



## Erasmus students in Portugal: from students to tourists and advocates

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### Abstract

Although there are several studies examining the benefits of the Erasmus student mobility programme on student's professional career and academic development, there is scarce literature focusing on how they are similar to tourists and can promote tourism in the country where they did Erasmus. This study interviewed 16 students from 10 different nationalities that have done Erasmus in Portugal, in order to examine their travelling behaviours and how they may contribute in promoting Portugal. The findings reveal that Erasmus students are similar to tourists, contributing to Portugal's Tourism not only by their travelling behaviour, but also by the visitors they receive and because of the posts of Portugal on social media. Furthermore, after their Erasmus experience, they become advocates, recommending Portugal to family and friends.

**Keywords:** Academic Tourism, destination promotion, Erasmus students, recommendation, tourism development

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## Introduction

According to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD, 2017) there has been a significant increase in student mobility across countries, rising from 0.8 million in the late 1970s to 4.6 million 45 years later. The OECD projects that by 2025 the number of international students will reach eight million (OECD, 2017). This increase has been driven by many factors, such as economic (e.g. costs of international flights), technological (e.g. Internet and social media) and cultural (e.g. the use of English as a common teaching language) (OECD, 2017). At the same time, there are more and more initiatives at national, regional and institutional level to promote university mobility, for example by providing grants or establishing exchange programs to study abroad (Rodríguez, Martínez-Roget, & Pawlowska, 2012). An example of such a program is Erasmus, launched in 1987, a European Union student exchange programme that provides students with the opportunity to study in a different country for 3 to 13 months (European Council, 2017).

Many of the studies carried out to evaluate the impact of Erasmus mobility have shown the positive impacts it has on the students in several contexts such as professional careers, academic development (Engel, 2010), on individual skills enhancement, employability and institutional development (European Commission, 2014, 2016a) and its positive influence on students' European identity and loyalty (Oborune, 2013).

There are also many benefits for the countries that receive foreign students. In the short run, for instance, mobile students are an important source of income, contributing to the local economy through their living expenses (OECD, 2017). However, there are none or limited studies focusing on how foreign students, in this particular case Erasmus students, can be future "ambassadors" of the host country. Indeed, Erasmus students when returning to their home country may recommend the host country to friends and family, contributing to the development of a positive image of the country. As a result, the host country might receive more tourists and more international students.

The current study seeks to add to our understanding on how Erasmus students are similar to tourists and how they can contribute in promoting the host country. For this purpose, a qualitative approach, with in-depth interviews, was conducted with students that had done Erasmus in Portugal. In the past 10 years Portugal has received more than 60,000 Erasmus students. It is crucial to assess the image they have of Portugal and their contribution in promoting Portugal in their home countries. Therefore, the study aims to study how Erasmus students can contribute to the development of Tourism in Portugal. Tourism plays an increasingly significant role in Portugal's economic development. According to a recent report from the World Travel & Tourism Council (WTTC, 2017) in 2016, the total contribution of travel & tourism (direct, indirect and induced) was 16.6% of the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and almost 20% of total employment, with 2027 projections of growth.

The findings of this research will provide valuable insights on how Erasmus students contribute to Portugal's Tourism industry and on how they can contribute in promoting Portugal as a touristic destination.

## International Students' Impact on Tourism

International student mobility can be defined as any form of academic mobility in which students study in a country other than their country of residence within postsecondary education study program (Zhukovskiy & Simak, 2015). It has become a general belief that International student mobility brings benefits at different levels: to the students, to the country of origin and to the host country. This study focuses on the benefits for the host country, in particular the impacts on the Tourism industry.

Mobile students are an important source of income, contributing to the local economy through their living expenses (OECD, 2017). Indeed, the economic impact of international students can be compared to the economic impact of tourists (Rodríguez *et al.*, 2012). In fact, mobile higher education students can be considered tourists considering the recommendations of the World Tourism Organization (Rodríguez *et al.*, 2012). Several

researchers use the term Academic Tourism to refer to International student mobility (e.g. Bento, 2014; Martínez-Roget, Pawlowska, & Rodríguez, 2013; Rodríguez *et al.*, 2012). Martínez-Roget *et al.* (2013) define academic tourism as “stays in higher education institutions in places outside the visitor’s usual environment for a period of less than one year, the main objective of which is to complete degree-level studies in universities and/or to attend language courses organized by these centres” (p.1140). Another study that supports that international students are similar to tourists is the one conducted by Hughes, Wang, and Shu (2015) that reported that Chinese international students studying in Australia had the same travel preferences as tourists (seeing natural landscapes, seeing famous Australian attractions and seeing Australian animals).

