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INTERNATIONAL ACADEMIC MOBILITY AS A SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION: THEORETICAL-METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK (Editorial)**

Abstract. *This special issue has two novel aspects. First, the focus is on better understanding the impact of students' international academic mobility (IAM) on students' attitudes to the EU's future while also looking at the bigger picture of relevant agents and factors that co-shape the outcomes of IAM. Second, we take advantage of social constructivism not being a fully self-standing theory and build on the research strategy of combining social constructivist ideas and various theoretical frameworks used in analysing various empirical data in relation to academic mobility.*
Keywords: *academic mobility, higher education, social constructivism, research methods*

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Introduction

In this special issue, we focus on the construction of youth and its attitudes to Europe in general and the European Union (EU) in particular by considering international academic mobility. While we take account of social construction relating to globalisation, we largely focus on the EU – European academic mobility, identity, constructing the EU and its future. Another novelty of the special issue is the integrating of globalisation (including European regionalisation) and a variety of factors in research: not only students (their experiences), but also primary and high school teachers, universities and internationally recognised academics and practitioners in the field of higher education (HE). The main purpose of this introductory article is to frame the particular research topics analysed in the articles of this issue within a shared and broader conceptual and empirical framework. We also introduce the contributions of the various authors, who approach the issue of international mobility from many different perspectives.

The social constructivism perspective allows us to understand global transformations and the transformation of Europe generally, especially the European Union, while looking at various social and political levels relevant to international academic mobility – macro, meso and micro. Indeed, the constructivist turn in integration processes has proven to be a very useful amendment to rationalist analysis of social integration since the end of the 1990s. This turn helps understand the relationship between an actor and their ability to learn from previous encounters with different institutions (Checkel, 2001: 560–561), while allowing for a reality not only composed of interests, but of ideational, social and material ontologies (Chebakova, 2008: 5). Further, social constructivism recognises the importance of discourse and the power of language. As they interact, actors are involved in "social learning, a process whereby agent interests and identities are shaped through and during interaction" (Checkel, 2001: 561). Last but not least, social constructivists can engage in meaningful conversations with other meta-theoretical approaches due to either a shared ontology or epistemology (Risse and Wiener, 1999: 776).

Views and elements of social constructivism in European integration processes

Views of social constructivism

While there is no peculiar social constructivist theory of social learning, social constructivists employ a version of individual learning rooted in cognitive psychology and some branches of organisation theory (Checkel, 2001: 561). However, several clusters of social constructivism are relevant for this special issue.

First, social constructivism as a social learning theory derives from the theory developed by the Russian psychologist Lev Vygotsky. He stressed that individuals are active participants in the process of creating their own knowledge while it is important that learning takes place in social and cultural settings (Schreiber and Valle, 2013). As successful teaching and learning is believed to depend heavily on interpersonal interaction and discussion, the crucial focus here is on students' learning mainly through interactions with their peers, teachers and parents, whereas teachers stimulate and facilitate conversation in the classroom (Powell and Kalina, 2009) and students' understanding of the discussion (Prawat, 1992; Schreiber and Valle, 2013). In this process, the instructor is actively involved in the students' acquisition of knowledge (Chen, 2012; Schreiber and Valle, 2013).

Second, social constructivism stresses the importance of social institutions. Institutions are defined as social structures that influence agents and

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their behaviour (Risse, 2005: 147). Social institutions are believed to either constrain or widen the possibilities of actors' behaviour (Risse, 2005: 147–148). Further, social structures also affect the identities, interests and preferences of actors – that may in turn re-create social institutions.

Third, social constructivists stress the importance of actors and networks, which support the travelling of ideas and changes in behaviour. This means constructivism not only questions materialism but also methodological individualism (Checkel: 1998).

Fourth, constructivists see communications, including the construction of meaning, discourse and language, as decisive elements in social construction processes (Risse, 2005: 149–150).

Fifth, constructivists build on the thesis that there are collective norms and understandings ('rules of the game') which actors are aware of. Yet this does not mean that actors always respect them; indeed, they might violate them (Risse, 2005: 148).

