

INTERNATIONALISATION OF HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS: A CASE STUDY IN A POLYTECHNIC IN NORTHEASTERN PORTUGAL

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Abstract

The internationalization of higher education institutions has been seen as a form of growth or even a measure to counteract the decrease in the number of national students. As part of the International Relations Office at the School of Education (ESE) of the Polytechnic Institute of Bragança (IPB), a questionnaire survey was carried out to find out and analyse the opinion of Erasmus and international mobility students regarding their academic experience in IPB. The survey was sent to former students who, regardless of the duration, 1 semester or 1 year, had an academic experience in IPB, covering students who attended the institution from 2015 to 2021. After conducting a questionnaire survey that was sent to 1240 students, 429 responses were obtained, aged between 21 and 26 years, most of them belonging to the European and American continents. Regarding the type of mobility, 221 students (52%) belong to Erasmus mobility, 195 (45%) to international mobility and only 13 (3%) students were identified as others, that is, students who came to the IPB for an internship or doctorate works. After analysing the data collected, we can refer as main results: Most students who performed Erasmus/international mobility at the IPB are fully satisfied. Most of the students come from the European and American continents, with the majority coming from South America, more specifically from Brazil. In terms of courses, the IPB offers a wide range of courses, many opting for this institute because these same courses are compatible with those in their countries of origin. Most students rated the IPB facilities as excellent or good, as well as teachers and non-teaching staff. All report being very well received and creating bonds of friendship quite easily. Unfortunately, the experience of many was not what they wanted due to the Covid-19 pandemic.

Keywords: Erasmus mobility, internationalization, international relations.

1 INTRODUCTION

Over the last few years, we have been witnessing a real transformation in terms of Erasmus mobility and International Mobility. The mobility programs responsible for the mobility of a greater number of students are Erasmus Mobility and Extra-Community Mobility (or International Mobility). The first program works as a community action, which supports and facilitates the academic mobility of students and teachers in the European space. Its objective is the cooperation of all countries belonging to the European Union in the field of education and research. Erasmus+ is the European program that supports education, training, youth and sport. It supports the priorities and activities set out in the European Education Area, the Action Plan for Digital Education and the Skills Agenda for Europe. The program also supports the European Pillar of Social Rights, implements the EU Youth Strategy 2019-2027 and develops the European dimension of sport [1]. The latter allows for a mobility period in Higher Education Institutes (HEIs) in Portuguese-speaking and non-EU countries. The international mobility of students can be done in cycles of studies such as bachelor's and master's degrees, to attend curricular units, carry out curricular and professional internships, and research works, among others [2]. This type of mobility is called Mobility from non-European higher educational institutions (HEIs). Within the scope of this article, we focus on mobility in higher education.

UNESCO defends internationalization as a solidary aspect of the insertion of countries in a global context, to which Higher Education Institutions contribute, either through the mobility of students, teachers and staff, or through various partnerships in the field of teaching and research. This internationalization has reached an increasing strategic importance not only due to the need to adjust students' competences to an increasingly dynamic and global context, but also due to the existing competition [3].

When participating in Erasmus or in international mobility, students have the opportunity to get to know a culture totally different from their own, be in contact with other languages or even learn them. In addition, it represents an excellent component to include in the curriculum, proving to be a fearless person, proactive, versatile and predisposed to change. The job market of today's world is looking for people in this sense: with the ability to communicate and innovate, ability to interact with others, ability to transform threats into opportunities, positive spirit regarding change, without fear of taking risks and experiencing new languages and cultures.

The evolution of international HEI mobility can be characterized by three stages [3]: (i) participation of students in teaching programs in foreign countries throughout practically the last half of the 20th century; (ii) establishment of agreements and partnerships with foreign HEIs and the corresponding possibility for students to acquire a foreign degree or a double degree from the 90s onwards; (iii) development of online courses and creation of centers in foreign countries.

We can also say that, in Portugal, the publication of the International Student Statute encouraged the attraction of international students to national HEIs, namely through financial support programs for mobility and the establishment of bilateral protocols.

Thus, this article includes the following sections: introduction, where Erasmus mobility and international mobility were generically addressed; methodological approach, which exposes the survey according to the questionnaire used, the analysis and processing of data where the most relevant aspects are presented and discussed; and, lastly, final remarks.

