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# **BENEFITS, IDENTITY AND VALUES. DISCUSSING THE PERCEPTIONS OF HIGHER EDUCATION STUDENTS ABOUT BEING PART OF EUROPE**

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## **Abstract**

Over the years, the European Union (EU) has steadily tried to forge a European identity. But how successful has been the EU's course of action? Building on the concept of European identity (and the values associated to it), this exploratory study aims to answer two main research questions: do higher education students perceive themselves as Europeans? Do they share the EU core values? With this purpose in mind, we conducted focus groups with students (N=15) from five European countries that were studying in a mobility program in Portugal. Our findings suggest that there is a weak connection with a European identity, although there is some proximity to European values. Students reveal scarce interest and knowledge about European issues, organization and current affairs.

Keywords: Europe, identity, higher education.

## **1 INTRODUCTION**

The European Union (EU) has been actively attempting to build a sense of community among its citizens, using a variety of strategies, such as the creation of symbols (EU anthem, flag and passport), the establishment of European citizenship, or the recurrent reference to Europe's shared values (recently labelled as "European way of life"). This is what Kuhn describes as the fostering of collective identities created and nurtured by narratives that give body to a psychological construction of a perceived commonality [1].

However, recent events started to cast doubts on what bonds Europeans together, namely the recent wave of crises that hit the EU, the growth of nationalist movements, Brexit, and the spreading of disinformation. In several member states, significant debates regarding what it means to be European are erupting, while casting doubts on the "utility" of the European project. The integration of the "other" and support to southern economies have also raised debate on EU core values such as humanism and solidarity.

The EU has been working on rekindling the bond with European citizens with a particular emphasis on youth, whose civic and political participation levels are alarming, despite the differences between different contexts [2]. International mobility has been a part of the European strategy, mainly aimed at young adults in higher education and in line with a Learning Society's development. Mobility has always been more than merely addressing skills and employment. It is precisely about being European. The White Paper on Education and Training [3] stated precisely that "the essential aim of education and training has always been personal development and the successful integration of Europeans into society by sharing common values, the passing on of cultural heritage and teaching of self-reliance".

Building on the concept of European identity (and the values associated to it), we aim to cast some light on a) what it means to be a European for higher education students, and b) the relation between mobility and sharing European values.

### **1.1 Being a European: Theoretical Framework**

It is not easy to explain what it means to be a European or why different people have such diverse conceptions. It is a difficult mission because of the tensions that arise from various dimensions, i.e., from secular or catholic visions to the difference between identity and citizenship, or even by questions regarding language [4].

In the long-lasting debate about the democratic and legitimacy credentials of the EU political system, the European identity is presented as one crucial source of legitimacy [5] and therefore as key to the success of European integration. Literature generally defines European identity as a "sense of

belonging” to EU, as well as a form of self-identification with EU that “supersedes the container of the nation-state, taking the EU or Europe as its frame of reference” [6]. However, as Laura Cram [7] notes, the concept of identity (and consequently, the concept of European Identity) is complex and needs to be unpacked to be used as an operational definition. Cram [7] distinguishes between three categories: i). a self-allocated label or role, meaning identification as European; ii). a state of being, meaning identification with the EU; iii). a political behaviour, indicating support for the EU. Therefore, the act of self-categorisation or identification might shed light on how a person sees herself as it does not reveal the meaning or intensity of that categorisation for the individual [7].

Expanding on the argument, some authors distinguish between European identity and EU support, since the former conveys identification, whereas the latter expresses an opinion [8]. Also, Ciaglia, Fues and Heinemann contend that identity is an incremental part of a self, that could be latent until triggered or referred to. What is more, while opinions are influenced, at least in part, by arguments and deliberations, identity formation can be stimulated by experiences [8]. This reasoning is arguably in line with Karl Deutsch’s and colleagues “sense of community”:

A matter of mutual sympathies and loyalties; of ‘we-feeling’, trust, and mutual consideration; of partial identification in terms of self-images and interests; of mutually successful predictions of behaviour, and of cooperative action in accordance with it – in short, a matter of a perpetual dynamic process of mutual attention, communication, perception of needs and responsiveness in the process of decision-making [9].

In his Transactionalist (or Communication) Theory, Deutsch et al. [9] highlighted the importance of communication systems for creating a shared cultural identity. Deutsch was particularly interested in forming what he labelled international security-communities (either amalgamated or pluralistic) in which people are bounded by mutual trust and identification and in which war between the units of the security-community is no longer viewed as a possibility. Since then, many scholars have used Deutsch’s insights in an attempt to understand or measure the development of an EU identity [7]. Especially relevant is Deutsch’s concept of “social mobilisation”, which describes a “process whereby people become uprooted from their traditional communities and become available for new patterns of communication and behaviour” [11]. Therefore, the focus is on straightforward transaction flows, either being, for example, trade, travel, migration, or exchange of university students. Also relevant is the importance of values and their incorporation in political institutions and in habits of political behaviour. Deutsch et al. called the connection between values, institutions and habits the “way of life” [10].

