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Commentary

Ahead of the 55th Anniversary of UACES: Where is the Academic Interest in the Association?

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Abstract

UACES is an influential association of European Studies. It is an intellectual platform that allows the co-creating of Europe and defining of the future of European Studies. Nevertheless, it has received surprisingly little scholarly attention as an object of study. Developments in 2020 have proven the dynamism and inclusiveness of UACES and therefore that the association deserves more in-depth attention in its own right.

Keywords

UACES; European Studies; Self-reflexivity

INTRODUCTION

The unprecedented implications of COVID-19 sparked my interest in taking a more comprehensive look at the last months and what those tell us about the present and future of European Studies and UACES specifically. A quick search via major academic databases shows a disappointing picture. UACES is not a subject of study. The association is seldomly mentioned in scholarly reflections.

Some discussions revolving around UACES occurred on the 50th anniversary of the association, which was celebrated in 2017. This commentary is presented with a clear stance that the four interviews organised on this occasion in 2017 offer rather limited insight into the role of this association. Its role in outlining directions of European Studies deserves a more elaborate approach.

On a daily basis, researchers of European Studies seem to be quite preoccupied with a study of phenomena 'out there' that are evolving in the policy-making process. They interview bureaucrats and targeted societal groups, conduct fieldwork and so on. However, there is too little self-reflexivity across the pages of the *Journal of Contemporary European Research* and other publishing platforms that are widely read among students and scholars of European Studies.

2020 has been unprecedented and thought-provoking year. The subsequent sections elaborate on three topics that arguably might shape the context of the 55th anniversary of UACES. The first part credits UACES for keeping European Studies open to various influences. The second part elaborates on the paradox of UACES being itself an understudied topic. The third part outlines that the lack of academic study of UACES and other associations is a loss to the overall understanding of European integration and the evolution of key frameworks set in place by the European Union to promote higher education and research. Conclusions sum up the main points raised about the role researchers and UACES play in defining and framing Europe.

OUTWARD-LOOKING EUROPEAN STUDIES

In 2020, UACES has demonstrated an outstanding openness towards various intellectual currents. The starting point for this observation is the inaugural workshop of the "Diversity, Inclusion and Multidisciplinarity in European Studies" (DIMES) project convened in a pre-COVID-19, or the usual in-person setting, at the Leiden University. During the concluding months of 2020, several events with an equally welcoming character were hosted virtually, for example, the Virtual Conference 2020 and the Sustainable Futures seminars. This receptiveness to diverse topics and theoretical approaches ensures that European Studies remain dynamic and keep pace with multiple developments across the world. The composition of DIMES panels was the best example of diversity and inclusion. It was mirrored not only in the research projects presented but also in the way some of the speakers elaborated on their own higher education stages and experiences while doing research.

Furthermore, the research projects presented during the first Virtual Conference and Sustainable Futures seminars clearly demonstrate that thanks to UACES European Studies are not suffering from self-inflicted irrelevance caused by intellectual isomorphism towards the geopolitical developments and socioeconomic implications of technological leaps. Be it that Brexit coincided with the 50th UACES anniversary (David, Bulmer and Haastrup 2017: 1483) or analysts of "post-normal times" in the EU-Africa relations getting their perspective published amidst the unprecedented turbulences caused by COVID-19 (Bourgeois, Mattheis and Kotsopoulos 2020), UACES does not seem to lose an appetite for complex topics and plurality of opinions. It is a great example of how to approach not only the 55th anniversary celebrations,

but also the earlier mentioned and much more distant centenary (David, Bulmer and Haastrup, 2017: 1483; David, Drake and Linnemann, 2017: 1450). The value of UACES is its capacity to gather a wide spectrum of presenters and discussants.

SELF-REFLEXIVITY

What has been the most surprising observation throughout 2020 is how reluctant researchers tend to be towards studying themselves as the key agents that shape European Studies. Individuals so keen on structuring, dissecting, measuring and ordering various phenomena affecting political and socio-economic currents, policy-making, implementation of various government, non-governmental, and private initiatives have shown rather limited interest in themselves as influential shapers of what Europe and study of Europe are all about. This comment is not expressed with complete ignorance of various facets of the study of epistemic communities. However, UACES itself as an influential association that assembles a vibrant international community has received so little in-depth attention.

Members of the association regularly receive seasonal greetings, listen to the conference opening remarks, and engage in brief interviews on such memorable occasions as the 50th anniversary. Additionally, UACES events are referred to as occasions when one or another article published in an academic journal has been discussed (Rosamond and Warleigh-Lack 2013: 552). The existence of UACES is acknowledged in periodicals receptive to European matters (Robert and Vauchez 2010: 26; Rosamond 2007: 235; Jacquot, Mérand and Rozenberg 2015: 48; Pfister 2015). The global course finder of UACES serves as one of the reference points for the project "European Studies in a Global Perspective" (Institute for European Global Studies 2021). The UACES-hosted Journal of Common Market Studies is considered as a benchmark for quality and thematic coverage among certain Chinese scholarly circles (Weber & Tarlea 2021). However, these bits and pieces form far from a coherent and complete picture of the association's activities and value.

