

In Conversation with: UACES Student Forum Chairs

SIMON USHERWOOD SPEAKS TO VIVIANE GRAVEY, ELIZABETH MONAGHAN, MIGUEL OTERO-IGLESIAS AND ANNA WAMBACH

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Facilitator: Welcome to this roundtable discussion about the Student Forum of UACES. With me, I've got a great group of people who are going to introduce themselves. My name is Simon Usherwood, I'm treasurer of UACES and I was the second ever Chair of the Student Forum way back in the very early 2000s. Viviane, do you want to say ...

Viviane: Right, so I'm Viviane Gravey, I'm at the Queen's University Belfast, and I was Chair of the Student Forum from 2014 to 2016.

Facilitator: Okay.

Miguel: Miguel Otero-Iglesias and I'm the senior analyst of the Elcano Royal Institute in Madrid and adjunct professor at the AU University as well in Madrid, and I was a Chair of the Student Forum from 2011 to 2013.

Anna: I'm Anna Wambach based at Newcastle and I've been involved in the Student Forum since 2014, and I've been a Chair since last November.

Liz: And I'm Liz Monaghan and I'm lecturer in Politics at the University of Hull, and I was involved in the Student Forum way back around 2004 as some member of the committee and as Chair for two years after that.

Facilitator: Okay, so between us, we've got, well, lots of experience of the forum. We're going to talk about some different things. We'll talk first a little bit about why we set up the forum, how we've seen it changed and then I think talking more about being a PhD student in European Studies and how the forum has played a role in that. As the old hand, which is always a wonderful position to have on these kind discussions, it's maybe worth saying just a few things. So, I was the second Chair of the association and I was involved at the point of setting up in about 2000 because we found that there were a lot of graduate students coming to the conference, been involved in the association but there wasn't really a place for us to get to know each other.

We thought that there was a good group of people who seemed keen in putting something together, a lot of support from the offices and the committee to try and develop that further and structure it a bit more. Really, it was about recognising that graduate students have always been a really important part of what UACES does. Just to give an example, I was doing my PhD at LSE and I never met people at LSE doing PhDs on similar topics. I had to go to UACES conferences where I'd meet people who had an office down the corridor from

me, but who never bothered to walk down the corridor, nor did I for that matter. So, recognising that this was a great way of building capacity, and I think particularly that European Studies often is quite atomised. We're spread out, that this was a way of creating a common space for people.

So, working with the committee, working with Charlie Burns who was the first Chair, we started to set up some activities. So, he was trying to think about what's useful. So, partly about providing a contact list. So, we were setting up the Euro Research mailing list, but also having some regional conferences. So, giving grad students an opportunity to present their work in a more friendly space. It's an already very friendly space here at UACES, but an even more benign environment giving them the experience to do that.

So, one of the first things that we were doing was organising regional conferences. I think we had a North conference and a South conference and yes, I think my earliest memory was an event at Essex, bringing together panels on a whole range of subjects. I think we had a really good turnout and again, meeting some new people who hadn't previously been involved, and I think that was one of the real things, was that by having a Student Forum, making it a more explicit welcome for PhD students, which I think was a really useful development.

I'm not going to go on about the past too much, but I'm interested in getting your views about how you see the Forum developing, changing, the big changes. One of the things that we talked about is or we might talk about is the way that we've gone from having annual Chairs to having bi, two-year Chairs and quite how that came about. So, Liz, it's probably a good reason to pass to you.

Liz: Yes, well I was on the Student Forum Committee for a year, or was it two. Then became Chair when the previous Chair vacated. I think the election was uncontested, so it was more like a coronation really. It was initially for a year's term, but there was no stampede of others to take over. So, I stayed for another year, and in actual fact, the kind of continuity over two years worked quite well, and I think since then, there's been a two-year mandate for Chairs but I'm not sure about your committee members as well.

Miguel: As well, yes.

Liz: Yes, one of the things we also decided to do, it worked okay, was to try and separate out some functional roles for committee members. So, there'd be someone who's looking after the conference, someone who's looking after Euro Research mailing list and so on, and someone looking after or in charge of overseeing JCER as we called it in those days, which of course is JCER nowadays. That was an innovation that started when I was on the committee. So, we had a kind of co-Chair of the committee, Lars Hoffmann who was doing his DPhil at St. Antony's Oxford, and whilst I was chairing the Student Forum, he was the first editor, the founding editor of the journal. So, it made a lot of sense to try and split our work in that respect. So, it was becoming quite differentiated already at that stage.

