



Advancing internationalisation at the Polytechnic University of Viseu: Transforming challenges into opportunities with short-term mobilities

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ABSTRACT

Internationalisation has become essential for higher education institutions (HEIs), driven by global collaboration demands. Blended Intensive Programmes (BIPs), Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL), and other European University initiatives (EUIs) offer new international opportunities. The Polytechnic University of Viseu (IPV) in Inner Portugal is embracing this trend. This study explores the potential of short-mobility initiatives in advancing internationalisation, focusing on opportunities for students, staff, and the broader institutional landscape. It highlights the role of the EUNICE European University Alliance (EUA), of which IPV is a member, in fostering international engagement. Through a qualitative analysis, the study examines IPV's strategic planning, showing how it aligns with internationalisation goals. Organisational culture plays a key role in shaping IPV's global perspective, and the institution's resourceful approach and clear strategic direction have contributed to a thriving internationalisation framework. This research also addresses the unique challenges HEIs in Inner Portugal face, offering insights that can inform policymakers and practitioners aiming to enhance internationalisation efforts in similar contexts. Ultimately, it showcases IPV's success and provides valuable lessons for improving international engagement in higher education.

In an era characterised by the rapid evolution of the global Higher Education (HE) landscape, internationalisation has become a cornerstone for academic institutions striving to prepare their communities for an increasingly interconnected world. This process involves integrating international and intercultural dimensions into the core functions of HE to ensure that graduates are globally competent and equipped with the intercultural skills necessary to address issues related to international developments and challenges.

Actually, the significance of internationalisation extends beyond mere academic enrichment; it plays a crucial role in enhancing cross-cultural understanding, advancing research collaborations, and equipping students to excel in a globalised job market (Alsharari, 2018).

The growing emphasis on internationalisation is driven by several global trends, notably the rise of the knowledge economy, which amplifies the demand for a workforce adept at navigating international contexts. Consequently, HEIs worldwide are increasingly focused on cultivating intercultural competence – defined as the ability to communicate, collaborate, and operate effectively and appropriately

across diverse cultural and national boundaries (Chang et al., 2022). This competence is essential not only for addressing global challenges but also for seizing international opportunities.

According to Tavares, Aguiar, and Sin (2025), Portugal's evolving role in internationalisation reflects broader shifts within semi-peripheral countries in global HE. Traditionally known as a sender of students – encouraged by national and European policies promoting outward mobility – Portugal has recently emerged as an increasingly attractive destination for international students, namely for full-degree programmes. Over the past decade, international enrolments in Portuguese HEIs have surged by 86 %, with the 2022/23 academic year marking a record high in both total and international student numbers. While Portuguese-speaking countries remain a key source of students, their relative share has declined, signalling a growing diversification in origin countries, now also including several European and Asian nations, as the same scholars point out.

Situated in Inner Portugal and traditionally recognised as a polytechnic institution, the Polytechnic University of Viseu (IPV) only

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recently acquired the right to use the designation “Polytechnic University” in English – a change approved by the Portuguese Parliament and implemented nationally for all polytechnic institutions in 2023. Despite this shift in nomenclature, IPV continues to face particular challenges in the increasingly competitive landscape of international student recruitment. Its peripheral geographic location, along with financial and linguistic constraints, presents significant obstacles to attracting a diverse international student body. In response, IPV has adopted a multipronged approach to internationalisation, employing strategies such as participation in international education fairs to engage directly with prospective students, and maintaining a strong digital presence through bilingual websites, and, among others, targeted social media campaigns. Despite these efforts, the institution continues to encounter systemic limitations, leading it to diversify its internationalisation agenda through alternative pathways: among these, short-term mobility programmes have emerged as both a strategic and complementary response to recruitment challenges. IPV’s engagement in programmes such as Blended Intensive Programmes (BIPs) and Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL), coupled with its active participation in the European University for Customised Education (EUNICE) Alliance, exemplifies its commitment to enhancing global engagement. These initiatives offer an important platform for fostering intercultural exchanges and academic partnerships, thereby positioning IPV as a global educational player capable of attracting a diverse talent pool and strengthening its international reputation.

This study aims to shed light on the dynamics of IPV’s short-mobility initiatives, exploring their opportunities and implications for the institution and its stakeholders. Through a comprehensive review of the literature and a discussion of IPV’s strategic involvement in internationalisation, this research will provide insights into the transformative potential of these programmes. It will highlight the role of organisational culture in shaping effective internationalisation strategies and offer recommendations for enhancing the internationalisation efforts of HEIs in similar contexts.

In light of the above, to offer a comprehensive understanding of the broader context, the first section of this article reviews the literature on internationalisation efforts in academia, as mentioned. Following this, the methodological framework is briefly outlined. Subsequent sections introduce IPV, examining its strategic plan with a particular emphasis on short-mobility initiatives. This includes an overview of the implemented initiatives as well as those being planned, focusing on their alignment with IPV’s mission and strategic goals. Embracing these transformative experiences not only bestows benefits upon students and staff but also actively contributes to the collective advancement of the institution. This, in turn, solidifies its standing as a beacon of international education and innovation, underscoring its resilience and adaptability in the ever-evolving landscape of HE.

Internationalisation efforts in academia

In practice, efforts from the university level to state and country level involve international elements; they are made with the aim of handling requirements and challenges induced by the impact of globalisation, and they are often seen as initiatives of internationalisation. Some of the actions are proactive and well-planned, while some universities and higher education systems are caught up in the wake of internationalisation tide. (Ge, 2022, p. 230).