So little interest in UACES as an object of study seems rather surprising. One of the longest-standing associations remains a comparatively novel topic for in-depth study within the framework of European Studies. UACES' quest to attract more talent from certain underrepresented domains such as law, economics and sociology (Keeler 2005: 553; Linneman *et al.* 2017: 1455; Usherwood *et al.* 2017: 1492), less studied geographical areas (David, Bulmer and Haastrup 2017: 1480; Linneman *et al.* 2017: 1458), and concerns about being too carried away by descriptive approaches towards specific events (Linneman *et al.* 2017: 1456) is an exciting source of insight into what aspirations are driving the evolution of European Studies. This is an invitation to UACES members to consider offering a more in-depth elaboration on these and other topics.

EUROPEAN INTEGRATION

UACES is not the only association contributing to European Studies. Several other associations shape the thematic contours, agenda, and the overall research output that referred to as European Studies. Thus, there is a vast field of dynamics that has received rather limited attention in the form of concise references made by one or another interviewee (Drake, Shaw and Whitman 2017: 1464; Linneman *et al.* 2017: 1460). There is room for more analytical focus on UACES ahead of its 55th anniversary. This is not an invitation for a friendly rivalry with the Council of European Studies and its 50th anniversary book of essays (Hawes 2020). There is no need to remind a community well versed in the vast inventory of quantitative and qualitative research methods that an essay or a short commentary, such as this one, are not

the sole modes of how to approach a study of a grouping of people. This commentary aims to work towards raising awareness about the underexamined role of UACES among those early-career scholars who find academia and student circles fascinating topics for research projects.

The well-structured formats in which UACES members have convened in person and are meeting during the COVID-19-shaped 'new normal' demonstrate that there are many forums fit for a study on 'where Europe is made'. It would help to fill the gap in the existing literature about the role of individual academic engagements in strengthening the European identity among younger generations (Cores-Bilbao, Méndez-García and Fonseca-Mora 2020: 16). Students are proponents of European Studies. They are active not only within the institutional confines of their respective universities. However, this is not an invitation for an exponential growth of new appraisals of an association. Looking at the issue in a much more comprehensive manner, the history of European integration and the study of the European Higher Education Area, as well as the European Research Area, would be incomplete without addressing in more extensive scholarly and analytical terms UACES and other key associations of European Studies. Universities have formed an immensely important fabric on which to build the ambitions and ideals of European integration and multi-level governance. UACES and other associations offer key complementary soft infrastructure that offers additional support to the existing core academic structures.

Europe is not made solely 'out there' in public office spaces and conference rooms that host discussions titled 'The Future of Europe' and the like. More importantly, Europe is created or co-created at the university library halls and reading rooms. Most recently, Europe is discussed in personal office spaces established at home. We continue co-creating Europe while sitting in front of a camera adjusted for the necessities of a virtual meeting, workshop, symposium, conference etc. All these episodes are equally important and deserving of more academic attention.

CONCLUSIONS

This commentary is influenced by an ongoing review of academic literature on practice turn (Adler-Nissen 2016), comparative regionalism (Börzel and Risse 2019), science diplomacy (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine 2021), histories of science and knowledge, circulation of knowledge (Östling *et al.* 2018) and European Neighbourhood Policy (Schumacher 2018; Olivié and Gracia 2020). Experts of these compartments of scholarly enquiry might trace some bits and pieces of this body of literature in the reasoning captured in the previous sections. UACES is a bundle of practices that shapes European Studies and the way Europe is understood. Researchers are agents who shape intellectual currents. Europe is an internal component of a campus. Europe is not some alien space somewhere beyond the university buildings. These are just some of the episodes captured in this encouragement to somewhat rediscover who, and where, puts Europe into motion and who provides meaning to European Studies.

In the context of the upcoming 55th anniversary of UACES, I encourage you to reflect on the association as a fascinating object of study. UACES is more than a forum that piles up one's mailbox with various promising academic opportunities. This commentary is not prepared to undermine the value of earlier chosen formats for referring to UACES gatherings, activities, and publications discussing UACES. It is presented by an optimistic member who sees great potential in improving the overall awareness among the UACES members, various parts of society, and public authorities about the role UACES plays in defining what European Studies are all about. It is an indispensable, yet so far largely neglected, element of the study of the European integration and multi-level governance captured by the European Higher Education Area and the European Research Area. Perhaps an international research

project assembling institutions keen on exploring the role of UACES in greater detail would be a good way forward how to address this gap in the existing body of literature.

In the context of the unpredictable COVID-19 implications, UACES has shown resilience. It gives certainty that the association will reach 2022 in excellent shape and well-equipped to face any potential future disruptions after the celebration of its 55th anniversary. Remarks about Brexit (issued on the occasion of the 50th anniversary) show that such resilience of an association is built not on purely technological capacity to adjust the practical modalities of certain meetings. It is the mindset and eagerness to keep discussions going and connections alive that ensures the continuity of European Studies and collaboration among those who find Europe an endlessly fascinating topic.

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