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Exploring Higher Education Mobility through the Lens of Academic Tourism: Portugal as a Study Case

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Abstract: This study seeks to expand the understanding of international academic tourism by revisiting concepts and their associations with the internationalisation of higher education and analysing the implications of the COVID-19 pandemic. This research takes Portugal as a study case, drawing on secondary data. From a theoretical standpoint, this work makes a significant contribution to addressing persistent conceptual ambiguities. In managerial terms, the findings hold significance for advancing Portugal as an academic tourism destination and raising awareness among tourism and educational stakeholders about the relevance and competitive advantages of international academic tourism. Finally, we reflect upon the pandemic effects and potential repercussions of future challenges on international academic tourism globally.

Keywords: academic tourism; COVID-19; international students; internationalisation of higher education; Portugal



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1. Introduction

Globally, the last few decades have seen consistent growth in the number of students who choose to study abroad. According to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [1], the mobility of international students across the globe has risen from 2 million in 1998 to 6.1 million in 2019, representing an average annual growth of 4.8% per year. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, projections from the OECD also indicated that by 2025, 8 million students would be pursuing tertiary education abroad [2]. This significant growth can primarily be attributed to the focus on the internationalisation of higher education, which has become a global, strategic, and mainstream phenomenon over the past 25 years [3]. This trend has been influenced by the globalisation of economies and societies and the growing significance of knowledge [4], exchange programs, and student travel [5]. International student mobility has also become a priority for higher education institutions (HEI) as it generates significant financial revenue [6] while yielding both economic and social benefits to the host destination [7].

Considered a subset of educational tourism with distinguishable characteristics from other types of tourism [8,9], academic tourism has been primarily studied in terms of the motivations of international students (e.g., [7,10–12]); their economic, social, and cultural impact on destinations; and the benefits for these students (e.g., [13–16]), or from the perspective of international students as academic tourists (e.g., [17–21]). Although substantive work has been conducted, this is still an under-researched academic field [15]. Furthermore, there is still ongoing debate and a lack of consensus regarding the precise terminology and classifications used [5,22]. In addition, studies focusing on the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on academic institutions and destinations (e.g., [20,23,24]) are scarce [6]. Hence, it is imperative to broaden the scope of research in this domain [6], encompassing both theoretical and applied dimensions.

The objective of this study is twofold. Firstly, we revisit the concept of international academic tourism by examining its associations with educational tourism and the internationalisation of higher education. This paper contributes to the theoretical understanding of this field by adopting a tourism approach that specifically focuses on HEI-led mobility. Secondly, given the paucity of research on the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on international academic tourism, this study examines the impact of the pandemic on the influx of international higher education students to Portugal, considering the previous conceptual clarification, which proves to be pertinent. Data analysis is framed within the context of motivational theory, emphasising the push–pull framework combined with cost–benefit reasoning. This approach provides a comprehensive understanding of the factors that influenced international academic tourism during the pandemic, thereby presenting insightful implications for forthcoming endeavours considering the global geopolitics of knowledge. The findings will assist policymakers and stakeholders in their efforts to formulate strategies that enhance the competitiveness and sustainability of academic tourism destinations and diversify countries' tourism portfolios.

The paper is structured as follows. After the introduction, a comprehensive review of the relevant literature in the fields of academic tourism and international academic mobility clarifies existing knowledge and identifies research gaps. An analysis of Portugal as a study destination for academic tourism is then conducted using secondary sources. Ultimately, the investigation culminates with the identification of significant implications and the formulation of conclusive findings.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Academic Tourism

Disentangling the concepts related to academic tourism proves to be a challenging task. According to the generally accepted definitions of tourism, educational tourism, and internationally mobile students, there is a significant overlap between tourism and student mobility [25]. The current definition of tourism encompasses numerous trips made by international students. From a spatiotemporal perspective typical of tourism, those students “taking short-term courses (less than one year) are visitors”, i.e., they are considered in tourism statistics, “whereas those taking long-term courses (one year or more) should be considered within their usual environment in their place of study and be excluded from visitors” [26] (p. 20).

Also, the term “educational tourism” has been used as a broad motivational concept to refer to any travel inspired by a desire to learn [27,28]. That includes formal and non-formal education (e.g., cultural tourism activities), with an emphasis on “education-first” as opposed to “tourism-first” [28]. In turn, international higher education mobility has substantially grown as its own phenomenon, generating vast research [22]. To circumscribe those who travel for formal study, the concept of academic tourism emerged, with the internationalisation of higher education adding a new dimension to travel patterns and creating an important sub-sector in tourism based on education [16,29].

Nevertheless, even when referring to students travelling to study at other educational institutions, this type of tourism continues to be termed in different ways, for example, educational tourism, edu-tourism, educational travel, or academic tourism [15,28–30]. In this study, the term “academic tourism” is adopted, within the broader context of educational tourism, often associated with cultural and youth tourism [9].

