

## ACADEMIC TOURISM THROUGH THE PERSPECTIVE OF ERASMUS STUDENTS

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### ABSTRACT

This paper conducts a literature review on a topic that is still little explored, which is academic tourism, and explores through empirical research the perspectives of international students who have chosen the city of Porto to undertake Erasmus mobility. The main objective of the study is to better understand the motivations and factors that influence international student's decisions to choose the location where they develop their mobility programs. An

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online survey was administrated and a total of 122 valid answers were collected. The data were analysed by descriptive and inference statistics. Results show that there are four main factors that influence this segment: quality and prestige of the universities; people's characteristics and hospitality; weather and landscape and being a fashionable destination.

**Keywords:** Academic Tourism; Educational Tourism; Erasmus programme; Motivation; Destination Attractiveness.

### Turismo académico a través de la perspectiva de estudiantes Erasmus

#### RESUMEN

Este artículo realiza una revisión de la literatura sobre un tema aún poco explorado, que es el turismo académico, y explora empíricamente las perspectivas de los estudiantes internacionales que han elegido la ciudad de Oporto para emprender la movilidad Erasmus. El objetivo principal del estudio es comprender mejor las motivaciones y factores que influyen en las decisiones de los estudiantes internacionales para elegir la ubicación donde desarrollar sus programas de movilidad. Se administró una encuesta en línea y se recogieron un total de 122 respuestas válidas. Los datos se analizaron mediante estadísticas descriptivas y de inferencia. Los resultados muestran que hay cuatro factores principales que influyen en este segmento: la calidad y el prestigio de las universidades; características y hospitalidad de las personas; clima y paisaje; siendo un destino de moda.

**Palabras clave:** Turismo académico; Turismo educativo; Programa Erasmus; Motivación; Atractivo del destino.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

According to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) there has been a significant increase in student mobility across countries, rising from 0.8 million in the late 1970s to 4.6 million, forty-five years later (OECD, 2017). The same organization projects that by 2025 the number of international students will reach eight million (OECD, 2017). Nevertheless, this increase had been driven by economic (e.g., reducing in transportations costs), technological (e.g., internet and social media) and cultural (e.g., use of English a common teaching language) factors; the *European Region Action Scheme for the Mobility of University Students* (ERASMUS) programme launched in 1987 was decisive in boosting higher education students' mobility<sup>1</sup>. The Erasmus programme 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. The numerous reports from European Commission prepared by the European Expert Net-

<sup>1</sup> Since January 2014, the earlier Erasmus programme is known as Erasmus+. This is the European Commission's programme for education, training, youth, and sport for the period 2014-2020, following the previous Lifelong Learning Programme defined for the period between 2007 and 2014. The advantages of Erasmus+ on more simplified funding rules and bureaucratic processes.

work on Economics of Education<sup>2</sup> highlight the economic and social benefits associated with education in Europe. Among the economic discourse, the reports supported evidence from the economics of education literature that rest on the labour market. Earlier reporters highlight that increased mobility of students within the European Union (EU) may be crucial to develop Europe's highly skilled labour force to strengthen its position as a knowledge-based economy (EENEE, 2007). Moreover, there is some evidence proving that studying abroad helps a person to cope more successfully with increasing international dimensions at work while helping with career enhancement (Teichler, 2007). It also helps to improve international competences, enabling former students to be placed in visible international professional positions (Bracht *et al.*, 2006) and increases the probability of a person working abroad later in life (Parey and Waldinger 2010). Despite these advantages projected by the Erasmus program's organizers, a study of the European Parliament conducted in 2010 suggest that students' reasons for participation in the programme are primarily for personal development – opportunity to live abroad, meet new people, acquire “soft skills”, and improve foreign language skills. The expected benefits to the future career rank lower in terms of individual priorities, although it remains an important factor for most students (European Parliament, 2010). This economic discourse is often accompanied by a socio-cultural discourse based on a pro-European ideology. Erasmus has become iconic for Euro-enthusiasts who underlie the relevance of student mobility as a prime mechanism to foster a sense of European identity and citizenship. Pro-Europeanism use the term “Erasmus generation” (Figel, 2007; Kuneva, 2007), invoking a hope that European youth will prove more supportive of European integration than their parents or grandparents have been. It seems true that students who have taken part in Erasmus tend to be particularly pro-European (ESN, 2007) which suggest that the programme have a positive influence in their European identity and loyalty (Oborune, 2013).

