

# Journal of Contemporary European Research

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# Journal of Contemporary European Research

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Introduction

## Innovative Teaching on European (Foreign) Affairs

**Heidi Maurer, Arne Niemann and Friedrich Plank**

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## Abstract

This special section seeks to extend our knowledge on teaching innovative methods in European Union (EU) Foreign Affairs in time of challenges, politicisation, and digitalisation. It shares the experience of established and early career colleagues on how they designed, implemented, and applied specific innovations in their teaching. The section focuses on these experiences and aims to provide guidance on how specific ideas were put into practice in a hand-on and reflective manner. It seeks to tip into what works and why and how we as educators deal with challenges. Contributions engage with teaching EU foreign policy via Problem-based learning (Tonra 2020), research-led teaching by linking policy briefs and employability (Lightfoot 2020), responsive teaching in times of radical change (O'Mahony 2020), and synchronous teaching among 13 universities (Plank and Niemann 2020). They offer insights into increasing the ownership of students, raise awareness of their subjectivity, stimulate critical thinking, or enhance student's media skills as well as to foster their employability. All contributions showcase the added value of the applied innovations, but also discuss obstacles that need to be considered in the conceptualisation and implementation of the proposed active approaches.

## Keywords

Teaching; EU Foreign Affairs; Innovative Teaching; Learning

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### RATIONALE OF THIS SPECIAL SECTION

Innovating teaching and learning are high on the agenda of European universities in order to offer a better learning experience for students and to ensure universities remain internationally competitive. Moreover, multiple technological developments such as digitalisation and new learning spaces generate novel opportunities and challenges for teaching. Hence, university instructors are increasingly encouraged to apply innovative methods (Lieberman 2014; Mihai 2014; Lambeir and Ramaekers 2006). While teaching certificates and instructor training for academics are becoming increasingly the norm, the practical application of innovative ideas can feel challenging and overwhelming for any academic. Moreover, the traditionally complex and challenging character of European (Foreign) Affairs (Parker 2016) is increasingly confronted with growing politicisation of European Union policies, European (dis)integration, and contestation of its core values (de Wilde 2011, Börzel 2018, Vollaard 2018). Brexit, the rise of (right wing) populism and Euroscepticism, severe crises, the EU's increasing engagement abroad, or the rule of law crisis have fuelled debates on European (Foreign) Affairs and of course also found their way into the classroom.

There are only few analyses and insights on how to best adapt and implement innovative ideas in practice. While scholars have engaged in analysing methods such as simulations (Usherwood 2014, Niemann et al. 2015, Muno et al. 2017), web-seminars (Lieberman 2014), distance learning (Brühl and Henneberg 2016, Plank et al. 2019), or student engagement (Lightfoot and Maurer 2014), the

application of any teaching pedagogy or teaching method needs to be adjusted to the respective institutional requirements, lecturers' comfort zone and students' experiences and expectations. The pedagogical literature explains in detail the rationale for using particular methods but falls also often short in giving hands-on guidance on how those innovative aspects can now best be integrated in already existing syllabi, lesson plans and course modules.<sup>1</sup>

This special section seeks to extend our knowledge on teaching innovative methods, as it shares the experience of established and early career colleagues on how they designed, implemented, and experienced the application of a particular innovation in their teaching on European politics or European foreign affairs. Since innovation does not necessarily lead to effective learning and analyses often only refer to the popularity of methods among students (Middleton 2010), this special section instead focusses predominantly on the experiences made by the instructors. Hence, this section not only shares ideas of what kind of innovations we as educators can think about, but more importantly provides guidance on how those ideas were put into practice in a hands-on and reflective manner. In doing so it offers the start of a frank and open conversation of how we as educators (and not university administrators) deal with teaching challenges, innovate and also identify what works and what does not work.

In addition, the special section seeks to tip into the challenging character of teaching European (Foreign) Affairs in times of contestation and politicisation. It illustrates how teaching a complex subject like European politics or European foreign policy can make use of innovative teaching and learning processes. We can identify growing challenges for university teaching, which originate, for example, from increased demands for services of digital teaching (Garrison and Vaughan 2007). Moreover, diverse student backgrounds, heterogeneous learning environments, and flexible learning pathways shape teaching. The answer to these challenges is increasingly found in the application of innovative teaching methods such as e-learning, blended learning, the use of social networks, and EU simulations. In this regard, the goal of the special section is to focus and reflect on innovative teaching methods and forms in European Studies and EU foreign affairs.<sup>2</sup> The idea is to share best practices of colleagues, who in an informed manner show how their way of teaching and learning innovates and works better than what they have done before. The aim of the special section thus is to provide insights into why those innovations have been applied, and to show how objectives, instruments and assessment have been aligned within particular structural conditions (class size; background of students; formal constraints etc.) and individual preference of the course convenor.

## **QUESTIONS ASKED AND SKILLS ADDRESSED**

Active learning pedagogy is at the core of this special section in showcasing the practice of innovating teaching European (foreign) affairs. We focus in particular on two objectives: (i) to activate students and increase student ownership of learning, and (ii) to train critical awareness and reflection of students by connecting and exposing learners to new perspectives. The contributions provide guidance on how we as educators can apply a variety of strategies and tools in order to increase the ownership, engagement, and critical awareness of our students of their own subjective self in the learning process.

In order to ensure that the shared experiences can be adapted to a variety of national, cultural and institutional contexts, all papers provide detailed descriptions of the selected innovation and the broader context that triggered the need for change. The contributions then explain the choices made and the rationale for such choices with regard to implementing and applying the teaching innovation, before they provide insights of how the added value of the innovated teaching practice has been

assessed. Each contribution in conclusion reflects critically on what elements of the innovation supported the attainment of the set objective, and which aspects would need further experimentation and improvement.

As guest editors we have selected papers according to their level of innovation for teaching EU (Foreign) Affairs and that at the same time cover a variety of teaching approaches as well as represent a diverse and multinational academic background of the authors. Our contributions talk about research-led teaching by linking policy briefs and employability (Lightfoot 2020), responsive teaching in times of radical change (O'Mahony 2020), synchronous teaching among 13 universities (Plank and Niemann 2020), and teaching EU foreign policy via Problem-based learning (Tonra 2020). We decided not to include a paper on EU simulations because there is now a relatively established body of literature on EU simulations and role-plays (Brunazzo and Settembri 2012, 2014; Muno et al. 2013; Muno et al. 2018; Niemann et al. 2015; Usherwood 2014; Van Dyke et al. 2000).

The contributions to this special section offer insights into a variety of best practices of how teaching European politics and European Foreign Affairs can apply active learning pedagogy with a particular focus on several important prerequisites for learning, i.e. (1) to increase the ownership of students as researchers (Tonra 2020, Mahoney 2020, Plank and Niemann 2020), (2) to raise awareness for their subjectivity in the learning process (esp. Mahoney 2020), (3) to stimulate critical thinking by exposing students to different views from either other students or disciplines (esp. Plank and Niemann 2020; Mahoney 2020), (4) to enhance student's technical and media skill in the digital age (Plank and Niemann 2020; Mahoney 2020), and (5) to foster student's employability (esp. Lightfoot 2020, but also Plank and Niemann 2020).

In order to ensure the coherence of the special section, we asked authors to include and reflect on the following questions in their contributions: What was the problem that you tried to tackle? Why is your selected teaching approach/method innovative? How did you go about? Where did you get ideas and support? How did you implement your teaching innovation? How did you know it worked? How does it compare to more conventional teaching methods? What recommendations for colleagues who would like to try it, too? All of the below contributions have addressed (most of) these questions and thus added to our practical, theoretical, and technical knowledge on how to conduct innovative teaching in European (Foreign) Affairs.

## CONTRIBUTIONS TO THIS SPECIAL SECTION

The contributions address the challenges of teaching European (Foreign) Affairs and seek to systematically reflect their own contribution to innovative teaching, best-practices and/or recommendations for colleagues. In his contribution, Tonra (2020) showcases his experience of integrating an active learning element in teaching EU foreign policy to 86 students, by experimenting with Problem-based learning (PBL). By structuring active learning elements according to "knowledge problems", "puzzles" or "threshold concepts", rather than according to topics, Tonra (re)defined the learning objectives for his course which was then based on PBL small group work interspersed with traditional lectures. The students' unfamiliarity with Problem-based learning methods or the drafting of role-play elements were immediate challenges. In the mid-term, the (perceived) absence of more directive leadership by the instructor or the reassignment of the groups after students had left and new students arrived on the course also posed challenges. The evaluation had mixed to negative

results. Subsequent modifications of randomly assigning groups and or restructuring the module delivery led to students' qualitative evaluation shifting quite significantly under this second iteration of the module. Tonra concludes that the rewards of Problem-based learning are significant and worth the additional front-loaded effort, and that the design and delivery of this method as a teaching model has to be thought through exceptionally carefully.

Connecting the foreign policy classroom with real-world and authentic tasks and raising students' awareness of how what they learn in the classroom matters for their next steps into the professional world was also the main objective of the second contribution. Lightfoot (2020) experiments with a different kind of assessment in the form of policy briefs about politics of foreign aid in his final year class of approximately 85 students, also in order to make students think explicitly in terms of skills and competences that they acquired during their learning for future employment. In contrast to Tonra, Lightfoot (2020) does not overhaul the whole of the course objectives and structure, but his innovation is focused on the final assessment. The underlying rationale to consider a different final assessment mode was for Lightfoot to choose an assessment form that would test new skills (compared to the other courses students had taken before with traditional research/term papers or exam assessments) as well as that would make the skill development process and the acquired skills more explicit for students, as feedback from previous graduates had suggested. The course set-up provides clear instructions, real-world examples and ample opportunity for students to discuss how this form of assessment is similar to, or different from, other forms of writings that they have done before. Most crucially, the design of the assessment tasks clearly showcases to students of how to apply the knowledge and concepts learnt during the course to their policy paper. Lightfoot reflects that the concise format of the policy brief as assessment emphasised some of the main academic skills even stronger than traditional research papers or student essays would do: the level of synthesis and analysis are much higher and students cannot hide behind long-winding literature description but realise that their tasks as researcher is to make sense of various arguments and sources and that they need to make hard choices about what to include and what not.

The third contribution to this special section departs from the question of how radical real-world events influence teaching and learning: O'Mahoney (2020) documents in her contribution on responsive teaching at a time of radical change of how Brexit changed her approach to teaching EU politics in a UK classroom. By applying an action research framework and self-reflective enquiry, she adjusted her EU politics course to become more responsive, more open to student agency, and more inclusive by engaging with (digital and social media) sources and discourses that students are exposed to on a daily basis. O'Mahoney emphasises the need to recognise the subjectivity in learning and researching for both instructors and students: we are embedded in a social and political world. By supporting students in developing and experimenting with sense-making tools that reach beyond the classroom they are able to develop their analytical and reflective skills and they see the added value of academic research processes for understanding societal and political developments.

Plank and Niemann (2020), in a similar manner to Tonra and O'Mahoney, aim at exposing students to the complexity of policy issues, while at the same time responding to the demand for an increased use of a digital teaching environment. They document their experience with two editions of a synchronous inter-university online-teaching course, which combined inverted lectures, online exchanges and a variety of local activities. First, 13 academic institutions took part in an interactive, synchronous and blended-learning course for 150 students on the inter-relations between crises in Europe and their



effects on European foreign affairs during the summer term 2017. Secondly, an adapted version of this course was run in 2018 with 15 academic institutions and 200 students on the security-development-migration nexus in Africa. The inter-university set-up created diversity among students with different disciplinary and knowledge backgrounds, but also allowed the instructors to tap into the expertise of participating colleagues and invited external experts. Despite the increased workload and time for coordinating with their peers from other universities, students reported their appreciation for the opportunity to actively contribute to the course with their own data gathering and analysis and by practicing the presentation of their findings in a concise and engaging manner. They also valued the ability to engage directly with experts and to be put in the situation to make use of academic knowledge for their analysis rather than just to read about it. This said, Plank and Niemann also critically demonstrate the challenges with using technology, the adapted role conception it takes from the side of the instructor, and the increased time and resources investment that their teaching innovation asked for.

## LESSONS LEARNT

The four contributions to this special section offer insights into a variety of best practices on how to innovate teaching European politics and European Foreign Affairs. They offer lessons learnt in terms of how to engage with the identified prerequisites for active learning: increased ownership of students as researchers, raised awareness for subjectivity in and self-responsibility for learning processes, the salience of developing critical thinking as a key academic skill, enhancing students technical and media skills in a digital age, and fostering students' employability and skills awareness. All contributions showcase the added value of the applied innovations, but also discuss challenges and obstacles that need to be considered in the conceptualisation and implementation of the proposed active teaching approaches.

Increasing **student ownership** and the role conception of the **student as an active researcher** and thus knowledge-creator instead of a passive knowledge-receiver runs as a key theme through all four contributions. Tonra (2020) showcases how an active learning approach in the form of Problem-based learning can become problematic if students do not seek such ownership or find it unreasonably demanding. Student ownership can be facilitated by explicit and clear communication of expectations, by discussing best practices with students, and by scaffolding the complexity of a task and by providing ample feedback opportunities (Lightfoot 2020). It is, however, not only students who might need to re-adjust their role expectations. Academics, too, need to re-consider their role as instructors (Plank and Niemann 2020), become more aware of their subjectivity (O'Mahoney 2020), be willing to be more responsive and more flexible (O'Mahoney 2020), and feel less in control at times (Plank and Niemann 2020).

The recognition for the "self" in the learning and research process is another key theme that all contributions alert to. Raised **awareness for subjectivity**, i.e. for where one comes from in terms of previous experience and knowledge but also for why one finds certain aspects more relevant than others is an essential starting point for acknowledging the **self-responsibility in the learning process**. Tonra (2020) reported his surprise "to see the amount of passion, depth and engagement of students with the topic" once he provided the space for students to discover the issue at hand in their own manner, and also Lightfoot (2020) demonstrates the added value of giving students the space (in this case during assessment) to apply their gained knowledge in a creative manner. In order to facilitate

students' self-responsibility, Plank and Niemann (2020) suggest considering different learning types and thus let students choose from a variety of tasks that they can contribute to. In their inter-university course students also valued the opportunity to not only read and digest research but that they could use interactions with experts for their own research. Emphasising the self-responsibility and ownership of students in active learning settings often comes hand-in-hand with two issues that instructors need to be aware of: (i) students at first might report increased anxiety due to the unfamiliarity of the new situation; (ii) tensions in regard of the relationship between individual and group contributions and possible occasional perceived free-riding (Tonra 2020; Plank and Niemann 2020) will be an concern of students. Both issues can be addressed and mitigated but will need a pro-active consideration from the instructor.

Actively re-educating students in understanding the need to take ownership in order to develop their **analytical and critical thinking skills** is an important consideration that can make an active teaching innovation success or fail, as Tonra (2020) concludes. Exposing students to peers with different disciplinary and knowledge backgrounds fostered those critical thinking skills, according to Plank and Niemann (2020), as these heterogeneous group setting encouraged students to synthesise their gained knowledge in explaining it to their peers (deep learning) and made them reflect more explicitly on what they know or do not know. It showed them their knowledge and understanding (which builds confidence) but also what they do not understand, yet (which builds motivation for further study).

In a similar manner, the aim to enhance **students' technical and media skills** in our digital age by bringing their daily online routines and technologically enhanced media consumption into the classroom fosters students' ownership, engagement and critical thinking skills. Plank and Niemann (2020) indicated that their students enjoyed the inverted classroom and synchronous online exchange that brought a different experience to their traditional university learning. O'Mahoney (2020) even encouraged their students actively to bring their technological world, often with its fake news and expert bashing, to their academic deliberations. Making students aware of how to integrate what they learn in the classroom with their everyday experience thus is a key element of innovative active learning.

Fostering students' **employability and skills awareness** is a good way to meet employability concerns but even more importantly helps students to consider more explicitly the added value of academic thinking skills. Lightfoot (2020) illustrated the importance of making students explicitly think about the similarities and differences of academic writing to other forms of writing, but his students also recognized the difference between descriptive summaries versus tight analysis in reckoning with the different kind of assessment that they were confronted with. O'Mahoney (2020) in her responsive and more flexible teaching also allowed students to recognize that academic thinking is not just about repeating the right answers, but about discovering, questioning, and analysing issues they encounter in the classroom but even more importantly in their daily social and political lives.

All contributions also point to the necessary understanding that all **innovation in teaching and learning is always an investment**: it needs increased efforts and necessary resources, and it will especially at the beginning not feel as easy as traditional methods (Tonra 2020, Plank and Niemann 2020). Experimenting with teaching innovations and implementing new active learning elements will need more time investment, and the general recommendation of all four contributions is to start innovations always in a small, simple and smart, thus considerate, manner. We hope that this special

section thus encourages colleagues to experiment with teaching innovation but also offers a good starting point about what kind of issues will need consideration.

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## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> As exception see the highly recommendable handbooks by Ishiyama et al. (2015) and Gormley-Hennan et al. (2012).

<sup>2</sup> For earlier works on that in EU Studies see Lightfoot and Maurer (2013); Baroncelli et al. (2014).

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Research Article

## Teaching EU Foreign Policy via Problem-Based Learning

**Ben Tonra**

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## Abstract

In this contribution I showcase my experience of integrating an active learning element in my teaching of EU foreign policy, by experimenting with Problem-Based Learning (PBL). I document how I went about my ambition of adding a PBL aspect to my EU foreign policy course for 86 students, and how my students and I experienced this first attempt. I also illustrate how I took my first experience and student feedback into account to fine-tune my application of PBL, before concluding on the lessons that I took away for integrating an active learning element in my traditional course of EU foreign policy. By sharing my own experience, doubts and critical reflections I aim to contribute to this special issue's objective to provide honest and hands-on insights and reflection on how this innovation in the learning approach via PBL has been put into practice.

## Keywords

Teaching; Learning; Problem-Based Learning; EU foreign policy, European foreign policy

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### INTRODUCTION: THE AMBITION AND STARTING POINT

A classic model of teaching EU foreign policy might entail lectures covering the historical development of EU foreign policy from the European Defence Community through European Political Cooperation (EPC) to the Lisbon Treaty and the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP), the (contested) nature and definition of the Union as an international actor, its legal base, and any number of lectures on specific policy areas such as trade, development, relations with key global partners (US, China, Russia, African Union et al), human rights, security/defence and/or conflict resolution. At graduate level this content might be delivered through seminar formats in which students take the lead in presenting empirical material and arguments, and class time then revolves around moderated discussion of associated key issues and questions. A variety of mechanisms designed to increase students' engagement in the subject matter; mini simulations, debates, team projects and so on can then supplement this basic format. At root, however, it is difficult to remove the lecturer from the centre of the room and even more difficult to ensure that the students take responsibility for their own learning. Frequently one finds advanced students capable of making this leap, but for the majority, the sense remains that the exercise is one in which students are presented with facts, with arguments about those facts and finally the means by which such facts/arguments can be assessed and measured. Too often, such students seek direction on what is the 'correct' interpretation of facts such that they can effectively present the same in final essays or exams.

The issue which is core, therefore, is how – for the average student – to maximise their engagement with the subject such that they begin to take ownership of their own learning and rely on the lecturer not as the director of the learning enterprise but as a support to it. In this regard, a quote from Confucius is perhaps apposite 'I will not instruct my students until they have really tried hard but failed to understand'.

Despite many innovations over several years with this traditional model (at both graduate and undergraduate levels) - and very positive teaching evaluations associated therewith – I found that there was a substantive challenge that remained: engaging students more directly in their own learning and a ‘leaning out’ from that process by me as the lecturer. To be frank, a personal ambition was also to reinvigorate my own engagement in pedagogy and to stimulate a more creative approach to teaching. Through engagement with the ANTERO ERASMUS Jean Monnet Network, I became directly aware of the Problem Based Learning approach (PBL). This was being applied by colleagues at graduate and undergraduate level at Maastricht University (Maurer 2015; Maurer and Neuhold 2012) and appeared to address my own core concern with learning ownership.

The key issue for me was how to make the learning process an active rather than a passive one. Here the work of Gijssels (1996) is crucial where he identifies this aspect as being critical to the overall utility of PBL as a teaching approach or ‘a process in which the learner actively constructs knowledge’ (Gijssels 1996:13). This for me was the key innovation that I wished to introduce to my teaching – even within the context of an institution that was – at least in my disciplinary and cognate areas – overwhelming reproducing a very traditional pedagogy.

The challenge was that the underlying logic of PBL is very different to traditional approaches and requires what has been described as a ‘paradigm change’ in approach (Birenbaum 2003) moving away from an ‘empiricist (positivist) epistemological stance’ (Birenbaum 2003). Ultimately, if somewhat ironically, I found resistance to this paradigm shift far more entrenched among students while the institution – at least through its teaching and learning supports, was not just supportive but at times even evangelical. This is also in line with the often-reported need to not only prepare and train academics in thinking differently about learning, but to also consider that students might feel overwhelmed or unsuited for this different kind of learning pedagogy (Maurer 2015: 381).

A subsidiary advantage was also to make a clearer link between scholarly knowledge and applied knowledge. Without subscribing to a notion that the purpose of the neo-liberal university is to provide high-quality inputs to a growing economy, I was anxious to give students real-world context for what could be perceived to be abstract concepts and/or lots of simple empirical detail. This might also be then usefully mapped onto some of the professional ambitions of students – some pay-off as it were for the paradigm shift with which they would struggle. This too is something that Gijssels (1996: 14-16) underlines – signifying the importance of linking acquired knowledge with its translation into a real-work context. As Maurer and Neuhold (2012: 3) state; the main focus must be ‘Educating students towards independent, reflective and sustainable learners.’ They also warn however, that ‘Students might be overwhelmed at the beginning, and also need some guidance in how to approach new topics, especially when suddenly working in a group.’ This is a point that came back to haunt me in my own endeavours.

