

Teaching and Learning European Studies in Times of Crises

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Introduction

As is common to university degrees focused on societal issues, programmes in European Studies, International Relations and Politics are confronted with an ever-changing society (e.g. Craig, 2012). For instance, at the occasion of the 50th anniversary of one of the biggest associations in the field of European Studies, the University Association for Contemporary European Studies (UACES), David, Drake and Linnemann (2017) write that European Studies is characterised, among other things, its close ties with one of its main objects of study (the European Union, EU) and, related to the latter, its events-driven scholarship and close links with policymakers. In this context, we see that European integration has regularly gone through difficult phases. However, the succession of economic and financial crises, the migration crisis, the crisis over the rule of law in member states such as Poland and Hungary, and, of course, Brexit, have raised many questions about the future of the EU (e.g. Davis Cross & Ma, 2015; Hodson & Puetter, 2018).

Confronted with such questions we also need to reflect upon teaching and learning in European Studies. After all, these questions are also echoed in the teaching that we do, in the interests of our students and in the professional world that our graduates will join after graduation (e.g. Gijssels, Dailey-Herbert, & Niculescu, 2014). Indeed, a recent special issue in the *Journal of European Public Policy* asks whether we need to rethink ways of teaching and learning European Studies as the EU “stumbles from crisis to crisis” (Rittberger & Blauberger, 2018, p. 436). While this special issue does not provide an answer to this question – the contributions discuss the implications of the crises for research – it does provide a first clue as to how any programme teaching the EU should respond to these crises (see also Manners & Rosamond, 2018). We might need to pay more attention to “critical and reflexive perspectives, rather than treating the EU as a ‘neutral’ object of study” (Rittberger & Blauberger, 2018, p. 437), as well as “better come to grips with the disintegrative dynamics” (idem, p. 438; see also Hodson & Puetter, 2018; Vollaard, 2014). Elsewhere, Manners and Rosamond (2018) also argue that a better understanding of the “dilemmas of integration” requires, among other things, more diversity in terms of disciplinary, theoretical and methodological approaches.

Hence, in conjunction with governmental demands regarding, for instance, retention, quality care and employability, the ever-changing society around us presents additional challenges for programmes focused on contemporary societal issues. This paper aims to provide a better understanding as to how such study programmes can adequately do so. In doing so we focus on student perceptions: when do students consider a study programme to be relevant and what programme characteristics are necessary to deal with societal change? We use the case study of Maastricht University's Bachelor in European Studies (BA ES). While our alumni generally express satisfaction about their three years in Maastricht (see for instance Groen & Bijsmans, 2018), prospective students and their parents, as well as current students, have raised questions about the viability of European Studies and its relevance in times in which the EU seems close to collapsing. Such questions are problematic because relevance is one of the key reasons why students choose a programme in Higher Education (HE) and an important factor in their motivation for studying (e.g. Kember, Ho, & Hong, 2008; Tinto, 2017).

In exploring student perceptions, we examine the expectation that active, student-centred teaching environments might be best capable of dealing with societal change. Bovill, Bulley and Morss (2011) highlight that engaging and empowering students increases programme relevance. This leads to the expectation that the Problem-Based Learning (PBL) approach employed at Maastricht University's BA ES offers opportunities to engage with our ever-changing environment. Based on a survey (N=134) conducted among our students and a subsequent focus group discussion, we look at relevance and curriculum design in the context of a PBL programme. From this we learn that relevance is an important, yet difficult to define concept. In addition, PBL might appear as a very suitable educational tool to ensure relevance in an ever-changing society, but then it has to be applied consistently. While the paper discusses the situation in one specific BA programme, it will do so in light of general challenges in the field of European Studies, but also in the fields of International Relations and Politics, as well as in HE more broadly.

The challenge of being (and staying) relevant

HE programmes are increasingly confronted with a host of challenges, including decreasing means and increasing and, at times, conflicting demands from governments, but also an increasingly diverse and international student body. For instance, anxiety and stress among students seem to be on the increase, presenting HE programmes with a challenge that many academics find difficult to address (e.g. Coertjens, Brahm, & Trautwein, 2017; Räisänen, Postareff, Mattsson, & Lindblom-Ylänne, 2018). Other challenges are reflected in requirements related to, for instance, student numbers, retention and completion rates, excellence and quality care (e.g. Ramirez & Tiplic, 2014; Szekeres, 2010). In addition, there has been growing attention for employability and the development of generic skills, something that has been pushed by national governments, but also through, for instance, the inter-governmental Bologna process that identified employability as a main goal of the European Higher Education Area (e.g. Adriaensen, Bijmans, & Groen, 2019; Wyman, Lees-Marshment, & Herbert, 2012).

When discussing how to deal with such challenges and demands in an ever-changing contemporary society, we basically touch upon the question of the core purpose of HE. As Shay (2016) writes, is the purpose of HE to enhance knowing, doing or being? Gijsselaers et al. (2014, p. 21) are very explicit in their answer to this question: “content can’t be king”, because an ever-changing society needs graduates who have the skills to deal with this complexity, rather than graduates who have detailed knowledge about a subject. Yet, students often choose programmes that they are interested in because of their relevance in light of contemporary developments (Szekeres, 2010).

Relevance is frequently discussed in teaching and learning literature, but it is often defined and conceptualised differently. For Bainbridge, Frymier and Shulman (1995, p. 41), relevance is a link between content and students interests and (career) goals. Kember et al. (2008, p. 250) refer to Hodgson’s 1984 article that distinguishes between extrinsic, intrinsic and vicarious experiences of relevance. This categorisation focuses on how students perceive or experience a topic to be relevant. Students can experience a topic to be relevant simply because they have to learn it (extrinsic experience), because they think about the material to be learned in light of their own experiences or knowledge framework (intrinsic experience), or because they become inspired by teachers’ interest or enthusiasm for a topic (vicarious experience).

These different ways of defining relevance have in common that they are linked to the personal experience of the individual student. As Scheffler (1969; quoted in Alexander, 2018, p. 126) writes, “nothing is either relevant or irrelevant in and of itself. Relevant to what, how and why? – that is the question”. In other words, what is relevant for one student, may not be so for another, and is also variable over time due to students’ progress through their studies. This coincides with the commentary on a special issue on the topic, that characterises relevance as “person-centered, complex or multifaceted, significant, and modifiable”, and indicates that all studies on relevance are fixed on the individual student (Alexander, 2018, p. 126). Relevance is important, because the more relevant students perceive a programme to be, the more likely they are to be motivated, and thus the more likely they are to successfully complete the programme (Tinto, 2017). The key question posed by students in this respect is “what’s in it for me?” (Bainbridge Frymier & Shulman, 1995, p. 40).