2 METHODOLOGY APPROACH

The exploratory research was based on a questionnaire survey that was sent to 1240 students who had carried out mobility from the 2015/2016 academic year to the 2020/2021 academic year. 429 responses were obtained. The remaining 811 students did not respond. The reason may be related to: (i) the return of some e-mails, since the e-mail in question no longer existed; (ii) probability that students did not have a visa or were not available to respond within the deadline. The survey aimed to understand the opinion/experience of Erasmus or international mobility students at the IPB. These 429 students attended the IPB between 2015 and 2021 aged between 21 and 26 years old. Most of them belong to the European and American continent.

The questionnaire was designed to obtain the voluntary and informed opinion of international mobility or Erasmus students regarding the mobility they had done at the Polytechnic Institute of Bragança. This questionnaire corresponds to one of the data collection elements of an exploratory research, institutionally limited to the Polytechnic Institute of Bragança (ESE-IPB), in the context of the Internship of Observation and Intervention in Professional Contexts (OICP) developed by Débora Martins, under the orientation of Prof. Vitor Gonçalves and supervision of Prof. Ana Maria Alves. The aim of this study was to evaluate the level of satisfaction and contribution in the realization of their Learning Agreement and was accepted by the International Relations Office of IPB [4]. The anonymity was guaranteed and the data collected and generated was of restricted access to the student and supervisors.

In the context of the data collection process, it is important to consider three different moments that concern it: (i) Validation of the questionnaire with the IPB's International Relations office and with ten students in mobility in the 1st semester of 2020/2021; (ii) Collection of data through a questionnaire in a Google Forms format; (iii) Analysis of results.

3 RESULTS

After analyzing and processing the data, it was possible to conclude that most of the answers obtained came from females, since 262 are female (61%) and 167 are male (39%). Most of the women who responded to this survey reside in the American and European continents, while the men who responded reside in the European and American continents. The African and Asian continents had fewer responses than the aforementioned continents.

Regarding age, during mobility, 184 students (43%) were 21 or 22 years old, 116 students (27%) were between 23 and 25 years old, 67 (16%) were over 26 years old, and only 4 students (1%) were 18 years of age or younger. Currently, 205 students (48%) are already 23 or 25 years old, 159 students (37%) are over 26 years old, 52 (12%) are between 21 and 22 years old, 12 (3%) are between 19 and 20 years old and only one student is 18 years of age or younger.

Most students performed Erasmus or international mobility in 2019/2020 (127 students or 24%). Then, in 2018/2019, 121 (22%) responded, in 2017/2018, 72 (13%) students responded, in 2016/2017, 53 (10%) students responded, in 2020/2021 we had 44 students (7%), in 2015/2016 we had 40 (9%) students. Justified by the Covid-19 pandemic. Overall, the numbers dropped, because many students were afraid to travel to a different country, namely for fear of being held back.

Regarding the type of mobility, 221 students (52%) belong to Erasmus mobility, 195 (45%) to international mobility and only 13 (3%) students were identified as others, that is, students who came to the IPB to carry out an internship or PhD.

Regarding the continental spectrum, we can conclude that there are two continents that stand out: the European and the American, with the American continent (due mainly to students from Brazil) being in first place and the European in second. That is, 211 students (49%) are from America, 201 (47%) students are from Europe, 11 (3%) students are from Africa and, finally, from Asia, we identified 6 students (1%). As mentioned, most students from the American continent are Brazilians - more than 200 students -, hence such a high percentage on this continent. It seems possible to conclude that the Brazilian community prefers to carry out international mobility in Portugal due to their familiarity with the Portuguese language. Still in relation to America, it was possible to identify 4 students from Mexico. In Europe we can highlight several countries, the main ones being: Poland with 49 students, Spain with 45 students, Italy with 27 students, Lithuania with 13 students, Romania with 12 students, Czech Republic with 10 students, Greece with 7 students, Hungary with 5 students and France with 3 students. The rest come from countries such as: Moldova, Croatia, Belarus and Germany, which only received a response from one student. Spain has been registering a higher influx of students due to the proximity between countries and languages.

Regarding schools, ESTIG (Escola Superior de Tecnologia e Gestão - School of Technology and Management) was the school that over the years welcomed more students, that is 191 (40.30%), followed by ESE (Escola Superior de Educação - School of Education) with 120 students (25.32%), ESA (Escola Superior Agrária - School of Agriculture) with 98 (20.68%), ESACT (Escola Superior de Comunicação, Administração e Turismo - School of Communication, Administration and Tourism) with 37 (7.81%) and, finally, ESSa (Escola Superior de Saúde - School of Health) with 28 students (5.91%). In this field, more than 429 responses were obtained, since several students attended curricular units from different schools. Regarding the courses, it was possible to conclude that engineering is the most frequented course, with the main ones being: Civil Engineering, Computer Engineering, Food Engineering and Industrial Engineering. In addition, the Renewable Energies course also had a large number of students. Other courses that stand out are English Spanish, Mechanical Engineering, Art and Design, International Business, International Marketing, Master's in Translation, Languages for International Relations, Animation and Artistic Production, Chemical Engineering, Sports, Social Education, Tourism, Dietetics and Nutrition, Gerontology, Nursing, Management, Solicitorship, Veterinary Nursing, Environmental Engineering, Basic Education, Laboratory Biomedical Science, Chemical Engineering, Agronomic Engineering, Game Design and Creation, Animal Science, Journalism, Music, Business Management, Accounting, Phytopharmacy, Biology and Biotechnology.

