

## **Summary**

Multiple connections, anywhere and anytime, have allowed a new approach to education, by streamlining the remote distribution of information, knowledge, and practice. Moreover, face-to-face teaching is no longer necessary, the virtual environment allowing interaction between several participants from different locations, the only condition being a secure internet connection and the same language to be able to communicate directly. Thus, distance learning became accessible, the users being able to benefit at the same time from the authorized teaching support, bibliography, and a complete educational content, corresponding to the topic of interest.

The adoption of e-learning in institutions was carried out gradually, starting with hybrid courses: a mixture of e-learning with traditional lessons in the classroom. Gradually, the education systems (learning management systems) at the distance were imposed, depending on the goals, availability and resources involved at the level of the faculty management

With the rise of social media, students form online networks to access informational support to cope with the transition to a new environment. Using social learning theory, particularly the Community of Practice (CoP) framework, this research aims to investigate how international students engage with online networks and the extent to which these groups display in practice the main features of communities of practice

The objectives of the current thesis are:

- To analyse the European space as a learning network society (Husen, 1974, Castells, 2004) which acknowledges the need for life-long learning and development of transferable skills (work ethics, respects, adaptability, problem-solving, etc) through use of learning networks (such as Erasmus).
- To study the effects online and digital tools bring to learning and to apply the concept of CoP to this superconnected space of amplified communication and see how mutual engagement and shared expertise help negotiate multiple boundaries (both geographical and cultural)
- To apply these concepts to two case studies: migrant students (Romanian students who have decided to migrate to the UK) and international students participating in the European exchange programme, Erasmus+ (focused on learning English).

For the first case study, the researcher set out to observe an online pre-existing “so called” community (a Facebook (FB) group). This was explored to identify whether “the habit” of community exists, and to check the interaction between its members. The purpose was to see if they indeed have the pre-requisites of a CoP through in depth semi-structured interviews.

For the second case study, the research extended the concept of CoP to the larger European community of international students who, by virtue of their participating in different learning contexts and interacting with different cultural environments, have created a new morpho-cultural social learning network representative of the European space. It exemplifies this through analysis of European documents and qualitative thematic analysis of interviews with Erasmus students.

The structure of the thesis is as follows:

The Introduction opens with the changes brought by online learning/elearning to education and presents the main theoretical framework chosen by the researcher to explore the proposed case studies: social learning, namely CoP. It is followed by an overview of the thesis structure, with a brief presentation of each chapter. It also presents the larger framework (theoretical, geographical, educational) that will be developed in the next chapters.

The paper argues that an online community can form a CoP where students share expertise and engage to better their learning. It also announces the perspective of viewing the Erasmus programme as having the features of a mega-CoP.

The first chapter introduces the concept of Europe as a learning (Husen 1974) network society (Castells, 2001), where exchanges and partnerships form the new learning processes in a space defined by the community spirit. Although Europe is commonly identified with the EU, in reality, Europe has a multiple cultural reality united by economical and institutional purposes. As such, one of the pillars of a united Europe is schooling, through European wide programmes such as Erasmus+.

A network society is a society whose social structure is made of networks, which in turn are sets of interconnected nodes that absorb and process information through flows, streams of information that circulate between the nodes according to a program that contains algorithms for evaluation of performance and criteria for success or failure. (Castells, 2004). The network society is a global society, but human experience is local: thus, fragmentation is a structural feature of the network society. It is a dynamic structure, highly malleable to social forces, to local culture, to politics, to economic strategies, and it relies on protocols of communication between different cultures that constantly interact and modify each other to function.

The European Union is an example of such network society. It is a co-national state because the decision-making power is in the hands of the Council (where all member states are represented and have the right to veto decisions), but it is at the same time an instance of shared sovereignty through supranational institutions. Such institutions, such as the European Commission and the European Parliament, although they are dependent on the member states, have autonomy, or even independence (the European Central Bank) (Castells, 2001). The nodes, the member states, have retained the control over their historical borders, but function as a unit to ensure prosperity and freedom of goods and people across the larger EU domain. Within the network, information is shared and bounced back from one node to another. In this sense, the EU has a host of exchanges and partnerships that contribute to learning. In the context of social learning theories, sharing information and expertise among the members/nodes of the community/network creates new meaning, which advances learning and new identity through dissemination of symbols and forging social and cultural connections.

