

## **ERASMUS STUDENTS IN COIMBRA**

Throughout the seven centuries of its existence, the University of Coimbra – with eight faculties and its great diversity running from the Social and Human Sciences to Medicine, from Law to Pharmacy and from Pure Sciences to Sport Sciences – has played a vital role in linking Portugal to the most important scientific and cultural developments and achievements taking place inside Europe and around the world.

At the present moment our University is, in the European context, the one that receives more Erasmus students. In order to promote this mobility, the University of Coimbra has established 340 bilateral agreements with foreign universities and education institutions worldwide. These agreements permit developing an interuniversity cooperation and increasing students and teachers mobility.

In 2001/2002 student mobility reached 530 incoming. The majority of them came to Languages Faculty and arrived from Spain. However, many other students came from different countries such as Sweden, Poland, Finland, France and Italy.

These students have a “Welcome Day” on the 1<sup>st</sup> September at the International Relations Centre that aims to promote their integration and to inform them about the intensive language preparation courses.

The registration at the University is made at the International Relations Office, which also helps them to find accommodation. Although the University has few places at the University Residences, Erasmus Students are granted housing in University Residences during the first 2 or 4 weeks. After that they can consult room rents lists provided by the International Relations Office, the Students’ Union and the Erasmus Students’ Association. This association, who gathers not only students who have already participated in Erasmus program, but also those who intend to do so in the future, contributes, by joining efforts, to the success of the integration of those who arrive.

Coimbra is a “university town” in which a rich and vibrant student life plays an important role; this greatly facilitates the integration of international students. Coimbra University’s Students Association (the largest and oldest in Portugal), and other student organisations offer opportunities to participate in a variety of cultural, sporting and social activities. Furthermore, inside each faculty there is a Departmental Coordinator,

in order to decide the programme of studies to follow during the academic year and also to solve eventual problems related with evaluation and courses.

The Higher Educational Pastoral Service, which is called SPES (in Latin, meaning HOPE), offers a combination of weekly activities to students, such as moments of prayer, deepening faith groups, discussion forums and a group of volunteers to work in public institutions. Besides this, it promotes periodically conferences and lectures, retreats and public debates and also offers study rooms and spaces where Erasmus students can organize their own events, such as cinema meetings. Furthermore, SPES organizes a special “Welcome Day” totally dedicated to receive the foreign students and inform them about all the activities in which they are invited to participate.

Each year there is a week dedicated to Erasmus cultural events, in which all students (foreign and Portuguese) are invited to participate, in order to encourage the interchange of different cultural backgrounds.

In conclusion, to be an Erasmus student in Coimbra is without doubt an opportunity to really grow as human being, by encountering a new reality that implies new challenges and by contacting with an extremely rich human diversity which is responsible for the international character of this city.