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The European Union's contributions to international stability: the role of education and study mobilities

Amy Stapleton¹ · Mihaela Mecea² · Lulzim Beqiri³

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Abstract The efforts of the European Union for stabilisation and democratisation in Eastern Europe and the Balkan region covered a range of areas. While the impact of such measures and incentives testify for the progress on the path of regional reconciliation and democratisation, this record remains largely a top-down account, with governments and political leaders acting as principal agents of change and drivers of stability. The long-term efficiency of this type of approach cannot be guaranteed without genuine transformations at all society levels and layers. The role of the European Union's educational exchange schemes, particularly *Erasmus*, may prove to be an instilling factor for regional reconciliation and a stability generator. The *Erasmus* scheme has been extremely successful and key to breaking cultural barriers and working across borders and disciplines. This study seeks to understand student experiences of two postgraduate programmes which deal with issues associated with international stability. The study used a case study research methodology and selected the case studies of the "MITRA" Erasmus Mundus Masters programme on Intercultural Mediation: Identities Mobilities and Conflict and the EM2-STEM (Entrepreneurship

and Management Training in Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics) Erasmus Mundus programme. The study specifically investigates the experiences of students in these programmes and their experiences of intercultural interactions. From here an analysis is conducted to explore if European Union-funded study mobilities have shaped or transformed participating students' views of international stability.

Keywords Education · Interaction · International stability · Communication · Conflict · Mobility · Erasmus · European Union

1 Introduction

Stabilisation, democratisation and reconciliation have always been fundamental visions of the international organisations operating in and supporting the normalisation of relations across instable societies. But in what order do these visions come, which is the most important and at what level? Is it the stabilisation at political and military level, is it the democratisation of institutions, or is it the reestablishment of sustainable cohabitation in the communities? The practicalities of experiences encountered by such organisations have shown that the intertwining of elements precedes the priority that any of these key terms may have been given in official discourses and policy lines.

Such experience is not different from what the European Union may argue with respect to its regional role. Incentives for progress at all levels have been attached to the membership/adhesion perspective that has been granted to all the states in the region. However, to take the example of the progress reports given by the Enlargement

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Directorate, one must regard these at an even deeper level and realise that the lack of accomplishment of objectives or lack of compliance of standards set has causes that go often beyond the political leadership level, and are to be found at deeper societal level, with the influences of political culture and the practice of everyday communities life. This is not to minimise the political diplomatic level and channels of conducting and pushing for structural change and sustainable management of bilateral/regional relations. The incentives of the EU have meant a breakthrough point of setting around the negotiations table that perhaps no other organisation, political entity or personal initiatives have had throughout the period which has elapsed since the extinction of the regional conflicts. However, practical experience has shown that this top-down approach has been at times incomplete, concluding that long-term sustainable results can only be achieved using an integrated approach.

Derived is our understanding that the EU efforts are to be understood, channelled and encouraged at other levels too. The need for profound changes in the society, in the local communities, is essential. The drivers of change here are young community leaders who can actually play the part of agents for sustainable transformations. The EU's input is observed here in the age group that attends university, a group of future leaders with higher education, perhaps agents and promoters of public policies, or leaders for civil society, people trained and equipped with the means to lead their countries towards the path envisaged. The importance of developing communication and team work skills is becoming even more apparent. It is vital to learn from other disciplines, perspectives and cultures in order to tackle the key issues of international stability in the world today. Juras (2012) demonstrated how students' perceptions of complex, interdisciplinary educational programmes which address international stability issues can be used to help us understand educational priorities in this important domain. They can also help us to design curricula and contribute to the work of AI and Society and other academic forums in very particular ways.

This study seeks to understand student perceptions of EU funded study mobility programmes which operate in developing or postconflict countries. More formally, this preliminary study used the experiences of international students as active subjects in the construction of international stability in order to establish the objective of the research reported here. This objective was:

to gain an understanding of if students' intercultural experiences on EU study mobility programmes can improve students' awareness of international stability issues and their ability to overcome otherness.

2 Review of literature

Even in the year 2014 divisions within and between societies are still causing international instability. Although the cold war is something of the past and even with international political figures and institutions continually advocating for peace, there seems to be no end to conflict. Historically and in our present day, deep-rooted cultural differences and struggles for power are among the principle reasons for global insecurity. In the past 5 years alone, the world has seen an array of ethnic conflicts and rebellions. We have witnessed a violent Arab Spring and a civil war in the Ivory Coast. Not forgetting the Crimean Crisis and the conflict that pursued or the current threats faced from the Islamic State across Syria and beyond.