In recent decades, HEIs have undergone a transformative shift marked by concerted efforts towards internationalisation, even if, some claim, universities have served as hubs for internationalisation since medieval times (Cunningham et al., 2024).

This evolution is particularly visible in Europe, where cross-border collaboration is not only encouraged but systematically supported through supranational frameworks and funding mechanisms. One emblematic initiative in this context is the European Universities

Initiative (EUI), which exemplifies the EU’s commitment to fostering transnational alliances among HEIs. These networks aim to facilitate deep structural cooperation, from joint curricula and degrees to shared research infrastructures and multilingual education environments. It is, thus, a proactive and well-planned transformative trend in action, responding to the challenges of globalisation, as Ge alludes to in the quote that opens this article.

In Portugal, this broader European context has significantly influenced the shaping of national policies. Following the political democratisation post-1974, and especially since the early 2000s, Portuguese HE has increasingly aligned with European trends. The Bologna Process further accelerated the internationalisation of Portuguese HE, not only by aligning degree structures and academic cycles across Europe but also by institutionalising mechanisms like the Diploma Supplement and the ECTS credit system, making Portuguese qualifications more comparable and internationally recognisable (Decree-Law 42/2005). Internationalisation also became a formal criterion in programme accreditation, leading to the creation of the A3ES in 2007 to ensure quality assurance in line with European standards (Guerreiro & Barros, 2018). Initially fragmented and reactive, Portugal’s internationalisation strategy matured with key milestones such as the 2014 government strategy document and the Ministerial Resolution 78/2016 (Arau Ribeiro & Coelho, 2019; Coelho & Arau Ribeiro, 2018). These policy instruments aimed not only to improve the international visibility of Portuguese HEIs but also to embed internationalisation across teaching, research, and third and fourth – as we will point out below – mission activities.

The motivations underpinning this international trajectory are diverse but frequently perceived as a reaction to the process of globalisation (Altbach et al., 2009; de Wit & Altbach, 2021; Ge, 2022). They may involve the promotion of collaborative efforts in teaching, learning, research, and innovation; articulation of shared interests; securing funding; bolstering the competitiveness of participating institutions; and, among other factors, addressing economic considerations (Stensaker et al., 2023). In Portugal, these motivations have taken on added urgency due to demographic pressures, financial constraints, and the ambition to participate more robustly in global knowledge networks. This has led to targeted efforts to attract students from Portuguese-speaking countries, increase the number of English-taught programmes and promote digital education formats such as MOOCs (Arau Ribeiro & Coelho, 2019; Coelho & Arau Ribeiro, 2018).

In fact, the current emphasis lies on the cultivation of synergies capable of enriching the educational experience, preparing students for an increasingly interconnected and interdependent world, while harnessing collective strengths to remain at the forefront of cutting-edge research, thereby contributing meaningfully to the progress and prosperity of societies at large. This sets the foundation for what is commonly referred to as the quadruple helix paradigm, initially conceptualised by Carayannis and Campbell (2009), and that has been adapted and re-adapted to bring forth the role of society as a major player, besides the traditional actors, i.e., academia, industry and government, as postulated by Schütz et al. (2019), González-Martínez et al. (2023) and Amante (2023), to cite but a few.

In the Portuguese context, the integration of civil society organisations, research and cultural institutions, and local businesses into internationalisation strategies reflects this more inclusive approach. Entities such as ReCLES.pt, for instance, play a pivotal role in supporting linguistic and cultural preparedness for international engagement (Arau Ribeiro & Coelho, 2019; Coelho & Arau Ribeiro, 2018).

This leads us to question the conventional understanding of internationalisation in the context of Post-secondary and HE. It is a term that is often contested, as different people perceive it differently. It may be associated with academic mobility, international programmes and partnerships, research initiatives, and educational delivery methods. In the widely acknowledged definition by Jane Knight, it is “the process of integrating an international, intercultural or global dimension into the purpose, functions or delivery of post-secondary education” (Knight,

2003, p. 2). However, this conceptualisation is not devoid of criticism, including by Knight herself (2004), as it has been regarded as a catch-all phrase, losing precision by encompassing a broad spectrum of activities merely associated with an international flavour. The Portuguese case illustrates this tension well: despite institutional efforts and policy developments, significant variation remains in how internationalisation is understood and implemented across different HEIs.

As we will note below, and according to Teichler (2010), internationalisation owes much to the “‘success story’ of the Erasmus Programme”, initiated in 1987, and afterwards to the Bologna Process, which started with the Bologna Declaration signed in 1999 (EUR-Lex, 2015), and aimed at creating a harmonised European Higher Education Area (EHEA) by 2010. It has never lost momentum since then and, nowadays, the EUI represents a contemporary development in this trajectory, as mentioned.

One prominent framework facilitating mobility, and, thus, international experiences, is the abovementioned Erasmus+ programme, the most renowned European exchange initiative designed by the European Union (EU) to support education, training, youth, and sport in Europe. The term ‘Erasmus’ pays homage to Erasmus of Rotterdam, a Dutch Renaissance philosopher, theologian, and humanist who became well-known for his international scholarly pursuits, but it is also an acronym that stands for the European Region Action Scheme for the Mobility of University Students (Lanzendorf & Kehm, 2010). Its overarching goal is to educate European Higher Education and High School youth, fostering a sense of European citizenship while deepening their understanding of diverse cultures, but, beyond student mobility, this programme also serves as a vehicle for professors and non-teaching staff seeking opportunities to teach/work or receive training overseas (Marinescu et al., 2022).

