European Identity and University Students: A Comparative Study of Italy and Belgium

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European Identity and University Students: A Comparative Study of Italy and Belgium

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Abstract

The present study aims to explore the experience of direct beneficiaries of the Erasmus programme in the perspective of the economic, cultural, political and social contexts in which the work was carried out. The research involved 287 Erasmus students, 146 Italian and 141 Belgian, enrolled at the University of Bari (Italy) and UCL Louvain-la-Neuve (Belgium) respectively. While the economic and political conditions of two Old Member States of the EU may bear similarities, the period of mobility brings to light a range of implications for students in the two countries. With respect to cultural and civic dimensions, the findings are of particular interest: living and studying abroad contributes, regardless of nationality, to the development of personal and intercultural skills. It would also appear to influence the development of a European identity, in this case closely linked to the local political landscape.

Keywords: European integration, European identity, cross-cultural comparison.

Introduction

The background to the present paper is firmly routed in the relationship between training and European integration; this relationship has a relatively recent history, strengthened and formalized through the Lisbon Treaty, which

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marked a turning point in educational processes within the strategic objective of the Union, thus recognizing for the first time the leading role of education in economic and social development. A knowledge-based economy (Lisbon, 2000) largely depends on investment in human capital in the perspective of life-long learning which thus involves formal, non-formal, and informal learning processes.

In this light, almost every European University shares the ambitious goal of the promotion of mobility, providing young people with the opportunity to either undertake or continue studies in another EU country, thus creating a European Higher Education Space (EHES). Over recent decades, significant resources have been, and continue to be, invested in mobility programmes, seen as a necessary prerequisite for open and dynamic European contexts able to aid European integration and labour market mobility.

In the wide range of programmes that the European Commission has launched in order to promote the building of European identity within member states, the best known EU mobility action is the Erasmus Programme established in 1987 which remains the EU "flagship" within all education and training programs (Teichler, 2001).

This paper begins from empirical evidence, supported by a systematic and scientifically based evaluation process, of the Erasmus programme as being not only effective in increasing human capital in individuals but also their cosmopolitan orientation.

Previous studies, albeit with differing methodologies, confirm the Erasmus programme as representing a valid example of the achievement of EU objectives in the field of higher education (European Commission, 2011): a period of study abroad, beyond the development of knowledge and the practice of a foreign language, contributes to employment opportunities and career development in an international context (Jacobone & Moro, 2014). These findings clearly confirm the results of previous studies carried out by the Kassel Centre for Research on Higher Education and Work (Johanson et al., 2009), and the CHEPS consortium (European Commission, 2008): a period of study abroad increases opportunities for job placement (Van Mol, 2011) both in the home country and abroad, thus favouring geographical mobility in the future career of students and ensuring European competitiveness within global economics.

The assumption of this work is that such effects are, moreover, combined with social and cultural factors in the panorama of the creation of European citizenship and the forging of a European consciousness.

Subsequent to a period spent studying abroad, students tend to become more aware of cultural differences, more open-minded and respectful of other cultures (Ersoy & Günel, 2011). Furthermore, student mobility represents part

of a wider project aimed at creating a shared sense of membership across European countries: the mobility and mixing of European youth leads to the consolidation of a "People's Europe" and the creation of European citizens (Ballatore, 2010).

Moving from the theoretical assumption of the effectiveness of student mobility in developing identity, this paper aims, through a cross-cultural comparison, to contribute to a better understanding of how a shared identity across Europe may vary according to a range of economic, political and, particularly, cultural factors.

Focus has been placed on the specific target of those students who participated in the Erasmus Programme, beginning from the assumption that young people who study in another part of Europe contribute significantly to the building of Europe itself, breaking down social and cultural barriers among Europeans. Similarly, several studies demonstrate that "mobile" students have the highest levels of openness to Europe compared with those students considered "non-mobile" (Bettin Lattes & Bontempi, 2008).

More specifically, this paper proposes a double objective: comparing Erasmus students with respect to the applicability of the Erasmus programme in two different EU countries, Italy and Belgium, exploring how young Europeans relate to Europe and revealing factors that affect their identities and attitudes.

1. Theoretical Framework: the Issue of Identities

The concept of identity/identities, intended as the communities that young people might perceive themselves as belonging to, is critical to the conceptualization of this study.

The notion of identity represents a significant node among all of the social sciences and, beyond specific disciplinary contributions, a number of "invariants of meaning" exist (Sciolla, 1983) that may be encountered. The basic assumption of the present study is that identity is not a property intrinsic to the subject (Berger & Luckmann, 1966) but has an inter-subjective and relational character as it develops within the everyday interaction with others (Melucci, 1982): recognition of the self cannot be separated from the knowledge of others. Indeed, the individual is able to differentiate between the self and others (locative identity dimension), to sustain it over time (supplementary dimension) and, having established the symbolic boundaries that delimit the territories of the self and others, is able to establish preferences and priorities among alternatives (selective dimension). In this perspective, identity is thus the key criterion for understanding the decision-making processes at the base of the action of the individual. In such a

dynamic and highly varied context, the modern problem of identity is that of locating a place in a system that offers a number of choices (Cerutti, 1996).

The question of identity can therefore be represented through the image of a concentric structure with personal identity at its centre and from which several social identities arise in relation to the various groups to which the individual belongs (Breakwell, 1992). Indeed, each individual identifies themselves as "I am", which results from her/his act of self-reflection and previous experience of interaction with their surroundings. An individual's awareness of the self is based on their self-awareness as part of a social/cultural group, e.g. ethnic, national, religious, gender (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). An individual is therefore simultaneously a member of a number of groups and social categories, e.g. French speaking, female, Catholic, etc. that may be either mutually independent or mutually binding (Deschamps & Doise, 1978). Each individual thus disposes of multiple identities, which may be employed in a variety of situations and contexts.

