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FOCUSES AND CHALLENGES IN EUROPEAN UNION STUDIES

Stemming the Euro-sceptic tide: Promoting European Studies in UK Higher Education

Abstract

After a temporary surge for European Studies in higher education in the United Kingdom in the 1990s, the subject area has in recent years been affected by a substantial decline. This is the result of a wider domestic climate of Euro-scepticism, which has been largely driven by a sustained campaign against the European Union in large sections of the British tabloid media. The domestic debate on the EU in Britain concentrates mainly on the adverse effects of British membership on national sovereignty and consequently leaves little room for the detailed analysis of institutional and policy development.

This has led to the widespread perception that the study of the history of the integration process and of EU institutions and procedures is a marginal subject area, which does no longer necessarily have to be part of the core curriculum in British universities. Instead the attention has shifted towards the wider international relations environment, particularly the United States and Asia.

The proposed article considers this development as an opportunity to re-energise interest in European Studies in the UK and proposes to promote it on the basis of the acknowledgement that it needs to be put in the context of the changes in the wider global environment. The curriculum in the area of European Studies should therefore predominantly concentrate on the EU as an increasingly influential actor in the global economy and international relations. This calls for a new emphasis on the analysis of the development of the internal dimension of the EU-27 Single Market and its external impact as one of the most dynamic integrated economic areas in the world. The embedment of European Studies in the wider international relations context offers the best potential to increase the level of interest amongst British students in the study of internal dynamics of the EU, including the languages, cultures, histories and polities of individual member states.

European Studies is a relatively new discipline in higher education in the United Kingdom. It has received increasing prominence since the 1980s, when the interest in the study of Europe as a cultural region and with it the analysis of the process of institutional economic and political integration in the form of the European Community substantially increased.

The study of European history and of the integration process has traditionally received more attention in continental countries than in the UK. This is mainly due to the lack of Britain's historical affiliation with the European continent. The infamous expression related to the existence of 'fog in the channel' between Britain and its continental neighbours illustrates that the British have historically considered themselves to be at the margins of Europe, as an independent Great Power with a global Empire that chose to engage in European affairs only temporarily and selectively (Young, 1997, p. 225). In the aftermath of the Second World War, the victorious Britain again considered Europe only to be one of Churchill's three circles of foreign policy interests, with the preservation of the Empire and the *special relationship* with the United States clearly remaining of higher priority for successive British governments than engagement in Europe. The attempts to consolidate reconciliation and peace between the continental countries on the basis of institutionalised European integration was therefore regarded with great scepticism by the majority of the British (Keens-Soper, 2000, p. 178). Britain's late entry into the EEC in 1973 in the aftermath of two French vetoes consequently occurred mainly on the basis of economic considerations. The decline in Britain's post-war economic performance stood in stark contrast with the increasingly booming Common Market. British leaders therefore realised that they could no longer remain in splendid isolation and had high hopes that membership of the Common Market would revitalise their country's ailing economy. This was particularly due to the fact that British trade with continental countries had become increasingly important in the post-war years, with a 30 per cent increase in trade between Britain and the Common Market by 1971 (Bulmer, 1992, p. 18). Britain's late entry into the EEC proved problematic in two respects. On the one hand, the economic benefits the British had expected to gain from membership of the Common Market did not materialise as most of Europe was negatively affected by the collapse of the Bretton Woods system in 1971 and the global impact of the 1973 oil crisis. At the same time, British leaders quickly realised that they entered an organisation with a policy *acquis* that had been profoundly shaped by French and German interest in preceding years. The resulting disillusionment with the EEC amongst the British public resulted in calls for the renegotiation of British membership terms and eventually the 1975 public referendum on the continuation of the membership. The positive outcome of the referendum with 67.2 per cent voting in favour to stay inside the Community did however not manage to settle the continuing British unease with in particular the political aspects of the European project.

The aggressive anti-Europeanism displayed by sections of the British tabloid press and the government during the Thatcher-Major after 1979 resulted from a frustration with the fact that the European Community was on course to become more than simply an intergovernmental free trade zone. Thatcher openly clashed with the attempts of the then Commission president Jacques Delors to develop a deeper political and social dimension for the Common Market.

In the wake of the signing of the Single European Act in 1986, which Thatcher had supported on the basis of its drive towards market liberalisation, the British prime minister publicly rebutted Commission plans to expand the powers of Community institutions like the European Parliament and the Commission in her famous ‘three nos’ speech in the House of Commons, following the European Council summit in Rome in 1990 (Gowland and Turner, 2000, p. 184). This symbolised the British perspective, which refused to acknowledge that the deepening of economic integration would inevitably lead to further integration in political areas.

