtained, it is worth highlighting that the respondents indicate that the internships allow reinforcing the foundation of the practical knowledge that enables facing the labour market with greater security and reliability, reinforcing the idea already mentioned in [3], [6], [5], [2] and [9] that overall, students are motivated and with a more holistic, integrated and coordinated vision between the reality of the labour market and the skills and knowledge gained in higher education as well as the difficulties in the transition to the labour market. Moreover, most students are satisfied with the learning experience in internships, considering it appropriate to their level of knowledge and as being within their expectations as to the acquisition of new knowledge and skills. Reinforcing these ideas, there is already a considerable level of internationalization and mobility in terms of internships and the majority also considers that the internships are or may be important for employability with nearly a third saying that they received effective offers of integration and employment as a result of the internships carried out.

The results also highlighted that the respondents in general indicate that the mobility provided by the Erasmus program, such as internships, is an asset to have more confidence in a career. This program is considered important for employability in the area by 87% of respondents, which is in line with the Brandenburg study (2014), in which 85% of Erasmus students study abroad to increase their employability. To reinforce the importance of this program from the point of view of employability, that same study also indicates that graduates with international experience are more successful in the labour market, with an unemployment rate lower in 23%, five years after graduation, and the percentage of being in long term unemployment is 50% lower compared to those without this experience.

In addition, those who have participated in an Erasmus mobility program mainly consider this experience as very positive or positive, both at an academic and professional, personal, social and cultural level. Those who have not yet had an Erasmus experience, most express an intention to participate in one, indicating a high or very high importance level, both in searching for new academic,

professional or cultural and social experiences as well as learning or language improvement, identical soft skills to those mentioned in Brandenburg [1].

Regarding the conclusion of remaining courses a less significant importance is assigned to it. These data will also meet the fact that 92% of employers, when seeking to hire new workers, seek for certain personality traits that are developed in the mobility experience, as reported by Brandenburg (2014), this large European study refers that students with an Erasmus mobility experience, compared to others, show higher values and more likelihood in relation to those skills, even before starting the exchange program and when they return this difference increases. In addition, 64% of employers, surveyed in the study, consider the international experience important at the time of hiring new employees and that these have access to positions of greater responsibility.

Finally, it is also noted that respondents believe that businesses/hotels give priority to those who already had the experience of having a curricular internship in a training context and, as already mentioned by the participants of this study who have made them, also according to Brandenburg [1], for trainees who have obtained this experience via the Erasmus program, it is mentioned that a job is offered, at the company where the internships are made, to more than one third of the students. Furthermore, respondents indicate their degree with greater employability abroad than in Portugal, although they do associate it to a medium-high expectation regarding employability in Portugal. In this sense, also the Brandenburg report [1] states that 40% of respondents in that study actually changed their country of residence or work at least once since graduation, which was almost double the number in relation to students who did not participate in an Erasmus mobility action program.

In short, through the results obtained, it can be concluded that the perception of respondents is that the internships and the Erasmus program are associated with greater employability and that these are learning experiences that are closely linked to the professional success of each student. These results are also important for decision-makers in higher education to get to know the perception of students about this issue, especially in a phase like the current one, in which restructuring and curricular adjustments in higher education in Portugal are being made, namely in area of tourism, and simultaneously it strongly promotes the internationalization and student mobility in the European higher education area.

Finally, we must remember that the work presented is only exploratory, a vast field of research in this area has to be developed with several lines of research for the future, such as focusing attention also in the opinion and needs of organizations that receive trainees, the skills they value the most and the evaluation they make of the most and least developed skills in students of ESTH/ IPG.

As a result of this study, we found that the students are aware of the importance of training in an internship context and the Erasmus mobility experiences on the expectations for their employability, which is a good indicator for the strengthening of their academic and professional options, helping them to grow in personal terms and prepare them to be active elements in the labour market with a skill quality and diversity that ensures high levels of professional performance, including the ability to innovate in a market that, according to Valente [7], is expected to have a very significant growth in employment opportunities in the next decade.

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