

**SOCIAL REPRESENTATIONS: INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS IN PORTUGAL  
PERCEPTIONS OF THE HOST COUNTRY DEPENDING ON THEIR  
COUNTRY OF ORIGIN**

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**Abstract.** This study intends to be an extension of another, already published in 2012 titled "ERASMUS students in Portugal: The perception and the impact of international crisis." However, even if both studies remain in the domain of social representations, what we propose is a comparative analysis of how international students in Portugal look at the host country depending on being, or not being, from Latin countries. In methodological terms, we decided to construct a questionnaire that was subjected to statistical analysis. We present some comments on the evolution of the Portuguese economy, before and after the crisis, and on the importance of EU policies to improve the perception of European values among students.

**Keywords:** ERASMUS Students; Social representations; multiculturalism; latin countries

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## **1. Introduction**

This study aims to analyze, in a comparative manner, how foreign students in Portugal look to and perceive the host country in terms of their origin: from Latin or non-Latin countries.

Thus, we can refer to a set of questions from which we want to obtain some answers:

- what representations have the groups of students,
- how it differs between the group of Latin or non- Latin students,
- in what extent the preconceptions they had on arrival coincide with current representations about Portugal.

The latin civilization corresponds to one of the great cultural centers of Europe (such as the Germanic and Slavic, or other ones). However, this civilization is not confined to the European continent.

Their culture is based, largely, on the legacy of the Roman Empire. Maybe so, Latinos tend to define culture as "a set of values that a people can communicate to each other in the name of an universal propose" (Tavares,2002:286).

Latin Europe includes countries such as Portugal, Italy, France, Romania, Spain and some French-speaking regions: Belgium, Luxembourg and Switzerland. The Latin America brings together the countries where romance languages are spoken primarily (derived from Latin) like Portuguese in Brazil, and Spanish in Argentina, Venezuela, Mexico, Colombia, Peru, Chile and many others.

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Constituting the field of analysis of this research contacts between cultures and language groups are also important to clarify the concept of social image or representation. Both the definition of the "us" and the "other" entails implicit representation theories that may be conditioned by the common sense, the media or simply the stereotypes.

Set on a representation of someone or something involves building prototypes, and assign these representations the status of objective reality (Jodelet, 2005). In a similar way, Abric (2000) proposes that social representations may be seen as a set of beliefs and opinions about a given object.

Moscovici (2007) even suggests that these social representations are like an "atmosphere", something that gives a feeling of closeness, familiarity and acceptance. It is this dynamics that he thinks is determinant to the perception of reality allways depending on previous concepts and experiences.

In what concerns Erasmus students, we have also to take in account that their presence is temporally and circumstantial and that fact may have influence in their perceptions about the host country.

In integration, we have to consider a group of images / representations that ultimately lead to the notion of stereotype. García Naranjo (2004) points out that when the image reaches a considerable level of disclosure and compliance becomes a stereotype, a concept group of great propagandistic capacity.

Dyserink (2005) draws attention to the fact that the picture that one country produces over another tends to be conditioned by the history of both countries. Thus, time and space are central elements.

It is from this theoretical framework, that the present study aims to analyze the social representations of Erasmus students about Portugal and at the same time to seek whether there are differences between students from Latin countries and non-Latin countries. For this purpose, a questionnaire was given to a group of 40 Erasmus students studying in the school year 2013/2014 at the Instituto Universitário da Maia.

## **2. Economic evolution and crisis in Portugal.**

Padrao(2001), and Guisan & Padrao(2001) present an interesting analysis of the evolution of industry and foreign trade of Portugal during the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, 1950-1999, and their positive effects on other sectors, improving income per capita and real wages. On the other hand Guisan & Cancelo(2014) analyze the evolution of Portugal in comparison with other European Union countries for the period 2000-2013. Graphs A1 and A2 in the Annex, show some of the important features of this evolution. The most outstanding has been the negative consequences of economic crisis, and other factors, on the industrial production per capita of many EU countries. It is desirable an improvement in EU economic policies addressed to recover and foster industrial development, in order to favor economic development and a positive image of the EU.

