

# EILC – an open door for the success of ERASMUS mobility programs

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## ABSTRACT

How can ERASMUS Intensive Language Courses contribute to the success of ERASMUS mobility periods? We will try to answer this question by reflecting on the importance of the harmonious development of a discursive competence (Capucho, 2010a) that enables the transfer of existing linguistic knowledge and the use of socio and cultural awareness and comparing the theoretical conclusions to the results of an empirical study. The empirical study is based in the quantitative and qualitative analysis of 3 questionnaires that were answered by the ERASMUS students who followed an EILC in Portuguese at the Portuguese Catholic University, in September 2010. Questionnaire nº 1 was answered at the beginning of the course, Questionnaire 2 at the end of the course (2 weeks later) and questionnaire 3 after the end of the mobility period (February 2011). By providing the students with a minimum knowledge of the host country's language and developing a strong (inter)cultural awareness, the EILCs constitute an open door to the success of the mobility period. The testimonies of students allow us to conclude that their inclusion in the Portuguese academic world and society was enormously facilitated by the knowledge and competences acquired during those courses.

Key words: ERASMUS mobility, intercultural awareness, intercultural communication, personal development

## INTRODUCTION

The ERASMUS Programme, which was inaugurated by the European Commission (EC) in 1987, is nowadays the most well-known of all the actions under the LLP (Life Long Learning Program). By allocating funds for financial support for temporary student mobility within Europe, and allowing full recognition of studies abroad, through the ECTS system, ERASMUS has changed the academic life of more than 2 million students until now. From 1999 on, ERASMUS Intensive Language Courses (EILC) were implemented, giving the opportunity for ERASMUS students, to follow short intensive language courses in the host countries, at the beginning of their stay. These courses aim at giving the students the opportunity to experience a close contact with the foreign language and culture, thus developing basic competences that may allow them to integrate better in the host country, from a personal, social and academic point of view.

The aim of our paper is to report a short study on the relationship between the participation in an EILC and the success of the ERASMUS mobility period, by investigating on the students perceptions about their experiences. We will define the objectives of the study, describe the methodology of research, present the main findings and draw some possible conclusions. Finally we will reflect on the limitations of our study and propose further developments for future studies on the same topic.

### 1.1. Problem status

ERASMUS has been considered as “the flagship of the educational programmes administered by the European Union” (Bracht et al., 2006: 7). Having been initiated in 1987, it has acquired a growing popularity amongst in High Education institutions and members: from 3,244 students in 1987/1988, the number of mobile students has increased to 198,523 in 2008/2009, attaining a total of 2,065,148 students during these 21 years. The EC is aiming at raising this number to 3 million until 2013.<sup>1</sup> Nowadays, the vast majority of European universities take part in ERASMUS. Therefore, it is a fact that “[a]lthough international student mobility is not a mass phenomenon, it is no longer just an exotic option” (Teichler, 2004: 395)

The objectives of ERASMUS mobility periods are explicitly mentioned by the EC<sup>2</sup>:

- To enable students to benefit educationally, linguistically and culturally from the experience of learning in other European countries;
- To promote co-operation between institutions and to enrich the educational environment of host institutions;
- To contribute to the development of a pool of well-qualified, open-minded and internationally experienced young people as future professionals.

Results from ERASMUS mobility periods are thus expected to allow change and progress at the institutional level, at the personal level and at the professional level.