### **GETTING STARTED: DESIGNING THE ‘EU FOREIGN POLICY’ COURSE WITH PBL**

My ambitions crystallised at a workshop directed by Dr Heidi Maurer, from Maastricht University, and Dr Terry Barrett of the UCD Dublin Centre for Teaching and Learning in 2016. The approaches applied (Barrett and Moore 2011 and Barrett 2017) opened new vistas in trying to address this goal through PBL. The attraction of this approach was rooted for me in the foundational understanding that knowledge is constructed rather than simply transmitted. Through such construction, students discover the antecedents of knowledge in that area but also its contestants and reinforcing commonalities. Through that awareness they then begin to build for themselves an understanding of the world that they inhabit. This ‘deep learning’ promised much by way of increasing student engagement and ownership, redefining the lecturer’s role as one of support and facilitator and profoundly restructuring the learning experience (Barrett and Cashman 2010).

A key element during the training workshop was to structure active learning elements according to 'knowledge problems', 'puzzles' or 'threshold concepts', rather than according to topics as we often do as academic instructors. The focus therefore would be upon the critical concepts that we want our students to understand, rather than what kind of descriptive knowledge we aim to cover during the course. During the workshop we also concluded that as instructors we have a tendency to add new aspects to the course each year, while actually a refocus on the few essential learning objectives would give more room for students to engage with those objectives in more depth.

Thus, I began by (re)defining the learning objectives for my Level Three undergraduate module INRL30030 EU in the World. These were not hugely dissimilar to those previously defined in earlier very different iterations of the module, but the ambition was less to seek out new objectives than to better achieve those which I had previously defined. These were that students would be able to:

- Demonstrate a detailed knowledge of the evolution, formation and implementation of EU foreign policy.
- Debate and discuss these policies as they relate to a number of significant contemporary challenges.
- Evaluate and apply the major theoretical approaches in International Relations to EU policies.
- Understand the construction of the European Union's foreign, security and defence policy.
- Critically analyse EU foreign policy through contrasting perspectives and utilising detailed empirical material.

Students were advised in the published syllabus that the module would be taught in a PBL format with a mix of 24 twice-weekly seminars of 50 minutes each. The seminars would be based on PBL small-group work interspersed with traditional lectures. This alternation was built into the structure of the module from the start. Students were to read the specified material for each lecture/seminar, to undertake active learning as part of the PBL framework, and to reflect critically on that reading and research. The university's VLE system (Blackboard) was designated as a support to the module.

I also relied on a template shamelessly borrowed – but clearly credited – to Maastricht University which was applying a '7-step' approach to the application of PBL (Maurer 2015: 381). This mimicked each group project as a discrete research exercise that effectively guided students through a self-directed process of thought, reflection and execution, with specific and well-defined roles assigned to each group member and processes for addressing group management. Derived from Gijsselaers work (1996: 15), this template had the added advantage of providing direct skills development germane to the research process.

Assessment for the revised module was then structured by engagement (10%), x 3 team PBL assignments (30%) and a traditional examination (60%). Originally, student engagement and participation were to be assessed through records of attendance, my professional assessment of contributions to group work and by self and peer review within each student's team. These latter elements of self and peer review were not fully operationalised. A series of three group assignments were to be undertaken by each team of approximately 8-10 students and these were to comprise a 2,000-word written submission with a live group presentation. Each of those three assignments would then account for 10 percent of the final grade (making a total of 30 percent). The final assessment piece was a traditional final two-hour essay-type examination. The three written team assignments were required to be submitted online through the university VLE and 'SafeAssign' software as well as in hard copy.



The assessment strategy and structure of the module was a deliberate compromise. Never having deployed PBL, I was anxious not to experiment too far, and in the event of the abject failure of the PBL component, I wanted to ensure that I had a traditional lecture component and exam to fall back on.

### FIRST EXPERIENCES AND IMMEDIATE CHALLENGES

An immediate delivery challenge for the module was students' unfamiliarity with PBL methods. While the evangelical enthusiasm of our colleagues in the UCD Centre for Teaching and Learning had made significant inroads across the natural sciences, exposure of students in the social sciences and humanities to this approach were limited. INRL30300 was a Level Three undergraduate module, with registrations from 83 students across the College of Social Sciences and Law and the College of Arts and Humanities. The cohort comprised 37 students of single or joint honours politics, 24 joint honours students from other social science disciplines (primarily law and economics), with a further 18 joint honours from arts and humanities subjects (English, Italian, French and history) and the balance of ERASMUS, US JYA and occasional students. When asked via a show of hands at the outset of the module, none of these students had had previous experience of PBL teaching methods.

As a result, the first seminar hour was devoted to an explanation and exploration of PBL methods and its application in this module. Emphasis was placed on its utility to students; transferable skills development, professional relevance and the opportunity for deep learning - as outlined in the associated research literature on the subject. Student anxiety – as expressed in Q&A session which immediately followed – was focused on the 'performance' aspect of the group presentations, how to govern/regulate group dynamics and intra-group communications. By and large, students were open and to some degree enthusiastic about the approach.

Another immediate challenge was the drafting of the three problem triggers. The function of these was to introduce a role-play element which would facilitate engagement, but which also spoke to the development of transferable skills and links to professional opportunities. Thus, the triggers were designed as:

- Acting as a civil service team presenting an analysis of the implications of EU membership for Ukrainian foreign policy,
- Presenting a proposal for a broadcast documentary on an EU foreign policy issue/challenge and
- Presenting a case for EU foreign policy action to HRVP Mogherini as a justice-inspired NGO.

In the latter case, a specific link was made to a major real-world H2020 research programme on which I was the local PI (GLOBUS). Linked to this, students were invited (for extra credit) to submit images related to justice in EU foreign policy to the GLOBUS web site and/or via social media (#globusjustice). These were later used to inspire a subsequent piece of project artwork (GLOBUS).<sup>1</sup>

### MIDTERM CHALLENGES

The first problem trigger was delivered to students and the initial seminar session went very well. Students were visibly engaged, asking questions and teasing out concepts. Shared group reflections also went well. In final presentations and submitted assignments, however, several groups presented less on the implications for Ukrainian 'foreign policy' of EU membership than on the broader economic and political implications for Ukraine of EU membership per se. This issue was raised in the immediate feedback to the oral presentations and featured in the written comments to students. A brief session

on 'lessons learned' from the first problem trigger – in advance of the second problem trigger – generated a frank classroom discussion. Therein, a number of students felt that in the absence of more directive leadership from me as the lecturer, their groups had been led into something of a cul de sac of their own enthusiasm. In the initial stages of research for the second problem trigger it is noted that the groups were much more assertive in defining the problem at hand and asking for feedback on project design. As noted below, I also took a more proactive role in sitting down with each group rather than passively offering them opportunities to ask questions.

A second issue arose with respect to group dynamics and group composition. Initial group composition had been based on random selection and assignment. I had originally envisaged that groups would remain constant over the course of the semester. However, UCD regulations and practice allows for a two-week window at the start of the semester during which students may deregister and register for new modules. Thus, up to one dozen students left the module and up to 10 joined over the first two weeks of the module. Additionally, a further four ERASMUS and overseas visiting students arrived late – but according to agreed timetables. This meant that some groups had increased from the original 8-9 up to 12 students while others had shrunk to below 5-6 students. Thus, following the first problem trigger I had to consider how best to equalise group size. In the event I proposed a wholesale random reassignment of groups. The logic was twofold: first that this would underline real-world professional circumstances where different project groups would be composed and work together and second to ensure that the pain/disequilibrium of the adjustment would be shared equally rather than limited to those groups whose memberships would have had to be adjusted in isolation.

This decision generated significant student opposition and disquiet. I had underestimated the extent to which the groups had taken on a life of their own. Students had constructed social media platforms to communicate and had negotiated sometimes complex meeting arrangements outside of formal class hours. This latter came as a complete surprise and foreshadowed a subsequent issue of workload which was to be raised. Several groups also insisted that they had managed to create very positive sets of group dynamics and had allocated work load across the semester based on the original group assignments. These advantages would be lost and their work disrupted as a result of reallocation.

A full and frank discussion ensued online and at open session in one of the seminars. Students appreciated the need to address the situation that had arisen and the logic that I presented for equal treatment but were profoundly dissatisfied with that resolution and what they saw as a lack of consultation on my part. The outcome was that the reallocation of groups proceeded, but I gave a guarantee that they would not be changed again over the course of the semester i.e. they would be constant from problem trigger two through problem trigger three. Strikingly, in the second round of group formation, group dynamics were visibly weaker. Whereas in the first round the groups had devised occasionally witty names and identities for themselves, in the second and subsequent round they did not – relying only on the group number to which they had been assigned – clearly underlining the importance of group dynamics and perhaps underscoring the student's dissatisfaction that their 'ownership' of the groups had been traduced.

Another issue which was spontaneously raised by students was workload and credit allocation. As has been noted, for each problem trigger students were meeting extensively outside formal teaching hours and communicating via various shared media platforms. Formal representations were made that this level of effort was not well reflected in assignment credit allocation and that the 60 percent final exam, based on the lectures, was not a valid reflection of their overall effort in the module. Students also feared that in the absence of formal lectures – and their associated notes – they would be less able to perform well in the associated exam. In response, I agreed to structure the exam in such a way as would give students a visible opportunity to deploy the specific knowledge generated in the group work. In the event, I divided the exam into two parts; with students required to answer at least one

question from each. Part one would be based on the problem triggers while part two would be based more on the lectures and associated readings.

### INITIAL STUDENT EVALUATION

At the close of the module in 2017 I devoted a seminar to student evaluation. This was conducted within the groups and narrated by a group spokesperson, giving some degree of anonymity to the results. The formal university system of student evaluation and feedback reinforced many of these issues. Meanwhile, unbeknownst to me, at least two other colleagues in my school, offering Level Three modules (all optional), had introduced PBL elements to their teaching. Among final year students in particular, this had raised anxiety as they were – across the board – faced with a new learning method in their final year. Their not unreasonable request was that such innovations should be better coordinated and communicated to students. This issue was raised by student representatives at School Board level. In general, wider student feedback centred on the utility of PBL in principle, workload issues, assessment and the structure of the module.

On PBL as a practice, feedback was certainly mixed to negative. For some students it provided a new and welcome learning environment - one which they had not experienced before and which they appreciated. For one student it was a 'great way to really be interactive with a topic and take interest - ability to share views & learn' while for another 'The interactive nature and PBL structure of this module were hugely beneficial.' The balance, however, was negative. One student complained that

'I attended every session, yet I struggled to understand the coherence of what the module was actually supposed to be teaching me about... I was required to essentially teach myself about the role of the EU and all of the different bodies that make up EU governance.'

For another the plea was

'Please teach more, for most of us we are new to learning about EU foreign policy. While the projects enhanced understanding of a specific area, I feel I did not learn the broad concepts as well as multiple specific policy areas.'

In sum, the balance of opinion on the PBL methodology was '(We) need more content-based lectures and problem-based learning does not help you learn effectively.' This was reflected in satisfaction ratings for the module with a 26.51 percent response rate.

Workload issues were especially problematic, and students remained unhappy with credit allocation across the assessment elements, highlighting again the disproportionate effort placed in the group work as opposed to the lectures/exam. This also raised issues as regards the 'fairness' of workloads within groups and the issue of 'free-riders'. At its most stark this was expressed as:

'The group work gives freeloaders freedom to not participate which in turn increases the workload of the other more conscientious members of the group. No one wants to tackle them. Perhaps more individual accountability within the assignments would work better.'

The assessment 'mix' between group work and traditional exam was not a success. Students lacked confidence in their exam preparation based on the work that they did in the PBL framework and what they saw as the paucity of notes from traditional lectures. Comments centred on the evident mismatch between levels of effort and the grade 'return'. They included the following:

‘Considering the exam for this is 60% I feel not enough time was dedicated to lectures and too much was wasted on group projects. I feel unprepared going into this exam and unsure where to begin my studies. As a final year student this is highly stressful as I wish to obtain a high grade.’

Also,

‘I think the module would have been a lot more beneficial if we had more of a foundation on lectures regarding historical and contemporary background on EU foreign policy to begin with instead of having to solve assignments without any prior knowledge on the EU.’

**Table 1: Student evaluations 2017-18**

Question Text	Times Answered	Likert <sup>1</sup>		% of Total				
		Mean	Standard Deviation	Strongly Agree	Agree	Not Sure	Dis-agree	Strongly Disagree
I have a better understanding of the subject after completing this module	23	3.04	1.15	4.3	39.1	26.1	17.4	13.0
The assessments to date were relevant to the work of the module.	23	3.57	1.20	17.4	52.2	8.7	13.0	8.7
I achieved the learning outcomes for this module	23	2.96	1.11	8.7	21.7	34.8	26.1	8.7
The teaching on this module supported my learning	23	2.91	1.16	8.7	21.7	34.8	21.7	13.0
Overall I am satisfied with this module	23	2.39	1.08	4.3	13.0	17.4	47.8	17.4

**Note:** <sup>1</sup> 5-point Likert Scale: (1) Strongly disagree; (2) Disagree; (3) Neither agree nor disagree; (4) Agree; (5) Strongly agree.

Finally, ‘I think the assignments for the amount of work required should carry more weight.’ and ‘The group work is too much for how little it is worth for the assessment, this needs to be more balanced.’ Critically, one more positively orientated comment was that ‘I would suggest no exam - I feel the Group presentations were a great way of learning. Maybe larger projects with groups with slightly more work involved instead of an exam would be more beneficial’.

On structure, students had some very specific preferences. They widely insisted that the groups – once assigned - should not be adjusted as working relationships were too important. For one student ‘groups should be set up and run with from the start, mixing disciplines of students, to mirror the workplace etc. if there are to be changes to groups, consultation with students as opposed to a decree’, while for another ‘The changing of groups after we had completed the first assignment was a terrible idea.’ Students also concluded that the structure of twice-weekly 50-minute seminar/lecture sessions did not allow for sufficient depth of engagement with the problem triggers and a weekly ‘double’ seminar slot was suggested. Students also felt that they were somewhat cut adrift at the start of the module - suggesting that a higher lecture content at the start of the module – shifting to a higher seminar/group work content towards the close of the module would give students a firmer grounding from which to engage with the material. Finally, there was some dissatisfaction with the role-play aspect of the problem triggers. Students evinced concern that it was not always clear to them whether

they were writing an 'academic' paper or something else, where (for example) the normal conventions of citation, scholarly objectivity etc. should or should not apply.

### **MODIFICATIONS AND SUBSEQUENT FEEDBACK**

In light of the above feedback I made a number of changes to the structure, delivery, and assessment of the module, while maintaining the overall content – and specifically the associated triggers. This was also a response to overall student performance on the module - including the exam component. Performance in the exam was not in fact any lower than in roughly comparable modules in previous years – but students' anxiety in advance of same and their dissatisfaction with their performance was marked.

When the module was then run for the second time in the 2018-2019 cycle a number of revisions were made. Groups were first randomly assigned (through a new VLE system) for the entirety of the modules and changes (as students entered/left the modules over the first two weeks) were handled on an ad hoc basis. Assessment was wholly revised. The exam component was eliminated. The assessment structure was revised as engagement (10%), team assignments (60%) and a reflective learning journal (30%). Student engagement and participation was assessed through records of attendance, my professional assessment and by self and peer review through questionnaires at the end of each of the group exercises. This allowed students to reflect on and score their own performance as well as that of colleagues. The series of three team assignments, based on the aforementioned problem triggers was repeated and again comprised a 2,500-word written submission and oral/visual presentation.

Finally, I introduced as the final assessment mechanism a fortnightly 200-300-word learning journal through the new VLE system. These entries were not themselves graded but formative feedback was provided on a selection thereof. Students were then required to submit a final Reflective Learning Journal Essay which was designed to encourage the student to reflect on both their own learning, their working experience in teams and how these impacted them. If all four fortnightly journal submissions were completed on time, the final essay would be graded at 100 percent, if only three were submitted the essay was graded at 75 percent and if only two of the required entries were submitted then the essay was to be graded at 50 percent.

The structure of module delivery was also adjusted. Accommodation in a dedicated open learning (ALE) facility was secured for a weekly two-hour session (rather than the bi-weekly 50-minute sessions). The balance between lectures and seminars was also revised so that a series of more traditional lecture/discussion sessions were scheduled at the start of the semester with a shift to more self-directed PBL sessions as the module progressed. I had also to adjust my own engagement in the PBL sessions. In the absence of TA support due to resourcing restrictions, and a student cohort of over 85 students, I had to more actively structure my own engagement with the individual groups over the course of the seminar sessions. This involved a 'live clinic' moving from group to group over the course of the seminar session and sitting with the group to tease out issues and address questions. This more proactive engagement also allowed me to intervene earlier where groups were moving off-topic or misinterpreting the key elements of the problem trigger(s).

**Table 2: Student evaluations 2018-19**

Question Text	Times Answered	Likert		% of Total				
		Mean	Standard Deviation	Strongly Agree	Agree	Not Sure	Dis-agree	Strongly Disagree
I have a better understanding of the subject after completing this module	15	3.80	.94	20.0	53.3	13.3	13.3	
The assessments to date were relevant to the work of the module	15	3.60	1.35	33.3	26.7	13.3	20.0	6.7
I achieved the learning outcomes for this module	15	3.87	.83	20.0	53.3	20.0	6.7	
The teaching on this module supported my learning	15	3.93	1.10	40.0	26.7	20.0	13.3	
Overall I am satisfied with this module	15	3.80	1.32	40.0	26.7	13.3	13.3	6.7

As noted in the table above, students' qualitative evaluation of the module shifted quite significantly under this second iteration of the module. These included statements that 'I love that there were projects and no final exam. Having to learn a policy paper is really interesting and I think it will help me achieve my goals in a career in the EU in the future', 'The by weekly [sic] learning journals were quite useful', 'The assignments were very relevant and interesting and greatly improved my research skills', 'The lectures which introduced EU foreign policy were very helpful and necessary', and 'Mix between group work and coursework was good'. Unfortunately, data from earlier comparable modules taught more traditionally is not available to contrast student satisfaction between the PBL and non-PBL frameworks.

As regards areas for improvement, the focus still settled on managing and evaluating group dynamics, the scale of effort needed for group projects and the balance between lectures and group work. On the management of groups, the comments centred on free-riders:

'Perhaps some more rules or structure to the group work - it happened that a majority of my group was willing to work, however I imagine others' groups might have had less positive dynamics. Some rules or even suggestions, such as to take attendance at group meetings, may help to mitigate issues of free-riding...to make such a suggestion on one's own might seem confrontational.'

Also, 'Nobody likes group work, that is clear, but I can see the merits of it.' For several students the scale of work put into the group projects remained problematic:

'I believe that two group projects would have sufficed for the continuous assessment of this module. Three projects on top of the other assignments I had to do in my other four modules made it hard for me to focus on this module'.

Others commented, 'having to do three group essays and a personal essay at the end is so much work that it just distracts from the course material', and 'Reduce the amount of group assignments, forcing large groups of students to produce high quality essays in the space of three weeks, on three separate occasions is too much'.

The final point of contention for some students is pretty much the core of the PBL framework, that is, they simply prefer a traditional lecture structure. One student commented:

'I was looking forward to this module but was very underwhelmed by it and feel let down as a whole. I found the first half of the module to be more structured and interesting, but the middle onwards but was disappointing; we had very few teaching classes as we were given time to do group work instead (at least one of the 2 hours although it was sometimes more, or even the 2 hours.) This meant that there was *very little time dedicated to actually teaching us* (author's emphasis), and therefore, I do not feel like I have an adequate knowledge on the topic, or that the learning outcomes have been achieved.'

Also,

'I would have appreciated more lectures. While I appreciated the lessons learned about group work and doing my own research, I did not feel like the few lectures we had supported what we did in our group projects and when there were lectures it just felt like contextualisation i.e. actors and their roles in EU foreign policy.'

## CONCLUDING REFLECTIONS

In terms of concluding reflections there are a few notable issues. The first is that PBL visibly delivered greater student ownership of learning - but that this can also be problematic where students genuinely do not seek such ownership or find it unreasonably demanding. Within the highly structured Irish educational system a premium is given to acquisition and reproduction of received knowledge. In staff common rooms across the Irish university sector, conversations around the need to (re)educate Irish students into being critical thinkers and active learners predominate. There is no doubt therefore, that the easier path - and one which flows with the grain of traditional pedagogy - is the simple 'chalk and talk' model. At the same time, the rewards for both the student and lecturer of a transition to a successful PBL approach are significant and worth the additional front-loaded effort and challenges in application. The depth and passion of the students as they identified issues of foreign policy concern, their determination to make a successful case for EU foreign policy intervention (or to highlight significant EU foreign policy missteps) and their ambition to see change, were striking and memorable. They are also experiences which visibly deliver deep learning and which contribute substantially to higher levels of critical thinking and even professional development.

The key lesson for me deriving from this experience over two years is that the design and delivery of PBL as a teaching model has to be thought through exceptionally carefully. The linkages between learning objectives, course content, course delivery and means of assessment - while important regardless of methodology - are perhaps even more acutely intertwined with PBL. The balance between group and individual effort has also to be considered - alongside its relative weight and assessment. Opening avenues for assessment of individual work within the PBL framework is another issue that I would wish to carry forward. Moreover, within the PBL process, serious cognisance must be taken of student 'ownership'. This has broader implications for class dynamics than simply how we teach. It can - and should - provoke deeper reflection on classroom power dynamics and the respective roles of student and teacher. Thus, my own take away from this experience has been that the introduction of PBL has been a net positive, but that it requires serious and detailed preparation, that it demands positive student buy-in and that the effort is more than worth it.