Social constructivism in theorising European integration processes

Social constructivism has more recently become recognised in the framework of theorising European integrations. Integration theories emerged already in the pre-integration stage, stressing their normative message. The first-stage theories (appearing in the context of the European Coal and Steel Community) tried to both answer the questions of why European integration had taken place and explain its results. The second stage was clearly marked by grand theories – especially international relations theories on intergovernmentalism and neofunctionalism and to some extent transactionalism. Since the mid-1980s, the focus has gradually moved from explaining EU-integration processes to analysing policymaking processes and the EU as a political system (ever more including concepts from comparative politics and policy analysis) (Hix, 1994; Saurugger, 2013). During this period, also the two clusters of grand theories kept their relevance. The third stage saw a considerable shift from the dominant international relations approaches towards comparative politics. More recently (the fourth stage), macro theoretical issues and approaches have (re-)emerged in the debate on unresolved questions of democracy and (globalised) governance. This recent shift is marked by a split into: a) revival of the importance of grand theoretical approaches in the search for new answers to big questions concerning democracy in the globalised world (seeing the EU political system as a unique case of regional political integration); and b) the growing body of empirical research that complementarily relies on social constructivism and several middle-range theories or concepts.

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While theorising European integration processes, social constructivism is embedded in several political science sub-disciplines/fields. In international relations, constructivism relates to the view that the processes of creating entities of international reality are not only material, but also ideational (including information and ideas). The term ideational encompasses both normative and instrumental dimensions. The agents involved may be both individual and collective. Further, they depend on time and place (Ruggie, 1998). While international relations constructivism is largely focused on the impacts of the social interaction of states on the international system and national norms on international politics, comparative political science and sociology are concentrated on human agents who reproduce or 'reconstruct' the environment through their behaviour and actions. Within European Union studies, constructivism started to flourish after the Amsterdam Treaty was signed (1997). Constructivism is well placed to study European integration as a process because it allows one to delve into how humans interact and produce structures (Rosamond, 2000: 171–174).

A focus on agents' interaction and structural context: While neo-functionalism and inter-governmentalism may be ontologically defined as rationalist or materialist, this is not possible in the case of constructivism. Still, we can say that constructivism is strongly focused on actors who are profoundly impacted by ideas, beliefs/attitudes, practices and experiences and beliefs about themselves (also understood as identity). Indeed, human agents are seen as individuals who collectively impact the environment (Kohler-Koch, 2002). While constructivists also believe that agents' interests are socially constructed, actors' accounts of self and other as well as of their operational context are also products of interaction (Rosamond, 2000: 173). However, this is not the only direction of the social construction as human agents depend on their social environment and collectively shared systems of meanings, also named as culture in a broader sense (Risse, 2005: 160). This makes constructivism also interested in links with agents' contexts. More precisely, it looks into how the context affects human agents, how human agent activities' (re)enforce these human agents' beliefs and how human agents' activities re-create the ideational socio-cultural context for other actors.

A focus on networks and public spheres: This constructivist focus is chiefly about the societal dimension of integration and is open to several layers of inquiry. First, there is the concept of networks, which integrates agents, their mutual relationships and processes is particularly useful. This includes the policy network concept, referring to clusters of actors representing multiple organisations that interact with each other and share information and resources on the political meso level (in the policy process) (Peterson, 1995b: 391). In the EU context, European networks, for example,

have proven to be a vehicle for the diffusion of (policy) ideas (Kohler-Koch, 2002), as was revealed in studies on the use of policy coordination for policy learning within the EU (Fink-Hafner, ed., 2010). Second, constructivists' interest also encompasses communication in public spheres. Habermasian theory of communicative action stressing the need for *"taking words, language and communicative utterances seriously"* has been applied in international relations while looking at behaviour (argumentation, deliberation), learning, the malleability of actors' interests, preferences and perceptions and re-defining public spheres (Risse, 2005: 149–150). Third, constructivism helps explain the emergence of transnational identities and functioning of transnational public spheres (Risse-Kappen, 2010). Finally, communication and framing are also opening up new spaces for politics beyond the national level by co-establishing both the transnational political contestation and politisation of European issues (Risse, 2005: 150).

A focus on appropriateness: Unlike acting rationally (calculating the material costs and benefits), actors rely on their beliefs and understandings while deciding what is the right thing to do. This means actors take account of what is acceptable in a given society, namely the opposite of rationalism where actors calculate whether to take an action based on expectations of what will happen to them – whether they will benefit or lose due to their actions. However, while *"EU membership implies the voluntary acceptance of a particular political order as legitimate and entails the recognition of a set of rules and obligations as binding"* (Risse, 2005: 148), the appropriateness of actors' behaviour might not be solely guided by these (as especially seen in the EU after the 2008 international and financial crisis).

