



**ERASMUS+ IN HIGHER EDUCATION:  
THE EXPERIENCE OF INCOMING STUDENTS AT  
A BUSINESS AND ADMINISTRATION SCHOOL IN PORTUGAL**

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**Abstract:**

Erasmus+ is the most widespread student short-term mobility programme in the EU and it has become mandatory in some of the business degrees. The main aim of this study was to analyse Erasmus incoming students' expectations and competences developed. The students were enrolled in a course in the field of Organisational Behaviour at a Business School and Administration School of a University of Applied Sciences. Methodologically it consisted of a qualitative study carried out in two stages: a first questionnaire was applied to the 30 students present in the opening class and a second questionnaire was applied to the 35 that wrote the final test of the course. At the beginning of the semester students were asked about their motivations and expectations for Erasmus and the course, at the end of the semester students were asked the competences they perceived they developed and their experience. Students were from the bachelor and master's degrees and all of them were from western and eastern European higher education institutions. Our main findings were that Erasmus students' motivations for the course, and the Erasmus experience, were related to "vacational"/leisure reasons and the opportunity to develop competences associated with culture awareness and working in multicultural groups, followed by the motivation to improve their proficiency in English. Personal development and independence were also mentioned but less salient. As to the competences they perceived they developed, culture awareness and the ability to work in multicultural groups are the most salient but it was followed by independence, sense of initiative and autonomy. The perception of competences to work in international assignments is also mentioned but it is not very salient.

**Keywords:** Erasmus+, higher education, expectations, motivations, competences

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## 1. Introduction

Today Erasmus is not only the most widespread student short-term mobility programme in the EU, but Erasmus+ has become EU's "*flagship programme to support and strengthen education, training, youth and sport in Europe*" (European Commission, 2018 :3). After three decades of Erasmus, today's programme includes 33 participating countries: all 28 EU Member States, Turkey, the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Norway, Iceland and Liechtenstein. Over the years the programme has been extended, at first, to higher education staff mobility followed by projects in the field of school education, vocational education and training (VET), and adult education, amongst others. Currently Erasmus+ has become a more inclusive programme. It offers opportunities for mobility and learning to higher education students and staff, as well as several projects of mobility, training, apprenticeships for trainees, youth workers, volunteers, and adult learners, thus including also low-qualified and low-skilled individuals which aim to acquire skills.

The political rationales and discourses advocate Erasmus as one of the pivotal means in higher education to enable the acquisition and development of international competences (Papatsiba, 2005). It is also presented to promote European labor market and the transfer of skills and technology from one country to another (Papatsiba, 2005; Marques and Almeida, 2014a). At the tertiary level the programme has become so highly valued that it has been integrated in the curricula of some degrees/courses as mandatory. Erasmus is not only highly recommended, but in the fields of Business and Administration and or Management, in general, not to mention in International Management, it is practically mandatory for students to have an experience abroad to enhance their employability. Over the years students themselves have assimilated this rationale and seem to find it imperative to participate in the programme. The boost of graduate employability and culture awareness of often mentioned as the main reasons to participate in the programme (Papatsiba, 2005). However, despite the perception of the importance of the programme there are numerous socioeconomic, cultural and individual factors that shape the participation and non-participation of students. Apart from the boost of their employability, other reasons for students to participate in Erasmus are: the opportunity to study in high quality academic environments; the opportunity to carry out extracurricular activities during this period, and/or for vocational reasons; to improve their linguistic skills (particularly English); to have the opportunity to meet people from other cultures; to become more independent, etc. (Pietro and Page, 2008; Vaicekauskas, Duoba and Kumpikaitė-Valiuniene, 2013; Marques and Almeida, 2014a). Reason for students not to do Erasmus are: the differences of cost of living between home and host country and the distance (students prefer neighborhood countries); social class or family background (students with graduate parents are more likely to do Erasmus); the financial support (the EU grant and/or from other institutions), family commitments (being married, working students), etc. (Pietro and Page, 2008; González, Mesanza and Mariel, 2010).