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## ENDNOTE

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.globus.uio.no/news/2019/art-installation-launch-dublin-apr19.html>

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Research Article

## Using Policy Briefs as Assessment to Integrating Research-Led Employability in Foreign Policy Courses

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## Abstract

The aims of this paper are to highlight the way policy briefs were employed as an assessment tool on a final year foreign policy orientated Politics/IR module in a UK university. It explores the skill/employability rationale behind the use of the tool alongside wider concerns about diversity of assessment before moving onto some practical aspects of its introduction within the module and the evolution of the task. Finally, it reflects on student opinion of the assessment, it highlights some of the expected and unexpected challenges in using policy briefs as an assessment tool and proposes some future modifications. Overall, this paper argues that policy briefs can be utilised on more “traditional” modules and that they have a range of benefits for both students and staff, confirming the general findings of Chagas-Bastos and Burges (2018) and others, whilst making a more explicit case for their use in relation to the fact that the tool allows students to demonstrate research-based employability skills.

## Keywords

Policy brief; Assessment; Employability; Research-led teaching

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## INTRODUCTION

There is a long- standing debate within higher education about the extent to which assessment tasks should mirror tasks students will encounter when they enter the workplace. There is a focus on ensuring assessment tasks are “authentic” i.e. they ‘replicate the tasks and performance standards typically found in the world of work’ (Villarroel et al 2018) thereby ‘requiring students to use the same competencies, or combinations of knowledge, skills, and attitudes that they need to apply in the criterion situation in professional life’ (Gulikers, Bastiaens, and Kirschner 2004: 69). Aside from the preparation for work, Villarroel et al’s study highlighted that authentic assessment has been found to have a positive impact on student learning, autonomy, motivation, self-regulation and metacognition; abilities highly related to employability, whilst Lincoln and Casidy (2018) found that authentic assessments were positively related to student satisfaction and promoting behaviour.

Despite these perceived benefits, the use of ‘authentic assessment’ in politics and IR remains niche. In part that is because politics and IR lack a specific work task to replicate that might be found in say nursing or even environmental studies. The range of authentic assessment tasks in Politics/IR ranges simulations to portfolio submissions (Blair 2015) but the focus of this paper is to explore the issues around the use of policy brief or briefing notes as assessment tasks. These tasks have been utilised on placement modules/internships but their take up remains low. In 2009 Boys and Keating argued that ‘international relations and political science curricula in the UK would benefit from the wider use of this tool [policy briefs]’ and yet more recent research suggests policy briefings are still an ‘under-utilized pedagogical tool’ (Chagas-Bastos and Burges 2018). In the UK, it was found that policy brief writing was evident in only 2.3% of Russell Group modules and 1.4% of Non-Russell Group modules

(Clark and Martin 2016). Chagas-Bastos and Burges (2018) suggest the syllabi sampled in the US, Canada, Australia, Brazil, and Colombia show similar usage rates.

The aims of this paper are to highlight the way policy briefs were employed as an assessment tool on a final year module in a research-intensive UK university-the University of Leeds. It explores the skill/employability rationale behind the use of the tool alongside wider concerns about diversity of assessment before moving onto some practical aspects of its introduction within the module and the evolution of the task. Finally, it reflects on student opinion of the assessment, it highlights some of the expected and unexpected challenges in using policy briefs as an assessment tool and proposes some future modifications. Overall, this paper argues that policy briefs can be utilised on more “traditional” modules and that they have a range of benefits for both students and staff, confirming the general findings of Chagas-Bastos and Burges (2018) and others, whilst making a more explicit case for their use in relation to the fact that the tool allows students to demonstrate research-based employability skills.

### Context

UK universities increasingly focus on the employability agenda as does the EU’s Bologna process (Niemann and Heister 2011). One aspect of this is to ensure students are aware of and able to employ the skills they develop as part of their university education in future employment. Given that political science and IR are ‘diverse disciplines’ that do not ‘train students for a certain profession’ means that ‘students often feel uncertain of the career paths available to them and how their expertise can be used in a future career’ (Broms and Licht 2019). There is also a feeling that political science/IR degrees do not provide students with the skills requested by employers-what can be called the workplace relevance of a BA (Robinson 2013; Biswas and Haufler 2018). There is therefore a need to more explicitly link student and employer expectations along with governance pressures in this field to respond to this agenda without damaging academic standards. One solution is to ensure that the employability agenda is ‘embedded into the curriculum’ (Maurer and Mawdsley 2013).

Research from the UK (Lee et al 2014) and the US (Biswas & Haufler 2018) has found that skills are only implicitly ingrained in the curriculum. A paper exploring skills and foreign policy courses in Germany identified that despite acknowledging the skills issues, ‘alternative innovative teaching methods, such as the drafting of policy papers, seem only rarely to have found their way into curricula’ (Nieman and Heister 2010). Research has shown that the politics/IR curricula in the UK provides students with a range of transferable skills that they will find of great use as they move towards employment, the discipline is poor in highlighting this: ‘if we don’t tell students what we are teaching them, then they won’t realise that they have gained a whole range of skills through their study of politics’ (see Clark and Martin 2016). An obvious way to ensure all students engage with the skill development aspect of this agenda is to embed and assess the skills via the choice of assessment (Curtis 2013) and across the curricula (Adriaensen et al 2019). Yet it is clear that essay writing is the most common form of assessment (Deardorff et al 2009; Blair and McGinty 2012) and whilst it is clear essay writing allows students to develop a range of transferable skills, the need to ensure students can demonstrate the full range of skills demands a broader range of assessment tasks. There is also a need to ensure students make the link between the skills they develop in research intensive universities like Leeds and the skills required by employers (Biswas & Haufler (2018). This can be seen as research-led employability (see Lightfoot 2015). Therefore given the low usage rates of “authentic assessments” in Politics and IR, the need for so-called show and tell pieces is still there, in part to inform practice across the sector but also to form an evidence base for the discipline that will then feed into broader discussions about assessment at the subject level. As such this paper sets out to reflect on the use of the same assessment over different iterations of the same module to provide a case study of practice.

## POLICY BRIEFS AS INNOVATIVE ASSESSMENT IN POLITICAL SCIENCE AND IR

A policy brief is a 'concise summary of a particular issue, the policy options to deal with it, and some recommendations on the best option. It is aimed at government policymakers and others who are interested in formulating or influencing policy' (FAO nd). As a result, the policy brief is a commonly used tool in a range of jobs related to politics and IR, such as civil servant, lobbyist or NGO. It is therefore perhaps surprising that their use as an assessment tool in politics/IR courses remains under-utilised (see Boys and Keating 2009; Pennock 2011; Trueb 2013; Biswas & Paczynska 2014; McMillan 2014; Chagas-Bastos and Burges 2018 for exceptions). The literature shows that the assessment method encourages students to develop 'real world' skills (very few jobs require the employee to regularly write 3000 words, most tend to need short, persuasive briefs), whilst also demonstrating academic knowledge (Moody and Bobic 2011). Assigning students policy briefs and policy memos gives them the opportunity to practice the type of writing they will perform both inside and outside of academia while still developing critical thinking skills and an understanding of the political world. The key elements of synthesis and analysis are honed via the use of policy briefs according to Pennock (2011). Feedback from alumni highlights that they would have welcomed the opportunity to engage with shorter pieces of writing that were more akin to the tasks they had to produce in their graduate jobs and chimes with feedback I have received and is discussed in the literature (Raile et al 2017).

In particular, a key element of getting a job in either the UK or EU Civil Service would be the case study or written Policy Recommendation Exercise in the assessment centre. The mock test for the EU process shows the benefit of using policy briefs in foreign policy courses as the 90-minute test makes the candidate assume the role of desk officer at DG Enlargement within the Unit responsible for the Balkan Region. The task involves reading documents provided to identify the key issues and potential solutions to a specific situation in the Balkans to assess the following competencies: Analysis and problem solving, Communicating (drafting skills), Delivering quality & results and Prioritising & Organising (EPSO, nd). Exposing students to the challenges of short, focused writing (albeit without the strict time pressure), highlighting the skill sets involved and explaining where they are likely to utilise these skills post-graduation are explicitly found in an assessment task such as the policy brief. Therefore, to ensure graduates in political science or IR are able to compete in the job market the discipline needs to provide them with the skills to do so as an integrated part of their program. It is one thing not to get a job because other people were better qualified; it is quite another thing not to get the job because you did not know the rules of the game, which has been defined as empowerment based employability skills (see Lee et al 2014) of which "authentic" assessments are one way in which students can be empowered.

## MODULE CONTEXT: HOW IS THE COURSE STRUCTURED?

The context is a final year undergraduate optional module that has been running since 2014 at the University of Leeds. The specific nature of the policy brief lent itself to use in this particular course given the topic—that of the politics of foreign aid. Foreign aid is clearly linked to foreign policy and the use of policy briefs as a tool of communication in foreign affairs ministries is well documented. Biswas and Paczynska (2014) utilised policy briefs in the classroom based on their experiences as Franklin Fellows at the United States Department of State. The aid context is, furthermore, interesting because short, focused pieces of writing like policy briefs are widely used by NGOs, think-tanks and government departments. It was therefore clear that many of the students on this specific module would go into careers, in which the ability to write a policy brief would be a useful skill.

Class sizes range from 75-90 students over the past 5 years. Students tend to be politics/IR/development studies students (including joint honours). As an elective module, students can choose this module with no prerequisite courses. It is also open to Erasmus/Year Abroad students.

Whilst this on the surface presents an opportunity to offer a longitudinal analysis of performance over five years, the nature of developing a new module is that refinements and changes are made in response to both student feedback and the external environment. As such this article offers a case study of the evolution of an assessment type in a final year module, student views of the assessment task and broader issues associated with the nature of this assessment task.

The literature above and an interest in employability/skills within the political science curriculum was motivation behind the choice of assessment task in the first place (see Lightfoot 2015). Therefore, when designing a module on the Politics of Aid I wanted to a: choose a form of assessment that tested new skills and b: make the skill development process/ skills acquired in module more explicit (with a coincidental link to graduate outcomes agenda in the UK). I had also been talking to graduates and undertook some research with them that highlighted the skills they obtained from their degree and the skills they used in their current employment and the overlaps or not between them. An underlying theme of this research was that many alumni wished they had been able to undertake assessment tasks similar to those they conducted in their employment. I was also impressed by the work of students at another UK university, where policy briefs were used in assessment.

In order to prepare the students for the assessment and in an attempt to reduce student 'angst' (Chagas-Bastos and Burges 2018) a 5 page document outlines the nature of the task and why I ask them to do it, key elements that must be in the brief, expectations of what topics might be covered and general notes on report writing. A list of aid-related policy briefs from think tanks (Overseas Development Institute, Centre for Global Development), NGOs (Save the Children) and government (UK parliament briefings) are provided to the students and these are discussed in the seminars. The purpose of the assessment is also explained, especially the skills/employability angle. This chimes with the excellent advice provided by Chagas-Bastos and Burges (2018). Ensuring students are clear as to the nature of the task and how it will be assessed are key features the literature highlight for success of the task. An aspect I found particularly helpful was stressing the similarities and differences between essays and policy briefs, particularly as the format and structure of the policy brief were the main concerns for students. Chagas-Bastos and Burges (2018) highlight an interesting aspect of terminology: whether you call something a briefing note or a policy brief or a policy paper could impact upon the nature of the task. So, for example there is a clear difference between providing background information on a country or topic, setting out and potentially offering a range of options for action on a topic and writing as advocacy (I return to this issue later).

The assessment of the course as well as the delivery have evolved over time: in part due to design and in part due to workload. The module has evolved from a single academic delivering all aspects of the module to a team of 3-4 academics. Whilst a major driver for this change was workload, the team-based approach actually allows students to see the topic from different research backgrounds and traditions thus ensuring a more rounded approach to the topic, i.e. bringing in someone who utilises more quantitative methods in their research on aid or specific country experts.

The final policy briefs address the question: In the form of a policy brief, provide a critical evaluation of the development aid policy of any one DAC member. In keeping with the nature of the assessment students must decide the country, the key time frame and therefore the context of the aid policy of their chosen state. To do the assessment requires excellent research skills and the fact that students have a choice of 30 states helps motivation. The module introduces students to key concepts, issues and debates relating to country level aid allocation, it also aims to introduce students to the political, economic and moral rationales of why international donors provide foreign aid. Alongside the "foreign policy" drivers it examines the role of NGOs and political parties in influencing decisions about aid levels. The assessment task asks students to examine the aid decisions of specific countries to meet the following learning outcomes:

- Critically examine the key concepts and definitions of aid;
- Analyse trends in and global levels of aid;
- Analyse the political, commercial, and moral rationales for foreign aid;
- Understand the links between aid and non-aid policies.

The policy brief allows the students to capture these outcomes within the specific context of their chosen state and demonstrate research-led teaching.

### *Module and assessment evolution*

The assessment was amended after 2 iterations of the module. The initial assessment was the policy brief (30%) and a seen exam (70%). After running the module for 3 years it was clear that to write a good 1500- word policy brief needed more planning and drafting than longer assessments and that the 30% weighting undervalued the time needed. The revision of the assessment task coincided with a university wide focus on assessment and feedback. I had a view that that there were too many assessment points in a student (and markers) lifecycle. So, the move to drop the exam fitted that agenda. In addition, the current framework within which all modules operate in Leeds Expectations for Assessment and Feedback. This asks that 'assessment should be sufficiently authentic to prepare students for [graduate] employment, further study or research'. It goes on to ask whether 'towards the end of the programme, do at least some of your school's assessments resemble the sort of activities that your graduates might encounter when in employment or embarking on further study?' The two aspects came together over at least 2 years. First, I realised that students focused considerable energy on the policy brief, yet it was worth only 30% of the final mark. Plus I worried that the exam offered assessment for the sake of assessment and I also felt the exam risked repeating topics that were already covered in the policy brief and so from 2017-18 the exam was removed and the assessment task became a portfolio of draft policy brief, unassessed presentation and 1500 word policy brief.

The draft was formalised into the assessment to a: ensure students realised the link between drafts and the final submission and b: provide specific support on an unfamiliar assessment type. Interestingly, in line with Chagos the presentation was designed to support students prepare for their policy brief by allowing students to practice presenting key points on specific case studies. Linked to this was another innovation within the module over time to include a much more focused reading list for seminars whereby students read key articles to provide the foundations of knowledge. These articles then provide a generic check list of factors that students will need in analysing their chosen country of study.

Working out how effective this assessment method was is tricky. This is perhaps the main weakness of this type of case study. The fact that data was only captured via the usual student education mechanisms at Leeds plus the module evolution over time means that I cannot hold factors as control. Student feedback on the module was generally favourable with unprompted qualitative comments noting the policy brief assessment in generally positive terms. This article draws upon module reviews, external examiner comments and solicited feedback from 3 different graduates from the module. To fully utilise the data is tricky due to the changing nature of the module.

There was a specific issue related to the draft submission that I will focus on separately. The external examiner in 2017 noted that 'An interesting assignment and one which has been tackled well by the students. A good spread of marks, with the lowest mark of 52% suggesting that students have engaged really well and received strong guidance on tackling the assessment'. What is clear is that the top end

work by students captured the essence of the literature on this assessment task i.e. it highlighted the ability to synthesise and analyse a wide range of sources and arguments in a concise and readable form. As Doyle argues that the language used in policy briefs should strive for maximum readability, with a 'capsule version of the key points and considerations about an issue' (Doyle 2017). Targeting knowledge in a briefing note is fundamental, seeking to distil 'complex information into a short, wellstructured document' (Doyle 2017). Chagas-Bastos and Burges argue that the 'central challenge of writing a good briefing note is thus to present complex, detailed information in an ordered, coherent manner that is easily read and can be 'absorbed on the fly' by busy decision-makers rushing between important meetings'.

The end result was that a large number of student students could produce work of a very high quality (so much so that 3 students presented the findings of their policy brief to a conference on UK aid attended by think-tanks and MPs). The levels of synthesis and analysis are generally much higher than those produced in longer traditional essay formats. I have also been struck by the way the task mirrors the expectations of the Fast Stream "brief" in the assessment centre. In particular, the criteria state 'there is no right answer; a good case can be made for the scenarios. The important thing is how you support your decision, using the facts provided, and how you express this in writing' (Faststream 2019). In the field of politics and IR helping students understand that there are no right answers and that their job as researchers is to make sense of the arguments is also aided by the concise nature of the task. It is unclear how many students made the explicit link between the course and assignment and their "employability" during the module although there are a few qualitative comments to suggest that some did. Feedback from graduates though suggested that for many having experience of writing policy briefs was helpful in either acquiring employment or carrying out tasks in employment, especially those who went into public administration roles.

## PEDAGOGIC OBSERVATIONS AND REFLECTIONS

Chagas-Bastos and Burges (2018) found that to produce a good policy brief 'it is consequently necessary to continuously emphasize the importance of revising and editing, actively encouraging students to deliberately think in terms of drafts'. Their article also highlights a key finding from my own experience: students need to make decisions about 'what matters' as 'writing a briefing note involves hard choices about what to include and what to exclude'. The need to start drafting early to ensure students really understand the topic is therefore been made explicit by the inclusion of a formal draft deadline at least 2 months before the final submission. Student feedback highlights that deciding what matters is tricky: 'as a student, the trap I fell into was treating the task too much like a literature review. The policy brief should use the literature to justify why (and what) policy action is required'. This confirms the literature that argues that 'synthesis and evaluation are particularly critical since—given the length of the paper—students must weave together arguments and make judgments on the best evidence that can be harnessed to support the thesis as well as make assessments and recommendations in those papers with a policy connection' (McMillan 2014).

However, what is clear from the five iterations of the module is that the need to act on feedback is not always clear to students. To counter this and the fact that not all students will have undertaken a similar task has meant that formative feedback has been built into the module from day one. There is an attempt to ensure this feedback is as individual as possible with 121 feedback on drafts an opportunity for all students in the first iterations of the module. Now, this became a formal element of the assessment, which has raised a number of issues.

The first is the tension between generic versus tailored support. The literature stresses the need for feedback to be more personal (Williams and Smith 2017) so each student has the opportunity to obtain personal feedforward on their draft. In that sense the module tried to mirror the research process

(draft, comment and re-draft). However, it was clear from a minority of students that this was not clear them. The particular issues were the fact that the draft deadline clashed with the final stages of the final year project and as such students tended to prioritize the final year project. Clearly managing multiple deadlines is an essential skill in most forms of employment as is prioritizing tasks but is there enough space in the curriculum to explain this aspect of skills development? (see Adriaensen et al 2019).

In addition, more than one student criticised the deadline because it meant they would not have time to “finish” their draft. The criticism ran along the lines of “if I had more time my draft would be better” with some students explicitly criticising the amount of time they had to re-draft after the feedback. Again, this prompted reflection as to whether the benefits of re-drafting are made explicit to students? This process is now given prominence in the module handbook and during lectures. Two examples are provided to show the need for re-drafting-a picture of the American constitution showing the change on the draft from ‘We hold these truths to be sacred and undeniable’ to ‘We hold these truths to be self-evident’ and the example of WD-40 a product named after the 40th attempt to create a water displacement solution.

The academic literature on draft-re draft for undergraduates highlights some issues that were not considered, such as how students handle feedback or how the nature of the feedback should vary by student i.e. stronger students get suggestions for improvement whilst weaker students get commands ‘you need to’ (see Court 2012). This strongly suggests that academic staff should more explicitly “teach” students how to use feedback. Re-reading Williams and Smith’s excellent (2016) article alongside Blair et al (2012) highlights what students feel about feedback and what type of feedback they want. Feedback also has a very human reaction in students and this informs how they use feedback (Shields 2015; Pitt & Norton 2017; Green, 2019). In many ways as academics we must remember feedback on university assessments is a human to human communication no different to the ones we encounter (and often complain about) in peer review (see Curtin et al, 2018). Factoring this research into the practice on the module and using mechanism to develop students feedback literacy (Carless and Bould 2018) may help students understand the benefits of draft feedback.

It was also clear that students who did not “get” the assessment tended to avoid seeking advice by either not seeing academic staff and/or not submitting a draft. Simon Usherwood has noted a similar trend in his assessment task. He states that there was a ‘cluster of students who simply didn’t ‘get’ the assessment – a reflective essay – and thus came out with poor marks. This time, I had only a couple of students in that situation, and they appeared (from my records) to have neither attended most of the classes nor used the opportunity for a conversation’ (Usherwood 2019). We tried to tackle this by making the submission of the draft an element of the portfolio but it is still an area of concern.

Another issue that I had not paid attention to was that the reduction in assessment tasks actually increased anxiety with some students. Some students felt more anxious, as the one-strike nature of the assessment meant also higher stakes. The “innovative” nature of the assessment adds to this anxiety due to the unfamiliarity to the student. One student noted that ‘I would advise against it being the sole assessment of a module due to the lack of familiarity most students have with policy briefs’. This therefore provides evidence that attempts to introduce authentic assessment tasks into politics/IR curricula need to be done so at a programme level so as to ensure proper scaffolding of support for students by mapping assessment tasks and skill development across the programme.



## THE WAY FORWARD: HOW TO FURTHER IMPROVE THE USE OF POLICY BRIEFS FOR ASSESSMENT?

Reflecting on the module delivery over the past 5 years the benefits of the policy brief as an assessment task are clear to me as a teacher as I'll discuss later. The assessment task does prompt some deeper questions. The first is how "real-world" does the task need to be? Can classroom assessment ever be real? This is an interesting challenge given that innovative tools can very often be presented in very traditionally ways. This module is no different with an explicit requirement to reference academic texts throughout the policy brief. One solution would be to mirror the type of tasks set in assessment centres. This could be in the form of a traditional take home assessment or even as a type of open book, seen exam. One colleague brings practitioners in to advise on the question and "mark" assignments. This provides an authentic element and reinforces the research element but it might be unrealistic. Practitioners attend university to present a policy brief from their work place and share tips and trips maybe half-way through the course?

Does the assessment need specific assessment criteria? Can you assess academic skills such as use of literature without references? It is clear that policy briefs exist for different purposes so does the task need a scenario. This would also help deal with student feedback such as a lack of clarity as to what 'what the aim and content of a policy brief needs to be'. One option might be to provide a scenario: You are writing this for a senior member of the EEAS as a civil servant to provide key facts on EU peace keeping in Mali? You are working for a human rights NGO and you wish to change EU policy on...'. There is an opportunity here to learn from the literature in problem-based learning which shows that different type of assignments can be used to address different levels of learning (Schmidt & Moust 2010).