Facilitator: One of the things is that the portfolio of activities has developed. We've gone through formulations of committee and roles and well, from this side of the

table, things that you introduced or that you brought about or that you saw happening, changing?

Miguel: I mean when I was a Chair actually, the Student Forum Committee was not really involved in JCER. So, the editors back then, they were really doing it themselves and then so we had to push a bit. There was a change of editors and that heads us back to co-edit or at least, find reviewers and I think overall, the Student Forum, I mean especially if you were one of the committee members, gave you a lot of opportunities to acquire skills, right.

I mean from going to the conferences to have just like peers at a new level so you are not as nervous, and it's not as daunting to be in a proper conference. It was more training for that but as well for the committee members, it was just amazing to see how you have to select places to do conferences, to organise a conference, to do the editing of the JCER etc.

So, I think it was a wonderful experience on my side and I think everyone really loved it and so, I mean we really strengthened the feeling of the Student Forum Committee should be much more involved in JCER.

Viviane: I think from my own experience, I completely agree in terms of skills training, but we try to make sure that if you had helped select the paper one year, perhaps then you were taking a lead on that and bringing new people in, showing them the ropes but also letting them learn on the job and then doing slightly different tasks year on year so that you could contribute to all the different elements of the committee. I guess a big change was also the rise of social media, the rise of the blog that we started. So, this is beyond JCER trying to decide what the Student Forum should be doing on Twitter, should be doing on Facebook, and I'm sure yes, it'd change again and we've been developing this thing.

Anna: Yes, we've been trying to become much more active on social media in the past year. Also, with a lot of help from the UACES office I have to say, just trying to get our events promoted and much more, just have it out because I think we were a bit quiet in the past year. It's only when we did have events going on, then we would tweet and then we would publish things, but now we really try in the run-up to the events and throughout the year to stay active.

We had the publisher panel here as well on Monday and that was one of the ways of getting the Student Forum out there and having another way to promote the Student Forum. Because unfortunately, we really struggled attracting people to come to the last conference, which is a shame because as we said, it's such a great opportunity to present your papers in a safe environment and a friendly environment with a really good round table at the beginning and at the end. So, we really tried and pushed it very hard on social media.

Facilitator: Yes, but thinking about getting people involved whether as participants or as committee members or as Chairs is a persistent theme, and we've tried different things. Certainly, I know those regional conferences we used to do, we had three years, four years where they worked really well, we got good really

recruitment, and then suddenly, it dried up and we went down to one regional conference and then we went into the more annual general conference.

I think that's one of the things that, for me, has always been quite striking about the Student Forum, is the way that it's been able to adapt to changing situations and finding new and interesting kind of activities. I think JCER was the classic example of that, an initiative that has taken on a life of its own. Maybe at some point, a bit too much of a life of its own, but then has come back and has that really deep, organic link with the work of the Student Forum.

Then just changing spaces, and maybe that's a useful question to you. When I was doing my PhD back in, I started in 1999 and I finished in 2003. Lots has changed that I can see and the way being a PhD student has changed, I think, also has reflected in the way that being the work of the Student Forum has changed as well. It's probably easier for me to reflect on that, but are there things that you've particularly noticed, changes that you've seen that have had that impact? How much is the Forum driving change, how much is it reflecting change?

Viviane: So, my first experience during the Forum was a seminar, the seminar in November in London, learning about publishing, blogging, all that and realising ooh, I'm a year in my PhD, I don't have any publication in the pipeline, it's a problem, I need to get going. The whole, yes, needing to publish a lot even during a PhD in order to have any kind of shot on the job market might, I think, perhaps be one of these changes in which the Student Forum has really been there as well to help students navigate that new chain.

Liz: I mean that's the reason that JCER originated in the first place, because it was becoming apparent that doctoral students needing to publish was increasingly a thing, and there was a sense that whilst one would aspire towards established journals, it was much more likely that if there was something aimed more at PhD students and early career research and cutting-edge, ongoing developing research, then that would fill that gap. So, that was really a Euro response to an emerging trend that was occurring.

