

# INTERNATIONAL STUDENT MOBILITY IN SOUTHERN-LATIN EUROPE: BEYOND THE EU LOGICS, TOWARDS A NEW SPACE

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## ABSTRACT

THIS PAPER DISCUSSES INTERNATIONAL STUDENT MOBILITY (ISM) IN SOUTHERN-LATIN EUROPE, SPECIFICALLY ITALY, PORTUGAL, AND SPAIN, ANALYSING THE INFLOW OF INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS AS REFLECTED IN THE UNESCO, OECD AND EUROPEAN COMMISSION DATABASES. ONLY RECENTLY ITALY, PORTUGAL AND SPAIN, AS LATECOMERS, HAVE BECOME MORE ACTIVELY INVOLVED IN ISM DYNAMICS. THIS TREND HAS BEEN A RESPONSE TO EU PRESSURES TO INTERNATIONALIZATION, INSTRUMENTED THROUGH THE CONSOLIDATION OF THE BOLOGNA PROCESS AND THE NEED TO BUILD A COMMON SPACE OF HIGHER EDUCATION. THE ANALYSIS SHOWS THAT AT THE INTRA-EUROPEAN LEVEL ITALY, PORTUGAL AND SPAIN SHARE SIMILAR ISM PATTERNS; HOWEVER, IN THE GLOBAL CONTEXT OTHER LOGICS SHAPE ISM DYNAMICS. THIS STUDY CONFIRMS THE GREAT POTENTIAL THAT ITALY, PORTUGAL AND SPAIN, OR THE SOUTHERN-LATIN EUROPEAN SPACE, HAVE TO ATTRACT INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS BOTH FROM THE EU AND FROM OTHER WORLD REGIONS.

## KEY WORDS:

INTERNATIONAL STUDENT MOBILITY, NEO-COLONIALISM, SOUTHERN-LATIN EUROPE

## INTRODUCTION

During the last decades, the internationalization of higher education has gained centrality, mainly triggered by new developments: international students turned into a global capital (Findlay, 2010), global rankings became relevant assets among higher education institutions (HEIs), and international students mobility (ISM) evolved into

becoming an important issue in the migration and educational agendas (Altbach and Knight, 2007; Rumbley *et al.*, 2012).

Since the 1980s, the European Commission has fostered ISM in the European space. Throughout time, this space has grown significantly with the incorporation of new countries and new university education cycles, creating an expanded student market. In so doing, the Erasmus programme has

arisen as its most consolidated action to promote student mobility. While in its first edition, in 1987, 3224 students from 11 countries –Belgium, Denmark, Germany, Greece, France, Ireland, Italy, Netherlands, Portugal, Spain and United Kingdom– spent a study period abroad; in 2013, this number had increased to 272.497 (EC, 2015), originating from the 27 EU-member states, Iceland, Liechtenstein, Norway, Switzerland and Turkey. Moreover, the programme’s scope has also changed along these years, targeting higher education students initially, while at present it also offers vocational education and training, school education, adult education and sports (EC, 2015).

Since the implementation of the Erasmus programme, the European Union (EU) has developed many other initiatives to further promote ISM at the intra-European level. The Bologna process, launched by the Bologna Declaration in 1999, promotes member States’ higher education systems compatibility through a converged degree structure –three-cycle system of qualification towards bachelor, master and doctorate degrees– and a joint credit system together with an European credit transfer system. Thus, it fosters staff and students mobility. The European Higher Education Area, established in 2010, hopes to enhance European cooperation in education and training programmes and to ensure that higher education systems across Europe are compatible (EC, 2017b). More recently, the “Mobility 2020 strategy” implemented since 2012, sets a goal of 20 % of student mobility among those graduating in the European Higher Education Area (Wulz and Rainer, 2015).

In spite of these efforts, not all European countries engaged in ISM schemes at the same extent and pace. Some countries have taken longer to adapt due to factors such as inertia, resistance from HEIs or the amount of changes it would imply. The United Kingdom has been at the forefront of this process; since the late 1970s it has been consistently developing and implementing schemes and policies targeting ISM. However, even if leading the ranking as a host country for international students (IS) in Europe, it has a weaker performance for sending students abroad (Boerjesson, 2017; King

*et al.*, 2010). Geopolitical hierarchies (França and Padilla, 2016; Mignolo, 2002), the high number of British world-class universities (Packwood *et al.*, 2015) and the importance of the English language for the global market are some of the elements that explain its attraction capacity, although Brexit may bring some changes (Mayhew, 2017). Since the 1980s, Germany and France have progressively increased their participation in ISM dynamics, improving their initiatives and practices both to attract international students and to send their national students abroad (Wit and Adams, 2013). As a result, both countries occupy also a leading position in this scenario, although with a more balance distribution between incoming and outgoing flows of international students (Boerjesson, 2017; Russell King *et al.*, 2010). Considering countries such as Italy, Portugal and Spain, in spite of some isolated measures implemented earlier, it was only in the last decade when they engaged more systematically in these dynamics.

The aim of this article is to improve knowledge on ISM by exploring less investigated contexts, exposing different mobility patterns and dynamics for Italy, Portugal and Spain. We start with a brief discussion about the relevance of studying ISM dynamics in under-investigated geographical contexts and a presentation of the three cases. Then, the methodological notes describe the databases used (UNESCO, OECD and EC) and their limitations, followed by the analysis of their statistics. Our results show that at the intra-European level Italy, Portugal and Spain share similar ISM patterns; however, in the global context other logics shape their dynamics.

#### INTERNATIONAL STUDENT MOBILITY IN UNDER-STUDIED REGIONS

Despite the growing literature and innovative research lines on ISM, the concentration of student mobility in some specific countries –namely United States of America (26 % of the total), United Kingdom (15 %), France (10 %), Germany (10 %) Australia (8 %) and Canada (5 %) (OECD 2016)–

has kept research geographically centred in these settings.

Several factors have contributed to this bias. At the macro level, the quality of their HEIs and the highly dynamic labour markets increased their attractiveness to international students with ambitions following graduation (Findlay *et al.*, 2012). In the case of the United States of America, United Kingdom and Australia, English as a global language plays an important role as well (King *et al.*, 2010).