The aim of this paper was to analyse students' expectations and competences developed during the course about organisational behaviour. This course is solely taught in English during the Autumn-Winter semester. Classes have 30 students and are taught by two professors in the classroom. Using active pedagogical methods, the course focuses on the main themes of Organisational Behavior, such as organisational dynamics and culture, motivation, leadership and group dynamics. In every class, students were asked to work in multicultural groups to solve problems and/or discuss texts. Role playing is also used. All themes are addressed in a meso perspective to focus and enhance national, culture, organizational and individual differences that shape people's behavior in organisations. The assessment system consisted of participation in class, an oral presentation in group and a written test. The latter included questions about their experience and competences developed in the course and during their stay.

This study, despite the differences in methodology, can be viewed as a follow-up of the work previously carried out about four years ago in similar courses (Marques and Almeida, 2014a; Marques and Almeida, 2014b). Methodologically it consisted of a qualitative study carried out in two stages: at the beginning of the semester an open question questionnaire was passed out to the 36 students enrolled in the course. The questionnaire aimed to analyse students' expectations and motivations for Erasmus and for the course. At the end of the semester students answered two open questions about the competences they perceived they had developed in the course and during their stay in Portugal. Content analysis by means of predefined categories with frequency analysis was carried out.

Thus, this paper is structured as follows: after this Introduction, the second chapter covers the literature review about the Erasmus+ programme, focusing on the factors students choose to do or not to do Erasmus, as well as the competences they perceive they developed. The third chapter outlines the methodology that was carried out, namely the stages of the exploratory study. In the fourth chapter the results are presented and discussed. In the fifth chapter we mention the limitations of this exploratory study and outline some recommendations for future studies. And, in the last chapter, the final considerations are drawn.

## **2. Literature Review**

The initial Erasmus Programme was founded in 1987 with the purpose to provide foreign exchange options for higher education students within the European Union. The programme has since then extended its aim, first to higher education, staff mobility, and then to several projects in the field of school education, vocational education and training (VET), and adult education. Nowadays, the programme offers a wide-range of projects that provide opportunities for study, training and/or internships in different fields of expertise, including sports, for a more diverse public, from different levels of education and qualifications and different generations (youth and adult learners and workers). Erasmus+ main motto has been social inclusion and accessibility, as well as equity, in education, training, youth and sport (European Commission, 2018). Aiming

to achieve “(...) *the objectives of the 2015 Paris Declaration on promoting citizenship and the common values of freedom, tolerance and non-discrimination through education*” (European Commission, 2018:3). After three decades, Erasmus+ and its predecessor programmes, have offered 9 million people study, training, volunteering and professional experiences abroad (European Commission, 2018). During 2017, Erasmus+ increased its coverage/accessibility in 10%, providing almost 800 000 people with an opportunity to benefit from learning, working or volunteering abroad (European Commission, 2018).

Since the beginning, the political rationales and discourses have outlined Erasmus as one of the pivotal means in higher education to enable the acquisition and development of international competences, such as the proficiency in maternal and foreign languages, culture awareness, initiative and autonomy, the promotion of the European labour market, and the transfer of skills and technology from one country to another (Papatsiba, 2005; Marques and Almeida, 2014a). In higher education, Erasmus+ and its predecessor’s programmes have been highly promoted for three main purposes. First, to enhance cooperation among the higher-level education institutions of the different states to enhance the convergence and competitiveness of the European Higher Education System (Bologna Declaration, 1999). Second, related to the first and embedded in the Bologna Declaration (1999), to foster academic enhancement, cultural enrichment and improvement of foreign language proficiency (Rivza and Teichler, 2007). Third, as above-mentioned, to promote employability, social inclusion, tolerance and citizenship (European Commission, 2018). Over the last decades the programme the focus on employability, comparatively to the other aims, seems to be strongly reinforced (Carins, 2017).

At the tertiary level the programme is so highly valued that it has been integrated in the curricula of some degrees/courses as mandatory. As a horizontal short-term mobility programme - the mobility between similar home and host country institutions regarding the quality of study programmes and students’ competences (Rivza and Teichler, 2007) - which can be a semester or a year abroad, in the fields of Business and Administration, i.e., Management, in general, not to mention in International Management, it has become almost mandatory for students to have an experience abroad. This experience can be training and/or an internship. Papatsiba (2005) mentions that over the last decades students themselves appear to have assimilated this rationale about the importance of Erasmus to enhance employability and culture awareness. However, not all students participate in the programme during their study period and there are numerous reasons for their participation and non-participation. The flows of student mobility depend on country size, cost of living, distance, educational background, university quality, the host country language and climate, amongst others (Gonzalez, Mesanza and Mariel, 2011). Thus, it is important to understand the socio-economic, cultural and individual factors that shape the participation and non-participation of students. The reasons students participate in the programme are, as abovementioned, to boost their employability as well as have: the opportunity to study in high quality academic environments; the opportunity to carry out extracurricular activities during this period, and/or for vacational reasons; to