Anna: I think we also use the knowledge of how the PhD has changed to attract students to the Student Forum. We say look, you know you've got those pressures in a PhD and we help you develop your skills in that area, we've got those panels on publishing, we've got those panels on teaching, we've got training on all sorts of things. For the next seminar, we were thinking about training on what to do at a conference just for people to learn how to present themselves at a conference.

Miguel: How to network, right.

Anna: Yes, as well, yes.

Miguel: That's important.

Liz: To take or not to take pictures of conference food.

Facilitator: For example, well I don't know whether I should be attending or presenting, and one of the things we were talking about just before we started filming was, Viviane, you were asking me if I had done a PhD because you seem to have this memory of apocryphal time where people could get jobs in universities without PhDs, and certainly when I was studying, I think I was at the very tail end of that. I did know of some people who had got jobs without PhDs. They had some professional experience or they had just, well, apparently just turned up and the university had employed them, and yes I found that unusual but certainly at the point that I was graduating, finishing the PhD, you needed the PhD to stand a chance.

Articles was coming through but it was very rare, and I think one of the things I notice now, not least when we are advertising for jobs, is that the requirements for entry into the job market, certainly for a permanent position have become so much more demanding, that the quality of applicants that we have is so much higher.

Again, partly that's about professionalisation of PhDs, which I think is a really important part and really reflects on the work of the Student Forum, but again, if we're looking at an entry-level job, if you don't have a PhD, if you don't have some publications, if you haven't got some funding, if you haven't done some teaching, it's possible just to scrape those people out and say well, we've got dozens of people who can do that. So, again, that shifting balance is a really important part.

Miguel: In my experience, well it might be now difficult to attract students for the Student Forum conference because I think now, it's all accelerated, right. I mean people have to publish very quickly. I mean there are even PhDs only on three pieces published because people really need to get three pieces published when they finish their PhD. So, I guess there's this eagerness to go to the senior conference as quick as possible, to publish as quick as possible, to network, to get a job, and I think the field has shrunk. There are not so many positions out there. I mean European Studies generally has been shrinking, and that makes it tougher for everyone, I think.

Facilitator: And that's interesting. We've been talking about PhDs but we've also got added career researchers which have become a much bigger part of what we had, and I see a lot of colleagues. They have their PhD but then it's a session of one-year posts and they're travelling around the continent and very much a more insecure position. How do you see the Forum doing things for them?

Anna: Well, we've only recently decided that we do invite early career researchers along as well because we thought that might be beneficial for both the PhD students attending, and for the early career researchers to still be involved in the Student Forum, still get a bit of extra training if they think they would like that. Also, a bit opportunistic, we needed more people to attend, but I think PhD students can take quite a lot out of actually having early career researchers there as well, have extra support, make the Student Forum more attractive for PhD students that'll say well, we've got people, they've got their doctorate that can give you really good advice that you can talk to.

- Liz: But I think it goes beyond the opportunistic in that it's good for perhaps first-year PhD students to come to the Student Forum conference and they'd just present a paper. At second year, perhaps they organise a panel, in the third year, they can also still come back and be discussant. It's all of these different skills about conference, it's not just about presenting. So, I think even, the early career researcher can, again, bring something else in terms of professional development or just building networks because perhaps, they have to start writing grants and they need other collaborators. So, we can do more in these conferences for different stages.
- Facilitator: It's interesting because one of the things I've always found about UACES is that the main association is always very welcoming and engaged with PhD students, with early career researchers, and certainly at the time that I was doing my PhD, I was more peripherally involved with other associations. There, it was very much the PhD students shouldn't sully the purity of the main activities, and requirements about having limits on the number of PhD students at a panel, at the main conference. You see that less but do you see that as an advantage for the Student Forum, that the main association was already very open and supportive? Or how has that played out for you?
- Miguel: Oh no, I think it was a natural process at the end of the day because I mean, for PhDs, the most difficult thing is to get into an organised panel, right. I mean at the beginning when you do your PhD, you just send your abstract and you think well, someone will maybe pick me, without knowing that in most conferences, conference organisers, they just take panels that have been already organised so it's much easier. So, I think that process makes it difficult for PhD students to go to the senior conference and therefore, I think the Student Forum would be but maybe, as I said, now everything is accelerated.
- So, perhaps even first-year PhD students, they know already that they need to go with other people in a panel to submit and that's why they prefer to go to the senior conference, but it should be a natural process, right. I mean it should be harder for PhDs to get in, the senior one. That's why the student one is there, right.
- Viviane: But I think something we haven't mentioned yet is resources, because the Student Forum is special in that there's financial support for students to attend.
- Miguel: That's true.
- Viviane: And not everyone has a very big amount of money while doing their PhD, and actually having that financial support helps bring perhaps people in and then really prepare them for that when they go to one expensive conference, they get more out of it.
- Facilitator: And talking about the financial support, we've also got some other streams of money for doing some study trips, but that wasn't from us setting up. So, where did that come from?
- Liz: I think the scholarships for conducting field work abroad were in existence when I was in the Student Forum as a member, and I think I benefitted from receiving