Several authors have examined the economic impact of academic tourism. For instance, Martínez-Roget *et al.* (2013) analyzed the economic impact of academic tourism in Galicia and found that it has a greater economic impact than conventional tourism. While a conventional tourist spends an average of 798 euros, an academic tourist spends 3,608 euros. Kelly, McNicoll, and White (2015) also report the important impact that international students studying at universities in Wales are having on the Welsh economy. Weaver (2003) demonstrated that international students had a positive effective on the tourism industry.

International students affect the tourism industry because of the trips they take while studying at the host country. First of all, they have greater motivations to travel, such as understanding national culture and people and trying to see as much of the country as possible during their stay (Babin & Kim, 2001; Gardiner, King, & Wilkins, 2013). On the other hand, since international students normally do not have homes close by to visit, they have more free time to travel (Hsu & Sung, 1997). Several studies evidence that international students actively visit other cities while studying abroad. For instance, a study examining travel behaviours of 4,633 international students studying in Australia found that 86% travelled whilst studying in Australia, most likely with other international students (65%) and

particularly with students of their own nationality (42%) (Gardiner *et al.*, 2013). Regarding Erasmus students, Pawlowska and Martinez- Roget (2009) found that almost 96% of them at the University of Santiago de Compostela visited other cities. Another study carried out also in Spain reached very similar findings: 93% international students studying in the Galicia region of Spain visited other cities (Martinez-Roget, López, & Pawlowska, 2013). Hsu and Sung (1997) found that the most popular activities conducted by international students travelling in the USA were touring activities, such as sightseeing, touring a city or visiting a museum.

Babin and Kim (2001) carried out a study to examine which factors were important to international student’s satisfaction when travelling within the host country. They found that although they want to learn about the country (in this case, the USA), their satisfaction is most strongly affected by the ability to have fun when travelling. That is why these authors suggest that travel marketers targeting international students should enhance attributes related to fun and/or amusement.

International students also affect the Tourism industry because they attract additional short stay visitors from family and friends who spend money on hotels and local amenities (Kelly *et al.*, 2015). Pawlowska and Martinez- Roget (2009) found that almost 76% of Erasmus students had received visits from family and friends during their stay in Santiago de Compostela. On average, each Erasmus student received the visit of 2.9 people for 4.3 days. Michael *et al.* (2004) also found that 55% of international students studying in Australia had visitors from friends and relatives that spent at least seven days. Another study reported that more than 70% of Chinese international students in Australia expected to receive the visit of family and friends during their stay (Hughes *et al.*, 2015).

International students are also very likely to recommend the country where they studied to others. For instance, in the study carried out by Pawlowska and Martinez- Roget (2009), 90% of the international students would recommend Galicia as a touristic destination. These

findings are similar to others in the tourism field that have consistently evidenced that the image of a destination directly influences intentions to revisit and recommend the destination to others (Alcañiz, García, & Blas, 2005; Bigne, Sanchez, & Sanchez, 2001; Qu, Kim, & Im, 2011).

Another interesting finding is that a high number of international students intend to visit the countries where they studied again in the future. Fifty-six per cent of international students in Australia intended to visit Australia again on their summer vacation (Gardiner *et al.*, 2013). An earlier study had found that 75% of Erasmus students at the University of Santiago de Compostela planned to return in the future (Pawlowska & Martinez- Roget, 2009).

In sum, these studies demonstrate how similar International students are to tourists, as already noted in several studies (e.g. Jamaludin, Sam, Sandal, & Adam, 2018; Martínez-Roget, Pawlowska, & Rodríguez, 2013). Being similar to tourists, International students can have an impact on the tourism industry of the host country: by the money they spend living and especially travelling, by the visitors they receive, by recommending it to others and by intending to return to the country.