In this context, international academic tourism has been gaining importance as an alternative type of tourism. This is driven by the need for tourism destinations to enhance their competitiveness and sustainability by diversifying their product offerings and targeting various market segments. Previous research reveals a variety of benefits associated with the influx of international students at academic destinations: a reduction in seasonality due to the long stay of students; the distribution of visitor flow to destinations other than mature ones; the promotion of different routes and destinations beyond conventional tourism; and return visits to the study location and recommendations to friends and family about the

destination [31]. Furthermore, they frequently receive visits from family and friends and average expenditure is more substantial as academic stays are typically longer than other trips [32].

2.2. Academic Tourism and the Internationalisation of Higher Education

International academic mobility research is grounded in a variety of research fields. The push–pull model, associated with motivation theory, remains a dominant lens in the current literature on international academic mobility, primarily explaining motivations and choices for mobility [22]. Motivation theory, immigration theory, acculturation theory, learning theory, and capital theory are the most used theories to study international student mobility [6].

Academic tourism and the internationalisation of higher education are intrinsically connected, sharing a common history related to the process of travelling for educational purposes [15]. However, most of the theoretical advances have been made in the internationalisation of higher education rather than in academic tourism. Over the past 25 years, internationalisation has evolved from “a marginal and minor component to a global, strategic, and mainstream factor in higher education” [3] (p. 2). This evolution has been influenced by the globalisation of economies and societies and the increased importance of knowledge [4]. Erasmus (European Region Action Scheme for the Mobility of University Students) and other higher education initiatives in Europe have boosted internationalisation, while cooperation agreements between universities have increased tertiary student enrolment in other regions [8]. University strategic plans, national policy statements, regionalisation initiatives, international declarations, and academic articles are some examples that indicate that the “internationalization of higher education has come of age” [3] (p. 3).

One of the main dimensions of the internationalisation of higher education, well reflected in growing student mobility numbers worldwide [33], is related to student mobility [34]:

1. Degree mobility, which involves the students pursuing a full degree abroad (Bachelor, Master, PhD, Post-docs) at an institution in the host country [35,36]. Those students (enrolled as regular students) are commonly referred to as international, foreign, or visa students [37].
2. Credit mobility, which occurs when students (known as exchange students, such as those in the European Erasmus programme) undertake a short-term mobility experience and transfer credits from an HEI in the host country back to their home degree [35,36]. These students remain enrolled in their home countries while receiving credits from their host institutions, and the length of credit mobility varies from six weeks to one year in the US and from two months to one year in Europe [34].
3. Certificate mobility, which involves shorter stays abroad to improve skills (e.g., summer programme, cultural or language courses, conferences, workshops) [34].

Academic staff mobility is a crucial aspect of internationalisation, involving the presence of an international faculty at HEI worldwide [34]. Programme mobility, also known as transnational education or cross-border education delivery, is concerned with the mobility of programmes and institutions [37]. Online mobility includes a variety of activities and models, including online distance education and massive open online courses (MOOCs). Internationalisation at home refers to the intentional integration of international and intercultural dimensions into the curriculum within domestic learning environments [38]. The internationalisation of research encompasses facets such as international funding for research, patents, publications, citations, funding for visiting scholars, faculty exchange programs, and project-based research grants [35].

Figure 1 illustrates the interrelationships between educational tourism, academic international tourism, and the internationalisation of higher education, employing a spatiotemporal perspective grounded in the tourism approach. This perspective focuses on formal learning and institution-led tourism. The proposed diagram visually represents the

conceptual and practical overlapping of educational tourism and the internationalisation of higher education, resulting in the delimitation of international academic tourism. The spatial criterion, distinguished by intra-country and cross-border movements, helps differentiate between academic tourism taking place within the same country and international academic tourism. Additionally, the temporal criterion discriminates between individuals categorised as international academic tourists and non-residents who are studying or participating in academic stays abroad, based on whether their stays are shorter or longer than one year. Various forms that these concepts assume are included in the diagram to illustrate and better define each phenomenon.



Figure 1. Interconnections between educational tourism, academic international tourism, and internationalisation of higher education. Source: Authors' own elaboration.

2.3. International Students as Academic Tourists

When international students choose a study destination, they consider various factors. These factors can be categorised as push and pull factors, according to the push–pull motivation theory that explains how travel decisions are made.

Push factors may include economic and political circumstances in the student's home country [11]. Additionally, personal motivations such as the potential for improved job prospects, financial opportunities, networking with international contacts, socialising, making new friends, experiencing new cultures, or enhancing language skills also play a role in their decision-making process [10,12,39–41].

In turn, pull factors are related to factors operating within a host country, making it relatively attractive to international students [11,42]. These factors directly influence the choice of host country and higher education institution [10–12,40] and include the level of safety in the country, how diverse and multicultural the environment is, the overall quality of life, the uniqueness of the culture, the connection between the student's country of origin and the host country, the potential to obtain immigrant status, the comparative cost of living, and the availability of job opportunities during the student's period of residence [10,12,39–41,43–45].