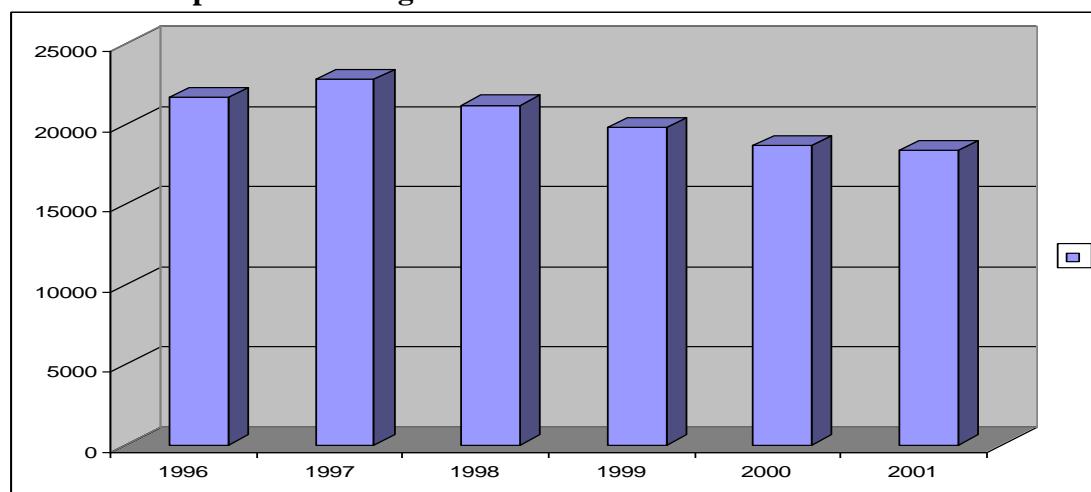
In contrast to most continental European countries, the British have therefore been mainly interested in the economic aspects of the integration process and either ignored or dismiss the political areas. Especially in the aftermath of the Maastricht treaty, which deepened the level of economic and political creation substantially and also turned the Community into a European Union of member states, the British public debate on Europe turned almost xenophobic in its tone, with the right-wing of the Conservative party and the Euro-sceptic tabloid press defining Britain’s relationship with the EU in terms of the defence of national sovereignty. Catchwords like ‘surrender’ or ‘red lines’ have since became regular occurrences in the British debate on the EU and relations with continental partners. In spite of the growing hostility towards the EU under the Conservatives, the 1980s led towards the continuation of a trend where an increasing number of higher education institutions in the UK started to offer European Studies programmes. Particularly the polytechnic institutes, which became the new group of universities after the 1992 high education reforms, promoted the introduction of European Studies as a new degree pathway which allowed students to combine a variety of disciplines related to the study of Europe. European studies degrees consequently tend to combine elements from political science, history and languages as the core subject areas of the curriculum (Smith, 2002, p.3). Particularly the study of modern European languages used to be a core compulsory element of European Studies programmes and provided the cultural link between the different disciplines involved in the degree. The importance of languages for the programme lies in the fact that students acquire not just skills in a particular language but also get an insight into the national history and culture of individual countries. This is often linked with a period of study abroad as part of the EU-sponsored ERASMUS/Socrates exchange scheme, which allows students to deepen their language skills and obtain a first-hand experience of the host country.

Ironically, while European Studies as a discipline managed to flourish in the Euro-sceptic climate during the 18 years of Conservative rule , the talk of a crisis in European Studies in the UK only emerged under the New Labour government that was elected in 1997. Tony Blair had initially claimed to pursue a sustained pro-European domestic campaign to convince the British public of the benefits of engagement in the EU. Although the New Labour government has definitely shown a more constructive approach towards the EU and is willing to constructively engage in the development of major policy areas such as enlargement, Common Foreign and Security Policy and environmental protection, it has failed to stem a deepening of the public resentment against the EU in Britain. Blair’s caution to actively challenge the Euro-sceptic agenda of parts of the British tabloid press has lead to a situation where the scepticism and the indifference towards the EU as an institution has grown substantially.

