# INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS IN PORTUGAL

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## ABSTRACT

This paper aims to make an exploratory analysis of the admission and retention policies towards foreign students enrolled in tertiary education in Portugal. Despite the limitations of the available data, we may conclude that throughout the last decade there has been a remarkable growth in the number of international students, namely from Brazil, Angola and Cape Verde. Portuguese policy has been driven by three fundamental pillars: the directions issued from the European institutions, the move towards the internationalization of higher education institutions and the continued cooperation with the former African colonies and Brazil.

## INTRODUCTION

The economic globalization and the rising demand for highly skilled professionals in the most developed countries has been followed by the growth of the international mobility of students and by the internationalisation of higher education. According to Hugonnier (2007) the effects of this mobility are visible in three dimensions: the growing number of students persuing higher education that are studying abroad; the rapid increase in the number of universities with a campus located in a foreign country and the number of partnerships or cooperative relationships developed with a foreign country by numerous universities and higher-education institutions. Thus, some of the more advanced economies like Canada and Australia have been developing active recruitment policies of highly skilled immigrants or higher education foreign students for a long time.

In the European Union, this issue was largely debated in the context of the so-called Lisbon Strategy, set out by the European Council in March 2000, which aimed to make the EU "the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world capable of sustained economic growth with more and better jobs and greater social cohesion" by the year 2010. The European Commission has also long been showing its concern with the brain drain of EU citizens to the USA and in 2005 a communication presenting the Policy Plan on Legal Migration proposed the establishment of a "Green card" similar to that of the USA for highly skilled migrants (Commission of the European Communities 2005). However, only in May 2009, did the European Council definitively agree to set out a "Blue Card", designed to attract highly skilled people from outside Europe. Under this scheme, high-skilled non-EU citizens can obtain an EU-wide work permit allowing them to work and live in any country within the European Union, excluding Denmark, Ireland and the United Kingdom, which are not subject to the proposal (Council Directive 2009/50/EC).

The EU has developed active policies stimulating the international mobility of students, teachers and researchers. The most sought and known are the large scale mobility programmes in the EU (like *Erasmus*) in which the student takes all or a part of his/her education in a foreign country. More recently the *Erasmus Mundus* programme improved mobility between the European Union and other parts of the world. The EU Commission has also put in place the Alfa programme for higher education with the aim to expand co-operation programmes with specific parts of the world, in this case with Latin America.

Recognizing the growing political relevance of the international mobility of students and the internationalization of higher education in Europe, the Council of Europe tried to introduce a more humanist vision of this issue in the public debate to enhance the personal and social development paradigm against the economic paradigm which has dominated the policy orientations for higher education (Serrano-Velarde 2010). In order to achieve this, the project "The University Between Humanism and the Market – Redefining its Values and Functions for the

21st Century" was launched at the international conference "New challenges to European higher education", (20-21 November 2007).

In Portugal, the political debate on the importance of attracting and promoting the settlement of highly skilled professionals, mainly Portuguese citizens living abroad, only acquired some relevance at the beginning of the 21st century, following the launch of the Lisbon Strategy during the Portuguese Presidency of the EU. Thus, the Support Office for the Integration in Portugal of PhDs Living Abroad was set up in the National Foundation for Science and Technology (FCT) in 2001. It not only provides information on the Portuguese research institutions and on the corresponding integration opportunities, it also mediates contacts with those institutions and shares travel and settlement expenses in Portugal. Moreover, complying with the Resolution of the Council of Ministers no. 24/2001, a specific Internet site was created (http://www.eracareers.pt/) to promote scientific and technological employment. This site advertised all research positions made available in public institutions, and in general, all remaining employment offers of this nature by public institutions which have to be published in the official journal of the Portuguese Republic (*Diário da República*). Additionally, this site is used to publicise offers of scientific and technological jobs in private institutions.