The prevalence of one identity over another depends on the degree of salience, linked mainly to situational factors (Ros et al., 2000). In the presence of a hierarchy of categories, the relevance of the lower-order category will depend on the degree of identification with the higher-order. Such identities are not therefore fixed as they depend on social context and on negotiation within interpersonal interactions: individuals may define themselves and act in terms of different identities (Reicher and Hopkins, 2001) differentiating the in-group from the out-group.

The sense of belonging to a group also relates to the process of categorization through which individuals reduce the complexity of their reality by classifying themselves in a limited number of categories. The existence of a categorization into groups becomes relevant and is able to create a sense of belonging to a "we" as distinct from "they", consequently generating a tendency towards affirming the specificity of one's own group in obtaining positive social identity.

The emergence of Social Identity Theory has, over time, become a strong theoretical point of reference for all those involved in the study of group identity (Sciolla, 1983), including national and supranational identity. Europe can thus be conceived as an element of both national self-understanding and as something different, beyond national identity: one may define oneself through reference to national, sub-national and supranational categories. Indeed, Durkheim (1925) had already argued for the importance of transfer attachments from communities and regions to nation-states.

It is therefore plausible to affirm that Europe, also defined as a meso-dimension between the local and the global (Moro & Pacelli, 2012), is developing both as a higher-order category (social and political supra-national

category) but also as a category involving the lower-order categories of nations and regions.

Identity, such as nationality and regional identity, has long engaged academics yet researching European identity has become a significant issue within the social sciences only fairly recently due to its flexible and dynamic nature, the unattended and undeveloped interest of the European institutions (Green, 2007) and the difficulty of identifying an acceptable and shared definition as well as effective measurement.

The development of a sense of European identity is one of the most pressing concerns of European Union institutions precisely because a principal aim is that of accommodating European integration with the consolidation of a European identity: the individual's perception of such European identity thus appears to be an essential factor in attitudes towards European integration more generally.

Within debate surrounding prospects for European unification, "integration" is both a fashionable and often confusing word. Depending on context, it may refer to long-term socio-economic processes, to processes of political construction, to symbolic processes (European identity), or to the quite separate issue of prudential co-operation between states, or to some uncertain blend of all four. Yet the concept of integration has a reputable sociological pedigree and remains useful for considering the issues raised by Europeanization (Giddens, 1984). In the most general terms, the issue of Europeanization is thus highly complex, combining sociological understanding, normative judgement and political prudence as well as raising questions of identity, calling upon the social sciences. Indeed, from the moment in which the debate on European integration begun to expand and involve not only a closed circle comprised of a political elite but also public opinion, the question of the existence of European identity was raised (Duchesne & Frognier, 1995), alongside its relationship with the nation state, the principal structure of collective identification in the modern age (Guglielmi, 2010).

European identity as a key concept thus became more pronounced in recent times with the proliferation of symbols of "Europeanness": the euro currency and scientific and educational policies aimed at enhancing European consciousness. European identity is a generalized mode of self-understanding through which groups, whole societies and movements, define themselves and their relation to others; translating Easton's definition (1965) of National identity, European identity it's a we-feeling or a sense of community that consists of the feeling of belonging together as a group that shares a political structure and a political fate.

Moreover, few studies have explored European integration employing an approach based on social identity. Interest in European society beyond the European Union in political terms is relatively recent: specifically, only after the Maastricht Treaty did social scientific research become active in studying the implications of European integration in a social context and, specifically, in the field of education. Indeed, since 1992, social identity research has begun to focus attention on European identity in relation to national and regional identities (Stefanile et al., 2003), taking into account socio-political changes and their psychological reflexes.

Perceptions of a European identity may differ from one country to another: some may perceive, for example, European identity as closely allied to their own national identity; others may believe becoming European to be synonymous with becoming less national. Identification with one's own nation is not, in fact, always compatible with a definite identification at regional or European level.

With regard to the young, various authors (Fligstein, 2008) have demonstrated the predominant identity in Europe to be national in character or a combination of a national with a European identity, yet the significance of a national identity may also vary among individuals of the same country.

Analytically speaking, both nations and Europe itself can be analyzed and distinguished with reference to their primarily ethnic or civic character.

With respect to national identity, the main constitutive elements of an ethnic nation are the belief that its members are ancestrally related, a common set of cultural traditions and a link to a specific historical territory. Civic nations are based on a common political culture, a legal system that assigns equal rights and duties to all members and a common economy.

With regard to European identity, the cultural component refers to a citizen's sense of belonging to a human community, in this case the EU, with which s/he believes to share a certain common culture, social similarities, values, religions. The civic component of European identity refers to the identification of an individual with a certain economic and political structure, defining a set of rights, obligations and liberties; civic Europe also involves "borderlessness", the free movement of people and goods and policy-making (Bruter, 2008: 279).

In this paper, the operationalization of the concept of European identity has thus been driven by the following questions: "What does it mean to be or feel European and how can European identity be measured in order to affirm that some people are European or more European than others?" (Van Mol, 2011: 31).

Indeed, it is not possible to study European identity without having first identified the components that constitute such a construct. This study has

attempted to support the growing interest in exploring issues regarding identity construction through a range of tools, some of which were provided by Eurobarometer.

European identity was studied as a multidimensional construct that is born, evolves and interacts within different layers of subjective experience of reality and which is subsequently mediated by the perceptions of young people with respect to the EU, the process of European integration and perceptions of the Euro. Identity was primarily investigated with reference to feelings towards Europe (Sinnott, 2005) and the level of attachment to different territorial units, such as the town, region, Europe or world (EB, 57.2) and the relationship between regional, national and European identity (EOS).

Finally, drawing from the definition offered above by Bruter, national and European identities were considered as constructs represented by the integration of two dimensions: the civic with the instrumental, based on a calculation of personal self-interest (Ruiz-Jimenez, 2004), a cost-benefit analysis (Cinnirella, 1997) and the cultural with an affective-symbolic dimension (EB, 57.2).

