



# CREATING CULTURAL UNDERSTANDING THROUGH TRAVEL

CultSense Case Collection

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2022

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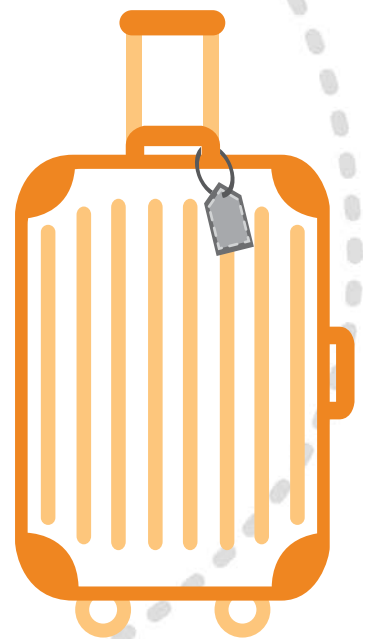
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**ENGAGING  
WITH LOCAL  
CULTURES**



# Erasmus Mobility as a Culture-led Experience: Opportunities for Sensitizing Young Travellers

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## Summary

The Erasmus programme and the underlying experiences have a huge potential to generate long-term travels of young people, with significant impacts both on the travellers and hosting communities. The international experience gained through studying, volunteering, or working abroad is widely acknowledged as positive, giving students a huge boost to self-confidence and curriculum enrichment, broadening their horizons and social links. A major benefit of study abroad is the development of intercultural competence, to learn the culture of Self and Other and to communicate across differences.

On the other hand, as long-term travellers, these young people can be agents of positive interaction with the hosting communities, and be the best advocates, as key informants to other travellers about local culture and traditions, particularly if they have lived and experienced those traditions.

What determines the Erasmus students' positive perceptions and willingness to spread the word and positively influence others? and How can hosting communities take advantage of the Erasmus mobility programmes to promote the territories as tourism destinations?

The case study describes the Erasmus mobility programme at Polytechnic Institute of Viana do Castelo (Portugal), with a particular focus on the perception and experiences of students taking part in the programme over the last 5 years. Results put in evidence that to seize the opportunities mobility represents, local authorities and destination management organizations need to understand that Erasmus students are potentially the best promoters and influencers of the country/region at an international level; whilst they are also bringing their knowledge, habits and own culture to Viana do Castelo, enriching mutual cultural understanding, exchanges and richness.

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## From Portugal with love

A few years ago, I hosted an Italian student in my classes. Luca was on an Erasmus mobility/exchange. When he arrived, he had some difficulty with English, and although I could understand Italian, I didn't speak it fluently. So, our communication wasn't always easy... Sometimes he spoke in Italian, and I would speak in Portuguese, and eventually we managed to understand each other.

Luca had very interesting characteristics, as he was very sociable, and very willing to learn, which made his integration easier. The way he performed made me realize that he was an excellent student, and he would certainly succeed even in the most prestigious universities.

As we usually do with Erasmus students, at a certain point in our talks, I asked him why he had chosen Portugal and IPVC (Instituto Politécnico de Viana do Castelo) for his mobility. After all, he even extended his stay for

**Topics for discussion**

- **What** might be the reasons that lead students to an Erasmus exchange?
- **What** could determine the Erasmus students positive perceptions and bonding with the host community?
- **What** aspects would facilitate the integration of Erasmus students, their understanding of local culture, and the advantages of an immersive experience?
- **Consider** the hosting communities:
  - a — How can they contribute to students' willingness to spread the word and positively influence other's "travels" to that destination (other students, families, or friends)?
  - b — How can the hosting communities take advantage of the Erasmus mobility programmes to promote their regions as tourism destinations?

another semester. His answer was:

My older brother came to study in Portugal a few years ago, in Porto, and he was very happy about his experience. He loved the place, the people, the culture, and its way of living. I came once to visit him, together with our parents, and as we were travelling around the country, we also fell in love with it and its fascinating atmosphere. I felt I could live here...

As a lecturer of international students, I am aware that students' mobility is not the only important factor affecting a (degree's and) Higher Education Institution's competitiveness, but also that it is greatly associated with the intercultural experience (Silva, Correia & Fernandes, 2005; Lesjak et al., 2015). Nevertheless, I was inspired and fascinated by Luca's answer. The importance of this experience in establishing bridges between cultures, leading to a better understanding and valorisation of the destination, resulting in an emotional bond, became stronger.

