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**Learning from Peers: The Role of the Student Advisor in Internationalising the
European Studies Curriculum**

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Learning from Peers: Developing the Role of the Student Advisor in Internationalising the European Studies Curriculum

ABSTRACT

This article seeks, first, to relate undergraduate student mobility to the ongoing agenda of 'internationalisation' in the UK's universities; second, to consider the role that peer-assisted learning (PAL) can play in this relationship; and third, to reflect on the significance of peer-assisted mobility for the European Studies curriculum and its futures. Accordingly, we ask: can peer advisors contribute to 'internationalisation' through their role in generating and supporting demand for student mobility? If so, to what extent, and subject to what limitations and conditions? What forms of mobility might 'save' European Studies where degree-level foreign language learning is no longer part of the curriculum? We answer on the basis of a single case study of ERASMUS student mobility conducted in one academic department at Loughborough University between 2010-12. Students move for one semester, their studies are credit-bearing and their tuition, although abroad, is in the English language. The findings in summary, are first, that in matters of student mobility, the impact of peer advisors is unequivocally positive and, unsurprisingly, is an 'industry' norm in the European Union's Erasmus mobility schemes; second, that the opportunity to study abroad for one semester in the English language was experienced by students as a valuable insight into 'Europe' and, by extension, as an invaluable addition to their degrees and CVs. As such, this experiment offers a perspective on the possible futures of European Studies *bis*, where any absence of foreign language learning may find compensation in the internationalisation of the curriculum *per se*.¹

Keywords: internationalisation; peer-learning; Erasmus; student mobility

¹ I would like to thank all the students at Loughborough who completed the questionnaires so fully and helpfully.

Introduction

In what follows we, first (I), review the internationalisation agenda of the UK Higher Education (HE) sector, and identify the links between this agenda and the longer-running practice of 'international student mobility' (King, Findlay and Ahrens, 2010: 1). We see that 'internationalisation' generally favours the recruitment of international students over and above the internationalisation of the core curriculum. At the same time, internationalising the *home* student's experience is invariably a stated strategic aim of Britain's universities that, explicitly or otherwise, incorporates an ideal of promoting and supporting student mobility. Second (II), we review in brief the field of peer-assisted learning and mentoring, and we look to its practice in the 'world' of Erasmus student mobility, part of the European Union (EU)'s Lifelong Learning Programme. Third (III), we evaluate the role of peer advisors in internationalising the undergraduate curriculum as implemented at Loughborough University between 2010-12 in a post-European Studies curriculum: the project was funded by a University Teaching Innovation Award, and implemented in a Department where the undergraduate European Studies programme (with, formerly, an emphasis on foreign language learning) has evolved into programmes of Politics, International Relations and History (in several combinations). Here, mobility abroad (and especially what King, Findlay and Ahrens (2010:13) refer to as 'credit mobility') increasingly involves partners able to offer tuition in the English language. Fourth (IV), we conclude with a number of observations regarding the likely role of mobility in the future/s of what we might term the European Studies *bis* curricula, in which the role of mobility to English-speaking partners abroad may play a growing role²; and we summarise our findings regarding the links between mobility, peer assisted learning, and the very real,

² These partners were, at the time of the study, exclusively European, but the scheme has since expanded to include a partner in Taiwan.

yet still ambiguous and unevenly implemented agenda of ‘internationalisation’ in – and of – the UK’s universities.

I The ‘Internationalisation’ agenda in UKHE

‘I think it would be really weird to study European Studies in the United Kingdom’

(May 2011: UK-based Dutch businessman on his UK-educated son’s decision to apply for a European Studies degree at Maastricht University, NL, instead of at a UK university³)

According to the Higher Education Authority (HEA), ‘[i]nternationalisation takes many different forms in the context of UK higher education’ (2012), and while ‘international students are an important part of the picture’ (*ibid*), ‘[a]n internationalised student experience is a key aspiration for many UK universities and colleges’ (*ibid*). For the HEA, ‘[w]e recognise that this must include a curriculum that is robustly informed by a broader world view and is taught in a range of ways. Another key element is students’ uptake of opportunities to study and work in different environments and countries, learning about themselves, their disciplines and their future professions in a global context’ (*ibid*).