While it is rather common to identify Europe with the EU, in reality, Europe has a cultural reality that is larger than the EU boundaries and is not congruent with the geographical boundaries. European identity cannot count on the cultural and linguistic homogenisation of its citizens, but rather on sharing a specific political culture and the economic benefits derived from the EU membership. One pillar of this construction is European schooling. Students identify Europeanness as a transnational lifestyle, based on mobility and multilingualism (Rohde-Liebenau, 2020). The present paper argues that through European programs such as Erasmus, a sense of a shared

European learning community emerges as practice of a set of values among its participants, while creating new values through participation and sharing.

Subchapter 1.1 explores concepts such as: digitalization, new competencies, the impacts of the pandemic on online learning (at a general level), as well as EU strategic documents on the future of learning and of the network society, based on the Digital Education Action Plan (2021-2027).

Europe and digital learning are not a new discussion. Before 2002, digital education policies focused mostly on infrastructure. The next policies, suggested to have started as a reaction to Lisbon Strategy (2000) and the eLearning Action Plan (2001), focus on complementary measures such as educational innovation through teacher training, competence building, and content development, with an increasing integration of digital technologies into broader policy frameworks. By 2011, all European countries had some digital education policies in their portfolio (European Commission, 2011), but not all schools benefited from these, as the strategic objectives needed to be translated into effective national operational strategies. For later policies, strategic and operational levels were combined, with monitoring and impact analysis sections, and with improved infrastructure and teaching capacity as primary objectives.

The Joint Research Centre has started in 2005 a research with more than 20 major studies and more than 100 publications to provide evidence-based policy support to the European Union on the potential of digital technologies to innovate learning and to deal with the new digital skills and competences necessary for employment, social inclusion, and personal development and growth. This was also a key priority in several of the Europe 2020 Strategy programs, including The Agenda for New Skills and Jobs, Youth on the Move, The Digital Agenda, The Innovation Agenda, and the renewed EU Agenda for Higher Education.

The final report was published in 2017 and it provides the European background for digital education, the new trends and characteristics, the drivers and barriers for digital policies, as well as the potential for transferability, scalability, and sustainability. The existing research at the time of the study showed there were benefits in elearning, but technology could not compensate for poor teaching, as the main ingredients for a successful transition to online were the teachers' confidence in utilizing digital technologies in a way that is pedagogically meaningful and their willingness to innovate through their use. From a policy point of view, the research underlined

the need for a coherent overall policy approach, and tangible support for educational stakeholders (JSR, 2017).

Due to the COVID-19 outbreak and unprecedented lockdown of education and training facilities, education sites have been forced to switch to emergency digital education. This global massive use of technology for online and distance learning has revealed both opportunities and challenges: on one hand, teachers and students have been requested to organize and interact differently to create a virtual space to facilitate learning and understanding. In the communication for achieving the European Education area by 2025, it is stated that "The COVID-19 crisis shed light on the key enabling factors for effective digital education and training: connectivity and suitable digital equipment for learners and educators; teachers and trainers that are confident and skilled in using digital technology to support their teaching and adapted pedagogy; leadership; collaboration and the sharing of good practice and innovative teaching methods."

With the awareness that action is needed, EU has in place a policy initiative designed to support an effective adaptation of the EU members' education and training system: Digital Education Action Plan (2021-2027). It has two tactical priorities: to increase digital ability and digital transformation capability by education on computing, digital literacy, and understanding data intensive; To support the development of a high quality digital education ecosystem through digital equipment, infrastructure and connectivity; digitally competent educators; actualized learning content, updated organisational capabilities, secure platforms and user friendly applications.

The approach is structured around several strategic priorities

1. Improving quality, equity, inclusion and success for all in education and training
2. Making lifelong learning and mobility a reality for all
3. Enhancing competences and motivation in the education profession
4. Reinforcing European higher education
5. Supporting the green and digital transitions in and through education and training

One additional agreement states that social learning and the exchange of information and expertise (which are base pillars within a CoP) improve on the act of education, aided by peer

learning, peer counselling and the exchange of good practice, with focus on the dissemination, national impact, and visibility of outcomes

In subchapter 1.2 the role of social network and online socialisation are analysed, as well as the new community spirit emergent from the UNESCO's Delors report and its four pillars for lifelong learning: to be, to do, to know, and to live together. It also lists the changes in learning and teaching expected in the next twenty five years, based mainly on the integration of new communication technologies in the education process, both at individual, and at institutional level.