Indeed, Luca was so captivated with the country during his first visit that he decided to apply for an Erasmus mobility here. In his case, the mobility was to Viana do Castelo. During his stay, his parents and friends came to visit him, as well as his brother who later returned to Portugal, this time to work, and live, as he had found love during his Erasmus mobility and therefore decided to settle in Portugal.

Due to Luca's brother's first positive (cultural) experience in Portugal, several long-term travels occurred, including that of Lucas and his family, both in an academic context and a personal context, with relevant impacts on the local economy... Portugal became a popular tourist destination for this family, relatives, and acquaintances, who became advocates of the destination.

## Background

In its strategy for the modernisation of higher education, the European Commission highlighted the need to provide more opportunities for students to gain skills through study or training abroad. The Erasmus+ is the European Union programme supporting actions in the fields of education and training, youth, and sports. The Erasmus Programme, which started in 1987, has been one of the first initiatives to implement the fundamentals of the European Space for Higher Education and lies at the heart of the Bologna Process. As a mobility program, Erasmus enriches students' opportunities for exchanging cultural, professional, and personal experiences (Lesjak et al., 2015).

With an estimated budget of EUR 26.2 billion for the period 2021-2027 (compared to €14.7 billion for 2014-2020), the programme aims to support, through lifelong learning, the educational, professional, and personal development of people in education, training, youth and sports, in Europe and beyond, thereby contributing to sustainable growth, quality jobs and social cohesion, to driving innovation, and to strengthening European identity and active citizenship (European Commission, 2021).

Mobility of learners and staff is the flagship activity of Erasmus+. About 10 million individuals, including students, learners, professors, teachers, and trainers in all sectors, are expected to participate in mobility activities abroad within the programme. Through the unique experience of living, studying, training, or travelling abroad, participants gain self-confidence and soft skills, discover different cultures and build networks of interpersonal and professional relationships with people from other countries. This fosters their employability and active participation in society and contributes

to greater social inclusion and a strengthened European identity. With more flexible mobility format and duration, higher education students will have even more opportunities to study or to carry out a traineeship in Europe and beyond (Directorate-General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture (European Commission), 2021).

During the 21 years of this programme, two million students have moved around the member states of the EU (the EU-27, plus Iceland, Norway, and Turkey) (Gonzalez et al., 2011). The programme and the underlying experiences have thus a huge potential to generate long-term travels of young people, with significant impacts both on the travellers and hosting communities. These young people can be agents of positive interaction with the hosting communities, but also cause friction, especially when hosting communities are more conservative, or socioeconomic inequalities and intercultural differences become more evident.

The determinants of Erasmus student mobility are very diverse: country size, cost of living, distance, educational background, university quality, the host country language and climate, country's characteristics, and time effects are all found to be significant determinants (Gonzalez et al., 2011).

## **Opportunities and benefits for participants**

The international experience gained through studying, volunteering, or working abroad is widely acknowledged as positive, giving students an opportunity for professional and personal growth. This, in turn, can enhance self-confidence, self-reliance and widening one's horizon. The Erasmus exchange allows meeting and experiencing new people and environments within diverse cultures, learning a foreign language, experiencing leisure-related activities and appreciating different cultures. All these opportunities are critical to boost students' self-confidence and curriculum enrichment, helping them to stand out in the job market and succeed in an increasingly competitive international marketplace (Lesjak et al., 2015).

Thus, students benefitting from Erasmus funding and exchange opportunities are highly motivated, independent, and confident, have improved their language skills and gained an international network of friends. These students are more entrepreneurial than their stay-at-home counterparts, and they can also expect faster career advancement.

But the Erasmus experience not only improves students' career prospects but also offers them broader horizons and social links. Students often change their country of residence or work after graduating (European Commission, 2014).

A major benefit from studying abroad is the development of intercultural competence (Kubota, 2017). However, these contexts are more likely to provide students with a better knowledge of other cultures, and not necessarily to develop attitudes, which are fundamental for a real intercultural communication.

Students' self-report of changes in knowledge, attitudes, and behaviours after study abroad in European countries are identified in the literature (e.g., Kubota, 2017), with the knowledge component most changed, while attitudes only changed to a limited extent.

## **Opportunities and benefits for hosting communities**

The Erasmus programme is a culture-led, life changing experience, impacting both on the participants and the host communities. Exchange students and Erasmus students can have a direct impact as academic tourists, not only



with their own expenses related to their stay at the destination, but also by attracting new visitors when family and friends come for a visit.