Moreover, Montgomery reminds us that ‘internationalisation’ is, perhaps above all else, a ‘culture’: “in terming internationalization a culture, it is intended that it is seen as a set of beliefs and values that underpin a perspective on Higher Education’ (2010: 3). This perspective boils down to ‘a new global competitiveness and a struggle for global economic power between giant trading blocs’ (2010: 4), and a ‘discourse of “marketization” in Higher Education’ (2010: 5). It is hard to argue with this, and Scott (2011) – a Professor of Higher Education - makes the point more forcefully still; namely, that the ‘mainstream drivers of internationalisation’ are ‘the pressure to recruit international students, almost entirely because they can be charged higher fees (...), the drive for geopolitical and

³ Brooks and Waters (2009) deal with this type of ‘whole diploma’ mobility, as do Findlay and King in their 2010 report for the Department for Business Innovation and Skills on the ‘Motivations and Experiences of UK Students Studying Abroad’ (BiS, 2010).

commercial advantage (...) and global positioning'. These factors, he argues, tend to drive universities into 'foreign adventures' in their drive to recruit abroad.

Even where universities have a more balanced 'internationalisation' agenda, we are still left with what King, Findlay and Ahrens (2010: 40) have identified as the 'outward mobility conundrum', whereby staff and student mobility abroad is invariably deemed a 'good thing' by university management (also noted by Scott, 2011), which nevertheless struggles to support or promote it in a sustainable fashion. Yet this missing half of the 'internationalisation' equation was already a source of interest, if not concern, for the Labour governments that had introduced the agenda itself (spearheaded by Prime Minister Tony Blair: see Brooks and Waters, 2009). In 2007, for example, then Minister for Innovation, Universities and Skills, Bill Rammell, stated that: 'I strongly believe that spending a period in another country as part of a course of study brings real benefits to individual students and I am keen to see an increase in the number of British students who have this opportunity. (...) For students, a period of study or work abroad brings positive benefits both personally and professionally. It enhances their understanding of other languages and cultures, and increases their confidence and self-reliance. In a global economy, these skills and competencies are increasingly sought by employers, and students with this experience will find that their employability is higher than without it (CIHE, 2007).

The UK coalition government that took power in May 2010 has also turned its attention to the perplexing matter of persistently sluggish outward student mobility in the UK's universities.⁴ A report commissioned by David Willetts, Minister for Universities and Science into the matter, and published in May 2012 (BiS, 2012), recommended '[t]he development of a national strategy for outward mobility and a sector-led body to support this' (*ibid*). In particular, the report notes a demand from students for credit-bearing

⁴ For example, in 2009-10, the UK received almost twice as many incoming Erasmus students (study and work placements combined) as it sent out: 22,650 to 11,723 (British Council, 2012).

placements of less than one year, an arrangement that describes precisely the scheme that constitutes our case study below. One year before, the same ministry had been advised by the business sector to make 'study abroad (...) an integral and accredited part of a wider range of courses, and to increase student mobility' (BiS, 2011). This, unsurprisingly, echoes Sir Drummond Bone's findings on internationalisation after ten years of implementation (Bone, 2009) which listed as its first conclusion that 'UK institutions will need to broaden their perspective on overseas work. Even if recruitment of students to study in the UK remains an objective, it will increasingly have to take place in a context of bi-lateral and multi-lateral internationalisation'; and by way of recommendation, that '[a]t home the environment must encourage mobility of home students and staff. This environmental development might involve development of curricula, development of support and mentoring systems for students and staff both before and during overseas experience' (*ibid*).