Erasmus+ encompasses a broad range of activities and opportunities. These include student exchanges, internships, and staff teaching and training, as well as projects that foster collaboration between educational institutions and organisations. The programme is available to participants from EU member states and partner countries outside the EU, promoting a genuinely international approach to education and training.

For teaching periods or staff training, if it happens between two programme countries, the duration of the mobility may be between 2 days and 2 months. However, in case it involves one country from the programme and another from a partner country, it must take a minimum of 5 days, and up to 2 months, excluding travel time (European Commission, 2024a). Regarding Erasmus student exchanges, they typically span from 3 to 12 months, “... and approximately 90 % of European universities are involved” (Gadár et al., 2022, p. 3).

However, these opportunities do not consistently result in tangible mobility, particularly for students. While the 2014 Erasmus Impact Study (European Commission, 2014) underscores the extensive benefits of Erasmus+ participation, revealing that participants not only acquire subject-specific knowledge but also enhance essential transversal skills that are highly valued and sought by 92 % of employers – specifically personality traits like tolerance, confidence, problem-solving, curiosity, self-awareness, and decisiveness, which are boosted by the programme –, besides accelerating career growth and other perks, the reality is that achieving effective student flows across borders has remained a complex task.

In 2020, the set benchmark for Higher Education mobility targeted a minimum of 20% of students engaging in a period of study or training abroad, encompassing work placements and related experiences (Müller, 2020). To monitor and assess the progress in facilitating academic mobility, particularly in HEIs across European countries and in initial vocational education and training (IVET), the Council of the European Union introduced the Mobility Scoreboard (European Commission, 2020), whose indicators are accessible on an online platform, sourced from the Eurydice Network, and that focus on six key metric headings, particularly: 1. Information and guidance; 2. Foreign language

preparation; 3. Portability of grants and loans; 4. Support to disadvantaged learners; 5. Recognition of learning outcomes; and 6. Recognition of qualifications (European Commission, 2023a). These indicators serve as benchmarks, providing a nuanced assessment of the landscape of academic mobility, while striving to diminish barriers and spotlight key areas for improvement and development.

Furthermore, the ambitious goals set within the European Universities Alliances (EUAs), which aspire to 50% of students benefitting from seamless mobility opportunities in European inter-university campuses (European Commission, 2024b) also call for substantial changes. Overcoming challenges, including financial, logistical, and cultural factors, is imperative but perhaps not enough for the established objectives to be reached. As a consequence, embracing remote intercultural exchanges and short-term mobility initiatives has emerged as a strategic approach to foster internationalisation, offering flexible alternatives that can mitigate some of the barriers associated with traditional mobility.

All in all, while Europe offers a robust framework for supporting internationalisation, the Portuguese experience reveals the importance of adapting these frameworks to local realities, ensuring alignment between national policy, institutional strategy, and broader societal needs. As such, internationalisation is not a one-size-fits-all endeavour but rather a dynamic and context-sensitive process (Marginson, 2023) that continues to evolve in response to both internal and external pressures.

Digital mobility and short-term mobility initiatives as flexible alternatives to enhance internationalisation

In this section, we intend to explore the dynamic role of digital mobility and short-term mobility initiatives as flexible alternatives in the internationalisation process. Understanding the flexibility these initiatives bring is crucial in tailoring internationalisation strategies to the evolving needs of academic communities, and they are acknowledged as key to democratise international learning experiences. From a set of ten recommendations, drawn from the 2015 Study on Internationalisation of Higher Education, requested by the European Parliament’s Committee on Culture and Education, two emerge as vital strategies that hold significant promise for reshaping the landscape of international education and that have now started to be implemented with a tangible positive impact on students, institutions, and the internationalisation of HE as a whole:

“5. Pay more attention to the importance of ‘Internationalisation at home’, integrating international and intercultural learning outcomes into the curriculum for all students.

(...)

7. Develop innovative models of digital and blended learning as an instrument to complement IoHE.” (European Parliament, 2015, p. 30)

In fact, while physical mobility programmes offer invaluable opportunities for students and staff to immerse themselves in diverse cultural and educational environments, we cannot ignore their inherent limitations, particularly in light of financial constraints that make them inaccessible to a considerable segment of the student population. The cost implications associated with travel, accommodation, and daily expenses and the low scholarships granted often exclude interested students from participation. In light of these challenges, digital mobility and short-term mobility initiatives emerge as unique, impactful opportunities to promote international engagement and cultural enrichment. They can take various forms, including international field trips and study tours, summer and winter schools, or, among other initiatives, Blended Intensive Programmes (BIPs) and Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL), which are two examples of innovative approaches to internationalisation that have recently gained prominence. BIPs are a key initiative introduced in European Higher Education through the Erasmus programme 2021–2027 (European Commission, 2021; European Commission, 2023b). These programmes provide

