

# The Attraction of Education: National Stereotypes and Study Destination Choice

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**Abstract.** This article discusses the relationship between the constructs of image, national stereotypes and attractiveness of higher education systems (HE), analysing the Portuguese case within the context of European Higher Education. The growing importance of academic mobility coupled with the sharp demographic decline, the increased internationalization efforts of higher education institutions (HEI) from around the world and the general increase in global competitiveness has forced the HEI, and their own regions and countries, to an increasingly strategic use of communication tools in an attempt to attract investment, resources and students to maintain their position or, even, to survive. The empirical research was based on the Stereotype Content Model [1] and measured its correlation with the intention of performing higher studies in Portugal. The implications of this study allows us to understand and, as a consequence, design strategies aiming to promote attractiveness of the Portuguese higher education system.

**Keywords:** Higher Education, Academic Mobility, National Stereotypes, Country Image, Country-of-Origin Effect

## 1. Introduction

The current globalized world where goods and services are exchanged with virtually no restrictions or difficulties, brought a new model followed by many changes on the production, dissemination and promotion of these products or services, both within

and outside the borders of each country. In this context, a country's image and national stereotypes are extremely important and have had, over the years, an increasing leading role, since several studies show its significance when we are choosing and deciding to purchase and/or consume.

As most of the commercial activities, higher education also joined this trend. As a consequence, among other factors, the decreasing number of students, the reduction of financial resources, the development of new technologies, the fact that education is now seen as a product, the start of globalization, the reality of this new knowledge economy and knowledge society with a competition with just about no borders, the phenomenon of internationalization of education has become a heavily discussed topic both in the Academy and in the governments. Therefore, understanding the mechanisms of the decision making process of international students, which are the most important factors in those decisions, the weight and importance of each one of them, and what is the relationship between the consumers perception and the intention of their choice, this information is increasingly relevant to the IES, but also not only to the regions where they operate but ultimately, to their country, since the flow of foreign students is an important source of revenue, contributing, in some cases, in a very sharply way to national economies.

In this globalization era of open markets, free and shared information almost without limit, countries have become authentic brands dealing and managing their communication as well as marketing strategies just as if they were commercial companies, in order to increase the export of their products and services as well as attracting foreign investment and tourism. Working as real brands, many countries are competing with each other for their share of millions of international students seeking experience and knowledge outside of their countries. In Australia, for instance, this sector is already the second largest source of revenue, after tourism [2].

As a result, if knowledge is universal, if it is exchanged and traded internationally crossing borders faster than people or capital, it is understandable that both institutions (that produce and promote it), and countries want to attract the best students, teachers, researchers and resources. In this context, the question of image - or perceptions / mental representations created from the stimuli communicated by brands, organizations or entities, such as cities and countries - is one of the most extremely

important concepts identified by modern organizations [3]. Therefore, the study of the image applied to higher education in an international context is relevant as a way to help raise awareness for this issue, to study the influence of national stereotypes (in the dual role of national organizations and geographic brands) and better understand the mechanisms that generate the intention of studying in that particular country.

Moreover, literature has already stressed out the fact that by differentiating the right way you can position yourself strategically and manage (improve or maintain) the dimensions that contribute to influence stereotypes that can be key tools to change the perception of consumers, managers and investors, that no government can afford to underestimate. The authors claim that the essence of a brand's magnetism is communication, perceived here in its broadest sense. That is, this symbolic exchange that generates positive or negative impressions is, in itself, a producer of magnetism, or, in other words, the engine that runs attraction. So the question here is whether they can, or if they are able to or if it is even possible to HEI and countries generate and / or control the magnet effect of their education brands through strategic communication?