The impulse experienced by academic tourism has been of such magnitude that savings, which can be comparable to the impact of longer tourist stays (Rodriguez et al., 2013). More and more national governments, regional and local regions are interested in promoting their regions as destinations for education (Cubillo et al., 2006). Academic tourism has gained notoriety for counteracting the seasonality inherent in tourism and the possibility of longer stays (Oliveira, 2021). International students become involved in the everyday life of the local community, as well as consumers of the tourism industry, often participating in entrepreneurial creativity and becoming newcomers/residents (Malet-Calvo, 2018). Moreover, Erasmus students can be the best advocates, as key informants to other travellers about local culture and traditions, particularly if they have lived and experienced those traditions (Vitoratos, 2015; Amaro et al., 2019). As long-term travellers, Erasmus students have greater opportunities to understand local cultures and become advocates of the hosting communities abroad, particularly when they go back home, and spread the word about their experience (Amaro et al., 2019). What they have experienced and what they share, both in person and through social media, will influence the perception of others about the hosting country (Vitoratos, 2015). The way students are welcomed and the support they receive from welcoming/hosting institutions are critical for the experience and for a better understanding of the country culture. Indeed, the role of organisations and of hosting communities are crucial to facilitate the student's integration. More, communities are strengthening their position as attractive destinations, both for academic visitors and tourists in general.

### **Disadvantages: are there any?**

Very few disadvantages are identified, and the existing ones are outweighed by the perceived benefits. Paperwork is the most challenging issue for the students in this period (Onen, 2017). Some students face cultural barriers having to do with religion, gender roles, or communication differences (European Commission, 2014).

On one hand, the main problem students encounter during their Erasmus programme seems to be communicating and socialising. On the other hand, after an Erasmus exchange, the majority of the students suffer from what can be referred to as "the post-Erasmus syndrome" (Onen, 2017).

### **Erasmus mobility at Instituto Politécnico de Viana do Castelo**

The Polytechnic Institute of Viana do Castelo (IPVC) is in the Alto Minho region in the northwest of Portugal, which has a population of around 250,000 inhabitants distributed throughout a territorial area of 2210 km<sup>2</sup>. It borders Spain to the north and east, the district of Braga to the south, and the Atlantic Ocean to the west. The region is characterized by its rich natural landscapes, and the harmony of its diverse ecosystems, – marine, fluvial, and terrestrial, – makes it unique.

IPVC offers various educational programs (licentiate degree, master's degree programs, professional and technical programs, and several graduate programs), integrates several national and international R&D consortia and projects in different areas of study, and cooperates with several higher education institutions outside Europe, namely in Brazil and Central America.

## Mobility programs

IPVC offers its academic community several mobility opportunities for studies, training, or curricular and professional traineeships at national and foreign HEIs, if there is an agreement between IPVC and the intended institution.

There are different mobility programs which include mobility within Europe, under the Erasmus+ Program (mobility of students and teaching and non-teaching staff), and mobility outside Europe, through the International Credit Mobility of Individuals and cooperation programs with various HEIs outside Europe, namely in Brazil and Central America.

The Mobility and International Cooperation Office provides support in the development and internationalization of IPVC and national and international cooperation with Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), as well as in promoting the mobility of students and teaching and non-teaching staff.

IPVC has been part of the Erasmus mobility programme since the early '90s and over the years has received a considerable number of foreign students, seeking for an academic, but also personal and cultural new experience. The average number of students every year is of about 120, in total for both semesters.

## Welcoming and integration strategies

To support the integration of Erasmus students at IPVC, the institution created the concept of Erasmus Guide Friend based on the concept of "Buddy Program", associated with the Erasmus Student Network (ESN). It is expected that this Erasmus Guide Friend will facilitate the integration of the Erasmus incoming students and the international students in the academic and regional environment, serving also as a contact point in the IPVC schools.

The tasks of the Erasmus Guide Friend are to receive, guide, and familiarize the international students with the daily issues of the academic life of the school and IPVC, as well as to make the exchange students aware of the uses, customs, and traditions of the region.



Figure 1. Erasmus students with the Mobility and International Cooperation Office

Source: Communication and Image Office, IPVC

There is a set of aspects for a foreign student to take into consideration to be properly integrated with the destination country and for which the help and assistance of the Erasmus Guide Friends should be channeled. Finding accommodation, introducing the students to the Erasmus coordinators of the school and the coordinator of the course they will attend, are examples. In addition, Guide friends also play an important role at introducing them to the other students, and the associative bodies, informing about the IPVC school calendar, organizing guided tours, in the territory of Alto Minho and informing them about the particularities of the Portuguese way of life, and local traditions like fishing activities and related gastronomy.

