CAN ERASMUS MOBILITY REALLY HELP CROSSING BORDERS?
THE IN AND OUT OF A CASE-STUDY
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Abstract

As lectures, but above all, as ERASMUS Coordinators for 3 years now, we decided to assess the outcomes of ERASMUS mobilities in our institutions – ESEIG, ESTGF and ISCAP – since they have been highly increasing in percentage in this three-year period, both IN and OUT.
This reality has made us think (i) of the reasons for the choice of Portugal, and of Polytechnic Institute of Oporto in particular (ii) if an ERASMUS mobility period can influence intercultural knowledge and break cultural stereotypes and (iii) to which extend the local environment and staff can act upon this process.
With this purpose, we carried out a survey on ERASMUS students/ teachers of the three last former academic years, trying to find out if the ERASMUS experience can lead to personal and domestic change through an identification, socialization and collective learning process, resulting in the development of new identities. Or, on the contrary, as Ivaylo Ditchev states, if trans-border mobility reinforces rather than weakens borders, creating more difference rather than less.

Keywords: ERASMUS, Intercultural knowledge, Internationalization, breaking borders

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1 Introduction

ERASMUS has become the key motor for internationalization of higher education in the European Union for some time now. And, only to name an example, according to last year report of the VALERA Project (developed by University of Kassel, 2006) “horizontal” professional value of temporary study in another European country can be also an added-value to academic mobility.

Other studies, though, state that the impact of ERASMUS as an internationalization and intercultural tool is no longer as pronounced as it was in the beginning, since globalization and Europeanization has helped most students in the development of intercultural skills (Söderqvist et al., 2005).

However, as the recent celebration of the 20th anniversary of the ERASMUS Program has confirmed, this action is still a major instrument of Europeanization for most Higher Education institutions in Portugal, Polytechnic Institute of Oporto (IPP) being one of them. On the other hand, Portugal, as one of the less well known countries of Europe is yet number 10 in the rank of the Top 15 ERASMUS destinations. Regardless of the language and of the inexistence of enough “international programs” (delivered in an international language) the percentage of ERASMUS mobility of students and teachers has raised annually though, being the city of Oporto the one in Portugal which hosts more ERASMUS students, according to last academic year data from our National Agency. This has also happened in our institution, Polytechnic Institute of Oporto (IPP), namely in our Schools (ESEIG, ESTGF and ISCAP) where the mobility flow of incoming students and teachers has increased quite a lot together with outgoing mobility, being ERASMUS the first real international experience for most students.

2 Scope and background of the analysis

For this reason, as stated in the abstract, we decided to assess these last three years of IN and OUT mobility, in a case-study carried out with the main purpose of analyzing the impact of ERASMUS mobility as a tool for crossing barriers. Therefore, and before presenting the results of this case-study, we would briefly like to explain:

1. The scope of this paper and the framework under which the concepts of internationalization, Europeanization and border were analyzed;

2. The internationalization policy of higher education in Portugal, especially concerning the Incoming students.

As far as point 1. is concerned, Europeanization and internationalization were not analyzed under any political or economical senses, but exclusively culturally, academically and personally, as a process of identity enlargement and a pathway for a global common ground of knowledge.
Therefore, our conclusions will focus on the mobility experience itself as a process of personal and academic growing in a multicultural Europe in the framework of the Bologna Declaration.

In regard to the concept of border, not only was the geographic sense considered, but also the psychological, social, cultural and last, but not least, personal.

In regard to point 2., we can briefly state that internationalization of Higher Education in Portugal is still mainly concerned with cultural, academic and scientific exchange through the development of mobilities and networks, albeit internationalization of higher education is entering a new phase in most European countries, no longer being mainly about student and staff mobility.

Rather as a key activity in the knowledge society, higher education is becoming a key player in a wide range of international relations policies, the trend being towards more economically oriented rationales for internationalization. But in Portugal the recruiting of international students is still restricted by law and is not a priority compared to the intention of developing networks and increasing mobility flows.

In the last report known on the Tertiary Education in Portugal (2006), it was stated that the political rationale for the internationalization was based on the perception that “it is not possible to vindicate the quality of the education system isolated from the international, and in particular the European, context”. For Portugal, the cultural rationale is rooted in the language and in the co-operation with Portuguese Speaking Countries (Angola, Mozambique, Cabo Verde, Guiné Bissau, S. Tomé e Príncipe – the African Countries with Portuguese as Official Language, PALOPs – East Timor and Brazil). There are special regimes of access to higher education for students from the ex-colonies, both in public and private higher education institutions (universities and polytechnics).

