



DEPARTMENT OF POLITICAL SCIENCE
CENTRE FOR EUROPEAN STUDIES (CES)

ERASMUS AND ITS EFFECTS ON PARTICIPANTS' EUROPEAN IDENTITY

An Interview Study of Swedish Exchange Students

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| Bachelor thesis: | 15 credits |
| Programme: | European Studies Programme |
| Level: | First Cycle |
| Semester year: | Autumn 2020 |
| Supervisor: | Katarzyna Wojnicka |

Abstract

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| Keyword: | Erasmus programme, European identity, collective identity, identity, exchange students, transactionalism |
| Word count: | 10211 |

- Aim:** The aim of this study is to examine how students that have participated in the Erasmus programme perceives the effect it has had on their European identity.
- Theory:** A theoretical framework based on Karl Deutsch's theory of transactionalism in combination with the concepts of "identity" and "European identity" are used to understand and explain the effects of the Erasmus programme on students' identification with Europe.
- Method:** The material was collected through interviewing students from Chalmers University of Technology that had partaken in the Erasmus programme
- Result:** The analysis of the gathered data showed that the students experienced a positive impact on their European identity due to their participation in the Erasmus programme. However, the vagueness of the concept of being "European" hindered the identification process. A clearer definition and a wider understanding of the concept would facilitate the creation of a European identity.

Table of content

| | |
|---|----|
| 1. Introduction | 1 |
| 1.2 Aim & Research question..... | 2 |
| 2. Theory and previous research | 3 |
| 2. 1. Identity..... | 3 |
| 2. 2. European identity..... | 5 |
| 2. 3. Transactionalism..... | 6 |
| 2. 4. Previous research..... | 7 |
| 2.4.1 Research supporting Erasmus effect on European identity | 8 |
| 2.4.2 Research dismissing Erasmus effect on European identity | 9 |
| 2.4.3 Research gap | 10 |
| 3. Method and material..... | 11 |
| 3.1 Choice of method..... | 11 |
| 3.2 Sample | 11 |
| 3.3 Ethical approach | 12 |
| 3.4 Limitations..... | 13 |
| 3.5 Conducting of interviews..... | 13 |
| 3.6 Treatment of material | 14 |
| 4. Results | 16 |
| 4.1 Interactions with other Europeans | 16 |
| 4.2 The move to another European country | 17 |
| 4.3 Perception of the EU and Europe | 19 |
| 4.4 Perception of self-experienced national and European identity | 21 |
| 5. Discussion | 23 |
| 5.1 Intra-European migration and its effect on the participants' European identity | 23 |
| 5.2 Trans-European communication and its effect on the participants' European identity .. | 24 |
| 5.3 Summary..... | 26 |
| References | 27 |
| Appendix | 30 |
| Appendix 1: List of interviewees..... | 30 |
| Appendix 2: Interview guide | 31 |

1. Introduction

In 1987 the Erasmus programme was set up in order to support actions in the field of education. It aims to encourage improvements, innovation and the internationalisation of organisations active in education all over Europe. In 2014 the new Erasmus+ programme launched combining all EU's current schemes for education including the previous Lifelong Learning Programme and other international co-operation programmes like Erasmus Mundus and Tempus. For the period 2014-2020 the programme aimed to provide over 4 million people with the possibility to gain competences through education and training. One of its main rationales is to provide students with a better feeling of what it means to be a European citizen. Furthermore, the EU states in their mid-term evaluation of the Erasmus+ programme 2014-2020 that there is a need for "greater understanding of European integration and a greater sense of belonging to Europe among the youngest generations" (European Commission, 2018).

A feeling of togetherness among its citizens is therefore an important matter for the EU. The reason for the importance of this subject lies within the multi-layered issue regarding the lack of a common European identity, which inflicts the EU with a democratic deficit. The roots of this deficit lies within the citizens themselves, in order for the European integration project to continue to function democratically there needs to be a sense of community. Creating a supranational identity could therefore work as a remedy for the democratic deficit and consequently legitimize the EU-project as a whole (Ambrosi, 2013:143, Recchi, 2015:44).

According to the EU, the Erasmus programme is vital in the creation of this supranational identity. In a report from 2014 the EU stated that more than 83% of the Erasmus students felt more European after their exchange term (European Commission, 2014:132). However, the Erasmus programme's positive effect on students European identity is a disputed subject among scientists. Mitchell (2015) supports the EU in this matter. With the use of a large empirical material Mitchell concludes in the article "Rethinking the 'Erasmus Effect' on European Identity", that the Erasmus-students experienced a significant enhancement in their identification as Europeans during their sojourn abroad (Mitchell, 2015:339). Sigalas (2010) on the other hand is questioning both Mitchell and the EU's statements regarding this matter. Sigalas argues that the effect of the Erasmus programme is overrated and has been

exaggerated by the EU: “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” (Sigalas, 2010:242). Sigalas argument is backed by Wilson who mentions the lack of adequate scientific research in order to empirically establish the Erasmus programmes effect on students' identities (Wilson, 2011:1115).

It's evident that there is a lack of consensus among scholars in this field. The EU firmly states that the Erasmus programme indeed has a positive effect on the European identity while some scientists are more sceptical towards this. As a common identity could be vital for an institution like the EU in order to validate and legitimize itself it is safe to say that answering the question regarding the “Erasmus effect” on its participants' is of utmost importance.

1.2 Aim & Research question

The aim of my research is to examine to what extent participants in the Erasmus programme perceive that their European identity has been affected by this experience. To answer this I performed in-depth interviews with ten Erasmus alumni's where I asked questions with certain thematic perspectives about their sojourn abroad. With the result from the interviews I could depict in what way the participants European identity has been affected by participating in the Erasmus programme.