As argued by Suter and Jandl (2008, 403), the growing international competition for talented human capital was also visible in the development of policies to recruit higher education students as a potential source of qualified labour. Therefore, the international competition among universities to attract the most talented students has become more acute because its capacity to recruit foreign students positively influences its position in the international rankings. On the other hand, in the perspective of many students, attending a foreign university is a path to emigration.

This paper aims to make an exploratory analysis of the admission and retention policies towards foreign students and the evolution of international students in Portuguese universities.

## ADMISSION AND INTEGRATION POLICIES TOWARDS INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS

Being traditionally an emigration country with a vast colonial empire that lasted until the mid-1970s, Portugal and its policies have facilitated access to higher education for Portuguese emigrants and their descendents residing abroad as well as students from Portuguese-speaking African countries holding cooperation agreements with Portugal, natives from East Timor and civil servants in official missions abroad. For these individuals and their families, there has always been a special agreement defined in the law (Decree-Law no. 393-A/99, of 2nd October).

Unlike what occurs in other EU member states, in Portugal there are no active policies to attract foreign students. The existing initiatives are essentially the result of the transposition to the national laws of the directions given by the EU institutions from the so-called Bologna Process, as well as the participation of Portugal in programs to stimulate intra-European and trans-European mobility among European students in the scope of the ERASMUS and ERASMUS MUNDUS programmes (see: Commission of the European Communities 2009).

The principles of the Bologna Declaration, simultaneously promoting European cohesion through knowledge, mobility and the employability of its graduates, were incorporated into national law by the Decree-Law no. 42/2005, of 22nd February. In a similar fashion, in order to facilitate and stimulate the retention of foreign students, the rules for transferring a foreign degree to the standards of Portuguese higher education were changed in 2007 (Ministerial Order no. 401/2007, of 5th April ). Moreover, the new Immigration Law (Act 23/2007, 4 July 2007) transposes into the Portuguese judicial framework the EU Council Directive (no. 2004/114/CE, of 13th December 2004) on the conditions of admission of third-country nationals for the purposes of studies, pupil exchange, unremunerated training and voluntary service. Under this directive (the "Students Directive"), EU Member States shall facilitate the admission procedure for students, including issuing the necessary visas in a timely manner. Provisions were also made to allow third-country national students to study in various EU Member States.

Portuguese higher education institutions, mainly the ones with more international prestige, have been stimulated to develop internationalization strategies to coincide with these policy orientations. These guidelines are linked to the growing relevance given by performance assessment panels to the ability of recruiting foreign students and to the participation of Portuguese universities in international cooperation projects (intra-EU and also with institutions from third-countries) in the domains of education and research. Therefore, in the last decade there has been a remarkable growth both in the number of Portuguese students taking part in the ERASMUS/SOCRATES international mobility programmes, as well as in the amount of students coming from foreign universities to Portugal under the same programmes.

In terms of the government measures adopted to stimulate the internationalization of higher education and research in Portugal, the assignment of scholarships, mainly PhD and post-doctoral fellowships, are particularly important. Moreover, there has been a significant growth

in the number and proportion of PhD and post-doc scholarships given to foreign students, with particular relevance to Brazilians. Thus, from 1994 to 2009, the proportion of scholarships given to PhD foreign students increased from 2% to 18% and from 14% to 31% to post-docs.

The intensification of immigration to Portugal observed in the transition from the 20th to the 21st century and the goals defined in the Lisbon Strategy led to the adoption of some specific measures to facilitate the access of foreign residents in Portugal into higher education.

The changes in access for foreign citizens to higher education introduced in 2007 were complemented by a new measure to simplify and streamline the validation process of documentation of third-country nationals who intend to establish a formal link with a higher education institution or who were attending classes there. This measure, designated "Simplified Certification of Foreign Citizens in the Access to Higher Education" is essentially an access, via web service, to SEF's (Foreign and Borders Office) database by each university. Thus, the foreign students do not have to go to SEF facilities in order to collect the documentation allowing them to stay in Portugal and higher education institutions can validate the situation of foreign candidates (third-country nationals) by simply checking their respective passport at the moment of enrolment.

