A glimpse from inside the "EU bubble"

A qualitative interview study of European youth doing traineeships at the EU institutions

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Abstract

European citizens demand more bottom-up debates in opposition to the existing elite-driven voices heard within European policymaking. The youth is one of the groups which demands more participation and involvement, and the EU is partly involving young people by having trainees at the EU institutions. With the goal of hearing the voice of these young people and getting insights on youths' experiences in relation to the "EU bubble", international internships at the EU institutions have been studied. Qualitative interviews were conducted with trainees having undertaken, or were in the middle of, their Brussels-based EU institutions traineeships. The interviews were coded and analysed with the help of theoretical concepts on youth migration as well as research on European youth identity. The main results show that the youth are somewhat critical to the EU institutions hierarchal structures, gender inequality and lack of diversity. They are aware that not everyone can enter the "EU bubble" and see themselves as privileged for doing so. The experience gave them new skills, professional experience, friendships, and a stronger feeling of a European group membership.

Content

1 Introduction

According to an article in The Brussels Times[1] the "EU bubble" is the part of Brussels where most of the European Union (EU) institutions are situated, also called the European Quarter. It's a quarter made up of large concrete boulevards, office buildings with modern glass facades and restaurants and parks full of people wearing smart-casual office attires. The term is however often used in a broader context than just to explain this very area. As explained by the satiric memes' website 'DG-MEME': "The EU Bubble is a term used to indicate a reality distortion generated by the peculiar set of people that inhabit the Brussels' European District."[2] While keeping in mind that the phrase is meant to be ironic, the phenomenon is of interest for me and constitutes a focus of my research.

For a long time, the EU has cultivated narratives of European integration. Research by Kaiser[3] shows that the European citizens demand more bottom-up debates in opposition to the existing elite-driven efforts in constructing European legitimacy as well as a European identity. Among these citizens demanding more participation there is the youth. In order to contextualize European youth identity for this thesis I am choosing to follow the Youth Policy Organisation's criteria, seeing youth as someone between 15 and 29. The European identity will be based on whether the youth expresses that they feel a European belonging or not.

Last year, 2022, was the year of the youth on president of the European Commission Von der Leyen's initiative. Youth participation and involvement is a recurring topic within the institutions and has been discussed since at least the 1968's student protests when youth perhaps for the first time were seen as a political actor.[4] Youth participation stay nonetheless an unfilled goal since involving especially unorganised youth has proven to be a problem.[5] One way of involving youth in the work of the EU institutions is however to have young trainees.

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[1] Whitehead, Orlando. 2022. Bringing the EU bubble to life. *The Brussels Times*. 13 May. https://www.brusselstimes.com/224706/belgium-in-brief-bringing-the-eu-bubble-to-life (2023-05-09).
[2] Directorate-General for Memes, Satire and Sober Fun. N.d. EU Bubble. *DG MEME*. https://www.dg-meme.eu/meme/glossary/eu-bubble/ (2023-05-09).
[3] Kaiser, Wolfram. 2017. One narrative or several? Politics, cultural elites, and citizens in constructing a 'New Narrative for Europe' from the Special issue Narrating European Integration: Transnational Actors and Stories. *National Identities*, 19(2).
[4] Pušnik and, Tomaž and Banjac, Marinko. 2022. Dialogue with youth 'is not a dialogue among "elites"': problematization of dialogue with unorganised youth in the EU. Journal of Youth Studies, 1-18.
[5] Ibid, p. 1.

The 1,900 trainees that the EU institutions receive every year, which of the biggest group end up in the institutions in the "EU bubble", provide political capital for the institutions and useful professional experience for the youth. International internships within the EU can be seen as a symbol for the European free movement and amplifies the idea about the supranational European space - especially in Brussels; "the heart of Europe".[6]

The youth coming to Brussels for their traineeships might have some interesting insights on what life in the "EU bubble" is like. This thesis will contribute to hearing the voice of these young people and get their perspective, experiences, and views from the life in the "EU bubble".

1.1   Aim and research questions

Conceptually I place the phenomenon of internships in the context of youth mobility, European identity, and perception of the EU. The topic has relevance to European young people and policymakers, but it is an understudied research area with a research gap to be filled, especially when looking into internships within the EU institutions. Since the subject of international internships is understudied it might be disproportionately influenced by "publicity material" created by institutions, organizations, and other stakeholders that profits from hosting placements.[7] Opposed to an elitist and institutions focused perspective, it is important to have a bottom-up perspective on Europe and the EU from the youths' point of view. Internships at the EU institutions can be seen as a way to attempt to include youth voices into politics.