Research question:

- How do students perceive the effects on their European identity from participating in the Erasmus programme?

2. Theory and previous research

In order to answer the question regarding in what way the Erasmus programme affects its participants there is a need for a discussion and definition of the concepts “identity” and “European identity”. This need stems from these concepts having several definitions and that they are highly debated in this research field. The following section will disseminate and investigate the concepts in order to clarify what definitions of them this study will use.

2. 1. Identity

The concept of “identity” has intrigued sociologists over the last decades. Giddens defines identity as “the distinctive characteristics of a person’s character or the character of a group which relate to who they are and what is meaningful to them” (Giddens, 2014:1047). Giddens argues that the notion of a collective identity has become more and more relevant in the global age and emphasizes the importance of “group closure”, which are the means whereby a group establishes boundaries for itself and thereby separates itself from other groups (Giddens, 2014:1046). Giddens idea of “group closure” is similar to the thoughts of one of the most prominent sociologists of the 20th century, Zygmunt Bauman, regarding collective identities. Bauman argues that an important element in the creation of a group’s identity is to identify “outsiders” and claims that the identity of a group could be defined only by referencing to the ones outside the group (Bauman, 2001:124). The current state of the art understanding of identity formation involves the argument that identities are something that individuals and groups *do* and *use* contrary to the more static perception where identities are seen as something that people *have* and *are*. Bauman stressed that the formation of one's identity is fluid and can change through social processes (Jamieson, 2001:1).

Tajfel describes the concept of “social identity”, which could be equalled to collective identity, as “that part of the individual’s self-concept which derives from his knowledge of his membership of a social group (or groups) together with the value and emotional significance attached to that membership” (Herrmann et al., 2004:6). This definition implies that social identity incorporates a cognitive, affirmative and evaluative meaning. Beyond the fact that individuals recognize belonging to a certain group, identification with this group also implies that its central characteristics are an integral part of individuals’ self-concept, associated with

values and emotions. Social identities have therefore implications on individuals' behaviour in a sense that identification entails dedication, loyalty and a feeling of responsibility over the groups' welfare. It is this certain component that makes social identification a potential resource for acceptance of political institutions and collective actions (Herrmann et al., 2004).

As the section above mentioned, the concept of "identity" is a prominent topic among researchers. According to Oborune (2015) the concept is still underdeveloped despite the vast amount of research done regarding the matter. Despite this, Oborune concludes that identity is a social and dynamic concept (Oborune, 2015:78). Mayer & Palmowski supports this argument and states that identity is perceived "as a distinctiveness of an object or a person, a specificity which marks out, but is not necessarily unique to, an object or a person". The difference between people or groups is therefore of importance. It's when someone or something else exists that an identity can come forth. Identities are constantly created and recreated, this also applies to collective identities. Furthermore, identities always need confirmation in order for it to be legitimate. It's not enough that one individual sees themselves as Swedish but the individual also has to be legitimized as Swedish by other people (Mayer & Palmowski, 2004:576).

What mostly has intrigued political scientists is the concept of "collective identities". A collective identity implicates a group of people that accepts a fundamental similarity, which consequently makes them feel solidarity with one another. This sense of a collective identity is socially constructed which appears as a consequence of social interactions. A collective identity cannot exist without the notion of the "other", which implies that the idea of who we are is often shaped in relation to other groups (Fligstein et al. 2012:108).

What also is of importance when it comes to the concept of "identity" is that an individual can possess several different identities and have a connection with several different groups. It is for example possible for an individual to feel a sense of belonging to Europe, one's ethnicity, nationality, gender, religion, social class or age at the same time. These identities can co-exist in several ways. They can be configured in a system of multiple identities in the way that a local identity can be subsumed in a national identity, which in turn could be subsumed in a supranational one. Alternatively they can exist alongside one another with cross-cutting

connections. For example, some, but not all, members of one identity group can also be a part of another identity group. One can be part of a professional identity in which only some members also identify with a certain religion. Identities could also be separate. Meaning that the different groups a person belongs to are distinct from one another, with non-overlapping memberships (Herrmann et al., 2004:8)

2. 2. European identity

Similar to the concept of “identity”, the concept of “European identity” is also a subject of controversy among scholars and what is meant by the term is quite unclear. Sigalas (2010) mentions that when the Erasmus programme was launched it was meant to promote a nation-like European identity. The features of this identity were never specified by the EU (Sigalas, 2010:245). However, the mentioning of a “nation-like” European identity entails that it could be compared with a national one. With this reasoning it is thus important to first depict how national identities are shaped in order to sufficiently define European identity.

Herrmann et al. (2004) defines national identity with three characteristics. It is created by a nationalist movement where members identify with one another, which believe that their community should have a sovereign state and are willing to sacrifice their lives for that state's independence (Herrmann et al., 2004:7). Furthermore, Deutsch defined nationality as “a people striving to equip itself with power, with some machinery of compulsion strong enough to make the enforcement of its commands probable in order to aid in the spread of habits of voluntary compliance with them”. In order to achieve this there needs to be an interconnection between disparate groups within the nation. This interconnection and co-existence can be held together by several factors as social interactions, language, ethnicity, religion or history, which in turn leads to a common national identity. This means that it is possible for a national identity to be forged from a range of different elements, as long as it stretches across every group in society (Fligstein et. al, 2012:109). Moreover, Deutsch did not perceive national identity as something rigid that could not extend beyond the realms of the nation state. Deutsch maintained a constructivist approach to the concept of “collective identity” which implied that supranational integration could lead to a supranational identity (Sigalas, 2010:245).