A focus on identity: According to social constructivism, European identity is the key factor in states' opting to integrate into the EU. Even more, this may be further complicated by the lack of European identity or differences in European identity among various parts of the country, which may impact the approach taken by a particular EU member toward the EU – such as the United Kingdom (Kuhn, 2019). In addition, research (Risse: 151–152) shows that holding multiple social identities that coexist and complement each other is possible. "Common Europeanness" may also co-form a sense of difference with regard to other communities (Risse, 2005: 152). Here, it is important to stress that the EU has achieved identity hegemony in Europe, particularly in the context of many European post-socialist countries' efforts to "return to Europe" and the EU's increasing filling of the meaning of Europe with specific content (Risse: 2005: 154). Taking the EU as a regional and global actor – the EU's collective identity (Chebakova, 2008) – might be another factor in integrations with other countries, like Turkey (Risse: 2005: 155). European identity's functioning in real life has been very visible in the Euro and migration crises when European political leaders were reacting

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largely to the mobilisation of exclusive/nationalist identities by (mostly) right-wing populist parties and movements (Risse, 2018). Overall, European identity is not a given, but constructed in time and space depending on the social and political context in which it is enacted (Risse 2005: 156).

Outline of this special issue: conceptualisation, focus and methods

This special issue has many novel aspects. First, authors look at international academic mobility from different angles which, although separated, nicely complement each other. Some contributions focus on academic mobility on the micro level, while others consider the macro level of international student mobility. Second, this issue is based on the idea of combining constructivist ideas with various theoretical frameworks. For instance, the question of identity is often mentioned in several of the articles included, but in some it is approached from the perspective of citizenship or subjectivity while in others it is primarily viewed as an individual perception. Such a mix of approaches thereby takes advantage of social constructivism not being a fully self-standing theory, but a "partial theory" (Hoskyns, 2004: 227), also allowing for more explorative endeavour, in turn stimulating more (self)critical and innovative views for further research.

In a very general sense, this special issue is mainly interested in agents – as either students, teachers or academic staff – and networks that contribute to international academic mobility. Both the agents and accompanying networks are contextualised in several ideas of academic mobility, showing how mobility may be viewed as a social, cultural and political phenomenon. In a narrower sense, this issue tries to both identify and explore the larger set of areas, structures and relationships involved in the academic mobility process that construct the position, attitudes, practices and norms of selected agents.

Research topics and main questions of inquiry

In order to accomplish this quite ambitious outline, the contributors selected for this special issue engage with research questions which may be presented on three main levels of a shared general framework.

First, some authors look directly at *the level of academic structure and spheres of education*, trying to explore the ways in which and to what extent different institutions, disciplines or educational venues (de)stimulate youth mobility. In this regard, one article focuses on the question of how universities create their strategies to promote the international academic mobility of students. *Tamara Dagen's* contribution here provides an example of the potential re-affirmation of the former historical constructivism by

presenting the strategies for attracting international students in three different universities. As Dagen states, the Erasmus exchange programme has served as an impetus for internationalisation processes in higher education on the institutional (university) and national levels, especially in mobility due to goals and policies related to the Bologna Process. In this regard, her article considers three questions: 1) which factors have mainly influenced the selection of different approaches to institutional and national policies in the area of internationalisation; 2) what kind of outcomes are evidenced in the three cases; and 3) how are these approaches connected to the concepts of internationalisation at home and internationalisation abroad. Another contribution largely focuses on the narrower role of teachers in promoting the international academic mobility of students, asking how socialisation through primary school impacts the international academic mobility of students. Here, *Meta Novak, Damjan Lajh and Urška Štremfel* analyse the teachers' identity vis-à-vis the EU as a stimulating or supporting factor of European mobility. Focusing on primary and high school teachers, the article frames school settings as the most important context in which young people (first) obtain an experience of mobility within the EU, focusing more narrowly on the attitude of Slovenian teachers to mobility within the EU.

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The second category of contributions views students as one segment of the main agents in the process of student mobility. Therefore, instead of structural factors, their core aim is to reveal *the concrete practices of mobility* and the potential future ambitions held by students who have experienced or plan to experience study in a foreign educational environment. Articles which consider this level take account of the case in Slovenian higher education, asking, for instance, how students' international academic mobility socially re-constructs their identities, involvement in public spheres and political participation. Here, the social constructing of pro-European and pro-EU attitudes is considered, trying to show how international students' exchange may be understood as a crucial factor in attitudes to the EU among young people. *Danica Fink Hafner and Mitja Hafner Fink*, following the social constructivist theory of European integration processes, test the thesis whether taking part in an Erasmus exchange contributes to students' positive attitudes to Europe generally and the EU in particular. They especially aim to reveal how the international academic mobility of students re-shapes their attitudes to Europe/EU as well as to globalisation. Another contribution in this section shows the major limits of the social constructivist ideal by highlighting the structural and individual factors of student (un) mobility. Here, *Tanja Oblak Črnič and Barbara Brečko* question the idea of student mobility as articulated in the rise of European student exchange programmes and internationalisation, which generally assumed that the ability to study abroad would encourage young Europeans in the direction