In the domain of social support in higher education, the Portuguese State promotes access to the benefits of social support to foreign students with a permanent residence permit and to long-term residents in an attempt to eliminate discrimination by nationality. This group includes nationals from the EU member states, stateless persons, political refugees and foreign students from countries that maintain cooperation agreements with Portugal (Decree-Law no. 204/2009, of 31st August).

The Plan for the Integration of Immigrants (2010-2013) includes a specific measure supporting the hosting and integration of foreign students and their families through the reinforcement of the cooperation between higher education institutions and the Ministry of Science, Technology and Higher Education. This includes information sessions for foreign students and other actors in order to eliminate obstacles that may arise through misinformation (Resolution of the Council of Ministers no. 74/2010).

All in all, one may conclude that the Portuguese policy for attracting and integrating foreign students has been guided by three fundamental pillars: the directions originating from the European institutions, the stimulus to the internationalization of higher education institutions and the development of the cooperation with the Community of Portuguese Speaking Countries - CPLP (Angola, Mozambique, Cape Verde, Guinea-Bissau, S. Tome and Prince, East Timor and Brazil).

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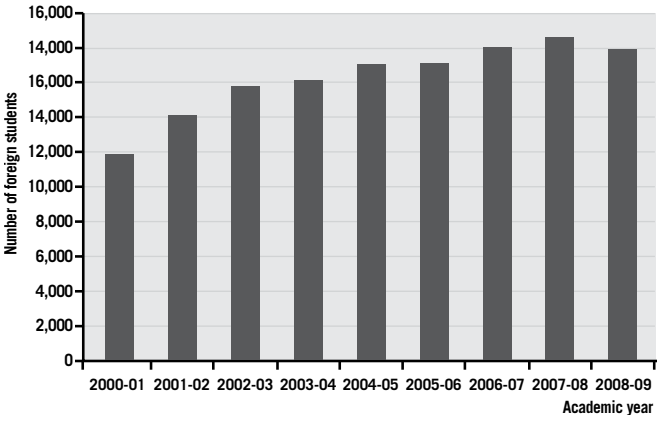
Portugal is not a very attractive destination for post-secondary education. In 2004 it ranked 21st in the world in terms of the number of foreign students enrolled in tertiary education (IOM 2008).

Unfortunately the statistics available in Portugal do not allow identifying the non-resident foreign students, who have entered the country for study purposes, from the resident foreign students. Thus, apparently, the number of "foreign" students is an overestimation of mobile international students. However, this information gap is partially compensated for by the special conditions of access that were created for the Portuguese students living abroad which are not different from those who live in national territory. Thus, the statistical data available on foreign students enrolled in Portuguese universities and polytechnic institutes should be interpreted as an approximation of the international students in Portugal.

In 2008-09 there were 17,900 foreign students registered Portuguese higher education institutions, 48% being male students and around 52% female students. Among these, 34.5% were enrolled in the 1st year for the first time.

Since the 2000-01 academic year there has been an increase in the number of foreign students registered in higher education institutions (11,911, in the 2000-01 school year and 17,900 in 2008-09), which corresponds to a growth rate of 50.3% (Fig. 1). In the same period, the number of Portuguese students experienced a decrease of -5.3%.

**FIGURE 1: Numbers of foreign students enrolled in tertiary education in Portugal, 2000/01 – 2008/09**




Source: GPEARI/MCTES, own calculations.

In a disaggregated analysis by continent and main origin countries (Fig. 2 and 3), the growing number of students coming from American (especially from Brazil) and European countries, particularly from the Ukraine, must be pointed out. Since 2006-07 there has been a decrease in the number of African students, particularly among Angolans and Cape Verdeans. The Asians, although still few in number (491 in 2008-09) have been growing very fast, namely the Chinese who have tripled their number in just eight years.