financial support to European institutions for developing international courses that include participation from institutions in at least three countries. They combine short-term, intensive physical mobility in one of the participating countries with collaborative online learning activities. This approach allows students to gain international experience flexibly without requiring long-term stays abroad, as it lasts between 5 and 30 days. Typically, these programmes feature collaborative projects, joint coursework, and cultural exchanges, which enhance students' intercultural competence and academic skills, and they "have to award at least 3 ECTS credits for students" (O'Dowd & Werner, 2024, p. 5). COIL, on the other hand, is an innovative approach that connects students and professors from different cultures to learn, discuss, and collaborate as part of their coursework. According to SUNY COIL Center (2024), professors work together to design the COIL experience, and students engage in intercultural collaboration to complete the assigned activities. COIL can be implemented in any discipline and is especially effective in interdisciplinary collaborations. Its modules are a graded component of the participating classes and can use any technology tools that serve the learning goals. While the COIL component can be integrated throughout the entire course, it is more commonly designed as a module lasting several weeks, with a minimum recommended length of five weeks. It encourages active student learning and promotes intercultural dialogue, digital literacy, and collaborative problem-solving, making it a valuable tool for institutions seeking to enhance their internationalisation efforts (Hackett et al., 2023).

The concept of digital mobility is not new, though. Also referred to as 'online', 'virtual', or 'remote' intercultural exchange, this approach has a well-established research history spanning over 15 years. Even as early as the turn of the millennium, there were "pioneers in the field" who acknowledged the possibilities inherent in online mobility (Clement et al., 2023), and envisioned its capacity to transcend geographical boundaries and connect learners worldwide.

Despite this established history, recent critiques have emerged regarding the terminology used to describe these initiatives. In a recent editorial position paper, Colpaert (2020) critiqued the shift from the term 'telecollaboration' to 'virtual exchange' to describe online intercultural collaboration aimed at developing students' foreign language, intercultural, and digital competencies. Colpaert argued that the term 'virtual' implies an approximation of reality, which can undervalue the activity by suggesting it is not as genuine or complete as physical exchanges. Thus, this scholar expressed concern that this terminology might highlight the limitations of online exchanges compared with physical mobility programmes. As a result, he suggested that if the activities are digital or online, these terms should be used instead to avoid any negative connotations associated with 'virtual.'

The digital shift accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic has significantly amplified the relevance and adoption of these online mobility initiatives. The pandemic forced educational institutions to rapidly transition to remote learning environments, demonstrating the practicality and effectiveness of digital platforms for maintaining academic continuity. As a result, there has been a renewed focus on leveraging digital technologies to foster intercultural exchanges and academic collaboration, reinforcing the role of online mobility as a critical component of contemporary HE strategies (Beelen, 2022).

These different short-mobility initiatives and internationalisation at home (IaH) offer numerous benefits: collaborating with peers and academic staff from diverse backgrounds and cultures enables students to improve their language proficiency and enhances their teamwork capabilities and a set of other intercultural skills. The same goes for teaching staff, as they share best practices, exchange knowledge, and embrace pedagogical innovation, but the cross-pollination of ideas also inspires non-teaching staff, who get empowered by being exposed to international administrative and technical experience and expertise, igniting a sense of adaptability and a forward-thinking mindset.

Furthermore, these initiatives align with the goals of the EUI, which promotes deeper cooperation among European HEIs. These versatile

alternatives are easier to implement than conventional physical mobility, thus facilitating a more inclusive and dynamic approach to achieving the ambitious goals of increased international mobility in HE.

In summary, in light of the above, we can say that these initiatives not only offer practical benefits but also act as catalysts for deeper internationalisation efforts. Recognising these transformations prepares us for a more detailed exploration of the specific opportunities and challenges that IPV encounters in its internationalisation journey. This sets the foundation for our discussion in the following sections, where we will delve into these aspects, right after an overview of IPV and its integration into the EUNICE European University.

Overview of IPV and its integration into the EUNICE European University

In this section, we provide an overview of the Polytechnic University of Viseu (also known as IPV, as mentioned before) and its integration into the EUNICE European University. This discussion highlights collaborative efforts and the transformative impact resulting from this integration.

The Polytechnic University of Viseu, established in 1979, is a prominent HEI located in the heart of Portugal, specifically in Viseu, a city renowned for its high quality of life. IPV's geographical position in Inner Portugal situates it in a region known for its rich cultural heritage and dynamic economic activities, which provide a stimulating backdrop for academic pursuits and community engagement. However, this location also presents certain challenges. Being far from major transport hubs can limit accessibility and connectivity, potentially affecting student and staff mobility as well as collaboration with other institutions. Additionally, the region faces issues such as a 'demographic winter,' an expression coined by Dumont et al. (1986, p. 21) and also adopted by Gellérné, Mészáros and Pári (2025, p. 6). This phenomenon contributes to desertification, a declining and ageing population, and reduced economic vitality. These demographic challenges can impact the institution's ability to attract and retain both students and staff. Furthermore, the rural setting may pose difficulties in accessing certain resources and services that are more readily available in urban centres. These factors necessitate strategic planning and innovative solutions to ensure that IPV can continue to thrive and expand its reach despite these obstacles.

Formed by five schools, namely the School of Education, School of Technology and Management in Viseu and another in Lamego, the Agrarian School, and the School of Health, the Polytechnic University of Viseu offers a diverse range of undergraduate and postgraduate programmes tailored to meet the needs of the regional, national, and international job markets. The institution prides itself on a strong commitment to applied research, innovation, and community service, aligning its academic offerings with the demands of a rapidly evolving global landscape.

In recent years, IPV has embraced internationalisation as a strategic priority, which is exemplified by the establishment of the new Pro-Presidency for International Affairs in February 2023. This commitment is further demonstrated by its active participation in various international networks and partnerships, most notably the European University Initiative through the EUNICE European University Alliance, where a specific Pro-President has also been appointed at IPV.