improve their linguistic skills (particularly English); to have the opportunity to meet people from other cultures; to become more independent, etc. (Pietro and Page, 2008; Vaicekauskas; Duoba and Kumpikaittė-Valiuniene, 2013; Marques and Almeida, 2014a). Reason for students not to participate in Erasmus are: the differences of the cost of living between home and host country; the distance between home and host countries: students prefer neighborhood countries; social class or family background: students with graduate parents are more likely to do Erasmus; the financial support: the EU grant and/or from other institutions; family commitments: being married and or full-time working students are less likely to be able to do Erasmus, etc. (Pietro and Page, 2008; González, Mesanza and Mariel, 2010).

Back in 2010, Vossensteyn, Beerkens, Cremonini, Huisman, Souto-Otero, Bresancon, Focken, Leurs, McCoshan, Mozuraityte, Pimentel, Bótas and de Wit (2010) presented a framework that summarises five main reasons for participation and non-participation in Erasmus: (1) higher education system compatibility: this is assured by the Learning Agreements between institutions and the system of credits; (2) financial barriers: as Erasmus' grants do not cover all costs, thus the programme is less accessible for lower socio-economic groups; (3) Erasmus conditions include the administrative "burden" and the length of time of the program, as well as the options students have in what concerns the study programs or the host institutions; (4) personal motivation such as: the perceive benefits of the program, the obligation to participate in some courses, the language skills (lack of foreign language proficiency can discourage students participation); civil status and family conditions such as being married and/or having children, having a part-time or full-time student can influence participation; (5) awareness about the importance of the program and its influence on their personal and social development as well as employability.

The reasons that shape participation and non-participation also underly some of the reasons for the imbalance in participation among countries and differentiate predominantly incoming and outgoing countries. Vossensteyn et al. (2010) study showed that in 2007/2008 the new EU member states - Poland, Slovakia or the Baltic countries - had a high outbound/inbound ratio, whereas the Swedish and UK student population showed a low outbound/inbound ratio. In what concerns outgoing students, this study showed that the Roman/Mediterranean, Northwest-European and Scandinavian countries were very popular, unlike the Slavic states that attracted fewer students (Vossensteyn et al., 2010). Some of the reasons for this were the abovementioned, such as existing incentives for students from the new member states to use the programme to study in high quality institutions (Northwest- European and Scandanavian Countries). The attractiveness of the Roman/Mediterranean countries were linked to it being the largest group of countries with the largest number of institutions (Vossensteyn et al., 2010). The reasons abovementioned, such as vocational reasons, were also present in this study. González, Mesanza and Mariel (2010:427) reinforce the attractiveness of the Mediterranean countries for vocational reasons, going on to state that *"So, evidence suggests that despite the academic purposes behind the inception of this programme, there is a real danger of misusing public funds to finance leisure pursuits."*

An update on this information-the Erasmus+ Annual Report 2017 - Statistical Annex (European Commission, 2018b) - shows that the ratio outbound/inbound for higher education students has not differed considerably in the last years. Nevertheless, Poland and Estonia's outbound/inbound ratios were lower (below 1,0), correspondingly: 0,91 and 0,61, but Slovakia (1,88), Lithuania (1,41) and Latvia (1,11) had high outbound/inbound mobility ratios. The Scandinavian countries showed low outbound/inbound mobility ratios (below 1,0), being lower in Norway (0,34) and Sweden (0,37) and a higher in Finland (0,72) and Denmark (0,82).