The economic crisis of the period 2007-2013, has had many negative consequences on the perception of Europeans about confidence on EU measures and policies. Erasmus Program, and international programs for students, are part of a policy addressed to improve knowledge and cooperation among European students from different countries and with other non EU countries. These programs should be improved with other measures intended to favor the confidence in European institutions to solve the crisis.

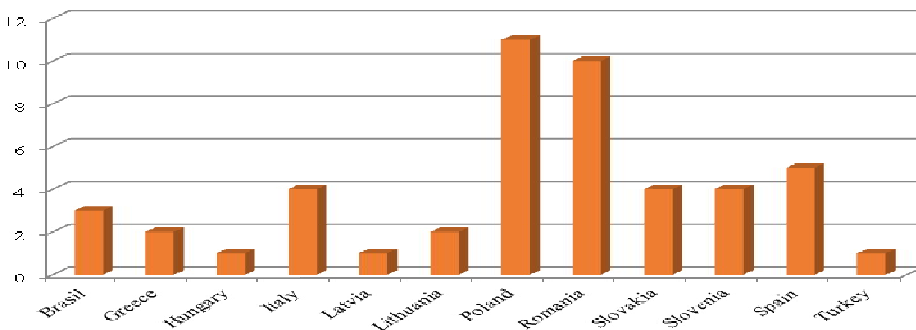
### 3. Study results

This study is the second part of an investigation that aims to understand the impact of the present Portuguese crisis in the Erasmus students’ perceptions about the country. To reach this goal, during the first phase of this research, 35 questionnaires were analysed last year. These were filled in by a randomly selected group of Erasmus students at ISMAI - Instituto Superior da Maia, Porto, Portugal. This year, a new group of random Erasmus students were handed the same questionnaire that was prepared using open questions so that each respondent could freely express his/her opinion. We have received 48 answers and have collected information about the students’:

- main ideas about Portugal prior to arrival;
- main determinants for taking Portugal as an Erasmus destination;
- main images of Portugal after arrival;
- desire to return to Portugal after the Erasmus experience;
- willingness to work in Portugal after finishing the degree at the home university;
- perception about the Portuguese financial and economic crisis;
- opinion about the future of Portugal.

The group of respondents age between 20 and 28, averaging 22 years old. Most respondents are female (65% of the total number of respondents) and come from Eastern European Countries (69%). These students will stay in Portugal for a period up to 6 months. When these questionnaires were filled in, most of them were already in Portugal for 2 or 3 months. Regarding the respondents’ country of origin (Figure 1), more than a half comes from Poland (23%), Romania (21%) and Spain (10%). There are also students from Italy (8%), Brazil (6%), Greece (4%), Lithuania (4%), Slovakia (4%), Slovenia (4%), Hungary (2%), Latvia (2%) and Turkey (2%).

**Figure 1** – Home Countries (% of each country on total Erasmus students in the sample)



We have divided the participants in the study in two groups: Latin Countries’ and Non-Latin Countries’ respondents. The first group comprises Brazilians, Italians, Romanians and Spaniards. In the second group there are students from Greece, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Slovakia, Slovenia and Turkey. The percentage of students in each group of analysis is presented in Table 1.

**Table 1** – Percentage of Students in each group of analysis

Latin Students	Non-Latin Students
46%	54%

### Main ideas about Portugal prior to arrival

In the first part of the study (Padrão *et al.*, 2012), the images of a beautiful country (11%), close to the ocean, with a lot of sun and warm weather (49%), inhabited by a kind, friendly, polite people (23%) were identified as the most frequent expectations about the country before the students arrived in Portugal.

The analysis of this new pool of questionnaires supports that conclusion. Table 2 lists the main conceptions the students had about Portugal before arriving. These are listed in descending order of frequency, that is, the percentages of students that have mention that idea in the total of participants. Those frequencies do not sum up 100% since most students have conveyed more than one idea.