The decrease in the Cape-Verdean students, observed since 2006, is related to the establishment of a University in the archipelago and the development of agreements between Portuguese and Cape Verdean universities allowing Portuguese teachers to work there. In a similar fashion, the decrease of foreign students from Angola is also associated with the expansion of higher education institutions in that country, including the installation of some Portuguese private universities (*Universidade Lusófona, Instituto Piaget* and *Universidade Lusíada*).

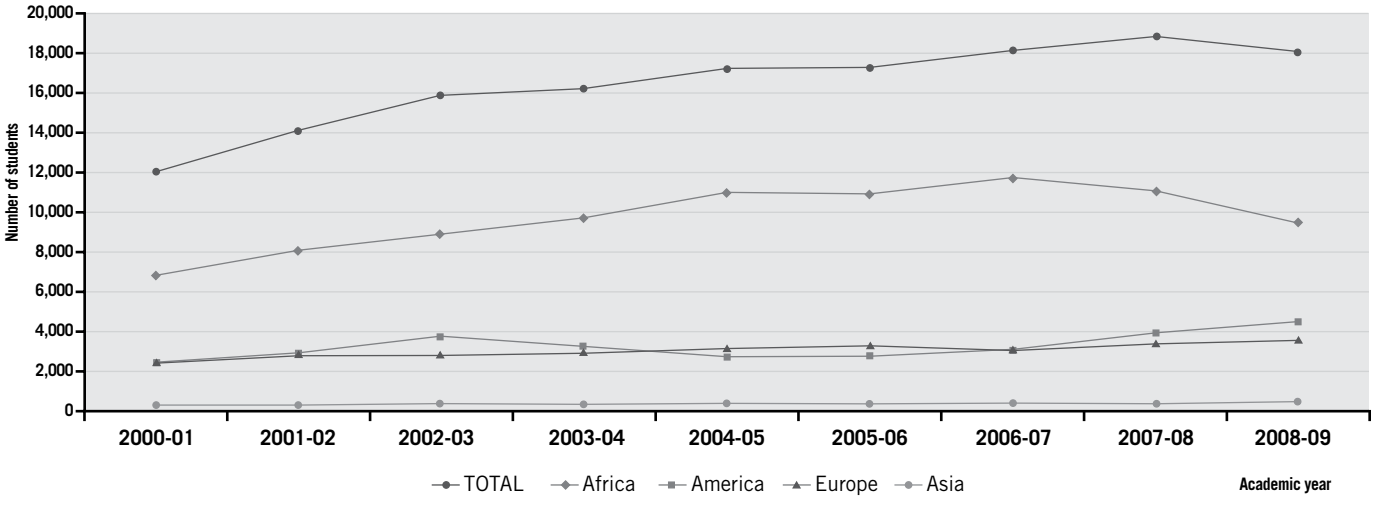
In the 2008-09 school year, foreign students enrolled in Portuguese higher education institutions came from forty different nationalities, although 61.1% were from only three different countries: Brazil (21.1%), Angola (20%) and Cape Verde (19.8%). Besides the Portuguese Speaking African Countries (PALOP) and Brazil, which represent 72% of the total number of students, among the top fifteen countries with the largest number of students registered in tertiary education in Portugal, there is also a group of EU countries (Spain, France, Italy, Germany, Poland and Romania), the Ukraine and USA (Fig. 3).

The reasons for this distribution are twofold: the colonial history of Portugal on the one hand, and the process of integration in the EU on the other. The reason for the presence of so many Brazilian and Ukrainian foreign students is possibly related to the major recent waves of immigrants from these countries. However, the comparison between the top fifteen countries of origin among foreign students and the fifteen largest groups of foreign nationalities living legally in Portugal corroborates the relevance of the cultural and linguistic similarity and also the historical relations between Portugal and the PALOP and Brazil, in the international mobility patterns of students that choose Portugal to pursue their post-secondary studies (Figs. 3 and 4).