The use of such a wide range of measurement tools is closely related to the notion, shared by a number of authors, that discourse on European identity is complex and elusive, marked by fragmented yet indispensable changes. Such a perspective results as even more relevant today as Europe is confronted with the critical processes of globalization, economic crisis, transnational and intercultural conflict and the deficit of political culture, all dynamics that pose significant new challenges as well as the convergence of a number of factors. It therefore follows that reflections on the perceptions of students on the European Union, the Euro and the European integration process provide preliminary information for an understanding of the feelings and the level of attachment to both the nation and to Europe. In particular, Thomas Risse (2003) stresses the significance of the Euro in the development of a collective identity in the European Union, arguing that the introduction of the Euro has had a substantial impact on the identification of citizens with the EU and Europe, as the common currency enhances the "realness" of Europe by providing a tangible link between Europe and the daily lives of citizens (Cerulo, 1995).

2. Background to the Research

This paper will present the main results of a survey carried out on samples of mobile students from two Old Member States, Italy and Belgium. The choice of these two European countries as survey locations was not

arbitrary but dictated by historical and cultural factors: indeed, many similarities can be identified in terms of European integration processes.

Firstly, both countries were founding members of the European Community and share a decidedly European outlook. For both countries, European integration has represented a way of "anchoring" national macroeconomic policies in a European context (Maes & Quaglia, 2003).

Secondly, both countries have been characterized by numerous economic and political weaknesses. Indeed, both Belgium and Italy suffer from high levels of economic inter-regional inequality (North-South divide), the persistence of which has, over several decades, become a fundamental political and economic issue.

The recent history of public institutions in Belgium and Italy also seems to share numerous similarities. Both countries are relatively young when compared to countries such as France, the United Kingdom and the United States, achieving full independence and current borders during the nineteenth century. The two countries were characterized by high-level centralization for a considerable period of time through a strong Napoleonic administrative structure. Both countries now show high levels of decentralization, despite differences in their institutional composition (Badriotti et al., 2006): Belgium and Italy have respectively become a federal state and a decentralized state.

Belgium is a federal state composed of Communities and Regions; it has three Communities, comprised of speakers of French, Flemish and German, and three regions, Wallonia, Flanders and Brussels. Communities and Regions, the first level of government, possess legislative powers and are able to issue decrees with the force of law yet while the Regions are defined geographically, Communities are likely to bear similarities in terms of culture and language. It may therefore be maintained that Belgium has been characterized by fragility since its independence in 1830. While its early weakness was mainly due to threats from powerful neighbours, since the early 20th century it has principally been due to conflicting relationships between the two main linguistic groups: Flemings, the Dutch-speaking inhabitants of the northern part of the country, and the French-speakers of Wallonia and Brussels (geographically located in Flanders but predominantly French-speaking). The more recent history of the country, as previously detailed, has been punctuated by the demands of the Flemish movement in two main fields: linguistic policy (with the recognition of Dutch as a national language) and financial and political autonomy (Klein et al., 2012).

Furthermore, the unique internal situation in Belgium has aroused particular interest in relation to deeper issues of identity: Belgium is a telling example of a state whose citizens are faced with two competing nation-building projects. A "Belgian model" has emerged as the result of "sub-

national building", separating the Flemish and Walloons along linguistic and economic lines. Belgium represents a European Union country in which the sense of belonging to the Region is more highly developed precisely because of its internal situation (Ros et al. 1987). Although national identity obviously refers to the status of being Belgian, the main sub-national entities, Flanders and Wallonia, have acquired a substantial amount of autonomy over the last decades. Flemish identity is associated with the protection of Flemish cultural heritage and, in particular, the Dutch language; conversely, Walloon identity is primarily associated with the social-economic emancipation of the Wallonia region, openness towards other cultures and anti-racism (Van Dam, 1996).

As regards Italy, the Republican Constitution, which came into force in 1948 in the wake of the Second World War, provided various elements of decentralization (Carli, 1993): Article 5 recognized local autonomy while Title V provided for the establishment of the Regions, defining their legislative powers in certain matters. In contrast to Belgium, the process of decentralization in Italy has tended to lead to the equal treatment of all Regions, eliminating differences between the 5 Special Status Regions (Trentino Alto Adige, Friuli Venezia Giulia, Valle d'Aosta, Sicily and Sardinia) that represent 15% of the population. The sense of common identity amongst the national population, although questioned during the mid 1990s, is therefore relatively strong compared to the Belgian situation where the sense of belonging to the Region or a language community is often experienced as oppositional to membership of the Belgian State (Centre d'Etudes et de prevision, 2003).

With reference to Europeanization, Belgium has, along with Italy despite its fascist legacy and tragic experience of World War II, developed during the post-war era into a stable democratic country affirming its European vocation as early as the 1950s with both countries acting as founding states of the EEC.

Italian identity and national sovereignty have also been challenged from above as a result of a deepening and widening of the European integration process over recent decades. Italians have experienced integration into the Union and delegation of power to European institutions as a positive development in terms of their national pride. Survey results suggest (EB, 77) that support for European unification in both countries has been consistently high and, indeed, much higher than the European average with both Belgium and Italy having been perceived to have benefited from participation in the EU.

3. The Research

The cross-cultural comparison between Italy and Belgium developed in the present work is located within the wider political and economic context. The two countries not only share an enthusism for the EU having contributed to the founding of the EEC, yet are also still linked by the economic and political weaknesses that characterize them.

Consideration of the role that Belgium plays in the European context was of fundamental importance in terms of the decision to include it, along with Italy, as a location for the survey: in addition to being one of the founders of the European Union, its capital, Brussels, is home to several EU institutions: Brussels is home to the European Commission and the Council of the European Union; it also hosts the offices of the Presidency of the European Union, the committees of the European Parliament and the Committee of the Regions.

3.1 Aims and predictions

The aim of the research was to explore how young people in different countries relate to Europe, revealing factors that affect their identities and attitudes, starting from the assumption that the significance of Europe and, thus, the sense of belonging to Europe, is sensitive to the local political scene or, as argued by Brubaker and Cooper (2000:14), "self-and other-identification are situational and contextual".