Apart from these students (50%), there are also foreign students enrolled as normal students in Portuguese higher education institutions. And among the European students, the main percentage seems to be from Luxembourg, Switzerland, France (all countries with many Portuguese immigrants…) Belgium and United Kingdom (OECD).

Under these internationalization policies, ERASMUS mobility and European consortia certainly play a very important role in opening borders and establishing cooperation.

3 Methodology

In this section of the paper we will explain the research steps designed in order carry out the survey and the analysis.

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| 4 – Report |

Table 1 - Research steps
3.1 Research Objectives

Although the increase of the mobility flows have raised several questions, for the scope of this paper we designed the research main question as follows:

a) To what extend can an ERASMUS mobility act on intercultural knowledge and cultural stereotypes?

b) What main differences are there between the Incoming and Outgoing mobilities?

3.2 Design of the investigation plan

Yin (1994) stated that the methodology can be selected according to the research question:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strategy</th>
<th>Research question</th>
<th>Control on behaviour events?</th>
<th>Focus on contemporary events?</th>
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<tr>
<td>Experimental</td>
<td>how, why</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Survey</td>
<td>who, how, where, how many</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Archives analysis</td>
<td>who, how, where, how many</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes/No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>History</td>
<td>how, why</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Case Study</td>
<td>how, why</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
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(Source: Yin, 1994, p. 6)
Table 2 – Strategy according to the research question design

According to this theory, we considered the best method to be quantitative analysis, i.e. survey analysis. This methodology focuses on measuring, on questions like who?, what?, where? how many? and when?

Therefore, we selected the units of analysis - ISCAP, ESTGF and ESEIG - , the three schools belonging to the Polytechnic Institute of Porto and to SPACE.

The data collecting techniques were based on the literature (Yin, 1994) in the following way:

a) Design of the surveys (4) on all target groups involved: incoming students; outgoing students; incoming teachers and outgoing teachers.

b) In order to avoid loss of information and data the survey was available online.

c) All target groups were informed by email of this research and of the link where they could access the survey;

4 Data Analysis
As stated before, we elaborated 4 different questionnaires and emailed them to approx. 80 Incoming ERASMUS Students, 100 Outgoing Students, 38 Incoming Teachers and 17 Outgoing teachers. However, although it was an online blind questionnaire, many of our contacts have not answered and we got 29 answers from Incoming Students, 36 from Outgoing students, 12 from Incoming Teachers and 16 from the Outgoing Teachers, being the majority of the responders female in all cases.

In a comparative and cross-cultural analysis of the target groups, we will now present the results of the survey, first as far students mobility is concerned, and then referring to teacher mobility. In order to make information as clear as possible, we’ve divided the analysis into several items, according to the questions of the survey.

4.1 Student Mobility 2005-2008

In order to understand the data better, we’ll start presenting the students to what concerns the countries of origin, of destiny and field of studies of the students involved:

![Incoming Students Chart]

**Host countries:**

![Outgoing Students Chart]
As we can see, there is no relevant difference between origin and host countries, being Czech Republic a popular In and Out destiny, for instance. This similarity is certainly related to former experiences and testimonials of ERASMUS students, who recommend the schools for ERASMUS mobility. Moreover, this country, Czech Republic is also popular amongst our students for the similar cost of living.

Also the Field of Study from both In and Out students is very alike. This is not surprising, since mobilities are supported on established Bilateral Agreements, where the study fields are already defined.

Reasons for the choice of the host school:

We asked the students to select 3 reasons (1- most important to 3 – less important) for the choice of the host School. Here we will see that there are some differences. The Incoming students referred to as the most important reason for their ERASMUS mobility the high quality standards of the School (27%) and, as second, the fact of the
population being nice (17%). As far as the outgoing students are concerned, the main reason was related to the fact that they wanted to find a job in that country (50%) and, secondly on account of the host country not being an expensive country (30.5%). On the other hand, language and cultural items were surprisingly not as important factors for the mobility for both In and Out students. Both groups considered these two reasons less important. Nevertheless, the majority of the students of both groups has enrolled in a language course, either during or before their mobility period, and stated that after having attended the course, they felt more prepared to communicate and interact with the people and to understand the host culture and people better.

Local environment and Staff

Another issue we wished to assess was the relevance of the local environment, particularly of the International Office, for the success of the mobility. The students were therefore invited to evaluate the International Offices of the host schools in three main aspects, in a ranking system where 1 - very bad to 5 – very good:

a) Support,
b) Communication;
c) Kindness.