Beyond these benefits of the Erasmus programme on students' professional career, academic development and European integration, this programme brings many benefits for the countries that receive foreign students. Foreign students directly contribute to the income of local communities with their living expenses (OECD, 2017) and indirectly as catalysers of the tourism sector. It is well known that Erasmus students make tourism in the host country and thus are important influencers of the image of the country becoming “ambassadors” of the host country (Amaro *et al.*, 2018). According to the recommendation of the World Tourism Organization (WTO), mobile higher education students can be considered tourist and thereby the economic impact of international students has been compared to the economic impact of tourist (Rodriguez *et al.*, 2012; Hughes *et al.*, 2015). In recent years, this linkage between tourism and education has gained a renewed interest among academics and managers of tourism products and destinations largely due to concerns with the now-dominant paradigm of sustainability. It is argued that tourists consciously motivated by the desire to learn and to be educated, e.g., Horne's “intelligent tourist”, are regarded as having a more positive impact on destinations than those driven by hedonistic motivations (Weaver, 2003).

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2 Available at: <http://www.eenee.de/eeneeHome/EENEE/Analytical-Reports.html>

The most recent data available show that, in 2019, 940.000 higher education students attended the Erasmus programme of which more than 16.000 selected Portugal to develop their education mobility (European Commission, 2021). Portugal was chosen from among 253 other countries and reached the 7<sup>th</sup> position in the top ten of the countries that received most higher education students on mobility. These numbers highlight the importance of the Erasmus programme for Portugal. By hosting almost 2% of the total number of students on the move, Portugal has a huge academic responsibility but also a significant number of potential ambassadors to boost the tourism sector.

## 2. STUDENTS' MOBILITY PROGRAMS AS OPPORTUNITIES FOR TOURISM

Erasmus mobility agreements among universities, both private and public, are opening more collaboration and cooperation in an international context. From a touristic perspective, this type of mobility can be considered a type of tourist activity, creating a specific form of tourism that it is usually known as “academic tourism” or “youth tourism” (Cavagnaro *et al.*, 2018). In fact, one of the links that could be established between the universities and the tourist destinations could be educational tourism (García-Rodríguez and Jiménez, 2015; Chen and Kerstetter, 1999; Ritchie, Carr and Cooper, 2003; Weaver, 2003; Llewellyn-Smith and McCabe, 2008) and, inside it, academic tourism (García-Rodríguez and Jiménez, 2015; Pawlowska and Roget, 2009). Academic tourists can be defined as groups of people who travel from their place of residence to do academic courses, of less than a year of duration, in the tourist destination (García-Rodríguez and Jiménez, 2015; UNWTO, 2010). It has a high capacity of generating new visits, because most of these students receive visits from family and friends during their stay. In recent decades, increasing attention has been paid to students' reasons to take part in exchange academic programmes (e.g., Llewellyn-Smith and McCabe, 2008; González *et al.*, 2011; Padrão *et al.*, 2012; Rodriguez *et al.*, 2012; Bento, 2014; Bokareva, 2014; Lesjak *et al.*, 2015; Monteiro and Pereira, 2016). Some motivations to study abroad are enjoying from leisure activities, know places, to meet new people and to have new experiences in a different country. Cultural attractions, scenery and natural environment of the destination are also often cited (Llewellyn-Smith and McCabe, 2008). Finding out about a new culture is one of the main reasons for initiating an exchange (Arteaga Acosta, 2004; Krzaklewska and Krupnik, 2005). This cultural exchange brings mutual gains for Erasmus students and for the host destinations, since international students enrich local culture diversity, increase understanding of other societies in terms of religion, music and/or arts espousing therefore internal students to different perspectives regarding international affairs (López, Fernández and Incera, 2016). Lesjak *et al.* (2015) found that the most important characteristics of Erasmus destinations were his rich natural attractions and sights, be safe and secure, yet not discovered by tourists, be rich in culture, arts and history and have a great offer of events. Bento (2014) found that economic factors such as transportation costs, the standard of living and cross-country differences in relative prices, capturing differences in their living costs, emerged as important determinants in the demand for academic tourist.

### 3. FROM STUDENTS TO TOURISTS: A GENERATIONAL PERSPECTIVE

Academic international flows of students are the future of tourism mainly due to the sheer amount on young tourists travelling today, their new attitudes towards tourism and the expectation that young tourists will continue to travel in the future (Richards, 2007; Leask *et al.*, 2013; Barton *et al.*, 2013). In this regard, it is important to understand the behaviour pattern of the younger generations and their relationship with travelling and tourism. The link between youth tourism and new generations is particularly interesting in the academic tourism context.