Although the two countries may be linked by several common characteristics, it is necessary to highlight the diverse nature of regional, national and European identities in both Italy and Belgium when taking into account the different levels of government: while the Italians identify with their region and nation on a similar level, it is believed that the Belgians see themselves less in terms of national categories and more in terms of regional and European categories. In light of the internal situation in the two countries it is therefore assumed that the Belgians:

a) Demonstrate a higher regional identity and a lower national identity than the Italians (Cinnirella, 1997);

b) Identify more closely with Europe (Huici et al., 1997).

The exploration of the extent to which national loyalty and identification with Europe are mutually exclusive or compatible and intertwined with one another is also considered significant. A number of theories on the issue exist, some authors arguing such compatibility to be possible (Wintle, 2005), while

others believe such factors to be inversely proportional and, therefore, difficult to reconcile (McLaren, 2004).

Starting from the assumption of a contrastive approach to European identity to be unproductive (Negrea, 2011) and that the idea of European identity need not be conceptualized significantly differently from the concept of a "nation-centred identity", it is argued that national and European identities are not incompatible: it is thus possible that "ideas about Europe and European identity appear in various 'national colours'" (Marcussen et al., 1999: 617). It is therefore also assumed that:

c) There is a positive correlation between national and European identity (Udrea, 2012);

d) European identity, as situational and contextual (Brubaker & Cooper, 2000), is influenced both by the nationality of origin and by perceptions of the EU and, above all, by the perceived benefits of participation in the EU.

3.2 Procedure and participants

In light of the proposed objectives of the study as defined above, the present study operates as a valuable contribution to the concept of identity as theorized by Tajfel and Turner, revising and developing existing knowledge on perceptions of the region, nation and Europe in two current member states and associated countries.

Participants in the evaluation research consisted of students from the University of Bari (Italy) and the Université Catholique de Louvain (Belgium) who had responded to the Erasmus programme call between 2005 and 2010 and who had volunteered to participate in the study.

287 online questionnaires were completed from a total sample of 2850 programme beneficiaries in both countries with a corresponding response rate of 11%. This low response rate would appear to be characteristic of web surveys (Fricker, 2008) and the possibility that participant contact e-mail addresses held by the University may no longer have been active.

In 2011 data were collected in Belgium from 141 French-speaking respondents in Wallonia and Brussels (95 females, mean age: 27.4 years) at UCL Louvain La Neuve. The 146 Italian respondents (91 females, mean age: 29.2 years) were enrolled at the University of Bari.

Only those students born and living in the region prior to their university enrollment were considered in the analysis in order to avoid regional bias; for this reason, 14 Flemish students were excluded from analysis.

The sample consisted predominantly of women (65%) with an average age of 28.3.

Faculties (Figure 1) represented by both groups included Economics and Commerce, Law and Education Science. The best-represented faculties for the Belgian group were Literature and Philosophy and Management, while the best-represented faculties for the Italian group were Foreign Languages and Literature and Medicine and Surgery.

FIGURE 1. Student faculties (f).
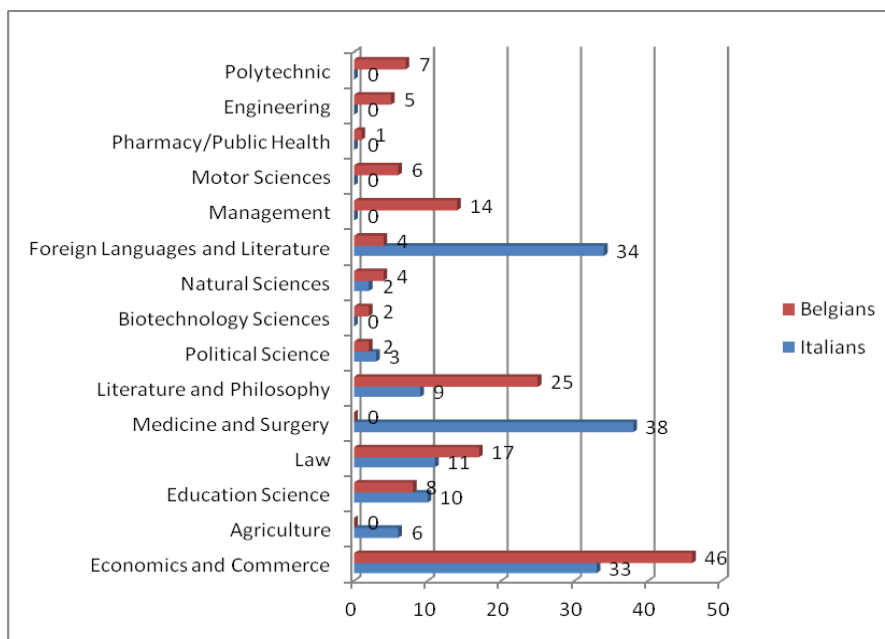
The sample was varied with respect to the cultural backgrounds measured in terms of the educational qualifications of the father (Tables 1) and of the mother (Table 2). The group of Belgian students (N = 141) appears to demonstrate higher cultural capital compared to the group of Italian students (N = 146). Indeed, with respect to these factors, in the comparison between groups approximately 55% of Belgian students claimed both parents to hold a degree compared to 25% of Italian students.