Authors like Wilken and Dahlberg (2017), Boerjesson (2017), França and Padilla (2016) and Mol (2014) have been focusing on ISM dynamics in less mainstream countries, such as Denmark, Spain, Portugal, Italy, Austria and Poland. These studies show that, on the one hand, these contexts of ISM may reproduce some of the features found in the more conventional regions –such as the quality of HEIs involved, the availability of courses taught in English and future employment opportunities–. On the other, nonetheless, some of the particularities of their social, economic, political and historical background may offer singular features, advantages or logics that justify further consideration. For example, colonial links, scholarship and funding opportunities, shared language and geographical proximity may play a role in ISM dynamics.

Thus, including under-studied cases in the ISM analysis helps grasp a more accurate picture of the landscape of global ISM, as they allow examining interactions patterns and arrangement across countries and regions and conceiving a broader view of power relations behind these dynamics. As Boerjesson's (2017) argues, this vision contributes to develop a multidimensional perspective that considers the traditional connections between countries and new emerging powers, highlighting the relevance of regional ties.

In line with this view, the Italian, Portuguese and Spanish cases become a relevant scenario of inquiry. These countries share some commonalities among themselves such as membership of the EU since its early years, similar social and economic characteristics that have influenced their higher education systems, a particular modernisation process consequence of their late capitalist development, a

weaker and unstable economy (King and Zontini, 2000), a less developed welfare state and a higher level of dependence from the EU if compared to other state members. However, they also present some differences that should be taken into account when analysing ISM dynamics, namely a colonial past –Portugal and Spain controlled territories in Latin America and Africa for many centuries with long lasting legacies reflected in linguistic, cultural and religion heritages–. The Italian colonial enterprise was late, brief and geographically limited, thus it did not allow such proximities (Palumbo, 2003); instead Italy has placed more emphasis on a commercial logic built on its advantageous status as a member of the G7, as an industrial power worldwide (Jesuino, 2002) and its worldwide known design and art history capital.

#### INTERNATIONAL STUDENT MOBILITY IN SOUTHERN EUROPEAN COUNTRIES: ITALY, PORTUGAL AND SPAIN

Based on the existing literature, this section briefly describes ISM dynamics in Italy, Portugal and Spain considering both their historical trends and main ISM initiatives to attract IS.

The European Union's pressure through educational policies can be pointed as one of the main triggers of the internationalization process in the Italian, Portuguese and Spanish higher education systems. The three countries have adopted EU's recommendations to promote ISM by participating in the Erasmus programme, actively implementing the Bologna Process and transposing European Commission directives on ISM –Directive 2004/11 and 2016/801 (Di Pietro and Page, 2008; Fonseca and Hortas, 2011; Hunter, 2015; Pineda *et al.*, 2008; Rumbley, 2015).

Since its first edition in 1987, Italy, Portugal and Spain joined the Erasmus programme in both categories, outbound by sending students abroad and inbound by receiving international students. Throughout these 30 years, their participation in the programme has improved considerably, the total number of incoming and outgoing students has grown significantly, and additionally, the number

of hosting institutions has also increased at a great pace (EC, 2017a).

Concerning the Bologna process, although the three countries signed the Bologna declaration when it was launched in 1999, its implementation followed different paths. Italy was one of the first to introduce the reforms foreseen in the declaration, still in 1999, speeding the internationalization of its higher education system (Hunter, 2015). Portugal and Spain only managed to implement the reforms in 2005 and 2007, respectively, because their higher education systems differed at a greater rate from the model proposed by the Bologna process—Portugal had a binary higher education system constituted by Universities and Polytechnic Institutes and Spain had many different degrees/levels, which requested longer debates in order to align with the Bologna model (Lara, 2015; Sousa, 2011).

Thus, several initiatives were carried out by these countries to adapt to the Bologna process, among them, the adaptation to the three-cycle degree structure, the introduction of the European credit transfer system, an increase in the number of courses taught in English and the promotion of specific actions targeting ISM.

In spite of adopting these similar measures, these countries also developed different ISM strategies to target outside EU regions, according to their specific interests and historical background, to further promote ISM, as shown below.

#### ITALY

In the late 1990s, Italy started to invest in the internationalization of its higher education system by attracting international students from outside the EU. The signature of bilateral agreements with different countries—notably Argentina and China—were some of the main actions developed (Aittola *et al.*, 2009; Hunter, 2015).

In 1999, Italy inaugurated a new era of internationalization based on opening campuses abroad. Its first experience took place in Buenos Aires, with the establishment of a local centre of the University of Bologna, offering Master's degrees in interna-

tional relations, social sciences, engineering and technological innovation. The courses were (and are) taught by Italian and Argentinean staff in Italian, Spanish and English. Argentinean students enrolled at the University of Bologna centre in Buenos Aires were required to spend a semester in Italy and, likewise, Italian students from the University of Bologna had to attend a semester in Argentina (OBHE, 2005). The initiative has been so successful that it still continues today (UNIBO, 2017).

Later, in 2006 a similar initiative was reproduced with China. The Polytechnics of Milan and Turin and the Luiss and Bocconi Universities from Italy, as well as the Universities of Tongji and Fudan in Shanghai, from China, created a Chinese-Italian university that operates in Shanghai. This university offers a four years undergraduate programme in engineering and master degrees in economics and management. Like in the Argentinian case, Chinese students have to spend a year in Italy and Italian students do so in China (Pulcini and Campagna, 2015). During the same year and at the national level, the Conference of Italian Rectors launched the “Marco Polo” and “Turandot” programmes targeting Chinese students. Both initiatives were conceived to increase the number of Chinese students enrolled in Italian Universities through the reservation of seats (quotas) at the universities, the offer of free Italian language courses upon arrival and the creation of special visa granting measures (EMN, 2012a).

Still in 2006, the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation in partnership with companies from the private sector created a programme named “Invest your talent in Italy” to attract international students from different regions. The programme offers scholarships to attend undergraduate and master courses in the following areas: engineering and technology, economics, management, social sciences, architecture and design. The target countries are selected depending on their potentiality to contribute to the internationalisation of Italian enterprises, among them, Brazil, Turkey, Ghana, Colombia, Mexico, Egypt, Azerbaijan, Ethiopia and Vietnam (EMN, 2012a).

More recently, in 2014, the Italian Agency for the Evaluation of Universities and Research, in order to reinforce the need of Italian HEIs to deepen their investment in ISM, decided that institution's rates of both incoming and outgoing students involved in Erasmus or other ISM schemes would be taken into account as a budget criteria when granting funding to HEIs (Hunter, 2015).