A national identity is therefore presumed, according to above-mentioned theories, to simplify and legitimize political rule. A political rule that is built upon a common identity is presumed to lead to an acceptance for collective decisions and political institutions. This argument could also be applied to a European level. A European identity would in that case, similar to a national identity, be built upon the association and interconnection between people, but across nation states inside of Europe rather than inside a nation state.

2. 3. Transactionalism

In 1957 Karl Deutsch and his colleagues invented the concept of transactionalism. This concept views integration as a process of cultural assimilation, leading to the formation of “security communities”. In these communities people are linked together through mutual trust and identification with one another, thus making war and conflicts no longer possible. Deutsch envisioned that the creation of these security communities through international transactions as migration and communication would trigger socio-psychological processes that would create cross-border common identities (Sangiovanni, 2007:31). According to Deutsch and his colleagues these communities are created through institutionalising cross-border mobility and transnational communication. A textbook example of this is the EU’s creation of the Erasmus exchange student program (Kuhn, 2011:814). Transactionalism urges that these types of student mobility programmes can foster processes of social assimilation, which will lead to integration. This social assimilation occurs on an individual-level where personal contact and interactions will diminish the social distances between people of different nationalities and thus help to create a common identity. (Büttner, 2010:539).

Using the theory of transactionalism Fligstein (2008:239) explains how a European identity can be created through face-to-face interactions between people of different social backgrounds. Fligstein argues that this interpersonal connection between Europeans will make them: “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” (Fligstein, 2008:139). As this study will revolve around the Erasmus programme and its potential effect on students’ European identity, transactionalism is very suitable to use as a theoretical

framework. Student mobility programmes are perfect illustrations of how people of different nationalities connect and interact with each other on equal conditions. Interactions that according to the theory of transactionalism will create a fertile soil on which a common European identity can grow. Applying this theory to the results of my interviews will enable me to answer the question regarding in what way participation in the Erasmus programme affects students European identity.

2. 4. Previous research

The matter of student mobility and its effects has aroused the curiosity of several scientists. There are many articles and books written on the subject with a variety of different perspectives that use different methodological and theoretical approaches. Heger (2013) and Beerkens et. al (2013) for example investigate the structural organisation of the Erasmus programme and the barriers to international student mobility. Heger concluded that the Erasmus programme is not for everyone and he identified two reasons why this is the case. The first reason revolves around intra- and international differences regarding selection criteria, that universities across Europe have different criteria for who is eligible to participate in the Erasmus programme. This means that students in some countries have a smaller chance of performing a sojourn abroad than their fellow students in other countries.

The second reason Heger argues regards the funding of mobility and the fact that there are inequalities between European students in how high their grant is which reduces the likelihood of participation in the Erasmus programme for certain groups of students (Heger, 2013:74). Similar to Heger, Beerkens et. al (2013) also argues for the existence of barriers to international student mobility. Beerkens et. al mentions the importance of better communication regarding the benefits of the Erasmus programme, which will cause it to have more participants. Furthermore, the author also argues for the importance of individuals' social background and how students from good socio-economic backgrounds are overrepresented in regards to those who come from inferior conditions (Beerkens et. al, 2013:76).

Then there are researchers that focus on the quality of the Erasmus programme and if it is performing in the way it was set out to do. Cairns (2017) has studied the imbalance of outgoing and incoming students in Portugal and concludes through interviews with managers of the Erasmus programme that this imbalance affects the participation of local students in international student mobility. Furthermore, Cairns suggests that the EU should do more than provide more money for scholarships, and that they should focus more on highlighting the needs of each country participating in the Erasmus project (Cairns, 2017:737). González et. al (2010) follows this line of thought and argues that the Erasmus administrators should focus on signing agreements with neighbouring countries in order to increase the flow of international students. González et. al also argues that higher educational institutions should become better at marketing the academic quality levels in the host country in order to attract more international students (González et. al, 2010:427).

Beyond the research regarding the Erasmus programmes quality, barriers and organisational structure there is also a discourse surrounding the programmes' effect on participants' sense of belonging to Europe. Despite the quite extensive research made surrounding the topic there is still an evident incongruity and lack of consensus among scientists. Some are claiming that the Erasmus programme has a positive effect on participants' European identity while others hold the contrary view. I will in the following section disseminate these dichotomous standpoints in order to shine a light on the obvious inconsistency among the scientific results regarding the matter. This will lead to a discussion on the research gap that is made clear through the dissemination.

2.4.1 Research supporting Erasmus effect on European identity

As it was stated in the introduction of this thesis, the EU is one of the main drivers of the idea that participation in the Erasmus programme will indeed positively affect students' European identity. This comes as no surprise as one of the programmes main rationales is to give "civic experience" to its participants that will instil a feeling of European togetherness. The EU stated in a report from 2014 that 83% of students that had partaken in the programme felt more European after their Erasmus graduation (European Commission, 2014:132). Ambrosi supports this fact and argues that graduates that have gone through this type of student mobility programme tend to be more positive towards a European identity. The author

continues and refers to surveys that have been conducted by the “Erasmus Student Network”, which concluded that a majority of students testified to having a stronger European identity after their sojourn abroad (Ambrosi, 2013:148).

Following this line of thought King & Ruiz-Gelices (2003), referring to their surveys done on British exchange students, argue that they have found a causal relationship between attendance in mobility schemes and an increased sense of European identity. They stated that: “Regarding identification, our surveys reveal that Year Abroad graduates are more likely to see their identities as at least partly European”. King & Ruiz-Gelices compared the “Year Abroad”-students with their non-mobile peers and found a difference in identification with Europe as the mobile students had a greater sense of European identity (King & Ruiz-Gelices 2003:246). Both Mitchells (2015) and Van Mols (2013) studies are agreeing with the previous mentioned research. Mitchell uses a large empirical material in the article “Student mobility and European Identity: Erasmus study as a civic experience” and concludes that the Erasmus programme has a positive influence on the strengthening of a European identity (Mitchell, 2015). Furthermore, Van Mols research suggests that the interaction made with international students inclines to make them feel more connected to other Europeans (Van Mol, 2013:171).

