

RESEARCH ON SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION THROUGH INTERNATIONAL ACADEMIC MOBILITY**

Abstract. The research presented in this special issue points out both the complexity and fluidity of the actors, processes, contexts and outcomes of international academic mobility. Based on multiple methodologies and levels of inquiry, the findings not only highlight some *na ve* expectations concerning international academic mobility (particularly students in HE) in existing research, but also call for new venues and different research approaches in the area of HE. The aim of this article is therefore not only to summarise the main findings, but to engage in a constructive inter-dialogue among the various contributions.

Keywords: *academic mobility, higher education, social constructivism, research methods*

Introduction

This special issue had two main goals. First, to help answer four general questions relating to international academic mobility: Who are the agents? What is socially constructed? What are the inputs to the international academic mobility phenomena? What are the outcomes of international academic mobility phenomena? Second, to provide answers to several research sub-questions based on focused empirical data analysis: How do material structures (socio-economic statuses) impact on the international academic mobility of students? What is the role of teachers in promoting the international academic mobility of students? Does socialisation through school (already starting in primary school) impact the international academic mobility of students? How do universities create their strategies to promote the international academic mobility of students? Does students' international academic mobility socially re-construct their identities, involvement in public spheres, and political participation? Does students' international academic mobility re-shape their attitudes to Europe/EU? Does it alter their attitudes to globalisation? How do academics and practitioners with rich

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personal international experience in the higher education (HE) area reflect on international academic mobility in a broader historical and global context?

To achieve the first end, the special issue includes research findings based on the results of focus groups involving academics and practitioners in the HE area. The findings reveal the very big variety of actors and networks: students, teachers, academics and practitioners, universities, states as well as social levels and streams of these actors' activities. It is stressed that the plethora of phenomena in the HE area is socially constructed – including learning, teachers' attitudes, students' skills, attitudes, citizenship, academics and practitioners' attitudes as well as universities' strategies for academic mobility. To accomplish the second end, several contributions focused on certain research sub-questions, as we discuss below. The analytical dimension of the special issue is the social construction of academic mobility from its pre-existing social conditions through the activities of actors and the (re) creation of actors' identities and outcomes of academic mobility.

Although this special issue is not based on one single research study with a common theoretical and methodological research design, it may serve as an explorative endeavour by revealing several weaknesses and dilemmas as well as ideas for future research improvements. Indeed, the concluding article brings a synthetic view on the articles presented in this issue and discusses the importance of including the social constructivist approach in the current context of socio-political-economic changes generally and while studying international academic mobility in particular. We close with ideas and venues for further research related to international academic mobility from a broader, contextual perspective.

Comparative perspective on the empirical findings

The comparative perspective combines the findings concerned with both the general research questions and the set of sub-questions in the research as presented in the introduction.

Starting with the general research questions, we may summarise that numerous and very different agents of international academic mobility are indicated in empirical research. While international academic mobility has indeed been linked to the state's policies (public policies), it is far from the reality to assume that state (public) agents are the only agents operating in the HE area. Indeed, it has been pointed out that many private agents, including families, may directly matter considerably to (potential students) and indirectly to many other collective and institutional actors. Further, the agents are not strongly rooted to just one level of social organisation or management. Instead, they take actions cross-cutting territorial-political

borders, with cases in point being e.g. the European Commission communicating directly to universities and (global) universities directly acting across national and supranational (EU) territorial/political borders.

Various research studies considering different agents and processes show the social construction of many aspects of international academic mobility: students' ambitions regarding HE; students' identities, values and political participation; student families' ambitions related to HE; attitudes of elementary and secondary school teachers to mobility; particular countries' needs and demands for internationalised HE; universities' strategies for internationalisation; academics' and practitioners' perceptions of international academic mobility. To what extent and how international academic mobility actually impacts on social constructions on the level of the individual, family, organisation, (sub)governments etc. is an entirely different question.