#### PORTUGAL

From a long-term point of view, the Portuguese ISM can be divided into two phases. The first one dates back to the colonial period and is composed primarily by students from the elite in the former Portuguese colonies in Africa (Mozambique, Angola, Guinea Bissau, Cape Verde; São Tome e Príncipe), who moved to the metropolis to pursue a degree. After their independence in 1975, this flow continued through a series of bilateral cooperation agreements between Portugal and the new African states, fostering mutual scientific and academic development. At that time, the mobility of African students to Portugal was sponsored mainly by the Portuguese government (Mourato, 2011).

The second period inaugurated with Portugal joining the EU in 1986 and lasts up to today. It is characterised by Portuguese efforts to build and secure a position in the global higher education market, which is carried out through a two-folded strategy. On the one hand, it continues targeting students from the former colonies, and, on the other, it focuses on attracting EU students.

Portugal has favoured its privileged relationship with its ex-colonies by promoting cooperation channels and opportunities to attract students from the Community of Portuguese-speaking countries (CPLP), an international organization founded in 1996 and integrated by Portugal, Angola, Cape Verde, Guinea-Bissau, S. Tome and Príncipe, Mozambique, East Timor and Brazil, grounded on the premise of a shared past, cultural relationship, official language, and common economic and political interests (Almeida, 2008; Baganha, 2009). In line with this, Portugal has set up special

admission regimes, lower fees, scholarships and specific visa issuing procedure for students from CPLP countries.

In 2014, two important initiatives have further advanced internationalization for all students, namely the creation of the International Student Statute, *Estatuto do Estudante Internacional* (Decree-Law No. 36/10 March 2014) –a legal framework for international students– and the “Strategy for the internationalization of Portuguese Higher Education”, developed by the Ministry of Education and Science and the Ministry for Regional Development –a series of recommendations focusing on improving the internationalization level of the Portuguese HEIs–. These documents together encompass the current Portuguese official rationality towards ISM.

Throughout this period, ISM from Brazil had gained new features in addition to Portuguese policies targeting students from the Portuguese-speaking countries: the Brazilian government increased its investments to foster the internationalization of its national higher education system –mainly through scholarships and the celebration of cooperation agreements–. Because of historical links, diplomatic proximity, long-lasting collaboration networks and the common language, Portugal has been a suitable partner, gaining from the spill over of Brazilian policies (França and Padilla, 2016).

Additionally, during the last two decades, sending their youngsters abroad to pursue a university degree has become a common practice among Brazilian middle-class families who intend to provide them with a better quality education and future career opportunities (Nogueira *et al.*, 2008). In this scenario, Portugal became a popular destination due to its low cost of living compared to other countries and to pre-existing migration social and family networks (Merçon *et al.*, 2012).

Simultaneously, through private and public entities, Portugal developed specific strategies to attract Brazilian students to raise the internationalization level of its higher education system as well as to compensate for the demographic crisis experienced by the universities. For instance, in 2007, the Portuguese Santander Foundation cre-

ated a scholarship mobility programme targeting exclusively students from Brazil, and since 2014 some Portuguese Universities accept the Brazilian National High School Exam (ENEM) as a requisite to access undergraduate selection process (Fonseca *et al.*, 2016; França and Padilla, 2016).

### SPAIN

Spain's entrance to the EU in 1986 opened its HE system to the world and prompted its internationalization process. Since then, the country has been implementing diverse initiatives to promote ISM from/to Spanish HEIs (Peach, 2001).

Based on its colonial and historical ties with Latin America and Northern Africa regions, Spain built particular strategies to attract students from these areas (Rumbley, 2015). The Spanish government has stimulated collaboration with HEIs in these regions by promoting specific cooperation policies and funding mechanisms –mainly scholarships and research programmes–. For instance, in 1990, the Spanish Agency for International Cooperation (AECI) and the Organization of Ibero-American States for Education, Science and Cultures (OEI) created the Academic Mobility and Exchange Program (PIME) to foster ISM from Latin American to Spanish institutions (Jaramillo and Wit, 2011). In addition, in 1995, the International University of Andalucía created the “Group of Latin American Universities - La Rábida” to foster academic, scientific and cultural cooperation by strengthening universities partnerships and promoting ISM through scholarships and grants. The network numbered in total 60 different universities from sixteen countries in Latin America –Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Cuba, Ecuador, El Salvador, Mexico, Nicaragua, Panama, Peru, Puerto Rico and Dominican Republic–. More recently, in 2012, the Spanish Agency for International Cooperation and the Morocco government signed the Strategic Association Agreements on Development and Cultural, Educational and Sport Cooperation (AECI, 203). In line with the previously mentioned actions, this

initiative also promotes collaboration between the two countries in the academic field.

Furthermore, cross-border education initiatives were developed through the implementation of joint degrees with institutions in Latin America and Morocco. In 1997, the University of the Basque Country set up a “Network of Master's and Doctoral Degrees in Latin America”, comprised by fifteen universities located in Latin America. In 2010, The University of Cadiz together with the University Abdelmalek Essaâdi from Morocco created the Cross-border Strait of Gibraltar Campus. These programmes foresee that students enrolled in partner institutions come to the main campus in Spain for at least one semester, while Spanish students must complete a period in Morocco (Doiz *et al.*, 2012; EMN, 2012b).

Likewise, some HEIs have individually invested in attracting international students by creating solid bonds with Latin American and North African HEIs. Examples of these strategies are the “Cátedra José Gaos Complutense”, established in 2002, as cooperation between the Complutense University of Madrid and the National University of Mexico (UNAM), and the collaboration agreement signed in 2005 between the University of Granada and the University Mohamed I de Oujda in Morocco (EMN, 2012b).

Moreover, in 2008 the “University Strategy 2015” was created to improve the internationalization of HEIs. This strategy was implemented through the initiative called “International Campus of Excellence”, designed to attract international students through fostering strategic partnerships between universities and private and public institutions (Rubiralta and Delgado, 2010; Seeber, 2017). Deepening the scope, its follow up, the “Strategy for the Internationalization of Spanish Universities 2015-2020” was approved in 2014. The initiative defines ISM as one of its central aims (Nadal, 2016) to be achieved by promoting more courses taught in English, the simplification of the credits validation processes and the creation of a portal named “Study in Spain” to strength the Spanish HEIs as a brand.