Active learning approaches are likely to be beneficial for programmes that strive to be societally relevant, because they are more likely to actively engage and empower students, as well as to apply theory to concrete problems. Bovill et al. (2011) show that engaged students are more likely to perceive the programme as relevant and are more likely to be successful in their studies. This engagement can be perceived through empowerment; ensuring that students own and control their own learning process, and making content relevant to students’ personal and career goals (Bainbridge Frymier & Shulman, 1995). Equally important in enhancing relevance, and potentially likely to be applied in active learning approaches, is the extent to which curricula manage to link to everyday applications, topical issues, and allow fieldwork (Kember et al., 2008).

What we learn from the above, is that in order for study programmes dealing with societal change to stay relevant, the following elements need to be in place. First, programmes need to ensure diversity in terms of disciplinary, theoretical and methodological approaches to be able to fully engage with, often multifaceted, contemporary developments (Manners & Rosamond, 2018) and to provide room for critical reflection (Rittberger & Blauberger, 2018). Second, since “content can’t be king” (Gijsselaers et al., 2014, p. 21), it is important to ensure the application of theory to realistic cases (Kember et al., 2008) and to link content to students’ personal and career goals (Bainbridge Frymier & Shulman, 1995). Third, the aforementioned points are more likely to be achieved in an educational environment that engages and empowers

its students (Bovill et al., 2011). These elements lead to the expectation that an active learning approach such as PBL as employed by Maastricht University's BA European Studies has to potential of ensuring programme relevance and its capacity to address societal change. In the next section we outline the specificities of teaching and learning in European Studies and explain why PBL might work in this context.

Why would PBL work to enhance relevance?

European Studies is a broad field of studies. It does not come with one clear framework, with some programmes focussing more on the EU, whereas others resemble more traditional Area Studies programmes (Calhoun, 2003; Rosamond, 2007). Maastricht University's three-year, interdisciplinary BA ES – celebrating its 15th anniversary in 2017 – developed out of the core idea that general societal and political challenges can only be understood when attention is paid to broader socio-cultural changes in Europe through the lenses of different disciplines. Fully taught in English, each year the BA ES attracts 280-330 new students from all over Europe and even some from other continents. One thing that distinguishes this European Studies programme from others, is its commitment to PBL (Timuş, Cebotari & Hosein, 2016; see also Craig & Hale, 2008). PBL is a student-centred approach to learning, based on active construction of knowledge in the context of specific problems. Learning takes place in groups of 12-15 students, guided by a member of staff who acts as a tutor who facilitates rather than lectures. When students of Maastricht University are introduced to PBL, they are trained to work with the so-called seven steps (*Table 1*), which essentially mimic the research process: students start with a puzzle, determine what they know and what they do not know about the topic, and develop one or more research questions to guide their research (see Maurer & Neuhold, 2014).

Table 1: Maastricht University's PBL seven steps

1. Clarification of terms and concepts
2. Defining the problem statement
3. Brainstorm using prior knowledge and common sense
4. Structuring of the brainstorm through constructing a detailed and coherent 'theory'
5. Formulation of learning objectives for self-directed learning
6. Self-study to fill the gaps in knowledge
7. Post-discussion to integrate acquired knowledge in a suitable explanation

See the video 'Problem-Based Learning at Maastricht University' for a more detailed explanation of the process: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cMtLXXf9Sko>

These seven steps are a tool to introduce new students to PBL. More important is that PBL rests on four key principles, namely that it advances constructive, collaborative, contextualised and self-directed learning (Moust, van Berkel, & Schmidt, 2005). PBL has a positive effect on skills development and remembering acquired knowledge (Dochy, Segers, van den Bossche, & Gijbels, 2003). In addition, PBL is credited for fostering stronger academic and social integration (e.g. Severiens & Schmidt, 2009), which is generally seen as being important for study success (e.g. Tinto, 2017).

Several scholars have argued that forms of active and student-centred learning, including PBL, suit programmes in European Studies, International Relations and Politics well. In the words of Leston-Bandeira (2012, p. 55), a student-centred approach to teaching and learning is much more suitable to have students "engage with ongoing political phenomena and keep abreast of fast changing political developments." Similarly, Tinto (2017, p. 263) argues that for students to see the relevance of topics and subjects, it is worth exploring the opportunities offered by "problem and project-based pedagogies that call for students to apply what they are learning to address meaningful problems". More generally, in its ideal-typical application, PBL advances an empowering learning environment. In other words, through its usage of real-world problems and emphasis on self-directed learning, PBL should be in an ideal position to give students a heightened sense of relevance of a curriculum, without students having to know the details of the latest European crisis.

PBL assumes that students decide on what learning objectives they need to answer to tackle the problem at hand, as well as on the literature that they need to read to be able to do so. Even when literature is given (which makes sense in case of first-year students), PBL allows for critical discussions that extend beyond that literature. However, this ideal has come under pressure. As Moust et al. (2005) show in their article about PBL at Maastricht University, some of the basic premises on which a properly functioning PBL environment relies have in reality started to fade away. This includes students no longer always exploring prior knowledge but rushing through the brainstorm to arrive at less-than-ideal learning objectives for the self-study phase. Another problem concerns the fact that literature is increasingly provided by staff, also in later years, due to which students get to know fewer perspectives on the problem at hand *and* lose control over an important part of their (self-directed) learning process.

While PBL may have many benefits in terms of student learning, it also comes with certain challenges, including obvious ones such as group dynamics and the role of the tutor as facilitator, but also less obvious ones such as curriculum design. Designing an interdisciplinary programme in accordance with PBL principles, is a complex endeavour that requires a coherent, integrated curriculum, in which there is a need for integration at the level of bureaucracy and content (Bridges, Yiu, & Botelho, 2016). Maastricht's BA ES has been designed in such a way that courses build upon each other, with each year having a different focus: European diversity in year 1, European unity in year 2 and Europe in the world in year 3. On the one hand, this means that content is to some extent set in advance; on the other hand, this means that there is relatively little choice for students during years one and two of their studies. The need for early agreement on education and examination regulations and the increased emphasis on quality control play a role in this too.