EUNICE, standing for European University for Customised Education, serves 150,000 students, supported by 15,000 professors and administrative staff. Its mission is to transform HE across Europe, by developing personalised educational paths, fostering interdisciplinary research, and addressing both global and regional socio-economic challenges. Additionally, EUNICE promotes experiential learning, student mobility, and international research collaboration, contributing to a truly customised educational experience.

Originally formed by seven HEIs in its first phase (from November 1, 2021 to October 31, 2023), the EUNICE European University included

Poznań University of Technology (PUT) in Poland; Brandenburg University of Technology Cottbus-Senftenberg (BTU) in Germany; the University of Cantabria (UC) in Spain; the University of Catania (UNICT) in Italy; the University of Mons (UMONS) in Belgium; Polytechnic University Hauts-de-France (UPHF) in France; and the University of Vaasa (UVA) in Finland. With its expansion in 2023, it welcomed three new members: the University of the Peloponnese (UoP) in Greece, Karlstad University (KAU) in Sweden, and the Polytechnic University of Viseu (IPV) in Portugal. Notably, IPV received immediate recognition for its work and leadership capability, being responsible for Work Package 3 (WP3) and various tasks within this and other work packages. WP3, focused on experiential learning and mobility, promotes non-formal learning, the development of intercultural and global competencies, inclusive and sustainable mobility, and process alignment that brings the ten institutions closer together in a cohesive and diverse collaborative network capable of facing contemporary global challenges.

With the approval of the application in July 2023 and the commencement of the consortium activities in November of the same year, this alliance provides IPV with a robust platform to expand its internationalisation initiatives.

Through EUNICE, IPV has strengthened the physical and virtual mobility of its academic community, not only for study and continuous training, internships, and research but also for participation in numerous activities that enrich the personal, academic, and professional experience of its members, such as international weeks, conferences, exhibitions, and other cultural and sports initiatives.

EUNICE's emphasis on personalised education and interdisciplinary approaches is fundamental for IPV, as it aligns with its goal of being a centre of a dynamic regional ecosystem connected to the world. This approach allows IPV to actively contribute to the development of innovative solutions for regional socio-economic issues, promoting more balanced and just societies. This vision is encapsulated in the slogan "Do IPV, vê-se o Mundo! [From IPV, you see the world!]"

IPV's participation in EUNICE also strengthens its institutional reputation, opening new funding opportunities. Moreover, the close collaboration between EUNICE partner institutions facilitates the sharing of physical and virtual resources and infrastructures, and specialised knowledge, paving the way for jointly addressing technological advancements and emerging societal needs.

Thus, if we aim to delve deeper into the mechanisms and outcomes of IPV's internationalisation efforts, with a particular focus on digital and/or short-term mobilities, it is essential to adopt a qualitative method while documenting and analysing these initiatives to gather rich and diverse data. This approach will be elaborated on in the next section, dedicated to the research objectives, methodology, data collection and analysis, before presenting the findings and the discussion.

Research objectives and questions

This study seeks to unpack the various elements that constitute short-mobility initiatives at IPV, such as BIPs and COIL, particularly within, but not restricted to, the context of the EUNICE European University Alliance. So, the aim is to discuss how these initiatives align with IPV's broader internationalisation strategy and contribute to the objectives of the EUNICE consortium.

In fact, beyond individual experiences, it is equally important to examine the broader institutional impact by analysing how short-mobility initiatives influence IPV's strategic planning, reputation, and overall institutional landscape. This includes discussing the role of these programmes in fostering a globally engaged and culturally enriched academic environment, consistent with the goals of the EUI to promote academic excellence and facilitate mobility.

Finally, based on the findings, it aims to provide actionable recommendations for enhancing internationalisation efforts by developing practical strategies for IPV and similar institutions in inner or less populated regions to improve their internationalisation strategies. These

recommendations will focus on enhancing the effectiveness of short-mobility initiatives, fostering a supportive organisational culture, and achieving sustainable internationalisation outcomes.

Research Questions:

1. What specific challenges do institutions in Inner Portugal face regarding internationalisation, and how can they be overcome?
2. In what ways do short-mobility initiatives align with IPV's broader internationalisation strategy?
3. What are some of the benefits and challenges experienced by students, teaching, and non-teaching staff participating in short-mobility initiatives, and how does participation in the EUNICE alliance influence these experiences?
4. What practical recommendations can be made to improve internationalisation strategies at IPV and similar institutions?

Methodology

To achieve the objectives defined above, we approached our research questions through the lens of the interpretive paradigm, aiming to openly explore the emerging themes. Thus, we employed a qualitative research methodology, ensuring a comprehensive approach to understanding IPV's internationalisation efforts, particularly through short-mobility initiatives. According to [Alharahsheh and Pius \(2020, p. 40\)](#),

Qualitative research is relating to the meaning and process where it might not be examinable through quantity or amount. Qualitative research aims to provide specific understanding to a phenomenon based on the ones experiencing it with less generalization. Furthermore, qualitative research is aimed to attain deep understanding of a specific case with in depth exploratory studies to enable finding quality responses throughout the research.

As seen above, we began with a literature review covering internationalisation in HE, short-mobility programmes, and specific initiatives like BIPs and COIL activities. This review, conducted across several online databases, such as Scopus, Web of Science and Sage, provided a foundational understanding of the theoretical frameworks and previous research related to our study.