The aim of this master thesis is therefore to get the youth perspective on the life in the so-called "EU bubble" through conducting interviews with former and current trainees at the Brussels-based EU institutions.

The research questions follow:

- How do EU-interested youth perceive the EU institutions and European power relations?

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[6] Wallonie-Bruxelles Campus. Belgium: an ideal position, right in the heart of Brussels. *Wallonie-Bruxelles Campus*. https://www.studyinbelgium.be/en/belgium-ideal-position-right-heart-europe (2023-08-20).
[7] Cuzzocrea, Valentina and Cairns, David C.2022. Mobile moratorium? The case of young people undertaking international internships. *Mobilities*, 15(3), p.6.

- What personal experiences do European youth have in connection to the "EU bubble"?
- What impact did the internships have on the youth in understanding themselves in relation to Europe and their European identity?

1.2 Disposition

Next section of this thesis consists of a background that aims to provide some additional information about internships and youth policy. This is followed by previous research on youth mobility and migration. Thereafter, in the second chapter, the theoretical framework lays out research on European youth identity as well as theoretical concepts on youth mobility. It is succeeded by a chapter on the method and empirical material used for this thesis, where qualitative interview, data and sampling, analysis of interview and critical reflections are included. Consequently, the analysis and result chapter carries out the investigations in three subchapters for the three research questions, ending with a discussion that aims to answer the questions. Finally, a fifth chapter presents summarizing conclusions of the findings. Suggestions for further research will likewise be presented.

1.3 Background

The following part is meant to give some background information on internships and youth participation. Internships are considered important in two respects: 1) as a part of education 2) as a part of youth policy.

Approximately 1,900 students or recent university graduates take part in the various EU trainee programmes every year. The traineeships normally last between 3 and 5 months with a payment of around 1,200 euros per month (as of 2022)[8] and exist in a broad selection of fields, such as politics and development, human resources, competition law, employment and social affairs, food safety, finance and many more. The students and university graduates that are offered the trainee positions get a chance to develop personal and professional qualities, get useful professional experience and enhance their EU knowledge.[9] Internships within the

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[8] European Union. Jobs & traineeships in European Union institutions. *European Union.* https://european-union.europa.eu/live-work-study/jobs-traineeships-eu-institutions_en (2023-03-08).
[9] Keshelashvili, Salome. How to get your foot at the doorsteps of the EU institutions? *Erasmus Student Network.* https://www.esn.org/how-get-your-foot-doorsteps-eu-institutions (2023-03-08).

EU institutions provide political capital for the institutions and amplify the idea of the supranational European space - especially in Brussels; "the heart of Europe". International internships within the EU can also be seen as a symbol for the European free movement and are a way for the institutions to get additional work force of most of the time, young, motivated people. They might also function as a way to get youth more involved and interested in European politics since today's EU leaders continuously emphasises the importance of youth participation in European politics, especially in the formulation of youth policies. There exists particularly a need for participation of unorganized youth, meaning youth who are not members of any youth organizations, since this group is the least represented in dialogues conducted with youth.[10]

As transnational mobility has been added as a priority item on the EU's professional skill development policy agenda in the late 2010, in parallel to the already existing trend of professionalization in higher education, many European universities have chosen to adapt more market-oriented practices. By professionalisation in higher education it is referred to students being ready for the job market upon graduating, which often incentivizes universities to add opportunities for the students to develop their professional skills as a part of the curriculum. This is done by higher education institutions since they are facing problems of education massification and higher demand of quality or desired by the students because of the hard competition they are oftentimes facing. Not all internships are done as a part of a university degree, however. For many, especially young people, internships are a way to get some hands-on experience in a market that can be hard to step into since employers often look for workers with years of experience.