By analyzing the answers of the Outgoing students, we could see that 8.33% of the outgoing students found no support in the International Office, 19.44% considered to have little support and the large majority (over 60%) considered to have a good (4) or very good (5) support from the International Office. As kindness and communication are concerned, the results were quite similar. Also the majority of the Incoming students (around 50% in each category) rated the host international offices as “very good”, as far as support, kindness and communication were concerned. Interesting is to mention that no Incoming student rated the international office under or adequate.

ERASMUS mobility: a lesson of intercultural knowledge and a tool to break cultural stereotypes?

If, as stated before, students had mentioned intercultural interests as reasons of less importance for the mobility, we can now see that after the experience, they developed considerably, as far as intercultural knowledge and cultural stereotypes are concerned. This seems to have happened unconsciously, as a striking experience resulting from mobility.

Incoming Students
Outgoing Students

The outgoing students also considered that their intercultural knowledge and cultural stereotypes were highly influenced by this experience, as we can see on the following graphics:
The results were just as positive when we asked them if this experience had influenced:
- their daily life,
- their relationships
- their communication skills
- their tolerance towards different cultures

Global assessment of the ERASMUS experience

Three positive aspects of the mobility (free question)

Again, when asked to name the three most important aspects of their mobility experience, the two most important aspects are related to cultural development and language improvement. Therefore, we can conclude that these seem to be the major outcomes of an ERASMUS mobility, although they had been considered secondary inputs in the process of decision making.

Three negative aspects related to the mobility experience (free question)
This was also very interesting information for different reasons. Incoming students seem to have major problems getting their meaning across, since most don’t know Portuguese before coming and most Portuguese don’t speak English. Therefore, it’s perfectly understandable that they feel homesick. However, if compared to the previous graphic, these problems seem to have been the root of the positive outcome of the ERASMUS mobility too. As far as the Outgoing students are concerned, also the named negative aspects seem to have helped them live their ERASMUS experience at the most, helping them developing autonomy, for instance. Thus, we think we could state that it proves to have been the cultural and personal difficulties that availed them crossing borders as well.

Finally, when asked if they would repeat this experience, both In and Out students were unanimous: 100% said yes.

4.2 Teacher Mobility 2005-2008

came from Poland (34%), Belgium (17%) and Czech Republic (17%).
As far as the Outgoing teachers are concerned, we can see in the graphic below that Spain, France and Poland are the most popular host countries.

Outgoing Teachers
Reasons for the mobility

Most of the incoming teachers said they decided to come to Portugal for 3 main reasons: first to develop language skills, second because it is a warm sunny country and third because of the high standards of the School. With regard to the influence of the mobility in developing their intercultural knowledge and breaking their cultural stereotypes, most of the teachers agreed that the ERASMUS mobility has acted upon these two areas.

Intercultural knowledge

![Incoming Teachers Chart]

![Outgoing Teachers Chart]

Cultural Stereotypes
Following the same methodology as before, we decided to assess the International Office of the host Schools. We selected the items communication and kindness and asked the teachers to evaluate from 1 – very bad to 5 – very good. The results were as follows:

**Communication**
Support

As far as this item is concerned, 75% of the incoming teachers rated it as very good, against 56% of the outgoing.

ERASMUS Mobility: crossing boarders?
When assessing to what extend this exchange had influenced the teachers, most of them (75%) answered affirmatively.

**Three positive aspects of the mobility:**

- New country/culture (50%)
- Improve language skills (20%)
- Meeting people/colleagues (30%)

**Outgoing teachers**

- Cultural exchange (50%)
- Pedagogic experience (37%)
- Scientific enrichment (13%)

**Three negative aspects of the exchange:**
Finally, and similarly to the students, intercultural encounters and language improvement seem to be the most important outcomes of a TM, although for this group these are already two important items prior to the mobility. And, when asked if they consider repeating the experience the answer is also 100% yes.

5 Final Notes

According to the survey, we think we can say that ERASMUS, as a trans-cultural program, raises intercultural awareness in any case, even if this was not an issue before and the main goal had to do with more personal and individual issues. Therefore, on the other hand, it can also break some personal barriers, like lowliness, family ties, lack of
independence and other, since autonomy was an issue which was brought forward as an upshot of the experience.
Finally, we think that it is also clear that students and teachers who have experienced ERASMUS and could deal with different cultures can, in some way, act domestically and contribute to the internationalization at home, as well. Therefore, although ERASMUS in no longer a priority in many universities in Europe and some are even trying to decrease the flows, it continues to be a very useful and economic intercultural tool, especially in countries with a low standard of living and low ERASMUS scholarships, like Portugal. And what is more, this is probably one of the very unique programs by which you can choose a host country electing reasons like the warmth of the people and the sun.

References:


