

## International Students Mobility - Ten Years of Experience at the Faculty of Medicine of the University of Coimbra (2009-2019)

**Marília Dourado**

University of Coimbra, Faculty of Medicine, Portugal,  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5003-4722>

**Nicole Dourado**

University of Coimbra, Faculty of Medicine, Portugal,  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7876-3126>

**Cláudia Ribeiro**

University of Coimbra, Faculty of Medicine, Portugal,  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9699-3814>

**Abstract:** Since 1987, Faculty of Medicine of the University of Coimbra (FMUC) has been engaged in mobility programs, making efforts to encourage and support the internationalization of its students. Mobility programs are designed to strengthen the dimension and quality of the Higher Education, to encourage transnational cooperation between Universities, to improve transparency and academic recognition of studies and qualifications. The objective of this paper is to present a report on the evolution of mobility of the FMUC undergraduate students in the period between 2009 and 2019. A descriptive report was carried out. During this last decade, the FMUC has dealt with mobility applications from 1,500 incoming and 1,350 outgoing students to attend both classes and clinical traineeships as part of their Master's Degrees in Medicine. In the academic year 2015-2016 there was an increase in the number of applications, coinciding with the introduction of clinical internships in hospitals. The top countries where the FMUC sent students (538); and from where it received students (978) were, Italy, Spain and Brazil. In Portugal, the FMUC is one of the main medical schools with the largest number of students attending mobility programs, which has contributed to fostering the internationalization of undergraduate medical students' training.

**Keywords:** Higher education internationalization, Students mobility, Mobility programs, Incoming and outgoing students, Medicine

### Introduction

The rapid process of the globalization of society, which is characterized by the economic and social activities (Dollar 2001; Labonté, 2018), that we have witnessed in recent decades, has naturally been accompanied by the process of the internationalization of Higher Education Institutions, namely with regard to student mobility,

opening up universities to students from abroad. (She & Wotherspoon, 2013) The internationalization of higher education, with regard to student mobility, has been considered as one of the most important transformations at this educational level in the past decades. It is not only a complex individual, institutional but also political process, that is in a continuing transformation with regard to student flows to chosen destinations, but which is also influenced by the political interests and objectives of governments. (Courtois, 2018; Bærenholdt, 2013; OECD, 2018). Whatever the reason, international mobility always brings benefits: to the student, as she/he becomes more tolerant and flexible when confronted by difference, and has the opportunity to develop his or her cognitive skills and cross-cultural communication; to the institutions, because through student movements, opportunities for cooperation and participation in projects and the exchange of knowledge, among others, are created (Gartmeier, 2020; Toprak, 2019).

The various mobility programs, LLP/ERASMUS and ERASMUS+, Free Mover and Almeida Garrett, a Portuguese mobility program, and other institutional agreements, are aimed at promoting quality and reinforcing the dimension of Higher Education, encouraging transnational cooperation between Universities, with a view to improving, transparency and the academic recognition of studies and qualifications worldwide. It also offers students the possibility of attending a period of study abroad, in an eligible educational establishment, with full academic recognition (as an integral part of the study program of the home institution). No less important it is also an opportunity, often the first one, for socially disadvantaged students to get to know new realities and a different country. The student benefits from a rewarding experience at an academic and personal level, which translates into contact with new working methods; improving a foreign language; knowledge of other cultures and academic recognition (with a prior agreement between partner universities/institutions and the student).

The interest and commitment of the Faculty of Medicine of the University of Coimbra (FMUC) to student mobility dates back to 1987, when the ERASMUS / ECTS (European Credit Transfer System) was still a pilot program, which years later was adopted under the Bologna Process. The FMUC was the first Portuguese School of Medicine to participate in this project, alongside other European Higher Education institutions. (Dourado et al, 2009). Since then, the International Relations Office of the FMUC (IRO-FMUC) has worked to promote and encourage students to internationalize their academic education, guaranteeing them full recognition and the necessary support, in line with the objectives of the University of Coimbra.

The objective of this paper is to present a report about the evolution of mobility of the FMUC's undergraduate students over a decade, from 2009 to 2019.

## **Methodology**

An observational descriptive report was conducted to carry out the study. For this purpose, we consulted the anonymized records from the archives of a decade (2009-2019) of the International Relations Office of the FMUC (IRO-FMUC), about mobility programs and incoming and outgoing students. As I was the director and

responsible for the IRO-FMUC over the period of time previously identified, it was our concern to collect and store information regarding student inflows and outflows, so that the evolution of the internationalization of students at the FMUC could be analyzed in the future. For this purpose, we recorded and anonymized the following information: gender, year that the student attended/would attend, country and host institution during the mobility period, country of origin, home institution, program under which they applied, duration of the mobility period and type of mobility (for studies or internships).

After consulting the files, the information necessary to prepare this report was collected and organized on an excel sheet for analysis.

## Results

### Evolution of Incoming and Outgoing Mobility of medical students at the FMUC

Since 2009, we have witnessed a progressive and considerable increase in the mobility of the students on the Integrated Master's Degree in Medicine (MIM) at the FMUC, both incoming and outgoing mobility (Figure 1). As shown, incoming mobility overpassed outgoing mobility until 2012/2013. There was a reversal in this trend in 2013/2014, in which year it may be observed that the number of outgoing students exceeds the number of incoming students, and that it was maintained until 2016/2017 when, again, the inversion of the trend is observed, with more incoming than outgoing students at the FMUC.



Figure 1. Evolution of Incoming and Outgoing Mobility of The FMUC's Medical Students

It was in the academic year of 2015-2016, that we can see the biggest increase in the outgoing mobility, with 241 students leaving FMUC to study outside Portugal, exactly when the ERASMUS + Program came into force. According to the data collected on the website of the "Observatório da Emigração" (Observatory of Emigration), this peak of growth that had started in 2015-2016 is coincident with the peak of Portuguese

emigration that was registered, with the departure of 134,624 Portuguese citizens, due to the economic and social crisis at that time (OEm, 2020). Many of the FMUC's outgoing students were seeking an opportunity and a place where they could continue their specific training, for the specialties in which they felt most suited, and perhaps work in the future as medical doctors in their destination countries.

By 2018/19, the IRO-FMUC had provided support for more than 2,800 medical students, with a steady growth rate, receiving 1,500 and sending 1,350 students to foreign institutions. In fact, the 27 students who studied outside Portugal in 2009/10 contrast significantly with the 204 outgoing students who decided to leave during the academic year of 2018/19 with the same purpose. It is also possible to observe that the number of incoming students increased progressively over the ten years under analysis, from 86 in 2009/10 to 253 in 2018/19. Therefore, there was an increase in the number of outgoing and incoming students by the end of the period of time analyzed, at the FMUC.

During this period of time, one of the goals of the IRO-FMUC was to stimulate and encourage its medical students to attend a period of study at a partner institution abroad. Analyzing the results, we may conclude that this objective was achieved. It is also clear that the FMUC has become progressively more attractive. The efforts of the IRO team, which over the 10 years under analysis, worked to clarify, inform, encourage and support the FMUC's medical students by motivating them to take a period of international mobility within the scope of their studies, justified the results obtained.

With regard to the FMUC's growing ability to attract foreign students, this may be justified by the quality of teaching on offer, above all the clinical teaching that takes place in a large hospital with all medical specialties, where students have the opportunity to learn and practice clinical procedures under the supervision of senior tutors and not least where they also feel welcome. The security of the country and especially the city where FMUC is located, Coimbra as a university city that annually welcomes several thousands of students, which contributes to a youthful living environment, where mutual help and companionship dominate students' lives and are certainly factors that justify this growing number of incoming students.

### **Outgoing Mobility**

*Where did the FMUC's Students go?*

The language factor is very important when choosing the country and the institution of higher education for a mobility period. As we can see in Table 1, the FMUC's outgoing students chose countries where the communication would be easier. Italy, Spain and France were the most chosen countries, because of their geographical proximity, but also because they facilitate the learning of the languages spoken there as there are many similarities between Portuguese and the local language. Brazil, where the spoken language is the same as in Portugal, was also very popular and the Czech Republic where English is used for teaching.

Table 1. The Five Most Sought-After Countries for Outgoing Mobility

Countries	Total Outgoing (2009/10 – 2018/2019)
Italy	282
Spain	175
Brazil	126
Czech Republic	100
France	72

### Distribution of Outgoing Students by Gender

As may be seen in Figure 2, in all the academic years analyzed, the number of female students who applied and completed a mobility period, outside the FMUC, was always higher. In fact, the total number of female students significantly exceeds that of male students from the FMUC (average 1277 vs. 662, respectively). Traditionally, it is considered that women are by nature more modest, dedicated to caring, less stressful and better-known tasks, while men are associated with being more adventurous and accepting more challenging tasks.

What our experience has shown over these years is that female students have always fought side by side with their male colleagues for the "best" places and opportunities. The fact that more than double the number of females took advantage of the mobility program reinforces this idea and partially explains the trend. They are equally motivated for the international experience, while demonstrating that they are equally, if not more, qualified and competent to respond to the growing need in the contemporary context, in agreement with the findings and reflections of other authors (Desmarais, C. Alksnis, 2005; Dumont et al, 2007).

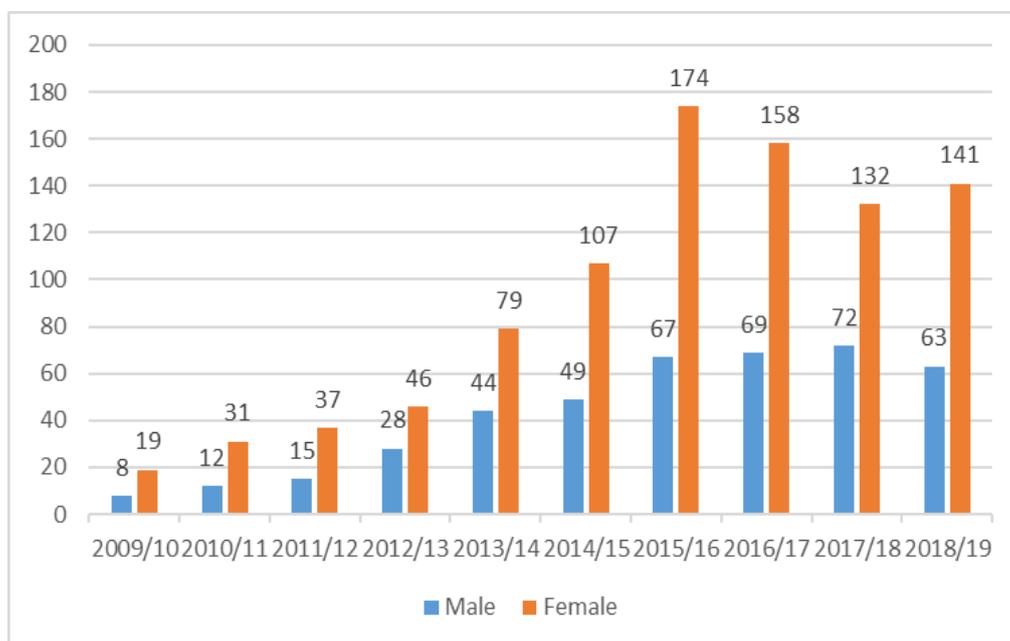


Figure 2. Distribution of The FMUC's Outgoing Students According to Gender

### Traineeship Mobility versus Study Mobility

As we can see in Figure 3, up to the academic year of 2012-13 we had more outgoing students for study mobility (all programs included) than for traineeship mobility, the fact is that traineeship mobility started later than study mobility at the FMUC. However, in 2014, with the entrance of the new ERASMUS Project, ERASMUS+, traineeship mobility escalated.

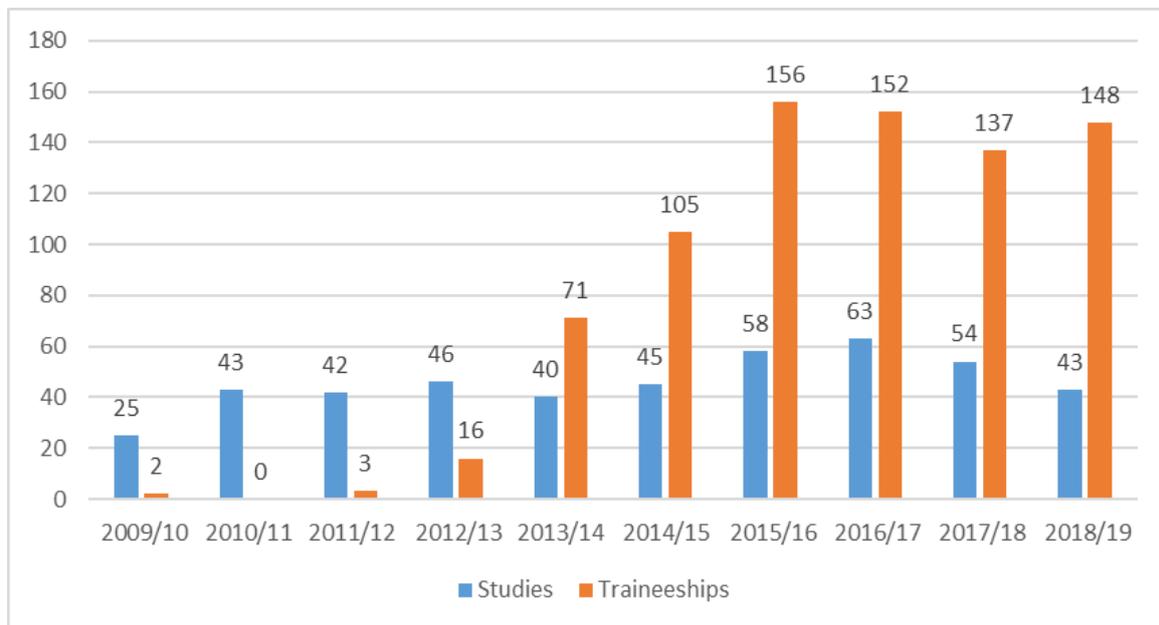


Figure 3. Scope of Mobility of Outgoing Students

In fact, traineeship mobility up to the academic year of 2012/2013 was residual or non-existent, as in 2010/2011. It was in the academic year of 2013-2014 that it more than quadrupled considering the previous academic years of 2011-12 and 2012-2013, (3vs16vs71). After 2013-2014, the increase in the number of outgoing students was due, significantly, to the greater number of outgoing students for Traineeships than for Studies.

Last (6th) year students carried out this mobility traineeship under the MIM. During their degree, the 6th year students have a full clinical year that takes place at the Coimbra Hospital and University Centre. However, some students opted to do their traineeship abroad for at least two main reasons: one was the possibility to complete their traineeship in a shorter period of time abroad, with less financial demands for families, the other one is the fact that there was no need that a bilateral agreement had to exist. That enabled the student to look for the best place to learn and practice clinical procedures in a different hospital, scientific and cultural environment, enriching them as future doctors and citizens, with the bonus that it might open doors for a future job abroad. These were the main reasons why students chose to do a traineeship mobility instead of a study mobility.

According to Asoodar et al. (2014) in their analysis of the IEREST questionnaire, the main reasons why students decide to participate in a mobility program are because of personal reasons. Before they depart, they

believe this experience will help them to be more successful in the future and to become more autonomous and self-confident.

### **Incoming Mobility**

*Where do incoming Students come from?*

As can be seen in Table 2, over the 10 years analyzed, the largest number of incoming students (n = 474) were students from Brazil, followed by students from Italy (n=276). In the third position were incoming students from Spain (n= 228) followed by Germany and the Czech Republic.

Table 2. The Top Five Countries Sending Incoming Students

<b>Countries</b>	<b>Total Incoming (2009/10 – 2018/2019)</b>
Brazil	474
Italy	276
Spain	228
Germany	118
The Czech Republic	86

This shows that Brazilian medical students are very interested in the FMUC, where they apply to do a period of their medical training, with a special demand for clinical practice. In the broader context of higher education, between 2008 and 2012 there was a strong growth (109.1%) in the number of Brazilian students in Portugal, despite the decrease in migration from Brazil to Portugal following the economic crisis and the decrease in the jobs available. However, due to the joint efforts of the Brazilian government and the Portuguese University, the attendance of students, namely at the University of Coimbra, was made as smooth and trouble-free as possible. (Fonseca et al, 2016)

### *Incoming Students by Gender*

As shown in Figure 4, alongside the continued growth of incoming mobility, we can see that there is a gender asymmetry in the 10 years under analysis with regard to incoming students at the FMUC. There is always a predominance of the female gender, which becomes particularly evident from the year 2014-2015 on.

These results are in line with the comment made by Böttcher, et al (2016), who stated that, within the scope of the ERASMUS Program, for almost all participating countries female students are over-represented when compared to the entire population of tertiary level students.

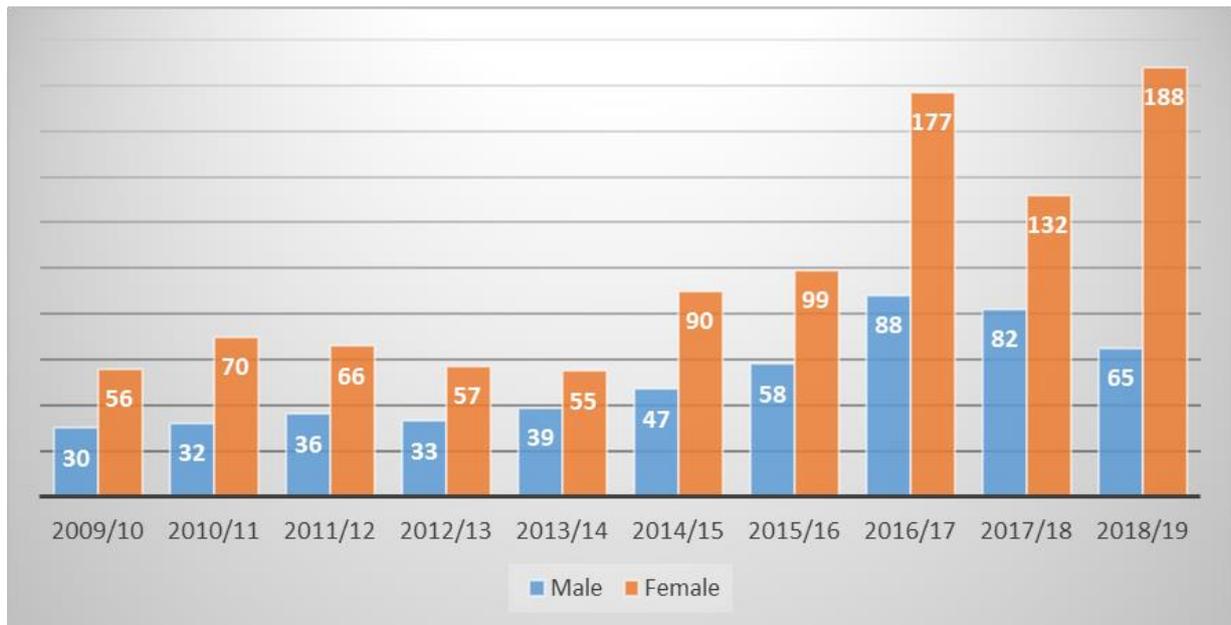


Figure 4. Distribution of Incoming Students According to Gender

### Mobility Programs at the FMUC

The FMUC started participating in mobility programs in 1987, namely the ERASMUS Program. During the 10 years under analysis, we participated in several other mobility programs such as the LLP/ERASMUS and ERASMUS+, Agreements (especially with Brazil), Free Mover and Almeida Garrett. Occasionally, we collaborated with the mobility program “Science without Borders”, created and financed by the Brazilian government, which only existed in Portugal in the academic year 2012/2013; in “AMIDILA”, within the scope of ERASMUS Mundus; “Coimbra Group”, constituting itself as a network of universities that includes European institutions that cooperate in the area for the internationalization of higher education.

In Figure 5, we can see that over a decade, the FMUC received students on a larger scale from institutions covered by the ERASMUS Program to carry out studies, with a total of 686, and with 273 students doing traineeships. The presence of students from Brazil remains significant, both in studies (n=158) and in traineeships (n=177), which is mainly due to the great participation of Brazilian students in the Free Mover Program for Traineeships, where, within the total number of students, the majority is from this country Brazil (n=168).

It is already known that the ERASMUS program has been, in recent years, the mobility program that has involved more students. As Cunha et al (A. Cunha, & Y. Santos, 2018) explains, ERASMUS has achieved its successive targets and grown in size and impact. As can be seen in Table 3, the ERASMUS program was clearly the mobility program that mobilized the most students (n=2063) to study abroad.