The ERASMUS programme is undoubtedly a success, but this does not mean that problems have been identified throughout the years, driving the EC and the institutions to search for possible effective solutions. One of the main general problematic issues is the great difference of mobility flows between the EU countries, both in the home countries and in the host countries. As far as outgoing ERASMUS students are concerned<sup>3</sup> 64,38% of the mobile students in the period comprised between 1987 and 2009 come from 5 countries (Germany, France, Spain, Italy and United Kingdom). This might be explained by the fact that some countries could only join the ERASMUS programme after 1999 and that in fact the total number of university students vary immensely from country to country. However, the outgoing numbers of 2008 – 2009 confirm the same tendency, with the exception of Poland. Yet, if we look at the outgoing and incoming ERASMUS student mobility in 2008/2009 numbers<sup>4</sup>, we may also conclude that 59,47% of the mobile students choose exactly the same 5 countries for their studies abroad. It thus seems that the majority of ERASMUS exchanges are merely confined to these 5 countries and Poland, which is now the 5<sup>th</sup> country in the number of outgoing students (13,402) only received 4.923 in the same year. The opposite phenomenon happens in the United Kingdom, the home country of 10,826 ERASMUS students, which hosted almost the double number (20,850) in its universities.

Therefore there is an evident lack of equity between home and host countries. Causes for this fact may be found in a diversity of factors, like the prestige of national universities or the prestige of the country itself, and we know that southern countries like Spain or Italy are extremely popular amongst youngsters. But we cannot ignore that one of the main obstacles of generalized flow of ERASMUS students all over the EU is language – it is not a coincidence if the languages of the 5 countries that are mostly chosen by students are the 5 mostly spoken languages in Europe. In fact, how may students integrate in the foreign academic life if they do not know the language in which courses are held?

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<sup>1</sup> Data available in <http://ec.europa.eu/education/ERASMUS/doc/stat/table1.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> [http://ec.europa.eu/education/ERASMUS/doc892\\_en.htm](http://ec.europa.eu/education/ERASMUS/doc892_en.htm)

<sup>3</sup> See the chart of Outgoing ERASMUS students from 1987/1988 to 2008/2009 in Appendix 1

<sup>4</sup> Appendix 2

In order to increase their number of foreign students, many universities in the UE are now using English as a teaching language in at least a part of their syllabus. This may be a strategic solution for countries of LWUTL (Less Widely Used and Taught Languages), but is it coherent with the EU aim of respecting cultural and linguistic diversity? Isn't it contradictory to the first objective of the ERASMUS Mobility Program that was mentioned before?

The problem of the use of English as an International Language has been tackled in a large number of studies (cf. for example, Commission of the European Communities, 2007, Malouf, 2008, Frath, 2009 and 2010, Capucho, 2010b) and the issue is not consensual. However, and apart from all the social and political arguments in favor of multilingualism, academics should be aware that accepting to use English in their publications and on their daily work as teachers will definitely harm their native language, which will be no longer used in the specific prestigious register of academic communication. A register that is no longer used dies. A language that loses a prestigious register is impoverished and may die.

In order to find a solution for this specific problem, in 1999, the EC implemented a new ERASMUS action – the EILC. The EILCs take place in the following countries and for the following languages: Belgium (Dutch), Bulgaria (Bulgarian), Cyprus (Greek), Croatia (Croatian), Czech Republic (Czech), Denmark (Danish), Estonia (Estonian), Finland (Finnish and Swedish), Greece (Greek), Hungary (Hungarian), Iceland (Icelandic), Italy (Italian), Latvia (Latvian), Lithuania (Lithuanian), Malta (Maltese), the Netherlands (Dutch), Norway (Norwegian), Poland (Polish), Portugal (Portuguese), Romania (Romanian), Slovakia (Slovak), Slovenia (Slovenian), Spain (Catalan, Valencian, Basque and Galician), Sweden (Swedish), Switzerland (Italian) and Turkey (Turkish). They give ERASMUS students visiting these countries for studies and placements the opportunity to study the language concerned for two to six weeks (with a minimum of 60 teaching hours in total, and at least 15 teaching hours a week) with the aim of being prepared for the ERASMUS mobility period abroad. They are directly funded by the EC, through specific grants for which the organizing institutions of the courses may apply every year.