Clearly defining the audience appears key to make the assessment more authentic and this is a change that I will make in the future. Within this framework students might be able to experiment and choose their audience (an NGO or for a brief in a ministry) which coupled with a reflective element would focus again on both skill development and employability. The fact that the policy brief sits within a portfolio would allow a reflective task to sit alongside the more formal policy brief relatively easily. Other possibilities include elements of group work could be introduced which have different students working on the same country, and then ask them to present; all students could then judge which brief was most persuasive and one could discuss why.

Student comments highlight the fact that in their use of policy briefs in the workplace a graduate found they were utilised more for persuasion. The point about taking a position is very clear: 'I would suggest it's important to remember that a policy brief is not unbiased- they are written by organisations which often have their own political agenda and are using the brief to influence others'. Having an ability to understand the organisation you work for and its aims and values is an under-appreciated graduate skill. The aim is not to teach organisational culture but to make politics and IR graduates more aware of the fact that these differences exist-in many ways it is a form of commercial awareness. Personally this would raise some issues around my capabilities as a marker. Am I assessing persuasive writing or advocacy skills? These are not insurmountable problems (similar to assessing presentations) and need to be tackled to ensure students understand.

## CONCLUSIONS

This paper has made a case for the use of policy briefs on Politics/IR modules. It also argues that given their use in assessment centres for jobs within the EU it has a special resonance for European Studies course, especially those with a foreign policy focus. It argues that shorter policy brief style pieces should fit well into the political science/IR curriculum as the skills they encourage are ones we seek from our students plus as McMillan (2014) points out 'few fields (of employment) require papers of 10

pages or more. Instead, shorter memos, letters, briefs, and reports are expected tasks'. Student feedback noted that 'a policy brief provides you with a set of transferrable written communication skills which can be applied when working. [the skills of] 'being succinct and informative I found to be often overlooked and under nurtured whilst studying for a politics-related bachelor of arts'. Policy briefs prepare students for authentic employment tasks whilst allowing them to demonstrate critical thinking, synthesis, analysis and concise writing skills. This article concurs with Chagas-Bastos and Burges (2018) in that the briefing note serves multiple purposes; standard testing of knowledge and skills; builds student communication skills by teaching them a new format; format can encourage deep synthesised learning. The combination with an explicit research focus also helps connect employability (often an add on) to the core curriculum-the research-led employability argument. One specific angle that is important for Politics/IR is that all students on a module can engage with an employability-focused assessment not just the few who undertake a placement. As Chagas-Bastos and Burges (2018) show this method can be utilised with modules with 100+ students as well as smaller cohorts. In addition, the coupling of skills and subject knowledge is key to student engagement. Whilst it is still unclear whether all students explicitly get this or identify which key skills they have developed and notwithstanding the improvements suggested above, the use of a policy brief has been a positive one for me. Given the topics covered in most foreign policy courses lend themselves to this type of assessment and given that it combines "authenticity" with academic rigour makes me wonder why the method is not more widely utilised in Politics and IR courses than it is.

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Research Article

## Teaching the EU in Brexit Britain: Responsive Teaching at a Time of Uncertainty and Change

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## Abstract

The decision by the electorate of the United Kingdom (UK) in June 2016 marked the first time in its history that a member state of the European Union (EU) voted to leave. For the EU, its story is no longer primarily one of cooperation and integration but also of disintegration. For the UK, implementing Brexit has thrown its economic, geopolitical and territorial models into question in an unprecedented way. From the moment of the referendum result it was clear it was no longer going to be business as usual for scholars and teachers of the EU in the UK. Drawing on an action research approach, this article explores how the referendum result affected what and how this educator teaches the EU at a time of uncertainty and change for the UK. This is best encapsulated in the idea of *responsiveness*. This included responding to students' desires to broaden and deepen what they study as they try to make sense of myriad complex and continuously changing political events in an age of the internet and social media, as well as navigating new social dynamics that have emerged in the classroom at a time when the politics of identity is increasingly salient.

## Keywords

EU; Brexit; Responsive teaching; Action research; Identity; Politicisation; Social media

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Even at the best of times, teaching the EU is challenging (Parker 2016: 37). From the Maastricht Treaty onwards, students of the EU have grappled with a complex entity whose membership, level and scope of integration has expanded and become more differentiated. Added to this, in the last ten years the EU has experienced a confluence of both fast-and slow-burning crises including a Eurozone crisis, a Ukraine crisis, a refugee crisis, a terrorist crisis, a Brexit crisis and a rule of law crisis (Börzel 2018: 475; Seabrooke and Tsingou 2019). Domestic and transnational politics intervene in EU-level politics as never before and the EU has become increasingly salient in domestic politics with vote gains for populist radical right political parties in a number of member states. Students of the EU are learning about a complex, constantly evolving and often bewildering subject in unsettled times. In this context, the phenomenon of Brexit is yet another challenge, amongst many, for students of the EU to contend with.

Yet Brexit is also a novel historical event in the trajectory of European integration. For the first time an EU member state has chosen exit over voice and loyalty (Laffan 2017: 9). While the origins of many of the crises experienced by the EU in the last ten years or so have been exogenous, Brexit is an endogenous shock to the system (Schimmelfennig 2018a: 969). For teachers of the EU, particularly those working within the UK, it was clear on 24 June 2016 that it would no longer be business as usual in the classroom. Ever since this event, Brexit continues to affect the teaching of the EU in the UK and also beyond. Yet teaching the EU in the UK post-referendum is a singular experience: the decision to leave the EU means that students of the EU studying in the UK are living within a political system that is in a process of significant change, mired with uncertainty, with the potential to significantly impact their lives and futures.

While Brexit is just one issue amongst many affecting EU politics, it dominates the UK political landscape as its political and governance systems are consumed with the process and implications of withdrawal. Brexit entails a fundamental reset of Britain's economic and geopolitical orientation in the world, risks undermining the peace process in Northern Ireland and the settlements with the devolved administrations within the UK. Its consequences will be felt for many years to come. Implementing Brexit has disturbed and disrupted the UK's political system, hitherto known for its stability. Students of the EU in the UK are living through what Evans and Menon have termed 'one of those rare moments when an advanced liberal democracy might be witnessing a profound and far-reaching political recalibration' (Evans and Menon 2017: xvi). Through their lived experience, they find themselves in the midst of a 'real-time' social experiment of what the process of withdrawal from the EU really entails.

Within this new context, as a political science lecturer who teaches EU politics and policy-making at university level in the UK, the key question I seek to address in this article is: how have I changed my teaching since the Brexit vote? Following the referendum, in order to try to begin to make sense of this question, I conducted an examination into my own pedagogical practice using elements of action research, an analytical framework that can be used by educators to introduce problem-solving measures in their teaching and at the same time engage in a process of self-reflective enquiry of such measures so as to understand and improve their own practice (Wilson 2017, 99). In so doing, I reflected on the introduction of a new aspect to my teaching brought on by Brexit: responsiveness.

Influenced by ongoing developments in domestic, EU and global politics in an environment of continuously evolving politics I have become more responsive to students' needs in terms of what I teach, taking more of a lead from them on what they want to learn, often triggered by events, thus branching out from our more traditional curriculum. I also recognised that I needed to address more systematically the impact of advances in digital technology on my teaching of the EU. In recent years there has been a massive expansion in the availability of information and analysis for students on the EU, often representing polarised views of the EU. This direct access to wide range of information and analyses on the EU can have many positive benefits for students in terms of increasing and democratising access to information and knowledge (Beetham and Sharpe 2013). However, in a world where expertise is questioned, teachers still have an important role to play in terms of helping students to hone their critical thinking skills in evaluating the abundance of commentary, evidence and data now easily available online, assisting them to overcome information overload and interrogating issues of bias (Cardwell 2017; Thornton 2012).

The other political shock of 2016 was the election of Donald J. Trump as President of the United States (US). Brexit and the Trump Presidency have become closely associated with each other (Van Middelaar 2019, 140; Norris and Inglehart 2019) and there are also parallels to be drawn from a teaching perspective. Academics teaching political science in the US have reflected on how Trump's election affected their teaching in ways similar to my own experience. Daniel Drezner (2018), Professor of International Politics at Tufts University, described how he took to Twitter to compare with other academics how, since Trump's election, they have had to adjust their course materials in their teaching. Responses focused on efforts to reconcile ongoing events with their understanding of how the world works, including creating completely new courses, redesigning existing ones to include new elements reflecting issues arising from the Trump presidency and the challenge of contextualising latest events in their teaching. They also spoke of undertaking more work with students on how to teach them to be 'critical consumers of news', as well as making references to anxiety and confusion in the classroom.

This article proceeds as follows. First, I outline how I responded to developments following the referendum result in my teaching and investigated my own teaching practice using elements of action research. Second, I explore a number of insights gained from this process, including how Brexit and

other challenges facing the EU have prompted me to broaden and deepen what and how I teach, how the politics of identity can enter and be used in the University classroom and how the role of teachers can evolve as students respond to learning about the EU at a time of uncertainty and change and with a profusion of information available to them online.

### **METHODOLOGY: ACTION RESEARCH AS AN APPROACH TO EXAMINE EDUCATIONAL PRACTICE**

Used first to describe research that helps a practitioner, action research is often associated with healthcare policy contexts, but it has also been used in education, agriculture and international development research (Arnold and Norton 2018). Action research is method that can be used by higher education practitioners interested in improving their students' learning experiences through the process of researching, interrogating and evaluating their own practice (Arnold and Norton 2018: 4; McNiff 2013: 23). Action research can involve introducing and evaluating new changes to practice and is collaborative as it can incorporate dialogue with those who are participating in those changes, e.g. students. Rather than just evaluating the effectiveness of practices or as an approach to improve techniques of teaching and/or assessment, action research can seek to understand teaching as it takes place within a broader social, cultural and historical context and endeavours to challenge the assumptions that underpin practice (McNiff 2013: 24; Arnold and Norton 2018: 5). According to Noffke: 'action research is part of the process of constructing what it means to be a teacher and involves interconnections between the identities of the researcher and the researched' (quoted in Arnold and Norton 2018: 5).

Action research combines formal inquiry into an aspect of practice (research) that is carried out alongside changes in practice (action). As a type of inquiry, it is reflexive as it requires practitioner researchers to keep their own knowledge, values and professional activities under review. It is collaborative as it encourages engagement with others in the process and it is contextual as it acknowledges institutional, national, historical and societal influences (Arnold and Waterman 2018: 9). Action research typically involves a number of steps or stages in a cycle beginning with an examination of practice, exploration of the context in which practice takes place and the identification of possible actions to enhance practice; the implementation of action; the observation of action; the reflection and articulation of learning from the process and finally a reassessment of practice and a consideration of opportunities for a further cycle of research. McNiff represents this cycle as follows: Planning -> Acting -> Observing -> Reflecting -> Planning (McNiff 2013: 54-71).

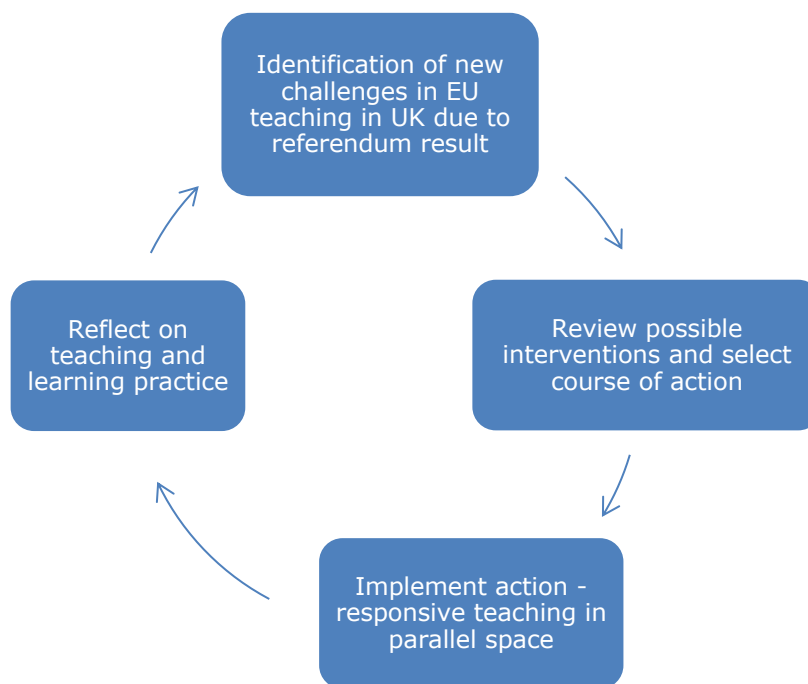
In reality, action research is not always a linear process. Unexpected findings, problems and new questions can emerge out of the process of enquiry and not just in the period of reflection following the research. In this way as a research process it can be fluid, open and responsive (Koshy, Koshy and Waterman 2011: 6). In addition, many aspects of the lessons learned are likely to be linked to developing an individual teacher's practice in their own particular setting rather than creating generalisable rules for other practitioners. That said, some findings may resonate with and be relatable to others in their own contexts (Arnold and Norton 2018: 24).

Action research was used in this study to help gain greater knowledge and understanding of how changing political events such as Brexit affected my teaching of the EU in the UK. In the cycle of action research conducted, following the referendum result the initially identified action consisted of the setting up of a new parallel teaching space with my students alongside lectures and seminars where in one extra teaching event each week we branched off from the existing curriculum. In this new space I took my students' lead in terms of widening the curriculum, giving them agency over the subjects we would cover in class as together we responded to ongoing events and the questions and issues they inspired.<sup>1</sup>



The action research approach taken in this study can be illustrated as follows:

**Figure 1: An Action Research Cycle on teaching the EU in the context of Brexit**



Adapted from: Arnold and Norton 2018

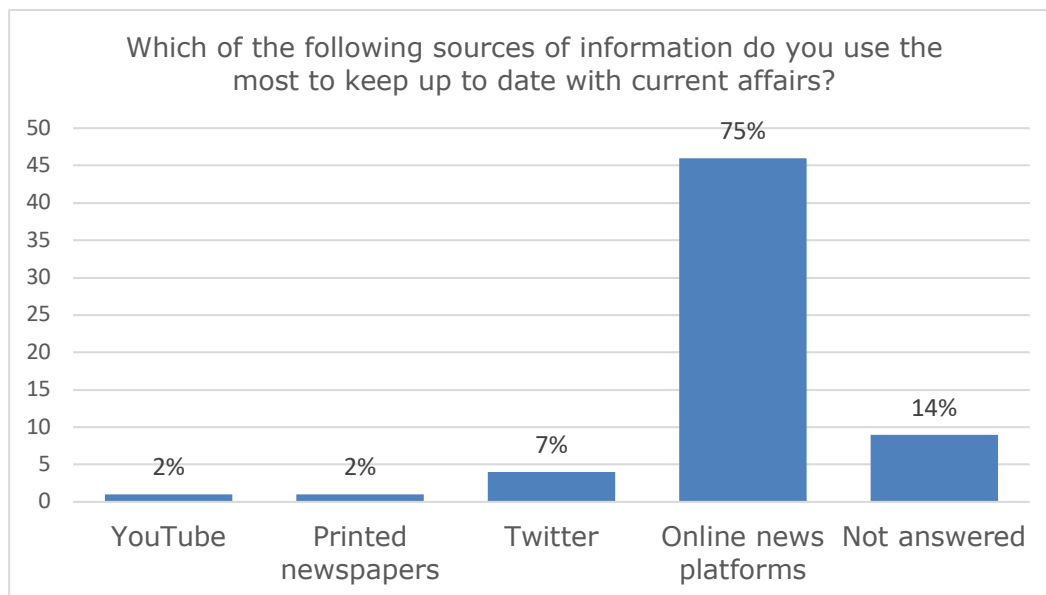
Alongside the introduction of this action I conducted two small surveys of undergraduate students in the 2016/7 academic year in order to gauge their own needs with regard to their learning. At the beginning of the academic year an initial short survey was conducted online using the audience response system application Socrative to a second-year undergraduate cohort of an introductory EU politics course on the sources of information and media they used to gather information on current affairs (61 responses, 66 per cent response rate). A second qualitative survey was conducted later in the academic year with final year undergraduate students on a higher-level EU policy-making module once the initial action had been put in place (28 responses, 88 per cent response rate). This survey asked more in-depth qualitative questions of students regarding sources of information they use to study the EU as well as the challenges of studying the EU at a time of change, including Brexit.<sup>2</sup> I also kept an informal log of my teaching, using it to note down important observations and reflections on my practice as teaching progressed.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Since the arrival of digital technologies there has been an exponential increase in information readily available on the EU and accessible to anyone with a computer/mobile device and an internet connection. The development and deployment of information technology developments can very much enhance learning as students of politics learn about and engage with issues that change often on a daily basis (Pleschova 2015: 291). Both surveys conducted as part of this research into my teaching practice post-referendum showed how much students use online sources and social media to access information on current affairs and the EU. As figures 2 and 3 show, the vast majority of students surveyed in the first online survey used information technology, particularly online news platforms, to access information on current affairs. When it comes to social media, figure 3 shows that for just over

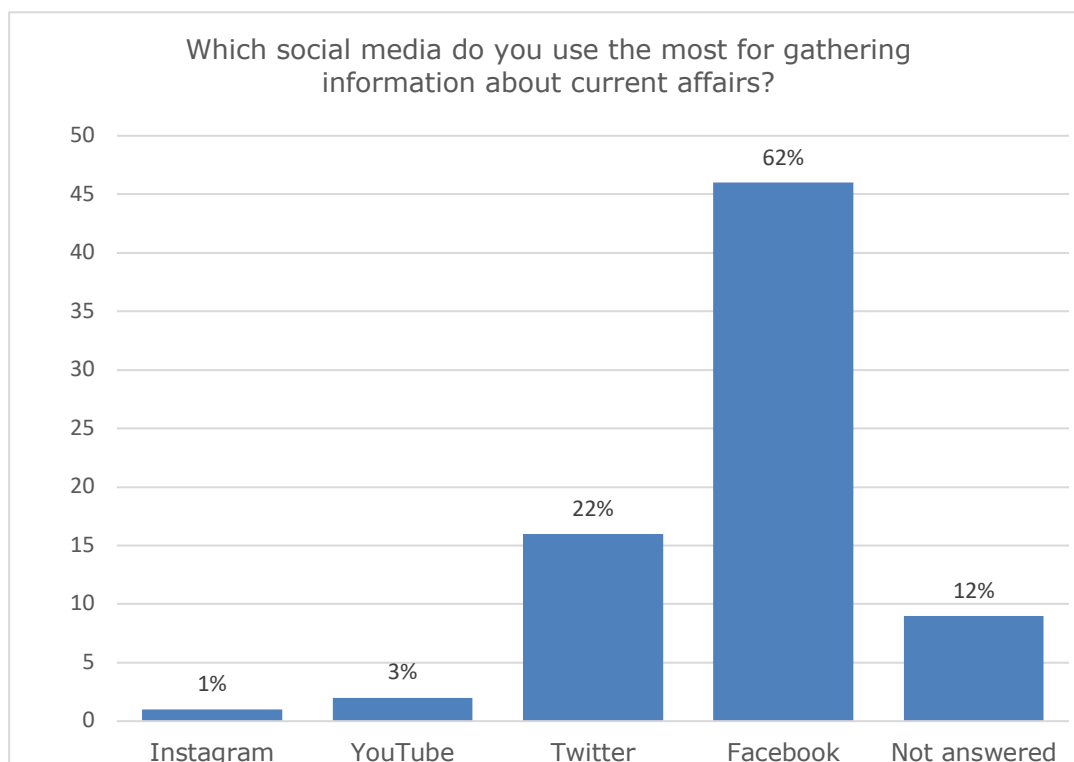
half of those students surveyed, Facebook was their most used type of social media network to gather information.

**Figure 2**



Total responses: 61 (66%)

**Figure 3**



Total responses: 61 (66%)

In the second qualitative survey<sup>3</sup> students were asked whether and how they used social media in helping them to learn about the EU. In their answers they spoke of how social media and online news platforms can be useful to help them keep up with rapidly changing political events:

'For the EU, especially current affairs, social media (Twitter) is a fantastic way to keep up with developments. Especially for Brexit, EU summits, international affairs and polling data' (Student 12).

'I follow the EU institutions on Twitter and have found this really helpful for keeping track of what is going on. For example, my dissertation is on EU enlargement in the Western Balkans and Federica Mogherini visited the region last week, so finding her reports via Twitter has been very helpful' (Student 23).

'Social media can be a useful way of sharing information.... It's particularly useful for issues like Brexit that are constantly developing' (Student 14).

However, this wealth of information also brings with it a number of challenges. Access to a superabundance of information may create a scenario of information overload, which can hamper learning unless students are trained in how to deal with such a vast information supply and become critical and reflective consumers of information themselves (Thornton 2015; 2012: 97). The potential information overload from access to online information and social media means teachers play an important role as guides to students in teaching them the skills of how to interpret data, select and evaluate information that is both accurate and useful to them and understand and analyse how arguments on issues are built.

The second survey showed clear signs of students developing as critical consumers of news and information, triangulating information, data and commentary from multiple sources, in line with the responsive approach adopted in my teaching. One student surveyed commented:

'I usually get my information from Twitter and Facebook, by following BBC World, Bloomberg Brexit, the EU Commission and Al-Jazeera. As the EU is a broad topic and knowledge comes from different perspectives, it helps on getting current topics of the week and provides current issues for us to think about' (Student 18).

Others signalled their caution, if not scepticism, of online information:

'I use Twitter sometimes because I follow some politicians, academics, experts etc. and obviously news accounts so I sometimes find information, articles etc. but in general I'm also cautious because I know you can find literally anything and everything on there. More 'classical sources' remain my main source of information' (Student 6).

'I use some forms of social media, mainly to gain information on the news. However, I try not to take it so seriously' (Student 10).