The latest *Eurobarometer* compiled in the autumn of 2007 shows that now only 25 per cent of the British public express trust in the EU and its institutional setting, with only 37 per cent claiming that they understand how the EU works as an institution. The figures are particularly alarming amongst younger people with only basic education (up to age 15 or less). In this group the number of those who claim to understand the EU currently stands at 26 per cent (*Eurobarometer*, 2007, p. 11). Blair himself acknowledged his failure to promote a pro-European message amongst the British public in a speech at Oxford University towards the end of his premiership, in which he admitted that he ‘had long since given up trying to conduct a serious debate about the future of Europe’ (Blair, 2006). Blair’s concept of turning Britain into a bridge between European and American interests, which he had originally advocated in his speech at the Polish Stock Exchange in 2000 (Blair, 2000), collapsed when he decided to side with the Bush administration over the military invention in Iraq and consequently technically abandoned his European agenda. The lack of engagement on the European front also became obvious in the government’s higher education policy, where it abandoned the obligation to learn a language for students at GCSE level in 2004. This was widely criticised and has led to a dramatic decline in the number of students choosing to take a foreign language at A level.

The Confederation of British Industry (CBI) reported in its recent employment trend survey that the number of students who decide to choose a foreign language has fallen by 25 per cent between 1997 and 2007, with a particularly noticeable decline in the interest in French and German, in the decade since New Labour came to power (CBI, 2007). Already in 2005, the chief of the CBI warned that the decline in A level language students would risk to seriously undermine the competitiveness of the British economy (CBI, 2005). The decline in interest in languages is also visible in the higher education sector. Figure 1 shows the general decline in application for language-related degrees in British higher education since 1996. UCAS, which is the central body which deals with university applications in the UK, measured applications in different categories before and after 2002. Between 1996 and 2001, students applying for language degrees or degrees which contained a language element, where statistically recorded in the broader category of languages-related disciplines.

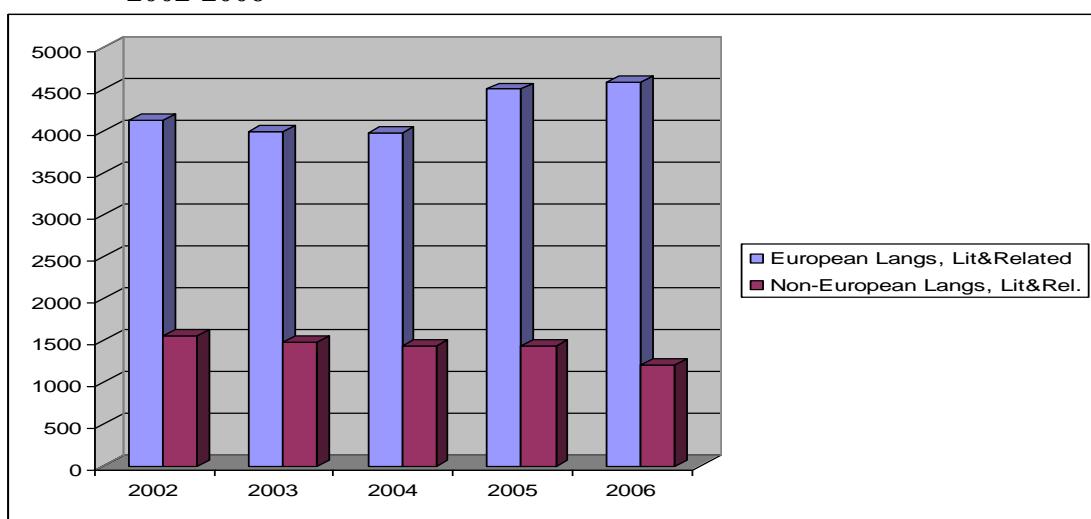
Figure 1 Total number of applicants for languages-related disciplines at UK higher education institutions 1996-2001



Source: UCAS

Since 2002, UACES has been categorising applications more distinctively and is now dividing them into applications to enter European and non-European languages, literature and related programmes. This is the result of the criticism from business leaders in Britain, who have pointed out that in addition to European languages, the study of languages which are spoken outside Europe (like Mandarin) would be crucial to allow British businesses to expand their operations into markets outside Europe (CBI, 2007). Figure 2 illustrates that the interest in studying European languages remains on a low level in Britain (less than 5,000 applicants per year), but has been slightly on the increase since 2004, in spite of the government's decision to make the study of languages optional in schools. The interest in non-European languages is even lower (less than 1,500 applicants per year) but can be expected to rise in the future, as British businesses intensify their investment in the rising economies of Asia.