It was precisely with such 'environmental development' in mind that in 2010 at Loughborough University, we launched a scheme to designate student peer advisors who, by assisting us in internationalising the curriculum on a small scale, would aim to generate greater outward student mobility. This, in turn, would serve Loughborough University's strategic plan which aims to 'provide a high quality international educational experience with wide opportunities for students from diverse backgrounds which prepares our graduates for the global workplace'; and to ensure that as part of the 'student experience', 'the syllabuses that they have been covering, the broad based social experience they have had on campus, the work experience placements and study exchanges will all help to make them the employee of choice for the employers in their field' (Loughborough University, 2006/7: 3 & 17). In these aspirations, Loughborough is representative of the sector, as is its own experience of the 'outward mobility conundrum' (by way of example, in 2009-10, the total outward Erasmus student mobility figure for the University was 68 of a

total undergraduate, full-time student population of around 11,500; see British Council, 2012)).⁵

II The role of the Peer Advisor (PA)

'My time spent studying abroad was without a doubt the best year of my life and I wanted to encourage others to do the same' (Peer Advisor, 2011-12)

We saw above that the key role of peer mentors in addressing the UK's low levels of outward student mobility has been identified at the highest of political levels. From their review of academic literature too, King, Findlay and Ahrens (2010: 3) have identified the potential of 'using returning students as mobility ambassadors to prospective mobile students by involving them in promotional events'; and in its 2007 report (2007: 23), the Council for Industry and Higher Education cites peers as the number one 'key influence on students when they consider overseas travel'. More broadly, in her study of the UK 'international student experience', Montgomery (2010) points to the importance of what she calls 'informal learning' and its link to the 'formal curricula' in 'improving intercultural interaction and international experiences in HE' (125-6) - and to the curriculum, full stop. Indeed, the role of the student peer will inevitably be less formal than the staff-peer relationship, particularly when defined in basic terms as 'the use of teaching and learning strategies in which students learn with and from each other *without the immediate intervention of a teacher*' (Boud *et al*, 1999: 413 in Hammond *et al*, 2010: 202, my emphasis). Peer advising or mentoring (we use the terms interchangeably here) is potentially a mutually-beneficial relationship, moreover, as our findings indicate in our case-study section below. By way of example here, we anticipate that peer advisors themselves 'gain from mentoring others because they improve their sense of interpersonal skills such as confidence, communication, problem solving and presentations, and it allows them to find a meaningful use of the subject matter of their studies [or in our

case, their own mobility experiences]' (Jeary *et al*, 3-4). This, logically, is particularly the case in 'the most common model of PAL [peer-assisted learning] (...), that of cross-level peer tutoring (...), whereby a student leader from a higher year level helps to facilitate classroom-based activities' (Hammond *et al*, 2010: 203), and this is the model that we adopted in our study, 'using returning students [from study abroad] to promote study and work placements abroad' (King, Findlay and Ahrens, 2010: 41). Such is the estimated value of such peer support, in particular to the younger students thinking about taking time out of their degree to study abroad, that the Erasmus scheme itself routinely employs 'ambassadors' whose testimonials are seen as crucial to encouraging the next generation of would-be mobile students, as exemplified in the use of 66 such ambassadors (two per country) in celebrating the 25th anniversary of the scheme (European Parliament, 2012). Similarly, *thirdyearabroad.com* relies heavily on the same technique on its website, and that data and information is currently informing the public debate on the importance of study abroad (*thirdyearabroad.com*, 2012; & British Academy & UCML, 2012).

III The Loughborough University Case-Study

[the Peer Advisors gave me] the confidence to be able to move, live, work and play in another country!' (International Semester Student, 2010-11)

Taking the step to move out of the mainstream curriculum and into a study period abroad is always a significant decision for students. The decision represents emotional, psychological and financial challenges, and for British home students is inevitably informed by the ambient UK cultural context in which foreign languages (and 'foreign' full stop), are simply not part of the staples of daily popular culture, and where public attitudes to Europe, or at least the European Union, are typically negative, sceptical, ignorant or all three. In this context, the role of the PA takes on a particular significance: only peers, it seems, can provide students in the year groups below with the sorts of reassurance and information on study abroad that can truly make or break a hitherto tentative expression of

interest in taking such a step. University structures, support and resources are irreplaceable in their own right, but the value of the PA is unique. As Sigalas argues, 'studying abroad can be a stressful experience. Abandoning a familiar environment and language means that students have to make an effort to make new friends, adapt to their new surroundings, communicate in a foreign language and cope with a series of new challenges. As a result, student sojourns abroad imply a process of psychological and socio-cultural adjustment and feelings of homesickness or alienation are not unusual (2010: 1347). In this picture, PAs are logically a crucial part of the picture of successful mobility.