## **2. Theoretical background**

As Varghese [4] reminds us, the sources of economic growth have changed over time: in the time of agricultural societies it was the land; after that the capital took that place during the industrialized societies and, finally, in this society of knowledge the attention is focused on the individual, their features along with capabilities. This change from industrial society to knowledge society, since the mid-century XX, brought new challenges to human communities as a whole, but especially for the individual (focused on their intellectual ability and their knowledge) that sees the growing emphasis on progress, creativity, innovation and entrepreneurship. Furthermore, since knowledge by definition is universal, it is natural that the institutions that produce and promote it have been gaining an even greater role, as they are the most visible sector of the process of creation, preservation and systematic spreading of knowledge [5].

Although the universities have always attracted international students, until the 1990s what we had was an "international education", that is a set of little

defragmented activities very little related between them. Since then, with globalization and the assumption of Education as a commodity (since it was included in the rules of GATS in 1995), a new reality has emerged.

In this global arena of transnational education, the analysis of the preferences of international students has become a very important subject of study, not only for HEIs involved in strategies for internationalization but also for local, regional and national authorities concerned in promoting their territories as study destinations [6]. Indeed, there are many governments that have shown, in a very strong way, the economic benefits of higher education. This has become a global commodity, with many countries "selling themselves" as expert nations in research and education in order to strengthen their competitive position in the global arena [7].

After all, the benefits of international student mobility go beyond the financial returns: it brings highly qualified individuals to the territory, increasing its quality, cultural level and prestige. Hence, many countries assume as a strategic objective, the development of incentives to attract foreign students to their IES. To name just one example, since 1990, United Kingdom doubled the number of international students [8], and, in the same period, Australia has tripled [4].

In Portugal, the number of incoming students, by geographic regions, according to the OECD, are the following: Africa, 34.9%; Latin America, 29.5%; Europe, 28.5%; Asia 4.8%; North America, 2%; and Oceania, 0.2%. Of course the historical relationship, linguistic, cultural and even economic relation that Portugal has with many African countries and with Brazil - which is the country with the highest percentage of students sent to the country: 26.8 % - explains part of this numbers. Among the European countries, the order is Spain 9.3%, France 2.7%, Italy 2.4%, UK 2.1%, Germany and Poland, 1.8% and Belgium 1.1% . As for the outgoing mobility of Portuguese students, UK leads the table (30%), followed by Spain (15.7%), France (14.5%), Germany (8, 1%), Switzerland (6.1%), Belgium (3.9%), Brazil (2.7%), and the Czech Republic and the Netherlands with 2.1% each, as the most representative destinations.

These statistics can be due to geographical proximity, social life, associated costs, knowledge, familiarity, geography, climate, or the image one has of a destination, among others, many authors recognize the location as a decisive factor when choosing

the IES. Within this article, we will examine some ideals, that encompass several of these factors: the Country of Origin Effect (CoO), the country's image and the National Stereotype.

The Country of Origin Effect is explained in a very simple way, through a metaphor, by Papadopoulos and Heslop [9]: This represents for a product, the same as the profession reveals about a person who was just introduced to you at a party, i.e. we use this reference to contextualize and make upon it a judgment of value. Commonly identified by the label "*made in ...*" is an extrinsic clue that consumers use to assess the quality of products, whose result have implications in the attitude towards these countries and the products offered by them.

However, in a globalized world, this concept of country of origin is increasingly difficult to operationalize. Products are often designed in one country, manufactured in another and sometimes assembled in a third, so often different of the nationality of the brand [10, 11, 12]. For services, this point gains a greater importance since the intangibility requires consumers to make assumptions, so the nationality of the service providers have a greater impact on their beliefs.

As for the country's image, Askegaard and Ger [13] define it as "a scheme or a network of interrelated elements that define a country, a structure of knowledge that summarize what we know of a country, together with its evaluative meaning or affective scheme." Simply put, we can further define this phenomenon of mental representation as a set of mental associations - emotional and cognitive – that individuals relate to certain countries. These associations include geography, natural resources and tourist attractions; people; history; culture; language; economic and political system; social institutions; infrastructures and famous people; among others.

