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As the United Kingdom enters post-EU Referendum negotiations, various stakeholders associated with the higher education community debate and think forward the ways for the UK to sustain its deep embeddedness in the European research and higher education area and continue to build proactively on the phenomenon of global regionalism. Such involvement in the EU research and education, for many universities, is generative of the formation of collaboration and deep partnerships and “potentially leading to educational innovation within the UK and EU” (Olds, 2016, “Models for the Globalization of Higher Education,” para. 5). In this context, it is important that the examples of what such collaboration can engender, the forms it takes, along with the conditions, processes, and outcomes, are analyzed and understood. Collaborative knowledge production and learning that are taking place within the EU networked projects require investigation if these are to be fully appreciated and negotiated.

This paper focuses on the nature and consequences of the learning experiences of students on a distinct European programme for cooperation and mobility in higher education – Erasmus Mundus (EM). The central aim of the programme is to support measures to make higher education in Europe more attractive globally. It achieves this mainly through providing scholarships to selected students from around the world to follow specially designed joint Masters courses, constructed and run by the consortia of a minimum of three European universities, in three different countries, over two years.

While EM has been an object of analysis as a policy (Batory & Lindstrom, 2011; Dale, 2016; Papatsiba, 2013), it has received only narrow attention in research as a programme that actually facilitates learning and students’ experiences. The extant literature is mostly limited to surveys (ICU.net AG 2009; ICU.net AG, 2010; ICU.net AG, 2012; ICU.net AG, 2013; ICU.net AG, 2014; ICU.net AG, 2015), with a handful of qualitative studies (Hadasz & Wittchen, 2006; van Swet, Armstrong, & Lloyd, 2012; van Swet, Brown, & Tedla, 2013). What is hidden from view in these studies is the ‘collective nature’ of the student experience. This paper seeks answer to the following overarching question: *How are student learning experiences shaped by studying as part of a multinational, multicultural group in at least two universities in different European countries involved in the EM Joint Masters programme?*

The research draws on a number of conceptual approaches, including symbolic interactionism as a theory and method (Blumer, 1969) and contemporary theorizing on peer learning in higher education, and in particular, at the graduate level (Boud, Cohen, & Sampson, 2001; Boud & Lee, 2005; Flores-Scott & Nerad, 2012; Nerad 2012). The three EM

courses in different disciplinary areas are selected as cases for a multiple case study approach.

This paper argues that the students on the programme construe, and indeed constitute, their Erasmus Mundus group as a (re)source of global learning during their studies and beyond –through worldwide (global) networking. It further argues that the academics are actors playing the role of peer-learning socializers who transmit and often model the rules of peer relations in their particular academic discipline or social setting.

The three case studies explore in depth the various ways that students in the EM groups interact, work and learn together and from one another, both in their academic and non-academic arenas. In the case of students on the Performing Arts programme, the formal peer learning activities that were set up by the academics were picked up and continued by the students in their informal peer-to-peer activities outside of the classroom. While still on the programme, these students were already planning their future collaborative projects. They saw themselves as part of a strong and grounded network in their field and were eager to build on its potential immediately after graduation.

Similarly, students on the Environmental Studies programme reported that their EM group played an important role in their student life. In the narratives of these students, there was a clear discourse of strong collaboration and mutual support throughout their studies. Students in this interdisciplinary programme came from different backgrounds, and their diversity meant that together, as a group, they had a diverse pool of expertise, which was readily available, freely shared, offered and utilized. As for the future of their EM cohort, the students thought of themselves as part of a virtual professional network of EM graduates, which they could access if the need arose.

For the students on the Science programme, the few formal team projects set up by the faculty at the beginning were associated with the enjoyment of group work and the perception of better results. There was a joint understanding among the students that the science programmes are characterized by great complexities, which inevitably call for cooperation in order to tackle and solve problems, and ultimately – to achieve, succeed, and for many – to survive on the programme. Finally, the students saw their network - the EM group - as one that had performed its role of great peer learning enabler during the studies.

The case study comparison indicates that the variation in the student experiences breaks along the lines of academic disciplines, which is congruent with the research in other contexts (Robertson & Blackler, 2006). In addition, the findings suggest that the teachers' peer relations with their fellow academics within the university consortia, as well as teachers' overall perspectives on the role and place of student peer learning on the course were also consequential in shaping the different ways students were working and learning from and with their peers. It appears that different models of peer relations and learning among the students mirror the different models of peer relations among their teachers.

The analysis offered in this paper is significant for addressing challenges and appreciating opportunities for learning offered by the international collaboration programme. The paper highlights the multiple ways in which the “particular forms of social organization of the

programme” (Dale, 2016) benefit the student learning. Securing these benefits for students will require more reflexivity regarding the enablers and barriers to such collaboration.

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