Having received some information about the possibilities of running EILC in Portuguese, we decided to organize a course in our University during the first two weeks of September 2010 and were granted for three groups of students: 2 classes of beginners and 1 of intermediate students, on a total of 51 students. Since we received around 250 applications, we had to select the participants, applying several criteria:

- ERASMUS incoming students of our University
- Diversity of nationalities
- Academic background (i.e. preferably students from Arts, Medicine, Architecture and Management, which are the courses that are usually run at our campus)

The objectives of the courses were the following:

- To develop general competences in Portuguese, in oral and written reception, written and oral production and oral interaction;
- To develop Intercomprehension competences at A2 level (beginners course) and B2 (intermediate);
- To develop specific competences in Portuguese for professional/vocational purposes at the intermediate level;

- To promote socio-cultural awareness and cultural specific knowledge of everyday culture aiming at personal and professional adaptation in Portuguese contexts;
- To build specific knowledge about different aspects of the Portuguese culture, in order to promote mutual understanding and intercultural exchanges.

Learning outcomes were established:

- For the beginners course: A1 level in oral and written production and oral interaction; A2 level in oral and written reception; intercultural awareness in Portuguese contexts.
- For the intermediate course: B1 level in oral production and oral interaction; B2 level in written production and oral and written reception for specific purposes; intercultural awareness in Portuguese contexts.

Course components<sup>5</sup> were carefully drawn:

Mandatory classes – 60 hours (including 44 hours of language practical classes).

Optional Clubs – 14 hours

Conversation – 10 hours (during the meals where Portuguese young tutors were present at every table)

One full day excursion (optional)

One half day activity (optional)

The study we present here concerns the importance of our EILCs. We tried to find an answer to a specific research question - Was the participation in our EILC courses important for the success of ERASMUS mobility? – by analyzing students' representations on the topic. It is, in fact, only a part of a larger research pursuing the same aim, that also includes the analysis of motivations for mobility, the expectations about the mobility and how they were seen at the end of the experience, the main problems that occurred and the solutions that were found for them and the changes in representations on the country and on the language.

## 1.2 Methodology of the study

This empirical study is based in the quantitative and qualitative analysis of 3 questionnaires that were answered by the ERASMUS students who followed our EILC. Questionnaire n° 1 was answered at the beginning of the course, Questionnaire 2 at the end of the course (2 weeks later) and questionnaire 3 after the end of the mobility period (February 2011). Questionnaire 1 was answered by 39 students, questionnaire 2 by 42 students and questionnaire 3 was sent by email and answered by 27 students.

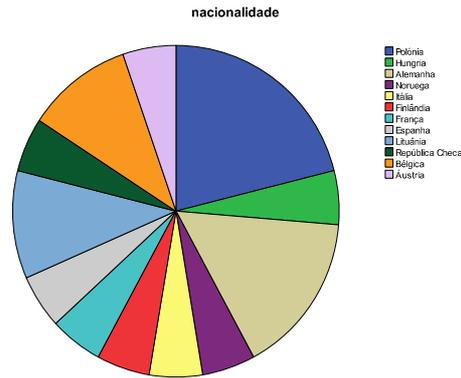
For the quantitative analysis of this specific study, we only considered the 19 students who answered all the 3 questionnaires. We will only present and comment the data corresponding to questions 4 of both questionnaire 2 and 3<sup>6</sup>; the qualitative analysis takes into account the 27 answers to question 5 (of questionnaire 3) that were gathered.

Age and nationality were the only two variables that were considered. The sample is characterized as shown in the graphics below:

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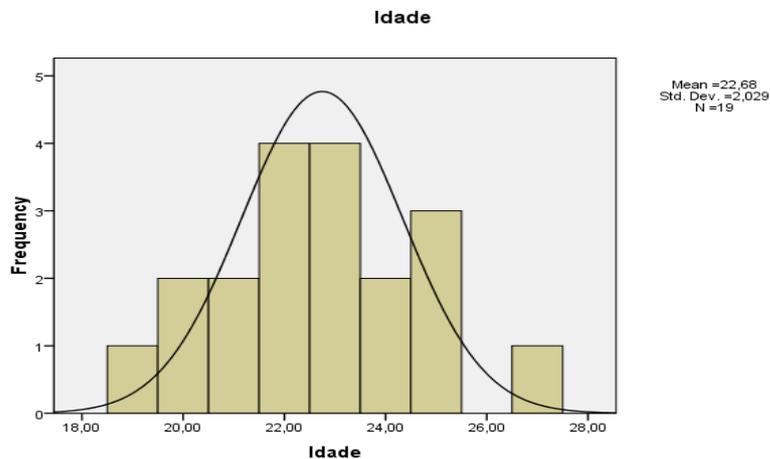
<sup>5</sup> For the specific schedule arrangements of these topics in the beginners course, see Appendix 3

<sup>6</sup> The questions can be found in Appendix 4. For reasons of length we only reproduce Question 4 of questionnaire 2 and Questions 4 and 5 of questionnaire 3.



Graphic 1 – Nationality

The graphic shows the plurality of nationalities – 12 different countries are represented in the sample, with a majority of Polish and German students.



Graphic 2 – Age

Ages range from 19 to 27, with a majority close to the mean 22,68.

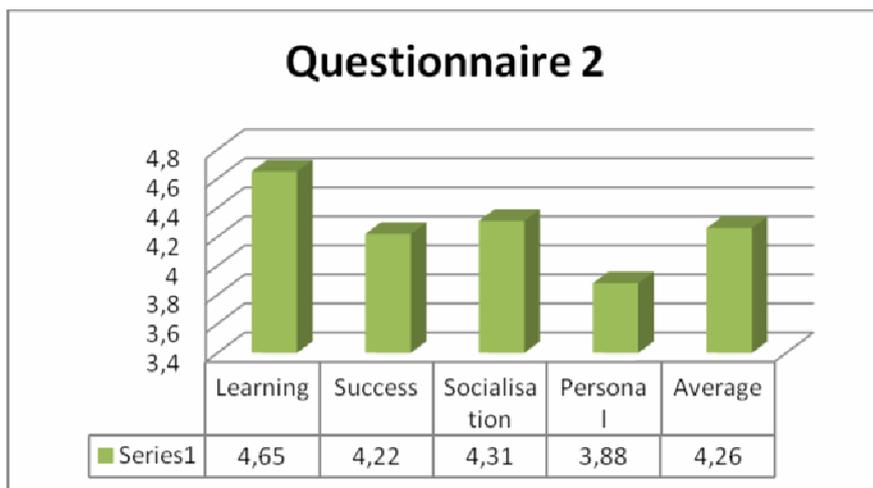
### 1.3 Presentation of results

As we may see in the questionnaire, for each item we have considered 5 categories, ranging from “I totally disagree” to “I totally agree” and quantified them from 1 to 5 (except on negative items, i.e. Useless, where the quantification was the opposite”.

For questionnaire 2, we have grouped the 11 items in 4 categories:

- Learning the culture and the language
- Contribution to the success of ERASMUS mobility
- Socialization
- Personal feelings

The results of this analysis were the following:



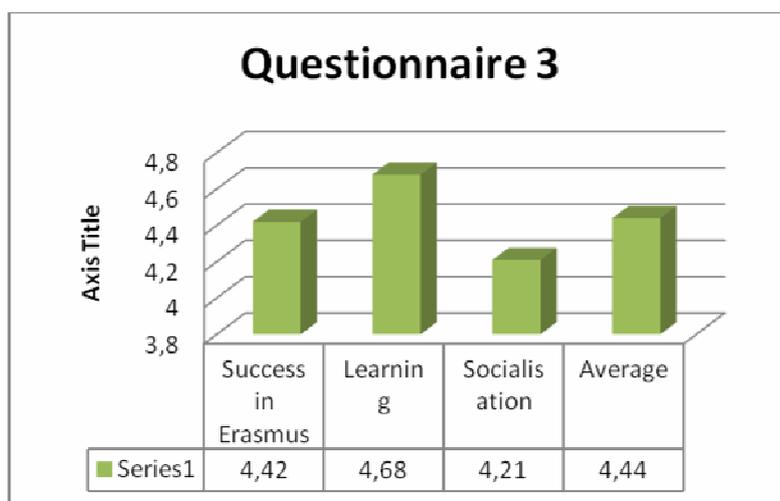
Graphic 3 – Questionnaire 2

The degree of importance attributed to the EILC is therefore quite high, showing students' satisfaction. The results for each category do not differ a lot: there is less than 1 point between the highest grade (EILC importance for learning the language and the culture) and the lowest grade (personal feelings about the experience). This lowest grade corresponds to the fact that students did not specifically face the course as a challenge (the question is graded 3,37). Individual opinions do not differ significantly and therefore the results show no differences can be related to both variables (nationality and age).

In questionnaire 3, we have only considered three categories:

- Learning the culture and the language
- Contribution to the success of ERASMUS mobility
- Socialization

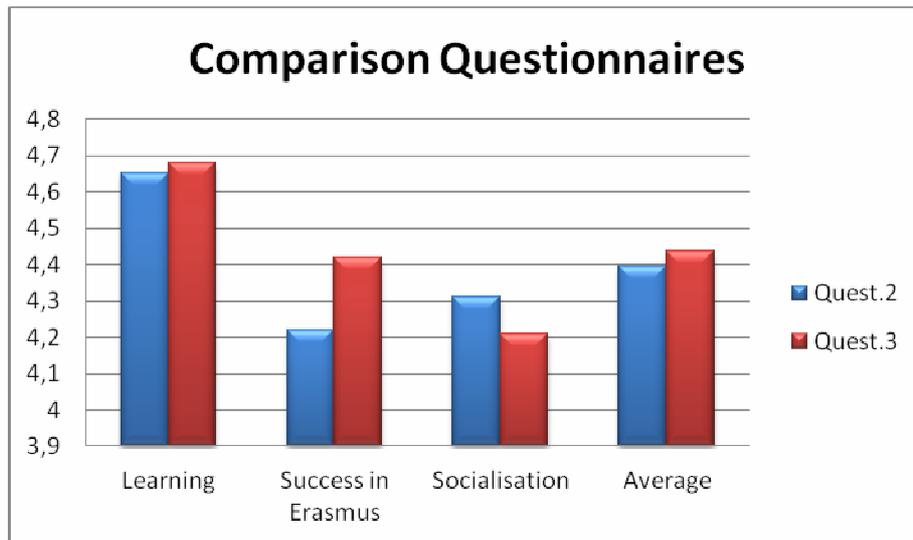
Graphic 4 shows the results obtained:



Graphic 4

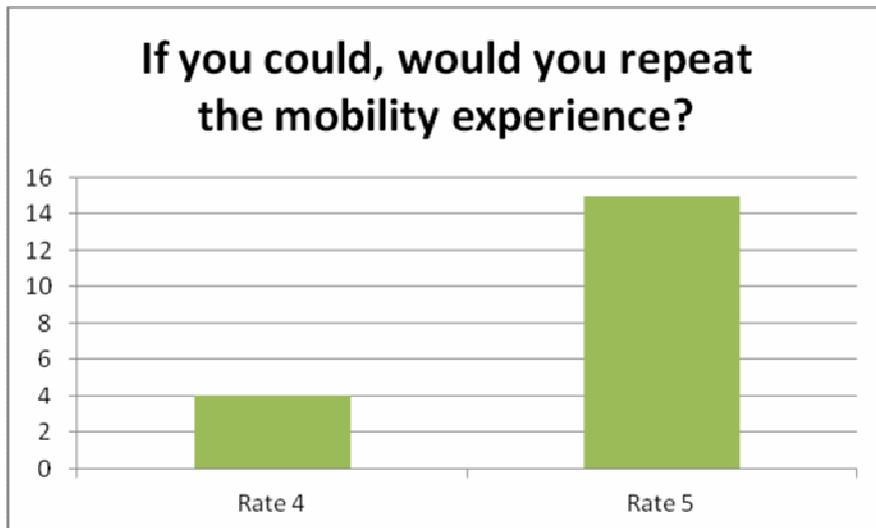
At the end of their ERASMUS mobility students judge the EILC experience slightly higher than 4 months before. Two categories seem to have gained importance in their minds:

learning and the whole contribution for success. Socialization seems to be judged slightly less important, as shown in the comparative graphic below:



Graphic 5

The full success of students' mobility seems to be clearly attained. When asked about their opinion on this matter, a great majority of students totally agree that, if they could, they would live again the same experience:



Graphic 5

The quality analysis of open answers to items 5.1 and 5.2 confirms this opinion. Students seem extremely enthusiastic about their ERASMUS period. Content analysis of the answers allows us to distinguish three main factors:

1. Personal Development, which is the most recurrent topic in students' testimonies:

*[...]personal development and the most important is knowledge about yourself (especially if the person is alone on ERASMUS program) (Jana)*

*to increase myself* (Nicandro)

*manage to enjoy life in a new setting* (Mai)

*definitely widens one's horizons and gives new perspectives. ERASMUS Program helped me to look from a different point of view on my life and on my perspectives in the future.*(Zuzanna)

*Because it was the best time ever in my live* (Robert)

*I grow up, I've got more confidence by myself* (Elodie)

*Because it was great time for me and big opportunity to become confidence and to grow up.*  
(Dawid)

*and basicly about life, not only studies.* (Ana)

*It was my best time ever* (Annamaria)

## 2. Learning language(s) and live a multicultural experience. Some examples:

*Because of other culture, language!!!* (Mikolaj)

*[...] everyday I'm learning something new, that sometimes it's just a word, sometimes it's about a situation in another country and so on...* (Adriano)

*Because the normal life in the home country can not give you too much experiences about new country, culture, language* (Jan)

*[...] to have a new experience, to know another culture ;) I would repeat it because I found very interesting to get to know more from other nationalities and to study in a multicultural environment* (Tomas)

*Learn a lot about life in general, different cultures* (Mai)

*[...]to learn more about other countries and to get more proficient in other languages.*(Matthias)

*[...] open me to the different culture[...] my portuguese language is now very very good*  
(Elodie)

*[...] and it's a really special experience to be a part of the Southern way of life.* (Nathalie)

## 3. Socialisation is the third topic that is mentioned. Meeting youngsters from other countries seem to be one of the great issues of the ERASMUS experience:

*It's a really good way for meet new people* (Ana)

*[...]to get to know a lot of other students from different parts of the world ( not only Europe) [...]Getting to know so many people with different experiences showed me that nothing is impossible* (Zuzanna)

*I'm finding everyday new friend* (Adriano)

*[...] meet other people came from every countries* (Nicandro)

*The best time that i passed with people in portugal, that make me enjoy any other thinks here.* (Chira)

*I could meet some other foreign student* (Elodie)

Only one student mentions the effects of ERASMUS in his future professional life:  
*[...] and with many known languages it's more possibilities to find a job* (Mikolaj)

#### 1.4 Discussion of results

Generally speaking, our findings confirm the results of other studies that can be found in literature on this topic: “Most ERASMUS students [...] considered the study period abroad as worthwhile” (Teichler, 2004: 405). As in other studies (Papatsiba, 2005:183) “the ERASMUS stay, while potentially a powerful tool for a broader and multi-faceted experience, was primarily formulated like a personal experience”. In fact, our students express “a representation of mobility like an intense personal experience” (ibidem) and therefore, our findings reinforce “the vision of this stay as a means of global education and an opportunity for personal development”. Testimonies also confirm what is reported by Teichler (2004:406): “[...] they rated the cultural experiences, the improvement of language proficiency and the contribution to personality development more favourably than the academic value of the temporary period abroad. [...] Many ERASMUS students refer to eye-opening and horizon-broadening effect”

This general human potential that is acquired during the ERASMUS period is recognized by experts, as it is reported by Bracht et al (2006: 17):

Mobile students are considered superior to non-bile students almost consistently with regard to foreign language proficiency, intercultural understanding and knowledge of other countries, i.e. areas directly linked to international experience. It is worth while noting that most experts also consider the general academic and professional competences of mobile students as better than those of their non-mobile fellow students.