At the beginning of European integration, the political process was more important than the people’s actual involvement [12]. However, the need for public support represents a shift in the way the EU institutions and its leaders think about the European project. The institutions need to engage people in the European project and the last 30 years have seen a progressive rise of a European mass identity [13].

Another essential mechanism to forge this sense of community is cross-border mobility (Schengen, Erasmus exchange, Discovering EU, etc.). Indeed, the idea that cross-border mobility might help to foster European identity is widely present in academic and policy discourses [14].

Mobility is an empowering concept that holds a nuclear place in the European integration process. The European Commission’s Green Paper on transnational mobility published in 1996 addressed the importance of mobility for developing a multicultural, solidary and cooperative society with well-trained individuals that respect diversity and contribute to a “European citizenship”.

Since the late 20th century, several initiatives have supported mobility in Europe for education, research and training purposes. The Erasmus programme is one of the most notorious actions focused on promoting European integration and forming a European identity. It has supported the mobility of more than three million students, since its creation in 1987.

Research on the relation between educational mobility and European identity is not a new path and was first considered in the 1960s [15]. Nevertheless, this is not a prolific or consensual debate. However, the works by Sigalas [12], Van Mol [16] and Kuhn [1] point to an interesting perspective: the Erasmus experience does not seem determinant to the creation of a European identity. Kuhn [1] shows that Erasmus students are a group that tends to be previously favourable to the European Union. Thus, if the sense of a European identity is more present in students that choose to embark on a mobility process, arguably it is the group of non-Erasmus students that needs to be addressed by these policies [15], [1].

This is an interesting line of work that we believe to be relevant in the present context. Thus, building on the theoretical framework explained above, our goal in this exploratory study is to deepen our knowledge of European citizens' feelings and beliefs and how mobility may influence this. Hence, the focus is set on the self-categorisation dimension, embodied in the sentence: Am I a European?

## 2 METHODOLOGY

Our specific research questions were: do educate young people to perceive themselves as Europeans? Do they share the EU core values? Are there any differences between mobility and non-mobility students?

We hypothesise that students from higher education institutions have firm convictions about what it means to be a European, some administrative knowledge regarding the organisation and functioning of the EU, and are engaged with the European project, especially the participants in mobility programs.

With this purpose in mind, we followed Kuhn's thought [1] that quantitative methodologies do not handle such complex and abstract notions like identity. So, we conducted two focus groups with students (N= 15) from five European countries currently studying in Portugal: six Portuguese, two Italians, three Danish, three Spanish and one from the Czech Republic. The first group comprises 6 (4F and 2M) students from Portugal who had never gone on a mobility program. The second group had nine students (4M and 5F) that were part of a mobility program. The methodological strategy focused on issues that guide the two focus groups, mobilising the discussion and recognising identity and narrative discourses on the European Union. The guiding themes of the focus groups were as follows:

- 1 European identity.
- 2 Identification with European values.
- 3 Relationship with the "other".
- 4 Civic and/or political involvement of young people with issues at the local, national and European levels.

## 3 RESULTS

### 3.1 European Values

The conceptualization of a geographical community emerges as the central idea of defining what is a European identity. This was verified in both focus groups. However, cross-cultural issues in Europe are essentially related to administrative matters. All participants mentioned national and local cultures as their primary referential when asked about the European identity.

FG1

M: Do you identify yourselves as Italian, Czech, Spanish, Danish, or as Europeans? Or both?

P1 (F – Italy): I personally see myself as both, yeah.

E: Equally?

P2 (F – Italy): **I don't feel well in a political way. I don't feel well represented by the Italians, because of the government and all the people that... Exactly. But, yes, let's say that I feel equally both Italian and... I feel more Italian because of the culture and the things I like to do in Italy, and other kind of stuff. I don't feel Italian, as I said, in a political way, but still, I feel both Italian and European. In a political way, more European.**

P6 (M – Spain): **For example, I feel more Galician rather than Spanish. OK. And I also feel a little bit Spanish and European not so much, because I see Europe not so much as a feeling of being European or a source of pride, but as a series of administrative facilities.** For example, the Euro, free trade, free [borders] ... I can go to another country without needing a passport.

(...)

P1 (F – Italy): At the basic level, you take your identity from your national country. I mean "I'm first Italian, and then European"... There are traditions about all the European that are common in every

place, that isn't just the Euro, or same legal things. But that **you are first, from your first nation, nationality.**

P5 (M – Denmark): I think there is missing one step. There is no European public, in my opinion. I think it's quite complicated to get to know what's really going on in Italy. We just are like "what is going on?", just for an example... (...) **You just know from your own country, mostly, because of language. Like, what's happening politically, and what's important in France and for example, hitchhiking and... well, we have a quite good impression of Macron, the president, cause "ah, he's being friendly and everything", but the people were like "oh no, he's just cutting so much, like cutting the taxes of the rich people, and, like, for us is more expensive now". And this is something which yeah, didn't count. Different countries. I think as long as this is not possible, to know more what's really going on, and you just have this feel that you, from your own country... it's very difficult to get a European identity.**

(...)