TABLE 1. *Analysis of differences between Italian and Belgian students involved in the Erasmus programme in terms of the educational qualification of the father.*

Qualification of father	Italian students				Belgian students			
	f	% within educational qualification	% within nationality	% of total	f	% within educational qualification	% within nationality	% of total
Primary school	4	57.1	3.2	1.5	3	42.9	2.1	1.1
Middle school	27	75	21.8	10.2	9	25	6.4	3.4
High school diploma	57	70.4	46	21.5	24	29.6	17	9.1
Degree	34	28.3	27.4	12.8	86	71.7	61	32.5
Post-graduate qualification	0	0	0	0	9	100	6.4	3.4
Professional qualification	2	100	1.6	.8	0	0	0	0

$|\chi^2 (df=6)= 65.299; p=0.000|$

TABLE 2. *Analysis of differences between Italian and Belgian students involved in the Erasmus programme in terms of the educational qualification of the mother.*

Qualification of mother	Italian students				Belgian students			
	f	% within educational qualification	% within nationality	% of total	f	% within educational qualification	% within nationality	% of total
Primary school	8	72.7	5.5	2.8	3	27.3	2.1	1
Middle school	32	82.1	21.9	11.1	7	17.9	5	2.4
High school diploma	54	62.1	37	18.8	33	37.9	23.4	11.5
Degree	35	32.7	24	12.2	72	67.3	51.1	25.1
Post-graduate qualification	0	0	0	0	7	100	5	2.4
Professional qualification	1	100	.7	.3	0	0	0	0

$|\chi2 (df=10)= 79.099; p=0.000|$

With respect to the period of study abroad, the two groups of students were not evenly distributed among the different destination countries [χ2 (df = 21) = 111,263, p = 0.000]. Countries with a higher percentage of Erasmus students from Italy and Belgium include Spain (30% of the total sample) and France (16% of total sample). Other choices of Erasmus destination differ between the two groups: Italians chose to study predominantly in Poland (11.6%) and Romania (6.8%), while the Belgians in Italy (19.9%), Netherlands (7.8%) and the UK (6.4%).

3.3 Tools

The questionnaire was divided into 3 sections:
1. *Personal information* (gender, age, nationality, residence, education, family background)
2. *Erasmus destination*
3. *Perceptions of Europe and feelings towards Europe*. The scales employed are reported below:

   a) Regional, national and European Identity (EOS; Stefanile et al., 2003)
   e.g.: *I identify with my fellow countrymen*; Likert Scale 1/5, 1 = Strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree; No. of items: 5
   Identity was primarily investigated through the European Opinion Survey (EOS), a questionnaire specially designed for cross-cultural research into the sense of national identity in several European countries. The Italian version, supervised by Stefanile & Giannini, consists of three mono-scales: national identity, regional identity and European identity, each consisting of 5 items.

   b) Meaning of national/European identity (EB, 57.2)
   e.g.: *I feel European because I share a history and common destiny with my fellow Europeans*; Likert Scale 1/5, 1 = Strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree; No. of items: 14.
   The interaction between the two political identities, Italian and European, was investigated through the use of the items developed by the authors of the EURONAT project, also employed by Eurobarometer 57.2 (2002), which, in the present research, allowed to demonstrate how the students surveyed identify themselves with Italy/Belgium and with Europe and how they relate to the different types of identification.

 c) Sense of belonging to multiple communities (EB, 57.2)
Single item: *Which are, in order of intensity, the geographical areas you feel closest to?*
This item measures European identity with reference to territorial attachment (Kohn, 1955:9). Individuals may feel attached to different territorial units such as the town in which they were born, the *region* where they grew up, the *country* in which they live or even *Europe* or the *world* as a whole. For this question (a Likert scale, ranging from 1 'less tied' to 5 'strongly tied'), students were required to rate their identification on different geographical levels.

d) Sense of attachment to Europe (Sinnot, 2005)
Single Item: *How attached do you feel to Europe?* Likert scale 1/4, 1 = Not at all attached, to 4 = Very attached.

e) Perception of citizenship present and future (Moreno, 2006)
2 items; for example: *Thinking back to your status as a citizen, do you feel more Italian, Italian and European, European and Italian or European?*
This question, developed by Spanish sociologist Luis Moreno, aims to measure the duality of identities. This question is however, for several reasons (Bruter, 2008), not equipped to fully capture the notion of European identity, as it presupposes a tension between national and European identities. Other extensive research has already demonstrated that multiple identities can coexist without necessarily competing (Risse, 2004; Caporaso & Kim, 2009; Huyst, 2008). The so-called "Moreno question" has, since 1992, become a standard question of Eurobarometer surveys and replaced a previous question in which European identity was proposed as a potentially complementary to national identity: "*Do you in the near future see yourself as (nationality) only, (nationality) and European, European and (nationality), European only?*". Both items have been used within this research.

f) Perceptions of the process of European integration, the Euro and consequences of EU membership for their country (EB, 57.2)
e.g.: *The process of European integration has promoted the integration of different cultures*; Likert Scale 1/5, 1 = Strongly agree to 5 = Strongly disagree; No. of items: 18.

For the purposes of the Belgian phase of data collection, the Italian-language questionnaire was translated into French by a team of bilingual translators using standard back-translation procedures (Brislin, 1970; 1976).

4. Analysis and results

Firstly, data relative to the measuring tools of the European dimension were subjected to confirmatory factor analysis and principal component analysis followed by Varimax rotation.

The psychometric properties of the scales considered were, in line with the literature, generally satisfactory. The final factor structures of the scales used with relative reliability indicators (Cronbach's α) are presented below (Table 3), analyzed for the entire sample: having obtained similar results in the CFA for the two groups of different nationalities, items were aggregated in accordance with that emerging from the factor analysis of both groups together, Italians and Belgians.

TABLE 3. Confirmatory factor analysis of scales used.

Dimensions	No. items	E.g. Var. (%)	Cronbach's α	Example
Italian identity dimensions				
I feel Italian because I share with my fellow Italians:				
Cultural-symbolic dimension	5	31.933	.844	*A common language*
Civic-instrumental dimension	5	24.519	.732	*Common rights and duties*
European identity dimensions				
I feel European because I share with my fellow Europeans:				
Cultural-symbolic dimension	6	32.024	.842	*History and common destiny*
Civic-instrumental dimension	4	22.675	.759	*Emerging EU defence system*
Identity				
National identity	5	27.684	.908	*I identify myself with other Italians*
Regional identity	5	27.147	.948	*I feel strongly linked to my region*
European identity	5	27.476	.939	*I am like other Europeans*
Representations of the European Union				
For you the EU represents…				

Positive	8	33.975	.792	*An important voice in the world*
Negative	6	31.015	.767	*The loss of our cultural identity*
Representations of the Euro				
The introduction of the Euro…				
Positive	4	27.827	.779	*Facilitates travel and international exchange*
Negative	4	26.885	.808	*Has brought about a rise in prices*
Consequences for nation of origin of membership of the European Union				
Positive	4	26.663	.729	*….. is politically more stable as a member of the Union*
Negative	4	24.979	.775	*….. has weakened our national identity and culture*

With respect to the objective of the research, subsequent to analyzing the differences between the two groups on every variable relative to attitudes towards Europe, correlational analysis and linear regression analysis were conducted, allowing for the identification of the relationship between such variables.