Portugal had the lowest outbound/inbound mobility ratio amongst Southern European countries (0,64). Spain has a ratio of 0,83 - and Slovenia 0,75, both below 1,0, whereas Greece and Italy showed ratios of 1,21 a ratio of 1,36. Most Western European countries have outbound/inbound mobility ratios very close to 1,0 or above 1,0, which means they are both outgoing and incoming countries, but mainly outgoing. Luxembourg appears to be an exception with a ratio of 0,49. The Netherlands and Belgium have below 1,0, correspondingly 0,97 and 0,87 whereas Germany and France had 1,19 and 1,53 outbound/inbound mobility ratios. The UK and Ireland showed low outbound/inbound mobility ratios, correspondingly 0,53 and 0,43. In what concerns Portugal, Cairns (2017), based on a study carried out in 2016, concluded that Portugal is more of an incoming than outgoing country for the following reasons: on the one hand, the low cost of living, the friendliness and educational quality makes Portugal attractive for vacation and educational reasons, and on the other hand, the low grants and the economic crisis some families were going through at the time made it difficult for Portuguese students to participate. Cairns (2017) also reinforces the Erasmus experience as a vacational experience.

Students consider Erasmus an eye-opening experience which enables them to become more receptive to other cultures, enhance their ability to adapt to new situations, enhance their tolerance and management of diversity, as well as improve their language skills (European Commission, 2018a). According to the latest Erasmus+ Annual Report 2017 (European Commission, 2018:25): *“93% of mobile higher education students say they are more receptive to Europe’s multiculturalism after their stay abroad; 92% of mobile students say they become more able to adapt to and act in new situations. 91% of mobile students improve their language skills during their mobility experience. 87% of mobile students say that their stay abroad made them more tolerant towards others’ values and behaviours and better able to cooperate with people from different backgrounds and cultures”*.

The above-mentioned factors are very similar to what our previous research has shown in what concerns Erasmus students’ motivations and competences they perceive they develop during their stay abroad. Firstly, it should be highlighted that most Erasmus students stated they were highly satisfied with their experience abroad and would recommend it to other colleagues (Marques and Almeida, 2014b; Rivza and Teichler, 2007). Regardless of the all the challenges they have to face surrounding what they define as *“excessive bureaucratic procedures”* (Rivza and Teichler, 2007), most participating students consider Erasmus as a valuable experience that enhances their autonomy and initiative as well as their career prospects (Teichler, 2004). Bureaucratic

procedures and other administrative issues should be addressed for two main reasons. For one, students do not prepare themselves to cope with these issues (Rivza and Teichler, 2007) and/or have not developed these skills. Second, students perceive that the challenges they face during Erasmus enables them to develop these competences that can be described as autonomy, initiative and accountability (Marques and Almeida, 2014b).

Studies have also shown that Erasmus students are better in what concerns “*international competences*” than non-mobile students and they are more likely to get jobs that involve international assignments (Bracht, Engel, Janson, Over, Schomburg, and Teichler, 2006). When comparing competences students expect to develop and competences students perceive they develop, studies carried out by Vaicekauskas, Duoba and Kumpikaitė-Valiuniene (2013) and by Marques and Almeida (2014b) reveal that the competence of sense of initiative and entrepreneurship is perceived as being more developed than initially expected by students. The competence of sense of initiative is defined as “*sense of initiative and entrepreneurship refers to an individual’s ability to turn ideas into action. It includes creativity innovation and risk-taking, as well as the ability to plan and manage projects to achieve objectives*” (European Commission Recommendation of the European Parliament and of the European Council of 18 December 2006: 394/17).

Competences can be understood as the set of the capabilities and knowledge a person mobilises to carry out a certain assignment, that she or he has created upon three axes (Boterf, 1994; 1997): personal characteristics (biography, socialization process), education and training trajectories, and professional experience. The European framework on key competences for lifelong learning defined eight key-competences (European Commission, 2006): 1) Communication in the mother tongue; 2) Communication in foreign languages; 3) Mathematical competence and basic competences in science and technology; 4) Digital competence; 5) Learning to learn; 6) Social and civic competences; 7) Sense of initiative and entrepreneurship; and 8) Culture awareness and expression. The above-mentioned studies showed that overall students’ perceived Erasmus had a positive influence in the development of all competences, there appeared to be some differences between what students consider as important competences and what they consider the level of development of these competences during their period of study abroad (Kumpikaitė and Duoba, 2013; Vaicekauskas, Duoba and Kumpikaitė-Valiuniene, 2013; Marques and Almeida, 2014b). Vaicekauskas, Duoba and Kumpikaitė-Valiuniene (2013) study showed that communication competences, both in foreign language and in mother tongue, were considered as the most important and most developed competences by Erasmus students. However, in the other seven competences there were differences between the perceived importance and the perceived level of development of each competence (Vaicekauskas et al., 2013). Social and civic competences were the second most important competences students expected to develop, however they perceived that the second set of competences they had developed were sense of initiative and entrepreneurship, and thirdly social and civic competences. Marques and Almeida’s (2014b) study also showed that

competences students expect to develop and perceived they developed more are competences in communication in foreign languages and culture awareness and expression. Corroborating other studies, though students expected more to develop social and civic competences they perceived they developed more the sense of initiative and entrepreneurship. Both studies also show that mathematical and basic competences in science and technology were considered the least important and least developed competences.