### METHODOLOGICAL NOTES

This paper carries a comparative analysis of ISM base on statistical databases from different official sources at a global and European level. More specifically, the UNESCO and OECD databases, since they offer exhaustive data on different countries covering longer periods of time; as well as data on the Erasmus programme obtained from the European Commission statistical reports: *Erasmus: Facts, Figures & Trends* (2004-2012).

Some clarifications are needed in order to understand the data. UNESCO and OECD have agreed that when it comes to measuring international mobility in higher education the preferred definition should be based on the students' country prior to entering tertiary education. Thus, the official definition is "students who have crossed a national or territorial border for the purpose of education and are now enrolled outside their country of origin". In the case that countries are not able to report data in accordance to this definition, the country of usual or permanent residence can be considered as the student's country of origin (UNESCO, 2016).

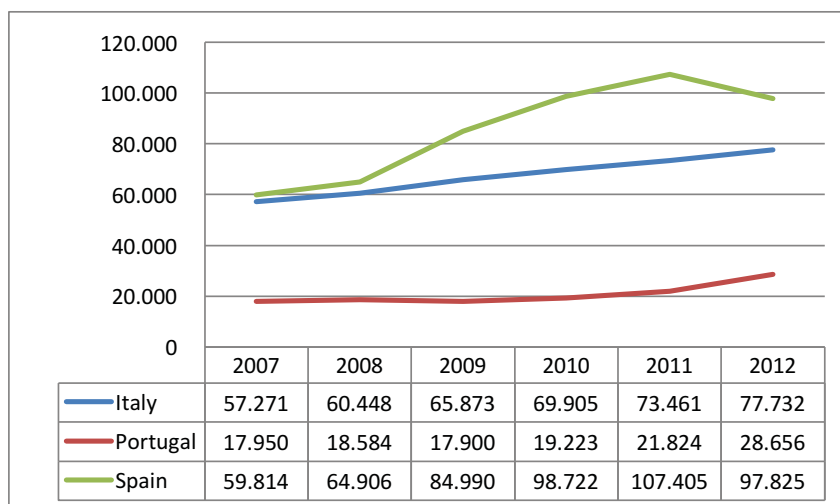
Our analysis focuses on the incoming flows of international students originated from developing

countries and EU nationalities to Italy, Portugal and Spain between 2007-2015 (period in which data is available for the three countries, allowing for suitable comparison).

One limitation for the Italian case is that data on international students are based on the student's country of origin, inflating the results as it also includes students who moved to Italy due to other reasons than educational purposes. Spain and Portugal, since 2007, have reported their data according to the international definition. Hence, when comparison between the three countries is carried, the analysis is based on the student's country of origin. In the cases of individual analysis for Portugal and Spain, the international criterion is adopted.

A final methodological note concerns the comparison in absolute numbers across the three countries, as the number of university students population varies considerably. While Spain and Italy have about two million students enrolled in their HEIs, in Portugal this is about four hundred thousand. Nevertheless, they proportionally present a similar percentage, between 3 and 4 % (UNESCO and Eurostat, 2012).

**Chart 1. Evolution of ISM to IT, PT, ES (2007-2012)**



Source: OECD.

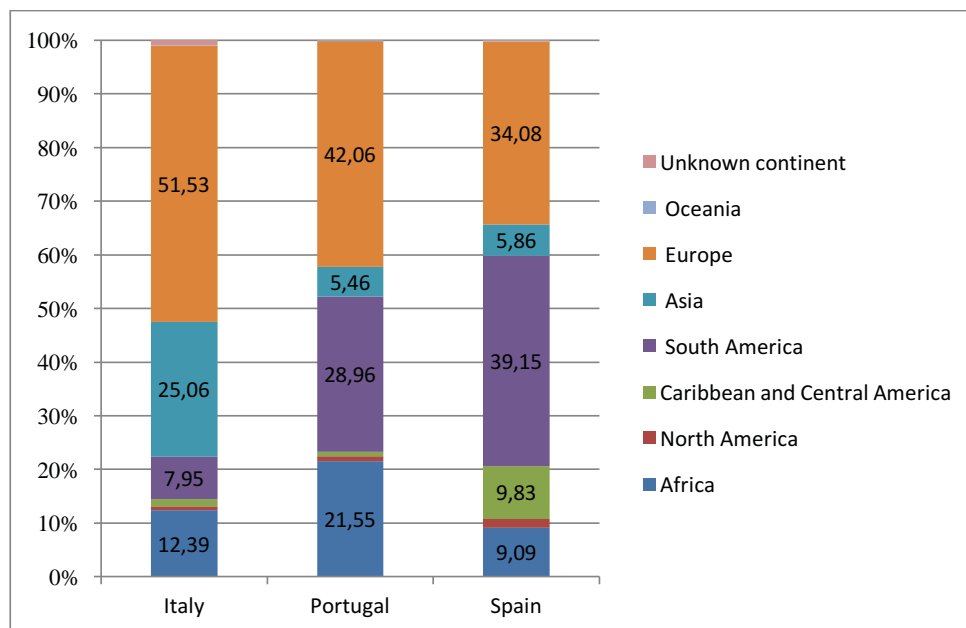
## ANALYSIS

### GLOBAL MOBILITY

OECD data capture the evolution of inbound flows of international students to Italy (IT), Portugal (PT) and Spain (ES) between 2007 and 2012 (Chart 1). The three cases show a progressive

growth that corresponds respectively to an increase of 26 %, 37 % and 38 %. It illustrates a positive outcome of the internationalization initiatives put in practice by these countries, both at intra-European level as well as at the global level (Chart 2), to adjust to current demands in the higher education global market.

**Chart 2. Inbound International Student mobility by region of origin, 2012**



Source: UNESCO.

In 2012, European students were the most representative group of international students in Italy and Portugal, 51,53 % and 42,06 respectively. This numbers clearly show a high degree of compliance to EU policies fostering ISM at intra-European level and towards the establishment of European Higher Education Area.

Comparatively, in the Spanish case, Latin American students account for the largest group, reaching about 49 - 39,15 % from South America and 9,83 from Central America and the Caribbean. This attests Spain's successful strategy in recruiting students from this region. European students

occupy the second position, reaching 34 %. It is interesting to notice that, even though European students are proportionally less representative than Latin Americans, they are still very relevant within the overall picture of international student mobility to Spain and within Europe. Since 2002, Spain has been the most sought-after destination for Erasmus students, showing the attraction power that Spain enjoys in Europe (Pineda *et al.*, 2008; Rumbley, 2015).