2.4.2 Research dismissing Erasmus effect on European identity

This positive effect that the Erasmus programme is supposed to have is contested by several researchers. For instance, Sigalas (2010) uses a quantitative method that shows that participation in the Erasmus programme does not have a causal relationship with a strengthened European identity but on the contrary can have an adverse effect on it. Sigalas continues and mentions that the supposed effect the programme has on students' identities is overestimated and that his research shows that the effect, if there is one, is modest at its very most (Sigalas, 2010: 242). Wilson (2011) supports the idea of the overestimation of the programme's potential. According to him the hype around the ‘Erasmus generation’ is unjustified and the supposed effect it has on participants' attitudes to European integration is overestimated. Wilson argues that participation in the Erasmus programme does not lead to major changes in students’ political views in the short term and that there is no evidence of the creation of more pro-European attitudes among Erasmus students (Wilson, 2011:1135).

Furthermore, in the article “Becoming more European or European after Erasmus” Oborune (2015) conducts a quantitative study using surveys in order to gather information regarding the matter of the Erasmus programmes influence on students' feelings toward Europe. The results showed that every third mobile student stated that they did not feel more European after their exchange. Moreover, Oborune also found that there was no significant difference in having a European identity between non-mobile students and mobile students (Oborune, 2015:88).

2.4.3 Research gap

Although there is some research performed on the subject, the lack of consensus among scientists and the call for more empirical studies to be conducted opens up a clear research gap. Several authors point to this fact (Ambrosi, 2013; Sigalas, 2010; Van Mol, 2011; Van Mol, 2013). Ambrosi mentions that the qualitative research regarding this matter is scarce and urges that interviews rather than surveys are the best method in order to gain a better understanding of the subject (Ambrosi, 2013:149). Furthermore, Van Mol (2013) argues that the empirical evidence on the influence of a sojourn abroad can have on the meaning students attribute to the concept of Europe still remains limited. Similarly to Ambrosi, Van Mol also calls out the need for more qualitative research to be done in order to investigate the dynamics of this subject. He specifically mentions the need for more in-depth interviews to be made in Scandinavian countries like Sweden (Van Mol, 2013:172). Van Mol also states in an earlier article that the studies done by researchers in this field rarely ground their assumptions empirically and that there is a need for more extensive research (Van Mol, 2011:30).

So, according to the above-mentioned articles there is an evident need for more qualitative research being made regarding the Erasmus programmes' effect on participants' European identity. The urge for more qualitative research in combination with Van Mols call for the need of more in-depth interviews being made in Scandinavian countries makes the relevance of my study quite clear. It will answer Van Mols and the other authors call for more qualitative research being performed in this field. Although the time frame of the study hinders me from drawing more general conclusions about the subject, it will undoubtedly contribute to filling in the research gap.

3. Method and material

The following section will discuss the methodology and material of the study. Choice of method, sample, ethical approach, limitations, conducting of interviews and processing of the material will all be discussed.

3.1 Choice of method

This study used a qualitative method in the form of interviews in order to answer its research question. This type of method is suitable for studies whose goal is to acquire deeper knowledge in how an individual feels or thinks about a certain topic or phenomenon. The researcher can then obtain information regarding the individuals' attitudes and experiences regarding a certain subject that would not be possible in a survey (Justesen & Mik-Meyer, 2011:45). This fact makes interviewing by far the most suitable method for this study. As the study deals with individuals' perception of their own identity, which is an abstract and subjective topic, there is a need for a deeper understanding of the interviewees' lifeworlds. Asking them questions about their own identity, triggered reflections that most likely would not have emerged through the use of a more quantitative method.

Having an open dialogue with the respondents was a key factor in the performance of this study. In order to achieve this the interviews were of a semi-structural character where all of the respondents were asked the same open questions in order to encourage unexpected and interesting reflections. The concept of one's identity is as mentioned an abstract subject, therefore the semi-structured interview created space for elaborated thoughts and reflections which would not occur to the same extent in a more structural type of interviewing method (Justesen & Mik-Meyer, 2011:46).

3.2 Sample

When choosing the sample for respondent-interviews there are three general guidelines to follow. Choose strangers, choose a small amount and choose those who are not experts in the field. Interviewing strangers makes it easier for the researcher to maintain the scientific

distance to its respondents. From the respondents point of view it can also be easier to open up and talk about more personal topics if they are aware that they are not going to keep socialising with the interviewer (Esaiasson et al., 2017:267). Which is relevant to this specific study as it regards the personal subject of the respondents' identity. Regarding the amount of respondents, Esaiasson et al. (2017:268) argues that ten respondents is a sufficient number of people in order to generate interesting analyses. Not choosing experts in the studies' field is of importance due to in some studies an interviewee's prior knowledge regarding the subject can harm the outcome of the interviews.

This studies' sample is in alignment with these guidelines. The sample consisted of people whom I have never met before which maintained the scientific distance between us. Ten Erasmus graduates were interviewed in this study which all were students from Chalmers University of Technology. The selection of students from Chalmers was intentional as it follows the guideline of not interviewing experts in the field. Students that are enrolled in a technical educational programme presumably have less prior knowledge about questions regarding European integration and identity than students of political science. For example, if I were to interview my fellow students at the European Studies programme the answers would be affected by their prior knowledge in the subject, which is assumedly more comprehensive than the students from Chalmers. Furthermore, students of the European Studies programme probably already feel a degree of European belonging as their line of study gives them a very different understanding of the EU and Europe contrary to students enrolled in programmes of a more technical character. This is of great importance as the aim of the study regards how participation in the Erasmus programme affects students' European identity. Moreover, regarding gender the sample was equally divided with five male and five female respondents ranging between 25-29 years old.