Interestingly, some students did not wish to use the internet or social media to help with their learning:

'Personally, social media distracts me so I try to stay away from it when working' (Student 25).

Students were also aware of the impact of the timeliness of events on academic research and printed publication lead-in times and the added issue this presents for their learning and research. According to one student surveyed, the most challenging aspect of studying the EU at this time of change is 'gathering academic sources that are up to date with recent events of Brexit and populism – even articles from a year ago could be considered to be out of date in some aspects' (Student 1). Digital and

social media technology including YouTube, Twitter and online instantaneous recordings of key speeches, academic talks and online academic blogs can be important sources of up to date information, knowledge and research for students but require careful navigation on the part of both the teacher and student. Teachers can also integrate these digital innovations into online visual learning environments widely used in university teaching.

A key challenge for students and scholars of the EU currently is uncertainty regarding the future development of the EU and particularly surrounding the UK-EU relationship and the future of the UK post-Brexit. The pervasive uncertainty and fast-paced coverage regarding the UK's future relationship with the EU can be challenging for students to deal with in their learning. Many students referred directly to this uncertainty in the qualitative survey when asked what, for them, is the most challenging aspect of studying the EU at the present time, commenting that this has both positive and negative aspects:

'There's a lot of uncertainty about the EU's future, which leads to key assumptions being questioned. However, that also makes studying the EU at this time interesting' (Student 14).

'The levels of uncertainty arising from Brexit are the most challenging, nevertheless this is the most interesting part as well' (Student 13).

'I think the most challenging aspect has been studying an organisation that is either a car without a driver or with too many drivers wanting to go in different directions. There is no telling how the EU will change in the next few years which is both difficult and interesting' (Student 17).

A number referred to the speculative nature of analysing the future of the EU and also the Brexit process, e.g.:

'With things changing so often many things we say in class are very speculative and so can't necessarily be said with much certainty. But in some ways, this is good, it lets us give our view of how we think things might or should go' (Student 2).

'Trying to deal with questions of the future post-Brexit is the biggest challenge, when it feels even our government has no idea....' (Student 23).

In addition, the assumption or presumption that teachers know more than their students is somewhat undermined in circumstances such as Brexit where due to digital technology students often can be aware of events before teachers, when events can sometimes occur 'live' in the classroom and where students can be aware of useful research that the teacher has yet to come across. In this context and in my own experience, it was important to recognise my role as a facilitator of knowledge for students in my teaching but also to acknowledge that students and teachers are also collaborators in sharing and making sense of new information and research.

As well as reflecting on the survey results, using an action research approach enabled me to glean a number of insights into my teaching the EU in the UK post-referendum relating to what and how I teach and what students want to explore further. The initial action of creating a parallel teaching space alongside the requirements of the set curriculum as mandated by UK university specifications had the effect of creating of what can be termed an *exilic* teaching space outside of lectures and seminars where students and I worked in partnership as co-learners to discuss and answer questions of their own choosing as they responded to ongoing political events and developments (see further Brogan 2017).<sup>4</sup> In this way, Brexit inspired and challenged me to break out of a teacher-controlled, heavily

curriculum-based mode of pedagogy and to be more flexible in my teaching of the EU, involving student agency to a greater degree.

### *Making connections in an expanding EU curriculum*

The steer I received from students led to a widening and deepening of the EU as an object of study, greater connections made within and without the discipline of political science as well as with other disciplines including law, history, economics and international political economy. In our parallel space, students wished to understand in greater depth the linkages between domestic and EU level politics and comparative public policy as well as a wish to make links between domestic and international legal frameworks including trade. They also wished to address the big questions and challenges facing the EU today, particularly in the broader global context of the liberal internationalist order under stress.

Until the eurozone crisis there was a widespread assumption prevalent in academic work on the EU that the EU was a settled system. Scholarship in the decade before the euro crisis focused on institutional and governance aspects of European integration, enhancing our knowledge and understanding of the dynamics of governance processes within the EU but as Laffan acknowledges, 'at a cost of neglecting politics other than technocratic politics and the cost of paying insufficient attention to power' (Laffan 2017: 18). The core curriculum of many courses on the EU, including my own and as also seen in many undergraduate textbooks on the EU, reflected this emphasis which tended to treat European issues and domestic politics as separate. The challenge of keeping track of developments in all member states and the difficulty of cross-country comparison as the EU deepened its integration and widened its membership also fed into this European-level technocratic focus in both scholarship and teaching (Wallace 2017: 11).

The sequence of challenges affecting the EU since 2008 and the increased fragmentation of domestic politics in many EU member states with rising nationalist and populist discourse has prompted both students and scholars of the EU alike to wrestle with the big existential questions facing the EU. Significant moments in the evolution of the EU have tended to inspire new departures in theorising on the EU and European integration and the last ten years are no exception to this. From the eurozone crisis to the refugee crisis and now with Brexit, scholars have renewed their focus on understanding the institutional and constitutional transformation of the EU in both positive and negative directions as well as its resilience. This was also reflected in the new questions my students wanted to answer and explore in our *exilic* space as they responded to ongoing events.

Through their post-functionalist theory published on the cusp of the Eurozone crisis, Hooghe and Marks showed how conceptions of identity are having an independent effect on the trajectory and outcomes of European integration and affect voters' and elite decisions about national and international politics (Hooghe and Marks 2009). Other scholars have examined the limitations of integration theories such as neofunctionalism and liberal intergovernmentalism, recasting and applying them to the Euro and refugee crises (e.g. Schimmelfennig 2017, 2018a; Niemann and Ioannou 2015). Students have similarly become alive again to these key questions and frameworks regarding European integration, mirroring this emphasis of many scholars. Combined with the impact of a succession of crises affecting the EU, the Brexit vote also led both students and scholars to question whether we have reached the limits of European integration. While Volland (2014) and Webber (2014) focused on the forces behind disintegration in the EU well before the Brexit vote, since 2016 scholars such as Schimmelfennig (2018b), Jones (2018) and Leruth et.al. (2019) have also begun to systematically theorise the dynamics of disintegration and differentiated disintegration. Hodson and Puetter have even gone so far as to conduct a thought experiment on what EU scholars would study if the EU were to fall (Hodson and Puetter 2018).

Trying to understand the EU's multiple challenges including Brexit has also reminded us that the EU cannot solely be examined and understood through exclusive disciplinary lenses alone (Manners and Whitman 2016). By its very nature understanding the beast that is the EU, as with many issues of political concern, involves the interlocking nature of a variety of economic, social and legal factors and dynamics and opens out new opportunities to adopt multidisciplinary approaches to studying the EU (Kauffman 2015: 111). Prompted by my students' questions responding to events since the referendum, it became clear that helping to introduce them to the process of looking at the EU through multiple theoretical and disciplinary lenses enabled them to make stronger connections and more in-depth critical analyses of the EU and its integrative processes.

### *Identity in teaching the EU*

Teaching EU politics in the UK since the Brexit vote has shown that identity issues and the social context within which teaching takes place are also present in the classroom experience. Although the determinants of the Brexit vote are multiple, in their research some scholars have found that attitudes to intra-EU migration may have been an important driver of the Brexit referendum result (e.g. Clarke et.al. 2016). It is certainly the case since the referendum result that the politics of identity has become much more salient the UK and also in discussions in the classroom (and this can also be influenced by where within the UK teaching takes place).

Increasingly in our discussions where British students were joined with other European and international students, they realised that they have different experiences of EU membership based on where they are from. This echoes the insights of scholars such as Diez Medrano (2003) and De Vries (2018) who, at different times in their research, have investigated how our views about the European project can be affected by our national perspectives. For Diez Medrano:

‘People approach the topic of European integration equipped with a cultural repertoire that tends to vary along sociographic, political and national lines. This cultural repertoire includes, among other things, knowledge, habitus, stories, memories and world views, upon which people draw more or less consciously when framing objects and problems’ (2003; 6).

Underpinning De Vries' more recent research is the key insight: ‘people's evaluations of and experiences with the European project are fundamentally framed by the national circumstances in which they find themselves’ (2018: vii). For De Vries, the challenge now is to understand more about the exact way in which national conditions matter for public opinion about European integration and how they relate to behaviour in elections and referendums.

When it comes to teaching the EU, rather than ignoring or minimising the issues of how we identify with, and our national experiences of, the EU in the classroom (as had been my own practice in the past out of a desire to be as objective as possible), it can be useful as part of the learning process to acknowledge them explicitly and integrate them into our teaching in order to enhance understanding. How can this be done? For Wallace (2017: 9-10), we need to pay more attention to the stories or narratives that we tell each other about Europe and the EU and what membership means. As a way of exploring this further, having students deploy the concept of narratives or stories in the classroom can help engage their cognitive frames and personal experiences in a new way, increasing their ability to make connections (Bode and Heo 2017). By asking students in class to actively interrogate their diverse national experiences of the European project through the identification of possible narratives on EU membership as presented in their own countries (a sort of narrative heuristic as it were), my students went on to gain a greater understanding of the stories we tell ourselves about what it means to be part of the EU from different national and subnational perspectives, what the EU represents to those

from outside the EU and the constraints these narratives can also have on elite behaviour. In making use of narratives and frames in this manner we were able to access the politics of identity and how it relates to the EU in a more nuanced and perhaps even more authentic way.

### *Brexit and the politicisation of teaching the EU in the UK*

In an environment of contestation and contention it is impossible to teach the EU completely dispassionately and it is important to be open about one's potential biases and consider questions of subjectivity (O'Rourke 2019, xxi). In a political context where one's subject is hotly contested also means that politicisation in the form of controversy and emotion can come into the classroom. For the first time, British students are experiencing 'live' what it means for their country to move from being an EU member state to a third country and this is also present in their learning experience in the classroom setting. As an example, by definition the UK's withdrawal from the EU entails the loss of EU citizenship rights for British citizens. Depending on their political views some students may be sanguine about this, but for others it has given rise to a number of feelings including anger, upset, fear and anxiety often occurring in class discussions, as students contemplate the loss of their rights to live, work and study in the EU.

Drawing on political controversy in the classroom can, at times, be a useful teaching method in order to enhance student engagement (Malet 2015: 245). But what about when the subject being taught becomes contentious in a divided society? The Brexit result and the reactions of certain political elites and tabloid newspapers to it also politicised the teaching of the EU in the UK. In October 2017, Conservative politician and then party whip Chris Heaton Harris MP sent a letter to all UK university vice chancellors (heads) requesting the names of lecturers teaching European affairs with particular reference to Brexit, copies of their syllabi and online content (including presumably online lecture recordings as this practice is now ubiquitous in UK universities) thus bringing contention directly into the classroom. Reactions by newspapers such as the Daily Mail and Daily Telegraph alleging 'remainer' lecturer bias and infiltration of the EU in universities further unsettled the teaching process. This prompted academics to challenge such charges of bias and influence asserting their educative role in imparting knowledge, encouraging debate and developing skills of critical thinking amongst students (Cardwell 2017; The Guardian 2017).

### **CONCLUSION**

'Europe is an idea and a place. It must be defined by each new generation as the challenges confronting it and the solutions to them change' (Peter A. Hall, 2018).

Teaching and learning about the EU in Brexit Britain has brought with it both challenges and opportunities. In my own experience, since the referendum my students have never been more interested and critically engaged in the EU as an object of study as they personally experience the Brexit process. They are asking wider and more far reaching questions about the nature of the EU project and its impacts than before, as well as making more interconnections between politics, economics and social phenomena in Europe and between Europe and the rest of the world. Teaching more 'responsively' and flexibly in reaction to political events as I have done since the referendum has meant that my students contribute to the direction of their learning in a more active way. Political controversy and social context are also more present in the classroom and the teacher does play a role in acknowledging and responding to this. Finally, keeping up to date with and making sense of ongoing events, especially in the digital age with its enhanced opportunities for knowledge acquisition, adds to the challenge of teaching and learning about the EU at this uncertain time. Indeed, this abundance of

information and proliferation of rapidly changing events can be overwhelming for both students and teachers and our workloads increase as a result.

As a method of educational research, the action research method adopted in this study is best conducted as a continuous process of problem-posing, data gathering, analysis and action in multiple cycles (Wilson 2017, 99). Although this research involved one cycle of action research, it still allowed scope for careful reflection on practice. Taking the action research process further could involve more active engagement with students as participants in the research process, gaining their evaluations of responsiveness and instigating a new action of their suggestion, including them as active agents in the research cycle.

While every teacher's experience is context dependent, particularly in terms of the rigidities of national curriculum requirements, since the referendum the introduction of flexibility, student collaboration and student agency into my teaching has certainly enhanced, if not transformed, the learning experience in my classroom. In times of flux and uncertainty, as students and teachers we can respond to and navigate the choppy waters of events in partnership together.

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## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> The class appeared in students' timetables as a 'drop-in' to highlight its flexible and non-compulsory nature. Each week, prior to class students were asked to indicate in advance of upcoming sessions the questions and topics they wished to address.

<sup>2</sup> This teaching comprises a second year undergraduate introductory EU course and a final year course on EU policy making in the School of Politics and International Relations at the University of Kent, UK. With approximately 20,000 students and situated in the south east of England, in 2017 its student profile was as follows: 73% UK; 10.9% EU and 16.1% Overseas with students from 158 nationalities studying at the university. 41% of Kent's academic staff are from outside of the UK (University of Kent 2017). In my own EU undergraduate modules, in 2016/7 approximately 60% students came from the UK, 30% from the EU (including Erasmus) and 10% overseas and were in the range of ages 19-21, evenly split across gender.

<sup>3</sup> Students were asked two questions in the survey: 1) 'do you use social media in helping you learn about the EU and how?' and 2) 'what do you find the most challenging aspect of studying the EU at the present time?'.

<sup>4</sup> Drawing on post-anarchist thinking, Brogan defines an exilic space in teaching as a temporally and spatially bracketed space where, in their educational interactions, teachers and students are able to step out of their predetermined roles to create new possibilities of relationships (Brogan 2017, 510).

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Research Article

## Synchronous Online-Teaching on EU Foreign Affairs: A Blended-Learning Project of Seven Universities between E-Learning and Live Interaction

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## Abstract

Together with 6 universities in Germany, we organised a seminar on the inter-relations between crises in Europe and their effects on European foreign affairs. The seminar was conceptualised with regard to two dimensions: (1) weekly live-interaction between more than 150 students with a clear schedule for discussions and presentations, and (2) an e-learning portal that constituted the main reference for various elements of learning and information exchange. Within this framework, students in working groups across different universities critically developed problem-based assumptions and arguments on EU foreign affairs both live and through the e-learning portal. The projects thus included both synchronous teaching and blended-learning elements. Our aim was to particularly link students from different disciplinary and knowledge backgrounds who discussed current issues of EU studies/ EU foreign affairs. In this paper, we interrogate and reflect on this teaching experience by elaborating on its technical and didactical aspects, presenting its innovative character, outlining its strengths and weaknesses, and providing recommendations for colleagues.

## Keywords

Teaching; EU foreign affairs; Blended-learning; E-learning

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## INTRODUCTION

Academics teaching European Union (EU) foreign affairs are confronted with increased complexity of current developments in the international arena. Moreover, multiple technological developments such as digitalisation and new learning spaces generate novel opportunities and challenges for teaching programmes. Hence, university teachers increasingly seek to apply innovative methods (Lambeir and Ramaekers 2006, p. 546). Many students wish to discuss the fast-changing developments in EU foreign affairs. Focusing on recent developments and explicit links to current debates such as Brexit, the financial crisis of the EU, the so-called European refugee crisis, or Europe's relations to the world in times of eroding alliances tend to be very popular among students. However, diverse backgrounds and previous learning experiences of the students require flexible approaches to teaching. Thus, the questions arise how to engage students effectively in learning about EU foreign affairs and its complexity, and how to make broader theoretical approaches interesting and worth studying for students.

Following increased demand for services of digital teaching (Garrison and Vaughan 2007, p. ix), a debate has evolved on so-called innovative teaching in Political Science (Goldsmith and Berndtson 2002, Gormley-Heenan and Lightfoot 2012, Ishiyama et al. 2016), and European Studies (Baroncelli and Farneti 2014, Lightfoot and Maurer 2014, Maurer and Mawdsley 2014, Maurer et al. 2020). However, most of the proposed innovations such as simulations (Usherwood 2014, Guasti et al. 2015, Muno et al. 2017, Plank et al. 2017), student engagement (Lightfoot and Maurer 2014), flipped classroom (Bergmann and Sams 2012, Boevé et al. 2017), new media (Quaintance 2014), web seminars

(Lieberman 2014, Mihai 2014), field trips (Roder 2014), and distance learning (Brühl and Henneberg 2016, Bell et al. 2017, Plank et al. 2019) can only to some extent respond to the demands made by students in digital teaching environments and with regard to the complexity of policy issues. On the one hand, students question the learning efficiency of traditional teaching methods (Garrison and Vaughan 2007). On the other, within digital learning courses, students have asked for more opportunities to interact with each other in synchronistic ways (McBrien et al. 2009).

Confronted with the challenges described above, lecturers of European Studies as well as International Relations from 13 universities and academic bodies decided to establish a course on the inter-relations between crises in Europe and their effects on European foreign affairs during the summer term 2017 (Plank et al. 2019). It sought to bring together the expertise of different universities and research facilities for the students.<sup>1</sup> The seminar was conceptualised with regard to two dimensions: (1) weekly live-interaction between more than 150 students with a clear schedule for discussions and presentations, and (2) an e-learning portal that constituted the main reference for various elements of learning and information exchange. The latter included aspects from both an academic perspective – e.g. by making use of weekly short video lectures by internationally renowned scholars on specific topics as well as academic literature – and integrated aspects from a more practice-oriented perspective, such as online tests, or student works like videos, briefing papers, wikis, or podcasts. Within this framework, students critically developed problem-based assumptions and arguments on EU foreign affairs in mixed working groups across different universities, both live and through the e-learning portal (see below).

Our aims were to particularly link students from different disciplinary and knowledge backgrounds who sought to discuss current issues of EU foreign affairs. Moreover, we had the goal to specifically enable students to critically reflect on current challenges of EU foreign affairs. Another specific objective of the courses was to provide universities with limited expertise on EU foreign affairs with knowledge provided by experts and to make use of synergies from cooperation in this regard. The project drew on inverted/ flipped classroom elements – i.e. the shift of knowledge transfer to the self-study phase and of the in-depth reflection to the actual session (Lage et al. 2000, Strayer 2012, Talbert 2012, Goerres et al. 2015, Lambach and Kärger 2016) – which were replenished by far-reaching e-learning platforms and an interactive, cross-site element during each session. The focus on students and their learning paths was complemented by a didactic-theoretical teaching concept which centred on the specific requirements of e-learning and synchronous online-teaching. The creation of a cross-site working atmosphere within student groups by using digital elements was an essential part and objective of the course. In the summer term 2018, the consortium reviewed the project and started a cross-site seminar involving 200 students which focused on the security-development-nexus of EU-policies towards Africa.

In this paper, we seek to particularly focus on the answers to the quests for innovative teaching in European Studies the projects provided, and the lessons learned for future teaching projects as outlined in the introduction to this special section (Maurer et al. 2020). We thus aim at presenting the concept of synchronous teaching in the field of European Studies and EU foreign affairs and point to its strengths and weaknesses. Specifically, we focus on the didactic and technical implementation of the projects, their context, adaptations we made, a comparison to more conventional teaching approaches, and recommendations and lessons learned. Moreover, this study seeks to critically engage in a discussion concerning the degree to which we achieved the aims of the projects. We argue that the projects had specific advantages such as the inclusion of a heterogeneous student group, and specific weaknesses such as considerable expenditure.

We proceed as follows: First, we elaborate briefly on blended-learning and synchronous teaching before we outline the conception of our cross-site courses. Afterwards we point out in how far the projects could respond to an increased quest for innovative teaching before we point to lessons

learned from the experiences. Finally, we conclude with a discussion of the findings and consider potential improvements for prospective teaching projects.

### **SYNCHRONOUS TEACHING AND BLENDED LEARNING AS INNOVATIVE TEACHING METHODS**

Before this contribution presents the projects undertaken, it seeks to briefly elaborate on synchronous teaching and blended learning as specific teaching methods. The term blended learning has been defined as combination of “face-to-face instruction with computer-mediated instruction” (Graham 2006, p. 5). Scholars have to a great extent elaborated on teaching experiences, and the efficiency and effectiveness for student learning processes of blended learning (Bonk and Graham 2006, Garrison and Kanuka 2004, Garrison and Vaughan 2007). As effort to increase a perceived lack of social interaction in (traditional) forms of distance learning, synchronous teaching allows “students and instructors to communicate orally, exchange messages through typing, upload PowerPoint presentations, transmit video, [or] surf websites together” (Mc Brien et al. 2009, p. 2). Synchronous teaching elements have particularly been used in the context of international cooperation or language courses (Hastie et al. 2010, Wang and Chen 2009), but have only been marginally applied to political science and European studies so far. One aim of the seminars presented below has been to provide for blended learning by including synchronous elements, in particular live interaction between the students and lecturers of the different universities. This effort moves beyond traditional forms of synchronous teaching that specifically target online-communication but do not necessarily include live-social-interaction (Martin and Parker 2014).

### **THE SYNCHRONOUS AND BLENDED SEMINAR ON EUROPEAN CRISES: “THREATS TO INNER PEACE IN EUROPE?”**

In response to student interest in current political issues related to EU foreign affairs and in continuation of a previous teaching project on the Islamic State, which had been conceptualised as a classical lecture series (Brühl and Henneberg 2016), lecturers from six German universities came together in order to organise a synchronous online-teaching experiment. The seminar focused on crises in Europe and their effects on European foreign affairs and asked whether the various crises in Europe and the European Union can be deemed threats to peace in the region. This broad and up-to-date set of topics could only be achieved through the joint expertise of the participating universities, which was a major incentive for cooperation.