them, quite apart from the financial support to actually go and conduct field work in Brussels. One of the things that struck me was that it encourages PhD students to get into the habit of bidding, of competing for funding, which has become even more important at the sense rather than expecting it to be pounded out essentially. The whole process of making a case field research, making a case for why this needs funding has just got more and more important. So, that practice, a kind of training of broader academic skills, and it's not just academic skills either.

One thing that we didn't talk about yet was transitioning from a PhD to a job outside academia, and that was a theme when I was doing my PhD. I think it's taken on a different life now in my work at the university of how I lead on post-graduate research and it's something that I talk about to PhD students as well. I don't know, does everyone else feel as though the PhD was training for and only for an academic job, or is there a sense that there are other careers possible?

Facilitator: You're shocked at the concept people might not want to be an academic.

Viviane: No, I think unless I remember it, so when we organised a session at one of the seminars on how to get a job after a PhD, and that was one of the key inputs. We needed someone who had done a PhD in Political Science and European Studies and then gone onto a terrific job outside of academia, because more and more of us leave academia after a PhD. It's not that many jobs in academia, and also there's lots of great jobs outside. So, having a positive discussion about this, it's not just because you can't find a job in academia, it's also because you might want to do something else. There's lots of great other things to do. So, that was something that I was hearing in the Student Forum, but not necessarily hearing in my university. So, I think the Student Forum lead the way as well in terms of having this open discussion about the fact that you can do something else with a PhD.

Miguel: Yes, I mean coming back to the question of whether PhDs training, the process leads to or really, people get trained properly for outside academia jobs. I don't think that's the case. I mean right now, still I think PhDs are taught in a way that will lead you to academia, instead of really giving perhaps your other skills for other sectors. That's my impression.

So, there I think, because it's true, I mean I see it at more and more fields, you need to have now a PhD. In banking, in finance, I think a lot of areas, you need to. Before, the Masters, now it's a PhD, right. I mean you even have like DBA's, right, Doctors of Business Administration. So, I think that's a trend but I think within universities, people still are trained to be an academic.

Liz: Yes, I think that's where we are responding rather than driving things, and in academia, the research councils in the UK, they're all over this notion that a PhD might lead to other careers, economically significant or socially significant careers as well as careers inside academia. So, I don't know and the way doctoral training is organised and funded by research councils in the UK has changed massively since I was doing my PhD and since I was in the Student Forum. Whereas we were organising events on elements of research training ourselves then. I think this is now increasingly really concentrated in Doctoral Training Centres, the ESRC Doctoral Training Centres in our discipline.

Facilitator: And that has totally changed from my time. When I was doing a PhD study, it was just me. I had turned up for LSE and said would somebody supervise me, and somebody supervised me and largely, I was left to get on with it and at the end, we hoped that there would be a PhD. So, it is a very different kind of situation. I guess that prompts the question of a different kind, which is how do you see the discipline changing? European Studies is a broad area.

So, how much is it about specific disciplines, how much is about the cross-cutting thing? Because one of the things I found really useful of the Student Forum of UACES was that opportunity to meet people from outside of whatever discipline I might be doing and get that across a fertilisation of ideas. So, I obviously see you nodding heads.

Liz: I think one of the things we've been struggling with was the definition of European Studies, is that on paper, it is incredibly developed but if you look at who's coming to conferences, it tends to Political Science, International Relations and there's a few lawyers who really still try to come and make it more diverse. I think the diversity of European Studies has been decreasing because of lack of perhaps language skills in students, and so it's been less and less specific European Studies programmes that were really looking at different disciplines. Though that just might be coming up again now. I'm not exactly sure where it's going, there's Brexit and the fact that Europe is in the news again a lot. We might actually see a new wave of European Studies multidisciplinary programmes, but I think we need to be careful that this multidisciplinary of European Studies is something we need to fight for, we need to really encourage our colleagues in History, in Law to consider UACES, to come and contribute and so that we're not just political scientists talking to each other.