Figure 2 Total number of applicants for European and non-European languages, literature and related disciplines at UK higher education institutions 2002-2006



Source: UCAS

The decline in language interest has a noticeable effect on European Studies in the UK. It has led to a new trend where combined European studies degrees, especially at newer universities, are disappearing or are being replaced by interdisciplinary programmes without languages or with only a very basic selection of language options to choose from (Smith, 2002, p. 4). As the government has failed to highlight the importance of studying the languages and cultures of other countries in Europe as part of its higher education strategy, British universities seem to move in a direction where European studies is considered as a minor subject area which can be integrated into the curriculum of other degrees like Politics/International Relations, Law, History and Economics, rather than to be promoted as an individual degree pathway. According to the official listing of universities in that offer European Studies courses, provided by the University Association for Contemporary European Studies (UACES), only 12 higher education institutions in the UK currently offer a combined Languages/European Studies degree¹.

¹ The detailed list can be found on the UACES website: <http://www.uaces.org/G71.htm>

A number of other universities still have a language programme as an integral part of their European Studies degree. However, the trend towards combining European studies with core subject areas other than languages has become clear.

A future for European Studies in the UK?

It would be short-sighted to assume that the prevailing Euro-sceptic climate and the decline in the interest in languages amongst students in the UK will inevitably lead to the gradual disappearance of European studies as a major subject area in British higher education. There is yet a risk that the subject is increasingly marginalised if the government and universities do not swiftly embark on a coherent strategy to promote the importance of the study of the variety of European histories, cultures and languages as an essential basis which allows students to grasp the background and the mechanisms of the institutionalised European integration process symbolised by the EU.

The first step to revitalise interest in European Studies should lie in the active promotion of the importance of foreign language skills in British schools. The government has recently already taken steps to promote the language in schools from an early age but not enough is yet done to provide prospective school leavers with information on the options for studying languages at university. This is especially obvious with regard to information on the opportunities for future university students to deepen their practical language skills and knowledge of other European cultures on the basis of a ERASMUS/Socrates-funded year abroad placement. A recent consultants education survey in the UK has shown that the lack of interest in foreign languages is already affecting the recruitment of teachers of foreign languages in schools, with the number of applicants to train in modern foreign languages having declined from 858 in 2006 to 588 in 2008 (Lipsett, 2008). Promotion of languages therefore has to be twofold and occur both at school but also increasingly at university level, in order to ensure that a higher number of students decide to take up foreign languages to acquire the necessary skills to subsequently teach languages in schools. This demands that universities stop cutting down financial support for language departments, which are often slimmed down and reduced to a supporting role, mainly in order to provide language tuition for international students embarking on a degree in the UK. In order to remain attractive for prospective students as a viable major degree pathway, European studies programmes should therefore include a broad set of integrated language options. As Michael Smith points out in his report for the standing heads of European Studies at UK universities, the removal of language options in European Studies programmes ‘has had a clear consequence in limiting the countries whose cultures, history and politics are studied in detail within a trans-European framework’ (Smith, 2002, p. 4).

An improved level of language tuition on its own is nevertheless unlikely to ensure that European Studies has a future in British higher education. As students are increasingly concerned about the impact of the choice of their degree for their employment prospects after graduation, the European Studies curriculum needs to be substantially revised. While the study of historical and cultural aspects of individual member states and of the European integration process will remain an important part of the curriculum, it will be increasingly important to offer students the option to study major EU policy areas in greater detail.

In this respect, especially the analysis of the origins and the policy mechanisms of the Single European Market in the EU-27 is of crucial importance. As the progress in the area of political integration has stalled and is unlikely to move substantially beyond the present level in the near future, domestic and overseas students at UK universities are increasingly interested in considering the evolution of the EU Single Market as an example for regional economic integration in the context of the study of changes of the global international environment. In this respect, the evolution of a new global power balance between the EU as a regionally integrated economic area with a growing list of member states joining monetary union and the US and China offers students the option to combine the analysis of EU institutional and policy mechanisms and evolution with other core subject areas, such as political science/internal relations, economics, business studies, history and sociology.

The knowledge of European (and also non-European) languages and cultures, including study placements abroad and work placements at EU institutions, would have to be a crucial element of this new emphasis in European Studies. This shows that the proposed revision is not an attempt to create a new alternative to language-based European Studies. It is on the contrary designed to integrate languages and cultural studies into a more streamlined curriculum, which opens European studies programmes up to elements of globalisation studies. The latter is an increasingly popular interdisciplinary subject, which is in the process of being established at a growing number of universities in the UK and elsewhere. Specifically in the generally Euro-sceptic domestic climate in Britain, a more pragmatic approach in European Studies, which is less concerned with the political vision of a united Europe is needed. It needs to instead concentrate more on the global economic impact of the ongoing deepening of the Single Market, as well as past and future processes of enlargement. This offers the best chance to attract a larger number amongst the future generation of students in British higher education to this subject area.

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