

Erasmus report LISBOA03 – NOVA University Lisbon (FCT NOVA)

In the winter term 2025/26 I spent my fifth bachelor semester abroad at NOVA University Lisbon (FCT NOVA) in Portugal as an Erasmus student. I study Cognitive Science at the University of Tübingen and was formally enrolled in Mathematics at NOVA, due to some organisational issues that I will describe below.

1. Preparation and application

To prepare for an Erasmus semester, the University of Tübingen offers several information sessions. These cover the application process, possible host universities and different funding options such as financial top-ups. These sessions are announced via university e-mail and are helpful if you feel uncertain about how the process works, but they are not strictly necessary because the application itself is quite straightforward.

For Cognitive Science, the Erasmus coordination is very accessible and helpful. In 2025/26 the secretary responsible was Ms Manuela Di Paolo, and she replied quickly to e-mails and questions. After you have been nominated by Tübingen and accepted by the host university, most of the paperwork is handled via the Mobility-Online platform, where you need to respect strict deadlines. It is important to register there early, read everything carefully and complete all steps in time, as the Erasmus grant (including Green and Social Top-Ups) is also handled through this platform.

For the Learning Agreement you have to coordinate closely with your departmental Erasmus coordinator (for me, this was Prof. Butz from Cognitive Science). Because you might need to adjust courses multiple times and wait for replies, you should definitely not do the Learning Agreement at the last minute. I would recommend planning at least a few weeks for this.

Regarding funding: the first instalment of the Erasmus grant often arrives only in October or November. The earlier you complete all the required steps on Mobility-Online, the earlier you receive the money, but you should still have a financial buffer before going abroad. The amount for Portugal is not sufficient to cover all living expenses, so additional funding (BAföG, support from parents, savings) is, in my opinion, necessary. You can also apply for the Social Top-Up, for which many students are eligible, so it is worth checking the criteria. The Green Top-Up is also attractive, as it reimburses travel costs if you avoid flying.

2. Housing and living in Lisbon

Once the formalities on Mobility-Online are done, the main remaining task is to find accommodation. You can apply for a place in a student residence, but there is no guarantee of getting one. Many students therefore look for shared flats via various housing websites, where you usually communicate directly with landlords or intermediaries. Scams are unfortunately quite common, so it is important to be cautious: do research, never transfer large sums without a proper

contract or a video call, and ask other students or the Erasmus office for advice if you are unsure. I personally found my room through friends, so I cannot give a step-by-step guide, but I would recommend starting early.

Rents in Lisbon are very high. One important structural reason is the large number of foreigners who can afford these prices because they earn or bring in higher incomes from abroad. As an Erasmus student paying a high rent, you contribute, at least indirectly, to gentrification and rising housing costs. At the same time, you can see the consequences in the city: many locals move out of central Lisbon and commute in, there is a lot of car traffic, and although there is a well-developed public transport network, social inequality is very visible. In the city centre you will repeatedly encounter poverty and homelessness, which you cannot easily ignore.

If you are interested, there are also opportunities to get socially or politically involved. Lisbon has various left-wing social centres and community projects, such as Sunday kitchens and Küfas (community kitchens). You can contact them via social media, help with cooking, or support them as a volunteer. This engagement will not solve the structural problems in the short term, especially if you are only there for one semester, but it can be a way to contribute and connect beyond the Erasmus bubble.

3. Nightlife, queer scene and free time

Lisbon is a very good city for going out and enjoying cultural life. Left-wing and alternative centres organise regular events, concerts, screenings and parties, and on almost every day of the week you can find something to do. The main source of information is Instagram: most venues and collectives have their own accounts where they publish event information.

One of my favourite clubs was Outra Cena, which usually offers carefully curated line-ups with local DJs and a well-trained awareness team plus respectful security staff. In contrast, some more commercial clubs in Lisbon are very profit-oriented, and there are parties where sexist, racist or otherwise discriminatory behaviour and assaults occur, especially at certain Erasmus events. It is therefore important to pay attention to the general attitude of organisers: check the Instagram profile, read how they talk about awareness and safety, and listen to recommendations from people you trust.

Overall, Lisbon is a very queer-friendly city with a lot of visible, colourful representation in public space and in nightlife. If you are looking for queer spaces, you will find plenty of options.

Apart from city life, the natural surroundings of Lisbon are a huge plus. There are excellent surf beaches within easy reach of the city. Detailed information on different beaches, conditions and skill levels can be found on various surf blogs; for weather and wave forecasts, windguru.pt is very useful. Surfboards and equipment can be bought second-hand relatively cheaply via olx.pt (similar to eBay Kleinanzeigen) or Facebook Marketplace. The wider region around Lisbon also offers

great possibilities for hiking and exploring. Many places are accessible by bus (often covered by the public transport card), although having a car is more convenient. Cars can be rented relatively cheaply at the airport if you book in advance.

4. Public transport and NIF

Public transport in Lisbon is free for people under 23. To access this, you need to obtain a NIF number (Portuguese tax number) and then apply for the transport card (commonly called “Navegante” – sometimes informally referred to differently) at one of the main stations.