Thus, in the academic year 2010-11, a peer advisor scheme (PAS) was trialed on a specific type of mobility at Loughborough - the International Semester - in the Department of Politics, History and International Relations. The context here is that what was in the 1980s and 1990s a flagship degree for the Department – the BSc in European Studies, whereby students were proficient at degree level in one or more (European) foreign languages – has been phased out. Consequently, the prominence in the Department of the equally traditional 'foreign language year abroad' has shrunk (although take up of the option by those students who do still study a foreign language to degree level remains high, largely due to a remarkable continuity and intensity of support at Departmental level by one specific academic colleague). In place of the European Studies degree are programmes in Politics, in International Relations and in History, all of which can be combined in different proportions with each other, and/or with other social science subjects. On all of these degrees, students have the space to study a foreign language if they wish (a significant minority do), yet mobility is still offered in the form of the (credit-bearing, Erasmus-funded) International Semester where students opt to spend their fourth (of six) semesters abroad at an Erasmus partner institution in the EU. In this way, those degrees too can be 'internationalised' and crucially, in the light of the 'internationalisation'

trends discussed above, through the credit-bearing curriculum itself. Nevertheless, take-up of this scheme has been typically low (in single figures, against an offer of 30+ student places in seven institutions across five different countries), and this 'non-mobility' was the primary target of the scheme under study here. The project, accordingly, aimed to tap into a hitherto under-used resource, namely the experience and expertise of final year students returning after a period spent abroad (of any kind), recruited as PA, and briefed to inspire, encourage and reassure their younger counterparts nervously imagining whether 'internationalisation' was for them or not.

The parameters of the Peer Advisor Scheme (PAS)

With the support of a £2000 University 'Teaching Innovation Award', and in the summer of 2010, we invited all returning students who had studied or worked abroad in the previous academic year (approximately 30 in total) to sign up as PAs for the duration of their final year. 17 students came forward, one of whom offered to act as coordinator for the group; this, subsequently, turned out to be crucial in staff communications with this group. Upon their return to Loughborough in October 2010, the PA group collectively created a 10-minute video compilation of their experiences and reflections (good and bad), on their decision to study abroad; their experiences whilst abroad, and their feelings on taking up their Loughborough studies again. This video was made available through the University's (Moodle-based) intranet, and delivered as part of a presentation made to freshers in Week Four of their first semester, in a core, compulsory module (Introduction to Academic Studies). The class was introduced by the academic tutor, and a sub-group of peer advisors then ran the entire class interactively. The peer advisors subsequently held three further briefing meetings throughout the academic year, and made themselves available for Q&A exchanges on the intranet; the aim here with regard to the first years was to 'keep them warm': to convert their interest into actual mobility, and to prepare them for their challenge. The class room presentations - embedded into the module curriculum - were

intended to crucially, to *inspire* first year students to have the confidence to consider customising their degree; at the same time, the activity was an opportunity for the peer advisors themselves to brush up on transferable skills, and to draw on their group camaraderie for the final year of their studies. Alongside the work of the PAs, we created designated sources on the university's intranet; in particular, every single first year student in the Department who was eligible to take an IS was registered on this site, and thus saw the opportunities for study abroad (and work placements) on their home page every time they logged into the intranet. Amongst the resources on the site (which included official university information) were the PAs' video, and a Q&A forum to which the PAs were registered alongside the freshers. We also co-opted foreign students on exchange into the scheme alongside the peer advisors on an ad-hoc basis.

In 2011-12, the scheme ran for a second year. There was a similar number of PAs (16) and again, a self-designated coordinator. This group also produced a video compilation of its experiences and this time posted it to YouTube (unlisted), as well as making it available through the university intranet. The embedded seminar sessions did not run (for reasons outside our control), and were substituted by a lecture, immediately followed by a 'mobility fair' organised by the PAs in which they decorated and staffed stands offering information and visual clues regarding their particular experiences abroad. In addition, the PAs were deployed *beyond* the IS scheme to reach second year undergraduates eligible for a foreign-language year abroad;⁶ and one of the pioneer PAs was recruited to a one-year internship by the University's Teaching Quality and Teaching Partnerships team, specifically to support University-wide outward student mobility. As we write, the PAS is going into its third year, and the PA-led seminar session has been restored to the core fresher curriculum. It will be up to the PAs of class 2012 as to how they develop the scheme in their own image, over and above these basic parameters.