Also, for the Erasmus Guide Friends, there are advantages in performing this role, such as the opportunity to experience different languages; improve their knowledge of English by the frequent and fluent practice of the language; opportunity to meet new cultures; enlargement of the network of contacts and new friendships and issuing of a collaboration certificate, which will be integrated with the Diploma Supplement. This is clearly understood in Vítor Mendes testimonial, about his experience:

As a Guide Friend I had many opportunities to develop my language skills and at the same time I also had the chance to teach the Erasmus+ students some words in Portuguese. The main reason for me to become a Guide Friend was to check that there was a need to support the incoming Erasmus students, based on my previous experience as an Erasmus student in Greece and Erasmus Mundus in Azerbaijan, and all the obstacles and difficulties I had while I was on mobility. In Greece I had no Guide friend, so it was much more difficult to adapt. However, in Azerbaijan I had my guide Friend and thanks to that my experience was way much better and the way I absorbed the culture from the country was wider. Many times, I was invited by my Guide Friend's family to have dinner, to learn some more about their culture, religion, music, and history. I also had my chance to share some of the Portuguese culture, gastronomy, and history. Because of this Intercultural opportunity I still have my second family abroad in Azerbaijan, due to the friendship that we grow day by day!

In addition to the guide friends, IPVC also organizes, in close cooperation with local organisations (e.g., city hall and tourism office), several events dedicated to help them to get to know the city and become familiar with local culture. One of those events is the International Week, organized biannually, oriented to promote the Erasmus Mobility program and related activities, (namely) conferences covering a wide range of topics of interest, with the participation of (its) national and international partners, as well as cultural and traditional visits with the thematic 'ERASMUS+ leverages Knowledge Transfer between Universities and Enterprises'.

## Perception of Erasmus students about Portuguese culture

### Survey

A survey was conducted to understand the perception of Erasmus students about their experience in Viana do Castelo, Portugal, as part of their mobility at IPVC, about the cultural aspects. The underlying question was whether these students would be advocates of Portugal and Viana do Castelo as a destination, and if they would recommend it, both from an academic and personal (cultural) perspective. The survey was conducted through a structured questionnaire, sent to 531 e-mail addresses of former incoming Erasmus students (over the last 5 years). Out of these, 79 completed and valid questionnaires were received.

### A picture of the IPVC Exchange student

Most respondents were males aged between 21 and 32 years, from several countries, but mostly from Poland and the Check Republic (although IPVC receives students from many countries like Austria, Brazil, Spain, Estonia, Germany, Greece, Italy, Lithuania, Romania, Turkey, and Ukraine). More than a third stayed in Viana for one semester.

About 15% were repeat visitors to Portugal, at least once. This means that these international students had visited the country before their exchange. However, most, in general, had previous awareness about Portugal (although not necessarily about Viana do Castelo). Its cultural traditions and diversity of attractions influenced the students' choice, particularly for those who were familiar with the country.

The students felt very welcomed in Viana do Castelo and consider the local population to be very polite, hospitable, and tolerant. All students praised the Portuguese people and their attitudes, with expressions such as very kind; welcoming; very friendly; awesome atmosphere; attractive cities and amazing people.

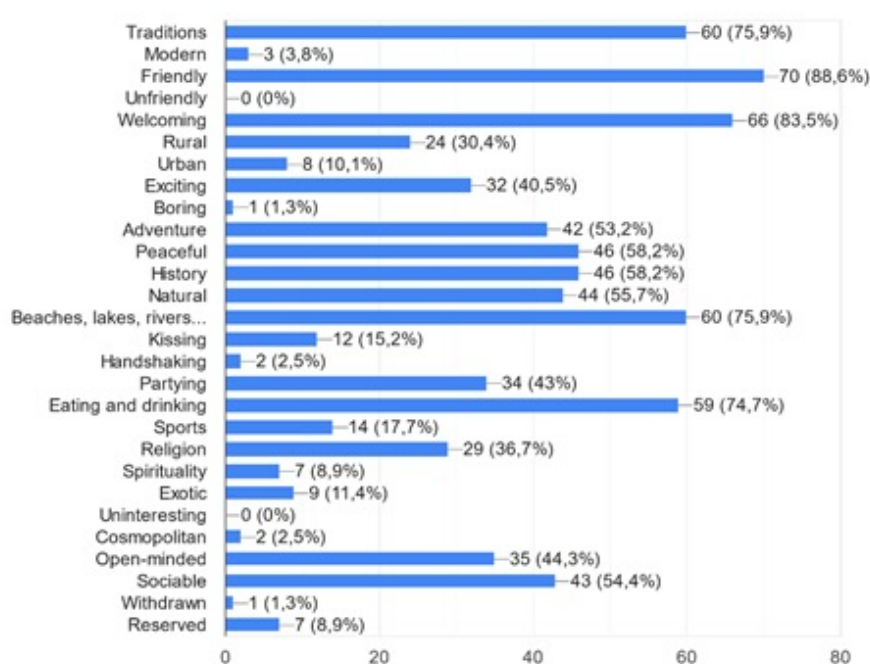
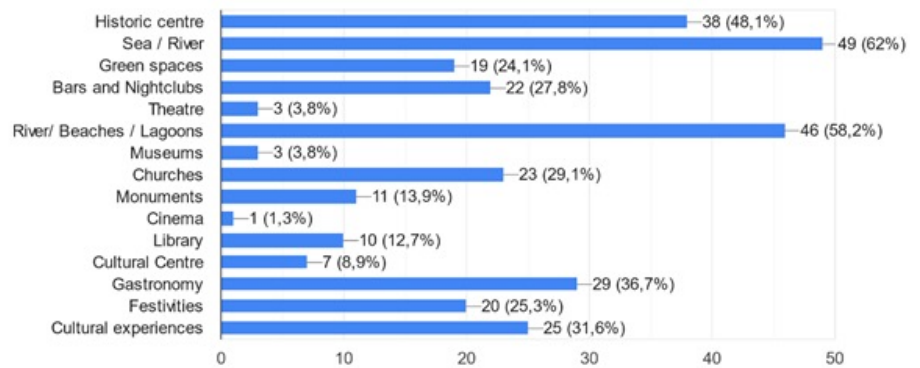