4.1 The European dimension in the comparison between Italian and Belgian students

Analysis was carried out during this phase of the evaluation of the differences between the two groups analyzed with respect to local, national and European identity and the strength of identification with Europe.

The main results regarding Italy and Belgium are presented with a view to providing some indications concerning the basis of the pro-European attitude of the opinions of students and the relationship between national identity and identification with the EU/Europe.

Respondents were initially asked to define, in order of intensity from 1 (less tied) to 5 (strongly tied), the areas with which they felt a greater sense of belonging, from *City, Region, Country, Europe* and *World*. In the case of the Belgian sample, six areas of membership were included given the political and cultural situation of the country with the presence of the Community located between different levels of government.

Among Italian students, the areas to which they perceived themselves as belonging were, on average, distributed according to the following order:

World - Country - Region - City - Europe

Among Belgian students, however, the order was as follows:

World - Community - Region - Europe - Country - City

The two groups thus differed significantly with respect to the sense of belonging to the various areas. Both groups show a strong sense of belonging to the World, testimony to the global age in which we live; *Europe* is placed, however, in last place by the Italian group and in fourth place by the Belgian group. In addition, the sense of belonging to the Region is, as predicted, stronger among the Belgian group, although lower than for the Francophone *Community* to which they belong. Membership of a *Country* is, on the other hand, more recurrent among the Italian group, while for the Belgians it is placed in penultimate position before the City (t=2.897; p=0.027).

Ultimately, the Belgians are characterized by a greater sense of belonging to the Region and Europe compared to Italians who are instead much more nationalistic.

In order to empirically measure European identity as experienced by both groups of participants, the concept was analyzed in *civic-instrumental* and cultural-symbolic components.

As demonstrated in Table 4, Italians and Belgians differ in a statistically significant manner in terms of the civic-instrumental dimension both for national and European identity. They do not, however, differ in terms of the cultural-symbolic dimension.

Analysis of the average values in each group demonstrated the Belgian group to be evenly distributed between the two components, civic and cultural, in terms of national identity. With respect to European identity, however, they present, as predicted, much higher average values in the civic-instrumental dimension than the cultural-symbolic.

Conversely, the Italian group demonstrated higher values for the symbolic-cultural dimension of national identity and for the civic-instrumental dimension in terms of European identity.

The strength of identification with Europe was also measured using the "Moreno question", the item that explores the perception of citizenship, both present and future. From analysis carried out on the sample the situation is relatively clear: more than half of students (55%) consider themselves a citizen of both their country of origin and of Europe. According to survey research

(EB, 77), a large section of Italian and Belgian citizens express a feeling of loyalty and belonging to both their home country and the EU/Europe. Indeed, in the comparison between groups there were no significant differences in the perception of "dual" citizenship: the two are seen as entirely compatible. Differences in the perception of exclusive citizenship are, however, significant: Europe for the Belgian students and the nation for the Italian students. 12% of the Italian sample group considered themselves as exclusively "national" citizens compared to 4% of the Belgian group, while 18% of the Belgian group perceive themselves as exclusively European citizens in the present [χ2 (df=3)=10.085; p=0.018] and 37% in the future [χ2 (df=3)=13.623; p=0.003].

TABLE 4. Comparison of averages of the two groups with respect to the cultural-symbolic and civic-instrumental dimensions of national and European identity.

		N	Average	SD	t test	df	p
Cultural-symbolic dimension of National identity	IT	146	3.7986	.73775	1.332	285	.184
	BE	141	3.6794	.77860			
Civic-instrumental dimension of National identity	IT	146	3.2521	.86529	-3.917	285	.000*
	BE	141	3.6369	.79628			
Cultural-symbolic dimension of European identity	IT	146	3.5091	.76333	1.541	285	.124
	BE	141	3.3712	.75313			
Civic-instrumental dimension of European identity	IT	146	3.8065	.62751	-4.644	285	.000*
	BE	141	4.1259	.53170			

The higher level of attachment to Europe by the Belgian group represents further confirmation of a greater European identity with respect to the Italian group (t=-4.769; p=.000).

The perceptions that students participating in the research hold of the European Union are generally positive and, in cross-cultural comparison, the Belgian group believe the EU to represent the freedom to travel, study and work, peace, the single currency and a wealth of cultural diversity (t=-2.953; p=.003) to a greater extent than the Italian group. Statistically significant differences do not emerge between the two groups with respect to a negative view of the EU in terms of unemployment, the misuse of money and crime.

Similar results were obtained with respect to the perceived consequences for the nation of membership of the European Union. Both samples show, overall, higher average values for positive rather than negative consequences.

In line with previous findings, the Belgian group consider membership of their country in the European Union as useful to a greater extent than the Italian group (t=-3,914; p=,000). Indeed, they report Belgium as being politically more stable, more secure, more credible and more competitive since joining the Union. Although the consequences of European integration are primarily perceived in the economic domain, the positive impact of membership of the European Union also concerns relations across European borders: indeed, citizens enjoy greater freedom to travel, study and work.

The comparison of averages through the use of the t-test showed Belgian and Italian students to differ significantly in their perceptions of the introduction of the single currency. Belgians have, in particular, more positive perceptions than Italians. While the Belgian group believe the introduction of the Euro to have facilitated exchange, trade and travel and to have provided economic stability to Europe (t=-2.843; p=.005), the Italian group believe the single currency to have suppressed a national symbol and to have subjected the national economy to the control of other countries (t=10.118; p=.000).

