

**Masaryk University**  
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**Final paper**

**»There is nothing like 40 people singing Happy Birthday to a fellow student, each one of them in their own language«.**

National, European and global identity in the light of Erasmus mobility programme

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## Introduction

Each year, more than 230 000 students study abroad thanks to the Erasmus programme. Since it started in 1987 close to 3 million students have participated. 33 countries currently take part in the programme and almost all higher education institutions in Europe are involved. The programme will also be further expanded with the newly proposed »Erasmus for all« programme, which will attract even more people to spend time abroad for study, work or as volunteer (European Commission 2013).

According to Petit (in Sigalas 2010: page 243) the European Commission has long been interested in employing education-related policies in order to promote a sense of European identity among Europeans and to strengthen public support for European integration. Androulla Vassilou (European Union 2011), European Commissioner for Education, Culture, Multilingualism, Youth and Sport argues that the »programme has contributed to the original European vision of bringing together nations by putting people first in the building of United Europe«. Nina Siig Simonsen (European Union 2011) from Denmark who chose to spend her Erasmus in Lithuania said that Erasmus made her feel part of European integration – politically, historically and, most importantly, culturally. She felt more European when she finished her Erasmus time abroad.

This essay seeks to discuss the question of creating European identity among students who chose to spend a semester or year abroad and have participated in exchange programme Erasmus. In addition I want to examine the impact of Erasmus on their national and possibly global identity as well. My methodology consists of secondary sources. I will use existing literature (articles and other internet sources) and existing statistical research about Erasmus and European identity.

Now I will examine the European identity because there are different perspectives what European identity stands for, including a view that there is no such thing because Europe lacks the most features that are important for cementing the national identity together. Next I will examine the Erasmus programme and what impact the mobility programme has on the identity of the students participating and moreover discuss the question based on available statistical research.

## European Identity

If we want to think about the question what happens with the students identities, first we need to define what social identity is. Sigalas is arguing that social identity is a mixture of self-identity and emotional significance: »The individual has to acknowledge that she or he belongs to a certain group and to value this group membership positively (Sigalas 2010: page 245)«. McMahon (2013: page 4) argues that »collective identity, the emotionally powerful sense of belonging to a group, is a crucial source of legitimacy for nations«. At that point I will also define the citizenship, because when talking about Erasmus we often bump across the term European citizens.

Streitwieser (2011: page 2) defines »citizen to be a legal member of a politically defined state. To be a citizen is to be a member of a legally uniform (usually national) group of people, with attendant rights and duties.« Furthermore according to Martinello (page 46) European citizenship is »a feeling of belonging to the European construction.« In addition there are not just European and national citizens, but for my paper the concept of global citizenship is also important. If I apply Martinello's definition of citizenship on global citizenship I will use the term as a feeling of belonging to the global society. Thus, based on Streitwieser(2011:page 2), I am particularly interested in how the individual citizen links him/herself to other people with whom they have contact in their own nation or outside it .

According to Sigalas (2010: page 242) » As border controls between most EU countries disappeared, and travelling to and living in other European countries became easier, Europeans have more chances than ever to interact with each other and, in theory, to develop a common identity. This, in turn could help the EU adress its legitimacy deficit and boost support for European integration.« Sigalas (2010: page 241) is according to the international integration theory developed originally by Karl W. Deutsch, arguing »that a high volume of international transactions prolonged over a period of time may eventually lead to the formation of an integrated community of states and nations. Cross-border people mobility is particularly important because it allows direct contact between people of different nationalities, which, in turn, could lead to a 'we-feeling' and make institutional integration easier«. »Cross-border people mobility has long been seen as a promising method to promote European integration (Sigalas 2010: page 242)«.

Fligstein (in Sigalas 2010: page 242) is »arguing that increased interactions between Europeans can lead to a common European identity. As he explains, people will, as a result of their interpersonal contact, 'come to see each other less as Italian and French, and thus

foreign, and more and more as sharing common interests, a process that eventually will lead to seeing themselves more as Europeans and less as having merely a national identity«.

The exact features of European identity were never specified in the EU documents beyond vague references to a common European cultural heritage (Sigalas 2010 : page 245). According to Bennhold (2005: page 2) »Unlike a national or regional identity, strongly based on geography and language, being European appears for most people to be a set of broadly shared values. One such value would be democracy, which most Europeans associate with a social safety net, according to periodic opinion polls conducted by the commission. Quality of life ranks high on their list of priorities, as do environmental concerns and a reluctance to use military means to achieve political goals«.

Marco Antonsich is arguing »that Europe as a socio-political space exist only as a network of upper classes and elites, but it remains distant from the emotions of the masses whose identities are primarily rooted in national spaces«. Furthermore Europe lacks most of the features that defines the nation (population sharing a historical territory, common memories and myths of origin, public culture, common legal rights) (Antonsich 2012: page18).

McMahon explains that » although European integration never had the political strength to attempt to merge national cultures into a single European culture, the EU has progressively evolved toward an acceptance of permanent diversity after experimenting with the promotion of a European nation-style identity«.