Nowadays, studying academic tourism implies knowing the habits of young people, more specifically of Millennials or Generation Y and post-Millennials or Generation Z. Millennials are individuals who reached adulthood around the turn of the twenty-first century while Generation Z comprises individuals born in the year 1995 and after, making the oldest members 24 years old (Eisner, 2005; Chhetri *et al.*, 2014). It is recognized that behaviours and motivations of these new generations influence the contemporary tourism trends. These younger generations share some characteristics, most notable a savvy with technology and creativity but Generation Z will show some consumer-oriented differences from Millennials because Generation Z have been shaped by the turbulent times they grew up in, amid the global economic uncertainty and the global environmental crisis (Palfrey and Gasser, 2008; Seemiller and Grace, 2016) what made them pessimistic about the future.

Since Millennials have grown up amid major global economic and environmental crises, they prefer to make sustainable choices, to live experiences instead of materiality (Ruspini and Bernardi, 2018). Therefore, Millennials travel more often, book more, over the Internet, explore more destinations, tend to stay ahead of travel trends, look for experiences and information and try to gain as much as possible from their travel also in terms of cultural understanding (Corbisiero and Ruspini, 2018). Because they are technologically “smart” and actively engaged with social media to communicate and share their travel experiences and feelings they are “natural” promoters and influencers (Richards, 2007). As digital savvies, known by their “always connected” obsession Millennials demands instant fulfilment, speed, efficiency, and convenience (Hamed, 2017). Thus, marketing strategies need to focus on long-term planning, development and designing an effective strategy (Michael, Armstrong and King, 2003; Li *et al.*, 2013). This strategy must address the tourism product; amenities; distribution channels; and communication tactics to meet the needs and preferences of Millennials (Gretzel *et al.*, 2006; Hamed, 2017).

Post-Millennials as opposite to Millennials tend to be more individualistic, less focused, better multi-taskers, entrepreneurial, more globally oriented with and with higher expectations (Beall, 2017). Notwithstanding, Generation Z is, so far, poorly analysed when compared to the Millennials. Even so, some efforts to understand the tourism pattern of this generation begin to emerge (e.g., Robinson and Schänzel, 2019; Slivar *et al.*, 2019; ETC, 2020). This is particularly timely since Bloomberg predicted that by 2019 Generation Z would overtake Millennials as the most populous generation on the planet. Besides, some of the world’s most populous countries are also some of the most youthful. As a result, the current demographic structure of the world’s population is likely to cause major

changes in consumer travel demand as the world's youngest populations grow, become more affluent and begin to travel (ETC, 2020). To ensure strong future growth prospects for tourism, the tourism industry must better understand peculiarities and expectations of Millennials and Generation Z.

The travel behaviour of Generation Y and Generation Z are the responsible factors for bringing more international students to Portugal, with the city of Porto being one of the preferred destinations. The importance of these segments consists not only in its dimension, but also in its fast growth that will represent 50% of all travellers by 2025 (Tutek *et al.*, 2015). Generations Y and Z – that mainly constitutes the current academic students – are characterized for their focus in “exploration, interaction, and emotional experience”. In a strategic planning vision, companies must become more agile to better understand their personalities, acting “with a strong focus on empathy and customer connection” (Tutek *et al.*, 2015:5). This demands a constant adaptation from the touristic service providers to be more attentive to these dimensions of service, in an Era where “customization and personalization of service is greater than ever” (Tutek *et al.*, 2015:6).

Arguably, in this context, emerges the concept of niche tourism as a way of providing a connection between the tourist's dreams, desires, imaginations, and experiences. According to marketing, the niche concept incorporates the idea that there is a place in the market for the product and that there is an audience for the same product (the “niche market”), *i.e.*, the identification of a group of individuals classified according to the same type of needs or desires. Nowadays, tourism is increasingly originating new and different market segments with distinct individual interests (Sousa and Simões, 2010).

Recognizing academic tourism as a niche and strategic market for Porto, the purpose of this study is to identify the main determinants that drive the demand of academic tourism in Porto. This study also intends to underline the strengths of the destination attractiveness, to characterize the visitors' profile and their travel habits, as well as the evolution of their behaviour during these international stays along the last decade.