The two landmark UNESCO publications, Learning to Be: The world of education today and tomorrow (1972), the "Faure Report", and Learning: The treasure within (1996), the "Delors Report" brought into discussion the importance of education in the 21<sup>st</sup> century as a transformative force to promote human rights and dignity, to create sustainability, to eradicate poverty and eliminate inequalities, and, as a whole, to create a better future for all.

The future of learning lies with personalisation, collaboration, informalisation, and the development of new generic, transversal, and cross-cutting skills such as: reflection, problem-solving, critical thinking, creativity, learning to learn, collaboration, and entrepreneurship, which will enable citizens to react proactively and flexibly to change, and to benefit from lifelong learning opportunities. With the evolution of ICT, learning must transition to customized learning pathways and experiences that are engaging, motivation, but at the same time relevant and challenging.

By 2025, pedagogy, content and curricula will change and be more integrated, personalised, and oriented towards life-long learning. ICT has the most impactful change: the new mobile, ubiquitous tools will change society by being integrated, ambient, invisible, networked, immersive, including augmented reality, AI, digital biology, nanotechnology. Lifelong learning opportunities will available anywhere, anytime, in a variety of modules and formats, and they will be adaptable, engaging, targeted, based on collaboration and peer support. ICT will also give rise to new skills such as: communicating, negotiating, collaborating, networking, organising, problem-solving, reflection, critical thinking, resilience, creativity, innovation, experimentation, risk-taking, entrepreneurship.

Regarding language, it appears that the linguistic consequence of globalization are both Englishization (Dor, 2004) and its complement, language loss. The Net is also growing multilingual as economic agents have realized that adapting to local languages and cultures helps them stay competitive. The future major linguistic agent " will will be neither global Englishization nor multilingual freedom,[...but] market-based, imposed multilingualism". (Dor, 2004, p.21).

English is still the connecting languages for business and the majority of the research in different domains is done in English. The present paper is such an example. Learning English will be a key aspect of the current research. At European level, the British Council commissioned a report to investigate the demand for English in 2025 - a mixed methodology study investigating seven European countries (France, Greece, Italy, Poland, Portugal, Romania, and Spain). (Trajectory, 2018).

The key findings show that English will continue to be the dominant language in Europe, and, at individual level, it is an important factor for securing employment or improving employments prospects in many sectors, and Brexit is not a significant threat. All European governments in the study have introduced policies to improve the quantity and quality of English instructions in schools, which will have benefit long-term, but it is unlikely that by 2025 the students will have the proficiecy levels needed by the employers. There will be a demand for better and more specific English as more mature learners will learn English as a hobby, or for personal development. The conclusion is that the number of learners of English in Europe will decrease, as well as the proportion of adult learners within a classroom setting. However, there will be an increase in demand from learners who want to improve their English language proficiency through blended learning (Trajectory, 2018).

Subchapter 1.3 explores in depth the concept of CoP from its inception, through its development and applicability in the context of academia and learning networks.

The concept of CoP evolved over time and it became used in multiple domains. It is originally based on the apprenticeship model (Wenger & Lave, 2002) where new-comers cross the community boundary from periphery and move towards the centre. It is a journey that enriches them and helps them gain expertise, thus using learning as an "evolving from of membership" (Wenger & Lave, 2002, p. 52). In the CoP framework, members of a community share experience

and expertise "at the intersection between daily engagement/ practice and identity/social formation and rites of passage" (Wenger, 1999, p.122). Through joint enterprise (mutual accountability), shared repertoire (concepts, stories, tools, actions), and mutual engagement (diversity, relationships, social complexity), they form a community of practice. The CoP represents the vehicle that links them together and allows them to grow and learn both as individuals and within the community itself. (Wenger, 1999).