Competing interests between national currencies and the central banks of member states were emphasized along with the need to protect the Italian lira and safeguard the country's interests. These results are not seen as critical of European integration as such but, rather, point to the belief that Italy must protect its own national interests from EU regulation, harmonization and the interests of competing member states during a delicate economic and political period that is not yet concluded.

Belgian and Italian students differ significantly in their perceptions of the European integration process with respect to various issues. The Belgian group generally show more positive perceptions than the Italians. Indeed, the former believe Europeanization to have favoured, on the one hand, the protection of fundamental human rights and democracy (t=-5.082; p=.000) and, on the other, the free movement of goods and economic exchange through the creation of a common market, albeit at the expense of price increases (t=-2.924; p=.004). The Belgian sample also believes that, as a result of the process, borders have been abolished, facilitating labour mobility and boosting employment (t=-3.753; p=.000). Italian students, however, believe the process of European integration to have led to a greater attention towards environmental issues (t=2.390; p=.018) yet also a depletion of national identity (t=5.606; p=.000) and the loss of local traditions (t=8.610; p=.000). From the point of view of crime, this group believes the process to have led to an increase in drug trafficking and criminal activity (t=3.803; p=.000),

favoured uncontrolled immigration (t=3.499; p=.001) and, with respect to the economic field, has led to an increase in prices (t=6.264; p=.000) through increased market competition (t=4.029; p=.000).

Finally, as hypothesized, the Belgian sample shows a higher regional and European identity and a lower national identity than the Italian sample (Table 5).

TABLE 5. Comparison of averages of the two groups with respect to the three levels of identity.

	Group	N	Mean	SD	df	t	p
European identity	IT	146	2.722	.903	285	-6.752	.000*
	BE	141	3.401	.807			
National identity	IT	146	3.167	.806	273.181	3.379	.001*
	BE	141	2.813	.961			
Regional identity	IT	146	2.963	.768	275.113	-4.811	.000*
	BE	141	3.438	.898			

4.2 Relationships among three identification variables

Beyond the cultural differences of the Erasmus students of different nationalities, a first correlational analysis between the three identification variables showed that national, regional and European identity are not seen as antagonistic: they are complementary rather than mutually exclusive (correlation is significant at level 0.01)

Various linear regression analyzes (Table 6) were performed with European identity as the dependent variable (DV) and a number of factor combinations.

Firstly, regression analysis shows how regional identity, as opposed to national identity, is a useful predictor of European identity as it contributes to the explanatory power of the model.

Others variables that are deemed to have a relationship with European identity were taken into account: nationality, positive and negative perceptions of EU, the Euro and belonging to the EU. The regression model with blocks used, employing the "backward" method in order to verify the significance of

each variable individually, allows for the identification of the independent effects of the factor variables.

The most effective model identified explains a good proportion of the variance in European identity ($R2=.231$, $F=22.465$, $p=.000$). It shows positive effects of nationality and regional identity. Furthermore, perceptions of the European Union, both positive and negative, are also significant predictors in European identity.

TABLE 6. Regression analysis of the effect of different variables (IV) on European identity (DV)

Variables	β *(standardized coefficient regression)*	SE *(Standard Error)*	t	p
Nationality	.720	.098	7.365	.000*
Regional identity	.233	.050	4.652	.000*
National identity	.002	.057	.041	.967
Positive representations of EU	.205	.082	2.492	.013*
Negative representations of EU	-.247	.063	3.939	.000*

This analysis shows European identity to be linked to various factors: identification (with region), nationality and perceptions of a series of benefits of belonging to EU. Conversely, participants who identify weakly with Europe also tend to identify weakly with the region and believe that belonging to the EU presents fewer advantages and more disadvantages.

5. Concluding Remarks

The present study demonstrates that among Erasmus students, notably more sensitive to European issues than other university students, opinions of Europe and consequent attitudes characterized by a general openness towards Europe must necessarily be detailed and analyzed in close correlation to the economic, cultural, political and social context in which they are located.

In this light, the framework guiding the comparative analysis of the two countries with respect to European issues may be seen as starting from the theoretical premise that national identity formation is related both to the historical heritage of nation-building as well as to the geopolitical position of a country and its links with the European integration process.

The findings of this study confirm several theoretical principles. Firstly, they underline the importance of contexts and situations in the development of identities. European identity is present to different degrees in certain contexts or countries and, consequently, is open to diverse interpretations. European identification appears, furthermore, to be linked to pre-existing identifications (national and regional identity) and to anticipated social perceptions of the EU and the process of European integration.

Secondly, it is possible to confirm the theoretical hypothesis of multiple identities (Fuchs et al., 2009) and of nestedness/concentric circles: it is possible for different identities to co-exist.

Thirdly, the work sheds critical light on the conceptualization of European identity with regard to the notion that one should distinguish between the civic and cultural components of European identity. It is also clear, based on findings, that no one single European identity, shared by all, exists, just as there is no single shared national identity. Individuals thus provide their own interpretation to forms of identity.

Specifically, the differences emerging from the samples demonstrated that the development of a European identity through student mobility is not self-evident for all European countries and is subject to contextual variations. While the two countries subjected to investigation share, at a macro level, a historical presence in the EU and similar political and economic conditions, a higher degree of identification with Europe emerges among the Belgian sample in comparison with the Italian sample. Belgians conceive of the personal benefits associated with being European citizens and relate, to a greater extent than Italians, the EU with more positive factors. This may be explained by a range of factors as, for example, the strong presence of Europe in the everyday life of students living in a core European country: in this respect, the fact that Europe is present in multiple forms through the existence of visible structural EU investments and, especially, through the numerous buildings intended for European affairs may be crucial, from the European Parliament to the "bureaux" of the Regions. Secondly, an important role is played in this regard by Belgian history which may justify identification with Europe as instrumental in resolving interregional tensions (Huici et al., 1997): Europe may be seen as a solution to protecting Belgium from a potential division into separate entities (Licata, 2000).