⁶ We also extended the scheme to include finalist students who had been on *work placements* in the UK, but in this article we restrict our comments to study mobility only.

Results and reflections

The take-up of the International Semester in 2011-12, the first cohort to have benefited from the input of their older, wiser peers, shot up from a particular low of three students the previous year, and an average annual take up of seven over the previous five years, to an unprecedented high of 24. In addition, the conversion rate of interest to actual mobility was approximately 90%, in comparison to an annual average of 50% or below. Beyond this suggestive evidence of the power of the peer advisor, we further evaluated the impact of the scheme by means of a simple, diachronic study as follows. In July 2011, questionnaires were distributed to the first 'batch' of 17 peer advisors (response rate 41%) and to the 24 international semester students they advised (response rate 75%), approximately six months before they would depart for their study abroad. In April 2012, the same IS students – now abroad and in the full flow of their IS – were again asked by questionnaire (electronically) about the role of their PAs in their mobility, and their views on the scheme (response rate 30%). At the same time, the second cohort of 17 PAs were polled for their views on the scheme (response rate 30%), as were the 12 first year students who by then had decided to take an IS in their turn (response rate 25%).

What, then, did our students have to say about the role of the PAs in supporting academic student mobility? We set out our key findings here in Figure 1 below, in the words of the students themselves:⁷

⁷ We only have space here to give extracts from students' responses, and we have selected the most evocative and vivid of these.

Figure 1: Evaluating the role of the Peer Advisor

Benefits to students considering an International Semester

- 'they confirmed that I wanted to go'; 'they put me at ease'
- 'a key role, providing key information'
- 'it made me decide I wanted to go'; 'it strengthened my decision'
- 'their experiences inspired me'; 'they encouraged me to go'
- 'they gave entertaining accounts of their experiences and also answered any questions I had'
- 'to speak with those with experience was very useful'
- 'I would love to be a PA as I think more students should do Erasmus'

Benefits of the PAS from the perspective of the IS itself (i.e. with hindsight)

- 'nice to not only hear about the academic advantages...but about the personal aspects'
- 'you gain more confidence that you can do it as well'
- 'they helped me understand' [the choices]
- 'everyone sounded really keen and enthusiastic'
- the PAs played a key role in my decision...they were very enthusiastic about their experiences which reduced my anxieties about being homesick

Reasons to be a PA

- 'because I had a great experience abroad'
- 'to increase the numbers of students taking up this amazing opportunity'
- 'I felt it important to pass on the experience to others'
- 'to share my experiences, advice and information'
- 'my time spent studying abroad was doubtless the best year of my life and I wanted to encourage others to do the same'

Benefits of being a PA

- 'Thank you. I felt like I made a difference'
- 'communication and presentation skills'; 'group work'; team work'
- 'friendship'
- 'satisfaction at spreading Erasmus'
- 'really great socially', 'meet new people and make new friends in the Department'
- 'small experience gained in promotional material and events'
- 'I know that I have given the advice that I would like to have received... I personally feel good in the knowledge that I'm helping someone else'
- 'I have developed many skills involving communication, presentation, organisation etc. which are transferable to the working world'

Limitations of the PAS

Not all the remarks about the scheme were as unequivocally positive as those highlighted above; and many good ideas for improvements were forthcoming. Some first year students, particularly in the second iteration of the scheme (2010-11), were disappointed that none of the PAs had been to 'their' institution of choice, suggesting that they desired information as much as inspiration. Others wanted more contact with the PAs than had been possible; indeed, in 2011-12 in particular, several PAs cited academic workload and deadlines as barriers to their participation. No fresher, in either year, used the Q&A forum on the intranet, preferring his or her own social networks to any official university site. We found the role of the PA coordinator be more of a critical success factor than we had anticipated, but as Jeary *et al* had indeed observed (2010: 4): 'the PAL leader status, compared to that of the learning group, can change the group dynamic significantly and determine the success of a PAL programme'. In addition, while the PAs were unequivocally a valuable a valuable departmental resource, the scheme itself put pressure on academic and administrative staff time at a time when universities are particularly risk-averse. Mobility is a managed risk on the part of the student, and King, Findlay and Ahrens (2010: 22) notes how significant institutional support is: 'good promotional information, institutional support, smooth credit transfer systems, preparatory language training if necessary, easy access to mobility grants, and committed, enthusiastic staff are the main causative factors (...) which can boost mobility choice'.