Additionally, over the last few years, some authors have studied the behaviour of international students as academic tourists. Academic tourists exhibit some particularities: the purpose of their stay is to engage in higher education studies, the duration of their stay is longer compared to other types of trips, their consumption patterns resemble those of residents more than traditional tourists, and their lodging is mostly in shared apartments, dorms with families, and student residences [9]. However, in addition to their academic pursuits, they also visit local attractions and explore other regions of the host countries, either alone or with friends and family [17–19,30]. Their travel behaviour shares

similarities with other tourists, and their expenditures on transportation, visits to cultural attractions, dining at local restaurants, and consumption of local food contribute to the local economy [46]. Moreover, their positive word-of-mouth, potential for future visits, and the fact that many students receive visits from family and loved ones all contribute to a higher likelihood of repeat visits. Indeed, their “whole experience—touching, smelling, hearing, tasting, and seeing—in foreign countries, perfectly matches the ‘tourism as an embodied practice’ argument” [18] (p. 1008).

3. Portugal as an International Academic Tourist Destination

Portugal, a small country located in southern Europe, was chosen for this study due to its remarkable growth in the number of international students enrolling in higher education in recent years, being considered a “micro-niche of educational travel” [8] (p. 24). This growth can be attributed to various initiatives introduced in 2014, such as the launch of a national strategy for the internationalisation of higher education [47], legislative changes facilitating the enrolment of international students, financial incentives, a national framework of action, and marketing initiatives specifically targeting international students. Efforts to enhance Portugal’s attractiveness as an academic destination have also been reinforced through nationwide coordination among various Portuguese organisations [48].

Moreover, Portugal’s renowned attributes, such as quality education, affordable cost of living, multicultural and welcoming environment [49], and its ranking as the seventh safest country in the world in 2023 [50], make it an attractive destination for students seeking safety and hospitality. Furthermore, Portugal offers political, economic, and social stability.

To address the gap in research concerning the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on international academic tourism, one of the envisioned objectives of this study involves analysing official existing secondary data from the Portuguese General Directorate of Education and Science Statistics (DGEEC) and the Portuguese National Institute of Statistics (INE). The analysis will cover both pre-pandemic and post-pandemic periods, specifically focusing on the academic year 2013/2014 onwards. This timeline is chosen because, since 2014, Portugal has actively promoted its higher education abroad [48]. The dataset includes information on all students enrolled in various courses and study cycles offered by Portuguese Higher Education Institutions (HEI) and has been sourced from the DGEEC [51]. Furthermore, this study combines a push–pull framework of analysis with a cost–benefit rationale to examine decision-making in times of crisis, such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

A new definition of international academic tourism will also be proposed, addressing the need for clarification regarding different typologies of international students and academic tourists. This will fulfil the second research gap identified in this study.

3.1. International Student Mobility

In Portugal, international students’ arrivals represent a very small percentage of the overall influx of international tourists, but it has been increasing. Between 2013 and 2019, international students accounted for around 0.3% of the total tourist arrivals, but, in 2020, this percentage increased to 1.4% [51,52].

Before the outbreak of the pandemic, there had been a steady increase in international student mobility and the number of students enrolled in Portuguese HEI (Figure 2). During the academic year 2019/2020, 60,679 international students studied in Portugal, accounting for 15% of all students enrolled in Portuguese HEI. This number has more than doubled compared to the 2013/2014 academic year.

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, there was a 9% decrease in the number of international students in Portugal, dropping from 60,679 in 2019/2020 to 55,137 in 2020/2021. This decline marked the first decrease in overall international student enrolment in Portugal. However, the impact of this decrease may be considered less severe than expected.

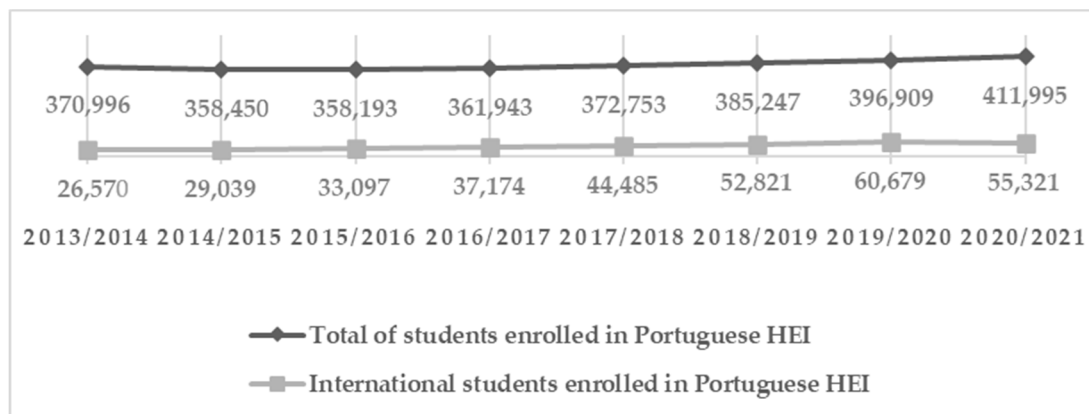


Figure 2. Number of students enrolled in Portuguese HEI between 2013/2014 and 2020/2021. Source: Authors' own elaboration based on data from DGEEC/MEC.