Although a variety of research is presented in this special issue, it all tends to stress the importance of a range of contextual factors including structures, identities and values. On the micro level of an individual (a student), there is their socio-economic status and also gender. On the level of schools (educational institutions), there are types of schools, the inclusion of EU topics in school lessons, school participation in EU projects and similarly on the level of HE institutions there are academic disciplines. At the same time, schools are also environments for teachers, who may impact their students by teaching and giving information.

The political meso level – the level of public policies – is in fact multiple phenomena embedded in several different territorial-political units and even cuts across these borders through intergovernmental organisations. As shown in the article on universities' internationalisation strategies, public policies determined on the subnational, national and supranational levels co-create a marble-cake-like network of various governmental interferences in the HE area. On the macro level one finds not only the state and its subnational levels, but also world regions and global context and intergovernmental organisations; cross-country professional social networks involving either individual academics and/or practitioners, along with HE institutions and/or other organisations active in the HE area. On all levels, the cultural factors of HE internationalisation appear to be directly or indirectly important.

Finally, what are the outcomes of international academic mobility phenomena? There is a broad range of clear hypotheses in empirical research on this question. However, testing these hypotheses has proven to be very difficult. In addition, where such testing appeared possible, no simple and strong correlations were found between identified inputs into international academic mobility phenomena (structures, identities, values) and their

outcomes. The epistemic problem is not critical simply because the inputs are multiple and it is difficult to grasp them entirely, but also because of the fact that identifying the outcomes of international academic mobility via clear indicators and valid measurements is underdeveloped in the area of education generally.

All of the above-mentioned issues are particularly visible while studying the correlation between students' international academic mobility and their European and EU identity. Further, such focused empirical research has also shown the need for greater precision in both theoretical and empirical research. A good case in point is the finding that European identity and EU identity may be two very different things. While a broad European identity may go hand in hand with domesticity, traditional values and even xenophobia, the EU identity speaks more to cosmopolitanism. Still, it remains methodologically challenging to measure changes in students' skills and identities in a direct relationship with international academic mobility. More research is also needed e.g. in testing whether and how: a) international academic mobility actually provides particular universities with a significant recruitment of the best individuals among incoming students for these universities' master and doctoral study programmes; b) the mindsets of internationalising departments are changing; c) elementary and secondary schools' milieus impact teachers' and student's international academic mobility; d) elementary and secondary teachers' awareness of students' opportunities for inclusion in international exchange are evolving and these teachers' self-confidence in teaching EU themes actually impact students' international academic mobility; and so on.

The summary of the findings now continues with the research sub-questions, as follows:

How do the material structures (socio-economic statuses) impact the international academic mobility of students? Based on processing the data of a survey among students (including Erasmus ones) at the Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Ljubljana, Tanja Oblak Črnič and Barbara Brečko highlight the finding that the practices and experiences of learning mobility among the student population are far from homogeneous, even within such a uniform sample of students and where their material structures (socio-economic statuses) matter. However, how the international mobility of students depends on the wealth of their families, whether/how students recognise a need to move or indeed work out how to incorporate transnational movement into their educational and occupational trajectories is a more complex research issue. They thus find international academic mobility to be a socially differentiated phenomenon that excludes certain students due to financial and social obstacles; other factors may include lower confidence due to limited language skills as well as students' attachment

to the local settings and connections. Accordingly, the researchers call for more sophisticated statistical analyses of the existing data, to refine these methods by conducting more in-depth qualitative studies and cross-country comparative studies.

What is the role of teachers in promoting the international academic mobility of students? The research among teachers at elementary schools and teachers at secondary schools in Slovenia (the article by Novak et al. in this special issue) shows that teachers on the general upper secondary education level have statistically significantly higher awareness of opportunities for student mobility than teachers from elementary schools. Still, at the same time the researchers warn against drawing any broader conclusions from their findings as there may be other factors impacting the difference between the two groups of teachers. These factors might also include: a) the difference between the real-life opportunities for mobility of students on the elementary level and students on the high school level; and b) the fact that the cooperation projects of elementary schools mostly include student mobility to a limited extent only. Moreover, whether elementary and secondary school teachers include EU topics in their courses is not correlated with their awareness of mobility opportunities. However, elementary and secondary school teachers who are more confident in teaching European topics are more aware of better mobility opportunities for the students at their schools (albeit this correlation is very weak). The research by Novak et al. also cannot answer the question of whether socialisation through school (already starting in primary school) impacts the international academic mobility of students, although the researchers note the need for more research in this area.