Anna: I had conversations with people trying to convince them to submit an abstract for a Student Forum conference, and then well, I'm not European Union Studies. You look at what you're doing and look at what I'm doing, I'm not just strictly European Union Studies in that sense.

So, you can actually submit, ones... oh right, it's that broad, I didn't know that. So, maybe it's a matter of getting the word out there as well, that you are invited and we are a broader field than it might look like from the outside.

Miguel: Well, I think European Studies generally, I think now it's inserted a little bit more global. I mean as I see more Masters and broader post-graduate courses are really more about IR. I think students, I don't know, maybe the UK with Brexit and that might change, but I think at least Madrid, my university, people really want because now it's a very international university. You have people from all around the world and then there are a lot of these people, Japanese, Chinese, from the Arab world. They are not really interested in European affairs that much, and I see the trend that European affairs is just one aspect of a broader IR Studies.

Facilitator: Which prompts the question what about the future? And we've been looking back a bit over the past, nearly 20 years of the Student Forum. Where do we

go, what do we see as the challenges that we need to think about, the things that you think are going to be important? Anna.

Anna: I guess in the UK context, at a UK university, what if there's no funding for EU-related PhDs anymore, which would be quite tricky for the UACES Student Forum because a lot of the people that come to us are British students. How are we going to work around that, which is a bit of a worry, which I don't think will happen straight away because I think there'll be a lot of research now, Brexit, it's going to be dominating in the next few conferences. After that, if the money dries up, not everybody is as smart as me and does a PhD without funding. So, if there's no money for it, we might maybe run out of PhD students.

Facilitator: Okay, that's true, let's find someone with who's more cheery or optimistic or sees potential.

Liz: I'm optimistic for the future. I think the driving forces behind the UACES Student Forum that we've talked about back in the early 2000s, I think a lot of them are still there, maybe in a slightly amended fashion. It's the need to be able to interact with other networks. It's a dreadful term but I think research is increasingly becoming collaborative rather than the lone scholar with their books shut away.

So, being able to connect with people from different institutions, from different countries, from different disciplines, that's something that I think the Student Forum has a real valuable role to play in. I think, because it tends to be populated by youngsters on the whole, that they are able to think more radically and to be responsive to the things that the members want.

Viviane: And I guess UACES is quite international. I think there's about half of the association based in non-UK universities. So, I think if we keep on pushing as well for that international aspect in the Student Forum, even if there's a slight dip or even a flurry of Brexit-specific PhDs, but we'll still have the non-UK based scholars to balance it out and make sure we keep on talking about a variety of topics in great places.

Facilitator: It is one of those paradoxes of the subject that often, the things that bring people to the subject is problems. In that perspective, you might argue that this is a great time for European Studies because it's had a lot of problems, whether that's Eurozone, micro crisis, neighbourhood relations, Brexit very obviously. Again, it is that question about the subject changes and I think one of the things that we see is that people are interested at the moment in the particular things, but also that [unintelligible 00:08:30] supported thing. One of the things for me about the Forum was you got to meet people who are doing different things, and make you think about the broader context that was coming through.

Anyone got any closing thoughts? I think we all agree that the Forum has been good for us and I know that if I hadn't been involved in the Student Forum at the beginning, I wouldn't be doing something else like I'm doing now as one of the officers of the association.

Viviane: I think you started talking about how isolated you felt during your PhD and that was at a Political Science institution. I did my PhD at an Environmental Science institution, and there were not that many doing Social Science and the number of people doing Politics or European Studies were even smaller. So, I think for lots of PhD students now, there's perhaps one or two people in your whole university that do things on Europe. So, the Student Forum is even more needed now, I think, than it was then.

Facilitator: Okay, anyone else?

Viviane: And it's also really fun.

Facilitator: Okay, thank you to all of you for your thoughts, your reminisces and your contributions, and yes, I think we see what the next years will bring. Lots of opportunities and doubtless, the occasional hurried meeting with people to work out what on Earth we should do about the local disaster that's occurred, which I think has been a theme for everybody at various points. So, thank you once again and thank you for watching.