Inclusion and participation of youth in the EU politics have not always been encouraged. The student protests in several European cities in 1968 are the earliest well-known example of youth being seen as a political actor, as they were spreading awareness of the need to be included in the political processes.[11] The protests lead both the Council of Europe and the European Economic Community to shape a new policy area that with time come to be known as 'youth policy'. 10 years later, in the 1980's, youth participation in European politics had widened. The youth were seen as a social movement searching for dialogue and different

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[10] Pušnikand, Tomaž and Banjac, Marinko. 2022. Dialogue with youth 'is not a dialogue among "elites"': problematization of dialogue with unorganised youth in the EU. *Journal of Youth Studies,* p.2.
[11] Ibid, p. 1, 6.

means of influence and with time, more and more youth organizations were created. [12] Some further head developments in the youth field are the International Year of the Youth in 1985, United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1989, EU's establishing of its Youth programmes in 1992 and the first World Congress of Ministers of Youth of the United Nations in 1998.[13] Events like these are considered building blocks that slowly formed what we today know as youth policy.

1.3.1 What is youth policy?

Youth policy differs depending on what level you are looking at, as in regional, national, or international level.[14] For the purpose of this thesis I am looking into European youth policy with the aim of getting a better understanding of the European youth perspective.

According to the Council of Europe[15] the purpose of youth policy is to allow the young population to play an active role in the civil society and labour market as well as to participate in democracy and integrate into society. The aim is to create learning possibilities and opportunities for youth to participate and gain knowledge, and in that way becoming active citizens. This happens in a time when the youth is leaving the childhood and becoming adults, finishing their education, getting their first jobs, discovering the world, and finding answers to questions about life and their future.[16] Since about 20% of Europe's population is in the age between 15 and 29,[17] youth can make a huge contribution to the society and its development. Different countries have however different age limits on what they consider youth.

Each country and government also decide what is considered a youth policy. In some cases, youth policies are considered everything that has an effect on young people, such as employment and unemployment, gender equality, education, housing and health but in other cases the scope is narrower, focusing more on programmes, for example for youth

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[12] Williamson, Howard. 2007. A complex but increasingly coherent journey? The emergence of 'youth policy' in Europe. *Youth & Policy,* 95, p. 58.

[13] Ibid, p. 60.

[14] Youth Policy Org. N.d. About Youth policy and youth policies. Youth Policy Labs. About youth policy and youth policies | Youthpolicy.org (2023-07-12).

[15] Council of Europe. 2023. About youth policy. Council of Europe. About youth policy - Youth (coe.int) (2023-07-11).

[16] Ibid.

[17] Youth Policy Org. N.d. Europe: Youth facts. Youth Policy Labs. About youth policy and youth policies | Youthpolicy.org (2023-07-12).

participation in democracy. Those involved in forming youth policy are normally not only governmental structures, but also municipal and regional bodies, youth NGO's, groups and councils, youth and social workers, schools, researchers, youth themselves and more.[18]

1.4 Previous research

Frändberg[19] studied the reason why youth are temporarily moving abroad, looking into whether it could be seen as an acceleration into adulthood and a step towards a better career or as an avoidance of transitioning into adulthood and committing to long-term planning. She based her study on retrospective and semi-structured interviews with thirty-year-old Swedes who had spent time abroad for studies or work during their 20's and had the *individualisation theory* as a starting point. The individualisation theory is according to Frändberg[20] related to the modern day's flexibility that youth have in making important choices for their lives, for example regarding studies and work and whether to live a more traditional form of life or not. Physical mobility is connected the flexibility of individuals making their own choices and to the positive values such as creativity, freedom, and success. Even the choice of moving back to your home country after a time abroad is considered an active choice and a part of the individualisation trend.

Frändberg's [21] results show that the choice of the Swedish youth going abroad is considered highly personal by themselves and that these youth felt that they differed from others around them in the same age by their strong desire to travel and move abroad. The "wanting to be different"-aspect is seen as a symbolic capital connected to going abroad and the different destinations that they end up going to bring a uniqueness to each case. The time spent abroad will also bring different personality traits, competences and knowledge that might improve their future life.

Zhong et al.[22] undertook a quantitative study through surveys focusing on international internships for European students within the hospitality and tourism sector and the perceived

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[18] Council of Europe. 2023. About youth policy. Council of Europe. About youth policy - Youth (coe.int) (2023-07-11).

[19] Frändberg, Lotta. 2015. Acceleration or Avoidance? The Role of Temporary Moves Abroad in the Transition to Adulthood. Population, Space and Place, 21, 553-567.

[20] Ibid, p. 564-565.

[21] Frändberg, p. 564-565.

[22] Zhong, YunTing, Murphy, Kevin, Khalilzadeh, Jalayer, Smith, Riana Madison and Weinland, Jeffrey. 2022. A European student perspective of international internship value. Journal of Teaching in Travel & Tourism, 1-25.

added value that it brought for the students. When researching the perceived value, the authors are taking a "get" and "give" dimension into account. Under the "get" dimension there is the *functional value*, consisting of future career opportunities, professional development, and financial compensation. There is also a *social value*, meaning network opportunities and new friendships. With *emotional value* they are referring to a sense of fulfilment that the student might feel, such as pride and better self-confidence. Furthermore, there is a *conditional value*, consisting of physical items such as textbooks and training materials of different sort. With *epistemic value*, the authors refer to a broader intellectual experience. Lastly, there is an *image value*, which can represent both the university that the student comes from and the organization that the intern works for as a way of signalling quality and status for future professional advancements.

When looking at the "give" dimension, Zhong et al. [23] are referring to either a *monetary sacrifice*, meaning fees of tuition and expenses and costs associated with travelling and living abroad, or a *nonmonetary sacrifice*, such as time and energy spent fulfilling work tasks, legal obstacles when moving abroad and cultural adaption.

Zhong et al.'s [24] findings show that the social value and the image value are the two top benefits. The monetary sacrifice was likewise bigger than the nonmonetary sacrifice. In general, the "get" dimension got a higher rating than the "give" dimension which meant that the students were highly satisfied with their internships.

In similarity to the study mentioned above, Cuzzocrea and Cairns[25] studied international internships but with a larger focus on circulation of young professionals within the EU. Their theoretical starting point is that international internships represent the first step of a commitment towards an international career, but that it is delaying the youth from going into adulthood – a phenomenon currently spreading across Europe.

Cuzzocrea and Cairns[26] interviewed youth online from different European countries that had recently finished their international internships. Apart from standard background questions about education etc., their questions were built on two basic propositions: firstly, the internship as a positive experience and secondly, the struggles that the internship came with.

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[23] Ibid, p. 5-6.
[24] Ibid, p. 15-17.
[25] Cuzzocrea, Valentina and Cairns, David C. 2022. Mobile moratorium? The case of young people undertaking international internships. Mobilities, 15(3), 416-430.
[26] Ibid, p. 421-422, 427-428.

Their findings showed that some interns experienced a lack of financial support, while others, especially when coming from a "well-off background", already expected the extra costs that the international internship came with and did not see it as a problem. Furthermore, internships were often seen as a somewhat playful stage in the passage from education to work, but they did have the effect of prolonging this transition, meaning that youths doing internships got a delayed labour market access. The negative aspects of an internship are however often accepted as a part of the whole "internship package", where the positive aspects such as enjoying a new experience, both professionally and culturally, and getting new acquaintances often weighed heavier. This is much in line with Zhong et al.'s[27] study, where the "get" dimension got a higher ranking than the "give" dimension.

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[27] Zhong, YunTing, Murphy, Kevin, Khalilzadeh, Jalayer, Smith, Riana Madison and Weinland, Jeffrey. 2022. A European student perspective of international internship value. Journal of Teaching in Travel & Tourism, 1-25.

2 Theoretical framework

The following chapter reviews the concept of European youth identity as I am to understand it for this thesis. I am also looking into previous research made on youth mobility and international internships to form the theoretical basis of this study.

2.1 European youth identity

In order to contextualize European youth identity for this thesis I am choosing to follow the Youth Policy Organisation's[28] criteria, seeing youth as someone between 15 and 29. The European identity will be based on whether the youth expresses that they feel a European belonging or not.

Identity is a huge area of scholarship and can therefore be interpreted and understood in many ways. I therefore mainly looked for research that had a focus on identity coupled with youth, Europe, or both.

Habib and Ward[29] explain how a person's identity is related to their feeling of belonging. With belonging it is referred to places that have a fundamental value or meaning for the person and has networks of social relations where common understandings exist. We tend to categorise others and ourselves into different boxes depending on common understandings and social practices and feel belonging with those that share places, networks, or common understandings with us. Identity is something self-made, and youth are "frequently negotiating their relationships with people and place"[30], meaning they are in a time when understanding more things about themselves and those around them, recurrently creating their own identity.

