CASE STUDY

European School for Interdisciplinary Tinnitus (ESIT): A global research training initiative

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ABSTRACT

The European School for Interdisciplinary Tinnitus Research (ESIT) is an EU-funded doctoral training network. ESIT is a consortium of 12 universities, over 30 commercial and not-for-profit organizations, and 15 PhD students providing cutting-edge education across 10 European countries to develop highly knowledgeable and innovative experts in the field of tinnitus research. The ESIT consortium is composed of multidisciplinary researchers and academics engaged in supervising culturally diverse students from nine countries. Over the span of 4 years, ESIT students demonstrated transformational growth in academic and personal spheres and overcame multiple challenges. This case study documents the meaningful partnerships developed between students and the ESIT support network and some of the challenges faced by ESIT in training 15 international students during a global pandemic. It documents the co-creation of knowledge achieved by those engaged in a global shared learning journey and the conflicts and cultural dimensions that they navigated.

KEYWORDS

internationalisation, diversity, inclusion, PhD program, cross-cultural partnerships

Governments' linking of education with economic growth (Barrie, 2006) has contributed to an increase in mass education, marketisation, and competition between universities (Green et al., 2009). Academic workloads, class sizes, and research output expectations have all significantly increased (Barrie, 2006), putting added pressure on academic staff. This massification is also contributing to a deterioration of quality in higher education (Giannakis & Bullivant, 2016), with success often measured in terms of economic productivity, market competition, and efficiency instead of educational transformation and academic standards (Pitman, 2014). The European School for Interdisciplinary Tinnitus Research (ESIT) program reverses these trends of massification and goes back to a student focussed educational approach, where students are partners in learning (Cook-Sather et al., 2014) and academic staff refocus the learning relationship from one where the student is a financial resource to one where student education is the central purpose of higher education.

Our progressively interconnected world requires global citizens to learn, work, and live across intercultural contexts (Barnett, 2004; Bolstad et al., 2014). This necessitates a paradigm shift in the way we educate tomorrow's interconnected global workers to develop the skills that enable them to form cross-cultural partnerships and communities of practice where heterogeneity, inclusion, diversity of beliefs, and equality underpin professional life. The current higher education learning paradigm as described in the above paragraph must be changed by breaking structural inequalities and hierarchical power dynamics and by cultivating student and educator connections with others who do not share their cultural, educational, or socioeconomic background (Cook-Sather et al., 2014). Eradicating systemic inequalities, such as racism and colonialism, enables heterogeneity of ideas, beliefs, and values, improving the probability of solutions to the wicked problems (Weber & Khademian, 2008) facing societies and the planet.

The European School for Interdisciplinary Tinnitus ResearchESIT doctoral training network provided PhD training and support for 15 international candidates, many from developing nations. Students were spread throughout universities in different European countries. ESIT provided students with an academic grant equal to a low-level academic salary, allowing them to focus solely on studies and removing the need for piecemeal work. ESIT provided a multidisciplinary support team of supervisors, administrators, and mentors, as well as clinical and industrial work placement experiences. ESIT developed meaningful partnerships between candidates and the support team through relationship-building strategies, including regular training, team events, regular meetings (virtual and face to face), collaboration opportunities, and by being inclusive and respecting the opinions and ideas of all people involved in the program. The opportunities provided by ESIT are rarely available for PhD students, particularly those from developing nations; these opportunities allowed them to deeply engage with curricula leading to more authentic learning (Arkoudis et al., 2010).

ESIT provided candidates funding for seminars from academics and professionals and face-to-face meetings with fellow PhD students to develop a community of practice. Providing an opportunity to share real-time experiences and challenges enables students to utilize their collective wisdom (Mercer-Mapstone et al., 2017). ESIT created a formal flat support structure, enabling candidates to choose different support personnel for guidance and mentorship. This replaced the traditional hierarchical support structure found in most universities. The program helped develop a sense of professional authority in PhD

candidates, reducing isolation, particularly for underrepresented students from developing nations (Baklashova & Kazakov, 2016). Student and educator partnerships empowered underrepresented students (Cook-Sather & Agu, 2013), raised awareness, and cultivated important postgraduate skills, such as collaboration, critical thinking, and independent research management, and provided the opportunity for both students and educators to "see the world through the eyes of others" (Clarke, 2001, p. 173), which allowed them to gain a better understanding of different sociocultural values and backgrounds, for example.