As previously mentioned, students from the Community of Portuguese Speaking Countries (CPLP) have some advantages accessing higher education institutions in Portugal other than their fluency in the language. These advantages are the result of the protocols signed between Portugal and the other CPLP members that allow for special conditions of access to fellow students from these countries, and of the access to internal scholarships and bursaries made available by the Portuguese government.

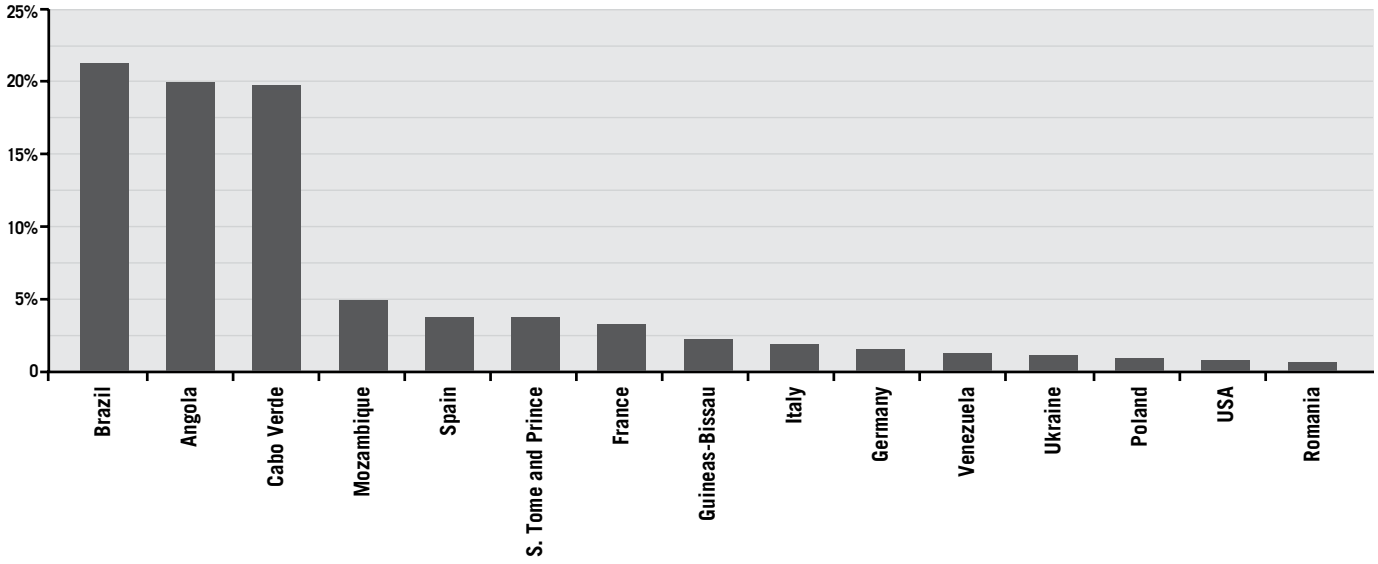
The diversity of students from European countries can be explained by the number of students involved in the Erasmus/Socrates programme, some of whom are descendents of Portuguese emigrants living in those countries. For them, the command of the Portuguese language, the presence of relatives or even the expectation of returning to Portugal are factors that can explain the option of studying in Portugal. The attraction of students coming from Italy and Spain can be justified by the language proximity which is reinforced, in the case of Spain, by the

**FIGURE 2: Foreign students enrolled in Portuguese higher education by continent of origin, 2000/01-2008/09.**




Source: GPEARI/MCTES, own calculations.

FIGURE 3: Foreign students enrolled in tertiary education in Portugal, in 2008-09, by country of nationality (top 15)




Source: GPEARI/MCTES, own calculations.

geographical closeness.