Complementing the literature review, we conducted a detailed document analysis. This involved scrutinising strategic documents, including annual plans and reports, and other relevant materials from IPV to gain insights into the institutional context and strategic alignment of its internationalisation efforts.

Focus groups were also an integral part of our methodology, as EUNICE Work Package 3 (WP3), which focuses on experiential learning and mobility, and the Mobility Task Force, among other groups, regularly meet online to discuss and capture a range of perspectives on the opportunities, benefits, challenges, and impact of these initiatives. These meetings have facilitated the dynamic exchange of ideas and experiences among participants.

Following data collection, we analysed the data using the main methods of Grounded Theory ([Strauss & Corbin, 2008](#)). Originally proposed by Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss, in 1967, it is a qualitative research methodology that aims to explain and understand social phenomena by deriving concepts and theories directly from data ([Glaser & Strauss, 1967](#)). This analysis provided a nuanced understanding of the broader context and highlighted key insights into the short-mobility initiatives' impact on IPV and its stakeholders.

Findings and discussion

The organisational structure at IPV is crucial in shaping and supporting its internationalisation efforts. A key aspect of this culture is a strong commitment to openness, collaboration, and continuous improvement. This culture has created an environment where internationalisation is seen as a valuable and integral part of the institution's

identity and mission, as we will further elucidate.

IPV's strategic plan emphasises several structural components that facilitate the process of internationalisation. For instance, IPV's strategic vision and mission include the production and dissemination of knowledge, along with high-level qualifications directed towards various audiences and fields of education. The strategic inclusion of internationalisation in its mission ensures a consistent focus on global engagement and outreach. Actually, internationalisation is identified as one of the key strategic axes in the IPV Strategic Plan 20|30 (IPV, 2024a). This integration ensures that internationalisation efforts are not isolated but are part of a comprehensive institutional strategy that aligns with education, research, community engagement, and infrastructure development.

IPV's involvement in international networks, such as the EUNICE European University, its recent agreement with the Brazilian Consortium COMUNG as part of its membership in the Portuguese Consortium ERASMUSCENTRO, together with the Rede Internacional Académica da Lusofonia – RIAL, to list but a few, demonstrates its commitment to deepening transnational cooperation. These and other memberships provide platforms for IPV to enhance its international visibility and collaboration, besides enabling the promotion of research and development of projects, as well as facilitating international internships.

The institution's strategic documents and reports highlight specific objectives related to expanding international partnerships, increasing student and staff mobility, and enhancing the global relevance of its programmes. For instance, Axis D of the planning document for 2025, which is currently being developed, continues the work initiated in previous years (IPV, 2024b) and delineates key objectives and initiatives aimed at bolstering IPV's international engagement, presence and excellence. To achieve this, IPV is working to join other international consortia, renew and establish new partnerships with foreign universities, and actively participate in international conferences and forums. The successful attainment of these objectives requires a dedicated team focused on building and maintaining these international relationships. Roles such as the Vice-President for Internationalisation, the Pro-President for International Affairs, the Pro-President for the EUNICE European University, the international relations coordinator and officers, the EUNICE officers, the academic coordinators and Erasmus mobility coordinators per department have been essential to managing these activities effectively.

Furthermore, Axis D seeks to promote the internationalisation of the Portuguese language and culture. Enhancing the global presence of Portuguese language and culture can be achieved through offering Portuguese language courses to international students, organising cultural exchange programmes, and collaborating with international institutions, as even academic collaborations in specific fields or disciplines can provide a taste of Portuguese culture. On the other hand, we cannot forget that offering courses in English is also of utmost importance, considering that it is the lingua franca. There is still work to be accomplished in this direction to attract a broader range of international students and ensure that IPV's programmes are accessible to a more diverse international audience, thereby increasing the institution's international appeal and fostering a more inclusive academic environment.

This leads us to another objective that is related to the development of initiatives that support the recruitment of international students. Attracting more international students requires a strategic approach, including targeted marketing campaigns, offering scholarships, and simplifying the admissions process for foreign applicants. The International Office at IPV is vital for handling these tasks and working in collaboration with the Internationalisation core area at IPV, responsible for coordinating marketing efforts, liaising with international recruitment agencies, and ensuring a smooth application process for prospective international students.

The strategic documents and reports also focus on the need to

promote initiatives that support mobility for students, faculty, and non-teaching staff. Exchange programmes, particularly the successful implementation of short-mobility initiatives, have been a critical component of this strategy, demonstrating IPV's ability to achieve its internationalisation targets. The alignment between strategic planning and practical outcomes underscores the institution's proactive approach to fostering a globally engaged academic community.