Regarding the question "Did the IPB institution inform about the possibilities of looking for accommodation?" In this regard, most students were informed by the IPB about the possibilities of looking for accommodation: 317 students (74%) answered yes, 67 (16%) students answered that this help was not needed, 33 (8%) got help from their home institution and only 12 (3%) students asked for help but did not get any useful answers. It should be noted that 405 (94%) students say they would recommend mobility to other students, 23 (5%) students say maybe and only one student says they would not.

In an assessment of the mobility experience at the IPB, on a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 being bad and 5 being excellent, 299 (70%) students rate their experience a 5, 110 (26%) students rate it a 4, 15 (3%) students rate it a 3, 4 students rate it a 2 and only 1 student rates it a 1.

Regarding teaching and non-teaching staff in general, 232 (54%) students rated teaching and non-teaching staff as excellent, 131 (31%) students as good, 50 (12%) students rated it satisfactorily, 14 (3%) students considered it unsatisfactory and only 2 students rated it as bad.

Most students consider the IPB facilities to be excellent, 218 (58%) students rated it a 5, 146 (33%) students rated it a 4, 45 (7%) students rated it a 3, 8 students (2%) rated it a 2 and 2 students only rated it a 1.

Regarding the availability and academic responsibility of the teachers, the evaluation given by the students turns out to be very similar to that of the teaching and non-teaching staff, 244 (57%) students evaluate the teachers as excellent, 122 (28%) students evaluate them as good, 48 (11%) students rate it as satisfactory, 13 (3%) students do not consider themselves satisfied and only 2 rate their professional work as bad. Also regarding teachers, 365 (84%) students consider that teachers were available to clarify doubts or provide academic support, 60 (15%) students say that sometimes and only 4 say that they were not available.

Most of the students chose the IPB due to partnerships with their home institution, with 108 students presenting this as a reason. Interestingly, all were Brazilians. Other reasons were the country itself, the fact that Portugal is a hot country, with a very unique cuisine and has many well-known cities that they always wanted to visit. The fact that there are courses corresponding to those of their university of origin leads them to choose the IPB. The institution's recognition outside of Portugal is also an advantage. After all, many students choose it because it is considered the best polytechnic in the country. Spaniards tend to mention that they chose the IPB because of its proximity to their country of origin. It is also worth noting that are students who mention that they only came to the IPB because they managed to obtain a grant that guaranteed them some financial support, since without this grant they would never have come. Finally, some came encouraged by former students, who had highly praised the city of Bragança, the teaching and the experience itself.

Most students were able to easily create bonds of friendship: 386 (88.9%) students answered yes and only 43 (11.1%) answered no. These 43 students found it difficult to create friendships due to Covid-19, since the country was closed and it was not allowed to contact anyone. However, it should be noted that 391 (91.3%) students were able to get answers to all the questions they had during their stay in Bragança and only 38 (8.7%) students could not.

Regarding the evaluation processes, the largest number of students answered that they did not feel harmed in the evaluation: 334 (78%) students answered no, 55 (13%) students answered maybe (they do not know how to answer) and 40 (9%) students answered yes.

In order to understand the places visited by students, we asked a question on the subject, to which 413 students (94%) responded that they visited the Cidadela and Castelo de Bragança, 303 (69%) visited the Churches of Bragança. The Municipal Theater of Bragança was visited by 296 students (67%), 270 (61%) students visited Typical Villages, 269 (61%) students visited the Domus Municipalis de Bragança, 224 (51%) students visited the Centro de Ciência Viva de Bragança and 208 (47%) students visited the Montesinho Park. The Military Museum of Bragança was visited by 201 students (46%), the Albufeira do Azibo by 190 (43%) students, the Graça Morais Contemporary Art Center by 165 (37%) students, the Iberian Mask and Costume Museum was visited by 156 (37%) students. It should also be noted that 140 (32%) students visited the Abade de Baçal Museum and, finally, the mountain range Serra da Nogueira was visited by 98 (22%) students.