In the Portuguese case, South America appears as the second largest home region of international students, accounting for 28,9 %.



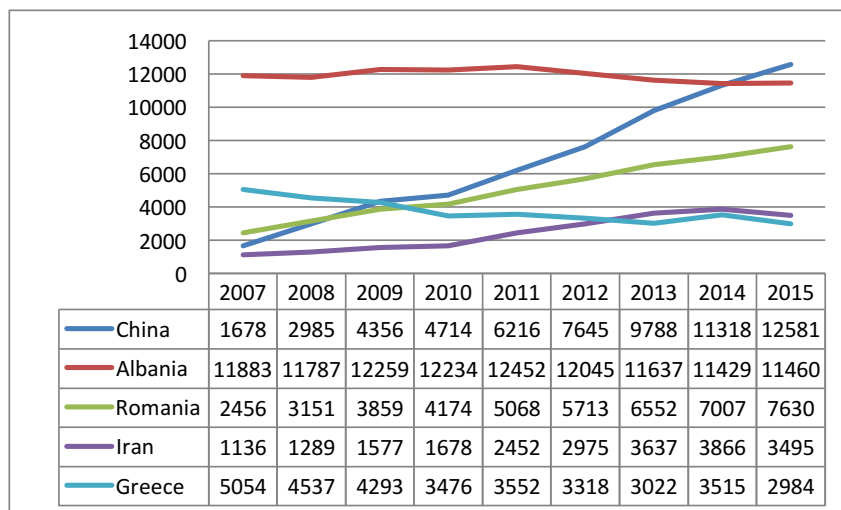
portant role in these numbers, as Brazilian students represent 96 % of South American students in the country. Africa constitutes the third largest region of origin from where international students come, accounting for 21,5 % of the total.

For Italy, Asian countries are the second largest source of international students, summing up 25,06 % of the total. This results, as previously explained, from the policies designed by Italy to attract Asian students, namely from China. Contrary to the previous cases, Italy and Asia do not share a historical past or a common cultural background; thus this connection represents a new niche for

the development of Italian ISM schemes. Consequently, Italians initiatives to attract international students developed a competitive model targeting markets and students who can afford to pay the fees (Boerjesson, 2017; Knight, 2012). According to Milanovic (2016), China has become one of the countries with a fast growing middle-upper class and new millionaires who are willing to pay for their children's education abroad.

The next three charts illustrate the evolution of the first 5 nationalities of international students for each of the three countries.

**Chart 3. Evolution of the main 5 nationalities of international students IT (2007-2015)**



Source: UNESCO.

While in 2007 Chinese students represented 3 % of all international students in Italy, in 2015, this number increased to 14 %, accounting for the largest foreign nationality enrolled in Italian HEIs. This progressive and steady increase surpassed the number of Albanian students, who until then constituted the largest and most stable group of international students in the country. As mentioned previously, the remarkable evolution of ISM from China to Italy is the result of the Italian efforts at targeting Chinese students by strengthening cultural and scientific cooperation between the two countries

(Bergaglio, 2014). Since the early 2000s, many ISM actions between the two countries were promoted, as commented above, the Chinese-Italian university operating in Shanghai and the launch of “Marco Polo” and Turandot projects to facilitate the enrolment of Chinese students in Italian universities (Bergaglio, 2014; EMN, 2012a). Italian interests in attracting Chinese students illustrate their ambition to enter a market that up to now has been mostly dominated by the Anglophone countries, namely the United States of America, the United Kingdom and Australia; and simultaneously goes hand in

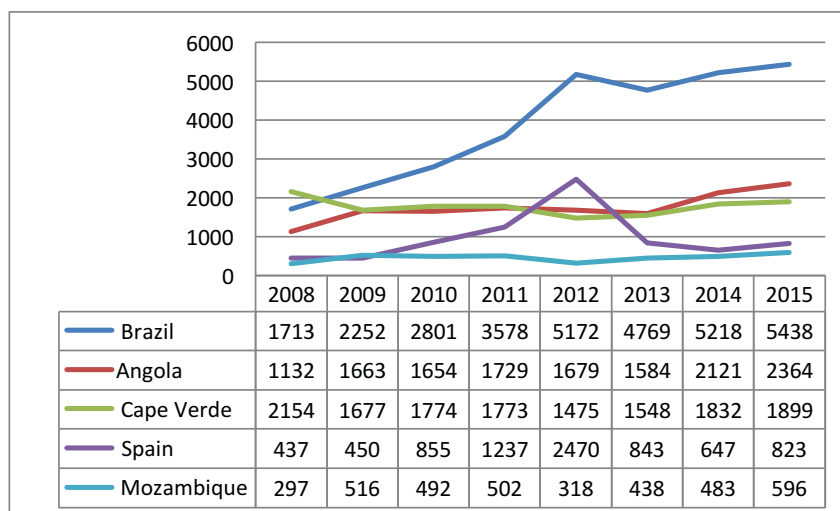
hand with the growing importance of China as a central actor in the new global economy (Milanovic, 2016). Comparative advantages for studying in Italy include low cost of living if compared to the aforementioned Anglophone countries, its historical heritage and cultural amenities, as well as its world leading position in art, music and design (Bergaglio, 2014).

Albanian students account for the second largest group enrolled in Italian HEIs. Their consolidated presence derives from a long standing relation between the countries as well as strong family and social networks resulting from the intense migration flows registered during the 1990s, right after the collapse of the Albanian communist State (King and Mai, 2013; Mai, 2011). In addition, the logic of proximity proposed by Börjesson (2017) applies to this case, as students tend to move to countries geographically close to each other.

Iranian students arise as an interesting case, due to its steady growth since 2007. A first wave of Iranian students to Italy can be traced back from

the late 1960s until the early 1970s, as a result of a diplomatic approach around oil-market issues (Colombo and Sciortino, 2004). During the Islamic Revolution (1978-1979) this flow decreased drastically; however, many Iranian students who were in Italy at that time, did not go back (Miggiano, 2015). The second wave of Iranian students in Italy is directly related to the Iran-Iraq war, in the beginning of the 1980s, when many Iranians, mostly from the middle classes, sought asylum in Italy (EMN, 2012a; Miggiano, 2015). More recently, Iran has become one of the target countries of Italian ISM programmes, more specifically “Invest your Talent in Italy” and “Uni-Italia”. In this sense, in 2015 Italy and Iran signed an agreement of cooperation in education and research also fostering student mobility (UNITO, 2016). Additionally, Italian and Iranian HEIs have signed individual agreements to promote ISM, among others, the Polytechnic of Milano with the University of Teheran and the University of Bologna with the Iranian Centre for Archaeological Research.