Design of the study

Having established why we expect PBL to be a suitable approach – with its own challenges – to ensure programme relevance in fields such as European Studies, we want to find out whether or not students share our expectation that PBL is indeed a suitable approach. We set out to study students' perceptions on relevance of study

programmes and their thoughts on what programme characteristics are necessary to deal with societal change.

We first designed an anonymous short survey (*Annex 1*) that we distributed among all BA ES students (N = 879) using Qualtrics.¹ The survey contains questions about personal background, study choice, programme content, and teaching and learning environment. These were open and closed questions, with the latter all using a five-point Likert scale. The questions about *study choice* asked respondents why they had originally signed up for the BA ES and whether their expectations have been met. The questions about *programme content* mainly concerned relevance and motivation. Since research shows that students actually perceive relevance in different ways (Albrecht & Karabenick, 2018; Alexander, 2018), we presented a basic definition (“the programme’s contribution to a better understanding of contemporary European developments”), but also asked students to define relevance themselves. The questions about *teaching and learning environment* focussed on students’ experience with PBL and its potential contribution to linking course subjects to contemporary developments.

Out of the 879 students invited to do the survey, 211 started the survey, but 73 never completed it. Of the 138 students who completed it, 4 students actually indicated that they did not consent to us using their answers for this study. They were excluded from the dataset. Hence, the findings presented below are based on 134 respondents (a 15% response rate). 85 of the respondents were female, 49 were male. These students represented a total of 21 nationalities, the biggest group being 56 German students (21%). Out of the 134 respondents, 50 students started in September 2015, suggesting that they are third year students. Another 38 started in September 2016 (second year students), 33 in September 2017 (first year students) and 13 started before 2015.

A final survey question asked whether respondents would be willing to take part in a focus group aimed at discussing these topics in more detail – the second step of this research. Based on the response to this question, we set out to form a focus group of ten students that was representative for the group of students who completed the questionnaire. Due to reasons beyond our control, three students dropped out at the

¹ We would like to thank Sjoerd Stoffels for his technical support and Arjan Schakel for his methodological advice.

very last minute, leaving us with the group composition as set out in *Table 2*. To safeguard students' anonymity, they were given aliases.

Table 2: Focus group composition

Name	Gender	Nationality	Year started
Sarah	Female	Belgium	2017
Jan	Male	Germany	2017
Anna	Female	Germany	2017
Franz	Male	Germany	2015
Heinrich	Male	Germany	2015
Tessa	Female	The Netherlands	2016
Willem	Male	The Netherlands	2015

The focus group discussion lasted two hours. Students were provided with a short engagement protocol a week before the focus group. On the day itself we introduced them in detail to the three discussion themes that we identified based on the survey: relevance, HE aims and tools, and the role of PBL. The discussion of each of these started with an open question about the theme and each came with a short exercise, which will be introduced below. Audio and video were used to record the discussion.

Student perceptions on teaching and learning European Studies in times of crises

Why study European Studies?

In order to better understand relevance of a study programme, it is insightful to look into why students choose a particular programme at all. Therefore, the first survey question asked students' reasons for opting for the BA ES. Students mention many different reasons, but the programme's interdisciplinary approach was clearly most important (mentioned 92 times). As illustrated in the words of one of the students:

The diversity of the study program interested me. I have furthermore always been interested in politics, an *[sic!]* Europe, but political science seemed a bit dry for me. Thus, ES combines different subjects which I enjoy: history, economics, and politics, but also offers several other perspectives.

Other reasons for students to choose this programme are content (wanting to learn more about Europe and the EU was mentioned 29 times), its international classroom (mentioned 22 times), and the programme being offered in English (mentioned 18 times). While PBL may be a defining characteristic of the BA ES, it only came in as the fifth reason for choosing for the BA ES (mentioned 17 times). In sum, the main reason why students seem to study ES is its interdisciplinary approach. This ties in with the observation by Manners and Rosamond (2018) that interdisciplinary approaches are crucial in order to provide a better understanding of contemporary challenges in European Studies. But does this also make a programme relevant?

What is relevance and when is a study programme relevant?

Relevance is important according to the survey respondents. The closed questions indicated that 125 out of the 134 students indicate that they 'somewhat agree' or 'strongly agree' to the statement 'relevance of a study programme matters to me'. 124 students give a similar answer to the statement 'the BA ES helps me to better understand contemporary European developments'.

Thus, relevance is important to students, but how do they perceive relevance? We presented students with a basic definition of relevance ("the programme's contribution to a better understanding of contemporary European developments"), and asked them what relevance means to them. Both the answers to the open survey question as well as the focus group indicate that there is no simple question to this answer. Some students provided interesting insights into what relevance means to them:

For me it means that it gives students a good understanding of how in this case the EU functions so that we can interpret actions in different situations without knowing every detail about it. A programme is relevant if it actually prepares students for the market and reveals to them the opportunities they have with the knowledge acquired.

For me relevance of a study programme means that it is useful, that it has a purpose for the time being or in other words, that you learn things you can apply to your future career and personal life. It is relevant if it prepares you to understand and deal with the current challenges and dynamics of the world and your future job.

Relevance of a study programme would mean to me that the things you learn are still applicable after finishing the study programme.

These examples indicate that many students combine several notions in their definition of relevance. It is crucial for students to have a clear idea about “what’s in it for me?” (Bainbridge Frymier & Shulman, 1995, p. 40). This links to the observed notion that students need to feel that a programme helps them achieve their own personal and career goals (ibid). This is clearly visible in our students’ answers to the survey. While several answers contain more than one notion of relevance, programme relevance in terms of preparation for the job market (linked to achieving career goals) was mentioned frequently (34 times in total). Other linked notions included that a programme is relevant when it provides you with learning skills and that a programme is relevant when it allows you to directly apply what you have learned (both mentioned 15 times). In addition, some find it important to achieve personal development (mentioned 6 times), nicely captured by the words of one student who describes relevance as “how a study programme brings out the most of you”.