Culture awareness and enhancing tolerance of people with different values, backgrounds and cultures are key competences developed during Erasmus. Students' expect to improve their knowledge of the host country's culture and, to some extent, the language. However, Sigalas (2010) found that Erasmus students contact with the host country remain limited and communication, which he defines as "high-quality", takes place mostly between students from the same nationality. Sigalas presents five reasons for this: 1) a high concentration of co-nationals in some institutions; 2) Erasmus does not strengthen, on the contrary, Erasmus students European identity; 3) The impact of socialising with other European students has only a moderate effect in fostering a European identity; 4) most students faced adaptation problems and just stuck to the programme and this did not help to foster a European identity, 5) Erasmus is more effective among younger rather than older students, and the length of time of the programme for older students should be questioned if it's long enough to develop a European identity or if longer time is needed. *"However, without guarantees that there is sufficient contact between Europeans when they are abroad, and without clarifying under what conditions direct contact has an adverse effect, we cannot be confident that cross-border mobility will help a European identity to develop"* (Sigalas, 2010: 262).

Most institutions have subjects and/or are courses in English that can be taken by Erasmus incoming students as well as home students whereas others have designed specific "International Module"- a set of courses and/or subjects accordingly with protocols with other institutions and the learning agreements- for Erasmus incoming students. Meaning that the degree of interaction between Erasmus and home country students in class can vary a lot within and between institutions. Notwithstanding the interaction between home country and Erasmus students, team work is highly widespread in all courses, which means that Erasmus students must work in multicultural groups. Strauss and Alice (2007) point out that group projects in tertiary institutions have to be clearly planned and monitored by the teachers and the cultural clash should be taken into consideration, but in itself does not explain students' overall performance. The authors point out the fluency in English as a facilitator in group participation, However, although one cannot ignore the difficulties students with *"English as an additional language"* (Strauss and Alice, 2007) have in expressing their opinions, and the apparent dominance of English-speaking students, some studies show that the lack of fluency does not affect their success. Dooley and Oliver (2002) studied the International English Language Testing System (IELTS) with foreign undergraduate students studying in Australia as a predictor of performance and success in the Schools of Business, Science and Engineering in undergraduates and



found out that language proficiency is only one of the variables that influence academic success. Although their results are inconclusive the authors suggest that success might depend on other factors such as the demand of linguistic skills each scientific field or course demands.

Erasmus students view the experience as very positive, i.e., as meeting their expectations of enhancing their European experiences, enabling them to travel and have leisure opportunities (Fombona, Rodríguez and Sevillano, 2013). As to the host country, students also learn about its language and culture, as pointed out by Fombona, Rodríguez and Sevillano (2013), in a study carried out with 377 Erasmus students from the University of Oviedo, in which they observed that students perceived they mastered the host country's language and culture.

### 3. Material and Methods

The aim of this study was to analyse Erasmus incoming students' expectations and perception of competences developed in the course about organisational behaviour during their stay at a Business and Administration School of a University of applied Sciences in Portugal.

Methodologically a qualitative exploratory study was carried out in class in two periods. At the beginning of the semester students were asked to answer an open-question questionnaire with the following: 1) Why did you choose this Institution/School?; 2) What are you expecting to accomplish from Erasmus as a whole and professionally? 3) What are you expecting from this course? At the end of the semester students wrote a final test in which we included three open questions: 1) What did you learn from the Erasmus experience? 2) What competences did you develop that will help you in your professional life? 3) What did you learn in course that will help you as a future graduate?

The questionnaires were given to the students present in class. The first questionnaire was answered by 30 students present in the first opening class of the course and the second questionnaire was answered by the 35 that wrote the final test. Thus, the 35 students represent the students that were formally enrolled in the subject at the end of the semester. Note, that students have one month after starting classes to change some of their courses in the Learning Agreement. Which means the number of students can vary during the beginning and the end of the semester. The course students were enrolled in a course in the field of Organisational Behaviour, taught solely in English, and in which they have to work in multicultural groups.