There are two indicators of a CoP's produced value: its member's expertise level, and the artefacts obtained in a process Wenger calls "reification"- a wide range of processes that include designing, making, naming, encoding, as well as interpreting, using, decoding, reusing" (Wenger, 1999, p.62). Reification can be used as an indicator for CoP coalescing (Pausan, 2018, 2019, 2020; Freese and Strong in Samaras et al, 2008, chapter 8). The results obtained in the team are better than the individual ones, due to the combination of autonomy and responsibility without results, as well as the fact that the team environment offers multiple opportunities for individuals to share their collective and complementary skills and talents for obtaining these results.

A community passes through different stages before becoming a CoP: potential, coalescing, maturing, stewardship, transformation (Wenger, 2002). Each stage is important and has different characteristics. From potential to its demise, CoPs create a nexus of becoming and growing for its members who move from periphery to centre by learning to negotiate multiple boundaries of skill and self.

The joint enterprise, shared repertoire, and mutual engagement combine to reemerge as a mix of continuity (peripheries) and discontinuity (boundaries) that the members of the community experience constantly, as they shift and adapt to new contexts (Wenger, 1998). Learning thus becomes a constant negotiation of meaning, through practice. Identity also undergoes reframing, while the most significant challenge remains multi-membership. "[...]reconciliating identities may be the most significant challenge faced by those who move from one community to another (such as immigrants); multimembership is experiencing live the boundaries, between private lives and social bridges, family and school. That is done in different languages and the three modes of belonging (engagement, imagination, and alignment) turn off-kilter due to different cultural values. (Wenger, 1999, p.160-168).



One part of the present research investigates whether an online FB group for Romanian migrant students exhibits the CoP features. Students connecting through digital tools, namely social media, effectively creating authentic networks of learners, has implications on academic practice and academic developers aiming to enrich their knowledge by connecting with and learning from each other in new ways. (Guerin, Carter, & Aitchison, 2015, pp. 3–4). The other part explores the CoP at a macro-scale, at European level, by applying the CoP principles to European students participants in the Erasmus+ mobility program.

The researcher lived the experience of being a student in the UK for a year. While researching for the literature review chapter, she realized she was living within a CoP framework, which contributed to its adoption into the present thesis: " It is interesting to live the very concepts you are studying: communities of practice (CoP). At a certain point, I have realized that I can apply to living and learning in a different community terms like peripheral participation, boundary negotiation, nexus of multimembership, identity realignment: all part of the CoP framework." (Pausan, 2018).

In addition to this, the researcher shares Wenger's perspective on community and network as two aspects of the social fabric of learning. The community is partnership and shared engagement to learn, while the network forms a set of relationships and connections among the same people "Belonging to multiple communities gives rise to personal experiences of learning that are unique, even in the context of a given community ((Wenger,Trayner, &de Laat, 2011 p.18)

Subchapter 1.4 investigates students mobility and international students in UE by first explaining the terms used for the present research: migrant students and international students. It then expands on the how the Erasmus programme came to be and its value using a series of existing articles:

- on the value of Erasmus mobility;
- on internationalisation of higher education institutions through participation in joined projects and Erasmus exchanges;
- on how and whether Erasmus contributes to a European sense of identity.

Among all migrant groups, international students are the fastest-growing group. International students are defined as individuals who have left their country of origin and moved to another country for study:

"An internationally mobile student is an individual who has physically crossed an international border between two countries with the objective to participate in educational activities in a destination country, where the destination country is different from his or her country of origin" (UNESCO, 2015).

There are many definitions for "international students". For the current thesis, the researcher will use the term international student as defined above to refer to the Erasmus students. To differentiate from them, the thesis uses the label "migrant students" for the Romanian students in the UK. They are Romanian students enrolled in the UK high education institutions (thus foreign, or international students as described above), but they have also decided to remain in the UK to further their careers and continue living here with their families (marking them as migrants).

Riaño and Piguet, in their 2016 study on international student migration, make a thorough review of studies to date concerning this phenomenon, and they group them by research directions. The current research would fall under the experience abroad and transnational lives papers' group, as it investigates European student mobility (under the general term of international students) and Romanian students who have decided to migrate to the UK and continue their lives as UK citizens (hence dubbed "migrant students").