The current generation of the European Union youth have grown up in a setting where there does not only exist a nation-state that they feel a belonging to, but also a European entity that creates a feeling of belonging. They have grown up in a time where notions of a European identity and citizenship has been promoted by the European institutions and their various

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[28] Youth Policy Org. N.d. Europe: Youth facts. Youth Policy Labs. About youth policy and youth policies | Youthpolicy.org (2023-07-12).
[29] Habib, Sadia and Ward, Michael. R. M. (Eds.). 2019. Identities, Youth and Belonging. International Perspectives. Springer International Publishing. E-book, p. 5-7, 12.
[30] Ibid, p. 7.

programmes[31] and, in comparison to their parents and grandparents there has to a higher extent existed opportunities to travel abroad for study or work through different fundings, programmes and the free movement between boarders. Young adults are the age group most prone to take benefit of these possibilities since they have more freedom from responsibilities and because it is a time in their life when they are the most likely to study or be in the beginning of their careers, and therefore look for opportunities abroad.[32]

Travels across European nations and the feeling of a European identity have shown to have a correlation[33] but research done by Mazzoni et al.[34], Frändberg[35] and Cuzzocrea and Cairns[36] found that youth participating in studies, internships or work abroad were more likely to come from a "well-off background", "the middle class" or "higher income families". Identification with Europe has also shown to have a correlation to political participation in EU-related questions among the European youth.[37] This means that youth from a less well-off background might not have an as strong feeling of European identity and be less likely to participate in EU-related politics.

Flanagan[38] shares that the feeling of a European identity among youth might also be correlated to trust – both in media trust and institutional trust. The degree of trust differs however among different nationalities but also among different ages. According to Faas[39] there is also an educational dimension, where different nations might have differently designed curriculums that leaves more or less space for encouraging interest in European

[31] Faas, Daniel. 2007. Youth, Europe, and the nation: The political knowledge, interests, and identities of the new generation of European youth. *Journal of Youth Studies*, 10(2), p. 162; Santana-Vega, Lidia.E., González-Morales, Olga and Feliciano-García, Luis. 2020. Are we Europeans? secondary education students' beliefs and sense of belonging to the European Union. *Journal of Youth Studies,* 24(10), p. 1359; Flanagan, Constance. 2020. Who among European youth are active citizens at the EU level and why? *Youth Citizenship and the European Union*, 15(3), p. 359.

[32] Flanagan, Constance. 2020. Who among European youth are active citizens at the EU level and why? *Youth Citizenship and the European Union*, 15(3), p. 358.

[33] Mazzoni et al.2020. Cross-border mobility, European identity and participation among European adolescents and young adults. *Youth Citizenship and the European Union*, 15(3), 324-339.

[34] Mazzoni et al. 2020. Cross-border mobility, European identity and participation among European adolescents and young adults. *Youth Citizenship and the European Union*, 15(3), p. 336-337

[35] Frändberg, Lotta. 2015. Acceleration or Avoidance? The Role of Temporary Moves Abroad in the Transition to Adulthood. *Population, Space and Place*, 21, p. 564

[36] Cuzzocrea, Valentina and Cairns, David C.2022. Mobile moratorium? The case of young people undertaking international internships. *Mobilities*, 15(3), p. 427.

[37] Pavlopoulos Vassilis, Kostoglou, Dimitra and Motti-Stefandidi, Frosso. 2019. From Political Interest to Participation in EU-related Actions: The Mediating Role of European Identity and Political Efficiency. *Psychology,* 24 (2), 102-121.

[38] Flanagan, Constance. 2020. Who among European youth are active citizens at the EU level and why? *Youth Citizenship and the European Union*, 15(3), p. 358.

[39] Faas, Daniel. 2007. Youth, Europe, and the nation: The political knowledge, interests, and identities of the new generation of European youth. *Journal of Youth Studies*, 10(2), p. 163.

culture and languages in different European schools. Religion, in most European cases catholic Christianity, is also identity building, as well as the secular European identity[40], which is growing stronger among European youth.[41] Well beyond these kind of factors, cultural activities, such as supporting a European football club or watching Eurovision, also contribute to the shaping of the European identity.[42]

Fligstein[43] examines the reason why some people across Europe are more likely to adopt a European identity than others. He proposes that the main reason for not recognising a European belonging is the lack of interaction with Europeans from other countries, and therefore the missing out on the feeling of solidarity with "the other". Those who do get the chance of interacting with other Europeans tend to be the more privileged in the society. Managers, professionals and educated people belong in this group. Statistics also shows that young people are more likely to see themselves as Europeans than older generations, and men are more likely to see themselves as European than women.[44] Fligstein explains that this has to do with young people, and men, being more likely to travel and interact with others abroad, for work or for leisure. Those who feel European also tend to speak several languages, can afford to travel at least once a year and are often members of European organizations.