### Erasmus programme in Portugal

Portugal has been participating in Erasmus since the year that the programme was launched in 1987. Ever since it started, the programme has gone through some minor changes. For instance, in 2014, the European Commission created the Erasmus+ programme for the period of 2014-2020, the new programme that not only includes the education component, but also training, youth and sport aspects. Erasmus+ and its predecessor programmes have allowed 9 million people to go abroad over the past 30 years (European

Commission, 2017c). Since Erasmus + started in 2014 until the end of 2016, 2 million people have participated in the programme (European Commission, 2017a).

The programme's objectives are well-known: to support learners in the acquisition of learning outcomes with a view to improving their personal development, their involvement as considerate and active citizens in society and their employability in the European labour market and beyond, among several others related to the development of sense of European citizenship and identity, acquire foreign languages competences and understand other cultures (European Commission, 2016b).

The Erasmus Program in Portugal has been a success, with an increasing number of incoming and outgoing students in the past years, as shown in Table 1. Portugal received 5,579 students in the academic year of 2007/2008, while in 2015/2016 it received 12,969 students. Regarding the number of outgoing students, in this same time frame, the number has risen from 4,753 to 12,969. Portugal is considered a case of disequilibrium, in the sense that the number of incoming students exceeds outgoing students (Cairns, 2017). Erasmus students studying in Portugal are mainly from Spain, Italy, Poland, France and Czech Republic (European Commission, 2016c).

Studies addressing Erasmus students in Portugal are scarce. A study conducted in 2012 (Padrao, Guerra, Marnoto, Padrao, & Oliveira, 2012) found that the main reasons for choosing Portugal to study were related to the weather, the ocean and the beauty of the country (37%), the proximity and similarities to the home country (23%), desire to know the western life style (14%), to learn the Portuguese language (11%). There were also other reasons such as

**Table 1. Portugal's incoming and outgoing Erasmus mobility 2007–2016**

	2007/08	2008/09	2009/10	2010/11	2011/12	2012/13	2013/14	2014/15	2015/16
Outgoing Students	4,753	5,394	5,388	5,964	6,484	7,041	6,957	8,033	8,705
Incoming Students	5,579	6,232	7,385	8,536	9,197	9,868	10,430	11,481	12,969

Source: European Commission (2016c) and European Commission (2017b)

the interest in the Portuguese culture, architecture and history (9%), the perception of Portugal as an inexpensive to live in (9%) and the influence of friends (9%). Sin, Tavares, and Neave (2016) note that Portugal's attractiveness has risen mainly due to location, climate and leisure opportunities and not particularly because of the reputation of the Universities.

A different study found that Erasmus students in Lisbon were satisfied with their Erasmus experience in Lisbon, revealing higher satisfaction with friendship (77.5%) and leisure (71.6%) and a lower satisfaction level with classes (25.4%) and attention received when interacting with others (22.4%) (Cunha, 2011).

### **Methodology**

A qualitative in-depth approach has been adopted to examine Erasmus students' perceptions of Portugal and to what extent they promoted the country. A total of sixteen individual semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted between September of 2017 and June of 2018 with students that had done Erasmus in Portugal. An interview guide (available in Appendix 1), developed from literature review, informal conversations with Erasmus students over the past years and based on discussions between the authors, was used to orient the interview and ensure that all issues were covered. The main questions were concerning why Portugal was chosen, perceptions of Portugal before and after Erasmus, if they had received visitors during their stay, if they had recommended Portugal to other people, and their travel and social media use behaviour during their stay.

In order to qualify for the participation in the study students had to have been in Portugal for at least one semester as an Erasmus student. A convenience sample was used in which e-mails were sent to former Erasmus students of the researchers, requesting to participate in the study. Thirty-eight e-mails were sent and although 19 answered that they were willing to participate, only 16 interviews were carried out, due to difficulties in establishing further contacts.

Eight of the interviews were conducted via Skype and eight were conducted in person,

with students that had returned to Portugal to visit or were here again doing Erasmus. The interviews lasted around 30 minutes. In order to ensure comparability, all interviews were conducted by two of the authors. All interviews were taped, transcribed and qualitatively analyzed.