3.3 Ethical approach

The study followed the ethical guidelines presented by Justesen & Mik-Meyer (2011:51). The consent of the respondents' participation in the study was validated, as was the recording of their voices. They were informed about where this recording would be stored and how it would be used. I explained what the aim of my study was, where it was going to be published

and who would have access to it. The respondents were guaranteed anonymity and told how this would be ensured. As my study revolves around the personal subject of people's identities, following these ethical guidelines was very important throughout the whole process.

3.4 Limitations

In this study I chose to interview ten Erasmus graduates from Chalmers Technical University in Gothenburg that all had performed their exchange term during the fall of 2019. Due to the study's limited time frame there was no chance of performing a more extensive research. Although this is needed in order to draw more general conclusions about the subject, ten interviews is still enough to come up with interesting facts that could contribute to the research field.

Another limitation is that only Swedish students from the same university were chosen. This harms the studies diversity and could create a rather one-sided result. Other similar studies have had a sample of students from various countries with different academic backgrounds. Some also compare non-mobile students to mobile students in order to investigate whether it is the actual mobility of a student that affects their sense of European identity. I would still argue for the suitability of my choice of methodology and material. Some of the studies I mentioned above were of a more quantitative character, this enables the researcher to examine a big amount of cases in a short period of time. As I performed an interview study, this was not the case for me as it is much more time consuming. Regarding the choice of only interviewing Swedish students from the same school I admit that it could contribute to a rather one-sided result. With this in mind, I still argue that the sample is a suitable one. This is due to the probable lack of a preconceived idea of what European integration and identity entails as the Chalmers students have a more technical character to their studies.

3.5 Conducting of interviews

In order to receive replies from the respondents that would enable me to answer my research question I started off with creating an interview guide (Appendix 2). The interview guide

consisted of four different themes with a number of open questions followed by sub-questions that would enable a deeper discussion. Thereafter I contacted 27 potential interviewees, all of them were students from Chalmers that had performed their Erasmus in the fall of 2019. Ten of these 27 students responded affirmatively and I could therefore start planning my interviews. Before conducting these interviews I performed a pilot interview in order to spot potential flaws and make amendments to my interview guide. The ten interviews were thereafter conducted via Zoom and the length of them varied from 25-35 minutes.

Each interview started off with me presenting myself and informing the respondent what the aim of the study was, this created an open and loquacious atmosphere between the interviewee and me. As the respondents and I were roughly the same age and both had performed exchange terms, we had some common denominators that put us on the same wavelength which aided the flow of the interview. During the interviews I used the interview guide and asked the same open questions to each and one of the respondents. They talked freely about their experiences and we had discussions about the pre-existing themes I had created. Each interview ended with some simple background questions about the interviewees and me questioning the respondent whether they like to be anonymous or not followed by some words of appreciation from my side for their cooperation.

3.6 Treatment of material

The recorded interviews were transcribed and then written in a manner so they were easy to interpret. These texts were then transferred to the software program NVivo that is used for analysing qualitative data. The empirical data was thoroughly read and the process of categorizing the respondents' answers began. The data that helped answer the studies' research question was thematically divided into four different categories; interactions with other Europeans, the move to another European country, perception of the EU and Europe and perception of self-experienced national and European identity. After the data had been categorized it was sorted into subcategories to help depicting what the data actually implied. Quotes that contributed to the answer of the research question were picked out and written down in order to help describe the data. The data was then analysed using Karl Deutsch's theory of transactionalism. I was guided by the main assumptions in this theory when coding

my interviews and during the analysis of the data. Through thorough examination of this theory I could perform a deductive analysis when applying it to the data, which ultimately helped answer my research question.

4. Results

In the following part the results from the conducted interviews will be presented. The results will be divided into four thematic sections based on the themes that the interviews touched upon and that are important in the creation of a European identity; interactions with other Europeans, the move to another European country, perception of the EU and Europe and the perception of self-experienced national and European identity (Büttner, 2010; Fligstein, 2008; Sangiovanni, 2007; Sigalas, 2010). These four themes will be systematically presented with the help of quotes that are relevant in answering this study's research question. In order to facilitate the presentation and to make my result easy to read I will refer to the respondents as I (interviewee) 1-10.

4.1 Interactions with other Europeans

Basically all of the respondents agreed that the interactions they made with other European students during their sojourn abroad made them feel a stronger sense of belonging with them. Many had preconceived ideas about how people from different nationalities were and placed them into different stereotypical categories. This changed during their Erasmus as they got a deeper and wider understanding of people from different countries and regions in Europe from interacting with them.

“I’ve learnt more about them (other Europeans). Some information gaps have been filled and I know more about them now than before my Erasmus. I have a more detailed picture of them”- I3

A majority of the interviewees concluded that the knowledge they gained about their peers from interacting with one another made them feel closer to other Europeans. Two of the respondents witnessed that through the creation of cross-border friendships and the amount of time they spent together made them realise the differences between them and people from other countries. The realisation of differences did not cause them to feel more distanced to the other person, on the contrary it made them feel closer to them as they both got a deepened understanding of each other.