The origin of international students is closely tied to the two major international networks that Portugal is a part of: the European Union (EU) and the Community of Portuguese-Speaking Countries (henceforth referred to by the Portuguese acronym CPLP). A member of the EU since 1986 and having joined the Erasmus programme in 1987, Portugal also has strong historical, cultural, and civilizational links with Portuguese-speaking countries (Brazil, Angola, Cape Verde, Guinea-Bissau, S. Tomé and Príncipe, Mozambique, and East-Timor).

3.2. Academic Tourists Versus International Degree Students

Academic tourists are defined as students engaging in “any stays made in HEI in places outside their usual environment for less than one year, the main objective of which is to complete degree-level studies in universities and/or attend language courses organized by these centres” [9] (p. 1583).

Given the intrinsic connection between academic tourism and the internationalisation of higher education [15], it is appropriate to incorporate certain dimensions reflected in the increasing global student mobility numbers [33], such as credit mobilities, certificate mobilities (e.g., cultural or language courses, summer programmes, workshops), and other mobility experiences.

Therefore, building upon a reformulation of the definition provided by Rodríguez et al. [9], it is proposed that international academic tourism should encompass any stays made in HEI in places outside their usual environment for less than one consecutive year, the primary objective of which is to undertake a short-term mobility experience.

For the subsequent secondary data analysis in this study, our specific focus is on two categories of international students: “credit-mobile students” and “degree-mobile students”.

Thus, following UNWTO [26] recommendations, in this study, “credit-mobile students” who undertake short-term mobility experiences in Portuguese HEI with stays of less than one year are henceforth considered as academic tourists. Conversely, “degree-mobile students” enrolled in Portuguese HEI are hereafter designated as international “degree” students.

Since the academic year 2013/2014 to 2019/2020, which predates the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, there has been a significant increase of 43% in the number of academic tourists (credit-mobile students) enrolled in Portuguese HEI. This growth is evidenced by the rise in numbers from 11,687 in 2013/2014 to 16,674, in 2019/2020. Likewise, there has been a notable rise in the first-year enrolment of international “degree” students, with an increase of 251% observed, from 6169 in 2013/2014 to 21,668 in 2019/2020.

The main countries from which academic tourists originate are Brazil (18%), Spain (16%), Italy (12%), Poland (8%), and Germany (7%). Indeed, there has been an increase in

the number of academic tourists from EU countries, with many of them associated with the Erasmus programme.

Regarding international “degree” students, Brazil accounts for 38% of international “degree” students, followed by Cape Verde (11%), Angola (10%), and Guinea-Bissau (5%), all of which are part of the Community of Portuguese-Speaking Countries (CPLP).

In turn, Figure 3 illustrates a map of Portugal divided into districts, with varying shades of grey representing the average annual count of international students from 2013/2014 to 2020/2021. The district of Lisbon appears as the darkest shade on the map, indicating that it has the highest density of HEI and the largest number of international students (76,450 enrolled from 2013/2014 to 2020/2021). Similarly, the district of Porto, located in the northern part of the country and encompassing the second-largest district, also exhibits a significant concentration of HEI and the next highest number of international students (42,108 enrolled from 2013/2014 to 2020/2021). Other significant locations for international students include the district of Coimbra, situated in the central part of the country, as well as Braga and Bragança, both located in the northern region.