Content analysis by means of predefined categories with frequency analysis was carried out for the first questionnaire. The same method had been used by the author and her co-author in two previous studies carried out with Erasmus incoming students during the school year of 2013-2014 (Marques and Almeida, 2014a; Marques and Almeida, 2014b). The categories were based on the theoretical framework referring to the reasons (expectations and motivations) students participate in Erasmus (Cairns, 2017; Marques and Almeida, 2014a; Vaicekauskas; Duoba and Kumpikaitė-Valiuniene,

2013; Papatsiba, 2005;) and the development of the competences on the eight EU key-competence framework as done in previous research by Marques and Almeida (2014b; Official Journal of European Union, Brussels, Belgium, pp. L 394/10 – L 394/18, 30.12.2006).

## **4. Results and Discussion**

### **4.1. Sociodemographic Profiles of Respondents**

The first questionnaire was replied by 30 students: 24 female students (80%) and 6 male students (20%). Their average age was 21,5 years and the mode was 20 years. Despite the difference in percentage between female and male students, female students had a lower age average (20,8 years) compared to male students (24 years). The predominance of female students in this course is slightly more accentuated in the second questionnaire which included the 35 students enrolled in this course and/or that wrote the final test. Despite the similarities in the distribution by sex, at the end of the semester there were more 5 female students, i.e., 29 female students (83%%) and the same number of male students (17% male), i.e., 6 male students. Data about the age was not collected during the second questionnaire.

Students that replied to the first questionnaire came from Western (53%) and Eastern Europe (47%). Western Europe students (16 students) came from: Belgium (7), France (4) The Netherlands (3) and Germany (2). One of the students from Germany was a Brazilian studying in Germany. Eastern European students (14 students) came from: Poland (6); Slovakia (5); Ukraine (3), The Ukrainian students are studying in Polish Higher Education Institutions, thus being formally Polish Erasmus students. As to the 36 students that wrote the test or second questionnaire, the percentage of students from Western Europe was 49% and 1 student was from Turkey.

Almost all the students were enrolled in courses in the field of Management, Business and Administration, Marketing and Human Resource Management. A couple was enrolled in Logistic courses. Most of the incoming students that replied to the first questionnaire were in the 3rd year of the bachelor course (13), followed by students in the second year (7 students). Only 1 student mentioned she was in her 1st year. All 4 incoming students from The Netherlands were in their 4th year of a bachelor's degree. and the 4 incoming students from Eastern Europe (1 from Poland and 3 from Slovakia) were doing a master's degree (being in their 4th and 5th year).

Erasmus incoming students that replied to the first questionnaire seem to come from more advantaged backgrounds and/or well-educated families, such as mentioned by Pietro and Page (2008). When asked about their parents' (mother and father) occupation and level of education, most students did not reply to the latter. One student did not reply at all and 3 students mentioned only one parent. According to the replies, most of the students come from double-income households, with both working parents, although one mentioned his parents were retired. Comparing both parents there appears to be only slight differences between mother and father's level of education and professional "status": 6 students replied that both parents have the same profession

(diplomat; architect; engineer; artist; entrepreneur). Most students' fathers have higher education degrees and are highly qualified professionals: 13 qualified professionals (engineers, doctors, architects; accountants; company directors/managers; and independent workers); 6 entrepreneurs (4 with higher level of education); 2 CEO, diplomats/politicians; 7 clerical, services and industrial workers. As to students' mothers: 13 are qualified professionals (teacher; engineer; artist; speech therapist; radiologist; nurse; company directors/managers; chief accountant) 3 are entrepreneurs; 1 diplomat; 9 are clerical, services and industrial workers. This data was not collected in the second questionnaire or test written by the whole class (36 students).