The societal divides and lack of cooperation between states are ongoing issues which can also be found even closer to home. The European Union faces many challenges regarding its member states and the surrounding neighbours. For instance, Othon Anastasakis (2002) discusses the difficulties in regional cooperation in the Balkans and the lack of focus in the region. She has found that the conflicting understandings regarding the conception of the region and the negative prepositions of neighbouring countries make it difficult to rebuild regional cooperation. Beck and Camiller (2004) describe cultural divisions as another threat to regional and international stability; "the culture, identity, and religious faith that used to be subordinate to political and military strategy now define priorities on the international political agenda. We are witnessing the invasion of politics by culture". For example, the lack of a regional identity in the Balkans is limiting the possibilities of the region becoming stable and working together (Othon Anastasakis 2002).

2.1 Otherness

Various academics and philosophers have tried to understand and overcome the sense of "otherness" that has sprouted from such cultural barriers and that has lead to so many international stability issues (Beck and Camiller 2004).

Zizioulas (2006) explains that otherness defines human beings, with, for example, one developing an identity and a sense of self through a relationship with others. Hawk (1967) demonstrates the influence of others on the development of one's self, describing the specific relationships in the life of an individual as "significant others". These significant others are those important to the person and who can influence feelings of security and well being. As well as others influencing the development of an individual's identity, otherness can influence a collective identity.

People search for a collective identity by identifying with a certain class or group in order to be accepted and to avoid being faced with this “otherness” or being seen themselves as the other.

On the other hand, humans have the freedom to search for otherness (Zizioulas 2006). This otherness can be the freedom to create a world or situation different to what one is living in now. This is often demonstrated through the creative qualities of humans with, for instance, art and music creating an alterior world. Humans also have a certain social freedom for otherness. Here an individual strives to be unique from certain groups or classes, rejecting the identification with certain morals, beliefs, stereotypes, classes and groups (Zizioulas 2006).

This search for a new world, for change, for uniqueness from societal norms, can lead to conflict between those who strive for otherness and those who wish to keep the current norms and stay within a certain class or group. Then again, these conflicts can also be instigated by those who believe that they are already classed as “the other” within a society. The creation of distinctive groups where one group is privileged at the expense of devaluing another group encourages otherness (Hursh 2013/14). The devalued groups within society feel that they do not identify with the norms. They feel rejected, stigmatised, persecuted for being different, for being the other. A conflict can arise when these groups decide that they want a new world and rise up against the privileged class or group.

Otherness can also lead to conflict and instability across different societies, nations and even regions. This tends to largely arise from fear and ignorance of the other. Although difference can be encountered with positives, at times people revert back to their norms and try to keep distance from the differences (Hursh 2013/2014): a fear that the other is dangerous, a fear of difference and a fear of the unknown. Ignorance fuels this fear with dramatised stories and stereotypes increasing the sense of difference between people. Various examples of this can be seen throughout history and have been illustrated within literature. An interesting example can be found within the *Butter Battle Book* by Dr. Seuss, the famous children’s writer. This book has been described as giving a valuable insight into the progression of societies towards an armed conflict. This story illustrates the relationship between otherness and conflict using the small difference of two societies spreading their butter on opposite sides of a slice of bread. This difference initiates a war between the two societies. Moreover, the story demonstrates cultural and social difference transforming into the construction of otherness (Hursh 2013/14).

In this story, the transformation of difference into otherness can be seen through the creation of a physical barrier (a wall) between the societies (Hursh 2013/14). This is an

interesting demonstration as we have seen many examples of this in reality with the Berlin Wall separating East and West Germany and the controversial wall in the West Bank separating Israel and Palestine. As well as this wall, different propaganda in the Yook society describes the negative aspects of the Zooks and highlights their differences. Exclusionary mindsets are illustrated by certain characters in the book, such as the grandfather who emphasises the differences between the societies and the inferiority of the Zook society to his grandson (Hursh 2013/14). Tanya Jeffcoat explains that the arrogance of one community over another creates otherness, where one believes that their practices are more valuable, more correct and are better than the other’s (Tanya Jeffcoat in Hursh 2013/14). This arrogance of individuals within the Yook society is demonstrated in regard to the methods of spreading butter on bread. These constructions of otherness demonstrated in the *Butter Battle Book* describe how cultural difference can transform to otherness and potentially lead to the creation of an armed conflict where two societies can fight even to the edge of complete extinction.

Throughout history fault lines and subgroup dynamics have led to instability issues at a regional and even an international level. Willis (2010) goes on to describe the similar fault lines and subgroup dynamics within small groups and the development of the “us” and “them” mentality. This mindset is driven by a range of differences such as culture, gender and professional divides (Willis 2010). Kile (2002) discusses the competition between these perspectives, for example, ethnic, social and religious ideologies leading to a reluctance to stabilise the larger systems. These authors highlight the importance of overcoming these divides and differences on a smaller scale in order to begin to learn from the challenges and to expand these skills to improve regional cooperation and stability on a greater scale. The question then arises, how do we tackle these challenges in order to develop and rebuild cooperation between states?