The most often mentioned notion of relevance for students links to what Kember, Ho and Hong (2008) stress when they describe that achieving relevance includes ensuring that we make use of realistic cases and do not only concentrate on theory without application. This is reflected in one of the core elements mentioned by our students: a study programme needs to be ‘up-to-date’ and discuss current events. The survey responses thus indicate that programme content turns out to be very important, with 68 out of the 134 responses discussing relevance along these lines. This seems to imply that content *is* king in ensuring that a study programme is relevant and capable of capturing societal change. However, the survey did not provide us with more insight into what exactly it is that makes content so relevant. For this the focus group provided clearer insights.

The discussion about relevance in the focus group started with the open question what relevance of a study programme means to the students. The start of the discussion very much resembled the type of answers as provided to the open survey question. While Tessa stressed that it is important that a programme teaches the skills needed for a job, Franz highlighted the importance of being up-to-date. The group reached agreement on the importance of an academic study programme discussing theory, but ensuring that there is a practice-oriented ‘add-on’, thereby confirming Kember et al.’s

(2008) notion that it is important to apply theory to realistic cases. The group did not agree on the extent to which the BA ES currently manages to do this, with some expressing the wish for more practitioner involvement, while others remarked being satisfied with the current approach.

As part of the discussion in the focus group, students were also asked to rank a number of statements derived from the survey according to their importance. They were first asked to do this individually; subsequently, they were asked to rank them as a group. The group discussion led to the following order²:

1. 'Relevance of a study programme entails how applicable or useful your knowledge and skills are in the real world.'
2. 'A relevant study programme is one that allows reflection on current societal issues.'
3. 'The relevance of a study programme comes from its ability to prepare for a future workplace.'
4. 'Relevance of a study programme means that the knowledge obtained will be helpful and insightful for one's own personal development.'
5. 'A relevant study programme is one that is in direct connection to the present.'

This ranking helps us to better understand how and to what extent content should play a role in the programme. The main motivation for this order was that only talking about the present is not sufficient enough to make a programme relevant. While some students highlighted before that a relevant programme is one that is up-to-date, this ranking forced them to become more explicit in what it then is in content that leads to relevance. As nicely captured by Tessa: "In that one [PB & EV: referring to the statement ranked fifth] you only talk about the present, whereas in that one [PB & EV: referring to the statement ranked second] you learn about certain theories that you apply to current issues. That is why that one is better". Or as Franz – who stated before that he would consider it important for a programme to be up-to-date – put it, "we can do a course on Brexit, but how relevant is that in ten years". When asked whether content should be king, the group clearly and immediately agreed that this should not be the case. The

² Students were presented with the option to come up with their own additional definition of relevance, but they did not make use of this.

term 'applicable' in the first statement particularly resonated within the group. Or as Anna stated: "You can reflect on current societal issues, but it should also prepare you to think in a certain way so you can apply it later on".

In sum, both the survey and the focus group provide an insightful understanding of how students perceive and discuss relevance of a study programme. It is clear that relevance is important for students, and they are well capable to put to words what they consider relevance to be. While the survey seemed to indicate that content (a programme being up-to-date) is the most important aspect of programme relevance, the focus group discussion made clear that it is not so much the discussion of current content that matters. Instead, it is more important for a programme to provide students with the tools to reflect upon current issues and to ensure that the skills and knowledge taught are applicable in the real world.

How useful is PBL in ensuring relevance and the capacity to deal with societal change?

After having established how students reflect on relevance, we will now come back to our expectation that PBL is a suitable educational approach to ensure relevance and capacity to capture societal change. We asked in both the survey and the focus group what elements of PBL work best in ensuring that a study programme is relevant and capable of capturing societal change. The answers to the open survey question again often contained more than one explanation, but it is particularly the room for discussion and debates that leads to a better understanding of current developments (mentioned 36 times). This is nicely captured by the following answer:

Traditional learning environments are often restricted to a unilateral teaching method: teacher-to-student. Regarding contemporary European developments, discussions are best conducted with everyone together and not just one person (the teacher) dictating the information. In the natural sciences there is not so much room for discussion on facts and figures, while the social sciences encourage such discussion. This is where PBL comes in and plays a vital role in understanding contemporary European developments.

What discussions and debates particularly lead to, is a better development of different perspectives on a particular issue (mentioned 33 times), which in turn enhances ones reflection capacity (mentioned 11 times). In addition, the students in the focus group –

when asked to write down their observations about what tools work for a programme to be able to deal with societal change – mostly point to active exercises where students apply their knowledge to a specific topical issue, such as debates.

The reality of PBL as applied in the BA ES in Maastricht does not always put this into practice, however. The survey results illustrate that while PBL may be of key importance in terms of relevance and connection to contemporary issues, students are quite critical about the way it is implemented. This is despite the fact that 100 students out of the 134 students answer ‘somewhat agree’ and ‘strongly agree’ to the statement ‘PBL helps to contribute to a better understanding of contemporary developments’. Also, 95 students believe that it is more suitable than traditional styles of teaching. And another 83 students believe that course materials create enough room for discussing such issues. However, when asked to reflect on how PBL can help to better understand contemporary issues, students’ answers remain rather abstract and do not lead to a clearly shared perspective.

Students seem to like the responsibility they have within PBL, as illustrated by the quote of a student who states that PBL helps to “take ownership of my learning”. They also believe that an active discussion can help to link course topics to contemporary issues. Criticism concerns the different quality of groups, in particular due to group dynamics (e.g. students who do not participate or are not prepared) and tutors who do not stick to the philosophy of PBL. As one student put it:

PBL can work rather well if both the tutor and the group have a same understanding of what a PBL meeting means. If everybody knows what is expected of him/her and fulfills their tasks, than [*sic!*] PBL is a nice way of learning. Otherwise, it can feel as a complete waste of time.

Students also mention that it doesn’t work in all courses, because PBL is seen as being applied too rigidly (PBL as ‘seven steps’) or when courses are simply too crowded with topics that need to be covered for the exam. In other words, students report mixed experiences and there are very few students who wholeheartedly embrace the current PBL practice in the BA ES. This is phrased very clearly by one student:

In my first year of EUS I was very satisfied and enjoyed the tutorials a lot since PBL was applied in all tutorials. However in the second year and the second half of the third year I sat in tutorials where no PBL was used which was a pity. When

I did my minor in the Faculty of Law, I was positively surprised. There PBL was consistently applied, it worked out pretty well and it helped staying motivated during studying. When I came back to the faculty in February I was very disappointed since PBL was not applied. PBL is a very student friendly approach which gives students room for discussion. Also, it gives a tutorial structure and helps all students to prepare thoroughly for the tutorials.