The papers grouped in their review investigate:

- how the students are affected by the host country's culture (with international students in China and Indian students and Australia),
- what strategies they devise to live in a foreign country (with South Korean students in New Zealand and Peruvian students in Brazil) ,
- what challenges they face during their studies (with international students from Africa and Latin America in Switzerland, international medical graduates' migration to UK, graduates in Hong-Kong),
- and the effects European mobility has on the European identity of students (using Erasmus programs) (Riaño and Piguet, 2016).

Erasmus started in 1987 as an exchange programme for high education students. The name is an acronym for **EuRopean Community Action Scheme for the Mobility of University Students** (and also the name of the famous Renaissance scholar Erasmus of Rotterdam).

An evaluation from 2006 on the professional value of Erasmus mobility showed that the programme was effective, had impact and all involved agreed that it would play an important role in the future. The students who participated in it perceived it as having increased their academic competences, including academic knowledge, foreign languages skills, social and communication abilities, as well as problem-solving and leadership. International context, communicating in foreign languages and working with people from different backgrounds was deemed as professionally important for their future careers.

In a 2010 report, the reasons for which English students participated in the Erasmus programme were mainly personal development, understanding of another country/culture/language, but also the opportunity to travel, an international career, and transferable skills that look good on the CV and help with employment prospects (King et al, 2010). Further research focuses on the reasons behind the continuous support for the Erasmus programme: Wilson, 2011 recognizes the exchange may facilitate the learning of foreign languages and increased awareness of other European cultures, combined with specialist knowledge available in those other cultures, but this is a token of European cooperation

Subchapter 1.5 introduces the case of Romanian students in the UK, and explains the three axes that drive the research: CoP, Facebook (FB), and (Romanian) migrant students.

In terms of student numbers, Romania recorded 10,830 students enrolled in UK universities in 2019-20, ranking fifth after Italy, France, Germany, and Spain (Romania Journal, 2021) , with 7,440 undergraduate students and 1,215 postgraduate students (Study in UK, 2021). There is little literature to be found on Romanian migrant students.

The present thesis comes to complete and expand the body of literature on Romanian migrant students, viewed from a CoP theoretical perspective and analysed with a novel lens of cyclical value assessment framework. It also captures the participants perspective as students who

study exclusively online from home (due to the global lockdown following the Covid-19 pandemic), and as migrants (due to the new economic and social conditions imposed by Brexit).

The most appropriate tool to investigate on was decided to be Facebook (FB). FB is mainly a social networking platform. It is easily accessible, available to users for free, and accessible from mobile forms of technologies, such as smart phones and tablet computers. It has an interface which is intuitive and user friendly. Many students are already using Facebook extensively, and it is deeply integrated into their day-to-day practices. “Facebook is truly a killer app for incoming [students] – as they prepare to start a new life in a new place, surrounded by a new social network, the Facebook presents a highly interactive way to explore this new space”. (Stutzman, 2006, cited in Selwyn, 2007). For the purpose of the current research an existing FB group of Romanian students studying and living in the UK has been chosen.

Throughout Chapter two, the researcher gives all the steps taken in order to perform a systematic literature review on CoP and international students, including the thematic analysis of the twenty-two articles that matched the inclusion criteria. It also uncovers the knowledge gap connected to these.

The author searched five databases: CMMC (Communication and Mass Media Complete); ERIC (Educational Resources Information Centre); ACM (ACM Digital Library); Science Direct; and IEEE (IEEE Xplore) to search for articles by keywords: CoP, online, migrant, student, and synonyms. The titles and abstracts of the 8,556 articles resulted from the concatenated searches in all database were read and inclusion/exclusion criteria applied. The “migrant” inclusion was removed for the March search due to the scarcity of related documents in the February search (less than 5 – Table 19). After reading the title and abstract and applying the inclusion criteria, the number of results obtained was 184 which were read in totality and inclusion/exclusion criteria applied again, resulting in a number of twenty studies to be assessed qualitatively.

Each of the twenty-two articles was re-read thoroughly and the CASP checklist. All of the articles have a very well-constructed theoretical background, mainly constructivism (Vygotsky) with an added framework of CoP. There is solid evidence of an international CoP with artefacts generated by collaboration and shared learning (Cochrane et al, 2013) and the integration between Twitter and a local platform was successful, i.e online students generated more discussions per

student (in Twitter posts) and students who took blended learning experienced higher levels of learning, but it "remains difficult to identify" the reason why. (Thoms & Eryilmaz, 2013).