“Even if what you discover and learn about the other person are your differences, I still believe that it contributed to a feeling of togetherness between us”- I7

Even though a majority of the respondents felt that it was easy to interact with other students, there were several of them who witnessed how students from the same nationalities created groups of their own making them difficult to interact with. This was also the case for them as their main group of friends often were Swedish or Scandinavian. The difficulty of bonding with the domestic population was something that several respondents agreed upon. Not many of them interacted with the locals as they felt that it was difficult to approach them. This could be explained by the following quote:

“I didn’t befriend too many Spaniards though. I feel like that is the case at my home university as well. The exchange students and the local students stay on different sides because the locals already have their circle of friends. In addition to that you’re only there for half a year which is not much time if you’d like to get to know a whole class”- I2

As was mentioned above, a majority of the students felt more European after their exchange term, but there were those who held the contrary view. I5 witnessed that during his time in Italy he felt more and more Swedish as the cultural differences became obvious. Furthermore, I5 concluded that the more time he spends abroad, the more Swedish he feels. I4 supported this line of thought and argued that “I’m never more Swedish than when I’m abroad.”.

4.2 The move to another European country

During the discussion of how the move to another European country has affected the participants there were several mentions of how the experience has made another move abroad in the future more likely. The experience of having lived abroad had as I1 put it “created a bridge” to Europe, which made him feel more connected to the continent. This type of argument is also carried on by I8 as she mentions that the threshold to moving abroad in the future has been lowered. Furthermore, I8 already had a potential move in sight and she argued that after having performed her Erasmus this move did not seem as big of a step. Both I1 and I7 talked about making contacts with international companies or working in an

international environment seemed easier now that they had moved and studied in another country. There seemed to be a consensus among the respondents that the step to Europe had become smaller.

“It felt like the threshold had become lower, it’s not unimaginable that you could move abroad again after you’ve dipped your toes if you know what I mean”- I6

Something that drove this feeling on was how effortless the move abroad was with the help of the Erasmus programme. Several of the respondents mentioned how much they appreciated the free movement inside of Europe, something that their Erasmus experience helped them realise. This free movement was extra clear when I4 compared her application process with her fellow American exchange student. For I4 the process was free and very smooth, for the American counterpart it was costly and complicated. The ease of using Erasmus as a way of experiencing another European country's culture was very appreciated and created a sense of European belonging among several of the interviewees. Erasmus has highlighted some of the pros with the European Union and made the respondents feel closer to Europe.

“/.../ it created some sort of European togetherness through that you realise that you could live anywhere in Europe and that the process is very smooth. /.../ I’ve always thought that it felt easy to move, and this feeling has been strengthened.”- I5

When asked to reflect on whether there was a big difference to living in another European country compared to their home country many of the respondents came to a similar conclusion. As the majority of them performed their exchange term in southern European countries like Italy, Spain and Portugal they experienced some noticeable cultural differences. There were several mentions of the discrepancy between the locals' perception of time compared to the Swedish students. The locals had a more relaxed attitude to time planning than the Swedes did. Other than that the respondents witnessed a huge difference in the food culture. As the Swedish students were used to eating lunch at noon and dinner in the early evening, having dinner closer to midnight as is usual in some parts of Europe created a cultural clash. The fact that people socialised more in bars and restaurants contrary to the more Swedish way of inviting people home to each other was also depicted as a cultural

difference. Attitude to alcohol, a more emotional and expressive way of communicating and a more bureaucratic societal system were also some differences that the respondents noticed. With this said most of the interviewees claimed that these differences were only mere trivialities that they quickly got used to and in some cases adapted to their own way of life. The major societal features were basically the same and the students felt that it was easy to create their own everyday life in their host country.

“After a while you got into the culture more and more. Although this is too short of a time to feel that I’m a Spaniard. But absolutely, the more time you spend in the country the more you get familiar with the culture /.../ the longer you’re there the stronger sense of belonging you feel.”- I2

4.3 Perception of the EU and Europe

The general perception of the EU among the respondents was rather positive before their sojourn abroad, and these positive thoughts were strengthened or confirmed during their exchange term. Many of them admitted to having a lack of understanding in how the EU operates but the experience of partaking in a EU-driven project has made their perception of the union more positive. For example, both I1 and I9 mentioned that they felt that there was a form of safety net for them as Swedish citizens travelling in another European country. With this said there were also those who claimed that partaking in the Erasmus programme did not have any significant implications on their feelings towards the EU. For instance, I5 mentioned that he also witnessed some difficulties with the international collaboration during his time in Italy. When talking to people from Italy he noticed a discrepancy in how the north and south of Italy is treated by the EU, being closer to Greece he also realised the struggles the country has had with the Euro after the financial crisis. But as mentioned above, most of the respondents’ perception of the EU was positively affected by their exchange term.

“I think that above all I appreciate it (the EU) more.”- I4

“Being away on an exchange term has strengthened my positive perception of the EU.”- I1

Other than feeling more positive towards the EU, some of the respondents witnessed how the experience of living in another European country has changed their perception of Europe. They claimed that after interacting with other Europeans they have gained an increased interest regarding foreign policy and an insight into other countries. This inflicted a feeling of togetherness with other Europeans and a more positive perception of Europe as a whole.

“/.../ I feel a bit more European. I feel that I get thoughts like “we together” when I think about Europe rather than thinking of it like separate countries that belong to a union. I get the idea of “we as Europeans”. So yes I would definitely say that I’ve gotten a more positive attitude towards Europe.”- I1

Similar to this line of thought there were also reflections made about how participation in the Erasmus programme is important in order to encourage tolerance towards people from other European countries. And how this eventually could lead to perceiving Europe as a nation rather than a continent.