The question of how universities create their strategies to promote the international academic mobility of students was answered by comparative research into three very well-internationalised public universities in three countries. Tamara Dagen shows in her article that in constructing university strategies for internationalisation the three universities under study do follow the strategic framework of their countries but are also autonomously creating their institutional strategies for internationalisation. Nevertheless, they do this under quite a strong influence of the broad traditions, social and historical context of each state and the specific characteristics of the national HE system. Further, particular factors may be more important for certain universities than for other universities, with such factors including language policy (especially important in the Spanish case) or an interest in attracting wealthy students from all over the world (especially in Switzerland). Even in the circumstances of sharing goals, instruments and activities created on the supranational (EU) level, there are big differences (e.g. when comparing Spain and Austria).

While Dagen's research offers a very good basis for broader testing of the theory by building on the comparative case study, it does not offer insights into the role of the international academic mobility in students gaining new cultural, lingual and social experiences or whether/how a semester spent at a foreign HE institution in a new social context has contributed to the common European identity-building, a positive attitude to the EU, the development of cosmopolitanism and a better understanding of differences among people in the European and global contexts. Similarly, the hypothesis concerning the correlation between the selection of an Erasmus destination and the economic standard of inhabitants in a specific country and the level of living expenses there also calls for additional research. Last but not least, further research is needed to look in depth at the real-life achievement of universities' ambitions to longitudinally absorb the best incoming undergraduate students also into these universities' master and doctoral studies.

Does students' international academic mobility socially re-construct their identities, involvement in public spheres, and political participation? Oblak Črnič and Brečko state that students who have already spent some time studying abroad are well informed and also highly interested in European affairs. In fact, this group was found to be involved in European issues and very politically engaged. Nevertheless, the authors could not find a basis for convincingly showing any kind of linear division between students who had not studied abroad and had no plans to do so ('locals') and students who had already spent some time studying abroad ('cosmopolitans'). While they found the locals to be very attached to Europe and the cosmopolitan group also attached to its local settings, the local youth was found to be more sceptical of Europe, the European Union and its politics than the group of students who had already spent some time studying abroad. This puzzle was somewhat resolved in the contribution by Fink-Hafner and Hafner-Fink - as presented below).

Does the international academic mobility of students re-shape their attitudes to Europe/EU? While Oblak Črnič and Brečko revealed that students who have not studied abroad and do not plan to do so mostly agree with the statement "I feel like being a citizen of Europe", they also noted that there are locals who mostly agree that they hold much more in common with their nationality than with other nations in Europe. Oblak Črnič and Brečko hypothetically state this may also be understood as an unreflected manifestation of nationalistic tendencies, with which cosmopolitans strongly disagree. Still, the question remains: what comes first - identity or international academic mobility? The data analysis presented in the article by Fink-Hafner and Hafner-Fink in this special issue shows that students who have studied abroad and those who plan to study abroad identify more with both the EU and Europe, unlike students who have not studied abroad and have

no plans to do so and who stand out by identifying with Europe, but not the EU. Interestingly, stronger feelings of attachment to Europe or to the EU generally lead to support for more integration with the EU. Of students who had studied abroad, the share of those who support more integration of all EU members in all areas is the highest (52.6%). Still, the analysis further showed that the experience of studying abroad has a very weak direct effect. At the same time, among factors included in the analysis the strongest direct impact on supporting further comprehensive integration among EU member states is a sense of attachment to the EU. The direct effect of gender was also revealed (women are more likely to support the further integration of all EU members in all areas). On the contrary, analysis of data gathered from domestic and Erasmus students at the Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Ljubljana did not show any notable explanatory power of subjective class.