### **Results**

Respondents' home countries included Germany, Italy, Lithuania, Serbia, Netherlands, Macao, Hungary, Czech Republic, Poland and Turkey. Table 2 provides an overview of the profile of participants. All of the respondents had completed at least a semester, only one was in Portugal for two semesters.

It should be noted that only three students (students 8, 13 and 16) had been to Portugal to visit before studying there under the Erasmus programme. All of the other students had never been to Portugal before Erasmus.

Table 3 summarizes the main results obtained from the interviews that were conducted.

When asked about their perceptions of Portugal before coming, it was noticeable that students did not have much knowledge about the country. In fact, two students mentioned that in their country many people think Portugal is a part of Spain ("In Italy, we think Portugal is another part of Spain" – respondent 3 and "Everyone knows about Spain, most of the Germans think Portugal is a little Spain, but I now know it is not..." - student 6). However, almost half of the students referred the good weather, beaches and wine. Four of the students mention that their perceptions of Portugal were of friendly people. Two students also mentioned that Portugal was a football country.

After their Erasmus experience, students have very favourable opinions about Portugal, with one particularly illustrative comment being "All my feelings are so good" (student 1). It is interesting to note that several students bring up the word love when referring to Portugal, for example: "I love Portugal" – student 5 and 10, and "I loved the people, the food, the culture" – student 14). The majority of the students highlighted that the Portuguese were extremely friendly, helpful and nice ("People were helpful

**Table 2. Erasmus Students' Profile**

Participant	Gender	Country of Origin	Major Area of Study	Academic Year of Erasmus
Student 1	female	Lithuania	Environmental Engineering	2016/2017 1 semester
Student 2	male	Turkey	Tourism Management	2015/2016 2 semesters
Student 3	male	Italy	Economics	2014/2015 1 semester
Student 4	female	Lithuania	Creative Industry	2014/2015 1 semester
Student 5	female	Germany	Business Management	2016/2017 1 semester
Student 6	female	Germany	Business and Economics	2016/2017 1 semester
Student 7	male	Poland	Logistics	2016/2017 1 semester
Student 8	female	Germany	Business Studies	2016/2017 1 semester
Student 9	female	Serbia	Marketing	2016/2017 1 semester
Student 10	female	Lithuania	Real Estate Management	2016/2017 1 semester
Student 11	male	Macao	Public Administration	2017/2018 1 semester
Student 12	female	Czech Republic	Food Quality	2017/2018 1 semester
Student 13	female	Hungary	Viticulture and Enology	2017/2018 1 semester
Student 14	female	Turkey	Sport Management	2017/2018 2 semesters
Student 15	male	Lithuanian	Tourism and Hotel Management	2017/2018 1 semester
Student 16	female	Netherlands	Tourism	2017/2018 1 semester

**Table 3. Selected answers obtained from the interviews**

Question	Selected Answers
What was your perception of Portugal before coming here/ What came to your mind when you thought of Portugal?	"Big oceans, beaches, friendly people, wine culture, food culture" "Beautiful country, nice weather" "I actually did not have a clue about Portugal" "Football country, beaches, port wine, and bacalhau"
What do you think of Portugal?	"All my feelings are so good!" "I love Portugal!" "I fell in love with Portugal!" "The people are nice and friendly" "Never meet such nice people everywhere, everywhere!"
What is unique about Portugal?	"Bacalhau, francesinhas, port wine" "Nature, Ocean, Wine Culture" "Food – bacalhau and the pastries de nata" "The people, definitely" "People enjoy life and fun"

When you were here in Portugal, did you share pictures of Portugal on your social media networks?

How would you describe the Erasmus experience? (Life changing? Incredible, etc.)

While you were here or when you returned to your country, did you recommend Portugal as a great place to visit?

Did anyone come to visit you while you were here?

When you were here in Portugal, did you travel to other places? Where?

Can you give me an approximate estimation of how many euros you spent here per month on housing, clothes, travel, etc? Did you find Portugal expensive or cheap?

Did you purchase anything here to take back home? What? Around how much did you spend on those products?

Would you ever consider living in Portugal? Why or why not?

Have you ever been to Portugal again after Erasmus? Do you intend to come and visit again in the future?