IPV's engagement in Blended Intensive Programmes and its growing but still modest involvement in Collaborative Online International Learning initiatives underscores its dedication to innovative educational practices that develop cross-cultural skills in a flexible and accessible format. Some BIPs have been organised at IPV, IPV students have participated in BIPs abroad, and a few COIL initiatives have been implemented, marking the early stages of a pathway towards making these programmes a consistent and integral part of its curriculum, as illustrated, for instance, by the 2024 edition of the BIP *Introduction to Global Studies*, offered by the University of Cantabria (UC), and in which five students from four different IPV Schools participated (EUNICE University, 2024a). A new edition is being launched this year by UC, along with other BIPs, such as "Applications of Artificial Intelligence", also led by UC, and "Crossing Borders: Colonial Echoes in Language, Space and Culture," coordinated by the University of Mons, just to name a few. IPV students who have taken part in short-mobility initiatives reported enhanced intercultural competence, which included improved communication skills, greater cultural awareness, and the ability to navigate diverse environments. These experiences have been particularly valuable in developing soft skills that are increasingly important in a globalised job market. Additionally, students gained academic enrichment through exposure to different educational systems and pedagogical approaches, broadening their perspectives and deepening their subject knowledge. The collaborative nature of these initiatives also fostered critical thinking and problem-solving abilities, as students worked on joint projects with peers from various cultural backgrounds, as Amante et al. (2021) explain, referring to a COIL that was developed with students from two schools of IPV, two institutions in Radom, Poland, and Ege University, in Izmir, Turkey. Other COILs have also taken place, such as a collaborative project between Nursing students from the School of Health at IPV and Pharmaceutical Sciences students from the University of Mons, held during the second semester of 2024 and repeated in 2025. Additionally, Wine Tourism students from IPV engaged in a COIL with participants from an English as a Medium of Instruction (EMI) class on Global Citizenship at Setsunan University in Japan in 2024, through a shared exploration of cultural and professional practices (Amante, 2025). In 2025, this same Japanese university invited IPV to participate in the *De Paul Global Conversations* initiative, partnering with the corresponding American university to further broaden intercultural dialogue. Among others, it is also worth mentioning a COIL between IPV and Fatec Ribeirão Preto, in Brazil, named "(Re)Branding Pequenos Negócios: São Paulo e Viséu", as well as the ProGlobe Project between IPV, Hochschule Bonn-Rhein-Sieg University, in Germany, Fanshawe College, in Canada, Middle Tennessee State University, in the USA, and Shenzhen Technology University, in China. Many other similar initiatives have now begun to emerge, reflecting the growing momentum and diversity of international collaborative learning experiences.

These short-term mobilities have, more than ever, taken new forms, including virtual mobility initiatives like the innovative escape game "Code Europa: The Disruptors' Dilemma." This EU-themed game, developed to celebrate Europe Day (May 9) and the European Parliament elections (June 6–9), was open to students from all ten EUNICE partner universities and served as an experiential learning initiative. A total of 647 EUNICE students participated in it, solving puzzles, answering quizzes, and deciphering codes. The top three scorers spent a few days in Brussels to visit the Parliament, the House of European History, and the 'Experience Europe' exhibition centre. This form of virtual mobility highlights the innovative and diverse approaches IPV is

taking to internationalisation, offering students unique and enriching experiences even from a distance. Building on this success, a new edition of the escape game has just been launched, now entitled “EUNICE on Route,” an interactive learning experience in which students are invited to embark on a new journey of discovery that continues to reinforce the values and relevance of the European Union in everyday life.

Many other short-term mobilities have already taken place, and others are being planned, such as the Alliance Games that were hosted in October 2024 by the Université Polytechnique Hauts-de-France and whose 2025 edition is being planned as a BIP to be hosted by IPV in November; the Palio d’Ateneo 2024 and 2025; a volunteering camp, entitled “Biodiversity and Risk Management,” hosted by IPV and again occurring as a BIP in late June (online) and in the second and third weeks of July (onsite); the EUNICE Weeks featuring several sports and cultural activities, and other initiatives within the EUNICE Work Package 3, as explained by its leader (EUNICE University, 2024b). As we have been noting, EUNICE European University has been actively contributing to the expansion of opportunities for IPV students and for those from the nine other partners to engage in diverse and meaningful formal and non-formal experiences that transcend traditional classroom boundaries.

Focusing on the teaching and non-teaching staff, short-mobility initiatives have provided opportunities for professional development and capacity building. Faculty members involved in these programmes reported improvements in their teaching practices, as they adopted new pedagogical techniques and integrated diverse perspectives into their curricula. Non-teaching staff have benefitted from exposure to international best practices in administration, communication and support services, and this has contributed to more efficient and effective institutional operations. The future promises a wealth of impactful initiatives that will positively shape the educational landscape, as exemplified by the BIP titled *Intercultural Relations and Intercomprehension in Mobility and in Higher Education Institutions* (EUNICE University, 2024c).

It is true that institutions in Inner Portugal, including IPV, face unique challenges in their internationalisation efforts. Geographic and economic factors can limit access to international networks and resources. Additionally, smaller institutions may struggle with limited funding and infrastructure to support extensive international activities. The cultural and linguistic differences can also pose barriers to attracting international students and staff. However, as we have been pointing out, these challenges also present opportunities for innovative solutions. The strategic focus on short-term mobilities, including both physical and virtual initiatives – some of them within the EUI – demonstrates that HEIs like IPV can proactively overcome these barriers and enhance their internationalisation efforts.

In conclusion, Axis D of IPV’s strategic plan, along with other key reference documents, underscores the institution’s commitment to internationalisation through specific, actionable objectives. The success of these objectives relies on a supportive organisational structure, which includes a dedicated team for international affairs, responsible for international student recruitment and overseeing both European and non-European formal and experiential mobility programmes and initiatives. By embedding these objectives within its organisational framework, IPV not only expands its international footprint but also enriches the academic and cultural environment for its students and staff.