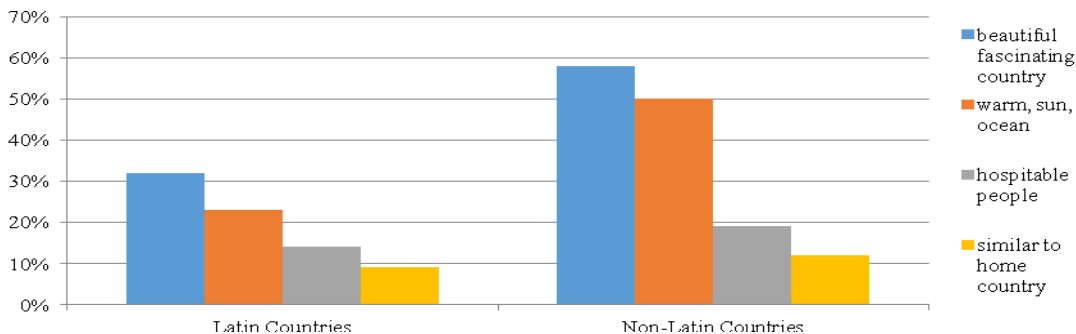
Prior to arrival, most respondents considered Portugal as a beautiful and fascinating country (46% of the total number of students) by the Atlantic with a warm, sunny weather (38%) and a hospitable people (17%). But, in contrast with last year’s query, where none of the students mentioned the Portuguese crisis, this year, a small percentage of students (8%) already pictured Portugal as a country under an economic crisis before arriving.

**Table 2 – Main ideas about Portugal prior to arrival**

ANSWER	FREQUENCY OF THE ANSWER
beautiful and fascinating country	46%
warm, sun, ocean	38%
hospitable people	17%
similar to home country	10%
crisis	8%

The comparison of the most frequent answers given by the two groups in analysis, Latin and Non-Latin students, is displayed in Graph 2.

**Graph 2 – Main ideas about Portugal prior to arrival by Latin/Non-Latin Countries**



When analysed by group of respondents, the answers concerning prior ideas about Portugal show that both groups have the same allusions. But Non-Latin students (58% of this group) were more prone to emphasise the appeal of Portugal than Latin respondents (32%). Several participants in the study (36% in total), regardless of the group of analysis (e.g. Italians, Romanians, Polish and Slovenians), mentioned the importance of the

Portuguese History to justify its allure while the rest of the students cited its beauty. This analysis also shows that the idea of a warm, sunny country by the ocean was considerably more prevalent on respondents from Non-Latin countries (50% of this group) than on Latin students (23%). Likewise, students from Non-Latin countries have more frequently appointed the friendly characteristics of the Portuguese People (19% vs. 14%). Surprisingly, Portugal's similarity to the respondents' home country was recurrent in the answers to the questionnaires in both groups of students. In fact, both 40% of the Spanish and 100% of Greeks stated that, before arriving to Portugal, they thought Portugal was similar to their home country. This result contrasts with last years' when 80% of the Spanish students have reported to see Portugal before their arrival as a similar country with the same culture and weather while no Greek has chosen to give this answer.

### Main reasons for choosing Portugal

In the first phase of this study, the key reasons for taking Portugal as an Erasmus destination were meaningfully related to the prior conjectures the students had about the country. The main reasons detected were related to the weather, the ocean and the beauty of the country, the proximity and similarities to the home country (23%), the desire to know the western life style (14%) and the wish to learn the Portuguese language (11%).

Table 3 identifies the main determinants found on this year's pool regarding the option towards Portugal.

**Table 3** – Main reasons for choosing Portugal

ANSWER	FREQUENCY OF THE ANSWER
warm, ocean, beauty of the country	29%
learn Portuguese	21%
friends	19%
only option	8%
culture, architecture and History	6%

Like last year, this query also reports the importance of the weather, the proximity to the Atlantic and the general beauty of the country as the main reasons for choosing Portugal as a host country (29% of the total number of respondents have mentioned one. or more than one. of those elements). Likewise, the desire to learn Portuguese looks as a key motive for coming to Portugal (21%). In fact this reason seems to be far more important for this group of students than it was for last years'.