Differently from the traditional studies of CoO that enable researchers to analyse the consumer preferences for products from a particular country in contrast to other countries [14], studies of the country's image in the higher education environment help to explain the reasons behind these preferences. The image of the country seems to play a key role in choosing the international study destination because, in the absence of knowledge of the courses, facilities, etc., students use this formed idea to form value judgments.

Regarding the National Stereotype, Walter Lippman firstly introduced it in the social sciences with the book “Public Opinion” in 1922, where it is referred that the social representations that each individual develops about himself and others is through "images in their heads". These are images that arise in our mind when we think of certain social groups [15], that is a cognitive scheme used in social perception when processing information on others. Basically, stereotypes are beliefs we have about the attributes, characteristics and expected behaviours of certain group members and can be explained by the principle of cognitive economy, i.e., we organize our knowledge so that we can access much information possible with minimal cognitive effort [16].

### ***2.1 Stereotype Content Model***

In all social interactions, several authors debate that people need to understand immediately: the intentions (good or bad) of the others, i.e., do they *intend* to harm me?, and secondly, the ability to perform those intentions, i.e., are they *capable* of harming me? [1; 17]. These two core dimensions of general stereotype content, warmth and competence answer these questions.

Moreover, as Fiske *et al.* [18] wrote, 82% of the perceptions of all daily social behaviours is based on these two dimensions. Therefore, when people spontaneously interpret the behaviours or develop first impressions of others, warmth and competence together largely determine how people characterize them.

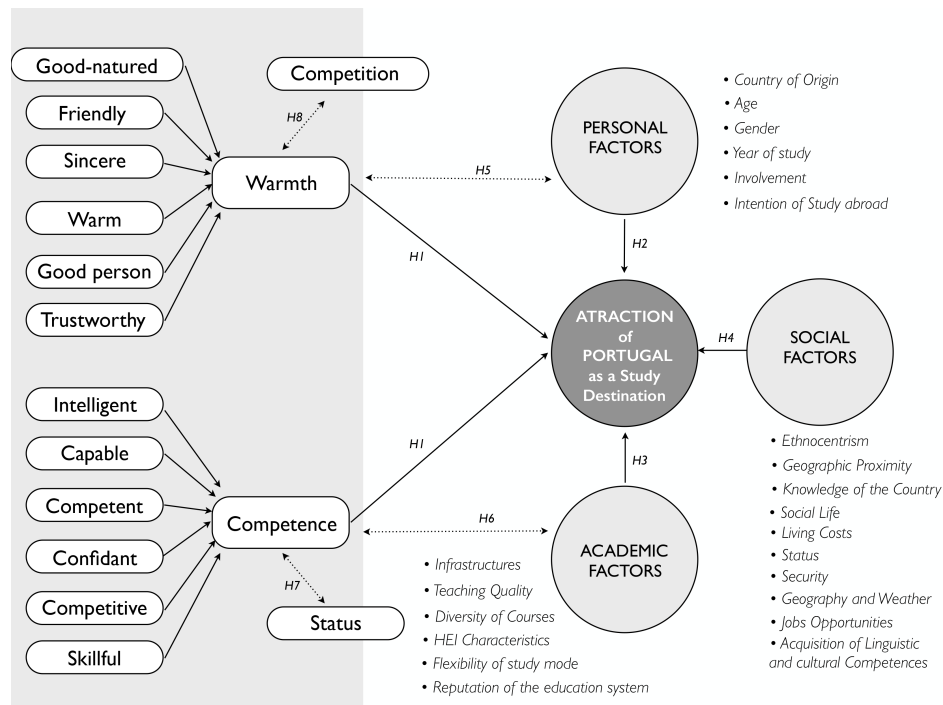
The Stereotype Content Model (SCM) is a model that offers a way to look at stereotypes [1], based on three assumptions: (a) Two-dimensional hypothesis, which puts perceptions on a map with two axes, defined by the dimensions warmth and competence, outcoming a representation in four quadrants; (b) the hypothesis of Mixed Stereotypes, which states that, in most cases, we combine the opposite of both dimensions, i.e. high warmth and low competence or vice versa; and (c) the Socio-structural hypothesis, which argues that a higher perceived level of competence corresponds a greater sense of power or status of this group, as well as a higher level of perceived competition represents a lower sense of warmth. This is the model that we used in our study.