of greater geographical mobility, multicultural fluidity, cultural tolerance and thereby enforce the idea of European integration and European citizenship (Ackers, 2005). Focusing on some studies (e.g. Cairns, 2010) which reveal how practices of study mobility in different European countries also show some limitations and problems of previous idealistic scenarios, the article describes how the share of youth deciding to study abroad is in the minority or even falling (Van de Wende, 2001; Maiworm, 2002). The article thus explores who are the young people that are more frequently and easily deciding to study abroad, and in what sense are they different from students who finish their study years only staying at home. Following this less optimistic perspective on the effects of internationalisation of student mobility programmes in higher education, the contribution by *Barbara Brečko, Maša Kolenbrand and Tanja Oblak Črnič* evaluates in a more focused way who actually are mobile students. In line with other recent studies, the article assumes that mobile students are only a privileged minority and attempts to reveal what is happening in a sample of social sciences students.

The contribution by *Danica Fink-Hafner* and *Pavel Zgaga* asks how academics and practitioners with rich personal international experience in the higher education area reflect on international academic mobility in a broader historical and global sense. The authors start with the position that academic mobility is a phenomenon that has accompanied the life and work of universities for centuries, but the incentives for it and the way in which it is realised have changed constantly. Understanding academic mobility as a contemporary policy idea, the authors focus principally on the European area, also considering more global processes. Namely, academic mobility is not a new phenomenon, but its significance came with the transition from the elite to the mass phase of higher education, i.e. from the middle of the second half of the last century onwards (Trow, 1974). As many documents testify, the concept of academic mobility began to play the role of a central concept in higher education policy even before the Erasmus programme was introduced (1987). One finds noticeable differences in the definition of the purposes, objectives and functions that academic mobility should have in the modern world. In this broader sense, the authors question whether the fundamental purpose of promoting mobility is to create a modern "cosmopolitan" or to expand the "industry" of higher education.

Empirical approaches: methods used and the data sets of the empirical inquiries

While authors in this special issue build on different sets of the literature review while drawing out the main theoretical/conceptual grounds underpinning their thematic focus, they also analyse a variety of empirical

material. Each article is hence focused on a specific data collection method. These relate to a quantitative approach, through use of a web survey or secondary data analysis or to a qualitative approach, like focus group and comparative case study research. More precisely, the whole issue is based on several segments of empirical research conducted in the Slovenian context. The empirical research is based on the following methods:

1. a web survey conducted among domestic and Erasmus students at the Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Ljubljana (Fink-Hafner et al., 2019);
2. a web survey conducted among Slovenian elementary and secondary level teachers between December 2017 and April 2018 (Lajh et al., 2020);
3. a comparative case study of three European public universities' strategies of internationalisation (Dagen, 2018; Dagen and Fink-Hafner, 2019); and
4. the focus group method, involving internationally recognised academics and practitioners in the HE field (Fink-Hafner et al.; 2019a, 2019b).

A major data set used in different contributions (like Fink-Hafner, Oblak Črnič, Brečko) relates to a recent quantitative research survey conducted in 2018 on a sample of Erasmus and non-Erasmus students at the Faculty of Social Sciences. The survey namely involves a larger set of variables, including: identity – national/ European/global; particular positive and particular negative views on the EU; obstacles to student mobility, reasons and motives for student mobility, socio-demographic variables, values and future plans of students, attitudes to the EU, and actual Erasmus experience. The second quantitative data set (used by Novak et. al.) arises from a web survey conducted among Slovenian teachers between December 2017 and February 2018. For comparison, data from the ICCS survey and analysis of mobility in schools by Cmepius were also used.

A qualitative data set was used for comparing three case studies in 2017 in order to explore three different universities' strategies – universities in Vienna, Lausanne and Granada – in three different national contexts of Austria, Spain and Switzerland. The main aim here was to compare their approaches and policies with respect to the Erasmus programme. In addition, a qualitative perspective is presented in another article that presents focus groups among academics and practitioners in the HE field.

By combining the results of the more in-depth qualitative studies with the more general and descriptive focus of the quantitative studies, this special issue provides a more integrative empirical approach to the selected study phenomena. In a conceptual sense, the selection of the articles presented in this issue show how controversial research international academic mobility is, yet also what a lively area it can be. All of the authors agree that

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there is an obvious lack of a strategic, systematic and also more longitudinal research tradition concerning the topics presented, at least in the national academic discourse.

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