#### **4.2. Motivations and expectations**

When asked about why they chose the institution/school, as shown in previous studies (Marques and Almeida, 2014a; Marques and Almeida, 2014b), the answers reinforce studies that show the attractiveness of doing Erasmus in a Southern European country and or for vacational reasons (Cairns, 2017; Pietro and Page, 2008). The most frequent answers (16) referred to the weather and the attractiveness of the city "Mostly because of the weather, I wanted to go somewhere warm" "Because of the location: the ocean, many beaches and good weather. Nice place to study (...)", "The school looked nice and the city looked beautiful"; "Because of the location (weather, nature)" "Nice place to study and live."; "It's the only university in Setubal". The second most frequent answers were related to Erasmus+ as a program of short-term horizontal mobility, i.e., of mobility between institutions with similar curricula. Students mentioned the existence of a learning agreement and the recommendation of their home institution: (7) "Because I would be able to learn Portuguese and there was a learning agreement."; "The learning agreement"; "Few options. Recommendation from my university." and "Interesting school and program".

They also mentioned that: "My university chose for me", and "It's not my first choice. But my university does not accept and proposed this institution." Students also mentioned recommendations from friends (2) "Friends recommended it a because they liked it a lot. Had the suitable courses for me." and "Good reputation according to friends". As well the wanting to know another culture (2): "Language, culture, good weather, cheap food."; "I'm curious about the Portuguese culture." "Because it's something new for me (new country), fish and fruits, amazing nature." "I'm doing Erasmus to get to know people, culture and language."; "I expect to meet new people with different experiences and also to share my experience with other people." Some also (14) mentioned they expected to learn Portuguese and about the Portuguese culture: "Get to know the Portuguese culture, explore the country, meet new people and improve English"; "To be able to speak a little Portuguese; learn many things about management and improve my English."; "Broaden my experiences, improve my Portuguese and other languages."; "I would like to know the Portuguese language and culture". Self-development and employability came in third place after culture awareness and language proficiency. Students (15) replied they expected to. "Personal development meet new people, contacts"; "I want to gain good new knowledge and

find international friends for future life.”; “Cross-cultural communication; personal development (take care of yourself), learning new ways of looking at the world, achieving in wider than what you know; networking”; “Working in a global environment and travel to different countries. To bring those experiences to my home country.”. Sense of initiative and or autonomy is the fourth set expectations (frequency) in what concerns expectations (10): “Try myself in a new place. Beyond my comfort.”; “Living and enjoying life on my own in a different country; learning how people work and live in Portugal compared to the Netherlands.”; “Become independent and open-minded. Manage school and party.” Speak better English; travel in Portugal, become independent.”.

When asked what they expected to learn from the course in Organisational Behaviour, students replied that they expected to learn how to manage and motivate people and groups, emphasizing multinational/multicultural groups: “How to interact with foreign people.”; “How to cooperate with people at work and in a future workplace and right now in daily life....creating a good working atmosphere and be proactive.”; “Learn how a right manager leads people; and what is necessary in an organisation for a successful motion.”; “Learn how a right manager leads people; and what is necessary in an organisation for a successful motion.”; “How to do a presentation. Deal with people from different cultures. Understand the social part of the organisations.; “How to work with people that are in different age group and motivate them.”; “Managing people at work in a good and smart way”.

### **4.3. Erasmus experiences: perception of competences developed**

Students’ perceptions about their experience and competence development during Erasmus appeared to be similar to what they initially expected. However, as observed in previous studies, sense of imitative and autonomy is perceived as more development as initially predicted. Although culture awareness (19) -“working with people from other cultures” “learning about other cultures”- is still the competence students perceive they have development most, sense of initiative appeared as the second most frequent competence they perceived they developed (12) -“independence”; “autonomy”; “assertiveness”, ahead of language proficiency (9), understood as the improvement of English. Students also perceived they developed soft skills, such as “team work”, and “managing people”.

As an hypothesis for the perception of the development of the sense of initiative and autonomy we have, taking into consideration information gathered during class discussions and some answers to the questionnaire (“Experience life outside my “Dutchbubble”/ “I want to be more on my own and do things by myself.”) that for most students this is the first time away from their parents’ home and the opportunity or challenge to fend for themselves and or to deal with the practicalities of daily life. Thus, corroborating some studies carried out by Vaicekauskas, Duoba and Kumpikaitė-Valiuniene (2013).

Apart from culture awareness, the opportunity to work in multicultural groups and their perception that they developed competences in doing so was highlighted. The development of this competence and or this social skill may in part be enhanced by the fact that in this course they have to work in multicultural groups in every class, and at the end of the semester they have an oral presentation in group. Also, students have a stronger perception of the development of sense of initiative and autonomy than they expected.