The main themes found were: social learning (twenty- one articles), engagement (fourteen articles, with sub-themes feedback and commitment, and peer communication); support (four papers); identity (four articles).

Framed by the social constructivist theoretical lens of CoP, all the articles reviewed discuss how social media, alongside regular academic instruction, can bring students closer together, creating a safe space for reflection and argument and allowing them to develop new skills and to learn both presenting their own work or by being critical or following criticism of others' works.

The conflict between private and public appears as the reason for the reluctant usage of social media at institution levels (de Lima & Zorrilla, 2017; Stephansen & Couldry, 2012; Waycott et al., 2017) with a few success stories (Novakovich et al., 2017; Stephansen & Couldry, 2014), with the outcome of switching the traditional teacher student relations, so that the students themselves become creators of learning content (Churcher et al., 2014).

Students generally perceive social media (Facebook in particular) as a tool for social relationships, not necessarily for learning (Stephansen & Couldry, 2012), although its use as learning tool lead to successful collaborative activities (Rachtam & Firpo, 2017) and produce artefacts (de Lima & Zorrilla, 2017; Thoms & Eryilmaz, 2015; Weller, 2007), thus reify (Wenger, 1999a) the existing knowledge and prove the CoP has passed the coalescing stage (Wenger, 2002). It is important to note that there is optimism regarding the possibilities of social media for formal learning, in the sense that it brings "micro-level, user-based generation of content, the community as a whole body contributing together to give shape to an abstract collection of bits of information" (Churcher, Downs, & Tewksbury, 2014). This abstract collective production generates content by uniting individual practices and expertise in a mutually beneficial exchange.

Although the original search revealed a gap in the knowledge base for migrant students in general, and migrant students using online tools/ social media in particular, the researcher took note also of the scarcity of complex studies related to the feelings and experiences of the participants involved. The majority of the articles focused mainly on the results of the community and the support between the participants. Very rarely issues ensued, like conflict between private

and public and self-esteem issues (Stephansen & Couldry, 2012), or anxiety (Waycott et al., 2017), which were glossed over in favour of the more positive aspects such as social engagement, support, and communication. This resonates with Pemberton's power issues within the CoP (Pemberton et al, 2007), which indicates further investigation is needed to assess the potential negative aspects in a CoP and how to overcome them.

Some of them are partial papers (Plutino, 2017) but even so, the researcher finds the data correlation overly optimistic and uncorroborated by the given evidence.

Chapter 3 presents the research problem, generic questions to address, objectives, hypothesis, research methodology, population, and research limits. The research is directed to explore the participation and motivation of international students from the perspective of learning, using the CoP theoretical framework.

The research is based on the need to know and explain objectively the international students' motivation and participation within the specific context of European exchanges and partnerships. The generic questions to address are:

- A) does a FB group for migrant students form a CoP?
- B) is Erasmus a CoP?

These are the focus of the two study cases in the present paper. In the first case, the researcher took an existing FB community and analysed it to see if it has developed into a CoP. Subsequently, she conducted semi-structured interviews with volunteers from the respective FB group to determine participation, mutual engagement and shared expertise for the same. For the second case, a desk analysis of European Erasmus documents has been conducted. Subsequently structured interviews with Erasmus students have been used to explore the experience of going abroad to study, as well as the interaction and sharing with both the local students and the with Erasmus peers.

One of the objectives of the present thesis was to explore how the principles and/or stages of CoP apply to online environments . It included using CoP as a lens for international students learning and to apply a new methodological tool of analysis: Wenger et al (2011) cyclic framework of value to reframe the notion of success on their endeavours.

The first phase was desk-based research of the current literature on the subject, analysed in the previous chapter. To explore how CoP principles apply to online environment, a Facebook group of migrant students has been selected, based on FB's popularity among students: they are Romanian students studying at various universities within the UK. The researcher has also been an active member of the group and used her observations for the current thesis. In the beginning, the intention had been to analyse qualitatively (thematically) the content of the FB group and then expand on the themes with a few interviews. After spending time on the FB group, the researcher realized there is no need to analyse the content, but it would bring more value to the research to conduct interviews with willing volunteers.