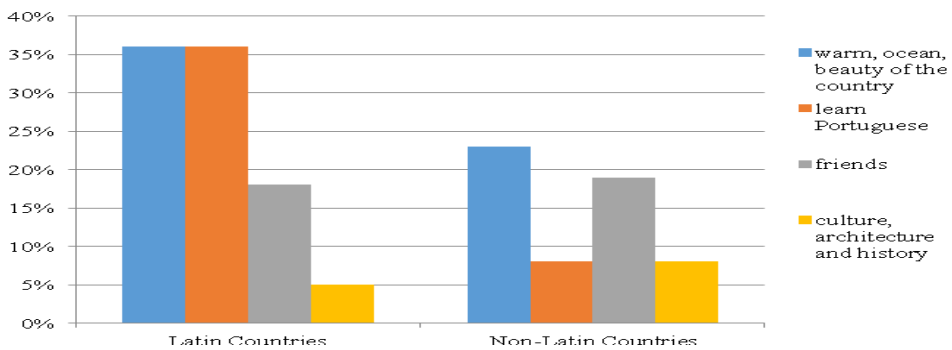
At this new pool, the opinion of friends (19%) and the fact that Portugal was the only available option (8%) were also very important determinants regarding the country host decision. Not so significant was the Portuguese culture, architecture and history (6%). It is possible that the differences between this year and last year's results have to do with the different mix of nationalities found in the respondents group at each phase of the study. Finally, like last year, a few other reasons have been mentioned but these were discarded for not being sufficiently frequent (two or less students have pointed them out).

Latin and Non-Latin students’ most frequent answers are represented in Graph 3. Although the climate, the Atlantic and the beauty of the country were the main reasons for both groups to pick Portugal as the Erasmus destination, the analysis by group shows that those reasons were more decisive for Latin students (36% of this group) than for Non-Latin respondents (23%). Portugal’s Mediterranean characteristics by the Atlantic were particularly important for the Spaniards (40% of the Spanish respondents), Italians (25%) and Romanians (50%). Nonetheless, these elements were also important for the Polish students (45%).

Latin participants in the study were also more influence by the desire to learn Portuguese (36% vs. 8%). This reason was particularly prevalent for Spaniards (60%), Italians (50%) and Romanians (30%). However, the desire to learn Portuguese was also mentioned by Slovenians (50%).

The importance of the opinion of friends was not significantly different in the two groups in terms of prevalence (18% of Latin respondents and 19% of Non-Latin participants). Finally, the culture, architecture and History of Portugal were mention more frequently by Non- Latin countries’ nationals (8% vs. 5%).

**Graph 3 – Main reasons for choosing Portugal by Latin/Non-Latin Countries**



**Main images of Portugal after arrival**

Like in the first part of the study, in this year’s query, there is a very long list of representations of Portugal. Table 4 lists these representations and the percentage of students that have mention them. Since most students have conveyed more than one idea, the frequencies do not sum 100%.

The more important of those images seems to be the sunny warm weather, the ocean and the beaches (58% of the students referred one or more of those elements against 46% last year). Almost as important is the Portuguese gastronomy (52% compared to 46% last year) where the typical pastry and the ‘francesinhas’ are in the front row. Side by side are the perceived characteristics of the Portuguese people as another important reference of the country (52% against 31% in the first phase of the study).

Also important references are the Portuguese monuments (44% vs. 31%) culture and traditions (35% vs. 23%) - including the song fado (considered by UNESCO as a world intangible cultural heritage), the Portuguese language (one of the most spoken in the world), the Literature Nobel laureate José Saramago, the navigator Vasco da Gama (who