The focus group helped us to further understand what it is in PBL that would make it a good educational format for a study programme to cope with societal change. We asked the students why they thought that we put forward this expectation, to which Willem highlighted that PBL is about having an open discussion, using solid arguments. Or, as Franz stated, "PBL is the best way to have an open discussion". The debate soon directed to what is then the best format to have an open debate, and here some of the students seemed to have preferences that do not directly match the original ideas behind PBL. While the philosophy behind the system concentrates on self-directed learning in which brainstorming by the group is crucial to unravel the direction of the self-study phase, some of the focus group participants would much rather see the tutor providing them with the learning goals.

This observation was further strengthened during the exercise that we asked students to do. We presented them with two versions of a PBL assignment (or problem), both included in *Annex 2*. The first one was an existing assignment that is problematic in light of some of the key principles of PBL, in particular because it already presents students with questions and literature, which conflicts with PBL's self-directed nature. The second assignment aimed to tackle this by means of a leaner text, the addition of three images, and the removal of the literature. We asked students what they thought the assignments were about. We also asked them which of the two they preferred.

Earlier some students expressed that they would much rather have more focus by the tutor (for instance by providing the students with the learning goals). With regard to the assignments, students also rather preferred the first, directive assignment. Or stated differently: the second assignment – without much steering or indication of literature to be used – was perceived to be scary. Students wondered how they would determine what to study exactly; how much they would have to read and whether or not they would choose the 'right' literature. When pushing the group to elaborate, it turned out that exam anxiety was particularly driving their reactions. Or, as Franz put it, "what we are discussing now is the relevance of getting a good grade". In other words, students

feared not to be able to be as prepared as in a situation where there is more steering and in which literature is provided. Particularly courses that end with an in-class exam testing knowledge, were not considered to be useful for a more self-directed version of PBL. This illustrates that another relevant aspect of understanding when and how a study programme is relevant is its assessment approach; a topic that we did not explicitly cover in the research design of this paper.

To conclude, the survey and focus group inform us that generally students feel that PBL is a good educational approach to ensure that a study programme is relevant and capable of capturing societal change. It has to be ensured, however, that PBL is applied consistently and correctly by both students and tutor; something that is not always achieved in Maastricht University's BA ES. In addition, it seems that students do not entirely adhere to all principles behind PBL. Yes, they value discussions and debates, and they want the programme to allow reflection on current topical issues, however, this needs to be done in a rather pre-defined context. Some students in the focus group hinted that they much rather have the tutor provide the learning goals, and all students indicated with some nervousness that an assignment text without much steering and prescribed literature would perhaps be too much. Students want to be empowered, but only to a certain degree.

Discussion and conclusions

The ever-changing environment around us may have a different consequences for scholars in European Studies than it does for students. The former may have to adapt more – for instance due to the availability of research funding – than the latter – due to the need to prepare for further studies plus the job market. Nevertheless, in times of crises, HE programmes in fields such as European Studies might run into challenges of ensuring that they stay relevant and that they are capable of capturing this ever-changing society. In this paper we aimed to provide a better understanding as to how study programmes dealing with contemporary societal issues can adequately do so. In this paper we focused on the perceptions of students of Maastricht University's BA ES and asked them when they consider a study programme to be relevant and what programme characteristics are necessary to deal with societal change.

Based on a survey and a focus group, we revealed student perceptions of programme relevance and their views on the usefulness of PBL as an educational approach. A review of literature in on the topic suggested that there are three key elements that seem to help in ensuring European Studies programmes' relevance and capacity to deal with societal change. First, programmes need to ensure a diverse approach to multifaceted, contemporary developments (Manners & Rosamond, 2018) and to provide room for critical reflection (Rittberger & Blauburger, 2018). Second, it is important to ensure the application of theory to realistic cases (Kember et al., 2008) and to link content to students' personal and career goals (Bainbridge Frymier & Shulman, 1995). Third, the aforementioned points are more likely to be achieved in an educational environment that engages and empowers students (Bovill et al., 2011).

The results of our analysis illustrate that students largely agree to these elements. Interdisciplinarity seems to a key reason for students to opt for European Studies. The observation that "content can't be king" (Gijssels et al., 2014, p. 21) and that critical reflection and application of theory to realistic cases is crucial, was shared by the students in the focus group. While students agree that PBL is a good approach towards reaching this goal, they are also critical about the extent to which the current application of PBL really reaches this goal. It is crucial to ensure a consistent application of PBL across the board, requiring active participation by all students. In this application of PBL, however, students seem to favour a more 'guided' version of PBL where the assignment texts are clearly stating the questions to be raised and provide the literature to be discussed.

We interpret this observation in light of our previous remark that anxiety and stress among students seem to be on the increase (Räsänen, Postareff, Mattsson, & Lindblom-Ylänne, 2018). In addition, the focus on exams and tests is also highlighted as a challenge in Moust et al.'s (2005) critical evaluation of the application of PBL at Maastricht University. Yet, since we did not specifically look into this matter, more research would be needed before we can state with more certainty what is at stake here. Another element that was not explicitly covered in our research design, but that does seem to be relevant, is how assessment formats come into play. A final limitation concerns the fact that we have conducted this research in a population of students used to a PBL approach; results might be different when analysing a student population that is used to a more teacher-led environment.

In conclusion, what seems to be key in ensuring relevance of study programmes dealing with societal change? Our findings appear to link back to the different experiences of relevance, as mentioned above, in particular intrinsic and vicarious experience (Kember et al., 2008). The former is reflected in the emphasis on contemporary issues and job perspectives; the latter in the role of teachers, and we may add, the role of the learning environment. First, in light of existing literature, we believe that society needs graduates who have the skills to deal with complexity, not necessarily knowledge of the details of recent European crises. But then we need to better explain to our students how the 'here and now' is less important than the background to and tools to analyse the 'here and now'. The focus group discussion showed that students are able to reflect on this.

The second challenge concerns the learning environment constituted by PBL. We need to think about how this learning environment needs to be structured in order to make students comfortable, while ensuring PBL's key principles. This includes, in particular, self-directed learning, which can ensure that students have the ownership that is so important and helps them to focus on more contemporary issues while doing so. But without proper introduction to and training of PBL for students and staff, a potential shadow side of increasing empowerment is increasing anxiety.