IV Reflections and Conclusions: towards European Studies *bis*?

'I personally feel much more 'European' than I ever did prior to my period of study abroad'

'The IS makes you more socially and culturally aware,

which is an important trait to have, especially as a social science student'

'It was much easier to pick up the vibe of the European element whilst living in France'

'It is only after spending time living in another EU state that you begin to truly understand the EU and view it almost from a 'continental' perspective as opposed to the British (outside/sceptic) view'

We return here to our comment above: is it 'weird' to study European studies in the UK, and to what extent can peer-supported mobility internationalise the curriculum in this and other subject areas? Based on our case-study, and fully cognizant of its limitations, we find, first, that it is not hopeless, or devoid of meaning to study 'Europe' (and beyond) in the UK, and that mobility abroad can make all the difference to student attitudes and perceptions in this respect. We stop short of asserting that Erasmus student mobility will create 'Europhile "Erasmus generations"', which Wilson (2011) demonstrates as 'unrealistic', since 'while former Erasmus students may be more pro-European than their peers, this is because students who chose to take part are already more pro-European' (1113). We note nevertheless that some of our peer advisors spontaneously claimed to feel 'more European' after their study abroad, and prospective mobility candidates eagerly anticipated such developments. Second, we found that the PAs are a vital link in the chain of factors leading to a decision to study abroad, and that returning students who become PAs in fact derive further benefit from the mobility experience by virtue of the opportunity to share it. Our experiment thus supports the consistent evidence that students can and do learn from their peers. Third, our experience leads us to consider that English-language tuition abroad does not necessarily deliver an 'impoverished learning experience', with students 'able to spend their period abroad as tourists, skimming the surface of their host country, without the deeper involvement that will bring maturity and intercultural awareness', which is how Coleman sees the 'Englishization of European HE' (2006: 9-10)

– quite the contrary.⁸ Our fourth conclusion here is that for ‘our’ students, peer-supported ‘credit mobility’ clearly has the potential to deliver the sort of ‘internationalisation’ that, we saw above, is deemed so important by those responsible for the agenda; indeed, claimed Universities Minister David Willetts in 2012, ‘[s]tudy abroad offers a huge range of benefits for students taking part, and also for our universities and the wider UK economy. Students improve their employability, institutions develop their international links and businesses value the wider experience of those who’ve spent time abroad. *It’s a win-win for all* (BiS, 2012). □Our students, particularly in the second year of the PAS, noticeably highlighted how they valued the scheme for its ‘employability’ potential both in the pre and post-mobility phase (‘I hope it [the IS] will stand out to potential employers in the future’; ‘It is a unique point to put on a CV’; ‘I think it is important to employers to look like you are willing to try new places and travel’); but they also consistently underlined the *academic* value of study abroad: ‘win-win’ indeed. Finally, above and beyond the understandably utilitarian motivations and reflections we encountered, a non-negligible role of the PAs in internationalising the curriculum was to infect a welcome dose of idealism and hope, for both students and staff, at a time of considerable turbulence for all in UKHE.

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⁸ It is clear but not explicit in Coleman’s 2006 article that his concern and disapproval of the impact of English-medium teaching in European HEs on UK study abroad students is targeted at students studying degree level foreign languages; this does legitimise his stance. But he misses an opportunity to reflect on how what he calls the ‘Englishization’ of European HE may bring to non-foreign language learners opportunities for quite the opposite of the ‘impoverished learning experience’ that he bemoans, and this is certainly the case for our small cohort under study here.

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Biography

Helen Drake is a Senior Lecturer in French and European Studies at Loughborough University where she is responsible for the International Semester scheme for undergraduate students of Politics and International Relations. Her research interests centre on contemporary France, the European Union, and (im) migration and mobility. Her latest book is *Contemporary France* (Palgrave, 2011).