Sigalas (2010: page 245) argues that »the existence of positive feelings towards one's social identity is even more important in the case of European identity. Anyone born and/or raised in Europe may call herself or himself European, but it does not mean that she or he holds a politically relevant European identity. Unless one attaches certain importance and value to this self-categorization, European identity will be nothing more than an empty shell. One has to be proud to be European, just as people are proud to be French, Italian or Romanian«.

There is also another conclusion that states »that people regularly sustain multiple simultaneous identities, which means that European and national identities can coexist and perhaps even reinforce one another (McMahon 2013: page 5)«. That is interesting for this paper because it is important to think about different ways the identities are constituted when Erasmus students finish their period abroad.

## Erasmus and the impact on identity formation

The main feature of the Erasmus programme is that students leave their home and spend a certain period of time abroad, in the new host country. Therefore I want to address a question, what role does leaving home play in the formation of Erasmus students' identity.

Green (in Mitchell 2008: page 495) argues that leaving the bounds of one's local homelands, perhaps for the first extended stay or first time on one's own, meeting new friends, and experiencing other cultures – these are very likely to expand the sense of the individual home space from the national boundaries to the continental.« Similarly Mitchell (2012: page 493) emphasized that »Erasmus is expected to be a transformative experience for its participants«.

Jacques Delors, former President of the European Commission, argues that »success of the Erasmus programme has made a crucial contribution to creating the »Europe of citizens. I make the link to the Europe of citizens because the so called »children of Erasmus« learn to know each other better and understand the realities of countries other than their own. (European Union 2011).«

Sigalas (2010: page 246) wrote that »as Erasmus student get to know the culture of the host country and mingle with Europeans with different national backgrounds, they may discern a common cultural streak pertrating to both home and host countries and even Europe as whole, Even if this falls short of a fully fledged common culture, an increasing awareness of things that unite rather than divide Europeans is a step towards a common identity.« In addition the logic is that Erasmus students use their sojourn abroad to engage in meaningful contact with other Europeans, they become more aware of and interested in Europe and other Europeans as a result, and ultimately they self- identify as European. Furthermore the idea is that intermixing students of different nationalities instils or enhances a sense of European identity among participants and serves as a path to creating truly European citizens (Mitchell 2012: page 491).

At that point I must add that European students engage in contact not only with other European students but also with the student's that are not a part of European Union. We have to take that in account in light of a possible global citizenship identity that Erasmus students might develop when studying in host country.

On the other hand, according to Jan Figel (in Bennhold 2005: page 2), the EU's commissioner for education, training, culture and multilingualism, »it is precisely the cultural diversity demanded of young Europeans today that is helping to give them a common identity.

They are not asked to give up their national or regional identity - they are asked to go beyond it, and that is what pulls them closer together. We are creating a community in which diversity is not a problem but a characteristic. It is an integral part of feeling European. «

However we should not take that view for granted and therefore rethink what happens with the identity of students when they finish their abroad experience. According to Sigalas(2010: page 242) »It is assumed, but thus far never proved, that the ERASMUS study abroad experience will bring students in contact with other European cultures and people and, consequently, will foster a European identity«.

At that point I will discuss a question if Erasmus students become European citizens and does that mean that their national identities are put aside? Furthermore, what happens with national identities? Moreover, do they start to identify themselves as citizens of the world?

Based on the previous literature review we can apply the theory on the case of Erasmus and assume that there are different possible answers to the question what happens with the identities of Erasmus students. One could argue that they do not gain European identity, since the masses' identities are primarily rooted in national identities.

Another option is that students become Europeans because of the contact between people of different nationalities, which, in turn, could lead to a »we-feeling«.

And the third possibility is that students sustain multiple identities, national and European which can coexist. In the light of transnationalism we must include also another option – that Erasmus students might identify themselves as global citizens or even have European, national and global identity combined.

Based on available statistical research I will try to discuss which one of the options is the most suitable and also pay attention to the national dimension of Erasmus students identity.

## **Overview and interpretation of previous statistical findings**

First I will present findings that deal with the question if Erasmus students are more likely to identify themselves as Europeans when they finish their abroad experience. It seems that different authors come to different conclusions.

Based on Mitchell's (2012: page 499) research some students feel more European after participating in Erasmus. 24 per cent is feeling more European to great extent. Almost 50 per cent feel more European to some extent and 21 per cent feel slightly more European. Only 6 per cent of students feel not more European at all. Mitchell therefore argues that "the fact that

73 per cent of students reported that studying abroad made them feel more European must be taken as an indication of significant attitudinal change. Moreover, these findings suggest that Erasmus is indeed a transformative change". In addition, 44 per cent of Erasmus students reported a greater level of European identification, answering that they often think about themselves as Europeans and not only their nationality. In comparison the percentage of non-mobile students that answered the same was 33 per cent. Although Mitchell (2012: page 502) interprets these differences as modest, but significant she also emphasized that the assumption that Erasmus students would be more favourable and attached to the EU and would more likely identify as European than non-mobile students needs to be interpreted carefully because it is plausible that students who identify as European are precisely the ones who choose to study abroad.