The ESIT students were given autonomy in the way they developed their PhD projects, the pace at which that they completed the project, and the topics that they wanted included in their research training. This devolution of power in the supervisor-candidate relationship and the addition of research mentors gave students a broad range of multidisciplinary expertise to draw upon (Spelt et al., 2009) and the confidence to voice opinions that challenge the orthodoxy found in many single school/university PhD programs.

IMPACT & CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF ESIT

The impact of ESIT on participants is documented in the form of shared reflection by two of the program's academic staff, one professional staff, and two students. What follows are first-person accounts of their experiences with ESIT and the internal rewards and learning that resulted.

International academic mentor's reflection

The global tertiary education system is embedded with challenges (Jaremka et al., 2020), and navigating them can be an arduous task. My passion and commitment is to create a more positive and inclusive society and be a role model to others through understanding, acceptance of differences, and innovation. PhD training is a steep learning curve irrespective of discipline, and it can be an isolating journey (Williams & Satherley, 2021). It is not uncommon to hear dreadful stories from PhD students about their experiences (Evans et al., 2018). Higher degree research (HDR) candidates need a well-structured support framework to ensure a rich experience and success (Mantai & Dowling, 2015). Working with them as partners and co-creating a personalized path for their unique needs and development is key for successful completion (Cook-Sather et al., 2014). From 2017 to 2021, I was part of the ESIT project in the capacity of international academic mentor. The ESIT project had a profound transformational impact on me and the entire team involved, especially the PhD students. I am eagerly looking forward to witnessing their growth post-PhD as they continue to become comfortable stepping out of their comfort zone. After all, "growth and comfort don't co-exist" (Rometty, 2014). Administrators and the wider team involved in students' PhD journeys should have a passion for inclusivity and compassion for those on the isolating journey of completing a PhD. Students should be given access to a wider network of mentors especially beyond the immediate vicinity of their discipline. Mentors can play a significant role in career development and the navigation of academic life for PhD students.

ESIT project coordinator's reflection

"Will the ESIT project make a difference?" I remember this critical question very well. The question was motivating, and, at the same time, justified, considering the project was

funded out of taxpayers' money to a volume of €3.8 million. I had to learn a lot about administrating a European project, develop my management skills, and refine my supervision strategies. Over the lifetime of the project, I experienced how joyful it is to watch the development of students.

Grant writing phase

I knew that the grant success rate is very low, and hardly any project gets accepted at the first attempt (Severin & Egger, 2021). Challenge accepted. The first goal was to get good and experienced advisors, which ESIT found through the Bavarian Research Alliance, the University Hospital Regensburg, and the national contact point. The grant proposal is long and complicated, and it is easy to make mistakes. I was privileged enough to be able to reserve several weeks for grant writing.

Project management

In any big project there are many things happening in parallel, and it is impossible to personally participate in everything; I tried, failed, felt bad, and learned this lesson very quickly. Once I accepted that I cannot be a part of everything, I started enjoying the many beautiful things that were happening. The network manager of the ESIT project, one of the most trustworthy and positive persons that I know, certainly helped me a lot. After learning to step back, it was like watching a meadow where many beautiful trees are blooming and growing. Some of the trees I planted and watered myself, and some other trees just appeared.

Training schools and conferences

Throughout the project, we had several training schools and conference satellite events where all the students came together for additional education and scientific exchange. These events were my highlights of the year because I could see all the ESIT students. What excited me was the rapid development and growth of the students. These students grew to be respectful colleagues with specialized knowledge, working on their own research ideas, being responsible for their projects, and bringing them to a successful end. While I always thought about how I could help to grow the professional network of the ESIT students, I soon realized that the ESIT project was also growing my own professional network: the network of the ESIT participants with specialized research profiles, good sources of advice, and valuable feedback.

Seeing the students face to face every 6 months, it was easy to observe the big jumps in their development. This was quantitatively expressed by the large number of publications that were written by the ESIT students. At the time of writing this case study, there are already over 50 peer-reviewed publications. But this reflects only a tiny part of the individual growth of all the participants. The personal development of the students was the biggest difference that the project made and was the most motivating factor for me during the project.

ESIT project network manager's reflection

Being part of ESIT as the project network manager shaped me both personally and professionally and changed my views of the world of research and work through the student training gatherings in different European countries, management team meetings,

international tinnitus conferences, networking, and policy events. I engaged with international and diverse teams to overcome challenges and achieve common objectives, creating a deep sense of belonging to this unique ESIT group. I formed strong bonds and deep friendships that I am certain will continue to accompany me for life to come.