In another question about which places they visited in Portugal, Porto and Lisbon stand out, followed by Vila Real, Aveiro, Braga, Coimbra, Guimarães, Algarve, Mirandela, Nazaré, Sintra, Serra da Estrela, Leiria, Azores, Madeira and Fátima. The first two are the most visited, since the first is internationally recognized and the second is the capital of the country. Vila Real and Mirandela were also mentioned a lot, which is normal, since they are cities relatively close to the city of Bragança.

In another section of the survey dedicated exclusively to Covid-19, we wanted to understand how the pandemic affected the experience of mobility students. Only students who attended the IPB during a pandemic responded to this section. Only 83 (19%) students were in Bragança during the pandemic, with 47 (56%) students stating that they were not stranded in Bragança without being able to return to their country of origin, while 36 (43%) students were stranded without being able to go back. However, 65 (78%) students say they felt totally safe and only 18 (22%) students did not feel safe. With Covid-19, there were inevitable impacts on the lives of each of them: most recognized that they started to feel a lot of anxiety, since they were closed off, without being able to go to any cafe, visit a new city and especially not being able to interact or meet new people. In addition to the fear of not being able to return home.

Online classes also seem to have been a problem, as many did not like the new system, nor were they getting used to it, which made adapting even more difficult. With online classes, there seems to have been an even greater workload, making the mobility experience even more difficult.

During confinement, to take their mind off the whole pandemic situation a little, they had fun online with friends and in person following all safety standards, went out in a group for a walk or even alone, tried to keep busy by studying or reading, or participated in get-togethers at close friends' houses.

On a scale of 1 to 5, with 5 being excellent and 1 being very bad, we obtained the following evaluation of online teaching via zoom: 28 (33%) students would rate the experience a 5, 31 (37%) students rated it a 4, 19 (22 %) students rated it a 3, 4 (4%) students rated it a 2 and only one student rated it a 1.

As for the assessment of practical activities, essentially the contents previously made available (pdf, web links, videos, etc.), the majority evaluated between 4 and 5: 26 (31.3%) students rated it a 5, 35 (42.2 %) students rated it a 4, 3 (15.7%) students rated it a 3, 5 (6%) students rated it a 2 and 4 (4.8%) students a 1.

Despite the difficulties inherent to a pandemic season, most students felt supported by the IPB, despite the distance classes. That is, 69 (83%) students felt supported and only 14 (17%) did not feel any type of support or would not need it. When it comes to seeking support from the institution in case they are infected or do not have a computer, 71 (86%) students have never asked for any type of support and 12 (14%) say they have asked for support and have not obtained it.

Despite the distance, most students felt a lot of support from their families: 78 (94%) students felt supported and only 5 (6%) students said they did not. One of the negative answers came from a student who claims that he did not obtain this family assistance, because in his country-of-origin things were worse than in Portugal.

In the last section, comments and suggestions were requested from all students. Most comments rate the mobility experience as “amazing” or “very pleasant” and would love to be able to return to Bragança. Leave messages of thanks for the welcome. It is worth noting that, after the mobility, some of them have already returned to Bragança, and a few are attending master's degrees. Finally, we would like to mention that several students suggested an idea for the future: holding an event where former mobility students were invited to meet again in a city and an institution they will never forget.

4 CONCLUSIONS

As we had already noticed from the percentages published in the media, more and more international students are seeking mobility at the IPB, apart from the 2020/2021 academic year due to the pandemic.

Most students who performed Erasmus mobility or international mobility at IPB are completely satisfied. Most of the students come from the European and American continent, with the majority coming from South America, more specifically from Brazil. In terms of courses, the IPB offers a wide range of courses, many opt for the IPB because these same courses are compatible with those in their home countries. Most students evaluated the IPB facilities as being excellent or good, as well as teachers and non-teachers.

It should be noted that the IPB, during the pandemic season, made computers available to students who demonstrably needed this digital technology to access the institution's eLearning platforms.

All report that they were very well received and easily created bonds of friendship in the city and in the institution. Unfortunately, the experience of many was not as great as they would have wanted because Covid-19 emerged.

Expressions of the songs of the IPB academic tunas such as “Friends forever. We will be until we die. I will cry when I must leave. I will miss the Academy. Friends forever. Friends forever.” [5] or “The taste for Tuna is the blood that runs in our veins, but studies and friends we will never forget.” [6] “Friends for life. Heart of a student” [7] were mentioned by many of the mobility students who once passed through the Polytechnic Institute of Bragança.

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