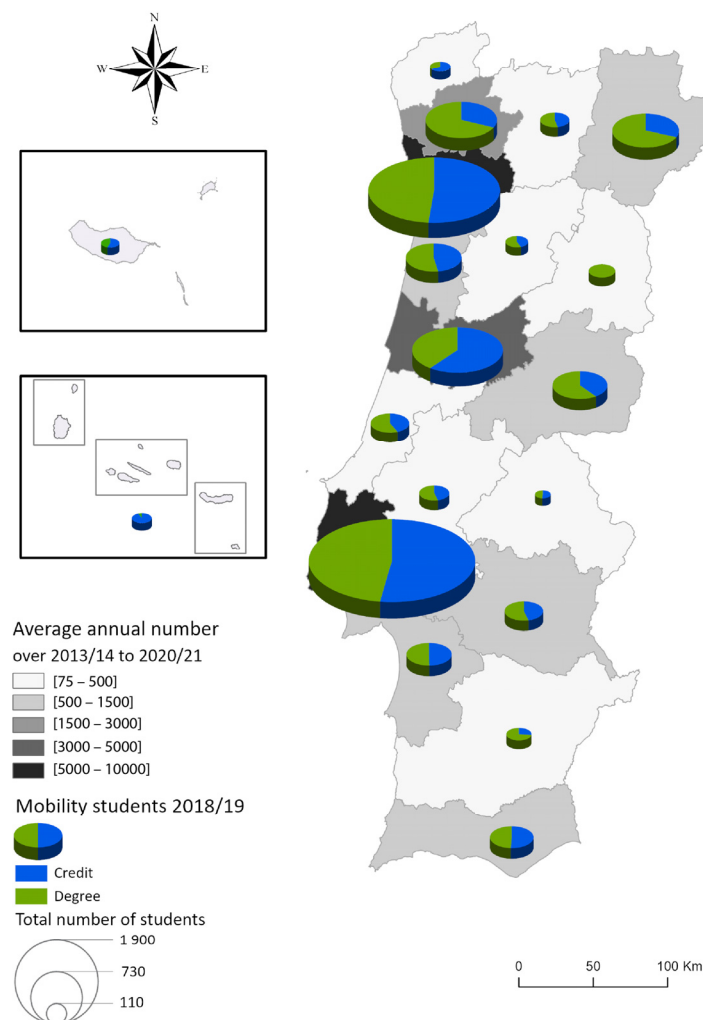


Figure 3. Number of international students enrolled in Portugal between 2013/2014 and 2020/2021 and in the academic year 2018/2019. Source: Authors’ own elaboration based on data from DGEEC/MEC.

Additionally, and particularly regarding the academic tourists, Figure 3 also shows that between the academic years 2013/2014 and 2020/2021, the main Portuguese districts, Lisbon and Porto, received over 50% of academic tourists. Coimbra, Aveiro, and Braga followed, accounting for 13.5%, 3.6%, and 3.4% of academic tourists, respectively.

These data help to understand Figure 3, which exhibits a notable disparity in the country to attract credit students (versus degree students), arguably ascribed to different facilitating push–pull factors. Attracting more academic tourists than international “degree” students, the Azores and Madeira islands, as well as Coimbra, Lisbon, and Porto stand out. A reasonably balanced distribution of international students from both categories can be observed in the coastal district of Setubal, located just below Lisbon, as well as in the Algarve, a renowned tourist destination. The allure of these regions as tourist destinations (pull factor) appears to have a positive influence on the proportion of academic tourists in relation to degree-seeking students. In contrast, it can be observed that districts such as Braga in the northwest, Bragança in the northeast, and inland districts lacking a coastal location generally demonstrate a diminished ability to attract academic tourists when compared to international “degree” students.

According to Figure 4, it is evident that the demand for international “degree” students has exhibited greater resilience in comparison to the demand relative to academic tourists amidst the ongoing pandemic. Multiple factors can account for this situation. In contrast to academic tourists, we contend that international “degree” students place a greater emphasis on education and a higher level of commitment: the chosen university will be the one to confer their degree, and the chosen location will serve as their temporary home during their extended stay. During pandemics, the cost–benefit framework analysis serves as a valuable tool for decision-making regarding travel, particularly when assessing associated health risks [53]. On the other hand, the benefits may include the significance of the trip, and the potential rewards of the travel experience itself, such as educational opportunities or career advancement [30]. Everyone’s cost–benefit analysis will differ based on their specific circumstances and risk perception, but we argue that academic tourists tended to make a different cost–benefit analysis than international degree students, which caused the number of enrolments of the former to drop further with the pandemic. The decline in academic tourism can be attributed to various pull factors (e.g., pandemic restrictions, vaccination rate, healthcare access, travel restrictions, limited access to information) and push factors (e.g., fear, health-related concerns, and family pressure) [54]. On the other hand, international “degree” students may be motivated by other types of factors. These include pull factors (e.g., improved educational circumstances and quality of life) as well as push factors (e.g., higher frequency of exposure to health risks and the aspiration to pursue higher education in Europe) [28].

The distinction between academic tourists and long-term international students is highlighted by the discernible differences between the two groups depicted in Figure 4. The presence of these distinct categories of prospective students suggests the implementation of diverse marketing strategies to effectively attract them.

To summarise, from the academic year 2013/2014 to 2019/2020, before the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, there was a substantial 43% increase in academic tourists enrolled in Portuguese HEI, rising from 11,687 to 16,674. Simultaneously, first-year enrolment of international “degree” students surged by 251%, from 6169 to 21,668. District-wise analysis revealed Lisbon and Porto as major hubs, with the highest density of HEI and the most significant number of international students. Lisbon had 76,450 enrolled students from 2013/2014 to 2020/2021, while Porto had 42,108. Other districts like Coimbra, Aveiro, and Braga also featured prominently. Academic tourists were concentrated in Lisbon and Porto, constituting over 50% between 2013/2014 and 2020/2021, with Coimbra, Aveiro, and Braga following. The data further revealed a discernible disparity in attracting academic tourists versus degree students, likely influenced by push–pull factors. Moreover, based on the cost–benefit analysis, the data demonstrated that demand for international “degree” students exhibited greater resilience during the ongoing pandemic compared to academic tourists. The distinctions between academic tourists and long-term international students underscored the imperative need for diverse marketing strategies to effectively attract each group.