Does the international academic mobility of students re-shape their attitudes to globalisation? The research presented in the article by Oblak Črnič and Brečko indeed shows that three groups of students vary in their feelings on being a global citizen. There are those who have already studied abroad who feel like a global citizen the most, followed by students who have not studied abroad but plan to. The lowest expression of feelings of being a global citizen was found among students who had not studied abroad and held no plans to do so. Fink-Hafner and Hafner-Fink in this special issue also point to the potential of cosmopolitanism that moves beyond identifying with the EU and Europe. However, limitations of the available data do not allow this phenomenon to be examined in detail. Yet, the presented research calls for shedding light on the potential of cosmopolitanism, but also EU-ism and Europeanism as ideologies. These may have a role to play in what Zeitlin et al. (2019) label “politicization in an age of shifting cleavages”.

How do academics and practitioners with rich personal international experience in the higher education (HE) area reflect on international academic mobility in a broader historical and global context? As presented in the article by Zgaga and Fink-Hafner in this issue, academics and practitioners with rich personal international experience in the higher education (HE) area tend to look at developments in the HE area within broader frameworks. They not only include a multi-level view, but also use historical, spatial and other contextual lenses. They appreciate both the diversity of phenomena as well as similarities that appear beyond existing territorial/political borders. As they all possess professional and life experiences from different countries and also different continents, they tend to stress the bigger picture of social, economic and political changes globally and from particular points of view. Multiple actors, processes and factors co-impacting

the changing world are seen as fluid, yet at the same time FG participants keep stressing the pro-active role of actors, including social scientists and researchers in the HE area. FG participants' declining of Western-centric debates goes hand in hand with the rejection of simplistic views on the causes and impacts (outcomes) of public policies. They not only stress that global mobility cannot be simply equated with cosmopolitanism, but that cosmopolitanism does not occur automatically and that market forces play a significant role in HE. Beside the numerous levels and varieties of actors involved in HE (states, international organisations, HE systems, universities, academics, students, students' families), FG participants also noted the considerable differences among continents as well as countries. Steering of real-life phenomena entails the policy coordination of multiple actors within and beyond borders and regional spaces, which are (re)forming, as are various scapes. In these circumstances, it appears questionable to the FG participants whether changing minds and culture is at all possible by way of internationalisation. All in all, they do not follow "the ideology of globalism" (Beck, 2002: 40), but point to the current mix of the processes of de-territorialisation, re-emergence of territorial borders and re-traditionalisation of the collective national imagination. This resonates with Beck's thinking (*ibid.*: 27). Indeed, the participants also point to what Fisher (2009: 168) describes as "public policy as a social construct" in the HE area.

The findings of the articles in this special issue can be presented in a synthetic way by taking account of the: 1) broad research questions; and 2) units of analysis (Table 1).

Like with research in the HE area, also in the articles of this special issue one finds difficulties in determining the real-life outcomes of international academic mobility. However, this special issue does bring the following narrative on the inputs, agents, processes and outcomes.

While material structures (socio-economic statuses and gender in particular) have an impact on the international academic mobility of students, socialisation through school – especially teachers in elementary and secondary schools – encourages the international academic mobility of students by promoting such opportunities. Indeed, Erasmus programme activities have become available to general upper secondary education, professional and vocational education students, and teachers on all levels of education. Yet, (as Novak et al. state in their article): 1) "if students of elementary and secondary educational level wish to participate in mobility activities their teachers must be aware of the mobility opportunities available at their schools" and 2) "since the decision to participate in a mobility programme on the university level is an important decision in their first years of studying, students should be informed about this opportunity as early as possible". Still, even these teachers are supported and socialised in their milieus.