The seminar involved 13 synchronous sessions (one per week) and was included in the curricula of various masters and bachelors programmes of the participating universities. These involved programmes in Conflict Studies, European Studies, and Political Science. It was conceptualised as cross-site course and involved the use of digital technology. The idea of synchronous online cooperation focusing on the specific topic of Europe in crisis emerged from the lecturers’ observation that the departments involved faced a similar student demand for teaching on the phenomenon of European crises. However, the expertise in European Studies and specific crises varied among the participating academics, who were not comfortable to teach on all the crises and issues involved. As a consequence, members of the consortium felt the need to include external expertise into their curricula. In this sense, experts from diverse academic institutions were invited to give a short lecture which was uploaded as a video to the e-learning system. However, instead of inviting experts to each of the universities, the consortium decided to pool resources and additionally develop a seminar with specific learning elements.

In general, the seminar involved two dimensions: (1) an e-learning portal that constituted the main reference for various elements of learning and information exchange, and (2) weekly live interactions

between more than 150 students with a clear schedule for presentations and discussions. The e-learning portal served as the main communication platform for interaction between the students and teachers. Each of the lectures lasted between 15 and 20 minutes and focused on a specific topic such as refugee relocation systems in the EU, the Front National as right-wing populist party, or the impacts of Brexit (see table 1). Moreover, the students could find additional information, for instance on previous elections in a country, academic literature on the specific crises, and many student-made elements such as quizzes or briefing papers in the portal. Within the platform, which was moderated by the lecturers, the students were also able to upload material. The student-made elements involved videos containing interviews with external experts conducted and organised by students, a briefing paper for each crisis which was uploaded prior to the respective session, radio podcasts, video polls, short wikis, short analyses of caricatures, etc.

Each student had to conduct at least one task which she or he had chosen within the online platform. A task could, however, also involve membership in a working group that had to fulfil one online task. As an innovative element and in order to generate synchronous online-learning and coordination competence among the students, most of the groups were composed of students from different universities. As a consequence, students worked together across large distances and in an online format. The e-learning platform provided for specific fora, ether pads, and communication channels for each group which made it possible to use the platform not only as an information hub, but also as a working space. We applied the ILIAS platform as the e-learning component, a system commonly used in many German universities.<sup>2</sup>

**Table 1: Course outline “Threats to peace in Europe”**

No.	Topic (original titles in German)	Input	Lead site
1	<b>Introduction 1 - Welcome, presentation of analytical concept</b>		Freiburg
2	<b>Introduction 2 - Theoretical and conceptual session</b>		Tübingen
3	<b>Rule of law contestation?</b>	András Bozoki (Central European University)	Hamburg
4	<b>Inequality in Europe</b>	Leo Bieling (Eberhard Karls University Tübingen)	Tübingen
5	<b>Brexit</b>	Karen Smith (London School of Economics and Political Science)	Freiburg
6	<b>The Eurozone crisis</b>	Joscha Abels (Eberhard Karls University Tübingen, and George Andreou (University of Thessaloniki)	Tübingen
7	<b>Right-Wing populism in Europe</b>	Daniel Stockemer (University of Ottawa)	Mainz
8	<b>The Asylum crisis</b>	Natascha Zaun (University of Oxford)	Düsseldorf
9	<b>Geopolitics and Ukraine</b>	Konstanze Jüngling (Institute for East and Southeast European Studies)	Marburg
10	<b>EU-Russia and EU-US relations</b>	Hans-Georg Ehrhardt (Institute for Peace Research and Security Policy)	Hamburg
11	<b>Conclusion</b>		Düsseldorf

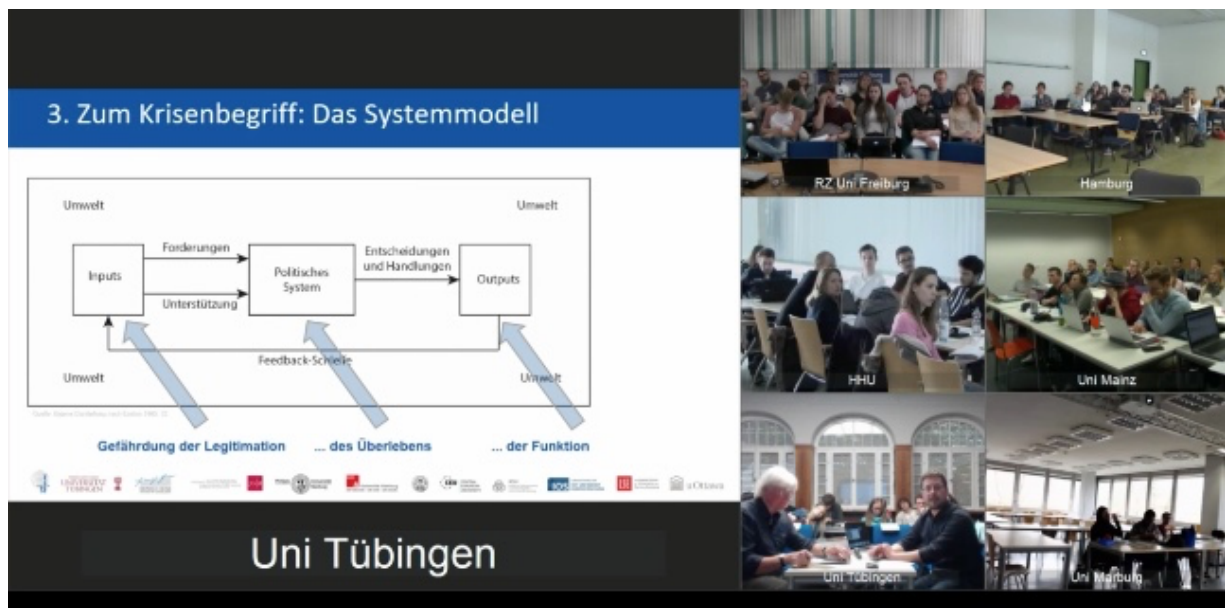
Weekly live interaction among all participating universities constituted the second main component of the seminar which was conceptualised as a live-learning space in order to enable students to interact with each other. In addition to a preparatory and a revision phase, the seminar consisted of a 90-minute weekly session reflecting an inverted classroom concept. All participating universities exchanged live with changing lead-sites that conceptualised the session and provided instruction for local-phases in which the students were able to conduct group exercises on specific topics related to the overall theme. For instance, in the session on right-wing populism, the students in at the University of Mainz discussed the conditions under which right-wing parties might evolve as a threat to peace in Europe. Other universities discussed the conditions under which these parties might be stronger or weaker to do so. As such, every participating university had the lead for (at least) one session (see table 1). A typical session consisted of a (1) welcoming stage, (2) a live interaction involving input on the specific topic of the session, (3) and the possibility to ask questions to the expert who had provided a lecture uploaded to the e-learning portal. Most of the time, the expert attended the session physically or through online contact and the students were able to engage directly with him or her. In this context, cross-site student groups collected questions and comments beforehand. After this first online stage, in stage (4) a local component of the weekly sessions enabled the lecturers to individually develop group exercises, discussions, or text analyses with the local group. For instance, during the session led by the Mainz group which focused on right-wing populism and included an expert lecture on the Front National, the students studied additional video inputs by other experts elaborating on additional populist parties such as the AFD in Germany. The local sites could individually choose from a set of material provided for by the students with specific tasks related to the session. This included literature, quizzes, or short videos. Afterwards the local academics used the discussed potential threats to peace in Europe in the local group with regard to the particular session theme. As a standard procedure, the lead-site provided materials, an outline of the session, and guiding questions for the local discussion phase.

Lastly, in stage (5) findings of the local discussions and elaborations were brought together online before the lead-site closed the session. In the example described above, the expert had the opportunity to respond and comment on the points raised by the local groups. Although not every session stuck with this outline – single universities sometimes skipped the last online stage in order to intensify discussion or due to technical problems – most of the sessions proceeded in this way. Technically, the consortium used the software vidyo<sup>3</sup> for the live interaction and some sites used H.323 standard as video-conference equipment (see figure 1).<sup>4</sup>

Since sessions in which students had to be present were taking place at every site which was connected via video conference, our conception of a synchronous online teaching set a different focus that distinguishes it from other sorts of online or blended-learning seminars and virtual lectures. Lecturers were present at all sites. In general, synchronous online-teaching is only scarcely covered by the existent literature (Plank et al. 2019). In contrast, the seminar provided an extension and modification of the inverted classroom and flipped classroom format in the sense that the possibility to discuss and work in small groups of up to 30 students was able and explicitly part of the concept. Accordingly, the teacher-team developed an analytical framework which was constantly discussed and modified by the students throughout the seminar.

The analytical framework included a discussion of central terms such as ‘crisis’ and ‘Europe’ and provided a basis for discussions and student working orientated to the framework. Moreover, many students used parts of the framework for theses and student papers.



**Figure 1: Example for weekly live interaction including a presentation**

### THE SYNCHRONOUS AND BLENDED SEMINAR ON THE SECURITY-DEVELOPMENT-MIGRATION NEXUS WITH LOCAL PHASES: “THE SECURITY-DEVELOPMENT-MIGRATION NEXUS IN AFRICA”

After the first round of a cross-site seminar the consortium decided to repeat the teaching experiment and conceptualise another course in the summer term 2018. This seminar built largely on the didactical approach of the previous experience, but the consortium modified the concept to quite some extent (see below). In sum, eight universities and seven academic organisations were involved in the teaching experiment and more than 200 students from different backgrounds including masters and bachelor programs participated and received credit points.<sup>5</sup> The seminar included 12 sessions. Whereas we also relied on weekly live interaction and an e-learning platform as major components of the seminar, the course also applied structured local phases into the conceptualisation and provided for a more flexible analytical framework based on securitisation-theory of the Copenhagen School. These local phases served as platforms for intensification and discussion within a smaller local group. They refer to working sessions within the synchronous session in which the local seminar (e.g. the seminar at the University of Mainz which involved 25 students), elaborated on specific aspects such as a specific proposal by the EU Commission, surveys in EU member states on the link between security and development, or the text analysis of one speech. The local lecturer (e.g. the authors at the University of Mainz), conceptualised these local phases (30 minutes) previously. After the local part, the findings of the local groups were brought together, contextualised and discussed.

The teachers put more effort into the composition of the group formats elaborating on specific tasks and tried to leave more space and flexibility to the local aspects of the seminar. For instance, in the session introducing the security-development nexus, it was possible to do a text-work on critical approaches to the nexus, discuss videos with statements from citizens in Mainz that tried to define the nexus, or search for narratives in Commission proposals. A particular emphasis was placed on securing the findings across the universities engaged in the local phases.

As one central element of both projects, the project team and the students created specific e-learning portals for both projects. These portals make the videos, students' outputs, literature, and all other documents, elaborations, or briefings publicly available.<sup>6</sup>

**Table 2: Course outline “Security-Development-Migration Nexus in Africa”**

No.	Topic	Input	Lead site
1	Opening		Freiburg
2	Introduction to theoretical and conceptual framework		Hamburg
3	Policy field 1 - Security and development	Alexander De Juan (University of Konstanz)	Marburg
4	Policy field 2 - Migration		Marburg
5	The Security-Development-Migration nexus	Julian Bergmann (German Development Institute)	Mainz
6	Germany as actor in the nexus	Cord Jakobeit (University of Hamburg)	Frankfurt
7	Italy as actor in the nexus	Bernardo Venturi (Istituto Affari Internazionali)	Magdeburg
8	The EU as actor in the nexus	Toni Haastrup (University of Kent)	Tübingen
9	The African Union as Actor in the Nexus	Christoph Hartmann (Heinrich-Heine-University Düsseldorf)	Hamburg
10	Consequences for the EU	Martina Fischer (Brot für die Welt) and Christine Hackenesch (German Development Institute)	Tübingen
11	Consequences for Africa	Chris Changwe Nshimbi (University of Pretoria)	Düsseldorf
12	Conclusion		Frankfurt

## IMPLEMENTATION AND EVALUATION OF THE INNOVATIVE TEACHING EXPERIMENTS

Both projects had their strengths and weaknesses. A particular reason for conceptualising the courses as seminars has been to address weaknesses of the preliminary lecture series on the Islamic State, which was partly criticised for including too few participating elements for students (Brühl and Henneberg 2016).

### *Synchronous online-teaching as innovative method in teaching EU foreign affairs*

As specific innovative elements, the synchronous character of both projects constitutes a challenging as well as new format of teaching EU foreign affairs. Drawing on the concept of inverted or flipped classroom, we additionally included an interaction mode in each of the sessions and through cross-site student working groups. The inverted classroom stands out in terms of encouraging a more intense interaction between lecturers and students and by overcoming individual learning challenges such as the need for clarification felt by single students during the presence phase in common seminars (Bergmann and Sams 2012, pp. 20–32, Strayer 2012, Brame 2013). It is explicitly not intended for knowledge transfer but for generating understanding, insight, and critical reflection, and scholars have argued that it leads to more effective learning (Talbert 2012, Brame 2013, Goerres et al. 2015). The extended concept of the inverted classroom has been used as an additional element of the seminars, but the consortium intended to move beyond the concept to additionally create a blended learning environment facilitating student interaction both in the presence phases and online.

We argue that three factors in particular make the projects innovative teaching formats, which seek to address challenges identified by previous teaching methods: (1) First, students had to conduct specific tasks that move beyond traditional learning exercises. In the European crisis seminar, one cross-site working group developed a dossier regarding the respective crisis and conducted a conflict analysis. This closely mentored dossier ensured a common level of knowledge among the heterogeneous group. During the sessions, the invited experts were connected to the cross-site video conference, while the mixed student groups were in charge of the discussion between the experts and

the student community. By assigning students to two different working group formats and mixing students of different stages of study, tasks could be adjusted to students' previous knowledge, thus focusing on students and their capabilities. Students appreciated the challenge inherent in these tasks compared to more commonly used presentations and confirmed that they allowed for a facilitated access and helpful overview over recent topics (evaluation poll).<sup>7</sup> Within the nexus seminar, groups preparing the discussion were replaced by 'summary groups' which encompassed students from all participating universities and sought to provide syntheses of the findings and reflections on the working processes. In addition, the nexus seminar put more emphasis on text work, for instance by analysing speech acts in the policy fields. Other students were asked to develop additional e-learning elements such as audio and video contributions as well as quizzes for feedback, which supported them in preparing and revising content. The development of these contributions fostered individual foci of interest and the skills of all participants in terms of their prospective 'employability'. Students also valued the possibility of becoming creative while extending their knowledge and the broad range of materials they could choose from: in the course evaluation that was undertaken they highlighted their appreciation for "creative tasks", "interactive methods", or "super media" approaches.

(2) Second, the seminar sought to make it possible to reflect on learning processes, the topics themselves, as well as analytical assumptions. In every session, time was reserved for students to reflect and classify their insights with regard to their broader knowledge which was taking place both within their local group (offline) and in cross-site working groups (online). In particular, the local phases of the projects that were increased in the nexus seminar, made it possible to discuss and reflect on the online interactions. Moreover, a working group focusing on a cross-sectional analysis of the whole seminar made reference to the analytical framework and provided for a conclusion. In this working group, students were able to express specific demands and reflect upon the seminar and its theoretical, analytical, and didactical basis. Most importantly and due to the prior recording of the expert presentations, students were granted the time needed to reflect the contents in-depth and to formulate well-directed questions, but most importantly to better contribute to the discussion because they could ask their questions directly to the experts. In this way, discussions with the invited scholars became a precious element of the weekly sessions.

(3) Third, the interaction between students from various universities, diverging study programs and different (e.g. disciplinary) backgrounds, can be emphasised as a specific focus of the project. Whereas for instance European Studies are a permanent feature of the curriculum in Mainz, students in Tübingen and Marburg are enrolled in Peace and Conflict MA programs. The inclusion of interactive elements both in the general approach of the courses as well as within the student working groups increased social interaction which has been identified as missing in many distance learning endeavours (McBrien et al. 2009). In the latter, important skills and learning processes are suppressed, such as the need to think with each other, to share one's ideas, and to engage oneself critically into the process of search and research (see Smith 2003). Moreover, students can be prevented from talking to each other in virtual learning environments when others are less present (whether student or professor) (Lambeir and Ramaekers 2006, p. 550). Hence, the engagement with each other, the exchange of ideas, and the collaborative search for answers constitute important elements of effective learning. Acknowledging these challenges of virtual learning, the consortium established student working groups, live interaction during the online phases, as well as interaction and exchange among the lecturers, the latter being another important element of collaborative teaching.

### ***Evaluation: Weaknesses and strengths of the projects***

As has been rightly noted, innovation does not necessarily involve effective learning and many enthusiasts of e-learning and new teaching focus primarily on evaluations that measure the popularity

of the methods among students (Middleton 2010, p. 7). As a consequence, we do not particularly analyse the popularity of the courses in terms of student demand but do include self-reflections of students' learning processes. From our point of view, students increasingly attach great importance to the effectiveness of their learning and how far their knowledge, skills, and reflection-ability increases. Both projects have shown that a synchronous online-teaching element involving blended learning formats has specific strengths: (1) First, different types of learners can be addressed individually. Since a diverse set of working materials – from academic literature to audio-visual e-learning elements – was offered and students were given the opportunity to conduct specific tasks, which varied in terms of requirements and with regard to the expected competence of students, flexible and individual approaches were possible. In this sense, the consortium tried to adjust specific tasks to the specific skills and competences of students by also enabling interaction in the working groups between students of different experience and background since students had to manage tasks within the group. As students increasingly express their wishes for decentralised and flexible learning outcomes (Bell et al. 2017), the projects largely enabled this flexibility.

(2) Second, the projects focused on the link between debates in EU foreign affairs such as nexus-thinking in the Africa-EU relations and current events. External experts and their exchange with our students by means of live transmissions are at the heart of including current research results. Given the shift of presentations to the preparatory phase, an intensive exchange is possible, and students can prepare their questions in advance rather than posing them in an ad hoc way. The applied tasks seem to strengthen students' motivation towards recent research. In the evaluation poll, 77 per cent of students praised the possibility to interact with these experts on current topics. For example, they had a chance to discuss the erosion of rule of law in Hungary and Poland with a colleague from the CEU in Budapest. The fact that experts were actually involved in the sessions and thus participated in the discussions was specifically appreciated by the students in the evaluation. They referred positively to the experts' approachability and the possibility to pose direct questions in the evaluation poll.

(3) Third, the learning outcomes are applicable for students. Based on the assumption that the application of knowledge and available skills improves learning processes, the latter become an integral part of teaching concepts, also regarding prospective 'employability' (Biggs and Tang 2011, p. 63, Maurer and Mawdsley 2014). This applies especially to interdisciplinary qualifications which do not only include classic competencies but also rely on teaching anchored in the digital age (Goldsmith and Berndtson 2002, p. 70, Carpenter and Drezner 2010). The practical applicability of learning outcomes is covered through the diverse range of tasks within the seminar. Students have to apply their skills in interviewing, producing digital content, and dealing with complex digital platforms. Due to the need for close coordination within working groups, the students have to work together under time pressure and over long distances.

(4) Fourth, the inverted classroom model allows for a stronger student-centeredness as well as a flexibilisation of learning methods as we could spend more time on intensifying learning objectives in the class. 63 per cent of all respondents confirmed that their overall learning progress was strengthened by the e-learning elements (evaluation poll). Self-produced videos like short expert interviews or representations of public opinion on specific political topics represent the most popular elements among students. In sum, the evaluation verifies that e-learning elements are accepted among students and deemed to contribute to the success of university teaching. The synchronous student cooperation was explicitly appreciated among the participants.

However, a number of weaknesses were also identified: (1) First, some challenges evolved concerning the student working groups. Students recognised that the time-consuming coordination and distribution of tasks was difficult in some groups. In addition, the communication for the lecturers with the working groups has at times been very time-consuming. Moreover, occasional free-riding was

raised in the evaluation as students reported of challenges from the unequal work distribution (evaluation poll). Partly, these issues emerged due to diverging examination requirements at the different universities, which can be standardised only to a limited degree.

(2) Second, the live interaction format is also characterised by some shortcomings. In contrast to traditional seminars, some students were less likely to raise questions or participate in discussions. This might be particularly related to the uncommon situation of speaking to a camera. Moreover, there were also challenges concerning the technical aspects. While the viewing and audio quality was rather good, many universities had to move the seminar to specific video-rooms which had number restrictions. Moreover, the format required lecturers to rather give up control in specific learning situations as they were embedded in a consortium of several lecturers. In this sense, cooperation, coordination, and substantial agreement between the participating lecturers constitute major prerequisites for the seminar (Plank et al. 2019). The latter also points to transaction costs involved. The more lecturers and universities become involved, the more likely the technical challenges. In addition, the group of lecturers should share specific teaching methods and be able to accept a loss of control.

(3) Third, many observers emphasising e-learning and blended learning as innovative teaching methods praise the cost-effective benefits of these approaches (Osguthorpe and Graham 2003, pp. 231–232). However, from the experience of the two projects, it seems that the considerable time invested in these teaching formats exceeds that required for regular seminars. Yet, when evaluating teaching from a cost-benefit calculus it is also important to specify the audience (Middleton 2010). In this sense, students tend to benefit from the projects, whereas the lecturers might have to invest more time than in a traditional seminar. Hence, third party funding constitutes an important aspect of synchronous teaching with blended learning elements, as this may, to some extent, help create the necessary foundation and infrastructure.

## CONCLUSION

Starting from the observation that EU foreign affairs constitutes a teaching field which is characterised by the complexity and dynamic nature of the subject, and referring to the changing nature of teaching in higher/university education, we have presented two teaching projects based on synchronous teaching, blended-learning, and collaborative engagement from both students' and lecturers' perspective. The study reveals that inverted classroom-inspired synchronous online-cooperation using blended-learning elements can make a precious contribution to innovative teaching EU foreign affairs and related subjects. We have indicated that such a teaching method can address different types of learners, include the most recent international expert knowledge, create applicable learning outcomes, and generate flexible learning outcomes.