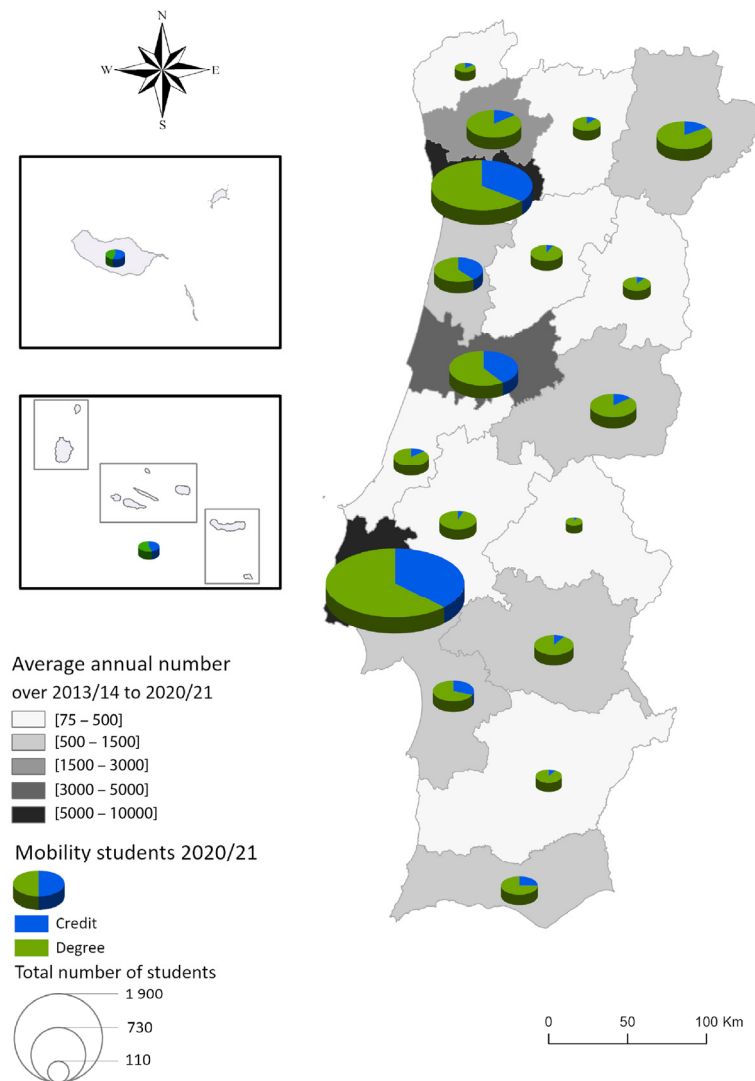


Figure 4. Number of international students enrolled in Portugal between 2013/2014 and 2020/2021 and in the academic year 2020/2021. Source: Authors' own elaboration based on data from DGEEC/MEC.

4. Discussion

International academic tourism has grown significantly in Portugal in recent years, arguably because of political measures undertaken by the Portuguese Government and Portuguese HEI along with incentives aimed at attracting international students to this study destination. Although academic tourism represents a small percentage of the overall influx of tourists in Portugal, its importance has risen, particularly when comparing the average length of stay of academic students to that of conventional tourists (typically around three overnight stays) [55]. According to a set of studies already carried out [9,13–15], these students still take the opportunity not only to study but also to visit the country (alone or with relatives and friends), contact residents, learn a new language, and understand a new culture and way of living. This relevance further increases if measurements include visits from relatives and friends.

Not surprisingly, therefore, education and tourism exhibit a robust connection, attracting renewed interest from both academics and tourism stakeholders. The increasing emphasis on sustainability concerns further underscores this connection as academic tourists play a crucial role in promoting destination sustainability by contributing to the enrichment of local cultural diversity; fostering a greater understanding of various aspects,

such as religion, music, and the arts; and exposing domestic students to diverse perspectives on international affairs [56]. These contributions have lasting positive effects on both the academic tourists and the host destinations.

In this study, it is pertinent to highlight that according to the push–pull motivation theory [10,12,39–41,43–45], which explains how travel decisions are made, Portugal experienced noteworthy growth. Emphasising its attributes such as quality education, safety, multiculturalism, affordable cost of living, and political, economic, and social stability, the country witnessed a remarkable increase of 46% in academic tourists and an impressive surge of 251% in international “degree” students from 2013/2014 to 2019/2020. Yet, findings reveal an asymmetrical growth pattern across the country, challenging the notion of balanced regional development. While Portugal’s reputation as a safe country, coupled with its peripheral location in relation to ongoing conflicts in Europe, provides advantages in attracting international students, potential challenges could impact academic destinations. Factors such as a declining youth population, climate change, natural disasters, socioeconomic inequalities, cyber-attacks, terrorism, trade tensions, ideological confrontations, increased regulations, and a focus on public interests and national security may introduce uncertainties [57] that could potentially threaten academic destinations. These factors may lead to geopolitical, economic, and sociocultural tensions between blocs or countries, creating risks to the stability and attractiveness of academic destinations.