This study is particularly relevant and timely for Porto as a tourist destination. In the last decade, Porto has seen an unprecedented increase in the number of tourists. The city of Porto is living and dynamic heritage – the Historic Centre of Porto, was recognized as World Cultural Heritage since 1996. The city is recognized by his main tourist products –Gastronomy and Wine, City Break, Business Tourism, Cultural Tourism and Religious Tourism. It is a destination in constant growth where demand does not stop growing and changing. Due to these, the city was recently recognized with awards in the tourism sector, namely “The Best European Destination in 2017” and “The Best Startup Friendly City of Europe” by World Excellence Awards in 2018.

With the increase of the capacity of lodging in Porto, new opportunities appear, particularly in the complementary services, adding value to the offer and becoming more focused on its different markets, including the academic tourism segment.

Despite the academic tourism grow over the past few years in Porto, its impact and potential as a tourism market was not yet analysed. The present study is the first to explore academic tourism in Porto.

## 4. METHODOLOGY

The main objective of the study is to better understand the motivations and factors that influence international student's decisions to choose the location where they develop their mobility programs.

### 4.1. Questionnaire

Data were collected through an online questionnaire sent by the international relations offices of northern universities to former and current Erasmus students. The questionnaire includes three sections. Section A collected information regarding students visiting behaviours. Section B collected information concerning the factors/motivations to choose Porto as an Erasmus destination and section C comprises questions about students' socio-demographic characteristics.

### 4.2. Sample

The questionnaire was sent, by email, using a database of foreign students who in the last ten years studied for a minimum period of six months in the city of Porto. The questionnaire was administered between June 2019 and December 2020. A total of 122 students answered the entire questionnaire. Most respondents were female (70,5%) and the most prevalent age groups are between 19 and 23 years old (62%) and between 24 and 28 years old (27%).

### 4.3. Data Analysis

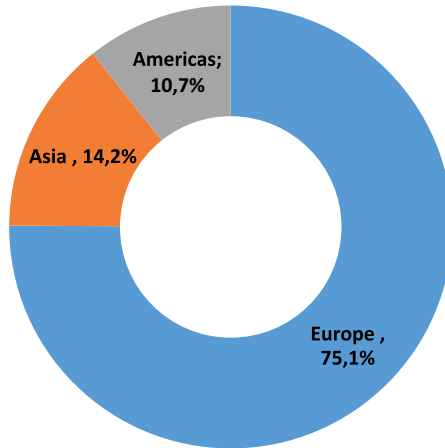
A quantitative analysis was performed using descriptive statistics.

## 5. RESULTS

Students who choose Porto to develop a study program are mainly from Europe (Figure 1). Two main factors may help to justify this scenario. On the one hand, the fact that Erasmus program is quite popular among European students; on the other hand, the geographic proximity resulting from direct air connections from Portugal to the main European cities. Besides Europe, the regions of Asia (14.2%) and the Americas (10.7%) also have some representation.

Most students indicated spending less than 400 euros per month, excluding direct expenses for education and accommodation and only 13% indicated spending more than 700 euros a month (Figure 2).