P3 (F – Denmark): Yeah, I was just thinking about your first question, and how for me, **it's very like, depending on the context. When I'm in Denmark, I feel like I am from Copenhagen, when I'm here I feel like I'm from Denmark. Maybe if I go abroad, I feel like I'm from Europe.**

FG2

**M - What do you think defines a European identity?**

**P5 (M - Portugal) - The geography?**

P6 (F - Portugal) - I only started to understand this question of Europe and the rest very recently, when I was specifically confronted with this, because I had never thought about it. I am Portuguese; I consider that I live in the same conditions as the remains of the Portuguese people. I had never thought of Europe.

P1 (M - Portugal) - This is a bit recent for me, now that I think about it. And I think it has more to do with this because of cinema because European cinema is considered more humanistic than the rest of the world. That is, there is the cultural question, isn't it? People can consider themselves superior to these issues. And this is stuck in my head; I don't know if this is of general perception or if it is the image that we transmit as Europeans.

### **3.2 Connecting to Europe**

Participants revealed scarce interest and knowledge about European issues, organisation and current affairs.

FG1

M: Do you know when the European Union was created? What was it created for?

P3 (F – Denmark): It was coal and, wasn't it about trading coal?

P5 (M – Denmark): Coal and...

M: Ok... Who were the founding countries, do you know?

P2 (F – Italy): England?

P5 (M – Denmark): Denmark, France?

P2 (F – Italy): France.

P5 (M – Denmark): Germany, Italy.

P2 (F – Italy): No...

P5 (M – Denmark): No?

P8 (M – Spain): Germany yes, no? Hm... Italy...

P5 (M – Denmark): Benelux?

P6 (M – Spain): Belgium and Luxembourg? Portugal?

M: Hm... Spain was...

P6 (M – Spain): In a dictatorship.

M: A bit before Portugal.

P6 (M – Spain): So like... Okay, it can't be Spain, because they were dealing with Franco, can't be... and, the East, well, they had communism, Soviet Union, so... not possible! Ah, Austria?

FG2

M: Do you vote?

Everyone: Yes.

M: In all elections? Which ones do you consider the most important?

P6 (F - Portugal): National. The truth is that I only had one chance to vote, but I couldn't do it. It is an individual perception: **I do not feel very close to everything that happens in the European Union, which is still wrong, because in fact we are affected by this, but I do not feel that I am affected in the near future. So there may not be a clear interest, but you have to gain awareness that it is an important thing increasingly. It will affect us in some way.**

P2 (F - Portugal): Because there is no need to feel close. For example, the Erasmus + program is a program that the European Union promotes, but we have never had it like the European Union. It is a program that exists, and I can do Erasmus wherever I want. But we have no idea that Europe is behind what we do. **The fact that Europe exists, as information does not reach us, we do not. For example, I am not going to research Erasmus to find out that Erasmus exists. There is the program and I can do it.**

#### 4 DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The hypothesis in our research is only partially confirmed. Following Sigalas [12] and Kuhn's [1] work, we were hoping to find more engaged people in this sample. After all, Kuhn says that Erasmus program is "preaching to the converted" ones [1]. However, we found that students in our sample lacked knowledge of the European reality, particularly concerning the other Member States and the institutions that make the EU. Students couldn't explain the functioning mechanisms of the EU and the different entities that comprise it, how representatives of member countries are elected to the European Parliament or list its member states' entirety.

However, one of the most relevant findings is that they recognize a common heritage, despite emphasizing geographical and economic dimensions when talking about European identity.

We also found that different contexts can determine how citizens feel their primary identity. It is precisely what Weiler [17] explained about people simultaneously being part of other collectives, like on a national and a transnational level. In Spain regional belonging can be stronger than national. But if citizens leave Europe, that will that make you feel more European?

However, students identified the European citizen as being a "different" foreigner than an immigrant from another country or continent (the "others"), which is part of the recognition of a collective European identity that needs to be further explored.

European mobility and the Erasmus + program were the most highlighted actions by the participants. There were no differences between students who were part of a mobility program, and students who never took one regarding identification with the European identity. Students who are part of the Erasmus mobility program have more significant contact with citizens from different countries. Still, they assume that they tend to group themselves by cultural proximity when they are abroad, which is an interesting paradox. Study participants referred to students from Portugal, Spain, Italy who are more culturally close, and those from Northern Europe. Portuguese students, who did not carry out any mobility program, show more excellent cultural proximity to Brazil. However, when a narrative of otherness is called, it is always attributed to citizens outside the EU.

In some cases, participants report that people from other countries tend to live in European Union countries because there are better living conditions. When asked about the countries where they would like to live, they emphasize how their European status facilitates their circulation in the rest of the world. This utilitarian connection with the benefits of being European has already been studied [12] but seems to be a relevant dimension for further research.

There is also a gap between the narrative of European identity held by young people and the reality of their real civic involvement. The students who participated in the study have low civic and political participation in the national and European spheres. The political disinterest shown in the two focus groups is pointed out as a consequence of the policy itself, with a polarization of historical

perspectives being evident, which coincide with a common trend: citizens have no power to interfere in European policies.

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