Table 1: INTERNATIONAL ACADEMIC MOBILITY FROM VARIOUS EMPIRICAL RESEARCH POINTS OF VIEW (BASED ON THE RESEARCH PRESENTED IN THIS SPECIAL ISSUE)

RESEARCH ASPECTS UNITS OF ANALYSIS	Agents of social construction in the frame of international academic mobility phenomena	What is socially constructed?	Inputs into international academic mobility phenomena (structures, identities, values)	Outcomes of international academic mobility phenomena
Students (HE)	Students themselves; their families; students' roles within their families	Identities (European, EU)	Socio-economic status; gender	EU, European identity formation through international academic mobility either inconclusive or to a limited extent
Universities	Universities, national and subnational governments; rectors; European Commission; international university organisations (e.g. EUA)	Universities' strategies for internationalisation; national policies related to internationalisation in HE; Universities' international "selling points"	National context (various social characteristics, tradition and historical developmental path of national HE systems), language; length of membership in Erasmus programme, commitment to implementation of the Bologna Process; individual international experience of university leaders; specific academic norms and values; (sub)discipline institutional norms and rules	Recruitment of the best individuals among incoming students to further enrol them in master and doctoral study programmes; strengthening of internationalisation in the home-university (HE) context; institutional reputation improvement; more competitive surroundings (not investigated)
Academics and practitioners in the HE area	Students, families, universities (university departments, academic disciplines), national governments, intergovernmental organisations; global universities; universities from developed countries with programmes in other countries	Families' ambitions related to HE; students' ambitions related to HE; particular countries' needs and demands for internationalised HE; Universities' strategies; Social science and practice in the HE area	Academic discipline; world region; state; involvement in professional social networks	Plurality of very different outcomes (hypotheses for further research)
Elementary and secondary school teachers	Elementary and secondary school teachers; schools' involvement in mobility programmes; various actors organising seminars on EU themes for teachers: domestic universities/faculties; Cmepius; EU institutions' representations in a member state; European Parliament (events in Brussels)	Attitudes of elementary and secondary school teachers to international academic mobility	Level of education on which teachers teach; inclusion of EU topics in school lessons, school participation in EU projects	Teachers' awareness of students' opportunities for inclusion in international exchange; Teachers' self-confidence in teaching EU themes; Confirmed to a limited extent

Source: Author – based on the research presented in this special issue of *Teorija in praksa*.

While university students are able to obtain mobility information on their own, universities also develop their own strategies for international academic mobility as they respond to external and internal factors. International academic mobility is both co-determined by a broader historical and global context while it also impacts a broader historical and global context. In this framework, students' international academic mobility has

an influence on the social re-construction of their identities, involvement in public spheres, political participation, attitudes to Europe/EU and to globalisation. Still, such a hypothetical vision should be seen for what it really is – a set of hypotheses in need of testing. This makes it very important to critically evaluate politically inspired expectations. Further, social scientists are also responsible for adopting a critical stand against simplistic guessing of what might be the difference between European and EU identity (Van Mol, 2013).

The above presented hypothetical narrative, which has no clear scientific support, calls for a different kind of research in the HE area to evaluate such hypotheses. There is also the persisting critical issue of thinking about the transnational mobility of young people based on a combination of methodological nationalism (Wimmer and Glick Schiller, 2002), which needs to be taken more seriously. Further thoughts on methodology for future research are presented in the concluding section.

Theoretical aspects of the empirical findings

We argue that the core issues of the EU as a cross-national social entity (values, norms, identity, social equality) that have thus far been less in focus are in fact critical for understanding the current trends in Europe's mix of integration and disintegration processes. Not only does social constructivism hold a particular value in its explanatory potential, but it may contribute to the understanding of European integration processes (Wiener and Diez, 2019: 241). We argue that social constructivism has indeed become indispensable in research in the circumstances of the rise of identity politics within the EU (Kuhn, 2019) and beyond. From this perspective, we are critical of the recent trend of leaving out social constructivism and in particular stressing the importance of the three grand theories of European integration and other theoretical and conceptual approaches: neofunctionalism, intergovernmentalism, postfunctionalism (Niemann and Speyer, 2018; Hooghe and Marks, 2019; Biermann, et al., 2019; Hodson and Puetter, 2019), the hegemonic-stability-theoretical approach (Weber, 2019), external governance (Lavenex and Schimmelfennig, 2009), and cleavage theory (Hooghe and Marks, 2018). While constructivism, like other theories, also has its limitations (Saurugger, 2016), there are calls for an over-arching theoretical framework to help explain how integration and disintegration interact on different levels of aggregation (Jones, 2018). Particularly in times of the growing politicisation of the domestic and EU levels in the situation since 2008, an understanding of contemporary EU (dis)integration through law in politicised times (Saurugger, 2016) may be unable to grasp the full range of societal changes.