**Chart 4. Evolution of the main 5 nationalities of international students PT (2008-2015)**



Source: UNESCO.

In 2008, based on the UNESCO and OECD's definition, Portugal started to collect its data on international students considering the students' country prior to entering tertiary education. Thus, to ensure data uniformity, the interval to be analysed in the Portuguese case is 2008-2015.

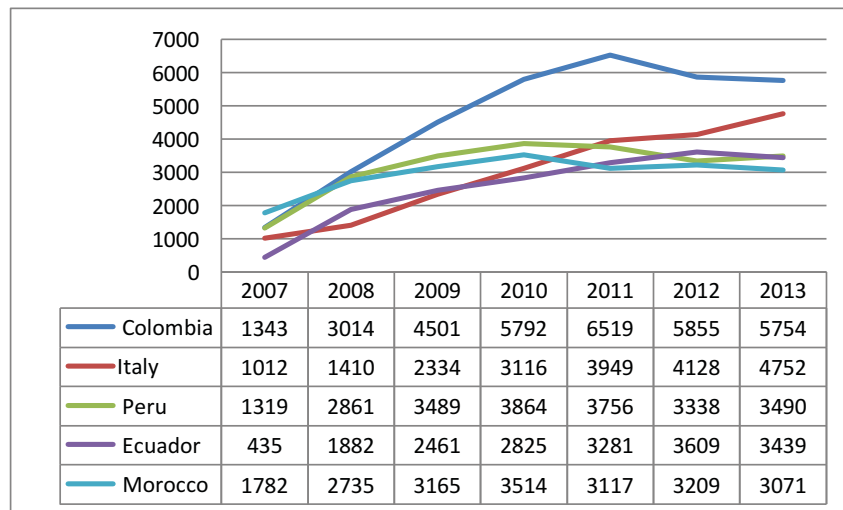
Historically, throughout the 1990s and early 2000s, Cape Verdeans and Angolan students constituted the majority of international students in the country. During this period, Cape Verdeans represented, on average, between 16 and 24 % of the total of international students, while Angola students corresponded to 17 and 25 % (Pedreira, 2015).

A first change in this trend is observed around 2008: while Cape Verdean students continue to be the largest group of international students, accounting for 27 %, Brazilian students grew significantly, occupying the second position and reaching 21 %, whereas Angolans dropped to the third position accounting for 13 %. Since 2009, Brazilian students became a new trend, and represented the largest group of international students enrolled in Portuguese HEIs, accounting for 32 %.

Between 2008 and 2015, Brazil, Cape Verde and Angola were the three most representative home countries of international students. In addition to the known impact of the colonial past in shaping this trend, the late creation of national HEIs in the three countries –1920 in Brazil, 2001 in Cape Verde and 1962 in Angola– have also stimulated Portuguese-speaking students to move to the former metropolis to complete their education. Still, these flows, even after decolonization and the establishment of their own HEIs, with ups and downs, persist until today (Alves, 2015; França and Padilla, 2016).

ISM dynamics in Portugal have certainly capitalized from the relation with the Community of Portuguese-speaking Countries (CPLP), as one of its goals is to promote ISM among its member states. However, due to existing geopolitical and epistemic asymmetries (França and Padilla, 2016; Mignolo, 2002; Pereira, 2014), Portugal has turned out to be the most attractive destination for students from the former colonies.

The case of Brazil shows some particularities to be considered, as ISM in Portugal has been nurtured both by Brazilian and Portuguese initiatives. In 2012, in order to internationalize and improve the qualifications of its HEIs, the Brazilian government created the programme Science without Borders, sending university students of different levels abroad. In its first year, due mainly to the common language, Portugal was the most sought-after destination among undergraduate students, contributing greatly to increase the number of Brazilians enrolled in Portuguese HEIs (Fonseca *et al.*, 2016; França and Padilla, 2016). On the other hand, Portugal has also fostered an increase of Brazilians students through overarching national policies as well as bilateral agreements between universities. In this sense, collaboration protocols were signed between the Brazilian and the Portuguese National Research Councils (CAPES, CNPq, FCT), among which the on-going programme CAPES/FCT is an example since 2008. Additionally in the last few years, many Portuguese HEIs have shown greater openness towards the admission of students from Brazil by offering special fees to Brazilian students and accepting the Brazilian National High School Exam for admission of university undergraduates (Portal Brasil, 2016).

**Chart 5. Evolution of the main 5 nationalities of the international students ES (2007-2013)**

Source: UNESCO.

In the Spanish case, the analysis interval is 2007-2013, as UNESCO database is available only until 2013. In 2007, Moroccan students represented the largest group of international students, 5,5 %, while Colombians occupied the second position accounting for 4,1 %. The following year, 2008, Colombians students became the largest group, 11,9 %, maintaining this position throughout the available data series, and showing also a steady growth. From 2007 until 2011, Peru and Ecuador were, respectively, the third and the fourth largest nationalities among international students.

Research shows that Spain has been investing in attracting students from its ex-colonies for a long time (Aupetit and Jokivirta, 2007) through bilateral agreements with Latin America. Examples include the academic cooperation programme "Luis Santaló" between Spain and Argentina since 2003, and other initiatives with the Ibero-American General-Secretariat, such as the MUTIS scholarship programme since 1992 and the Pablo Neruda scheme since 2008.

In 2012, Italy represented the second largest group of international students in Spain, which is associated to the remarkable performance of Spain as an Erasmus destination, as since 2001 Spain is

the most sought-after destination in the EU (EC, 2017a; González *et al.*, 2011). Other factors that explain this attraction may be linked to language and cultural proximity as Mediterranean countries (González *et al.*, 2011).