“Yes, on Facebook and Instagram”

“I shared pictures every day, at least 20 a day on Instagram, Facebook. I share pictures of buildings and nature, for example. I also created some videos that I would share with my friends”  
“The people commented my pictures with Wow! and wonderful!”

“It was an incredible part of my life”

“It was life changing for me and an incredible experience”  
“It is a fantastic adventure for everyone, when we have a chance to do that, we have to take the opportunity”

“Yes, I tell all our friends to visit Portugal.”

“Yes I recommended it because it is a beautiful country”

“Many people from my family came here, even when I was not here.”

“my parents came and 3 of my friends”

“I visited a lot of places: Coimbra, Costa Nova, Algarve, Acores, Estrela Mountain, Lisbon, Porto and the Dão region.”

“We came from Lithuania by car, so we visited all inland of Portugal, Algarve, the Northern part”

“Portugal is cheap but depends, for example Lisbon and Porto are not so cheap”

“Really surprised how cheap life was”

“Port wine”

“I brought 1 suitcase and went back with 2! So I guess I did! A lot of wine”

“Wine/Port wine, cheese from da Estrela Mountain, conserves, around 100 euros”

“I would like to live here. I am thinking about that”

“I would like to stay in my home country. But if I would consider living in another country, I definitely would consider Portugal, because the relaxed vibe, weather and safety are good”

“I want to go back, I would love to go back! I want to visit more towns than I did when I was there.”

“I am here now! I am here visiting and I brought a friend with me!”

and friendly” – student 1 and “everyone wants to help” – student 10).

Regarding Portugal’s unique features, there was a wide range of the answers given. Some students point out the food and wine, while others talk about Portugal’s unique landscapes, nature and ocean. Six students say that the people are unique because they enjoy life, are happy, relaxed and very friendly. Another unique aspect is the the fado music (“I got familiar with fado, it was very enchanting” – student 4).

During their stay, all students regularly posted pictures on their social media, mostly on Facebook and Instagram. Student 14 said she posted pictures 20 times a day. The posts were of places they had visited, of nature and beautiful landscapes, of food and of clubs. Friends would comment these posts with “How nice!” “Beautiful landscape!”, “I want this!” “Love it” and “I am jealous!”. Interestingly, many of the comments were regarding the good weather in Portugal, while in their home countries it was very cold. Student 10 affirmed that a friend came to visit her in Portugal because of her posts on social media. Student

11 and 14 made videos that they shared with their friends and family.

All of the interviewed students had a positive Erasmus experience ("It was an incredible part of my life" – student 3, "Perfect, I would do it without thinking! My English changed, I learned Portuguese, I learned culture things, a lot about religions, your celebrations, I Miss Portugal!" – student 2, "It was a life time experience. I learned so many things and met international friends. Incredible" - student 8 and "It was one of the best times of my life!" – student 10). Although students 13 and 15 loved their Erasmus experience, they mention that they missed their country "Everyone should live this experience, you return a completely different person... but no one ever told me how hard it is, a felt homesick..." – student 13).

All students have recommended Portugal as a great destination to visit. For example, student 2 "told everyone I know to visit Portugal". Student 7 recommends Portugal because "it is a fantastic country, there are a lot of fantastic places, with monuments, beautiful beaches, near the ocean and people are very open". Student 4 received emails from students from her University asking her if they should come to Portugal for Erasmus. She would tell them: "yes, of course, it is absolutely worth visiting and full of treasures." She said she knew that some did go to Portugal to study after her recommendation. Several studies have already highlighted the importance of recommendations from families and friends in choosing a study abroad destination (e.g. Mazzoral & Soutar, 2002; Michael *et al.*, 2004).

Fourteen out of the sixteen students received visitors while on Erasmus, such as parents and siblings. One of the students referred that around 15 friends came to visit her. Several students confirmed that they knew of people that had visited Portugal after returning to their home country, most likely due to their recommendation ("a close friend came because I had told her how much I loved it" – student 6).

Another interesting aspect that was referred in the interviews was the fact that Portugal seemed to be underestimated ("In Italy, I think

Portugal is underestimated – student 3"). Student 4 mentions that Portugal is "something forgotten:

"I like Portugal, it is nice, I feel like it is something forgotten. When people in Lithuania think of holidays, they think of Spain, Italy or Greece and not Portugal. People are super nice, and there are so many things to see. When I tell people I lived in Portugal, I tell them it is a great destination, but people do not think of it as a destination, and this is too bad!"

