

Brexit and The Internationalisation of UK Universities: The Experiences of Academic Staff from EU Member States.

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Proposal Information (600 words)

On June 23rd 2016 the Brexit campaigners won the referendum to leave the European Union with 52% (Leave) against 48% (Remain). With a turnout of 30 million voters (71.8% of the population), the result showed a deep divide in British society. However, in the higher education sector, the picture looked decisively different. According to a Times Higher Education survey (Morgan, 2016) 88.5% of staff at universities declared their support for Remain prior to the referendum and only 9.5% were in favor of leaving the EU; 2.1% were undecided. Out of ten academics, that is, nine were in favor of remaining in the EU. Despite this strong rejection of the Brexit, the effects of the referendum and the political changes will be, and are already, acutely felt in this sector, within and outside the UK.

Scholars are also worried about the impact on the internationalisation efforts of HE institutions in the UK, as one of the main political drivers behind the success of the Leave campaign was the restriction of the mobility of people and the rise of populist nationalism that threaten recent progress in some of the key themes of the internationalisation agenda. There is not a standardised model or approach to internationalisation (Knight, 2015), but the integration of international academic staff sets a common ground to define a depth dimension of international universities (Sanderson, 2008).

EU academics represent a group of international staff that enjoys the right to work in another Member State and be treated on an equal footing with nationals of that Member State (see: Article 45 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union) but it could change after Britain officially withdraws as a member state from the EU. Professor Margaret Wintermantel, head of the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD, n.d.) stated that there are 32,000 non-British EU academics making up 17% of the UK's teaching and research posts, with the figure topping 20% at higher-ranking universities. While academics are not the main target group of this anti-immigration sentiment, their lives will, however, be strongly affected by any changes in immigration policy.

This project aims to explore how academics from European member states experience, conceptualise and respond to the unfolding and shaping of the Brexit, with a particular view on how this phenomenon is assimilated as an element of the discussions about the internationalisation of HE in the UK. Therefore, our goal is two-fold: on the one hand, we want to understand how these major political changes affect European academics at personal (subjective) and professional level (instrumental). On the other hand, we want to investigate how their reactions might influence, in turn, the landscape and diversity of British universities and their understanding and implementation of Internationalisation.

Methodology or Methods/ Research Instruments or Sources Used (400 words)

We collected data from 12 EU academics working at UK HE through semi-structured and focus group interviews. The participants embody a wide range of European countries, types of UK-

HE institutions, disciplines, career stages/paths and time working in the UK. They provide a comprehensive picture that symbolises different realities.

In order to explore how European academics make sense of, feel about, and react to the evolving post-referendum policies and the concomitant changes to their status and future, we adopt Critical Realism (henceforth CR) as a philosophical framework, in particular Margaret Archer's (1995, 1996, 2003) variant *Social Realism* or the *Morphogenetic Approach*. CR is originally developed by Bhaskar (1979, 1986, 1998) as an alternative meta-theory to both positivism and postmodernism in the natural *and* the social sciences.

We hold that a CR perspective can help us to move away from an exclusive critique of unfair representations and categories constructed in and through discourse, and towards an explanatory critique that attempts to identify the social forces that generate ideological representations, as well as hold them in place or change them. Only if we are able to capture the powers at play can we come to a critical assessment of a situation that leads, for instance, to the result of the Referendum.

For our research, CR helps us to understand how political, legal and economic structures emerge before and during the UK's exit from the EU (including the political turmoil and contestation that accompany this unfolding new reality) and the emotional and cognitive reactions and actions of our research participants as the conditions of their existence changes around them. In a second step we want to assess—to the extent possible—how these political changes and our agents change the landscape of higher education in the UK, in particular in relation to the policies of internationalisation. While academics from the EU have little power to change the course of history—in part because they were not allowed to vote in the Referendum—they constitute a quintessential group of international staff at UK HE institutions. Their views, as well as their actions and reactions are therefore crucial for the internationalisation strategy of UK universities.

Conclusions, Expected Outcomes or Findings (300 words)

Academics from the EU in UK face insecurity of their professional future and fear that their voice is unheard and their concerns ignored. Many have therefore already applied for residency or the British citizenship or are planning to leave the UK. While it is still unclear what Brexit actually 'means', it will, in all likelihood, have an impact on the composition and diversity of university staff and students with implications for UK but also EU universities.

For EU academics working in UK, the referendum results brought uncertainty and confusion. This is not only associated to professional issues, but also has implications for the way that EU academics feel that they are perceived and represented by the British society. Consequently, they are required to reshape their personal and professional outlooks to fit in the new landscape. One of their main causes for concern is that this new milieu is still not defined, and the multiple messages that circulate are unclear. Main debates about the future of EU citizens living in the UK focus attention on their economic value and EU academics perceive it as a form of dehumanisation and objectification. Within this context, we argue that the internationalisation process has been threatened, since the instrumentalisation of academics is interfering in the ethical dimension of the project.

References up to 400 words

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