## **5. Recommendations**

This exploratory study has several limitations we would like to solve in future research. First, it would be interesting and relevant to have a more holistic approach of students Erasmus experience. This requires more research that focuses more thoroughly on their work-study and private life balance and or activities during their stay abroad and what competences they perceive they learn from their experiences. Second, it would be interesting to know what students perceive they learn in their field of study or professional field. Third, the effects of Erasmus in finding and international assignment or job after graduation are another issue that would be relevant to explore.

## **6. Conclusion**

Erasmus is the most widespread student short-term horizontal mobility programme in the EU and it has become mandatory in some of the business degrees, particularly in International Management and Marketing. The programme is set out to foster students competence development not only to enhance their employability but to enable them to have an eye-opening experience to life, become more culture aware and be able to have a vacation experience (Cairns, 2017; Marques and Almeida, 2014a; Vaicekauskas; Duoba and Kumpikaitė-Valiuniene, 2013; Pietro and Page, 2008).

The main aim of the current study was to analyse Erasmus incoming students' expectations and competences developed during their stay in Portugal. The students were enrolled in a course in the field of Organisational Behavior at a Business School of Applied Sciences and this study was a follow-up of the work previously carried out by the author and a co-author in the same school in two similar courses (Marques and Almeida, 2014a; Marques and Almeida, 2014b). Methodologically it consisted of a qualitative study carried out in two stages: a first questionnaire was applied to the 30 students present in the opening class and a second questionnaire was applied to the 35 that wrote the final test of the course. At the beginning of the semester students were asked about their motivations and expectations for Erasmus and the course, at the end of the semester students were asked the competences they perceived they developed and their experience.

The main findings of this study corroborate the previous studies. Students main reasons for choosing Portugal and the institution appear very much related with the reasons students usually choose Southern European countries, i.e, primary for vacation

reasons. These being: the opportunity to do extracurricular activities, travel and the lower cost of living. Thus, corroborating our two previous studies (Marques and Almeida, 2014a; Marques and Almeida, 2014b) and what was more recently found by Cairns (2017) as well as by (Pietro and Page (2008). Students' expectations about competences development also corroborate other studies. Culture awareness appears to be first followed by the improvement of English proficiency (the courses are solely taught in English). Sense of initiative and autonomy are competences that students were not expecting so saliently to develop but perceived they had developed more when asked at the end of their stay. Although culture awareness and the ability to work in multicultural groups prevails as the competences they expected to develop and perceive they developed, sense of imitative and autonomy came as a competence they perceived more than they expected. Thus, corroborating our two previous studies (Marques and Almeida, 2014a; Marques and Almeida, 2014b). The perception of competences to work in international assignments is also mentioned but it is not very salient. What is salient is the ability to work with multicultural and or international teams.

### **About the Author**

Maria Amélia Marques holds a PhD in Economic and Organisational Sociology and a Master in Socio-Organisational Systems of the Economic Activity – Sociology of the Enterprise, both from the Lisbon School of Business and Economics - University of Lisbon, and a degree in Psychology from the Faculty of Psychology and Sciences of Education - University of Coimbra. She is a teacher at the IPS since 1996, and an Adjunct Professor of the Department of Organizational Behaviour and Human Resource Management in the School of Business and Administration of the Polytechnic Institute of Setubal. Her main fields of research are Human Resources practices, Organisational Change, Organisational Culture and Learning. She has different publications and oral communications about Organizational and HRM Models, Work-Life study Balance, New Technologies and HRM AND Erasmus students' expectations and motivations. She is currently a member of the Portuguese team of the ISO 260 Human Resource Management, coordinated by APG (Portuguese Association of HR Professionals), and a member of the Unit of Development, Recognition and Validation of Competences in Higher Education of the IPS. She also took part in an EU Project of Lifelong Learning, named the LLL-Hub, in which 8 European countries participated. She is currently starting a post-doc about Work-life-study balance at the University of Lisbon, and participating in a project HR-PT Survey about HRM practices in Portuguese organisations, public and private. She has just completed a course about Practice-based Research by the JAMK University of Applied Sciences. Finland, having coordinated and presented a group project about "Graduate Branding - The Multiple Step Training Graduate Branding Model". Currently the President of the Council of Representatives of the School (since 2014), she was vice-dean of the School from 2010 to 2011 and Head of the Department of Organisational Behaviour and Human Resource Management from 2010 to 2014.

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