While doing Erasmus students took the opportunity to visit other places in Portugal besides the city where they were studying. All students went to at least five other Portuguese cities, two students travelled to the Portuguese islands Azores and Madeira, while three other visited Azores. Student 6 said "We would organize the trips – we would go every weekend and we would look at pictures, and we would say I want to go there and we would rent a car, or on the buses, we would stay either at hostels or Airbnb." Student 4 regrets not having visited more places ("I wish I had visited more"). Three students also visited Spain.

Regarding the money spent in Portugal, values ranged as low as 250 euros to 900 euros monthly. Those who spent more justified it because of expenses with travel within Portugal. Students also spent money with souvenirs to take back home, although the amounts were not that high (average of 30 euros), the highest being 200 euros. Eleven students said they bought wine to take back home. All students thought Portugal was cheap, with two students mentioning clothes being much cheaper.

When asked if they would consider living in Portugal, six students said they would, although one said, "if I had a good job". Student 10 said that she was making plans to come to live to Portugal. Seven students alleged that they wanted to live near their family and that moving to another country was not part of their plans. Student 6 mentioned that her parents were considering buying a house in Portugal when they retire.



All students affirmed, without hesitation, that they wanted to return to Portugal. In fact, two of the students (students 6 and 7) were interviewed in person because they had returned to visit, one of them with a friend that had never been to Portugal. Another interview (student 10) was also conducted in person because she was doing Erasmus again in Portugal for another semester.

## Discussion

The interviews conducted show that Erasmus students studying in Portugal are similar to tourists and as a result, have positive impacts on the Portuguese tourism industry. Several studies had already pointed out that international students are similar to tourists and the term Academic Tourism is often used precisely to define the activities conducted by students studying abroad (e.g. Bento, 2014; Hughes *et al.*, 2015; Martínez-Roget, *et al.*, 2013; Rodríguez *et al.*, 2012).

All of the students interviewed while studying in Portugal actively travelled to several places in the country, mostly to the same regions and cities that tourists also travel to: Algarve, Lisbon, Porto and Coimbra. While travelling, students spend more money on transport and accommodation, which has an impact on tourism. The impact of Erasmus students can also be seen by the visitors they receive while in Portugal and by the souvenirs they purchase to take back home.

On the other hand, while in Portugal, students also post pictures on social media frequently, namely Facebook and Instagram, which would receive positive comments from family and friends. After their Erasmus experience in Portugal, all students recommend Portugal to people they know. Students' posts on social media and recommendations are even more significant considering that the opinions of family and friends are the most important source of influence when making travel decisions (Hernández-Méndez, Muñoz-Leiva, & Sánchez-Fernández, 2015).

Another important aspect that should be noted is that all students intend to return to Portugal to visit or even to live. Since, these visits normally occur with family and friends, Tourism

in Portugal can be positively affected. In fact, two of the students that were interviewed had returned to Portugal to visit with friends.

## Conclusions

This study carried out a qualitative research methodology in order to assess how Erasmus students in Portugal could contribute in promoting it. The results show that Erasmus students are very similar to tourists, contributing to the invigoration of Portuguese tourism. They are also important in the sense that they can be considered Portugal's ambassadors since they recommend Portugal to their friends and family. Given their importance, there should be national policy initiatives to attract Erasmus students to Portugal. Indeed, Portugal is competing with other Erasmus countries and should, therefore, act competitively to attract students. This could be through various forms, such as participating in International student fairs or through Social Media, by creating accounts and Facebook pages specifically aimed at these students. Another strategy could be to invite people working at International Offices to visit Portugal's Universities so that they could recommend them to their students.

The interviews also offer important insights regarding Erasmus students' perceptions of Portugal. Portugal is seen as a country of friendly and warm people, as a country that seems to be forgotten as a touristic destination and that has a lot to see, despite being a small country. Unique features of Portugal that were highlighted in the interviews were its beautiful landscape, beaches, fado music and wine culture. These unique characteristics could be used in marketing campaigns to promote Portugal.