The growth observed in the group of foreign students from Eastern European countries (Ukraine, Romania, Poland, Bulgaria) can be explained by the recent migration trends of these countries towards Western and Southern Europe. Some of these students likely came to Portugal in mobility programmes like Erasmus/Socrates. Others are likely students who immigrated after finishing their secondary studies and chose to pursue their higher education in Portugal. Some of them might also be immigrant workers who find too many obstacles in seeing their qualifications recognized and try to obtain a new degree in Portugal.

A detailed analysis by gender and area of education and training shows that, with the exception of the PALOP countries, more foreign females are registered in higher education institutions in Portugal than foreign males. In terms of educational and training area, the number of female students is higher than that of men among graduates in Education, Social Sciences, Commerce, Law, Health and Social Protection (with the exception of Eastern European Students). The male students usually are more frequently found in engineering degrees. Most of the foreign students are registered in state universities and only 19.2% graduate from polytechnic institutions, with a more professional orientation.

## CONCLUDING REMARKS

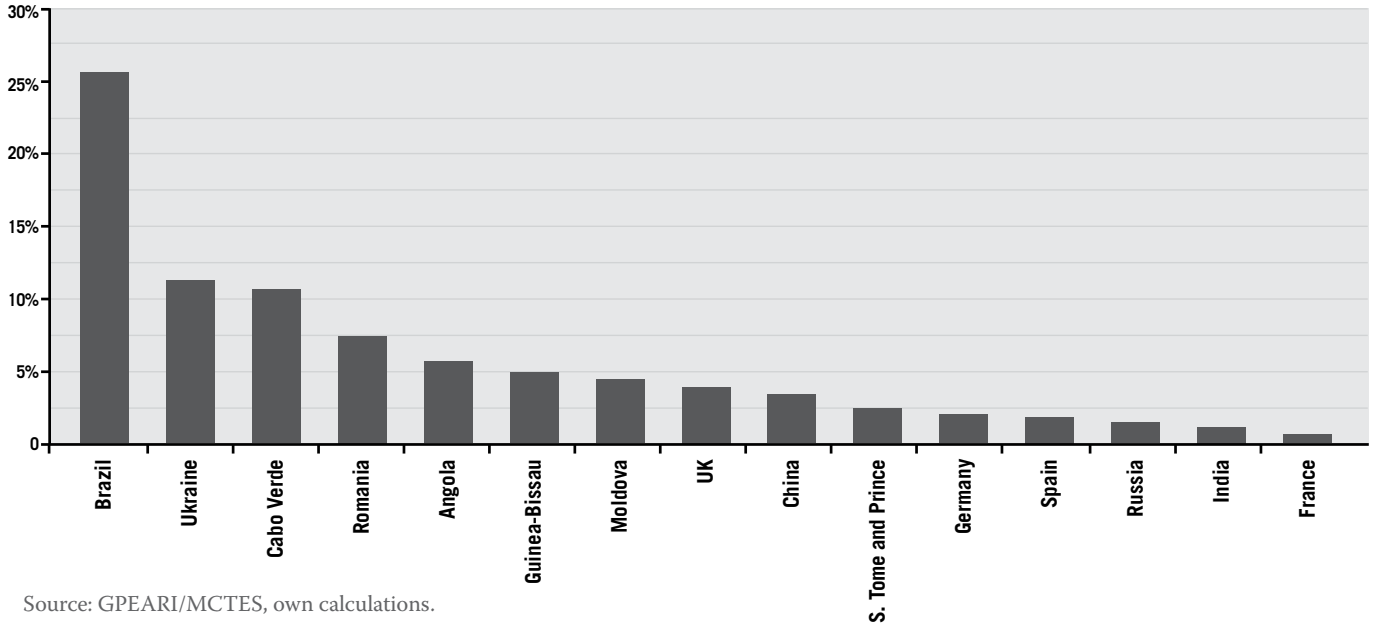
In the context of the developed economies of the OECD, Portugal is an unattractive destination for students who seek tertiary education in a foreign country. However, the indicators analysed show that throughout the last decade there has been a remarkable growth in the number of higher education students coming from other countries and suggest that this trend, as well as the internationalization of Portuguese higher education and research, will continue.