### 3. Starting question, methodology, analysis model

As a result of the presented literature review, we advocate in this study that national stereotypes generate expectations, which in turn, influence perception, social judgments and have direct influence on the attraction of a given location, as an option as a study destination. In this sense, we start with the following question:

*"in what way does the stereotype of Portugal influence the attractiveness of it's higher education system from the part of it's European university students?"*

For the study of stereotypes was used SCM model [1]. At the same time, and as a result of the literature review, the authors decided to include several other factors identified in the literature as relevant in the choice of study destination, and grouped into three broad groups - personal, social and academic - in order to realize its importance in the attraction, as well as their relationship with national stereotypes. The research scheme is shown in Fig. 1:



For this study, we used a convenience sample of students belonging to EDCOM (European Institute for Commercial Communication Education), a European network of HEI exclusively from the communication field, which has 39 members from 15 European countries.

The directors of each HEI were previously contacted and informed of the framework, scope and importance of this study in the context of European academic mobility and subsequently, we sent them the digital survey to distribute among their students. We chose to collect the data electronically because it's easier to reach to all countries, it's faster plus cheaper and because it facilitates the subsequent statistical treatment. We used English because it's considered the universal language [19; 20; 21].

The survey had a first version that was tested with 50 foreign students that used to live in Lisbon (students under the Erasmus program) and afterwards was corrected some inaccuracies, redundancies and had some of the wording of the questions altered. After all inquiries were collected, they ended up having 464 as valid, which was considered sufficient as a convenience sample.

#### **4. Presentation of results**

In the Portugal's perception analysis, and for the competence dimension, the Portuguese people were evaluated in all items above the average, with scored between 3 and 4, highlighting the "confident", "skilled" and "intelligent" features with the highest scores, and "efficient", with the lowest. On the Warmth dimension, the items were scored higher than Competence, with some of the items to overcome 4 as average, such as the characteristics of "friendly" and "warm." Although all average values are above the midpoint of the measurement scale for all items, we highlight "sincere" and "reliable" characteristics as the least popular.

Regarding the perceived status, the average figures are superior to "good education" perceived, where the average value is higher than the midpoint of the measuring scale. As for the items "prestige of jobs" and "economic success", the values are below the midpoint. That is, globally, European students perceive the status of the Portuguese below the average. It is our belief that the low score on the



perception of economic success is linked to the economic situation that Portugal is currently undergoing, widely reported fact and known in Europe.

Regarding the level of competition that respondents perceive about Portuguese people, it is very low. This is also explained in large part by the fact that all participants belong to the same big category, Europe, hence the level of competitiveness is smaller. That is, although the nationalities are different, there is a kind of feeling of sharing common geographic territory, values, culture, among others, which creates a sense of belonging to the same group.

When self-evaluating, European students also classified all relevant characteristics about Competence, with values between 3 and 4. However, in general, the items with higher scores are "smart" and "competent" and the features which received the lowest scores are "honest" and "confident". In the Warmth dimension, the mean values also lies between 3 and 4, with all the items being scored with values greater than the midpoint of the measuring scale. Despite the very small difference between the various features, the highest scores went to the features "reliable" and "good-natured" and the least popular were "sincere", "friendly" and "warm".

Regarding the Portuguese academic factors, the scores of most items are higher than the midpoint of the measuring scale, with the exception of the point concerning the "reputation of the education system." This should deserve special attention, for three main reasons: 1. Reputation is a key factor in the selection criteria of HEIs; 2. It works as risk reduction mechanism, which in the case of international students is essential; and 3. the reputation is a set of organizational associations that take a long time to change.