With the onset of the global COVID-19 pandemic, most of the stimulating aspects of this role and work in international research with PhD students came to an abrupt and unexpected end. All foreseen (and much awaited) further project meetings, training schools, secondments, and conferences were cancelled. Through collaborative effort we found the best possible solutions to all individual and collective issues. Meetings, training events, conferences, and secondments were changed to virtual settings. Students returned to their home countries to work remotely, extensions were granted on assignments, financial support was provided, and the project duration was extended.

My role shifted significantly from being physically present to being available online and on the phone and planning virtual events. This can only be described as a challenging transition, but all experiences gained and bonds formed beforehand served as the ideal basis of work and personal relationships to rely and build on and provided learning in yet again unexpected ways: crisis management and personal and professional resilience. My time working on this exciting ESIT project can be divided into two halves: first, a year of intensive learning when joining the project with its diverse people who continue to inspire me professionally and personally as their colleague and friend and second, a subsequent year of building on these experiences and transforming them in other places and keeping on developing visions through a crisis. ESIT has been the most diverse, intense, insightful, and optimistic time of my work life.

Student X's reflection (Schoisswohl, S)

The first meeting with my new colleagues in Regensburg as well as my supervisor was a very friendly one, and we immediately connected on a personal and professional level. These relationships strengthened over the course of my PhD and are still standing. Meeting my fellow ESIT students was a similar experience. Everybody was very professional but sociable and nice at the same time. The other supervisors also seemed very supportive with an intrinsic motivation to raise a new generation of tinnitus researchers. Over the course of ESIT a lot of personal friendships were forged.

Although I was blessed with excellent colleagues, supportive supervisors, and mentors, doing a PhD was a tough and pleasant journey at the same time. Learning, getting deeper into new methods, acquiring an appropriate level of background knowledge in a new field as fast as possible, plus handling the dual requirements of the local university and the ESIT training network was very challenging and gave me a lot of sleepless nights. The stories people told me about their PhD proved true. I had to learn that besides scientific expertise, project, time, and team management skills are fundamental. The workshops and training schools provided by ESIT were helpful to develop profound soft and transferable skills. With a lot of different topics ranging from social media presentation or communication to statistical methods and entrepreneurship, this training was something I appreciated as essential for my personal and professional development. One aspect of the training schools I will not forget were the twilight workshops, which took place in a more relaxed atmosphere. Scientists and prominent practitioners established in the field of tinnitus were invited to talk

about their professional history in an honest manner. Hearing about peoples' history, their motivation, as well as the ups and downs of their career path deeply inspired me.

Students also had the unique chance to do an academic and industry internship in the broad field of their PhD research. Unfortunately, the global COVID-19 pandemic made it impossible for many ESIT students to undergo both internships, including myself. Although ESIT was a very educative and formative experience, it demanded a lot of time. Dedicating the required time for ESIT alongside the completion of a PhD at the local university within a 3-year funding period was an enormous challenge and induced a lot of distress towards the end. Having more flexibility in terms of funding would make the completion of the PhD a little bit easier. However, the involvement in ESIT paved the way for my current position where I am working as a postdoctoral research fellow managing several interdisciplinary research projects and establishing independent networks, and I have the feeling that the training I received gave me substantial advantages for prospective career paths whether in academia or industry. I would do my PhD as part of ESIT again and would also recommend it to future PhD students who are searching for challenges and want to get the most out of their PhD just like me.

Student XX's reflection (Biswas, R.)

As I reflect on my experience as a PhD student with ESIT, I feel it has been in equal parts challenging and rewarding. The unique thing about my PhD was the consortium-based structure of the ESIT, which provided the opportunity to interact with peers and supervisors from other institutions. Apart from the home university, we had the opportunity to seek advice and insights from the supervisory board, grant coordinating team, and peers from partner organizations. The training schools played a major role in building connections with other members. We interacted with other /PhD students and supervisors in both formal and more informal events. This is where I truly appreciated the consortium's multidisciplinary approach to research. Some of our PhD projects overlapped, providing an opportunity to collaborate with other students and teams within the consortium. I collaborated with two other ESRs and supervisors for my PhD projects.