Furthermore, we have seen that conflict can develop when there is tension between the same and the other, when there is competition between the same and the other with the aim to have power over the other. However, is there a way of avoiding this conflict or the construction of otherness?

2.2 Overcoming the sense of otherness

Various approaches can be used to prevent the construction of otherness and in turn avoid conflict arising. Each culture has a unique way to cope with differences and to deal with disagreements. Differences in cultures also determine the different methods of resolving and avoiding disputes. As well as this, by establishing certain rules and norms which guide our behaviour, our acts and our expectations, culture,

itself, enables us to avoid disputes (Augsburger 1992). Although one can avoid confusion in their own society through the understanding of their own culture, people who enter into a secondary culture can encounter difficulties.

These difficulties can be found at a very basic level. For instance, they can be language based with, for example, an English student arriving in France and talking to his professor using the informal “tu” (you) instead of the formal “vous” (you). The professor would immediately feel treated with a lack of respect and therefore may gain a bad impression of the student. There are also problems which arise from somebody bringing their own cultural values into a new culture. For instance, a couple from a Christian, Western culture may feel that it is completely appropriate to show public affection in their own culture. However, if they travel to a strongly Islamic culture and act in the same way in this new culture, they may be faced with strong local disapproval and in some cases, even legal repercussions. Questions arise when one goes into a new culture: What is culturally acceptable? What are the norms? Is it possible to adapt to these norms? How does one avoid disagreements or confusion?

Education is one approach that has been used in various domains to educate and inform people on cultural norms and practices. It has also been used by various programmes, within and outside of the EU, to create awareness on the issues surrounding international stability, and various programmes have attempted to overcome this sense of “otherness”. For example, in Kosovo, the Institute of Engineering Management Education has set up third-level engineering courses designed to begin improvements in national infrastructure through innovative educational engineering programmes (Kopacek 2010). In order to get closer to achieving regional stability and cooperation, Juras (2012) emphasised the value of overcoming possible boundaries and building mutual trust among students.

Programmes exist which attempt to teach people about cultures, such as foreign language programmes. These programmes include lessons on culture. In spite of this, Juhl and Mennicke (2006) believe that it is not possible to *teach* people about different cultures. They describe that students need to experience these cultures, to improvise and to use their existing knowledge to develop new knowledge of culture and human behaviour. They subsequently go on to state that intercultural education programs are, of course, ideal contexts for this kind of learning (Juhl and Mennicke 2006).

There are number of educational initiatives which attempt to develop knowledge of young people through these types of intercultural educational programmes. On these programmes, students travel to study in new countries. Here, the students gain an opportunity to learn about the culture in the country of study but also to learn about new cultures with

other participating international students. These programmes are found in almost all educational domains, from, for instance, the physical sciences and technology to literature and the arts. Examples of these programmes include the Fullbright programme and the European Erasmus programmes. In Europe, these initiatives really began to grow in popularity after World War II (Teichler 1996). After the EC was founded to promote economic collaboration in the 1950s and once higher education came on the agenda in the 1970s, promoting educational mobility was one of the first initiatives of the EC (Teichler 1996). The European Erasmus and Erasmus Plus (previously Erasmus Mundus) programmes are among the most well-known and successful regional educational exchange programmes in the world. Their aims include promoting “dialogue and understanding between people and cultures through mobility and academic cooperation” (EACEA 2014).

Interregional programmes are also run by the European Commission. These programmes include the Intra-ACP programme which promotes cooperation in higher education between African, Caribbean and Pacific countries (ACP) and the Tempus programme which supports university cooperation in Eastern Europe, Central Asia, the Western Balkans and the Mediterranean. There is a continued focus on the importance of intercultural education and cooperation within the EU which is highlighted by the integration of these programmes into the new Erasmus + programme.

This paper has demonstrated that otherness develops due to a transformation of cultural difference. However, culture does not develop solely at a societal level, and differences in cultures are also found across different professions and even across different organisational structures. For instance, traditionally, a person became a professional in one particular field and used specific approaches applicable to this field. This is effective until different professionals encounter a shared problem. Weinsten (1999) quotes Charlotte Towle stating that similarly to an individual, a profession comes of age when it has the capacity for interdependent relationships, being able to give and take without suffering, losing its identity or dominating another. Morten and Taras (2008) stress that divides between professions need to be resolved and that professionals need to not only cooperate but also collaborate in order assist in solving complex societal challenges. Only through a focus on communication across professions can professional cultures begin to gain a mutual understanding (Morten and Taras 2008).