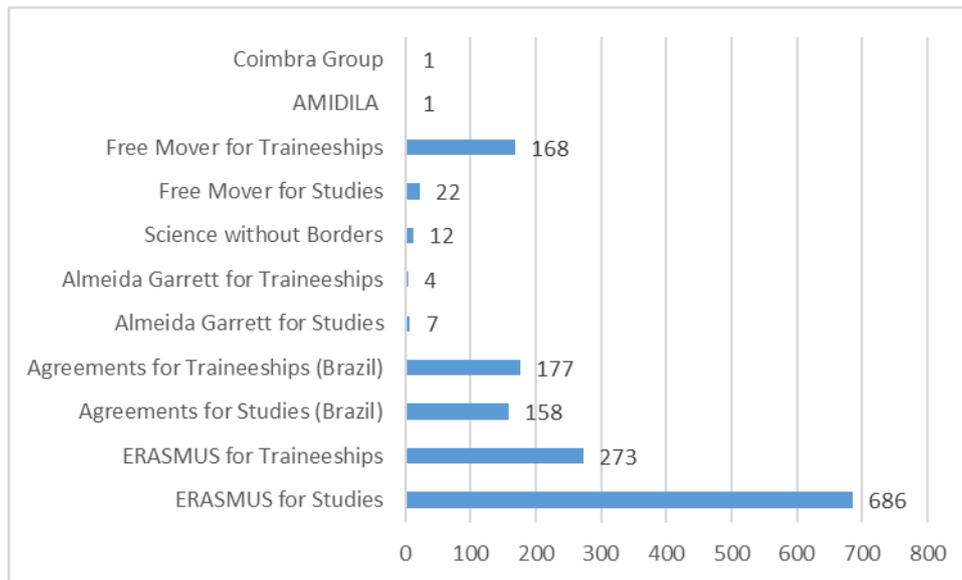


Figure 5. Incoming Mobility Programs at The FMUC

Following the ERASMUS Program, the mobility program with more exchange students, was Agreements (n=471). This program mainly supported exchange students from and to Brazilian Universities, this program was very sought-after, especially by students from Brazil, who came to the FMUC to carry out both studies and traineeships.

Table 3. Participation at the FMUC by Mobility Programs (2009-2019)

Mobility Programs	Incoming	Outgoing
ERASMUS (LLP/ERASMUS And ERASMUS+)	959	1,104
Agreements	335	136
Free Mover	190	1
Almeida Garrett	11	79
Science without Borders	12	0
Coimbra Group	1	0
AMIDILA	1	0
TOTAL	1,509	1,320

The proximity of European countries and the fact that the ERASMUS program is supported with a scholarship, which is not the case under the scope of the Agreements program that covers countries outside Europe and which may or may not be supported by a scholarship, are reasons that may help to explain the preferences shown by students.

The Free Mover Program, for studies and for traineeships which, by definition is a program where a student participates under credit mobility outside an organized student mobility program (WeAreFreeMovers, 2020),

has played an important role for incoming students at the FMUC. In fact, the FMUC has been accepting applications from institutions with which there are no bilateral agreements, allowing students from all over the world to experience a mobility period at the FMUC. Only one student from the FMUC has benefited from the Free Mover program. The student wanted to attend a University in the United States of America for the second time and where the possibility of being admitted under the ERASMUS Program was not possible, whereas by using this program, he was able to do so.

## Conclusion

Higher education students in general and medical students in particular have numerous opportunities to take a period of their graduation at a foreign university (Ebrahimi-Fakhari et al, 2014; Störmann et al, 2018). The various mobility programs, but above all the ERASMUS Program, allows students to experience different cultures and teaching activities, both when studying and doing traineeships. Learning and/or improving knowledge of a new language is also considered very important in this context, which is in alignment with what is recommended by the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) that emphasizes the need for the development of communicative linguistic and sociolinguistic competence (CEFR, 2011). In short, taking the opportunity to study abroad students gain experience and professional training, but also personal preparation as citizens of an increasingly global world. The work developed over these ten years has contributed to fostering the participation of the FMUC students in mobility programs and at the same time for the international dissemination of the Faculty of Medicine and the University of Coimbra.

This report has addressed incoming and outgoing mobility under various mobility programs. We can draw conclusions from four different perspectives. The first is related to the number of students who experienced an exchange period abroad in countries like Spain, Italy and Brazil, whose language is similar to the Portuguese language. Secondly, in relation to the students who went to or came from countries with a closer proximity to Portugal, here Spain and Italy are definitely the two top countries. The third perspective concerns gender, both the incoming and outgoing mobility over the past ten years were dominated by female students. Lastly, there was a significant increase in the traineeship mobility with the beginning of the ERASMUS+ Program in 2014. It is our belief that, it has definitely changed hundreds of students' lives, both incoming and outgoing students, in many ways at a personal but also at an academic level.

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