As regarding satisfaction, results show that 100% of our small sample express it, a slightly better result than the one which is reported by Teichler (2004:405) for 1998 – 99: “93% of [...] ERASMUS students stated they were satisfied with the ERASMUS –supported period abroad”. Is it an effect of the participation in the EILC? Our study is too restricted to allow any definite conclusions, but two of the students refer it explicitly:

*obrigada por ter organizado o nosso curso EILC que foi para mim uma das melhores experiências durante o meu ERASMUS<sup>7</sup>. (Zuzanna)*

*For sur, I would repeat the mobility, mostly in beginning with EILC courses.(Elodie)*

#### 1.5 Conclusions

As we have mentioned before this study is only a part of a larger exploratory research that is still under completion and we are aware of its limitations. It concerns only a specific population – one example of EILC, the sample is very reduced and we couldn't consider any control group to validate the results.

However, it may become the starting point of further research we want to continue, by collecting data on future participants in our EILCs and establishing comparative over the next years. Control groups will be essential to validate our findings. Nevertheless, as a first step for

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<sup>7</sup> Zuzanna wrote it in Portuguese, since she was directly addressing us. We translate: “Thank you for having organized our EILC, which was for me one of the best experiences during my ERASMUS”

broader studies, it was an opportunity to validate the questionnaires (Cronbach's alpha of validity is very good, varying between 0.80 and 0.87 in the three questionnaires) and design hypothesis to be confirmed.

Our first experience in organizing EILCs in Portugal was extremely rewarding. We believe now that we were active participants in an innovative movement that is opening new perspectives for European youngsters:

Many studies show that a period spent abroad not only enriches students' lives in the academic and professional fields, but can also improve language learning, intercultural skills, self-reliance and self-awareness. Their experiences give students a better sense of what it means to be a European citizen. In addition, many employers highly value such a period abroad, which increases the students' employability and job prospects.

[http://ec.europa.eu/education/lifelong-learning-programme/doc80\\_en.htm](http://ec.europa.eu/education/lifelong-learning-programme/doc80_en.htm)

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Appendix 1

(cf. Pdf file)

Appendix 2  
(cf. PDF file)

### Appendix 3

Beginners Course							
1st week	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday	Sunday
9.00 - 11.00	Icebreaker activities	PT Language		PT language		Full day Excursion	Walking activity – woods and vineyards
11.00 - 13.00	PT language	Intercp PT	PT language	Daily culture	PT language		
13.00 - 14.00	Lunch	Lunch	Lunch	Lunch	Lunch		
14.00 - 15.00	Intercp PT	PT language	PT language	PT arts	PT language		
15.00 - 16.00	PT arts	PT arts	PT arts	PT language	PT arts		
16.00 - 18.00			Intercomp PT		Intercp PT		
18.00 - 20.00	A tour around the town	Media Club	Theater Club	Gastronomy Club	Theater Club		
20.00	Welcoming reception			Dinner			

Beginners Course						
2nd week	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday
9.00 - 11.00		Intercp PT		PT language	Intercp PT	Assessment
11.00 - 13.00	Daily culture	PT language	Intercp PT	Intercp PT	PT language	Assessment
13.00 - 14.00	Lunch	Lunch	Lunch	Lunch	Lunch	Lunch
14.00 - 15.00	PT arts	PT language	PT arts	PT language	PT arts	Assessment
15.00 - 16.00	PT language	PT arts	PT language	PT arts	PT language	Assessment
16.00 - 18.00	PT language		PT language			
18.00 - 20.00	Theater Club	Media Club	Gastronomy Club	Theater Club	Media Club	
20.00			Dinner			Closing dinner
21.30						International show



## Questionnaire nº 2

This questionnaire aims at collecting data to be used on academic research about Erasmus Mobility in Portugal. Please answer all the questions and feel completely free to express your opinions.