Apart from the benefits received by directly participating students and lecturers, the format also carries great potential within an internationalisation of the participating universities, notwithstanding any organisational and technical obstacles that might exist. From the analysis undertaken in this study, the establishment of this form of teaching seems suitable for two reasons: on the one hand, interaction among students, lecturers, and between students and renowned scholars in the field might provide excellent opportunities for integrating the field also from a teaching perspective. On the other, there is a possibility to make the collected material (like videos, presentations, recordings) available to a broader public. Then, colleagues, students, and other interested persons can make use of parts of the knowledge collected or intensify their learning through additional material.

However, there are also some major challenges emanating from the structure of the environment in which these projects take place. There might be challenges within the student working groups and students might raise fewer questions due to the live interaction. From a cost-benefit calculus, the projects are rather demanding. In addition, and as we have argued in this study, innovation is not a good thing per se. Rather, effective, flexible, and dynamic learning environments should be a major objective of teaching. With these projects, we sought to enable students to learn in flexible, interdisciplinary, dynamic but also demanding environments, and despite some weaknesses and challenges identified, the projects have also facilitated synchronous cooperation and acquaintance between students and teachers of different backgrounds and universities.

Important recommendations for colleagues thus include in particular three aspects: First, the consortium should be kept small. With reference to transactions costs and coordination between lecturers, a smaller group of up to five different programs seems optimal. Second, additional technical support for each institution is necessary to develop the time-consuming e-learning elements (see also Henneberg 2018). This might require the acquisition of third-party funding. Third, local parts of the sessions are recommended since they enable in-depth discussion and consolidation of specific topics. It might even be an option to hold whole sessions on a local basis in order to leave more space for debates among the students. Overall, this article should be taken as encouragement for colleagues to engage in synchronous teaching and foster (international) interaction between both students and lecturers.

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## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> The project succeeded a lecture series on the Islamic State which the consortium jointly organised in the summer term 2016 (Brühl and Henneberg 2016).

<sup>2</sup> Similar to moodle or blackboard, Ilias constitutes an online platform for the management of courses.

<sup>3</sup> See <https://www.vidyo.com/>.

<sup>4</sup> For an outline and best practice guide see (Henneberg 2018).

<sup>5</sup> For more information see (Plank et al. 2019).

<sup>6</sup> See <http://www.elearning-europa.politik.uni-freiburg.de/> for the first, and [https://wb-iliad.uni-freiburg.de/iliad.php?ref\\_id=194694&cmd=frameset&cmdClass=ilrepositorygui&cmdNode=xy&baseClass=ilRepositoryGUI](https://wb-iliad.uni-freiburg.de/iliad.php?ref_id=194694&cmd=frameset&cmdClass=ilrepositorygui&cmdNode=xy&baseClass=ilRepositoryGUI) for the second seminar.

<sup>7</sup> The evaluation polls are accessible via <https://international.politics.uni-mainz.de/staff/friedrich-plank/>.



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Research Article

## The Council of the EU in Times of Economic Crisis: A Policy Entrepreneur for the Internal Market

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## Abstract

While many studies have focused on the European Commission and its potential to act as a policy entrepreneur, little research has been undertaken into how intergovernmental institutions as a whole are able to shape and advocate certain policies. This article fills that gap by analysing debates in the Council of the European Union on two major strategies: The Small Business Act for Europe and the Europe 2020 strategy. These debates were analysed using newspaper articles in the daily bulletins of Agence Europe, yielding 469 statements which were qualitatively evaluated by means of content analysis. The results demonstrate that the Council as a whole is able to act as a policy entrepreneur if certain conditions are met, namely a common interest and political goal among member states, a need for economic measures due to a crisis situation, and the possibility of shifting unpopular decisions to Brussels.

## Keywords

European integration; EU institutions; Council of the EU; Economic crisis; Policy entrepreneur; Internal market

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The global financial crisis, which severely affected the European Union (EU) and its member states, offered a window of opportunity at the EU level that made it possible to place certain topics on the political agenda and to advocate changes in various policy areas (Verdun 2015; Saurugger and Terpan 2015; Falkner 2017, 2016). Research has demonstrated that the European Commission has acted as a policy entrepreneur and has been successful in placing and adopting certain policies (Steinebach and Knill 2017; Schön-Quinlivan and Scipioni 2017; Pollack 1997; Laffan 1997; Copeland and James 2014). This is due, inter alia, to the fact that the Commission succeeded in increasing its power in the wake of the crisis. However, at the same time, member states became increasingly reluctant to transfer greater power to the EU level and intergovernmental institutions, such as the European Council and the Council of the EU (hereafter the Council), turned out to be major platforms to develop strategies in overcoming the crisis (Puetter 2012; Bickerton, Hodson and Puetter 2015). Consequently, important economic governance measures were to a large extent formalised in intergovernmental agreements (Fabbrini 2013; Dawson 2015). Individual or groups of member states (especially Germany, France, and the United Kingdom (UK)) were therefore also able to increase their power and advocate certain policies during the crisis (see Schild 2010; Tömmel and Verdun 2017; Bulmer and Paterson 2013).

Even though scholars have focused on the Commission and member states as potential policy entrepreneurs, little is known about whether intergovernmental institutions as a whole also have this potential. Therefore, this paper fills this gap by asking: are intergovernmental institutions as a whole able to shape and advocate certain policies and if so, under which conditions?

In order to answer this research question, the paper focuses on the Council debates while developing, debating and adopting two major EU strategies that were introduced as crisis management between 2008 and 2012, namely the Small Business Act (SBA) for Europe and the Europe 2020 strategy. Both strategies aimed to ensure growth in Europe in the long term. The Council debates have been analysed based on newspaper articles in the daily bulletins of Agence Europe, an international independent news agency that specialises in information on EU activities, legislative discussions and outcomes. A total of 767 daily bulletins were reviewed with a view to retrieving relevant articles on the Council debates (a total of 51). I subsequently analysed and qualitatively evaluated the identified 469 statements by means of content analysis and conducted a Krippendorff's alpha reliability test (Krippendorff 2013).

The results demonstrate that the Council as a whole is able to act as a policy entrepreneur if certain conditions are met. These conditions are a common interest and political goal among member states, a need for economic measures due to a crisis situation and the possibility of shifting unpopular decisions and responsibility for them to the EU institutions.

This study contributes to the literature in three ways. First, it applies the concept of policy entrepreneur to entire intergovernmental institutions and their characteristics. Second, it provides comprehensive insights into crucial Council debates. Third, it identifies wider implications for overall EU policymaking.

The remainder of this article is structured as follows. Based on the current policy entrepreneur literature dealing with the EU institutions, I discuss the changes in the EU institutional setting and the role of intergovernmental institutions in times of crisis. Next, I discuss what motivates intergovernmental institutions to act as policy entrepreneurs with a view to applying the concept of policy entrepreneur to the Council. This is followed by a discussion of methods and operationalisation. The results of the analysis of the Council debates and specific examples are presented in the subsequent section. Finally, the findings are explained and their implications discussed.

## **INTERGOVERNMENTAL INSTITUTIONS AND POLICY ENTREPRENEURS**

When focusing on the EU level, we find various actors and different degrees and levels of policy entrepreneur. To date, several scholars have examined the European Commission as a potential policy entrepreneur (Steinebach and Knill 2017; Schön-Quinlivan and Scipioni 2017; Pollack 1997; Laffan 1997; Copeland and James 2014; Bauer and Becker 2014). This can be traced back primarily to the fact that the Commission is a supranational institution with the right of initiative that has increased its impact on EU policymaking over the years. Especially in times when European beliefs and ideals are perceived as crucial and when supranational officials are regarded as more legitimate than domestic actors, the Commission has the potential to exert power and to push certain policies through (Moravcsik 1999: 280), resulting in its key role as a policy entrepreneur (Steinebach and Knill 2017; Schön-Quinlivan and Scipioni 2017; Copeland and James 2014). As the possibility of acting as a policy entrepreneur was often related to the Commission's function of proposing legislation, it comes as no surprise that there is little research when it comes to analysing intergovernmental institutions' potential to act as policy entrepreneurs.

This also has to do with the nature of intergovernmental institutions, where national interests are important and dependent on different discussions and time periods. For example, at the time of the economic crisis, member states increasingly avoided transferring more competencies to the EU level (Puetter 2012: 161-163) and policy-coordination became the common decision-making approach that has led to a new deliberative and consensus-seeking intergovernmentalism (Puetter 2012; Bickerton, Hodson and Puetter 2015). As supranational agreements were sometimes hard to agree upon since a

common consensus among the EU countries was lacking, new economic governance measures were often formalised through intergovernmental agreements (Puetter 2012; Fabbrini 2013; Bickerton, Hodson and Puetter 2015).

Research has pointed to a shift of power among the EU institutions after the onset of the financial crisis. While one study hints at the fact that the power of the Council formations and the presidency in agenda-setting decreased (Schwarzer 2012), most studies have analysed the increased power and political weight of the three large member states (Germany, France, and the UK) in advocating certain policies during the financial crisis, referring to this as political leadership (Tömmel and Verdun 2017; Schild 2010; Bulmer and Paterson 2013).

Moreover, studies have demonstrated that certain parts of intergovernmental institutions also have the potential to act as policy entrepreneurs (Pircher 2019; Juncos and Pomorska 2010). For example, officials in the Council Secretariat stressed their role in shaping policies and described their power as influential in the agenda-setting phase of the presidency. Their power was nevertheless dependent on the presidency in place (see also Pircher, 2019) and was more crucial in areas where the Commission lacked competencies (Juncos and Pomorska 2010: 19).

Research has demonstrated, for example, that the Council was also able to move certain policies forward in the area of security and defence by adopting the role of conflict manager (see Shepherd 2009). Furthermore, studies have demonstrated that the new institutional setting that was introduced during the economic crisis favoured intergovernmental institutions, such as the European Council and the Council (Tosun, Wetzel and Zapryanova 2014; Puetter 2012; Fabbrini 2013; Dinan, 2011; Bickerton, Hodson and Puetter 2015). This change in the institutional setting places intergovernmental institutions at the forefront, providing them with increased power and an enhanced potential to introduce and shape EU policies, and, in turn, with a greater potential to act as a policy entrepreneur.

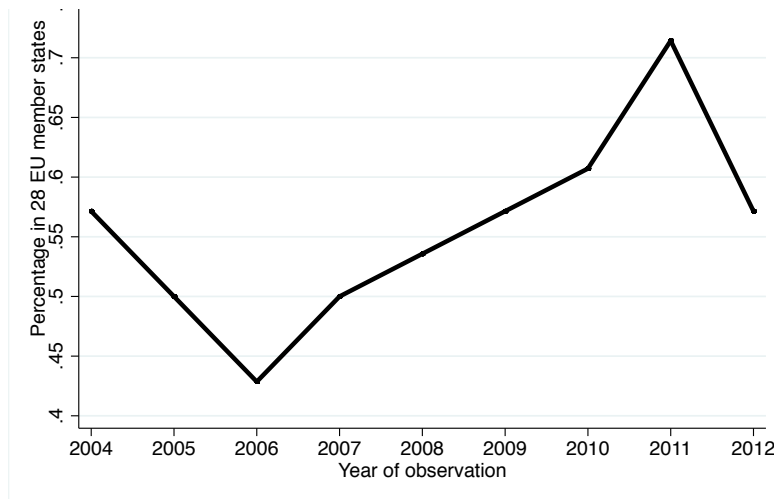
However, in order to answer the research question, one needs to clarify what kind of motivation the Council as one body may have to act as a policy entrepreneur. I therefore provide the following five main grounds: a common political or economic interest among member states, a need for economic governance measures, an economic need to implement unpopular policy actions, the possibility of shifting responsibility from the national to the EU level, and a common political agenda.

The 2008 economic crisis revealed weaknesses in the EU institutional framework regarding economic affairs (Verdun 2013: 53-59). Member states needed to respond to the crisis by introducing and implementing swift actions. At first, there was a trend to respond to the crisis individually, but given the developments in certain member states (for example Greece), joint EU agreements and responses became all the more urgent (Verdun 2015: 223). As Pircher (2018a) demonstrates, this led to a window of opportunity to push certain policies of market deregulation through. Therefore, the Council as a whole was able to implement ready-made plans as solutions to the financial crisis in 2008 (the 'garbage can model'). This demonstrates that under certain conditions and a certain type of common interest, the Council has the potential to act as a policy entrepreneur.

Especially if there is a need for economic governance measures (for example in the light of a global economic crisis, but also in general terms) the EU has the function to adopt and implement decisions that cannot be made efficiently at national level (Mair 2013: 131). Therefore, the EU often becomes a place where economic reforms succeed. These are reforms that governments and administrations want but cannot implement at national level, since these solutions are regarded as unacceptable by citizens and are rejected by voters (Mair 2013: 133). This means that national politicians can shift the responsibility and accountability for unpopular decisions to the EU and prevent voter discontent in their countries (Mair 2013: 129). Governments can thereby avoid national conflicts and 'hide behind or blame Brussels'.

In addition, as demonstrated in Figure 1, the years following to the financial crisis saw changes in European governments and an increase in the number of governments (EU 28) with a dominance or hegemony of right-wing parties (conservative and liberal parties) in favour of the same economic agenda. It is especially when member states with the same political interests and agenda are in power that it might be possible for such states to act as policy entrepreneurs. Furthermore, this might also suggest the direction of change towards greater harmonisation and deregulation.

**Figure 1: Percentage of governments (EU 28) with a dominance or hegemony of right-wing parties between 2004 and 2012**



**Note:** based on Schmidt-Index defined as (1) hegemony of right-wing (and centre) parties ( $gov\_left1 = 0\%$ ) and (2) dominance of right-wing (and centre) parties ( $0 < gov\_left1 \leq 33.33$ )

## DEFINING POLICY ENTREPRENEUR IN THE COUNCIL

In terms of Kingdon's (2011) definition, policy entrepreneurs have the potential to shape policy outcomes if they are willing to invest their resources in order to advocate certain policy objectives (Kingdon 2011: 116-144). For policy entrepreneurs to be successful they need to have a certain agenda, a political network, negotiating skills and a certain reputation (Kingdon 2011: 165; Capano 2009: 19-25). Policy entrepreneurs are, inter alia, often officials, politicians, lobbyists, academics, lawyers and bureaucrats that focus on the public good or on their own individual profit (Kingdon 2011: 122-180). However, the definition of policy entrepreneur can be broadened as suggested by Mintrom and Norman (2009: 650) since Kingdon's definition leaves room for interpretation. Research demonstrates that policy entrepreneurs can also be different actors (Bernhard and Wihlborg 2014: 290) and even entire institutions or supranational institutions at EU level (Pollack 1999: 6).

What most definitions have in common is that policy entrepreneurs introduce new policies into the process in order to provoke policy change to alter the status quo. This means that policy entrepreneurs are regarded as advocates or agents of policy change, striving for a significant change in the future (Mintrom and Norman 2009).

If we apply the concept of policy entrepreneur to the Council as an intergovernmental institution, five different types can be identified. First, this concept applies to experts in the Council who work 'behind the scenes', such as officials in the General Secretariat, experts and officials from each member state in the preparatory bodies (working groups and committees) and experts and national officials involved in work in the presidency that strive for policy change. Second, it applies to public servants who have the potential to alter policies due to their relevant position within the policy process (Roberts and King 1991; Carroll 2017). Third, it applies to politicians who are driven either by their own profit-seeking

motive or by the common good (McCaffrey and Salerno 2011; Dahl 1974). This applies to the various ministers in the Council and the presidency represented by national politicians. Fourth, this concept includes individual member states or a group of member states that encourage new innovative approaches and policies. Fifth, the definition involves an institutional approach where the Council as a whole strives for the alteration of policies. The latter is the primary focus of this study, as there is scant research on this topic in comparison to the other categories.

## METHODS AND OPERATIONALISATION

In order to identify whether the Council has the potential to act as a policy entrepreneur, this paper focuses on Council debates on two relevant economic governance instruments, the Small Business Act (SBA) for Europe and the Europe 2020 strategy. There are a number of reasons for focusing on these two measures. First, for the purposes of the study it was important to analyse cases in which the Council was able to play a significant role in shaping the policies. In contrast to concrete legislative acts such as regulations or directives, these strategies offer the Council more room for manoeuvre since they involve both overall EU strategies and guidelines and concrete policy measures such as various forms of legislation. Second, it is important to include core areas where the EU, and thus the Council, have the most competencies. Third, the strategies were developed and adopted in the aftermath of the 2008 economic crisis, a period which led to a window of opportunity for certain policies to be advocated (see Pircher 2018a). Fourth, both strategies were debated in the Council over a relatively long period of time, namely 2008 to 2012.

The Council debates are examined primarily through an analysis of Agence Europe newspaper articles, an international independent news agency that specialises in information on EU activities and legislative discussions and outcomes. This approach does have its limitations as these articles constitute second-hand information. However, many other sources ultimately rely on Agence Europe when analysing policymaking and discussions in EU institutions. It is therefore a well-established medium. Moreover, as it is often not easy to gain a clear insight into the discussions of the Council because of a lack of transparency, this approach is suitable for the purpose of the study. Nevertheless, all relevant government documents and primary sources were also consulted, including the Council's conclusions, minutes and press releases. However, these types of documents generally represent the outcomes of the various debates and to a much lesser extent the controversial discussions. It is for this reason that this study focuses primarily on the Agence Europe newspaper articles.

For the purposes of the current study, all Agence Europe daily bulletins within the investigation period were analysed. A daily bulletin is a collection of newspaper articles published on a certain day. It consists of a large number of articles grouped into different EU policy areas, analysing and focusing on European events, debates and legislative outcomes. The first step was to collect and review all daily bulletins and their corresponding articles between June 2008 and May 2009 (in the case of the SBA) and between March 2010 and June 2012 (in the case of Europe 2020). This time frame covers the period from the transmission of the act to the Council until the adoption of the strategies and includes a total of 767 daily bulletins. Second, all relevant articles that dealt with the Council debates on the strategies were analysed via content analysis in ATLAS.ti (51 articles in 39 different daily bulletins).

The reported statements (469 in total) contained in these articles were coded and classified into three main categories: policy entrepreneur 0, 1 and 2. A reported statement is either an entire sentence or half of a sentence (for example a list of different policy demands). The category policy entrepreneur 0 includes statements that represent overall or general information on the debates. This constitutes primarily information on what topics were discussed or specific background information on the strategies or the legislative status quo. For example, the sentence '[t]he Competitiveness Council will debate progress with the action plan for implementing the Small Business Act (SBA), an initiative that

lists a hundred measures for promoting the growth and employment potential of European SMEs' (Agence Europe, 2009) is one statement coded as policy entrepreneur 0.

By contrast, policy entrepreneur 1 and 2 represent specific policy demands raised by the Council or by one or more member states during the debates. Each statement in this category represents one specific policy demand. This includes specific policy objectives, changes and adjustments to existing policy instruments, the inclusion of certain aspects or topics in existing legislation, proposals for new legislation and completely new competencies or changes in policy goals and hierarchy. Two indicators were considered for this classification of the degree of policy entrepreneur, specifically with a view to differentiating between policy entrepreneur 1 and 2. First, Hall's (1993) order change was utilised to assess the potential direction of future policy change of the policy demands. However, the statements reflect only the potential of policy change and not the actual outcome.

Second, in order to differentiate between the policy demands in the category policy entrepreneur 1 and 2, the policy demands were compared to the Commission's proposal on the strategies. In this respect, the category policy entrepreneur 1 represents statements in relation to which the Council plays an active role in shaping, advocating and realising the policy objectives and where the change consists of adjustments or additions to the already existing legislation. Policy demands categorised under policy entrepreneur 2 exceed the Commission's proposal and call for a greater change (change in techniques, settings or even policy goals) or completely new legislation that is not included in the proposal. To clarify this distinction, I provide examples while debating the SBA and adopting the Council conclusions on research areas. Whereas underlining 'the need to continue to support research and innovation and speed up national investment in pan-European research infrastructure in the context of the current economic crisis' (Agence Europe 2009) was classified as a statement belonging to policy entrepreneur 1, the fact that the Council 'will call on member states and the Commission to promote the use of existing financial instruments, particularly structural funds and European Investment Bank instrument for the construction, modernisation and maintenance of research infrastructure' was classified as policy entrepreneur 2 (Agence Europe 2009). Table 1 presents a summary of the different categories and indicators for classification.

**Table 1: Operationalisation of the three degrees of policy entrepreneur**

	Policy entrepreneur 0 (0)	Policy entrepreneur 1 (+)	Policy entrepreneur 2 (++)
<b>Degree of policy entrepreneur</b>	Statements represent overall or general information on debates and on legislative outcome.	Statements represent policy demands where Council took active role in shaping, advocating and realising policy objectives set in Commission's proposal.	Statements represent policy demands where the Council actively pushes through certain proposals, strategies or policies that exceed Commission's proposal.
<b>Potential direction of future policy change</b>	No potential policy change.	First order change: change and adjustment in policy instruments.	Second and third order change: change in techniques, settings or policy goals.

In order to measure the reliability of the data, coding was conducted twice (t1 conducted in March 2019 and t2 conducted in August 2019). Moreover, I used the Krippendorff's Alpha (KALPHA) reliability test, which considers both the observed and expected disagreement between two coders (observed disagreement = percentage of mismatches between two coders in values attributed to the same units; expected disagreement: probability that coders code a unit correctly merely by chance). The KALPHA test ranges between 0 and 1, where 0 is perfect disagreement and 1 is perfect agreement. The values



between the categories are rank-ordered, and hence ordinal in the current case. If we conduct this test in relation to the three different categories of policy entrepreneur (0, 1, 2) and their values at the two time periods (t1 and t2), the KALPHA ranges between 0.94 per cent and 0.99 per cent (see results of KALPHA in Appendix). This demonstrates that the results of the content analysis are highly reliable.