It is clear that, when dealing with issues linked to international stability, cooperation with “the other” through intercultural interactions is an important dimension. It is vital to recognise and learn from this, particularly in relation to international stability education. It is evident

from the literature that tackling issues concerning international stability requires an intercultural approach. There are two consequences of this for a programme tackling such issues: the need to look at student perceptions of intercultural interaction and their awareness of international stability issues. This leads to the two research questions. This research particularly focuses on students mobility education programmes and draws lessons for automation and control education from student experiences. In summary, the research questions are as follows: R.Q.1. What are the student experiences of the intercultural interaction on EU funded study mobility programmes? R.Q.2. Do EU funded mobility programmes increase student awareness of international stability issues?

3 Methodology

This was a preliminary, exploratory study to gain an understanding of the student experiences of EU-funded mobility programmes. The study particularly aims to explore whether students' cultural experiences on EU study mobility programmes can improve their awareness of international stability issues. This study used two case studies as they can give an invaluable understanding, extending experience and increasing conviction on a subject (Gray, *Designing Case Studies*, 2009a, b). They are key in the explorations of ambiguous subjects and issues.

The target case studies needed to satisfy certain requirements in order to be selected for this research. These were:

- (1) It must operate in more than one country of study and have at least two different nationalities of students participating (intercultural requirement)
- (2) It had to be a programme with a partner university in a postconflict or developing country/region (regional stability requirement)
- (3) The programmes selected must have at least two partner countries in common with each other (comparability requirement)

Two programmes were selected as meeting these criteria. The first was the new "MITRA" Erasmus Mundus Masters programme on Intercultural Mediation: Identities Mobilities and Conflicts met each of these requirements and therefore was selected. The programme has over twenty different nationalities participating in this programme and is run over a consortium of eight European and non-European universities in the eight following different countries (four within developing countries): France, Ireland, Poland, Romania, Belgium, Senegal, Mexico and Brazil. As a result, it was certainly within the minimum requirements necessary for this case study.

The second case study selected was the EM2-STEM (Entrepreneurship and Management Training in Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics) Erasmus Mundus programme focusing on students based in the partner University of Business and Technology in Pristina, Kosovo. This programme was chosen as it met the requirements necessary. EM2-STEM runs across 12 universities in total (6 in developing countries), six in the Balkans and six within the EU. These are listed as follows: Albania, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Croatia, Kosovo (under UNSCR 1244/99), Macedonia (former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia), Serbia, Finland, Germany, Ireland, Poland, Romania and the UK. The programme has three partner countries in common with the MITRA programme: Ireland, Poland and Romania.

3.1 Data gathering and processing

The study used primary data gathered through the use of a qualitative questionnaire. These questionnaires were completed by students who were participating at the time of completing the questionnaire or had participated in the MITRA and the EM2-STEM Erasmus Mundus programmes. The questionnaires were completed in 2013. The target population of 39 (17 MITRA and 22 EM2-STEM) were invited to participate and complete questionnaires. This was the overall number of participants who are/have been involved in the programme. The questionnaires dealt with key areas including: personal intercultural skills, international stability and intercultural interactions.

In order to prepare the questions for the survey, two frameworks listing and explaining key cross-cultural abilities were relied upon. The first is the *Multicultural Personality Questionnaire* (Van der Zee and Van Oudenhoven 2009) according to which the key multicultural skills are:

1. open-mindedness—"capacity to be open and unprejudiced when encountering people outside of their own cultural group and who may have different values and norms, social initiative, emotional stability and flexibility"
2. social initiative—"tendency to approach social situations actively and to take initiative"
3. emotional stability—"the degree to which people tend to remain calm in stressful situations"
4. flexibility—"ability to adjust their behaviour to new and unknown situations"
5. cultural empathy—"the capacity to identify with the feelings, thoughts and behaviour of individuals from different cultural backgrounds".

The modelling of such competencies during formal educational training should later reflect in a person's abilities to cope with both job-related and social demands and

increase the overall capacity of the individual to integrate and function in an internationally oriented environment.

The second approach used in the design of the survey structure is William Gudykunst's *Anxiety Uncertainty Management* model (quoted in Butnaru 2001) which discusses key skills to include:

1. motivational aspects—identifying needs, establishing social delimitations, creating self-awareness and availability/opening to new information
2. knowledge-related aspects—establishing expectancies, approaching knowledge from multiple perspectives, from alternative interpretations, raising awareness of similitude and difference, extending relational networks
3. social abilities—empathy, tolerance towards ambiguity, communicational adaptability, creation of new categories, behaviour adjustment, efficient information.

Both these theories were used to assist in the design of the questionnaire sent to the target population.

From this questionnaire, the data were collected and standard qualitative analysis was conducted using Axial and Open Coding (Gray 2009a, b). A limited amount of numeric quantitative data were collected and analysed, but the majority of the data were qualitative.