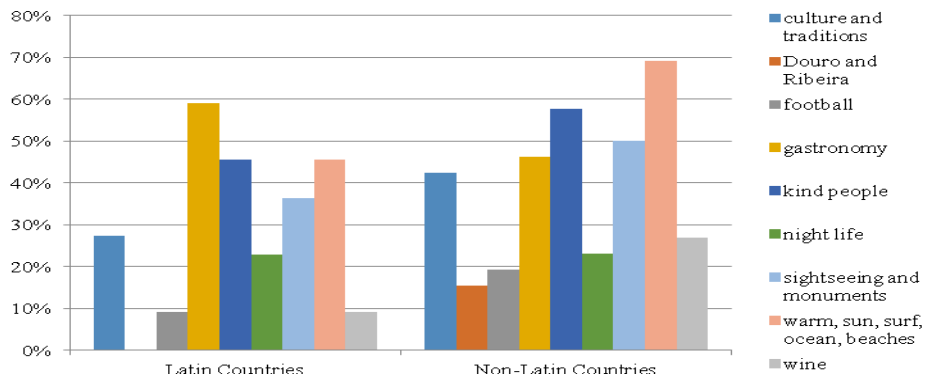
was the first to reach India through sea by crossing the Good Hope Cape at South Africa), the production and usage of tiles (a tradition left by the Arabs), the colourful Barcelos rooster (which is a sort of non-official national symbol) and also a few elements related to the Academic Portuguese Tradition.

Finally, the night life (23% vs. 26% in the first query), the Portuguese wine (19% vs. 34%), football (15% vs. 26%) and the UNESCO’s world heritage site of Ribeira (8% vs. 17%) are significant images of the country, among several other elements not so frequently mentioned by respondents.

**Table 4 – Images of Portugal after arrival**

ANSWER	FREQUENCY OF THE ANSWER
warm, sun, surf, ocean, beaches	58%
Gastronomy	52%
kind people	52%
sightseeing and monuments	44%
culture and traditions	35%
night life	23%
Wine	19%
Football	15%
Douro and Ribeira	8%

**Graph 4 – Main images of Portugal after arrival by Latin/non-Latin Countries**



When the data is analysed by group (Graph 4), it shows that, for Latin students, the five more frequently mentioned representations of Portugal are, by descending order of importance, the gastronomy (59% students of this group), the natural (45%) and ethnographic (45%) characteristics of the country, the sightseeing and monuments (36%) and the Portuguese Culture and Traditions (27%). For Non- Latin students the five more frequently mentioned representations of Portugal are the same as in the other group but the order of their frequency is quite different. Once again, by descending order of frequency, these are Portugal’s natural conditions (69%) and ethnographic characteristics (58%), sightseeing and monuments (50%) the gastronomy (46%) and the Portuguese Culture and Traditions (42%). Furthermore, Non-Latin participants are more prone to

mention wine, football, Douro and Ribeira as images of the country than Latin students do.

**Reasons for returning to Portugal**

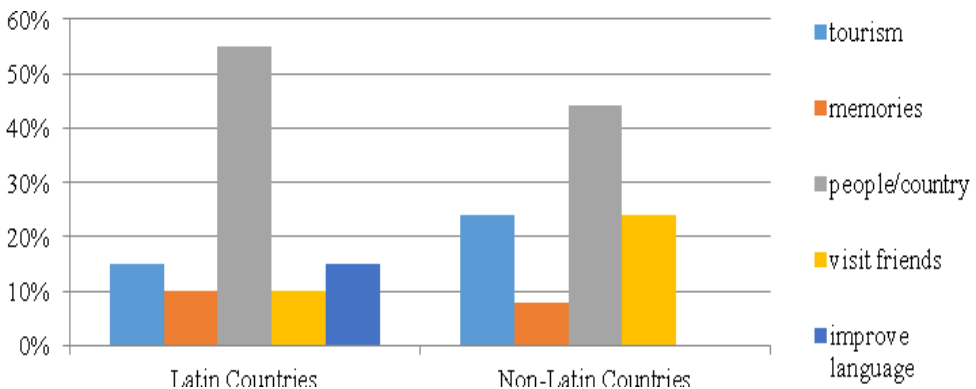
When asked about the possibility to return to Portugal after their Erasmus stay, ninety four (94%) of the query participants said to want to be back. Table 5 gathers the justifications given for the return and its frequency. Like in previous Tables, the sum of these percentages does not sum up 100% since some students gave more than one answer. The reasons for returning are the fascination for the country and the Portuguese people (49%), the tourism activity (20%), the wish to visit friends (18%), the desire to revive memories and the intention to improve the Portuguese language (6%).