**Figure 1**  
**STUDENT'S REGION OF ORIGIN**



**Figure 2**  
**MONTHLY EXPENSES BEYOND EDUCATION AND ACCOMMODATION**

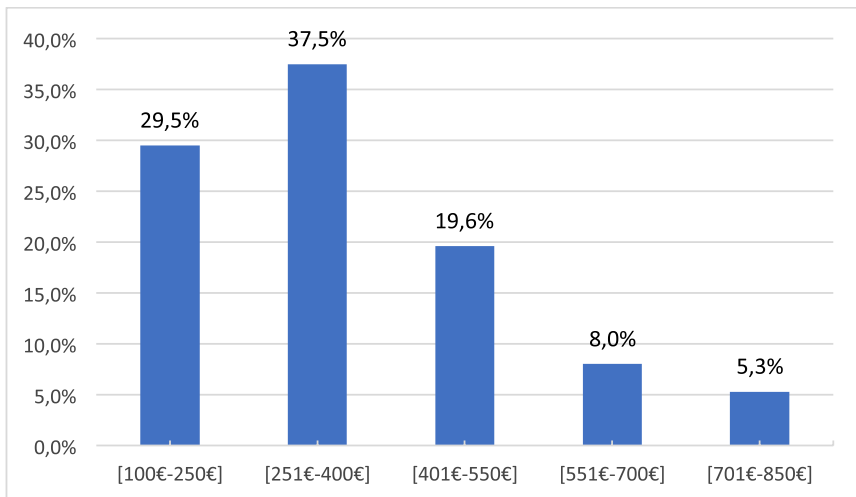
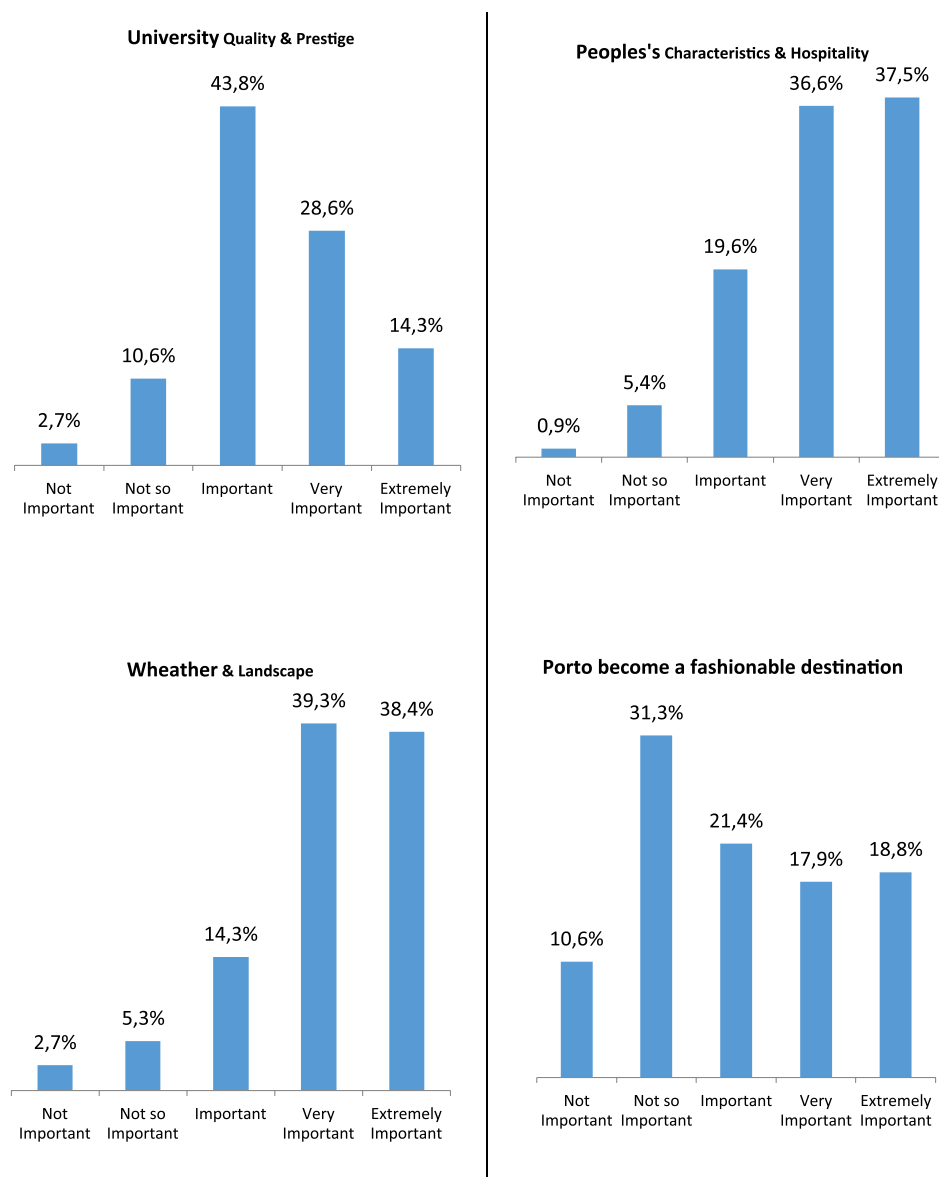


Figure 3 summarizes the level of importance assigned to quality and prestige of the university, people's characteristics and hospitality, the weather and the landscape and the fact that Porto is a trendy/fashionable destination as main drivers to select Porto as an academic destination.