4 Findings

4.1 Case study profile

The MITRA Masters: Intercultural Mediation: Identities, Mobility's and Conflicts are newly established among the Erasmus Mundus Master Courses. This programme is a bilingual programme designed using the fundamental concept of interlinking disciplines. The dialogue between different academic disciplines is indeed one of the key features of the programme. The issues tackled by the MITRA programme are so complex that using a single academic approach could lead to the oversimplification of issues. For this reason, the programme attempts to bring together various core disciplines, in hope that interdisciplinary approach will shed more light upon the issues surrounding international mobility, interculturality, international stability and international mediation. These core disciplines include: political philosophy, sociology, anthropology, literature and literary criticism, linguistics, social psychology, history and geography.

However, the dialogue is not only between the disciplines, it becomes more complex: the MITRA programme combines examining the issues tackled from a range of disciplines, but also through various and differing cultures. MITRA is a programme of intercultural mediation. The

word "MITRA" represents values of friendship and loyalty, and furthermore, the "M" in MITRA signifies mediation and the "TRA" signifies transformation, both necessary for better relations within an equal and more just world. The name itself suggests that a particular accent has been put on the intercultural dimension of the programme, not least in the fact that the programme is implemented by a consortium of eight universities from three different continents.

The interculturality of the programme is further reinforced by the diversity of student cultural backgrounds, a true testament to the intercultural character of the programme. It could therefore be said that the MITRA programme is an intercultural programme on multiple levels: not only does the programme study interculturality and intercultural mediation, but it also takes place across eight diverse cultural contexts, with students hailing from all corners of the world.

This programme currently only runs for masters level. Seventeen questionnaires were distributed targeting the total population of the 2012–2014 MITRA class and twelve responded, a 70.5 % response rate. Of the 12 respondents the average age of the students was found to be 27. There were eight female respondents and four male. Each respondent has a different nationality with five Europeans, two Asians, two Africans and three South Americans. Of the twelve participants, five had previously completed a master and seven had completed an undergraduate degree.

The second case study was the EM2-STEM (Entrepreneurship and Management Training in Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics) Erasmus Mundus programme. This programme is designed to provide scholarships and mobility opportunities for top students, researchers at various stages in their career as well as administrative staff with a purpose of studies, research and professional development. The academic fields of the participants include Systems Engineering, Computer Science and Engineering, Mechatronics Management, Architecture and Spatial Planning, and Management, Business and Economics.

The programme is designed for European Union and the Western Balkan countries. This programme aims to contribute to the sustainable development of countries in the West Balkan region through academic mobility. These mobilities aim to promote shared learning through mutual academic and cultural experiences. Through this, EM2-STEM assists in strengthening the cooperation and development between the EU and the Western Balkan region

A number of 264 scholarships/fellowships have been provided to the above-listed categories after a competitive selection process, which took place between the months of February to 15 April 2011. All mobilities were planned for the period from 31 December 2011 to November 2014.

Table 1 Number of UBT student mobilities

Mobility level	Number of mobilities	Direction of mobility
Undergraduate	16	Outgoing
Masters	5	Outgoing
PhD	1	Incoming
Total	22	

Depending on the target group and the level of studies (Bachelor, Masters, Doctoral) or level of professional expertise, the duration of mobilities in months varies. To date, mobilities in partnership with UBT have been from undergraduate level to postdoctoral level.

The host universities which have received students so far, researchers and staff from the University for Business and Technology¹ have been University of Limerick (Ireland), Free University Berlin (Germany), Lappeenranta University (Finland), City University London (United Kingdom) and University of Bucharest (Romania).

Questionnaires were sent to all 22 students on outgoing and incoming mobilities. The numbers are described in Table 1. There was a 50 % response rate from the target population with 11 respondents who were both current and former participants of the EM2-STEM, from the University for Business and Technology in Pristina. The respondents' average age was 24.9 years. There were seven female respondents and four male. There were ten Kosovan participants and one Albanian respondent. Six respondents were current masters students, two current bachelor students, two have graduated with a bachelors' degree, and one was currently undertaking PhD level studies.

4.2 Intercultural interactions

Regarding the intercultural interactions that the respondents had on their programmes, MITRA students rated their experiences of intercultural interaction as 4.4 on a scale of 1–5 where 1 is very negative and 5 is very positive. The EM2-STEM students rated their programme slightly higher on this scale at 4.7. The students described their views on the three things which worked best regarding intercultural interactions on this programme and the three things which were most difficult. Tables 2 and 3 categorise the key findings from their responses:

“[I learned from]cultural interactions and seeing that different cultures can work and live in harmony” (Respondent 6, ES2STEM)

Table 2 Responses of both groups to “What three things worked best? Why?”