The presence of Moroccan students in the Spanish higher education system should not be undervalued. In spite of the recent decrease between 2007 and 2013, they have always been among the top 5 foreign nationalities enrolled in the Spanish HEIs. Even if these students do not benefit from free-circulation as students from EU countries and do not share Christian or Western cultural backgrounds as Latin American students do, other historical links (former Spanish Protectorate and Spanish territories in Africa) and the geographical proximity play a relevant role. This is evident in the privileged diplomatic relations that Spain and Morocco maintain and the strong institutional cooperation in the educational area, as revealed in the many existing Spanish secondary schools in Morocco that allow students to be admitted in Spanish HEIs without having to go through further bureaucratic procedures (Barea, 2004). In addition, long-term Moroccan migration to Spain has con-

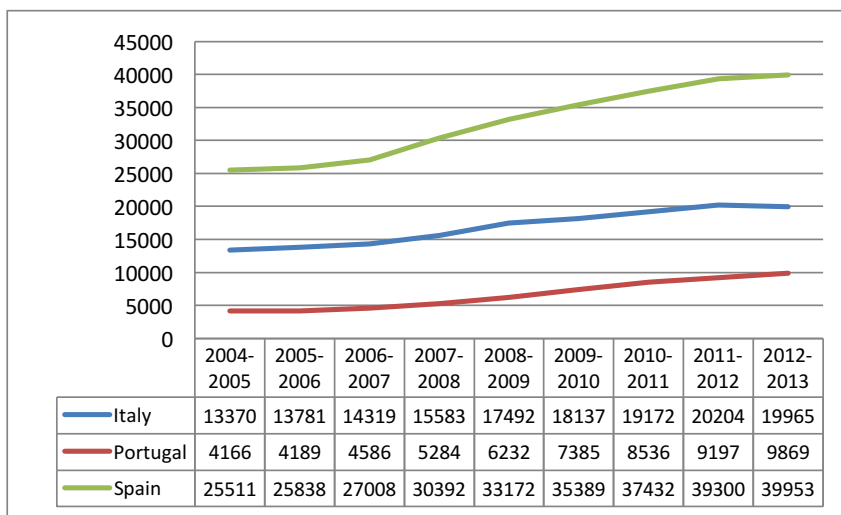
tributed to consolidate well-established social and family networks (Montesinos, 2016).

*ERASMUS MOBILITY*

Due to the significance of the Erasmus programme for ISM in the intra-European space and

its strong links to the Bologna process, a close look to how it has evolved is fundamental to grasp a better understanding of ISM dynamics in Europe (González *et al.*, 2011; King and Ruiz-Gelices, 2003).

**Chart 6. Evolution of Erasmus students from EU-28 in IT, PT, ES (2004-2013)**

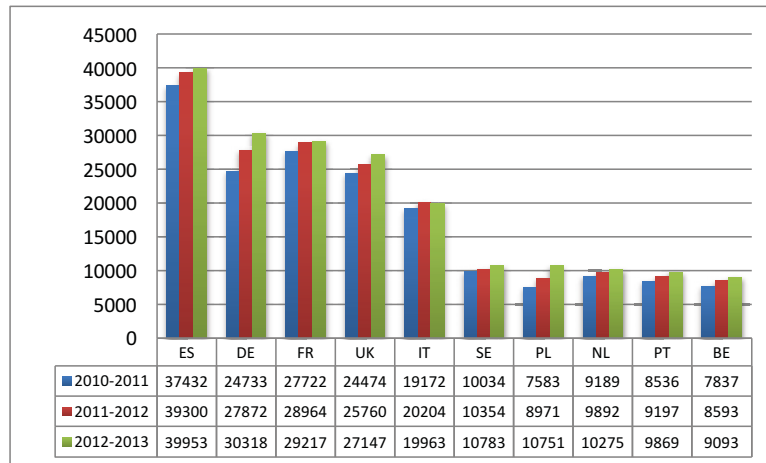


Source: European Commission.

In the period 2004-2013, the three countries show a continuous and steady growth as Erasmus destination. In the academic year 2012-2013, Spain, Italy and Portugal hosted respectively 14,9, 7,5 and 3,68 % of all students enrolled in Erasmus programmes. According to González *et al.* (2011: 413) and Findlay *et al.* (2006) different determinants explain student's destination choice: population size of the country of destination, cost of living, distance from country of origin, university quality, possibility of improving/learning a language, benign climate,

leisure activities and cultural life. Thus, in order to be successful in recruiting Erasmus students, countries and HEIs try to make themselves attractive by both offering high quality education and intense cultural and leisure activities. Furthermore, literature shows that Erasmus students' decisions on destination are primary driven by expectations on quality of life, and that the quality of HEIs comes as a secondary factor (Mol and Ekamper, 2016; Mol and Timmerman, 2014; Teichler, 2004).

**Chart 7. Ten first Erasmus destination countries, evolution between 2010/2011 – 2012/2013**



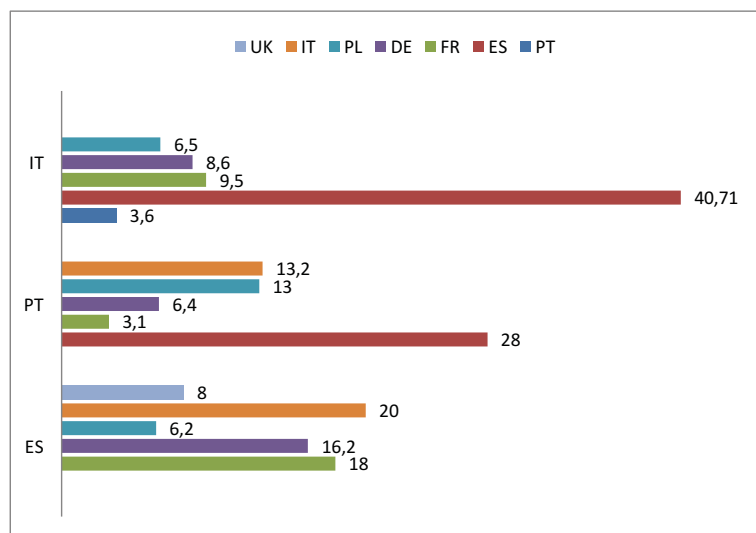
Source: European Commission.

Overall, Spain, Italy and Portugal make use of a combination of factors such as geographical location and climate, historical and cultural attraction as well as lower cost of living to boost its desirability when competing with other Erasmus destinations that are known for their world-class HEIs, such as Germany (DE), France (FR) and the

United Kingdom (UK). As Chart 7 shows, between 2010-2013, Spain, Italy and Portugal appeared among the ten most sought-after destinations for Erasmus students.