In this context, social “constructionism offers an orientation toward creating new futures, an impetus to societal transformation” and the “constructionist thought now contributes to dialogues on a new agenda for the human sciences, innovations in research methodology, the technology and society interface, the reconceptualization of power, the rekindling of spirituality, and the potentials of relativism” (Gergen, 2017). Indeed, constructionist thought stresses the need for interdisciplinary, complex theoretical and multi-method research approaches as well as the re-construction of the cultural characteristics of academic disciplines, which have been too burdened by knowledge based primarily on research conducted in North America and Western Europe, neglecting the majority of the world (Nastasi et al., 2017). In fact, today we are not only dealing with social, economic and political (re)construction, but with the cultural (re)construction of global development as well.

Articles in this special issue tackle the dynamic complexity of the EU’s as well as the global social (re)construction, including social inequalities, political changes, geopolitical re-structuring and technological developments. Yet, it should also not be forgotten that many social aspects, including education and HE, are also socially (re)constructed. Hence, not only is gender socially constructed (Lorber, 1994), but identity (Creed et al., 2002) as well as citizens (Olson, 2008) are also socially constructed. New phenomena such as global corporate citizenship (Shinkle and Spencer, 2012) and corporations as actors directly interfering in education and bringing about new forms of privatisation (Bryant, 2020) are re-constructing societies as we know them.

The concept of mobility needs to be refined and adapted to the changing world and to the fluid particular contexts, in the sense that in international academic mobility new formative (as opposed to touristic forms) have yet to be innovated to strengthen “an imagination of alternative ways of life and rationalities, which include the otherness of the other” (Beck, 2002: 18).

Global risks have been accumulating over a long period, but in 2020, for example, for the first time the Global Risks Report is dominated by the environment while geo-economic and political pressures are viewed as the top short-term concerns (United Nations Office Disaster Risk Reduction, 2020). It is high time to re-think what it means to be educated in this world and to explore ways to provide a coherent and meaningful educational experience in the face of the turbulence, uncertainty and fragmentation that characterise much of HE today – as Ramaley (2014: 8) stressed in the context of the building up of various crises. Various literatures – philosophy, education, sociology, anthropology, media studies – also stress the need to reimagine citizenship and identity in ways befitting a global age (Hull et al., 2010). As accounts of cosmopolitanism are, as a rule, theoretical, an examination of

what might be considered as sites for cosmopolitan practice practical issues are becoming pressing. This includes the creation of online international social networking and offline local programmes designed to engage youth in representing themselves and interacting with a broader range of actors across national borders and the borders of world regions.

Venues for further research in a changing context

The real world has been changing dynamically. Political, policy and private reactions are bringing about social adaptations and innovations. Political instability and threats are already impacting at least some international academic mobility flows. A case in point is definitely Donald Trump's hostility towards immigrants and the conflictual relationship with China (University World News, 2020a). It is no surprise that in thinking about a future destination some are already thinking of switching to a different country compared to their first choice (University World News, 2020b). Models of education are changing in the new contextual dynamics – such as turning to partnerships with industry (University World News, 2020c).

Non-linear, sudden radical social changes have become the 'new normal'. The two decades since transition to the 3rd millennium have seen the accumulation of many crises: social, economic, political, immigration, cultural, healthcare. These multiple crises have revealed the idealism and blindness of certain aspects of social science, including the barriers, controversies and conflicts working against the development of intercultural awareness and international understanding. The host country may offer hostility, as Osler (1998) pointed out.