Interacting with peers helped in gaining advice and insights on how to address common PhD-related issues. It also led to new ideas and projects. For example, I collaborated with other ESRs on a paper illustrating the early career researchers' perspectives on challenges in tinnitus research and co-led a collaborative project reflecting on the PhD experience in a consortium and comparing it to non-consortium-based PhDs. This was an exciting and rewarding experience as it was a learning opportunity in interdisciplinary research and collaboration. The training programs also usually included various modules for building transferable and empirical skills like communication, team building, and more. Participation in this consortium resulted in an overall career development opportunity.

I received a lot of support and advice from the ESIT management team and that helped me successfully navigate challenges. For example, my onboarding documents and contract agreement were in Italian. The ESIT management team translated the contract into English for me. I encountered salary payment issues and reached out to the ESIT management team who investigated and helped in resolving it. As an international student living abroad, it is crucial to properly understand the contract terms. Salary and living expenses are a vital consideration for any person at any point.

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Overall experience

When I joined the program, I was looking forward to the global exposure that the multinational scope of this program allowed. This experience expanded my world view and understanding. After participating in this program, I understand and appreciate the importance of diversity and inclusion in academia and in all spheres of life.

KEY LEARNINGS

Student reflections identified important academic growth because of engagement with ESIT. This included gaining transferable skills such as collaboration, communication, critical thinking, and networking. These were facilitated by mentoring with a wide network of multidisciplinary professionals and peer support/learning via engagement in conferences and seminars.

Transformational learning experiences are created through principles of respect, reciprocity, and shared responsibility (Deeley & Bovill, 2017), as evidenced by the above reflections. The reflections demonstrate the strong relationships and networks developed by the program, and the success of a PhD program where typical university hierarchical structures are replaced by a flatter structure in which support and power sharing transform the PhD experience. ESIT developed strong relationships by creating a small team environment early in the program where students, supervisors, managers, administrative personnel, and mentors worked together to get the initiative started and resolve early challenges. Having a voice in planning and shared responsibility for goal achievement meant participants were motivated to share knowledge, experiences and challenges to help each other and the program succeed (Cook-Sather et al., 2014). Teaching and learning were both two-way and shared. When power is shared, it fosters a more relational form of student engagement, encourages communities of practice, and fosters commitment and co-ownership of the learning process (Felten et al., 2016; Matthews, 2016).

The above reflections also highlighted some of the personal development achieved in the ESIT program. Candidates became more innovative, practical, and adept in applying theory. Access to scientists, prominent practitioners, and mentors and peers from diverse backgrounds inspired the candidates and exposed them to new ideas, new ways of looking at the world (Clarke et al., 2002), and an understanding of diversity and inclusion. Everyone involved in the program learned transferrable global skills (Bolstad et al., 2014; Fallows & Steven, 2013) by working on diverse research projects spanning disciplines (Spelt et al., 2009), nationalities, and levels of experience. All of the reflections highlighted candidates and ESIT team members' resilience to bounce back from rejection and adversity with support from each other (Novotny, 2011). While the global pandemic had an impact on the program, the ESIT team was able to manage the challenges presented, create a virtual experience, and arrange for candidates to work remotely from their home countries.

Some of the common themes emerging from this reflective exercise are outlined below in Figure 1. Initiatives like ESIT are an exception to the norm in academia. Traditionally, PhD opportunities in hearing health are challenging to find and are usually combined in a wider research project. Scholarships are usually a nominal amount, enough to survive on and with a limited travel and professional development budget. Internship placements are also rare. ESIT offered a substantial scholarship and a sufficient travel budget for multiple conferences and seminars per year. It also provided formal mentoring from a multidisciplinary team. Considering the transformational impact and learning

opportunities ESIT offered, it would be beneficial for models like ESIT to be adopted by other disciplines.

Figure 1. Reflection on ESIT through multiple lenses

Reflection on ESIT though Multiple Lenses

Figure 1 outlines the significance of reflective themes and skills such as: transferable skills, networking, peer learning, working with multidisciplinary team, facing rejections, necessary support etc highlighted by the participants.

Overall, the ESIT initiative was transformational in the growth of members involved; however, there were aspects which could be improved:

- Language barriers and culture shock could have been better monitored. There were support resources available; however, future initiatives and measures such as language learning and cultural competence could be embedded more deeply.
- Synchronization between the host universities and ESIT regulations was challenging due to different PhD regulations across countries. This could be improved for future initiatives.
- The pathway beyond the PhD could be improved. Financial and organisational support was not extended beyond the PhD. Students could be supported beyond their PhD into early career research, offering some job security and freedom to shape their careers.

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