The second lowest factor was "research capacity", very little above the midpoint of the scale. If we take into account that this is an area of excellence for the Academy, a factor of great weight in international rankings and a very prestige element, we easily realize its importance.

As for the best evaluated aspects, we find the "diversity of courses," followed by "quality of the teaching staff", "facilities" and "flexibility of the study format" in this order, despite having similar values.

In the self-assessment of academic factors of their own countries, the European students rated all items with scores between 3 and 4, with the higher score for the

"diversity of courses". In the second and third place, and in the opposite direction of Portugal, we find the "research capacity" and the "reputation of the education system."

When we look to the importance of social factors in the choice of the study destination, all ten factors have had a positive note, with the item "acquire cultural and linguistic skills" presenting a score above 4. The following items were "security", the "social life", the "costs of living" and "language". Considered less important are the "knowledge / familiarity with the country" and finally, "geographical proximity".

When we asked about the intention of studying abroad, 81% said yes, which proves that participate in a study abroad program goes far beyond the mere acquisition of knowledge or academic skills. However, 45% consider unlikely or very unlikely choose Portugal as a study destination. In our view, poor perceived quality of the Portuguese HE, is certainly one of the reasons contributing to this.

## **5. Discussion of Results**

Our research proved the existence of a positive correlation between the stereotype of the country and the intention to go there to study. In this context, we can say, as suggested by Chatallas *et al.* [22], that Portuguese institutions should stimulate and enhance the image projected through the different factors that make up both constructs, in order to promote and increase the attraction of the Portuguese higher education towards international students.

It is also significantly relevant to analyse the relationship between European students that Portugal receives and the stereotype about Portuguese people. The students that Portugal receives are: Spain (9.3%); France (2.7%); Italy (2.4%); UK (2.1%); Germany and Poland (1.8%) and Belgium (1.1%). Since Italy and Poland do not have IES belonging to EDCOM, they were not included in this study. In the other four countries analysed, the values are above the midpoint of the measuring scale and with minimal differences, so we cannot conclude a direct relationship between the stereotype and the actual enrolment in Portuguese HEIs. In our opinion, the high number of students from Spain is directly related to the geographical proximity and, in the case of France and Germany, especially, but also the UK, with personal affinity, as a consequence of the high rates of emigration of Portuguese citizens for these countries. In fact, we are probably in the presence of students in mobility rather than

international students, meaning it is possible that they are returning to their home country to study. Interestingly, UK, Spain, France, Germany and Switzerland are also the countries where Portugal sends more students with 30%, 15.7%, 14.5%, 8.1% and 6.1% respectively and, we believe, due the same reasons.

As for the academic factors, the proven correlation with the intention of studying in a particular destination, come in line with most studies, particularly the items "reputation of the education system" and "perceived academic quality."

About reputation, it is still important to note that, when comparing this evaluation with the scores obtained in the evaluation of the Competence dimension, we realized that the six countries that scored higher the reputation of the Portuguese education system, four of them also scored with the highest average the dimension Competence.

As for the evaluation of the remaining Portuguese academic factors, the values follow the same pattern of the reputation: in the top half of the table we find Romania, Turkey, Bulgaria, Croatia and the Czech Republic. As for the self-assessment, Belgium, Netherlands, Switzerland, Norway and Denmark stand out as the ones that best self-evaluate, i.e., there is an exchange position with the countries mentioned above.

At the intersection of evaluation of academic factors of their own countries with the intention of studying in Portugal, we found that five of the six factors analysed, the lowest rating (1) has a direct correspondence with the highest average probability of studying in Portugal, so we can conclude that one of the factors that motivates students to study abroad, can be the lowest assessment made of the academic factors in their own countries.

As for social factors, it is surprising the un-existing correlation between the intention to study in Portugal and items such as the "acquisition of language skills and cultural" and the "geography and climate." The first factor is surprising because it contradicts all previous studies and literature review, as well as, the second one because of its contradiction to the exploratory interviews with foreign students in Portugal.