Portugal’s membership to the EU and the CPLP plays a significant role in shaping the origins of international students. Academic tourists predominantly come from Europe, while international “degree” students primarily originate from CPLP countries, benefiting from historical ties and linguistic facilities. Moreover, the COVID-19 pandemic has affected academic tourists and degree students differently. Degree students have demonstrated greater resilience, possibly due to their long-term commitment to their universities and study locations outweighing the immediate impact of the pandemic. Effective marketing requires distinguishing academic tourists from long-term international students. However, Portugal’s communication and promotion efforts as an academic destination for international students may not sufficiently address this differentiation. To sustain the growth of the academic tourism sector, promotional efforts should address the specific requirements and preferences of each group, utilising differentiated marketing strategies and higher education policy measures.

5. Conclusions

This study aimed to achieve two main objectives.

Firstly, to reevaluate the definition of international academic tourism by exploring its connections with educational tourism and the internationalisation of higher education.

Secondly, in response to the limited research on the repercussions of the COVID-19 pandemic on international academic tourism, this study analysed the pandemic’s impact on the influx of international higher education students to Portugal. This analysis was conducted considering the preceding conceptual clarification, substantiating its relevance.

The analytical framework was contextualised within motivational theory, emphasising a combination of the push–pull framework and cost–benefit analysis.

5.1. Implications for Theory

Based on the recognised need for further research on academic tourism [9], particularly due to the apparent ambiguity in the distinctions among various terms employed in the literature [58], this study has contributed to the knowledge in the field of international academic tourism by revisiting concepts and providing a new international academic tourism definition. It also visually represented the interconnections between educational tourism, academic international tourism, and the internationalisation of higher education, highlighting their intrinsic connections [15]. The analysis, drawing on the tourism approach, considers spatial and temporal criteria to differentiate between academic tourism within the same country and international academic tourism and distinguish between academic

tourism and long-term international student mobility. These conceptual clarifications have proven to be pertinent for empirical analysis.

Furthermore, this study proposed combining a push–pull framework of analysis with a cost–benefit rationale to examine decision-making in times of crises, such as the COVID-19 pandemic. This approach provided a comprehensive insight into the factors influencing international academic tourism during the pandemic, thereby offering valuable implications for future initiatives considering the global geopolitics of knowledge. The findings contribute to assisting policymakers and stakeholders in formulating strategies that not only enhance the competitiveness and sustainability of academic tourism destinations but also diversify the tourism portfolios of countries.

5.2. Implications for Practice

This study also examined how international students, as academic tourists, can contribute to building a more sustainable portfolio for destinations in the post-pandemic period, using Portugal as a case study. It highlights the highly asymmetrical dispersion of academic tourism within Portugal and emphasises the importance of considering this aspect for decision-makers and stakeholders. Academic tourists have been shown to be more resilient than conventional tourists during crises, which is a crucial consideration for destination planning and management. Official data from the Portuguese General Directorate of Education and Science Statistics [51] indicate that the impact of the pandemic on academic tourism during the initial months was less severe compared to the significant decline of 76% in international tourist arrivals in Portugal. This difference can be attributed to factors such as the age group of international students and their determination not to miss out on the opportunity to study abroad.

Academic tourism also holds the potential to mitigate seasonality and foster innovation in tourist destinations [59]. Therefore, priority should be given to HEIs with low numbers of international students in their promotion and adequacy efforts as this can help stimulate academic tourism nationwide. Incentives provided by HEIs and the regions where they are located—particularly those with fewer international students—such as scholarships and accommodation discounts can attract a significant number of academic tourists. Furthermore, comprehensive strategies to promote diverse regions and cities across Portugal, showcasing their unique characteristics and attractions, will attract a wider range of academic tourists.

In turn, HEIs also play a crucial role in promoting the sustainability of academic destinations by incentivising and adopting sustainable practices among their students. These practices may include reducing energy consumption, minimising waste, and implementing eco-friendly measures on campuses. HEIs can further contribute by fostering partnerships with local communities to ensure that academic tourism benefits the destination. This could involve collaboration on community projects, cultural exchange programmes, or volunteer initiatives. HEIs may also encourage students to support local businesses, markets, and artisans, promoting local products, services, and cultural experiences. This, in turn, contributes to the economic development of the host community. Another approach is the design of cultural immersion programmes that allow academic tourists to engage with local communities, learn about traditional practices, and contribute positively to the preservation of cultural heritage. HEIs can also pursue and adhere to recognised sustainability certifications and standards for academic institutions, covering areas such as green buildings, energy efficiency, or sustainable campus management.