**Table 5 – Reasons for Returning**

ANSWER	FREQUENCY OF THE ANSWER
like the people/country	49%
tourism	20%
visit friends	18%
revive memories	9%
improve language	6%

Graph 5 shows the main reasons for returning to Portugal appointed by both groups in analysis. Although the Portuguese people and country are more frequently referred in the Latin Group (55%), it is also widely mentioned by the Non-Latin students (44%). Indeed, it is extensively mentioned by Italians (100%) and Spaniards (80%) but also by Greeks (100%), Lithuanians (100%) and Slovenians (75%).

**Graph 5 – Reasons for returning by Latin / Non-Latin Countries**



Tourism trips and visiting friends are more recurrent among Non-Latin countries' students (24% vs. 15% and 24% vs. 10% respectively). Particularly, the Polish wish to return for tourism (45%) and Slovenians for visiting friends (67%).

Reviving memories is more persistent in the Latin Group (10% vs. 8%), namely in the Brazilian (33%) and the Italian (25%) participants. Finally, the desire to return to improve the Portuguese language is only prevalent in that same group (15% of the Latin participants), referred by Italians (25%) and Spaniards (40%).

### Reasons for staying in Portugal

When asked about the likelihood of working or studying in Portugal in the future, seventy three per cent (73%) of the students replied affirmatively. Table 6 lists the reasons for staying in Portugal and the frequency of each answer. It also depicts the same information for each group of respondents.

The reasons for staying comprise once again the attraction for the country and the Portuguese people (40%). Also, the feel at home sensation (11%), the wish to improve the Portuguese language (9%) and the will to gain international experience (9%) are mentioned as reasons for staying in Portugal. Finally, a few other reasons have been mentioned but these were discarded for not being sufficiently frequent (two or less students have pointed them out).

Regarding the analysis by group of respondents, 56% of the Non-Latin respondents have justified their permanence in Portugal with their attraction for the country and the Portuguese people while only 24% of the Latin respondents have chosen the same motive. On the other hand, Latin students seem to be more likely to stay due to a 'feel at home' sentiment (18% against 6% for Non-Latin participants). Respondents from Latin countries are more prone to stay in order to improve the Portuguese language (12% against 6%) while Non-Latin students regard this possibility as an international experience (17%).

**Table 6 – Reasons for Staying**

ANSWER	FREQUENCY OF THE ANSWER	LATIN RESPONDENTS	NON-LATIN RESPONDENTS
like the people/country	40%	24%	56%
feeling at home	11%	18%	6%
learn/improve language	9%	12%	6%
international experience	9%		17%

Table 7 displays the motives for not wanting to stay in Portugal and the frequency of each answer

**Table 7 – Reasons for Not Staying**

ANSWER	FREQUENCY OF THE ANSWER	LATIN RESPONDENTS	NON-LATIN RESPONDENTS
other country	42%	75%	25%
Family/ homecountry	41%	25%	50%
labour market conditions	16%		25%

Again this information is also available for each respondent group. The reasons for not staying encompass the choice for another country (42%), the wish to live close to the family at the home country (41%) and the Portuguese labour market conditions, such as

the difficulty to get a job, the payment of low salaries and the Portuguese mind-set (16%). This response was only given by respondents in the Non- Latin group.

By comparing the answers by group of respondents, 75% of the Latin respondents have claimed not wanting to stay in Portugal due to the will to live in another country. This same answer was given by only 25% of Non-Latin students. Most respondents in this group wish to live in their home country (50%) while only a quarter (25%) of Latin students has given the same answer.

**Portuguese financial and economic crisis and the future of Portugal**

Table 8 displays the students’ opinion about the Portuguese financial and economic crisis and the frequency of those answers as a percentage of the total number of questionnaires completed. The questionnaires’ analysis leads to the conclusion that 27% of the respondents replied that they have not yet noticed the crisis in Portugal (against 20% last year) and 17% say it is the same that affects their home countries (against 34% last year).