Having proven the relationship between the national stereotype and the intention to study in Portugal, with the Competence dimension revealing a stronger correlation than Warmth, the Portuguese HEI, but also the national authorities, may brandish

arguments that potentiate the most valued factors and try to modify the less positive perceptions.

This study also revealed that on average, most European students consider themselves more competent than the Portuguese people but less affective. However, countries such as Spain, France, Bulgaria, Denmark, Turkey, Romania and Croatia evaluate the competence of the Portuguese people with higher scores than those with which they self-evaluated. Perhaps this shows an opportunity to explore in order to enhance the attraction of students from these countries.

Although when we evaluated the warmth, the evaluation of the Portuguese people is greater than the individual self-assessment of all countries, without exception. Though this dimension has a lower correlation with the intention of studying in Portugal, it was proved its existence and influence, so reinforcing this belief through communication activities will benefit Portugal's image as a whole and also stimulate the attraction of students.

Another conclusion of this study relates to the confirmation of the relationship between the dimension competence and the level of perceived status. Thus, it may suggest that efforts should be made to promote the status of Portuguese people, since an increased perception of this factor is directly implied in increasing the perception of competence, and this, in turn, has a strong influence on the decision of choosing the study destination.

We suggest communication supported in examples showing successful Portuguese cases, circulating more and better HEIs that arise in international rankings, articles published in newspapers and magazines of reference, research with real benefits for people, products and projects resulting from works or partnerships with Portuguese HEI, are, among many others, only a few examples that can serve as a lever to boost the perceived status of the Portuguese higher education.

Finally, we believe it would be useful to analyse the stereotype of Portugal with potential foreign students from outside Europe, since the majority of foreign students attending our HEI are from Africa, immediately after Brazil, the major "exporter" of students to Portugal. Although the language is the main reason that justifies these figures, there is a whole set of historical and cultural factors that enhances while stimulates the relationship and giving rise also to the way that the citizens of these

countries see Portugal and the Portuguese people. Most of these students, contrary to the European students, come in different mobility logic - normally longer, more engaging and paid, so with greater economic benefits for the country.

Moreover, with the increasing global competition, Portugal must guard the guarantees of this flow of students, under penalty of start to losing them gradually to other geographic regions and countries. To do this, one must know well their attractiveness, realizing the weight and importance attached to each of the social and academic factors relevant in deciding the choice of study destination, and follow the evolution of perceptions of these audiences, particularly through imaging studies and evaluation of the stereotypes, and finally, developing strategic actions, also at the level of communication in order to manage and improve these perceptions.

## **6. Conclusion**

Higher education is, like it or not, a worldwide business, where "HEIs operate and work their expressiveness through communication, in a competitive market logic and clear economic purposes" [3] and the HEI don't have another way to survive, unless increase its capacity to attract. Attracting more resources, more investment, better teachers, better researchers, and, of course, more and better students.

Despite the decision process and choice of students be complex and multidimensional, in the case of international choice, the location factor proves to be crucial and decisive at the time of decision-making. Whether by direct relation to the costs, either by geographic proximity, social life and surrounding environment, geography and climate, either for safety or even the perceived image of the destination, the location of the campus seems to be decisive in the choice of students.

Moreover, the stereotype of the country is fundamental in this decision process. Based on the assumption, confirmed by extensive literature, that mental network of the affective and cognitive associations that individuals have about certain countries (country image) has a direct influence on the evaluation of products and services they produced, and having proven, too, that the stereotype of a country is bounding the way it is perceived and has direct influence on the relationship of intent with this country and its citizens, we argue that the study of these beliefs is therefore essential for multiple industries, as in this case, higher education.

A better understanding of how countries and their citizens are seen by foreign students will benefit various stakeholders in this sector. Realizing better how they are perceived, different factors can devise strategies to address the less positive situations, improving the dimensions less well evaluated, and / or enhancing the most valued, making their higher education more attractive and more competitive in global market.

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