The research used a constructivist qualitative methodology with semi-structured and structured interviews. The population was:

- For the first case study, Romanian Students in the UK, all nineteen interviewees are student females and their ages vary, with the youngest being twenty and the oldest forty-three. The interview consisted of a series of ten questions to describe their situation as migrant students and to express their feeling about the UK learning system, as well as how they have integrated in the society. The analysis revealed several very interesting themes regarding education, language, integration, difference, support. An additional level interpretation through the lens of Wenger & de Laat's (2011) cycles of values was also explored.
- A second batch of interviews was conducted with international students participating in the Erasmus+ programme. There were two sets of interviews, one with international students from an Erasmus program in Lithuania, and another with a group of student form the National School of Political and Administrative Studies who participated in Erasmus programmes.

In Chapter 4, the focus is on the qualitative interviews with the Romanian migrant students and analyses them thematically from a CoP perspective, with the added lens of the cyclical framework of values (Wenger & de Laat, 2011). There were five overarching themes explored in the interviews: education, language, integration, difference, support.

For the migrant students who participated to this research, one of the main challenges, acknowledged openly 16 students, was English. Some were beginner speakers, but even if those who knew the language recognized they had to adapt both to its everyday and academic usage.

Within the systematic literature review conducted, three articles give evidence of the importance of learning a foreign language (Italian – Plutino, 2017, or English - Razak & Saeed, 2014, 2015) and the cultural awareness stemming from such exercises.

Language has a very important role in advancing situated learning and crossing from periphery to centre by gaining tacit understanding of the metacontext (Lave & Wenger, 1991). One of the student's experience was that: “the initial challenges were connected to the language, I understood what they were saying, but I could not find a way to express myself in a way that they would understand me [...] not to sound like a robot. I also has teachers who could not speak English, I meant I first needed to understand what they were saying, and then to understand what they were teaching. I also had several Chinese teachers who could barely speak English”. Acquiring the level to both understand and make herself understood in English meant making the extra-effort of integrating both the learning language and the learning context, an ongoing negotiation of meaning and increased participation (Wenger, 1998) and moving from merely realized value to reframing the learning structure that came with the new language (Wenger & de Laat, 2011). In other words, the students successfully negotiated the challenge that Wenger described as “the most significant challenge faced by those who move from one community to another (such as immigrants); multimembership is experiencing live the boundaries, between private lives and social bridges, family and school That is done in different language and the three modes of belonging (engagement, imagination, and alignment) turn off-kilter due to different cultural values (Wenger, 1999, (p160-168).

Integration and difference, two sides of a multi-cultural context, bring both challenges and rewards. From the researcher's perspective, it is important to underline the less positive aspects of negotiating the new context as well. Integration does not happen overnight and there are milestones to cross: externally, in clashing with the existing environment, and internally, in adapting to the new social and personal contexts.

All the students, to various degrees, spoke about their challenges and how they overcame them. The word “difficult” was as such used twenty -seven times, “overcome” sixteen times, “challenge” twelve times, always with a feeling of accomplishment because “ yes, it was a challenge, but I consider that everybody can overcome it” (AL), though you need “ a lot of ambition and determination” (AF). Several (LM, ES) have expressed their need for additional help



and support, but, despite their numbers, there is no Romanian student community in place. The FB group is not a CoP, it acts rather like a meeting point, a shared space where students ask questions and other students reply to the best of their abilities. Still, the group fulfills a necessary function, offering a point of contact when/if needed, advice and help for newcomers.

Learning in a new linguistical and cultural context thus generates indentity changes to stimulate adaptability, problem resolution, tolerance, and resiliance. This happens for all international students, whether they choose to remain in the host country (and become migrants) , or return to their country at the end of the study period, like the case of Erasmus students.

Chapter 5 offers the perspective of the Erasmus programme as a mega-CoP, where the members join and fluctuate according to their needs. Students join the Erasmus CoP, share experiences and expertise, mutually agree to learn and create together new values and projects at European and international levels. Erasmus has created a CoP space with shared values of respect, tolerance, understanding, where students get challenged by multiple cultural and linguistic contexts and learn to negotiate new meanings and boundaries.