“I think it’s good to encourage tolerance. If you’re not experiencing how other people's everyday life looks like it’s easy to become intolerant and prejudiced. /.../ So I think it’s an important part in order to get a more nation-like feeling towards Europe.”- I3

Perceiving Europe as a nation was not something that every respondent agreed upon. Several of them mentioned how they perceive Europe as divided into regions rather than separate countries. A common division was that between the north and south of Europe. People from the south were perceived as having more common cultural denominators and were quite distinct from north-Europeans in their way of behaving. I10 and I5 mentioned that they felt that they connected easier with Scandinavians and north-Europeans.

“I believe I think of Europe as divided into regions rather than separate countries. That you have the north of Europe with Germany and Scandinavia, which is what I belong to. And then you have Italy, France and Spain as the south of Europe.”- I5

4.4 Perception of self-experienced national and European identity

When asked to reflect upon their own national identity all the respondents claimed that they identified with Sweden and felt Swedish. A majority of them also argued that during their sojourn abroad they felt even more Swedish. When exposed to other cultures and nationalities, their own sense of national belonging was strengthened as the differences between the different cultures became apparent. I4, I6 and I1 mentioned that being away on an exchange term made them realise just how Swedish they actually were.

“I think it (the exchange) made me much more conscious that I am and that I behave as a Swede”- I1

With this said, there were also several mentions about how participation in the Erasmus programme had strengthened the respondents European identity. I1 and I7 argued that during their Erasmus they felt more Swedish, but after they came home they claimed to feel more European.

“During the exchange you got a stronger national identity. /.../ But after the exchange I would say that I have more of a European identity”- I7

A difficulty many of the respondents had was to depict what being a “European” actually entails. Many of them mentioned that they did not have a clear idea about what the term actually means and that it is too vague. This meant that the interviewees struggled to identify with the concept of feeling like a “European” as they did not comprehend the meaning of it. I5 compared “European” to the concept of being an “American”. To him there was a clear and defined image of what it meant to be an “American”, something that he did not feel was the case with the concept of being “European”. A line of thought he shared with several of the respondents.

“Europe has so many different cultures squeezed into a small area. I couldn’t say that I know a feature that is typical “European”. /.../ I can’t find any general notion of what it means to be “European”.”- I8

Several interviewees witnessed how they felt more European when they interacted with people that originated from countries outside of Europe. That they might not feel a strong sense of belonging with other Europeans until they were faced with someone from a completely different culture. Only then they realised the similarities they had with other Europeans. The sense of European togetherness was in this case strongly influenced by the context in which the interactions with other cultures occurred. This means that the respondent might not feel a strong sense of European belonging unless they were faced with people deriving from countries outside of Europe.

“I’m European compared to the USA. /.../ Europeans have something in common which means we can say “we”. Otherwise the concept of “European” would not appear in the same way.”-I3

5. Discussion

The results from the conducted interviews will now be analysed in order to answer the research question regarding how the respondents perceived that their participation in the Erasmus programme affected their European identity. According to Karl Deutsch's theory of transactionalism, which is the theoretical framework the analysis is built upon, there are two main factors in the formation of a transnational identity like the European one. These factors are international transactions in the form of *communication* and *migration* (Sangiovanni, 2007:31). In this study *communication* entails the interactions the respondents had with other European students and *migration* how the move to another European country has affected their sense of a European belonging. The data will therefore be analysed using these two categorisations connecting to the study's theoretical framework. Thereafter, the analysis will be summarized in order to conclusively answer the study's aim and research question.

5.1 Intra-European migration and its effect on the participants' European identity

The data collected from the concluded interviews indicates that the experience of moving to another European country and being a part of that country's culture fosters a stronger sense of European identity among the respondents. A fact that is in alignment with the theory of transactionalism as its creator Karl Deutsch argued that new patterns of socialisation and behaviour is an important factor in the creation of a supranational identity (Sangiovanni, 2007:30). The data suggested that these new patterns of behaviour as a consequence of being a part of the Erasmus programme have contributed to a positive impact on the students' European identity. The respondents comments show that their time as Erasmus students has played an important part in influencing their identities and has helped bridge the detachment sensed between their own country and Europe.

Furthermore, the data showed that the freedom of movement and the lack of borders, which made the process of moving quite effortless for the respondents, were very appreciated. The Erasmus programme functioned as a catalyst for this realisation and created a sense of European togetherness among some of the respondents. In connection to this there were comments on how the respondents' effortless process of moving was compared to the

complicated process of moving for non-Europeans and how it made them realise the pros of the European collaboration. A realisation that made them feel a stronger sense of European identity. The notion of the “other” as in this case is important in the creation of a collective identity. Bauman argues for the important element of creating “outsiders” when it comes to fostering a collective identity (Bauman, 2001:124). Thus, the comparison made by the respondents between themselves and the non-European students is an example of creating “outsiders” which leads to a positive impact of their European identity.

Moreover, comments made by the interviewees regarding how the experience of being submerged into a different culture indicates that the move to another European country made them feel more European. The data shows that being confronted with a different culture can initially be somewhat problematic. However, the time spent in another European country eventually made the students realise that the major societal features were quite similar to their home country. The gained knowledge and insight in other European countries had a positive impact on the respondents’ European identity.

5.2 Trans-European communication and its effect on the participants’ European identity

The collected data showed that the interactions made with other Europeans had a positive impact on the respondents. Befriending and creating a connection with other Europeans diminished the social distance between them. Something that is important in the creation of a supranational identity according to the theory of transactionalism. A key feature in transactionalism is how the creation of a European identity can be created through face-to-face interactions between people from different backgrounds (Fligstein, 2008:239). This is supported by the data as comments made by the respondents witnessed about how interactions made with other Europeans during their Erasmus made them feel a stronger sense of belonging with them. This is much due to the perceived similarities and differences that students discovered during the interaction process, which made them draw new group boundaries. The international context they lived in, which entails encounters with people from different countries, increased all the respondents’ supranational feelings. In this process categorisation and self-identification plays a crucial role in where supranational identification

is created by who others are and how they classify the self. It is in this process between the other and the self that the European identity is strengthened.