Annex 1: Survey ‘Teaching and learning European Studies in times of crises’

Research introduction

The research project ‘Teaching and learning European Studies in times of crises’ focusses on how to keep European Studies programmes relevant in times of rapid societal changes and with an EU that seems to go from one crisis to the next, while taking into account factors such as government policies. Relevance in this context refers the programme’s contribution to a better understanding of contemporary European developments.

In this context, we are interested in finding out more about our students' perspective on the Bachelor in European Studies (BA ES). This survey should take you around 10-15 minutes to complete. The information provided will be used only for this research project and in ways that will not reveal who you are. Should you have questions about the research project, please do not hesitate to write to patrick.bijsmans@maastrichtuniversity.nl.

By clicking the button below, you acknowledge that you are aware that your answers to this survey will be used only for the research project ‘Teaching and learning European Studies in times of crises’ and in ways that will not reveal who you are.

Please note that this survey will be best displayed on a laptop or desktop computer.

Many thanks for your contribution!

Patrick Bijsmans & Esther Versluis

- I consent, and will begin the survey
- I do not consent, I do not wish to participate

Personal information

We would like to know some basic background information about who you are and when you started your BA ES.

Gender

▼ Female (1) ... Male (2)

Year of Birth

▼ 1983 (1) ... 2003 (21)

Nationality

▼ Afghanistan (1) ... Zimbabwe (1357)

When did you start with the BA ES?

▼ September 2012 (1) ... September 2017 (6)

Your study choice

Students have different reasons for their study choice. We would like to know why you decided to enrol for the BA ES and whether the programme lives up to your expectations.

Please explain why you decided to opt for the BA ES.

Please indicate how important the following reasons were for your decision to enrol for the BA ES.

	Not at all important	Slightly important	Moderately important	Very important	Extremely important
Reputation of programme	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Reputation of university	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Programme Content	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Problem-Based Learning	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Fully taught in English	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Interdisciplinarity of the programme	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
International student population	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Career perspectives	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
The city of Maastricht	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Friends in Maastricht	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Other	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Considering your reasons to choose the BA ES, please discuss whether the programme has lived up to your expectations.

Programme content

Our research focusses on how to keep European Studies programmes relevant in times of rapid societal changes and with an EU that seems to go from one crisis to the next. We would like to know more about your view of the programme's content from the perspective of our research project.

Please explain what relevance of a study programme means to you.

Please indicate how important the following items are to keep you motivated during your studies.

	Not at all important	Slightly important	Moderately important	Very important	Extremely important
Programme content	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Skills development	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Problem-Based Learning	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Ownership of the learning process	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Fellow students	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Teaching staff	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Career perspectives	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Other	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Relevance of a study programme matters to me.

	Strongly disagree	Somewhat disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Somewhat agree	Strongly agree
Relevance	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

I am satisfied with the programme's content.

	Strongly disagree	Somewhat disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Somewhat agree	Strongly agree
Satisfaction	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

The BA ES helps me to better understand contemporary European developments.

	Strongly disagree	Somewhat disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Somewhat agree	Strongly agree
Better understanding	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

The BA ES sufficiently covers contemporary European developments.

	Strongly disagree	Somewhat disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Somewhat agree	Strongly agree
Sufficient coverage	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Teaching and learning environment

Different teaching and learning environments allow for more or less room to adapt to contemporary developments. We would like to know more about your view on Problem-Based Learning from the perspective of our research project.

Please indicate how important the following characteristics of PBL are for you.

	Not at all important	Slightly important	Moderately important	Very important	Extremely important
Active learning	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Student-centred learning	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Collaborative learning	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Contextualised learning	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Ownership of the learning process	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Fellow students	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Teaching staff	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Other	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Taking into account the aforementioned characteristics of PBL, please discuss your personal experience with PBL.

PBL helps to contribute to a better understanding of contemporary European developments.

	Strongly disagree	Somewhat disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Somewhat agree	Strongly agree
Better understanding	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Course materials create enough room for discussing contemporary European developments?

	Strongly disagree	Somewhat disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Somewhat agree	Strongly agree
Room for discussion	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

PBL better prepares me for understanding contemporary developments than traditional teaching and learning environments.

	Strongly disagree	Somewhat disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Somewhat agree	Strongly agree
PBL vs traditional teaching	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Please discuss how PBL could help to contribute to a better understanding of contemporary European developments.

Last question

We are planning to set up one or more focus groups once we have analysed all completed questionnaires. The focus group will consist of a small, but demographically diverse group of students. During a meeting of about two hours we will ask you follow-up questions in an interactive setting in which you will discuss with other group members.

Would you be interested in taking part in a focus group to further discuss the topic of this research?

▼ Yes (1) ... No (2)

If yes, please provide your email address below. Please note that only the research team will have access to information that identifies you and your answers to the questionnaire will still be used only in ways that will not reveal who you are.

Annex 2: Two PBL assignments

Assignment (old)

The enormous expansions of tasks of the EU have been among the most remarkable features of the EU's development. As early as 1988, Jacques Delors predicted that 80 percent of all legislation affecting European countries would be made in Brussels within 10 years. How can we explain what we see happening in Europe? What theoretical assumptions and concepts allow us to identify patterns and predict a certain development? The European Union created an interesting puzzle for theorising, being "more than an International Organisation but less than a state".

Traditional integration theories might be able to explain why this shift took place (although they do not agree on the quality of this shift, if we remember: integration vs cooperation). Yet, they are not suitable to explain how the EU works as a political system. Defining the EU as a 'multi-level governance' system, for example, assumes that "*while national governments are formidable participants in EU policy-making, control has slipped away from them*" (Marks, Hooghe & Blank 1996:342).

Additionally, other alternative approaches emerged to question how the EU as political system works: new institutionalism and social constructivism were adapted from the International Relations literature to the European Union setting and challenge the domination of rational choice explanations. Globalisation and increased interdependencies filled the governance approach, while the fiscal debt crisis in Europe brings back and challenges traditional questions of integration and the meaning of "intergovernmentalism".