On the other hand study from Emmanuel Sigalas (2010: page 256) suggest that the idea that Erasmus experience is likely to lead to increased interactions between Europeans can be only partly confirmed. Furthermore, based on the results of his study Erasmus does not strengthen students' European identity, on the contrary, it can have an adverse effect on it. In the case of outgoing students, he observed a minor increase over time, which is however statistically insignificant. Moreover, instead of contributing to the growth of European identity, the Erasmus sojourn in England undermined student's European identity, which declined statistically significantly. In addition, he concludes that the Erasmus experience does not make students more likely than before to self-identify as European.

Now let's take a look at the relationship between national and European identity. According to Sigalas (2006: page 26) "there have been concerns that a European identity cannot emerge as long as there is a strong national identity that inhibits it from doing so". However based on his research Sigalas (2006: page 27) rejected that hypothesis arguing that there is no correlation between the national and European identity. Those two identities are independent, which thus means that "feeling close to one's compatriots does not exclude them to feel close to other Europeans and vice versa". Furthermore he also rejected the hypothesis that Erasmus has a negative effect on students' national identity.

Similarly, based on the study by Karina Oborune (2013: page 193): " Mobile and future mobile see themselves as more European than non-mobile students. Interestingly, mobile students identify themselves more as Europeans and also have more national identity than non-mobile students". She is arguing that her study supports the conclusion that "people



who feel a strong European identity could also feel a strong sense of national identity. Furthermore, it means that the ERASMUS programme does not mean the loss of national identity. Moreover, people can have both strong European and national identity and these identities are complementary rather than excluding each other”.

Despite the fact that there has been some statistical research on European and national identity and Erasmus students it is rather hard to find research that would also include the global identity dimension.

Based on Streitwieser’s (2011:page 6) research 15 per cent of students choose to identify themselves as global citizens whereas 39 percent reported feeling European and 34 per cent choose the option citizen of my country. However the results are to be questioned because the sample consisted of only 343 students. Furthermore, 12 per cent of students choose the option other. There was no option that would allow feeling all at the same time, so we can only guess if that would have changed the outcome. However the author interpreted some students’ that identified themselves as global citizens answers that could be helpful:

*“ Those students rejected notions of nationality and territorial borders altogether, arguing that they are arbitrary, politically imposed strictures that represent labels people can choose to live above. Some of these students, however, also admitted with barely concealed contempt that living globally and traveling freely without regard to political borders is only possible for a privileged and educated minority of the world’s population. Students felt that their view of all humans as equal with shared rights and obligations—the very definition of cosmopolitanism—defined their sense of identity and made it possible for them to live anywhere in the world, regardless of culture or geography. Some of these students also explained that their mixed family backgrounds made them a hybrid of many cultures and gave them a liberating sense of rootlessness. Many students in this category cited the adage, “home is where the heart is” to explain their philosophy (Streitwieser 2011: page 10) ”.*

## Conclusion

From the available statistical research we can draw some conclusions about what happens with Erasmus student’s identity when they finish their time abroad.

Despite the fact that there are still authors that claim that there is no European identity, I disagree with that and based on the theoretical review on European identity that I

presented in this paper in my opinion there is at least a feeling of European identity and citizenship that is developing with time, particularly because of the fact the traveling among countries became easier.

However there is no clear consensus what exactly the European identity stands for, but one could argue that people from the Europe are, at least to some extent feeling more connected with each other. One group that particularly stands out is the group of Erasmus students, because Erasmus is systematically designed mobility programme that overtime became almost “must go” for the students from the countries all over the Europe. The large number of participants in their young age that are developing their identity and will most likely represent the “cream de la crème” of the future labour market is a transformative phenomenon for the Europe.

The question is how they feel about their identity when they finish their semester or year in a host country, what impact mingling with students from other countries has on their identity. This is relevant because the attitude that people have about the country and their feeling of belonging to a group can have an effect on their choices for future migration. Based on previous statistical studies that I include in this paper I came up with some possible conclusions for that question.

Even though I was dealing with different outcomes based on different studies, overall all of the studies revealed that there is at least a minor positive effect of Erasmus to students’ European identity. However we can conclude that the expected positive effect on European identity is far less significant that EU and other optimistic authors predicted and wished for. Future studies should therefore pay more attention to that question and carefully test those different outcomes.

Furthermore, I dealt with the impact of Erasmus on students’ national identities. The studies revealed that the national identities did not change because of new Erasmus contacts and possible “new or strengthen feeling of European identity”. Outcomes also suggest that if students do develop more strong European identity that means that those two can mutually and simultaneously coexist. However the future research should pay more attention to the question if Erasmus might reinforces national identities.

Moreover, because European students interact not only with other European students but also with the students all over the world I wanted to examine if that has an impact on

students' identity, more precisely if they due to that fact feel as more European also more global – citizens of the world. There is a lack of statistical research about that so the future research could also give more insight into that area. However based on the available study some students do think about themselves as global citizens but when we read the reasons that author included into the research they have a little to do with the exchange mobility programme. One could argue that those students choose the mobility programme because of their pre-existing cosmopolitan philosophy.

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