The second round of interviews included a first group of eight volunteers from the participants to ten-days Erasmus+ programme called: Making Culture Gr8 that took place in 2019 in Daugirdiskes, Lithuania: three men and five women from six countries. The researcher was part of this seven days training and engaged the participants in a short, structured interview to assess their Erasmus+ experience, as the group behaved like a short-term CoP (Pausan, 2020) coming together to share their stories and expertise and create new artifacts together (Wenger, 1998).

The students talked about their accomplishments : gained values, understanding, toleranace, new perspectives, but alos about their challenges: being away from the family, language barriers, transport connections. But they all agreed they have transformed themselves during that time, they have learned new skilles and become more fulfilled: "when when I came back [...] people noticed that I have changed, became more mature, more friendly, it was easy for me to solve problems and manage my time, as I also started to work [...] It became realy important to me to do thing that are making other people lives easier, that my work is doing good to others" said one of them.

The second group of respondents were volunteers who participated in the National School of Political and Administrative Studies' Erasmus+ programme, six women and two men, mostly at Master and Phd levels). These students recognized that their Erasmus+ experience had altered them by exposing them to fluid boundaries in terms of language, culture, attitude, learning methods and processes.

All the interviews have a common thread: the Erasmus experience was extraordinary, filled with challenges and new things. It changed the students in fundamental ways, building new skills, creating new stories, learning new processes. The Erasmus framework opened the opportunity to create a network of interconnected peers who chose to embrace change both personally and culturally by committing to shift contexts and extend boundaries for sharing and learning, which represent the essence of a CoP. In this context, the Erasmus+ network can be viewed as a larger CoP, where the members are identified by participation in one of the smaller programs

Chapter 6 presents the final conclusions of the research, as well as limitations, and recommendations for future research. It also validates CoP as a valuable framework for student learning, its role within academic networks and its effectiveness for learning foreign languages. The final chapter underlines the importance of using the new learning resources: social media, online and community, aggregating the digital space into a learning community whose features are inclusion, participation, engagement, personalisation, and collaboration. (Redecker et al, 2011).

The author wanted to discover whether the CoP existed in order to provide insight into the application of the CoP principle in a social media instance (a Facebook group) and identify the features and values shared by the participants. As conclusion, the CoP did not form as the members developed weak ties and offered only immediate value to the other members (i.e support, without the generative mutual engagement that a CoP has), which open the space for additional research into how to introduce and promote CoP in online settings.

In contrast, Erasmus acts like an umbrella CoP, where members are identified by participation in different exchanges. From the thematic analysis of another batch of interviews with Erasmus students, it can be concluded that Erasmus students do share repertoire and they mutually agree to share experience, they connect and create together. Thus, Erasmus+ can be viewed as an ideal non-stewarded CoP, in between the stages of coalescing and maturing (Wenger, 2002). The students themselves become stewards for smaller CoPs where they attract peers with similar interests and passions, as evidenced both in the interviews and in literature.

The Erasmus+ network can be viewed as a larger CoP, where students join, share experiences and expertise, learn and create together, and fluidly connect and disconnect to the larger group depending on their needs. This perspective of looking at Erasmus as a CoP validates the participants' learning experience, as mutual agreement to pursue shared values of respect, tolerance, understanding, and to create new values and projects at European and international levels. It is also congruent with the CoP as a safe space for sharing and learning that facilitates engagement, imagination, and alignment (Wenger, 1999).

The paper validates the value CoPs bring to academic network inasmuch as they perform the role of concentrating resources for peers to access new learning, as the digital space can become accessible to create learning communities.

There are several unique contributions this thesis brings to the body of current research:

1. It explored CoP framework in the context of a new population (Romanian migrant students),
2. It added both to the literature on CoP and on migrants/students
3. It gave evidence of "multi-membership", meaning negotiation of identity across multiple boundaries, which did not occur at such scale in the articles studied
4. Offers further insight into the value of CoPs for learning, by using the mega-project Erasmus+ program that operates at European level.
5. It expanded on the personal experiences of individual students from different universities across UK, which allowed for the participants' perceptions and views of the educational and expanded to the cultural and societal contexts
6. It used a new methodological tool: Wenger et al (2011) cyclic framework of value
7. It contrasted two different education systems through direct participants' feedback

All of the above can be further explored in additional in depth studies, alongside other themes such as acculturation, multi-culturalism, other analysis of the Erasmus+ programme, or multiple other directions open to explore the digital learning space as a CoP.