Required readings

Nugent, N. (2017). Conceptualizing the European Union. In *The Government and Politics of the European Union* (pp. 435-446). 8th edition, Hampshire: Palgrave (**library**)

Nugent, N. (2017). Theorizing European Integration and EU Politics. In *The Government and Politics of the European Union* (pp. 447-460). 8th edition, Hampshire: Palgrave (**library**)

Marks, G., Hooghe, L. and Blank, K. (1996). European Integration from the 1980s: State Centric vs. Multi-level Governance. *Journal of Common Market Studies*, 34(3), 341-378.

Bickerton, C. J., Hodson, D., & Puetter, U. (2015). The New Intergovernmentalism: European Integration in the Post-Maastricht Era. *JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies*, 53(4), 703-722.

Want to know more? Optional literature

Amy Verdun, (2015). A historical institutionalist explanation of the EU's responses to the euro area financial crisis. *Journal of European Public Policy* 22(2): 219-237.

Rosamond, B. (2010). New Theories of European Integration. In M. Cini (Ed.), *European Union Politics* (pp. 104-122). 3rd edition, Oxford: OUP. (library)

Pollack, M. (2005). Theorizing EU Policy-Making. In H. Wallace & W. Wallace & M. Pollack (Eds.), *Policy-Making in the European Union* (pp. 13-48). Oxford: Oxford University Press. (library)

Want to read more about how current developments in the EU can be explained from a theoretical perspective?

Arne Niemann, Arne and Ioannou, Demosthenes (2015). European economic integration in times of crisis: a case of neofunctionalism? *Journal of European Public Policy* 22(2): 196-218.

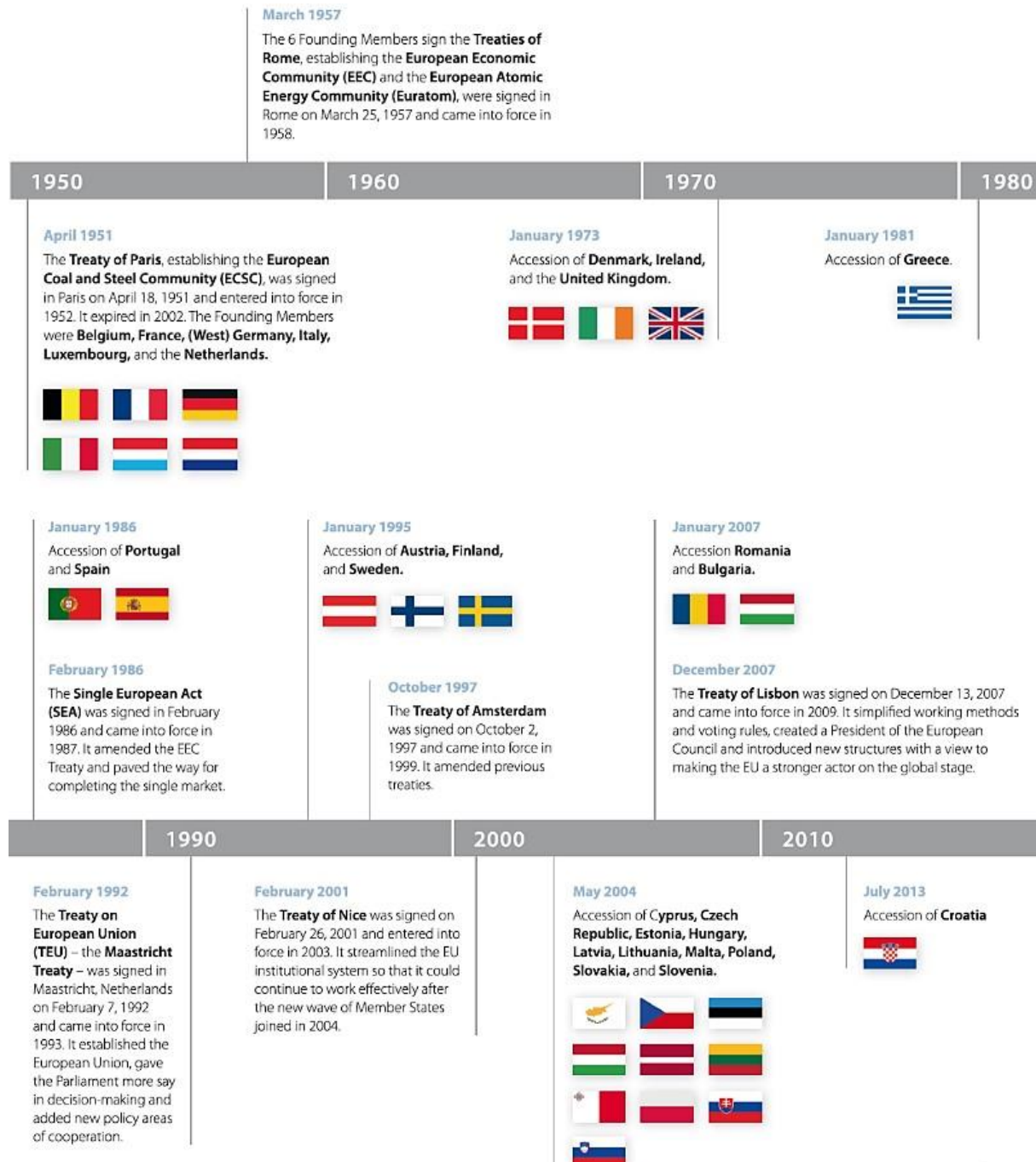
Frank Schimmelfennig, Frank (2015). Liberal intergovernmentalism and the euro area crisis. *Journal of European Public Policy* 22(2): 177-195.

Puetter, Uwe (2012). Europe's deliberative intergovernmentalism: the role of the Council and the European Council in EU economic governance. *Journal of European Public Policy* 19 (2): 161-178.

Assignment (new)

Throughout the history of European integration there have been many ups and downs, including significant treaty changes and periods of sustained crises. Scholars have attempted to theorise about these developments. Consequently, we now have a wide range of integration theories. At the same time, we have seen the rise of theories that look into differentiated integration *and* even European disintegration.