The following charts illustrate the main five nationalities of Erasmus students in each of the selected countries for 2009-2012.

**Chart 8. Top five countries of origin for Erasmus students in IT, PT, ES (%) 2009-2012**

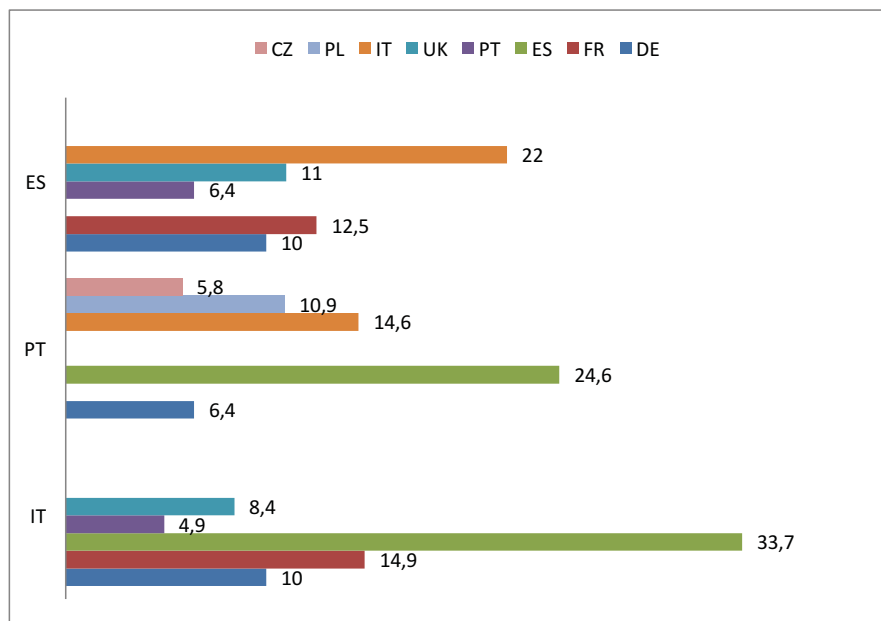


Source: European Commission.

As Chart 8 illustrates, in Italy the top country of origin among Erasmus students is represented by Spain, 40,7 %; while Portugal occupies the fifth position, accounting for 3,6 % of the total. Students from Spain also rank first in Portugal 13,2 %, while Italy ranks second with 13 %. In Spain, Italians occupy the first position with 20 %, while Portugal reaches 3,9 % (not in the graph), occupying the 6<sup>th</sup> position as an Erasmus country of origin. This

chart also shows the high level of bilateral flows of Erasmus students among the three countries, similar to the pattern identified by Mol and Ekamper (2016) when analysing the main destination cities in the Erasmus scheme. These authors suggested that Erasmus students from Southern European countries tend to move within their own region, due to similar costs of living, culture and climate.

**Chart 9. Top five destination countries of Erasmus students from IT, PT, ES (2009-2012)**



Source: European Commission.

Although this paper focuses on inbound mobility, considering the outbound mobility of Erasmus students allows unveiling the strength of the Southern-Latin European space. The top destination of students from Italian universities is Spain, 33,7 % while Portugal ranks 5<sup>th</sup> with 4,9 %. In the Portuguese case, Spain appears as the top destination with 24,6 %, followed by Italy with 14,6 %. Lastly, in the Spanish case, Italy occupies the first position with 22 % and Portugal the 5<sup>th</sup> with 6,4 %. Once again, it is possible to identify intense flows of Erasmus students among these three countries.

## CONCLUSION

The centrality of ISM in EU policies to increase internationalization in the European higher education area justifies the importance of analysing these flows in Italy, Portugal and Spain. Considering that these countries only began to systematically invest on ISM later than other European countries, for example, the United Kingdom, Germany and France, they have shown great success in attracting international students. Overall, they show a positive performance, since flows of international students

have increased considerably throughout the years. In the period 2010-2013, all three rank in the top 10 destination countries in the Erasmus programme. Spain is ranked first, Italy fifth and Portugal ninth. The similarities identified on their ISM dynamics together with the cultural and linguistic proximity tentatively suggest that a Southern-Latin European space of ISM may have emerged, even if accounting for some differences.

Several factors have contributed to increase their attraction power over international students: the strategic geopolitical position as a member of the European Union, the traditional reputation of their HEIs, the benign climate, the hectic cultural offer and nightlife and the low cost of living. In addition, different policies and investments made on ISM have paid off, both EU and national policies as well as individual initiatives from individual HEIs, either of bilateral or regional scope.

To attract students outside the EU space, the three countries apply different logics. Portugal and Spain use “cultural proximity” from their privileged relations with their former colonies. Both countries take advantages of a shared language and culture while putting in place measures to boost their attraction potential on international students such as distinctive admission/enrolment channels, special fees and joint degrees among others, reaching great achievements. Not being able to rely on colonial links, Italy has opted for a more “commercial approach” that invests in different niche markets to attract international students, for example China and Iran, and also favours the creation of international campuses. From the Asian perspective, Italy membership to the European Union, and their known cutting edge experience in sectors such as industry, art, design, among others, contribute to boost their interests in developing and strengthening partnership and collaboration with a country that is perceived as promising for future investments in the West, especially in the Mediterranean region (Andornino, 2015; Pietrobelli *et al.*, 2011).

The intense bidirectional flows of Erasmus students among these three countries reinforce the hypotheses of an emerging Southern European space of ISM. The shared “Latin” culture, linguistic

common roots for speaking a romance language, geographic proximity and low cost of living contribute to promote the circulation of Italian, Portuguese and Spanish students within the region.

One limitation of this exploratory study relates to the fact that data is not fully available for all countries in the same period. Moreover, the fact that Italy still collects data on international students based on the nationality criteria hinders a more accurate analysis. Another constraint for the interpretation of the density of the flows is the different population size, especially regarding Portugal, which may lead to inexact comparison. Besides this limitation, focusing on ISM in this geographical context is original and innovative because it allows shedding some light on ISM dynamics in an under-studied region, which, as seen, suggests the importance of extending the discussion to alternative contexts, as a way to complement and compare with studies on the dominant Anglo-Saxon regions and to identify new spaces of mobility.

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