Although several studies demonstrate Italians to be enthusiastic supporters of the EC (Hewstone, 1991) inasmuch as they conceive of its central role in offering a more stable and efficient political structure than the Italian state, they also, in comparison with the Belgians, tend towards greater nationalism than Europeanism. This is confirmed by the Italian sample that demonstrates a lower perception of a positive EU image combined with a

decrease in support for EU membership in comparison with the Belgian sample. These results could be analyzed in light of the global crisis and its early warning signs as reported by the Italian government during the period of the survey. The economic landscape, coupled with the constraints and austerity measures required by the EU may therefore play a central role in weakening the impetus for European attitudes, reducing European identities and a sense of belonging to Europe. It is in fact possible that among member-states such as Italy, Greece and Ireland, the determination to protect national interests is now so strong that it may lead to considering new, alternative partnerships or even withdrawal from the Eurozone. Indeed, some EC surveys (EC, 2010) shows that, due to economic crisis, instability of the Euro and the debt crisis in several countries, support for the EU has fallen to 49%, around the lowest levels recorded during the past decade. However, although in Belgium living standards have recently fallen with respect to some years ago, European identity amongst students seems less vulnerable to the negative effects of global crisis, inasmuch as it is based on a consciousness of belonging to an economic and political "space" in which freedom, liberal democracy, respect for human rights, prosperity and competitiveness are better guaranteed. Ultimately, drawing from the notion that social perceptions of the EU depend on processes of anchoring with the national model it is thus possible to confirm that young people from different parts of the European Union demonstrate diverse perceptions of European identity and thus experience common supra-national identity differently.

A major finding is that a sense of Europeaness is not incompatible with national or other loyalties for the participants in this study. Frequently, as revealed in this work, one level of loyalty within an identity may be stronger than another, yet this does not necessarily signify that weaker levels are entirely eclipsed. Instead, the primary loyalties of students are, in most cases, to their nation and, at the same time, some feel attached to regions, supranational institutions and continents such as Europe and the EU: different layers of identification may co-exist. In line with the results of recent studies (Flingstein, 2009), it is possible to confirm that young Europeans possess multiple identities, with European among them. It is thus possible to validate the definition of Varsori and Petricioli (2004:90) regarding European identity; in other words, being European does not stand in opposition to being Italian or Belgian since individuals generally articulate, on the one hand, a global sense of self, such as the religious, ethnic and social and, on the other, multiple identities, including the local, regional, national or supra-national (Straubhaar, 2008).

Furthermore, in this study European identity results as better defined as "non-emotional" identity (Guibernau, 2011: 41) in contrast with emotionally

charged national identities. European identities are primarily instrumental, while national identities are mainly cultural. Indeed, students consider themselves European particularly when perceiving European integration as a beneficial process, instrumental in positively affecting their lives rather than sharing in common values and symbols. Impact factors are the main drivers for citizens in experiencing their European identity (Habermas, 2011), and it is thus possible to confirm this kind of identification as intrinsically linked to a cost-benefit analysis regarding European issues: individuals in general evaluate the link with Europe in accordance with their own personal gains in an attempt to minimize losses. It is possible, in the specific case of Belgium, a small country lacking a culture as distinctive as that of Italy and with strong European agendas, to conceive of a country with greater political and economic opportunities for European integration (Sanchez-Mazas et al., 2003). This may be confirmed both by the higher values expressed, in comparison to the Italian group, in terms of a civic-instrumental national identity and by more positive perceptions of the EU. The Italians, however, despite a weak civic national identity and dissatisfaction with corruption and government services, nevertheless demonstrate a positive national identity in terms of the cultural and affective dimension. Thus, for the purposes of this paper, the reflections of students on the EU and the "advantages" brought about by EU membership are interpreted as evidence for the existence of a civic European identity.

5. Limitations and future perspectives

The initial aim of the present study was that of carrying out evaluation of the effectiveness of the Erasmus programme through a double comparison of Erasmus students versus non-Erasmus students, and an Italian sample versus a Belgian sample. This assessment proved, however, unachievable due to the low number of responses (15) obtained from the non-Erasmus students in the Belgian sample. The explanation for such a low response rate lies in the fact that, differently to Italy, UCL (Belgium) students receive an institutional e-mail address upon enrolment at the university, which is then deactivated at the conclusion of their studies. In view of the fact that students enrolled during the period between 2005 and 2010 represented the reference sample for research, it is likely that the sample was no longer available through the university e-mail address. Likewise, the results obtained though alternative channels, such as a link inserted in the UCL student newsletter and a link on the web page www.uclouvain.be/students were similarly unsuccessful, not allowing for the realization of an appropriate sample size for comparison.

Although the original objective of the survey proved unfeasible, the conclusions reached from the self-perceived benefits of the overseas experience were of particular interest.

The study has, moreover, provided useful insights into the way in which European identity functions in relation to the national sense of self as well as other possible identifications. It is believed that the study has thus provided a valuable contribution to the body of literature on emerging European identities.

These results may thus serve as a theoretical starting point for future research aimed at analyzing the differences between the two countries in more detail. Data collection carried out at UCL Louvain-la-Neuve (Wallonia region) could be further studied by extending the sample to students enrolled in a university located in the Flemish region. It would therefore be of interest to compare data obtained from UCL Louvain La Neuve with other data gathered at UCL Louvain (Flemish region) in order to verify the existence of Regional/Community differences in identity construction. Indeed, several studies highlight a greater regional identity among the Flemish population and a greater attachment to the nation among Francophones (De Winter, 2007). Moreover, while the Flemish "nation" is predominantly represented in ethnic-cultural terms, Wallonia is portrayed as a "civic nation" (Billiet et al., 2003). Similar considerations can be made for the Italian sample with the results on perceived identities emerging from a comparison of students from the University of Bari with students of a university in northern Italy of particular interest.

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