The fastest and cheapest way to get a NIF is usually to go to the central citizen's office (Bürgerbüro) in the city centre (R. dos Correeiros 70). Other offices tend to have very long waiting times, and some of my friends were sent away several times for different reasons, partly because the system is still quite new and not all staff follow the same procedures. The Erasmus programme also offers a “fast-track” NIF service, but this costs around 40 €, which in my opinion is not worth it if you can obtain it for free by waiting a bit at the citizen's office.

For the transport card, I recommend going to a major station that has an express or urgent desk. There you pay a small fee (around 5 €), but the card is issued quickly. If you apply via the regular route, it can take weeks and you have to pay for single tickets in the meantime, which becomes more expensive.

5. Travel to and from Lisbon

To travel to and from Lisbon, I used long-distance buses (e.g. FlixBus). If you book early enough, the tickets are relatively cheap and you can bring a large, heavy suitcase, which is practical for a semester abroad. Compared to other means of transport, this was, as far as I know, the cheapest option. Interrail tickets plus seat reservations in France, or other train connections, turned out to be more expensive in my case. Travelling by car can also become costly due to motorway tolls and fuel prices. If you want to apply for the Green Top-Up, bus or train are good options because they are accepted as “green” travel modes.

6. Academic experience at FCT NOVA

NOVA University is relatively well-known internationally and has a good reputation for its science faculty. Most professors and lecturers were friendly, approachable and responded quickly to e-mails. All of my courses were taught in English, and I did not need any Portuguese at all in my academic life. Communication with administrative staff and teaching staff was always possible in English as well.

I did not take any language courses in Lisbon, and in my view they are not necessary if you already speak English fluently. However, if your English is not fluent, you should definitely brush it

up before going, because English is absolutely essential for studying and for dealing with all administrative matters at NOVA.

If you compare similar courses in Tübingen and in Lisbon, the content at NOVA often feels somewhat easier. At the same time, because FCT NOVA is a science faculty with a strong focus on computer science, many courses involve regular and demanding assignments, sometimes group projects and continuous assessment, which can be time-consuming. You can find detailed information about course structure and assessment on the official course guide website (<https://guia.unl.pt/en/2025/fct>); it is worth checking this carefully before choosing NOVA, to see whether the courses match your expectations and your degree programme.

The Erasmus office at NOVA was less responsive by e-mail, so it was usually more effective to go there in person, especially at the beginning and end of the stay. It is important to get the Letter of Arrival and Letter of Confirmation signed on time, otherwise there may be issues with your Erasmus funding. The administration in general felt somewhat disorganised: for example, I was initially enrolled in the wrong study programme (Mathematics rather than something closer to Cognitive Science). At the time of writing, I have not yet had my ECTS recognised in Tübingen and have not received the second instalment of the Erasmus grant, but I hope this will work out without major problems.

The campus of FCT NOVA is located in Caparica, which means that you usually commute about one hour from Lisbon. The campus itself is quite large and offers many cafeterias and common spaces. In my personal experience, the main cafeteria (mensa) was relatively poor in quality and rather expensive, so I rarely ate there, but there are plenty of other options to get food or coffee on campus.

Overall, I would say that the academic offer in computer science and related subjects is strong and well suited to refresh or deepen fundamentals, especially if you come from a background like Cognitive Science. The organisational side, however, requires patience and self-organisation.

7. Language, learning outcomes and personal conclusion

From a language perspective, my Erasmus semester was entirely English-based. As mentioned, I did not need any Portuguese for either studies or administrative matters. I also did not attend any language courses. If you already speak English fluently, this is sufficient. If your English is not fluent, I think it is crucial to improve it beforehand, because you will rely on it for lectures, exams, assignments, group work and all communication with staff.

Academically, NOVA allowed me to strengthen my foundations in computer science, which fit very well with my Cognitive Science degree and helped to round off my profile. On a personal level, the semester abroad significantly improved my self-organisation, as I had to manage complex bureaucratic processes both in Tübingen and in Lisbon, deal with delayed payments and find my

way around a new university system. Living in a big, international city with strong contrasts between tourist areas, gentrified neighbourhoods and visible poverty also changed my perspective on urban life and my own position as a temporary resident.

In summary, I really enjoyed my Erasmus semester at NOVA in Lisbon. I chose the city mainly because of its rich cultural scene and the combination of urban life, sports (especially surfing) and beautiful nature in the surrounding area. These factors were my main motivations and they were fully confirmed. I would recommend participating in the Erasmus programme to anyone who wants a change of environment, is curious and can handle a certain degree of self-organisation and bureaucratic hassle.

I would clearly recommend Lisbon as a city, especially because it offers a strong contrast to Tübingen in terms of size, atmosphere and diversity. I would recommend NOVA University with some reservations: the course offer in computer science and related areas is very good and the teaching staff are committed and approachable, but the campus is far from the city centre and important administrative contacts can be difficult to reach. If you are aware of this and prepared to invest time in organisation, an Erasmus semester at NOVA in Lisbon can be a very rewarding experience.