Intercultural interactions: what worked best?		
Percentage MITRA (%)	Percentage EM2STEM (%)	Category of response
39	39	Learning from each other and surroundings
33	27	Student interactions and friendships
14	24	Interactions with and qualities of education system, programme and staff
14	9	No response

Table 3 Responses of both groups to “What three things were the most difficult? Why?”

Intercultural interactions: what was the most difficult?		
Percentage MITRA (%)	Percentage EM2STEM (%)	Category of response
44	55	No response
42	3	Communication and resulting conflicts
8	3	Respect for other peoples opinions
3	36	Integration and adapting to a new environment
3	3	N/A

The highest rated category as seen in Table 2 was “Learning from each other and surroundings” mentioned by 39 % of students in each group.

“[I] realise that people can be very similar and very different being from the same culture or not” (Respondent 5, MITRA)

The above respondent felt that they learned from the intercultural interactions that culture is not the only definition of somebody. The majority of respondents discussed the positive experiences learnt from these intercultural reactions:

“when you are in another culture, your eyes change and the way you see yourself and others” (Respondent 7, MITRA)

The possibility of sharing opinions, perspectives and stories both regarding the academic and non-academic aspects of these programmes were described as being a very good experience which showed that intercultural interaction goes well beyond the shallow comparisons between people of different cultural backgrounds. The intercultural interactions also were seen to break stereotypes and develop social skills of the students involved.

¹ According to data made available by the International Relations Office of UBT in October 2013.

“Meeting friends. This is one of the best things to happen to me when I knew so many friends from other places in Europe and from other places in the World” (Respondent 3, ES2STEM)

The diversity and openness of both the students and staff on the programme were found as working very well on these programmes. The friendships which developed from these intercultural interactions were mentioned by both groups of students as being very positive outcomes of the intercultural interactions.

There was a low response rate to “What three things were most difficult? Why?” at only 49 % overall. The opinions on this question differed greatly between groups.

“Communication: to learn to listen to others without prejudices” (Respondent 7, MITRA)

The highest rated category in the MITRA group was “Communication and resulting conflicts”; however, in the ES2STEM group this was only mentioned in 3 % of responses. Communication and misunderstandings were felt to be the most difficult during the intercultural reactions for the MITRA respondents. These difficulties were described to stem from language barriers, different customs (such as slang or gestures) and listening to others without prejudices. Respondent 1 described that the same things that worked best were the most difficult at times:

“making people from different cultural backgrounds work together is both enriching and challenging, the best things I gained from experiencing intercultural interaction on a daily basis stemmed from overcoming initial intercultural challenges” (Respondent 1, MITRA)

Integration and adapting to a new environment which was discussed most frequently by the ES2STEM group (36 %), only accounted for 3 % of responses in the MITRA group. These respondents described the differences in their culture, such as different transport systems, climates and regulations which were difficult to adapt to.

“Different culture – silent people, other rules and regulations etc.” (Respondent 3, ES2STEM)

4.3 Awareness of international stability issues

Both groups of students felt that the programme strongly improved their awareness of international stability issues with MITRA respondents rating an average of 4 on a scale of 1–5 where 1 is very negative and 5 is very positive. The ES2STEM students rated their programme slightly higher on this scale at an average of 4.4. The students discussed why/why not they believed the programme increased their

Table 4 Responses of both groups to “Do you think this programme improved your awareness to the issues associated with International Stability? Why/Why not?”

Improved awareness of international stability issues		
Percentage MITRA (%)	Percentage EM2STEM (%)	Category of response
58	45	Awareness improved due to directly experiencing and interacting with different cultures
33	9	Awareness improved due to studying topics related to international stability
8	0	No improved awareness
0	45	No response

Table 5 Responses of the MITRA respondents to “How can awareness of international stability be improved for similar master’s programmes?”

How can educational programmes improve awareness of intercultural stability issues		
Number of responses (maximum three per respondent)	Percentage MITRA (%)	Category of response
4	33	Increase the emphasis on and tailor the curriculum to tackle international stability issues
2	17	Have more practical learning
2	17	Improve and increase the use of technology to promote intercultural
1	8	Assist student integration
3	25	No response
Total responses: 12		

awareness and then made suggestions for similar educational programmes to use to improve awareness. Tables 4, 5 and 6 categorise these key findings:

“I think that the exchange of knowledge and values increases human’s integrity and awareness also in relation to international stability” (Respondent 10, ES2STEM)

Overall, both groups believed that their awareness of international stability issues increased due to directly experiencing and interacting with different cultures. Respondents on the MITRA programme also discussed an increased awareness as a result of studying topics related to international stability.