By integrating these suggestions, academic tourism can evolve into a positive force for sustainable development, ensuring that the benefits of international education extend beyond the individual student to the local community and the environment.

It is also worth pointing out that during the pandemic, it was observed that international “degree” students displayed more resilience compared to academic tourists. This indicates that different factors motivate each group, highlighting the importance of implementing tailored marketing strategies that cater to their specific needs and preferences.

Examining the geographical origins of academic tourists and international “degree” students in Portugal reveals that most of them come from European and CPLP countries. These findings emphasise the need for geographical segmentation in marketing efforts and the fulfilment of specific needs based on the origin of the students.

International “degree” students may choose Portuguese HEIs for various reasons. The political and economic context of those countries and a lack of suitable educational opportunities can act as push factors that encourage students to study abroad. However, there are also significant pull factors in the host country that attract international students to Portugal. These factors include the opportunity to study in their native language, the comparatively low cost of living, and the perceived high quality of education offered by Portuguese institutions.

As for academic tourists, the pull factors such as Portugal’s low cost of living, tourist and cultural attractions, and diverse and multicultural environment may explain their interest in the country. Academic tourism may foster product diversification and destination sustainability. Marketing strategies to promote the country and HEIs and provide transformative tourist experiences are critical to sustaining academic tourism growth [60].

Furthermore, in situations analogous to the COVID-19 pandemic, which may involve disruptions, crises, or global challenges, various influencing factors can shape how academic tourists choose a destination. For instance, the strength and resilience of healthcare infrastructure play a pivotal role in managing and mitigating the impact of pandemics or health crises, making them highly valued by academic tourists. The level of preparedness, the efficacy of communication, and the promptness of government responses significantly shape the course of a crisis, and clear and transparent communication from authorities, public health agencies, and the media is indispensable. Additionally, the degree of technological readiness in a society, including access to digital tools, remote work capabilities, and online education infrastructure, can impact how well a community adapts to changes imposed by a crisis. Cultural norms, societal values, and historical experiences also play a crucial role in shaping how communities respond to crises, influencing the destination choices of academic tourists.

It is finally worth mentioning that to promote Portugal as a safe, attractive, and competitive tourist academic destination, HEIs, national authorities, students, and tourism stakeholders should collaborate at the local, regional, and national levels.

At a global level, several potential challenges [57] should be proactively addressed. Academic tourism destinations can mitigate the declining youth population by expanding their educational offerings and diversifying their demographic target. To combat climate change and natural disasters, destinations and HEIs can prioritise sustainability measures [32], promote eco-friendly practices, and strengthen disaster preparedness and response plans. Socioeconomic disparities can be addressed by promoting inclusiveness, providing scholarships or financial aid programmes, and supporting community development initiatives [61]. They can implement robust security measures, collaborate with relevant authorities, and maintain open lines of communication with international partners to mitigate cyber-attacks [62] and terrorist acts [63]. To address ideological conflicts, it may be necessary to promote cultural exchange, foster dialogue, and create an inclusive and tolerant academic environment [64]. The digitisation and distance learning of higher education, accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic, also present challenges for promoting academic tourism destinations. While digital platforms can provide virtual experiences, they may not fully replicate the benefits of in-person learning and experiences. To overcome these challenges, it is necessary to prioritise face-to-face teaching and develop strategies that offer memorable and transformative experiences. By combining traditional and innovative approaches, academic destinations can continue to thrive and attract students seeking a comprehensive educational experience.

Overall, for effectively mitigating these threats and ensuring the resilience and sustainability of academic tourism destinations, a proactive and holistic approach that considers both local and global factors is required.

6. Limitations and Further Research

The primary limitation of this study is the lack of accurate statistical data specifically tracking academic tourists to Portugal. As a result, proxy data statistics were used, focusing on credit-mobile students and degree-mobile students in Portuguese HEIs. Additionally, this study was limited to examining a single country, which may restrict the generalisability of the findings to other contexts.

To address these limitations, it is important to consider conducting other types of impact studies that assess the short- and long-term effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on academic tourism across different scales and geographies. Furthermore, qualitative research focusing on pandemic-related academic tourism could provide valuable insights into this understudied type of tourism. Such research could explore students' decision-making processes, needs, preferences, and behavioural intentions in a post-pandemic context.

Moreover, considering the significant role that academic tourism can play in contributing to the sustainability of academic destinations, it would be worthwhile to conduct an inquiry addressed to HEIs. This study could delve into how HEIs contribute to sustainability through the adoption of sustainable practices among their students. Additionally, it could explore the sustainability messages conveyed by Portuguese universities in their marketing communications during the COVID-19 pandemic. Such an investigation could provide insights into whether these messages had any influence on students' destination choices during this period.

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