Most foreign students who attend higher education institutions in Portugal come from the African Portuguese-speaking countries (PALOP) and Brazil, followed, at a great distance by the EU member states, other countries in Europe and in the American continent where important Portuguese emigrant communities can be found, as well as immigrants and their offspring living in Portugal. Therefore, the linguistic and cultural and geographic proximity, as well as the Erasmus and Socrates inter-university mobility programmes sponsored by the EU, are the main factors influencing international mobility of students to Portugal.

Considering the weak competitiveness of the national higher education system, Portugal has taken advantage of the cooperation between Portuguese-speaking countries to facilitate the access of students from these countries to the Portuguese universities (both among internal and external foreign students) and to provide scholarships to PhD students and post-doctoral fellows.

Following this trend, Portuguese universities have tried to benefit from the advantages resulting from the common heritage of the Portuguese language, promoting diverse forms of collaboration, namely in advanced training with similar institutions from the PALOP countries, Brazil,

**FIGURE 4: Top 15 nationalities of documented foreign residents in Portugal, 2009**




Source: GPEARI/MCTES, own calculations.

East Timor and Macao. However, in the scope of these cooperation programmes, the policy of scholarships for foreign students is neither coordinated with the needs of the student's countries of origin, nor with the needs of the Portuguese society in terms of highly skilled professionals.

There is no information about the number of international students staying in Portugal after obtaining their higher education academic degree. Thus, it is difficult to assess to what extent the increase in the number of foreign students enrolled in Portuguese universities is framed by a future migration project (an entry door to Europe) aimed at facilitating their incorporation into the national labour market or to re-emigrate to another European country, or if it is an international circulation of competencies.

Portugal is one of the European countries with the lowest number of graduates. The number of academic staff with a PhD in public universities has been steadily increasing over the last decade . However, it is still low by international standards (OECD 2006).

Since the mid-nineties, the Portuguese government has been promoting the internationalization of the national scientific and technological system, increasing the number of scholarships for PhDs and post-docs and financing research projects. However, the rising number of PhD holders has not been followed by the growth of scientific jobs in Portugal, leading to the risk of a brain drain in Portugal and the increasing permanence of Portuguese scientists abroad.

These obstacles may also be negatively reflected in the attraction of international students, even among students from Portuguese-speaking countries who are the main international market for advanced training programmes within Portuguese universities and polytechnic institutes.

The combination of a possible brain drain of the more skilled Portuguese young people and the difficulties of attracting students and skilled professionals from abroad are a serious threat to the creation and diffusion of knowledge, technological modernization and to the economic and social development of Portugal.

Therefore, as stated by the OECD (2006) the international qualification of Portuguese tertiary education is essential for the development of the country and the employability of its graduates. This challenge involves the consolidation of the transition initiated with the implementation of the Bologna process, from an education system based on the transmission of knowledge to a system based on competence building. It also implies the reinforcement of the participation of Portuguese universities in international research and education networks through the enlargement of partnerships with foreign universities, namely of the European area and from the Community of Portuguese Speaking Countries. Moreover, it is important to keep in mind that to attract international students and to increase the competitiveness of Portuguese universities and polytechnic institutes we must consider the skills needed to modernize the national productive fabric as well as the training needs of professionals from Portuguese-speaking countries. Therefore, policies guiding the

Portuguese higher education system should be in tune with national economic and social development policies and the strengthening cooperation between Portugal and the Portuguese-speaking countries.

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## FOOTNOTES

[1] When enrolling in a Portuguese higher education institution at the beginning of the school year (moment when all students fill in the form to collect statistical data), and staying in Portugal for at least two semesters, the Erasmus students are counted in the official statistics as foreign students.

[2] It should be noted that the growth in the number of PhDs was largely based on "in-house" training.