“Because we worked with subjects such as boundaries throughout history and in the sense of within ourselves. We had lecturers speaking about subjects

Table 6 Responses of the EM2-STEM respondents to “How can awareness of international stability be improved for similar master’s programmes?”

How can educational programmes improve awareness of intercultural stability issues		
Number of responses (maximum three per respondent)	Percentage MITRA (%)	Category of response
4	36	Increase the emphasis on and tailor the curriculum to tackle international stability issues
2	18	Increase funding for mobility programmes
2	18	Increased research on international stability issues
3	27	No response
Total responses: 11		

from conflict to linguistic and migration. These subjects really demonstrated how conflict can occur and how difficult stability can be internationally and locally for various reasons and even stability within ourselves as humans. This was concreted by our experiences day to day with the programme, positive and negative which can show dispute management and in the other sense how easily cultures can have common aspects and can work together when given a chance which if was learned by everyone in the world, would make the world a lot more stable place” (Respondent 4, MITRA)

The responses of the MITRA and the EM2-STEM groups differed generally when discussing ideas to improve awareness on other similar programmes. However, in both groups the most frequent responses involved the programme increasing the emphasis on and tailoring the curriculum to tackle international stability issues.

“Maybe with a collective reflection, in a course for instance by sharing personal experiences about conflicts, modalities should be thought, because for some people conflicts are a deep issue in their countries, their life and have deep roots in their experiences but an interesting point is the multicultural presence in the masters classes” (Respondent 11, MITRA)

Otherwise MITRA students discussed the need for improved technology and more practical learning.

“The possibility to create a platform linked with 3 different university could be a great opportunity to be in contact with different language and cultures and learn that we need each other” (Respondent 6, MITRA)

ES2STEM respondents particularly discussed increased funding for students coming from postconflict regions and research on international stability issues.

“... through questioners submitted by students, professors, local schools etc...” (Respondent 6, EM2-STEM)

5 Discussion

5.1 R.Q.1. What are the student experiences of the intercultural interaction on EU-funded study mobility programmes?

The results in Sect. 4.2 showed that the student experiences were very positive, with an overall average of 4.6 on the Leichardt Scale. The category “Learning from each other and surroundings” was described as the biggest advantage from the experiences of interculturality for the respondents. This was followed by “Student interactions and friendship” by both groups. Interestingly, for MITRA respondents, the highest percentage of responses regarding negative experiences also related to communication with each other. This result may be an indication of the difficulties that can arise when working and interacting frequently with a range of cultures at once. The result on the MITRA programme demonstrates the advantages of different cultures working together and interacting but also the difficulties that can arise when interacting together. Although many respondents experienced situations of misunderstandings and experienced various issues when interacting with each other, their experience overall was positive, suggesting that they learned from, overcame and gained something from these misunderstandings. This gives hope for international stability, with a change in negative prepositions and prejudices towards other cultures increasing the possibility to the rebuild international cooperation at a larger scale.

The EM2-STEM respondents did not mention communication issue as frequently finding integration and adaptation to a new culture particularly challenging. The students on the MITRA masters were studying a programme directly dealing with topics such as culture, migration and intercultural interactions so may have been more equipped to integrate and adapt to new cultures. One example mentioned by an EM2-STEM respondent was the difficulties adapting to new rules and regulations. This is not surprising as Augsburg (1992) highlighted that certain rules and norms guide our behaviour, our acts and our expectations. When faced with a new culture and new rules and norms, it can be initially difficult to change our behaviour.

Although the EM2-STEM respondents did find integration and adaptation the most difficult overall, they described learning from each other and surroundings as positive. These findings support the opinion of Juhl and Mennicke (2006), indicating the importance of first hand experience with new cultures. The results, though differing for both cases, can give hope for international stability with friendships, positive interactions and learning from new cultures preventing the development of otherness stemming from communicational barriers and integration issues.

5.2 R.Q.2. Do EU-funded mobility programmes increase student awareness of international stability issues?

Although the response rate of the EM2-STEM group was low for this question, overall the respondents from the two case studies believed that their awareness of international stability programmes was strongly improved by their study mobility programme. The results in Sect. 4.3 demonstrated this with an overall average of 4.6 out of 5 on the Leichardt Scale. Both groups felt that their awareness of international stability issues was improved particularly due to direct experience and interactions with different cultures. This indicates the positive impact of cultural interactions for individuals and the effect that this has on overcoming potential deeper societal fault lines.

