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Brexit: EU student reflections of belonging at one university in the midlands

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Abstract: Universities continue to push their global agenda and recruit international students, despite the rise of nationalism and the political fallout from Brexit, resulting in EU students potentially facing what many Non-EU students understand to be practical aspects of 'foreignness' like visas and more restrictions on movement. In today's political climate, questions such as who is an 'acceptable' immigrant, and what does it mean to end the free movement of people add to the pressure of navigating student life. Such political moves disrupt the sense of belonging and may have adverse effects on students' experience of living and studying abroad, their mental health and their well-being. This paper aims to give a voice 9 students from different EU nations are not only currently dealing with the effects of Brexit, but how that political and ideological shift affects their feelings of belonging, satisfaction with studying at an English university, and their plans to remain in the UK after graduation.

Paper: Amidst heated debates around the fate of the UK in Europe, the premise of Higher Education (HE) as a driver and agent of global innovation and change is being challenged. In the aftermath of the BREXIT vote in 2016 and while universities continue to push the global agenda and recruit EU students, a divisive language of 'foreignness' springs up creating questions of whether an EU person is still welcome to participate in British life adding further pressure to student life. Thus, this project seeks to help answer one of the key questions that still linger "what would happen to the three million EU citizens living in the UK and the two million UK citizens living in the EU?" (Dhingra and Sampson, 2016, p.1). The small-scale longitudinal study endeavored to provide an opportunity to gain a better understanding of how EU students currently understand their social, cultural, and political positioning as an EU student studying within one English university. Nine EU students currently studying at an English university participated in one semi-structured interview lasting between 45 and 60 minutes. The interviews explored how EU nationals are not only currently dealing with the effects of the looming separation of the UK from the wider European Union, but also how that shift affects their feelings of belonging, satisfaction with studying at an English university, and their plans to remain in the UK after graduation. The hope was to capture a greater understanding of how EU students negotiate their identity within a context of tremendous political and social uncertainty and change that puts them on the spot because of their nationality.

Preliminary findings from the two first interviews create a number of questions around the role of HE within the global economy (see Peters and Besley, 2006; Peters, 2007) as an agent and driver or even as a "victim" of global change and innovation (Scott, 1998, p.122). Firstly, despite the role of HE in ensuring social cohesion, development and prosperity, evidence from the data set suggests that within an unstable global environment HE fails to address social and cultural issues such as Brexit and protect the student experience. Secondly, our findings point out the diversity of the EU student population, and the fallacy that HE as a sector often falls in in terms of understanding EU students as a homogenous group. An overall difference has emerged between the EU students themselves: those who have the means to move versus those who move to survive. The common denominator in these cases however seems to be their European and global imaginary captured in their understanding of Europe as a 'community'. It is this imaginary and understanding that is being challenged by Brexit, putting them in a precarious position in terms of their present as students and their future as employees and citizens in the global economy.

As instances of nationalism continue to rise, much of the rhetoric behind immigration often hinges on the phenomenon of unintentional othering. According to McCrone & Bechhofer (2015) one does not fully appreciate their national identity until they are away from home. Yet what happens when one's idea of home changes due to policy? So intersection of identity (Lawler, 2014), national identity (McCrone & Bechhofer, 2015), and student identity (Neary & Winn, 2016) each must be considered in order to understand how an individual experiences the world. As such, the language of inclusion used by HE should to stretch to incorporate EU students who are living, studying, and contributing to the academic community in a country that is arguably struggling with its own identity and stance on immigration.

Ultimately, the project aims to discuss whether the sector of HE is ready to address and support EU students in light of other economic, political, and social challenges compounding the pressure on HE institutions. Of course, at this time, there is still much uncertainty with how the UK government will proceed. Whatever the outcome, the short-term longitudinal study aims to capture the human effect of large economic, geopolitical decisions on EU students at one university with hopes to disrupt the current conceptualisations of 'inclusion' in higher education to stretch and include the experience of EU students.

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