Lessons learnt and broader implications

As discussed in the previous section, the Polytechnic University of Viseu is a proactive institution that has been steadily advancing its internationalisation efforts, keeping pace with others that invest in this area, both within Portugal and on the international stage. Recognising the challenges posed by its inland location, IPV has actively adjusted its strategies to overcome the geographical and infrastructural limitations that come with being situated away from coastal or metropolitan hubs. Much like other institutions that continually evolve to meet new

demands, IPV has embraced these challenges as opportunities for growth and differentiation. In a global context where HEIs are increasingly adopting diverse strategies to foster international engagement – such as investment in short-term mobilities, namely through BIPs and COILs – IPV has kept pace with these developments and made substantial efforts to stay competitive. Its participation in the EUNICE European University Alliance is a testament to this commitment, as it leverages international collaborations to enrich both its academic offerings and cultural environment.

While many HEIs prioritise long-term mobility programmes, IPV’s emphasis on short-mobility initiatives reflects a strategic adaptation to the specific needs of its student and staff populations. This focus allows for broader participation and reduces the barriers associated with longer-term exchanges, such as financial costs and time constraints, thus ensuring that international experiences are accessible to a wider audience.

While IPV has made significant strides in its internationalisation efforts, there remain several areas where further improvement is both possible and necessary. Currently, IPV is well-positioned in Europe and Brazil, but there is a clear need to expand its network of international partnerships beyond these regions. In response, IPV is actively working to establish more agreements and plan activities with Portuguese-speaking countries in Africa and Asia, aiming to broaden its global reach.

Another area of focus for IPV is the enhancement of support mechanisms for incoming international students and staff, and some examples are the construction of a fourth student residence and of a 24-hour study room, as well as the creation of a Language Centre. By strengthening these support systems and increasing the visibility of its international activities, IPV can more effectively attract and retain international participants. Additionally, increasing the financial resources allocated to internationalisation initiatives is essential. This includes not only securing additional funding but also developing more comprehensive data collection mechanisms to monitor and assess the impact of these initiatives, ensuring continuous improvement.

The findings from IPV’s internationalisation efforts have significant implications for policy and practice in higher education. Policymakers should recognise the critical role that short-mobility initiatives play as a viable and effective means of fostering international engagement, especially for institutions located in regions with less international exposure. To this end, policies that offer financial incentives and resources for international collaboration can substantially enhance the global reach of these institutions. In recognition of these needs, the Portuguese Erasmus+ Agency has recently introduced more flexible rules to better support institutions like IPV. These adjustments are designed to lower barriers to participation, thereby making it easier for institutions in less urbanised areas to engage in international partnerships and exchanges. By tailoring support to the specific challenges faced by these regions, policymakers can ensure that a broader range of institutions take fuller advantage of internationalisation opportunities, ultimately contributing to a more inclusive and globally connected higher education landscape.

Conclusion and future research directions

This study has explored the dynamics of short-mobility initiatives at the Polytechnic University of Viseu and their implications for internationalisation in HE. The research highlights the significant benefits these initiatives offer to both students and staff, including enhanced intercultural competence, professional development, and academic enrichment. Students participating in BIPs, COIL projects and other short-mobility opportunities have reported improved communication skills and greater cultural awareness. Similarly, faculty and non-teaching staff have gained from exposure to international best practices and the integration of diverse perspectives into their work.

The institutional impact of these initiatives is profound, cultivating a

culture of internationalisation that elevates IPV's academic standards and global reputation. IPV's strategic alignment with internationalisation goals and the support structures in place have been pivotal in achieving these outcomes. Nevertheless, challenges such as limited funding, geographic constraints, and language barriers persist, particularly for IPV and other institutions located in the inner regions of Portugal.

In summary, the findings of this study emphasise the multifaceted advantages of short-mobility initiatives for both participants and institutions, the significant institutional implications of these programmes, and the vital role of organisational culture in supporting internationalisation. The insights gained from IPV's experience provide valuable lessons for other HEIs striving to refine their internationalisation strategies and foster a globally engaged academic environment.

Looking ahead, it is of utmost importance for IPV to continue advancing its internationalisation efforts by deepening its involvement in EUNICE activities. This includes the establishment of new student clubs – besides the four Pan-EUNICE clubs already operating and the two whose campaigns are being prepared (EUNICE University, 2025) – theatre groups, and other cultural and sports activities that promote cross-cultural exchange and student engagement. These initiatives hold particular significance for IPV and other small, interior-based institutions, as they serve to bridge both geographic and institutional gaps, allowing for more equitable and meaningful participation in the European academic space. Such engagement can contribute to enhancing institutional capacity, fostering innovation, and increasing visibility within transnational academic networks. However, as with the broader Portuguese HE landscape, there is a critical need for further empirical research into the actual impact of IPV's involvement in its EUA. As Gogadze et al. (2024, p. 4545) remind us, while early participation may reflect a clear strategic commitment to internationalisation, “longitudinal and comprehensive studies” are needed to evaluate whether this engagement has translated into measurable and sustainable outcomes.

Furthermore, we cannot forget that EUAs represent only one dimension of internationalisation. Expanding programmes and partnerships with non-European institutions is another critical strategy put in place to further broaden IPV's global reach and enrich its international offerings, and comparable trends have been happening in other inland HEIs. Such initiatives have been enhancing these institutions' international profile and contributing to their mission of creating more inclusive, dynamic and globally connected academic communities.

CRedit authorship contribution statement

Susana Amante: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Visualization, Validation, Supervision, Resources, Project administration, Methodology, Investigation, Funding acquisition, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Helena Rodrigues:** Writing – review & editing, Visualization, Validation.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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