**Table 8 –Portuguese crisis**

ANSWER	FREQUENCY OF THE ANSWER
have not yet noticed	27%
same as home country	17%
do not know/ no answer	56%

Table 9 lists the answers to the question regarding the future the students perceive for Portugal and, again, the frequency of those answers as a percentage of the total number of questionnaires completed. Forty two per cent (42% against 45% last year) of the students are optimistic about the future of Portugal. Four percent (4% vs. 5%) are pessimistic and six per cent (6%) say Portugal’s future will be the same as Europe’s.

**Table 9 – Opinions about the future of Portugal**

ANSWER	FREQUENCY OF THE ANSWER
optimistic	42%
pessimistic	4%
same as Europe	6%
do not know/ no answer	48%

**4. Study conclusions**

- Before arriving in Portugal, most students expected to find a, sunny, warm, beautiful country by the Atlantic Ocean with a hospitable people. But, a small part of the students were also anticipating a country under an economic crisis. This result contrasts with last year’s query, where none of the students mentioned the Portuguese crisis.
- 40% of the Spanish and 100% of Greeks stated that, before arriving to Portugal, they thought Portugal was similar to their home country. This result contrasts with last years’ when 80% of the Spanish students have reported to see Portugal before their arrival as a similar country while no Greek has chosen to give this answer. This might be a result of the idea of Portugal as a defaulted country.

- The weather, the proximity to the Atlantic, the general beauty of the country and the desire to learn Portuguese seem to be the main reasons for choosing Portugal as a host country but the opinion of friends also plays an important role in that decision.
- The list of representations of Portugal for these students, after living in Portugal for a few months, includes the countries' natural conditions (sun, ocean, beaches), the perceived characteristics of the Portuguese people, the gastronomy, the monuments, the culture, the traditions, the night life, the wine and football.
- 94% of the query participants want to return to Portugal to tour, to visit friends, to revive memories, to improve the Portuguese language and also due to the fascination for the country and the Portuguese people.
- 73% of the students replied affirmatively to the possibility of working or studying in Portugal in the future.
- The reasons for living in Portugal comprise the attraction for the country and the Portuguese people, the feel at home sensation, the wish to improve the Portuguese language and the will to gain international experience;
- The motives for not wanting to stay in Portugal encompass the choice for another country, the wish to live close to the family in the home country and the Portuguese labour market conditions;
- 27% of the respondents stated that they have not yet noticed the crisis in Portugal and 17% say it is the same that affects their home countries;
- 42% of the students are optimistic about the future of Portugal, 4% are pessimistic and 6% say Portugal's future will be the same as Europe's.

The comparison between Latin Countries' and Non- Latin Countries' respondents resulted in the following conclusions:

- Non-Latin students seem to be more prone to emphasise the appeal of Portugal and the friendly characteristics of the Portuguese People as prior expectations about the country.
- Latin participants in the study were more influence by Portugal's Mediterranean characteristics and by the desire to learn Portuguese as the main reasons to pick Portugal as the Erasmus destination.
- The five more frequently mentioned representations of Portugal are, by descending order of importance,
  - o for Latin students: the gastronomy, the natural and ethnographic characteristics of the country, the monuments, the culture and traditions
  - o for Non- Latin students these are Portugal's natural and ethnographic characteristics, the monuments, the gastronomy, the culture and traditions.
- Tourism trips and visiting friends as reasons for returning to Portugal are more recurrent among Non-Latin countries' students, reviving memories is more persistent in the Latin Group, the desire to return to improve the Portuguese language is only prevalent in that same group.
- Regarding the reasons for working in Portugal, the attraction for the country and the Portuguese people and the international experience are more important for Non-Latin respondents than for Latin students while the 'feel at home' sentiment and the desire to improve the Portuguese language is more important for Latin students than for Non-Latin participants.

- Concerning the reasons for not staying, the will to live in another country is more prevalent in Latin students while the wish to live in their home country is more dominant among non-Latin participants.

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Annex on line at the journal Website: <http://www.usc.es/economet/rses.htm>