## THE COUNCIL AS POLICY ENTREPRENEUR

### *The Small Business Act (SBA) for Europe*

The SBA is an overarching EU framework based on ten principles that include specific policies and goals as well as concrete policy measures to improve the situation of small and medium enterprises (SMEs) in Europe. The main areas of focus for SMEs in the proposal are the promotion of entrepreneurship, reduction of the regulatory and administrative burden, improved access to funding and ensuring and enhancing access to markets, also at a global level (European Commission 2011). The SBA proposal was transmitted to the Council in June 2008. The Council agreed to prioritise the overarching SBA and certain objectives in the light of the economic slowdown in 2008 (Council of the EU 2008c). The problems posed by the financial crisis and the urgent need to take swift action to boost the economy were taken into account, and decision-makers began focusing on this area. This provided the potential for policy entrepreneurs to act.

An examination of the debates on the SBA within the Council makes it possible to analyse the Council's role in shaping the proposal. While analysing 218 daily bulletins of Agence Europe between 30 June 2008 and 29 May 2009, a total of five newspaper articles related to the Council debates on the SBA were identified. These articles included 57 concrete Council statements on the SBA. An analysis of the degree of policy entrepreneur in the statements reveals the interesting fact that 25 statements represent overall debates or outcomes (policy entrepreneur (PE) 0), nine statements represent the Council as an active player in shaping policies (PE 1), and 23 statements represent cases where the Council pushed certain proposals, strategies or policies through (PE 2) (see Figure 2). Surprisingly, most policy demands by the Council exceeded the Commission's proposal. All suggested policy demands in PE 2 were aimed at greater unification and harmonisation of the regulations within the EU Single Market than foreseen in the Commission's proposal. This clearly demonstrates that the Council played a more crucial role than hitherto realised and wielded more power during the adoption of the SBA than the Commission.

However, what were the main proposals and strategies that were introduced and adopted? The following section provides examples that answer this question.

One of the first initiatives was announced initially by former Commissioner Günter Verheugen. He made certain proposals for lifting the EU out of the financial crisis. These included the revision of the directive on reduced value-added tax rates in order to foster entrepreneurship (Agence Europe 2008). As a consequence of the Council debates, the European Investment Bank decided to mobilise €30 billion in support of SMEs (Council of the EU 2008b). The introduction of favourable conditions for SMEs were broadened and formulated in the Council conclusions in December 2008 (Conseil de l'UE 2008). In another 'rapid response' to the crisis (as Hervé Novelli, acting president of the Competitiveness Council and former French Secretary of State for Trade, Crafts and SMEs, called it) an action plan including short- and medium-term measures was adopted in late 2008 (Council of the EU 2009, 2008a; Agence Europe 2008). The priorities of this action plan were improved SME access to finance, reduction of the administrative burden, the so-called 'think small first' principle (tests that assess the impact of planned legislation on SMEs) and the promotion of SME markets, including the area of procurement (Council of the EU 2008a). In addition, the plan stressed a timely implementation



of the service directive, the adoption of the European Private Company (EPC) statute, SME access to third-country markets and easier regulations on patent questions (Council of the EU 2008a: 8-9; Agence Europe 2009). While certain policy objectives were also included in the Commission's proposal and can be identified as policy entrepreneur 1, it was mainly regarding the revision of certain directives, the creation of new legislation, changes in the procurement regime and especially the striving for an EPC statute that the Council exceeded the initial proposals. Therefore, these attempts can be classified as policy entrepreneur 2, as they have the potential to alter policies and bring about policy change favouring the internal market. This means that the Council as a whole utilised the crisis as a window of opportunity, as defined by Kingdon (2011), and was able to place the SBA priorities on the highest political agenda (see also Pircher 2018a). Consequently, the SBA is an example where the Council as a whole acted as a policy entrepreneur, as there was a common economic and political interest, a need for swift economic action, and a common political goal due to the economic crisis. Moreover, the analysis reveals a sharp increase in the dominance of conservative and liberal parties in 2008 and 2009 (see Figure 1), demonstrating there was also a common political agenda involved. It appears that these factors smooth the way for a joint strategy.

## EUROPE 2020

The objective of Europe 2020, the successor to the Lisbon strategy, is to extricate Europe from the financial and economic crisis. It therefore promotes three main areas, namely smart, sustainable and inclusive growth (European Commission 2010). Specific headline targets were set to be implemented in all member states by 2020. These headline targets relate to the areas of innovation, education, digital agenda, climate, energy, mobility, employment and the fight against poverty (European Commission 2010: 30).

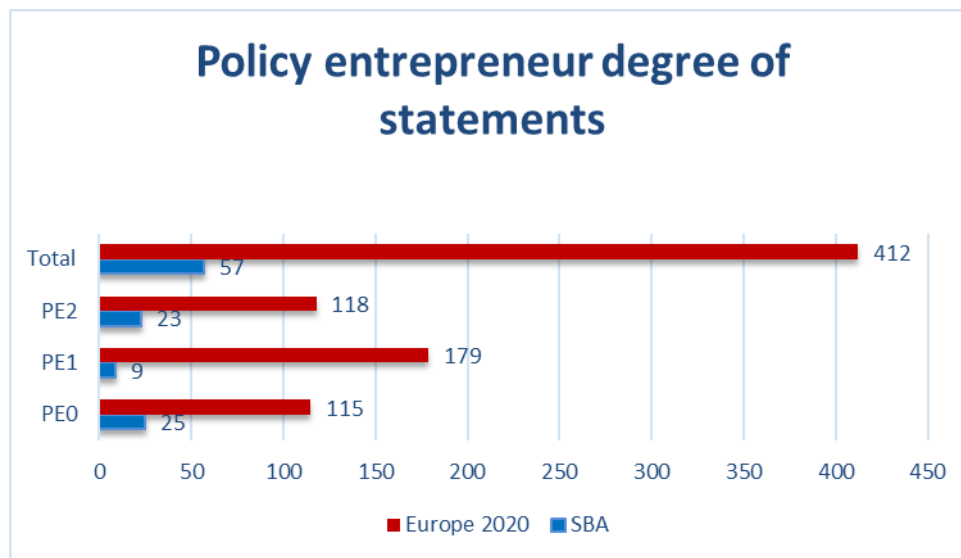
The analysis of the Council debates from 5 March 2010 to 22 June 2012 identified a total of 412 statements from the Council in the daily bulletins of Agence Europe. Of these 412 statements, 115 represent general statements (PE 0), 179 represent debates where the Council played an active role in shaping and realising policies (PE 1), and 118 represent statements where the Council actively advocated certain policies that exceeded the Commission's proposal (PE 2) (see Figure 2). In contrast to the SBA, individual member states, groups of member states and the presidency also had a strong interest in placing and advocating certain policies. In total, nine policy demands classified under policy entrepreneur 1 and 20 demands classified under policy entrepreneur 2 were advocated by individual member states or a group of member states. Concerning the presidency, five demands were classified under policy entrepreneur 1 and 20 under policy entrepreneur 2. The presidency took a leading role, especially in the initial phase of Europe 2020. However, the majority of policy demands were raised by the Council as a single institution.

As in the case of the SBA, several conditions were met which facilitated a common approach by the Council. The first ones are a common political and economic interest and a need for economic governance measures due to the crisis situation. When the European Council invited the Commission and the Council in 2008 to renew the Lisbon strategy (Council of the EU 2008b), attempts to identify further commitments in relation to smart, sustainable and inclusive growth soon came to a halt and stagnated. The reconsideration of the strategy can be traced back to three crucial events. First, as Copeland and James (2014: 7) demonstrate, increasing speculation about a possible Greek default triggered a relaunch of the strategy. Second, Herman Van Rompuy was elected president of the European Council in late 2009, and in his first speech he announced that the strategy was being made a priority (General Secretariat of the Council 2009). Third, José Manuel Barroso was elected Commission President, and he joined with Van Rompuy in prioritising the strategy. Therefore, the presidencies of both the European Council and the Commission played a crucial role in initiating Europe 2020. Moreover, the Council presidency soon adopted a leading role when the strategy was discussed

in the Council, and together all the presidencies advocated specific policies to promote competition and ensure growth in Europe. The draft conclusions of the Council finally consisted of common demands such as opening of the markets at a global level to boost competitiveness, national reform programmes that set national targets, and a governance architecture to implement the strategy at all levels (Council of the EU 2010a; Agence Europe 2010d). These attempts included policies that had already been proposed by the Commission, as well as certain elements that were more forcefully enhanced and formulated by the Council, which can be categorised as policy entrepreneur 2.

Even though 40 out of 118 policy demands classified under policy entrepreneur 2 were brought up by member states or the presidencies, the vast majority of policy demands was initiated by all member states together. This demonstrates the strong potential of the Council to act as one body, even in areas where national interests still play a crucial role. In the debates, Council representatives stated that agreements were found due to a broad consensus and a common interest to promote the 'European social model' (Agence Europe 2010q). However, as is evident from the various statements, all the demands under policy entrepreneur 2 promoted a strengthening of the internal market and greater harmonisation often via enhanced deregulation. Therefore, the European social model promoted by the Council can be questioned and demonstrates that social concerns played a marginal role (see also Woolfson and Sommers 2016; Pircher 2018a, 2018b; Crespy and Menz 2015; Bekker and Klosse 2014). Next to a common political and economic interest and a need to act due to the crisis, another important condition was met that enabled a common approach of the Council. This was a clear common political agenda that might once again traced back to an increase in conservative and liberal dominance in governments at that time (see Figure 1).

However, as is clear from Figure 1, the percentage of governments with such a dominance decreased in 2012 and the strategy was discussed more controversially in this year. Interestingly, the presidency assumed the role of a policy entrepreneur, especially in debates where a consensus could not be reached. In areas such as employment and poverty, for example, where several delegations criticised aspects of the strategy (Agence Europe 2010k), the trio presidency and Van Rompuy pushed for an agreement (Agence Europe 2010o). The post-2013 conclusions and demands in the areas of education, poverty and industrial policy are further examples where the trio presidency acted as a policy entrepreneur. Due to a lack of consensus in these areas (Agence Europe 2010c, 2010e, 2010f, 2010g, 2010h), the trio presidency formulated important conclusions that were incorporated into the strategy as Council conclusions and called for a rapid adoption (Council of the EU 2010; Agence Europe 2010a, 2010b, 2010d, 2010f). In the case of the individual member states, France and Germany in particular called for specific policy demands, such as the inclusion of agriculture in Europe 2020 (Agence Europe 2010d, 2010n), the formulation of a joint contribution on agricultural issues (Agence Europe 2010e, 2010p) and new proposals for a poverty indicator (Agence Europe 2010p, 2010q, 2010s). These policy demands are categorised under policy entrepreneur 2. However, as in the case of the SBA, the great majority of policy demands classified under policy entrepreneur 2 were again raised by the Council as a whole.

**Figure 2: Actual degree of policy entrepreneur in debating Europe 2020 and the SBA**

## CONCLUSION

This paper posed the question whether intergovernmental institutions as a whole have the potential to act as policy entrepreneurs and if so, under which conditions. I first explained the design of intergovernmental institutions and demonstrated how their role and impact were enhanced in wake of the economic crisis. On the one hand, to a large extent member states resisted further supranationalisation and the transfer of additional competencies to the EU level (Puetter 2012; Bickerton, Hodson and Puetter 2015). The response to the economic crisis was, in the first instance, a national one (Verdun 2015: 231) and individual member states and certain institutions adopted the role of policy entrepreneur (Tömmel and Verdun 2017). On the other hand, the developments in some EU countries (for example Greece) put pressure on the EU institutions to take swift action. Member states continued to pursue integration and the adoption of common solutions was seen as an adequate response to the economic crisis. Consequently, policy coordination became more crucial and intergovernmental institutions, such as the Council, became increasingly important (Puetter 2012; Bickerton, Hodson and Puetter 2015). This provided more scope for the Council to act as a policy entrepreneur.

This study has analysed Council debates on two main economic strategies: The Small Business Act for Europe and Europe 2020. It was based on 51 relevant newspaper articles in the daily bulletins of Agence Europe. This was followed by an analysis and qualitative evaluation of the identified 469 statements in those articles by means of a content analysis and a Krippendorff's Alpha reliability test (Krippendorff 2013).

The statements were classified into three main categories (policy entrepreneur 0, 1 and 2) based on the specific policy demands of the Council contained in the articles and on the potential policy change based on Hall's (1993) order change (see Table 1). Of the 469 statements, 140 - which is 29.9% - represent overall or general information on the debates or the legislative outcomes. The great majority of 70.1% - a total of 329 statements - represent policy demands where the Council acted as a policy entrepreneur. Of those 329 statements, 188 (40.1%) represent policy demands based on the Commission's proposal and the realisation of the policy objectives, while 141 (30%) represent policy demands where the Council exceeded the Commission's proposal (see Figure 2). Those proposals were advocated in order to strengthen the internal market. Even though 29 statements under policy entrepreneur 1 and 2 were advocated by individual member states or a group of member states and

25 statements under the same classifications were advocated by the trio presidency, the vast majority of policy demands were raised by the Council as one body.

The results demonstrate that the Council as a whole is highly capable of acting as one policy entrepreneur if certain conditions are met, namely a common political or economic interest and a common political agenda among member states, a need for economic measures in a crisis situation, and the possibility of shifting unpopular decisions and responsibility for such decisions to Brussels. These conditions are decoupled from politics at national level and depoliticise the arena of intergovernmental institutions, at least within the internal market. EU economic policies remain largely unaffected by national political developments. Therefore, the core of the EU project remains very stable and crises can be even a justification to strengthen it. However, this study is limited to the internal market only. Very different outcomes might be observed in more contested areas such as justice and home affairs. This would be an interesting topic for future research.

As the policy demands discussed in this paper related to the strengthening of the internal market, further research could combine an analysis of majorities within the EU institutions and their potential to push through certain policies in the light of national political developments (the rise of the radical right and Eurosceptic parties). It is likely that such an investigation of the constraining and enabling conditions of advocating EU policies and European integration as a whole would yield interesting results.

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**APPENDIX: KRIPPENDORFF'S ALPHA RELIABILITY ESTIMATE**

krippalpha T1\_Degree\_p0 T2\_Degree\_p0, method(ordinal)

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Krippendorff's Alpha reliability coefficient  
 Variable/Coders T1\_Degree\_p0 T2\_Degree\_p0  
 Method ordinal  
 Units 34  
 Raters 2  
 alpha .95185323

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krippalpha T1\_Degree\_p1 T2\_Degree\_p1, method(ordinal)

---

Krippendorff's Alpha reliability coefficient  
 Variable/Coders T1\_Degree\_p1 T2\_Degree\_p1  
 Method ordinal  
 Units 34  
 Raters 2  
 alpha .96082409

---

krippalpha T1\_Degree\_p2 T2\_Degree\_p2, method(ordinal)

---

Krippendorff's Alpha reliability coefficient  
 Variable/Coders T1\_Degree\_p2 T2\_Degree\_p2  
 Method ordinal  
 Units 34  
 Raters 2  
 alpha .94040577

---

krippalpha T1\_Statements T2\_Statements, method(ordinal)

---

Krippendorff's Alpha reliability coefficient  
 Variable/Coders T1\_Statements T2\_Statements  
 Method ordinal  
 Units 34  
 Raters 2  
 alpha .99180809

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Book Review

## EU Policy Making on GMOs: The False Promise of Proceduralism

*By Mihalís Kritikós*

**Sarah Lieberman**

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## Abstract

This monograph examines the regulatory framework for genetically modified organisms (GMOs) in the European Union. Analysis of the institutions of the European Union, in particular the European Commission, leads to the conclusion that technocratic governance relies too heavily on assumed objective scientific assessment, with not enough focus on cultural or socio-economic factors.

## Keywords

GMO; Biotechnology; European decision-making; Technocratic governance

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Published as Brexit takes effect and the UK government starts to look to both the EU and the USA in terms of trade and regulation, this book provides a clear and interesting outline of European legislation for genetically modified products, which will be of central interest to policy makers in both Europe and the UK as trade talks featuring agricultural standards commence. It may also be of use to officials in other countries, such as the United States of America (USA) where genetically modified organisms (GMOs) are considered equivalent to conventional crops and foods and the EU's position on biotechnology is little understood. Moreover, the issue of GMOs highlights aspects of EU policymaking, which will interest academics and scholars in this field.

Using genetic modification as his case study, Kritikos provides in depth examination of EU decision making processes. He notes in chapter one, that the EU's GMO regulatory framework is "inherently complex" (2018: 10) and as such "constitutes a unique case for examining the capacities of the EU institutional framework" (2018: 10). In this introductory chapter, he clearly sets out his research aims as well framed research questions which set the tone for a well written and clearly structured book. First, did any institutional structures shape the substance of the legal framework for the authorisation of new genetically modified organisms? Second, if so, what exactly were the mechanisms of this process? Third, what are the long-term consequences on the framework and its objectives? Kritikos thus approaches the book from an institutional perspective, which is driven by "a wave of research dealing with the role of institutional structures in the EU across a wide range of policy areas" (2018: 14).

Chapters two, three and four focus on the history of the regulatory instruments employed in the EU on the GMO issue. In chapter two, Kritikos focusses on the European Commission as an institution and on its constituent parts. Kritikos suggests that Directorates General (DGs) within the Commission saw an opportunity for expansion on the GMO issue and as such worked in fragmented and 'rather uncoordinated manner' to further their own interests. He argues that this shaped the future regulation of GMOs as it set the scene for the development of Directive 90/220 on the Deliberate Release into the Environment of Genetically Modified Organisms. Alongside discussion of the path dependent nature of the GMO issue, Kritikos analyses the European Commission, particularly DGXI (DG Environment), whose appointment as *chef de file* for regulatory development and GMO authorisation characterised agricultural biotechnology as an environmental issue rather than an agricultural breakthrough or industrial opportunity. In chapter three, Kritikos provides further analysis of the Deliberate Release Directive: Directive 90/220. In this second historical chapter, Kritikos concludes that

although Directive 90/220 represented a huge step forward in terms of regulatory structure and legislation to govern scientific approval, the complexity of its national and supranational governance structure meant that procedures were not applied with the required level of standardisation.

Chapter four further analyses and evaluates the problems in the implementation of the Deliberate Release Directive for GMOs that led to its ultimate revision and replacement. The author points to an overreliance on scientific based authorisation, and a lack of understanding that the various concerns expressed by Member States over GMOs were as relevant to discussion. Institutionally, he argues that the Commission's reliance on static scientific advisory reports clashed with the Council of Minister's need to acknowledge the 'plurality of concerns expressed in the various Member States' (2018: 144), and that the use of Regulatory Committees in the Comitology Procedure solidified, rather than eased, this tension.

The final two substantive chapters, five and six, provide a normative discussion where Kritikos addresses issues pertaining to the objectivity of science and its role in decision-making process. In chapter five, Kritikos concludes that the Commission requires a regulatory structure drawing on information from varied sources. He notes that the overreliance of Directive 90/220 on the scientific advice provided by the European Food Safety Authority (EFSA) damaged public confidence and, at the same time, the ability to authorise GM products. Kritikos notes that the current licensing framework, as altered by Directive 2001/18, takes note of socio-economic, cultural and local traditional issues and may thus expect more procedural success, but suggests that early failures to create a coherent and smooth procedure for GMOs led to continued policy difficulties. Chapter six focuses on the issue of scientific objectivity and the fact that the European Commission failed on this socially difficult policy area to acknowledge the subjectivity of findings, the existence of alternative scientific opinions or the value of non-expert input. This normative section thus concludes that the European Commission created a regime for GMO approval that 'limits the range of possible concerns not only to science but to a particularly narrow understanding of what science is' (2018: 278).

In the concluding chapter, Kritikos provides interesting material for scholars of EU decision-making. Kritikos discusses the European Union's (EU's) reliance on technocratic governance and calls for risky areas to include non-expert, non-scientific and non-technical voices throughout the policy cycle. He also emphasises the need to accept that policymaking is a 'deeply political matter' (2018: 329). He concludes with the note that EU decision-making and EU integration are difficult processes and that the GMO issue highlights some problematic areas. Kritikos identifies three main normative mistakes made in the GMO case: first, the denial of variation in favour of harmonisation; second, favouring expert driven scientific advice over cultural knowledge; and third, promoting proceduralisation of EU law to combat lack of social integration. Furthermore, he suggests that these may be attributable to wider EU policymaking, not simply to GMO authorisation.

The author's final comments broaden the analysis of the book by posing questions that exist at the heart of the European project: How can we balance diversity and unity? How can variation in social and ethical traditions be accounted for within decision-making? Critically, what do we want from the EU? Never have these questions been more important than at the end of the 2010s as Europe is discussed in terms of Brexit and normative misunderstandings abound. This book is the published 2018 version of a prize-winning PhD completed in 2008. While it has not been updated since then its message remains relevant today. While it appears at first glance to be only an historical account of a single policy area, we must note that the legislative portfolio on GMOs is largely unchanged in the interim. The de facto moratorium remains in place and the EU continues to prevent the flow of genetically modified foods, crops, animal feed and food derivatives into its Member States. Brexit, however, may change the status quo on GMOs and thus turn this from a historical policy area into a vitally current one. Indeed, an exit from EU regulations and trade partnerships will leave the UK in an

interesting position regarding biotechnology legislation, one that would potentially enable it to trade agricultural produce with the EU, or with the USA, but not with both.

In the current political climate this historical review of the EU's GMO policy is thus timely and much needed. Moreover, Kritikos has published a book which is a pleasure to read. It is comprehensive not only on the topic of GMOs and their regulation, but it also adds an interesting discussion on diversity and harmonisation to general literature on EU decision-making. However, the most widely applicable aspect of the book is its analysis of the role that technocratic governance and scientific advice play in European policy making. Kritikos's findings suggest that a change is required: this warning clearly has EU-wide applicability beyond the GMO policymaking he discusses in depth. However, Brexit discussions and looming trade negotiations suggest that it may indeed also soon be relevant to discussions of policymaking outside the legislative boundaries of the EU.

### **BIBLIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION**

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