As mentioned, Erasmus students travel actively to many other Portuguese cities. Destination Management Organizations (DMOs) of certain regions of Portugal could collaborate with universities to promote their regions to Erasmus students, for instance, by offering a trip to their city. This could also be a business opportunity for travel agencies or tour operators to organize trips specifically targeting Erasmus students. International students are different from tourists, since they stay for longer periods,

have different lifestyles and higher propensity to explore the country before returning home (Gardiner *et al.*, 2013). Thus, they have different needs and this must be embraced as an opportunity to create services and products adjusted to these needs.

This work is exploratory and is the basis of future work regarding the impact of Erasmus students in Portugal. The findings of this study will be crucial to design a questionnaire to conduct quantitative research with a large sample size. Indeed, qualitative interviews are often used to collect preliminary data to design a survey (Qu & Dumay, 2011). Future research could also consider analysing blogs and videos created by Erasmus students that had been to Portugal and perform a sentiment analysis. Another line of research could be to examine the economic impact of Erasmus students in Portugal since studies addressing this issue are inexistent. Comparative analysis of Erasmus students in Portugal, based on their country of origin, could also be conducted regarding aspects such as spending patterns, motivations for choosing Portugal and travel propensity in Portugal.

One of the limitations of this study was that a convenience sample was used to contact Erasmus students, involving the selection of the most accessible subjects (former students of the researchers that had done Erasmus in only two cities of Portugal). However, this was the least costly, not only in terms of money, but in terms of effort and time. Future research should include students that did Erasmus in other cities of Portugal. Although they travelled to other places in Portugal, their impression of the University and place where they studied may have influenced their perception of the country. Another limitation is that only sixteen interviews were conducted. However, it should be noted that new theoretical insights were not being obtained with the last interviews, i.e., there seems to be some homogeneity in the group.

Despite the limitations, this study evidences the important role that Erasmus students have, raising awareness for the need to provide favourable experiences to Erasmus students, so that they will create a positive image of

Portugal and recommend it to others. It also corroborates with Babin and Kim (2001) claims that international students have a greater motivation to travel while studying abroad. Therefore, international students are an attractive market for travel related businesses in the host country. The findings of this research are also useful to develop marketing strategies in order to enhance the awareness and image of Portugal. A possible campaign could actually be inspired with something one of the students said: "Portugal is full of treasures!"

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## **Appendix 1: Interview Guide**

### **1. Introduction to the Interview**

I want to thank you for taking the time for this interview. I would like to talk to you about your Erasmus experience in Portugal. The interview should take about 30 to 45 minutes. I will be taping the session because I don't want to miss any of your comments. All responses will be kept confidential. This means that your interview responses will only be shared with research team members and we will ensure that any information we include in our report does not identify you as the respondent.

### **2. Information about the respondent**

Where are you from? What is your major?

Which city and year did you do Erasmus?

### **3. Motivations and Perception of Portugal**

Why did you choose Portugal (For example, was it recommended by someone that had already been here)? Had you ever been here before?

What was your perception of Portugal before coming here/ What came to your mind when you thought of Portugal?

What do you think of Portugal now?

### **4. Erasmus experience in Portugal**

When you were here in Portugal, did you share pictures of Portugal on your social media networks? Which ones and how often? Did your friends comment on those photos? What did they say? Many Erasmus students create blogs or web pages to talk about their Erasmus experience, there are dozens of videos on YouTube, did you do any of these things?

When you were here in Portugal, did you travel to other places? Where?

While you were here or when you returned to your country, did you recommend Portugal as a great place to visit?

Do you know of anyone from your country that came to visit Portugal after you were here? Did anyone come to visit you while you were here?

Can you give me an approximate estimation of how many euros you spent here per month on housing, clothes, travel, etc? Did you find Portugal expensive or cheap?

Did you purchase anything here to take back home? What? Around how much did you spend on those products?

How would you describe the Erasmus experience? (Life changing? Incredible, etc.)

### **5. After Erasmus in Portugal**

What would you say is unique about Portugal?

Would you ever consider living in Portugal? Why or why not?

Have you ever been to Portugal again after Erasmus? Do you intend to come and visit again in the future?

### **6. Ending the Interview**

Is there anything more you would like to add? Thank you for your time!