Thank you!

### 1. PROFILE

Name –

Home country –

[...]

### 4. The EILC

Do you think that the EILC was

	I totally disagree	I disagree	I partially agree	I agree	I totally agree
1. Useless					
2. Too demanding for you					
3. Fun and interesting					
4. A good way to get in contact with the language and the culture					
5. A good way to meet Portuguese students					
6. A good way to meet other Erasmus students					
7. Essential for your future integration in Portugal					
8. A challenge that you have overcome					

9. As you would have liked it to be					
10. Important for your personal development					
11. Important for your professional development					

### Questionnaire nº 3

**This questionnaire aims at collecting data to be used on academic research about Erasmus Mobility in Portugal. Please answer all the questions and feel completely free to express your opinions.**

**Thank you!**

#### 2. PROFILE

Name –

Home country –

[...]

#### 4. The EILC

Do you think that the EILC was

	I totally disagree	I disagree	I partially agree	I agree	I totally agree
1. Very important for the success of your Erasmus mobility					
2. A good start for the whole experience					
3. A good way to get in contact with the language and the culture					
4. A good way to meet Portuguese students					
5. A good way to meet other Erasmus students					
6. Essential for your social integration in Portugal					

5 Final balance of your experience:

5.1.

	<b>Not at all</b>	<b>No</b>	<b>Partially</b>	<b>Yes</b>	<b>Absolutely</b>
If you could, would you repeat the mobility experience					

Why?

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5.2. Would you change anything

5.2.1. In your preparation of the mobility? If yes, what?

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5.2.2. In the way you've lived the mobility period? If yes, what?

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Again... OBRIGADA!



## Questionnaire nº 2

This questionnaire aims at collecting data to be used on academic research about Erasmus Mobility in Portugal. Please answer all the questions and feel completely free to express your opinions.

Thank you!

### 3. PROFILE

Name –

Home country –

[...]

### 4. The EILC

Do you think that the EILC was

	I totally disagree	I disagree	I partially agree	I agree	I totally agree
1. Useless					
2. Too demanding for you					
3. Fun and interesting					
4. A good way to get in contact with the language and the culture					
5. A good way to meet Portuguese students					
6. A good way to meet other Erasmus students					
7. Essential for your future integration in Portugal					
8. A challenge that you have overcome					

9. As you would have liked it to be					
10. Important for your personal development					
11. Important for your professional development					

### Questionnaire nº 3

**This questionnaire aims at collecting data to be used on academic research about Erasmus Mobility in Portugal. Please answer all the questions and feel completely free to express your opinions.**

**Thank you!**

#### 12. PROFILE

Name –

Home country –

[...]

#### 4. The EILC

Do you think that the EILC was

	I totally disagree	I disagree	I partially agree	I agree	I totally agree
1. Very important for the success of your Erasmus mobility					
2. A good start for the whole experience					
3. A good way to get in contact with the language and the culture					
4. A good way to meet Portuguese students					
5. A good way to meet other Erasmus students					
6. Essential for your social integration in Portugal					

5. Final balance of your experience:

5.1.

	<b>Not at all</b>	<b>No</b>	<b>Partially</b>	<b>Yes</b>	<b>Absolutely</b>
If you could, would you repeat the mobility experience					

Why?

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5.3. Would you change anything

5.3.1. In your preparation of the mobility? If yes, what?

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5.3.2. In the way you've lived the mobility period? If yes, what?

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Again... OBRIGADA!