Illustration 1

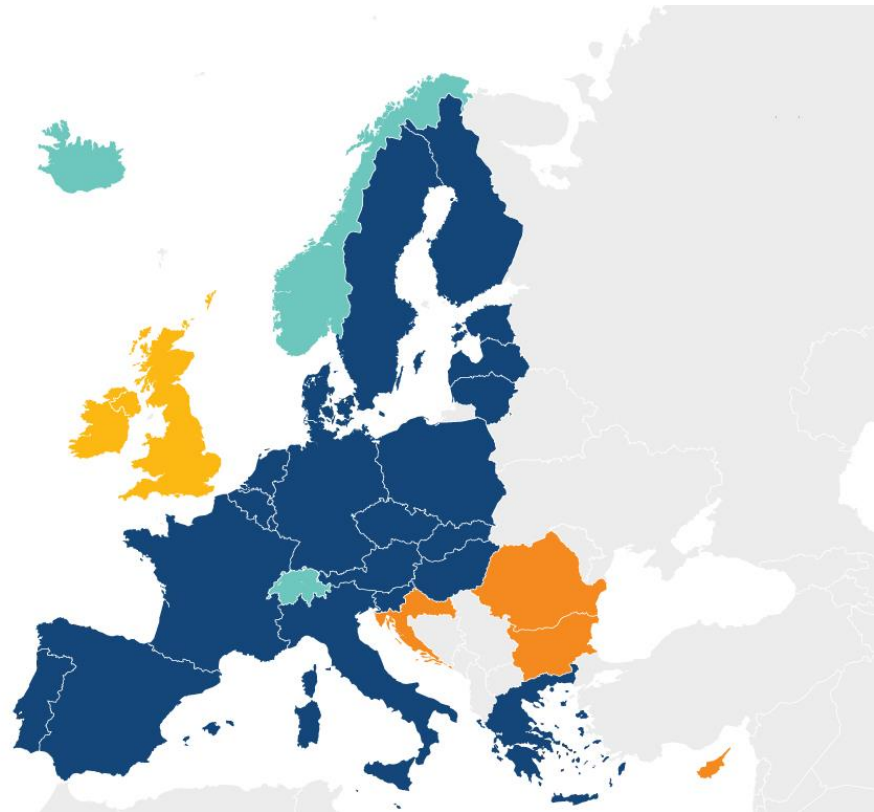


Source: <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/unitedstates/en/eu-us-relations/the-european-union>

Illustration 2

Schengen Area

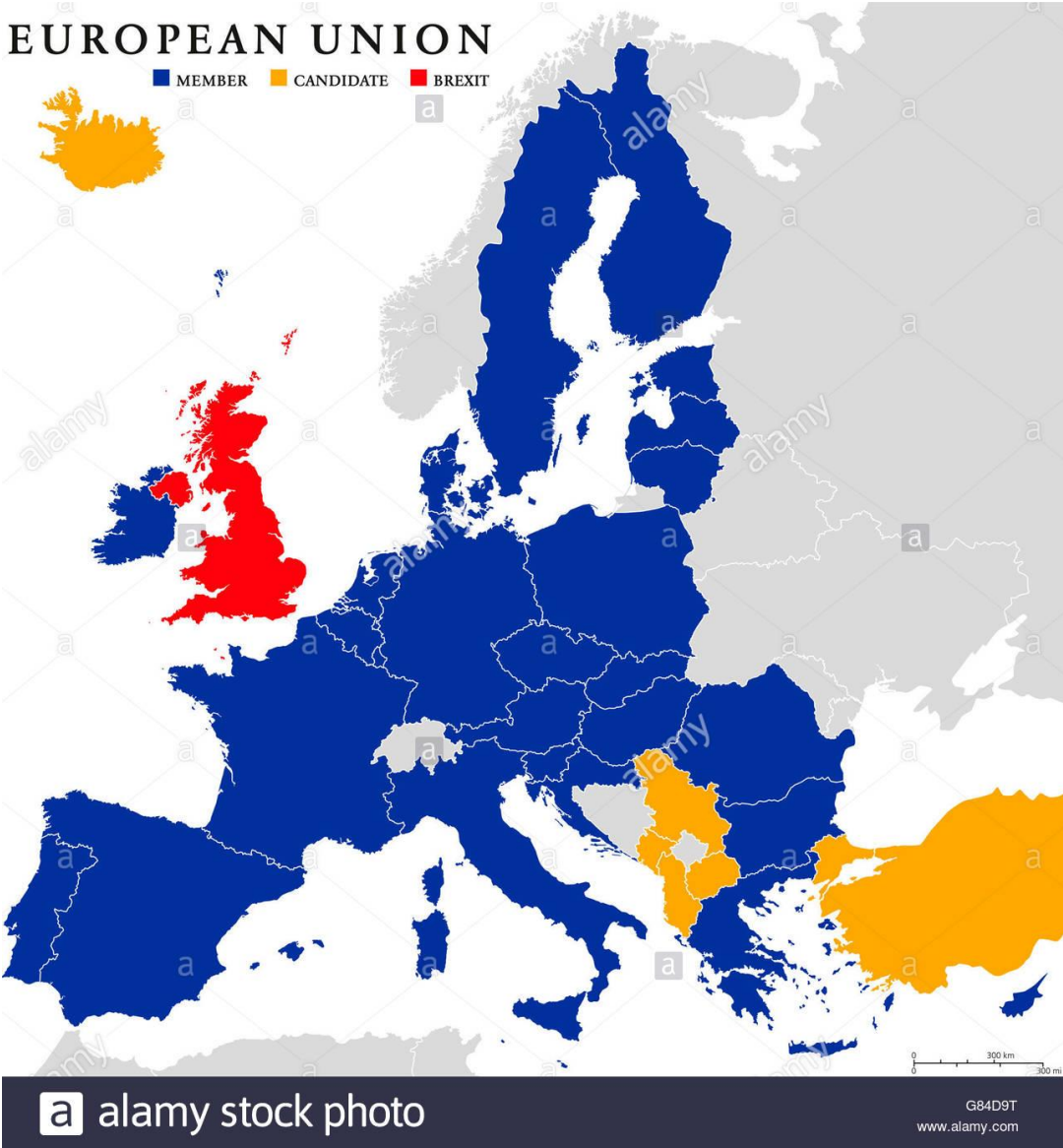
- Schengen Area (EU)
- Schengen Area (non-EU)
- Schengen candidate country (EU)
- EU country outside Schengen Area



Source:

http://www.europarl.europa.eu/resources/library/images/20180223PHT98530/20180223PHT98530_original.jpg

Illustration 3



Source: <https://c8.alamy.com/comp/G84D9T/european-union-brexit-political-map-with-european-union-member-states-G84D9T.jpg>

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