In a drastically changing world, many social aspects of life are transforming, such as identities. Moreover, it is not only a political, policy or identity crisis of the EU (Börzel and Risse, 2018a), but a more complex identity transformation, re-construction and new construction are taking place together with the need for critical re-thinking in both theory and empirical research. Engaging with social reality means taking the social fluidity and social complexity into account. For example, the social construction of youth has become increasingly diversified in this setting of rapid and radical social change. The blurring of the boundaries between youth and adulthood and de-standardisation of the life course are challenging the traditional considerations of young people's development, which has become complex, non-linear, sophisticated and dynamic (Lesko and Talburt (eds.), 2012). Looking at only certain selected perspectives – like for example in the case of analysing international student mobility (King and Raghuram, 2013) – has reached its limits. To avoid oversimplification of the social reality, the micro, meso, macro 'marble cake' of the social reality must be taken into consideration

(see e.g. El Masri and Sabzalieva, 2020). A complex web of actors (including the importance of family and friends) should be acknowledged when learning about decision-making on whether to stay or to be mobile (Thomassen, 2020) or to postpone international migration in HE and change the priority of countries for students' academic internationalisation (South China Morning Post, 2020).

Articles in this special issue tackled the health crisis caused by Covid-19 and its impact on (higher and other levels of) education generally and international academic mobility in particular. They specifically pointed to the following questions and hypothetical developments:

- one may expect less physical academic mobility on all levels of education;
- a decline in physical international mobility is anticipated, especially on lower levels where schools will probably avoid putting their students at risk;
- will the restrictions on physical mobility which were initially considered to be temporary have a longer-term impact on limiting international academic contacts?
- the quite swift decision of HE institutions to move Erasmus students' and academic staff activities into virtual surroundings has inspired questions of whether/how a distance learning model and mobility without actual physical mobility can be replaced and/or permanently in the following years;
- are the current circumstances a fruitful basis for excelling in the hitherto far less developed internationalisation at home?
- how will all of these changes impact HE institutions' leadership? Will university managements gain (even) greater importance in the years to come?
- what are the potential consequences of all these changes for the development of cultural identities?
- are students really more independent in their decisions than HE institutions? This question arises while taking account of the processes of the social construction of youth and the many agents impacting young people's socialisation and decision-making; and
- what is/will be the role of technologies (particularly technical means like the Internet) amid all these changes? Should they be used to maintain and develop communication or to support the real added value – the 'soft' dimension of the content of communication?

All of these questions not only suggest new possible research focuses, but also challenge the prevailing paradigm of the social sciences in general and social science research in the HE in particular. Research in the HE area

has not only encountered theoretical challenges, but also methodological challenges of empirical research. We have identified the following challenges:

- the dynamically changing reality;
- the social fluidity;
- the social complexity;
- the dynamics and parallelism of time and space;
- the non-linear, sudden radical social changes;
- the (trans)forming identities;
- the limited conceptual lenses; and
- the need for a research paradigm shift.

Indeed, a research paradigm shift was put on the agenda already some time ago. Similarly to how Beck called for a cosmopolitan sociology “in order to take globality and (human) social life on planet Earth seriously” as well as to understand the “situations, impacts, divisions, contradictions, and desires” of the “multiplicity of global generations” (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2009), the contributions in this special issue call for cosmopolitan social sciences and humanities. This is because the cosmopolitan perspective has become necessary in recognising the simultaneity and mutual interaction of national and international, local and global determinations, influences and developments. Part of this also entails the call to reach beyond the methodological nationalism. Whatever does not have its causes in the internal space of the nation state and is not limited to it can also not be described and explained solely by looking at that nation state, as Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (2009: 34) put it. Moreover, it also cannot be properly done while being locked into EU-centrism which is reminiscent of methodological nationalism – but now within the EU as a regional system.

In terms of the research methods, these challenges call for methodological inclusiveness and academic creativity in approaching the re-construction and transformation of social phenomena as we know them, also bringing about completely new phenomena. We need research methods and techniques that can be validly used across cultures (see e.g. Cranston, 2020). In order to fully grasp the changing reality, we need more qualitative, bottom-up research, interdisciplinary research endeavours and research sensitivity to time and space. It is also time to overcome methodological nationalism and make better use of already known research methods (e.g. panel research over longer time periods to capture the changes over time and space).

Overall, social sciences are highly challenged to adapt and respond to the changing reality both as individual sciences as well as actors in interdisciplinary research.

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