**Figure 3**  
**MAIN MOTIVATIONS FOR SELECTING PORTO FOR ERASMUS MOBILITY**



Among these motivations, people’s characteristics and hospitality, and weather and landscape, are those that have a higher importance. It seems evident that international students choose Erasmus mobility destinations according to how those destinations host

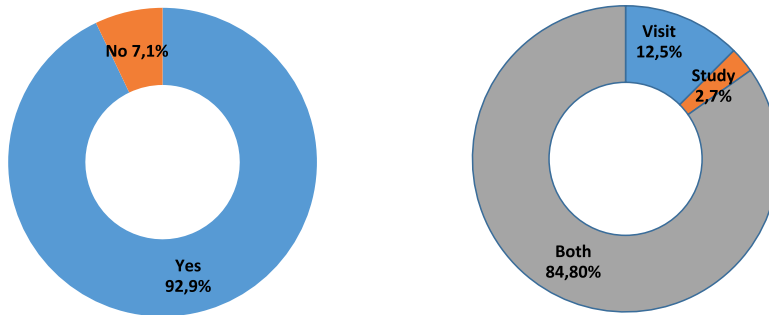
students. Apparently, they are looking for places where they feel welcome and where they can predictably integrate more quickly. On the other hand, the mild climate and the rich landscape of our territory are also very attractive factors for this market segment.

Figure 4 summarize the intention to return to Porto and the reason for that return. When asked if they would like to return to Porto, the majority (93%) of students said yes with 80% affirming that they would return mainly for touristic purposes. These two indicators are very positive and show that the levels of satisfaction with the destination were very high and could positively influence the intention to return. This means an increase in the tourist potential of the destination, through greater attractiveness.

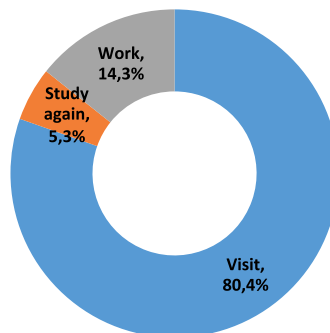
When asked if they would recommend Porto to other people, basically all respondents answered yes, with 85% indicating that they would recommend Porto for academic studies and tourism.

**Figure 4**  
**MAIN REASONS TO RETURN TO PORTO**

**Recommend Porto ....**



**Return to Porto ....**



All these outputs show that the Porto effectively has differentiating factors that contribute to increasing its attractiveness as an academic tourism destination. It is possible to verify that these factors are viewed very positively by students as they have high percentages of intentions to visit and recommend the destination.

## **6. FINAL CONSIDERATIONS AND SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH**

Our results confirm that Erasmus students are an important strategic market for the city of Porto. In addition to academic paths, students adopt tourist profiles during and after their studies. Moreover, they help to project the destiny across borders by promoting the destiny within their circle of influence. Data show that academic tourism has increased in the city of Porto over the years and, consequently, this segment contributes to the increase in tourists. The more Erasmus students a tourist destination has, the more academic tourists it will have and, predictably, the more tourists it will have in the future.

For students, international mobility is an opportunity to live abroad, meet new people, acquire soft skills, improve foreign language skills, enjoy leisure activities, have new experiences in a different country, while improving international competencies, gaining greater visibility in the labour market, and being better prepared to work in international environments. Considering the main factors that influence the decision to choose Porto as a destination for Erasmus mobility, it was possible to verify that there are four main factors that influence this segment: quality and prestige of the universities; people's characteristics and hospitality; weather and landscape; being a fashionable destination. Thus, in addition to the recognition of the universities where students come to study, other factors related to tourism potential (climate and landscape), hospitality and the popularity of the tourist destination are also very important. In this context, it is possible to infer that the destinations that want to position themselves in a more competitive way in this tourist segment, should invest not only in the promotion of their universities and academic programs, but also in the enhancement of the tourist elements that stand out the most, with a special focus in hospitality. As such, the strategy of destinations that intend to position themselves competitively in this market must involve coordinated actions between the academic sector and tourism agents.

Finally, it should be noted that literatures how that academic tourism is still relatively recent and underdeveloped. The present study intends to contribute to minimize this lack, pursuing to obtain knowledge about the sociodemographic profile of the students in mobility programmes in Porto, identifying their motivations, analysing their consumer behaviour during its Erasmus period through the characterization of their travel habits.

The originality, contribution and value of this research approach lays not only on the existing lack of literature about academic tourism in Porto but also in the fact that this issue has not been properly studied in perspective to offer pragmatic solutions for this segment.

This study can be of useful use to the managers of the tourism industry and researchers in the fields of tourism, marketing, and economics since the empirical analysis will contribute to the academic debate.

At this point, it is important to refer that while this is a non-ending task, this study intends to be the first step of a bigger project that can be suggested for future research.

The goal is to enlarge and apply this model of research to other touristic destinations in Portugal and in a next phase enlarge the scope of application to European destinations.

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