Furthermore, interactions with other Europeans did not have a positive impact on the students' European identity at first. The data indicated how the time spent in an international context made the respondents' national identity stronger. That the interactions with people from different cultures made them realise the differences between them which made them, in this case, feel more Swedish. Here it is important to emphasise that this strengthened sense of national affiliation was only palpable during their time abroad. After arriving back home the students witnessed how this feeling of belonging had become more European rather than Swedish. Deutsch argued that there are more factors than social interactions that are important in the creation of a supranational identity. Language, ethnicity, history and religion also play a part in this process (Fligstein et. al, 2012:109). This might explain why the students felt more Swedish or Scandinavian during their Erasmus as they share common denominators with people from this region. However, the interactions they had with other Europeans eventually diminished the social distance between them causing them to feel more European upon their arrival back to Sweden.

A key notion that could be depicted from the data was that the difficulty of comprehending what it meant to be "European" hindered the respondents from identifying with Europe. Comments made from the respondents indicated that they perceive Europe as having an array of different cultures which some that they can identify with and some that they are completely estranged from. This creates a barrier for the creation of a European identity. However, when faced with non-Europeans the respondents automatically felt more European. This can be explained, as in the previous section, by using Bauman's theory that argues for the importance of identifying "outsiders" when creating a collective identity (Bauman 2001:124). Even though the respondents might not feel a great sense of belonging to other Europeans due to the uncertainty of what being a "European" entails. When faced with non-Europeans this sense of belonging was immediately strengthened. This implies that the context of where the transnational transactions take place has a big part in the possible creation of a European identity.

5.3 Summary

From analysing the data gathered from the conducted interviews I can answer my research question of how students perceive the effects of participation in the Erasmus programme on their European identity. The migration to another European country and the communication the students had with other Europeans has affected their European identity in an overall positive way. Meaning that due to their participation in the Erasmus programme now feel a greater sense of belonging to Europe and other Europeans. With this said there is also a need to mention that the vagueness of the concept of being “European” harms the positive effect on the students’ European identity. This makes the students inclined to identify with Scandinavia rather than Europe as they have a better understanding of what it means to be “Scandinavian”. A clearer definition and more widespread understanding of the concept of “European” would facilitate the creation of a European identity.

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Appendix

Appendix 1: List of interviewees

| | |
|----------------------|---------------------------------------|
| Interviewee 1 (I1) | 29 y/o male. Studied in Italy |
| Interviewee 2 (I2) | 26 y/o male. Studied in Spain |
| Interviewee 3 (I3) | 25 y/o male. Studied in Spain |
| Interviewee 4 (I4) | 27 y/o female. Studied in France |
| Interviewee 5 (I5) | 25 y/o male. Studied in Italy |
| Interviewee 6 (I6) | 26 y/o female. Studied in Netherlands |
| Interviewee 7 (I7) | 26 y/o female. Studied in Portugal |
| Interviewee 8 (I8) | 25 y/o female. Studied in Italy |
| Interviewee 9 (I9) | 26 y/o male. Studied in France |
| Interviewee 10 (I10) | 27 y/o female. Studied in Germany |

Appendix 2: Interview guide

First and foremost:

- Tell the respondent a bit about yourself and what the subject of the thesis will revolve around.
- Explain that full anonymity is guaranteed if he/she wishes.
- Explain how their answers will be compiled, where the data will be stored and where the thesis will be published.
- Ask the respondent if they are fine with me recording the audio of our conversation.
- Inform the respondent that they are welcome to skip questions or cancel the interview whenever they wish.
- Ask the respondent if they have any questions before I begin with my questions.

Q1. Tell me a bit about your Erasmus experience.

Interactions with other European students

Q2. In what way did you interact socially with other European students?

Sub-questions:

- a) During school time only?
- b) Outside university?
- c) Big part of your experience?
- d) Has it changed your attitude regarding other Europeans?
- e) How much connection did you have with the local students?
- f) Do you feel more/less connected to other Europeans after this interaction?

The move to another European country

Q3. Has the move to another European country affected your sense of European belonging?

Q4. Was it similar to living in your home country?

Q5. The step to moving abroad again, is it more bigger/smaller?

Attitude towards Europe/the EU

Q4. What are your thoughts of the EU?

Sub-questions:

- a) What did you think before your Erasmus?
- b) Has it changed after your Erasmus?

Q5. In your opinion, are there a lot of similarities between the Europeans from different countries?

Sub-question:

- a) Has this opinion changed after your Erasmus?

Q6. Did you enjoy your time as an Erasmus-student?

Sub-questions:

- a) What was positive?
- b) What was negative?

Perception of own national identity.

Q7. How do you perceive your own national identity?

Sub-questions:

- a) Has your Erasmus made it more/less national?
- b) Has your Erasmus made it more/less European?

Q8. Do you feel that the concept of being an “European” fits well into your identity?

Sub-questions:

- a) Has your Erasmus affected this?

Q9. How strongly do you relate to your own country?

Sub-questions:

- a) Has your Erasmus changed this feeling?

Q10. How strongly do you relate to Europe?

Sub-questions:

- a) Has your Erasmus changed this feeling?

Background questions

Q11. How old are you?

Q12. What gender do you identify as?

Q13. What nationality are you?

Q14. What university programme were you enrolled in during your Erasmus?

Q15. In which country did you perform your Erasmus

Q16. Do you prefer to be anonymous?

Finally:

- **Is there anything you would like to add?**
- Inform them once again how their answers will be used and that they are guaranteed anonymity.