On the MITRA programme 33 % of responses described the participants belief that their increased awareness on these issues was due to studying related topics in their programme. Here the difference can be seen within the two programmes, one which concentrates particularly on issues surrounding interculturality and international stability and another which is not designed to especially examine these areas. The EM2-STEM recognised the need for an increased focus on international stability issues in their programme in Sect. 4.3 where the respondents discussed various methods of improving awareness of international stability issues in similar programmes. The need to increase the emphasis on international stability issues and to tailor courses specifically for this was described in over one-third of the responses in both groups. Sect. 2.2 described the aims of the EU study mobilities to include promoting “dialogue and understanding between people and cultures through mobility and academic cooperation”. For programmes in the future, including the EM2-STEM programme, the incorporation of related topics may assist in reaching this goal at a deeper level by increasing awareness and understanding. This way students can understand the workings behind the issues which they have begun to become aware of through practical and everyday encounters with new cultures. From there, students would be more

equipped to understand the concept of the “other” and overcome challenges faced within new cultures which may lead to instability issues.

Other suggestions made by respondents included the use of technology, such as knowledge sharing platforms, increased research and funding for similar programmes and a greater focus on practical knowledge as possibilities to improve these sorts of study mobilities. The respondents demonstrated their awareness of the importance and benefits of these types of programmes as well as the need to improve on them in the future. As active participants in these programmes, the respondents give a valuable insight into improvements in dealing with international stability issues through educational programmes. With the continued and increasing focus on regional and international stability within the EU currently, policy makers, programme coordinators and educational institutions should listen carefully to these suggestions and try to incorporate them into similar study mobility programmes in the region and further afield.

6 Conclusion

This paper demonstrated the need for students to experience various cultures, to improvise and to use their existing knowledge to develop new knowledge of culture and cooperation. Juhl and Mennicke (2006) described how intercultural education programs are without doubt ideal contexts for this learning of this manner. The *Erasmus* scheme is one such educational initiative which has been extremely successful and key to breaking cultural barriers and working across borders. The role of the European Union’s educational exchange schemes, particularly *Erasmus*, may prove to be an instilling factor for regional reconciliation and a stability generator.

This preliminary study focused on the perceptions of students on two EU-funded mobility programmes. It demonstrated the advantages of diverse cultures working together and interacting but also the difficulties that can arise when interacting together. This study showed that although the students did face difficulties, they overcame them and had extremely positive intercultural reactions overall. As discussed previously, communication is a key to overcome cultural barriers and not only can assist in rebuilding cooperation at a small scale but also will assist improving relations at a regional scale. The findings also indicated that educational mobility programmes have an unquestionable role in fostering such abilities, due to the fact that they require students to be creative with the use of language, to improve and extend their vocabulary, to employ innovative ways of preventing and managing conflict situations arising from cultural misunderstandings,

to develop and deepen social and interpersonal skills while trying to adjust to a new culture and society.

This demonstrates that the Erasmus Mundus MITRA programme and EM2-STEM programme have played a role in the breaking down of cultural barriers and communication difficulties, improving the skill set of participants in the area of cooperation and creating future leaders of change and therefore creating increased possibilities for international stability.

Further medium and long-term analysis of the two case studies is necessary for further learning and improvements in programmes similar to this even in other disciplines. Adapting and developing approaches similar to these programmes and to other study mobility programmes will assist in the development of an integrated, effective thought process which will support the maintenance of international stability.

These learnings could also be taken by the European Commission, who manages 130 Erasmus Mundus Master programmes. The learnings from this study could greatly benefit each of these programmes. Moreover, they could give further learnings in the area by studying their own programmes in a similar fashion. Control and automation system research can assist in developing these holistic programme frameworks and can improve the effectiveness of their programmes when tackling issues surrounding international stability.

6.1 Limitations

Case studies are, by definition, limited to the lessons learned from a particular case and are therefore not strictly generalisable to all cases. The data gathered here could also be improved by examining these programmes (or other programmes) longitudinally, to see how learning happened and how problems were overcome (or exacerbated) as the programme progressed. For example, data gathered after each semester or annually could show whether student experiences change from semester to semester, year to year and from location to location. This would provide a richer picture of experiences. Also, the study presented here does not address different modes of delivery (didactic, problem-centred, etc.) and how they might contribute to improved learning in intercultural settings. These are all topics for further study.

6.2 Contribution to research knowledge and implications

This study is relevant to various other educational domains, including automation and control engineering studies, where international stability is an important topic. This paper further develops the debate on control and

automation education in relation to international stability. It highlights the importance of educational programmes as a way to address issues of intercultural instability.

In spite of its limitations, the results indicated that the acquisition of cross-cultural skills resulting from this educational experience has impacted on the students' awareness, vision and approach towards achieving international stability and regional co-operation. This study contributes to our understanding of student experiences of intercultural interactions in study mobility programmes as well as how such a programme can influence students' awareness of international stability issues and their ability to overcome otherness. Clearly, much more work needs to be done, not only to gain a deeper understanding of these experiences but also to discover whether similar experiences are found in other programmes and what can be learned from them.

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