Figure 2. Description of Portuguese Culture by the former Exchange students

What impressed them the most about Viana do Castelo were its natural surroundings, the combination of the river and the sea, beaches, and the historical centre, as well as gastronomy. Cultural heritage and resources are thus at the forefront of appealing assets of the city and its most memorable attractions.

Figure 3. Classification of the attractions of Viana do Castelo that most contributed positively to the mobility experience by the students



When trying to understand the ease / difficulty of the students' integration in the new experience, only one (answer) option was given, and it was an open-ended answer. The main difficulties of integration were language barrier; difficulty of the locals in speaking English; difficulties in finding a place to live; difficulties in integrating at school and with colleagues; difficulties with the Erasmus Guide-Friend; difficulties at school with the curricular units.

Very few students faced unpleasant situations and they were mostly related with some to people not speaking English (supermarkets, cafeteria...), and others with more conservative behaviours (narrow-mindedness).

When also asked if they would repeat the experience or recommend Viana do Castelo to other colleagues, nearly all replied that they would. Furthermore, some highlighted the same positive aspects already mentioned. Words like "felt in love with Viana and its people" amazing and welcoming people, delicious gastronomy and wines, safety, amongst other aspects were mentioned.

The positive impression these students had, to refer not only to Viana do Castelo but to Portugal in general, as most have travelled around and visited other cities like Oporto, Lisbon, Coimbra, or Braga. Their stay allowed for a richer cultural experience, often beyond the hectic commotion and hustle of tourist places. They lived both as ordinary Portuguese young people, often going to supermarkets, to shops, and clubbing now and then, but also as tourists, travelling around, and discovering the country's natural and cultural wonders. However, as their stay was longer, their impressions are deeper and will mostly likely last longer. In addition, as their memories are mostly positive, and even impressive as mentioned in the literature, it will influence their willingness to return to and speak positively of the country, when talking to others.

Local authorities and destination management organizations need to increase their awareness of these opportunities for the host community, and work with IPVC in welcoming and in accompanying these young people throughout their stay, as they are potentially the best promoters and influencers of the country/region at an international level.

#### Learning objectives

- **To discuss** how Culture-led mobility experiences, such as Erasmus mobility, offer opportunities for tourism development, with impact on the local economy
- **To understand** how mobility experiences can influence the perception of participants of their hosting countries
- **To analyse** that participants in mobility programmes, such as Erasmus students, can have an important role as advocates of the hosting countries as tourism destinations
- **To recommend** how hosting communities can take advantage of mobility programmes by creating positive experiences for participants

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**Dolors Vidal-Casellas**, PhD in Art History, is interested in the planning and management of cultural tourism. She teaches in the Tourism Bachelor Program and the Master in Cultural Tourism of the University of Girona. She is member and representative of Spain in the UNITWIN Culture, Tourisme et Development of UNESCO and director of the Chair Culture, Gastronomy and Tourism Calonge-Sant Antoni of the University of Girona. Recently (2019) she has won an award from the Catalan Government for her work on the field of Cultural tourism. She is the director of the LMRT research group.



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