Hauvette[45] is using the term *migratory elite* for explaining the same phenomenon. In her study she is however looking at young Europeans studying or working abroad in Ireland. She explains how these young Europeans in most cases inherited privilege from their parents. During their stay abroad they concluded that they belong to a new generation of Europeans.

According to Fligstein[46], those who have not had the opportunity to travel and learn about other cultures and people are less likely to support the European project. He relates this to having a national identity, a collective identity, where there is a need for a common culture.

[40] Checkel T. Jeffrey and Katzenstein J. Peter (eds.). 2009. *European Identity*. Cambridge University Press. E-book, p. 14.

[41] World Economic Forum. These are the European countries where young people are least religious. *World Economic Forum*. 2018. These are the European countries where young people are least religious | World Economic Forum (weforum.org) (2023-07-19).

[42] European Identity. Checkel T. Jeffrey and Katzenstein J. Peter (eds.). 2009. Cambridge University Press. E-book, p. 2-3.

43 Fligstein, Neil. 2009. Who are the Europeans and how does this matter for politics? In J. Checkel & P. Katzenstein (Eds.), European Identity (Contemporary European Politics, pp. 132-166). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press E-book

[44] Ibid, p. 141.

[45] Hauvette, Marion. 2010. Temporary Youth Migration and European Identity. In: Cairns, D. (eds) *Youth on the Move*. VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften, p.47, 49-53.

[46] Ibid, p. 133, 136.

This can include language, religion, ethnicity, or a historical formative experience. A common culture may create a feeling of solidarity and even produce a feeling of the need to "protect the nation", but it might also lead to conflict if their interests or identities are seen as competitive. He states that a European national identity will be adopted when people have interacted with other Europeans, felt solidarity as in realising they are much alike themselves, and related them "as part of an overarching group in Europe, [as] 'Europeans'"[47]. For the majority of the European population this will not happen however, and the EU might be continuously seen as "an elite project that has mainly benefitted the educated".[48]

2.2 Theories on youth mobility and international internships

According to King,[49] a new migration era started in the 1990s Europe together with the higher degree of globalisation. A new type of temporary migration of students and high-skilled professionals became more and more common, and women were increasingly likely to participate. The EU-sponsored Erasmus programme for students of higher education facilitated exchanges for many, and as the EU undertook several enlargements during the 2000s, young people, in particular from the Central and East European countries, got new opportunities to migrate. To explain these evolving dynamics and characteristics of European youth migration, King[50] developed several theoretical formulations.

2.2.1 Neoliberalism and the free movement of labour and core-periphery and new migration geographies of uneven development

The first one he calls *neoliberalism and the free movement of labour.* It has the free movement of persons, capital, goods, and services from the 1957 Treaty of Rome as a starting point, where labour migration is linked to economic growth as well as political and cultural partnerships within the EU. King is applying the theory to the post-2004 East-West labour migration within Europe. The second theoretical formulation is called *core-periphery and new migration geographies of uneven development* and has its roots in Marxist political

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[47] Ibid, p. 136.
[48] Fligstein, Neil. 2009. Who are the Europeans and how does this matter for politics? In J. Checkel & P. Katzenstein (Eds.), European Identity (Contemporary European Politics, pp. 132-166). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press E-book
[49] King, Russel. 2018. Theorising New European Youth Mobilities. *Population, Space and Place*, 24 (1), e2117.
[50] Ibid.

economy. According to this theoretical stance, the countries in Europe that are more economically advanced, and often socially and politically dominant, are grouped together in the centre while the somewhat less developed countries are forming the periphery. King[51] makes clear that these structures are more applicable on the early post-war decades in Europe, where the labour migrants often came from Portugal, Spain, Southern Italy, Yugoslavia, Greece, and Turkey, and the main destination country was Germany, but also France, Switzerland, and the Benelux. After the EU enlargements during the 90s and early 2000s, especially Poland, Slovakia, Latvia, Lithuania, and Romania were considered in the periphery according to the theory.

These conceptualisations have some important focuses and contributions to this subject but will not be used directly as theories in my thesis. The first theory has a focus on East to West migration which gives us useful background information. The second centres on the country of origin of the migrants and as King[52] implies himself, it is a theory best suitable for early post-war decades in Europe. These theories could be interesting for a similar study with a larger emphasis on labour migration and where the population in the study would come solely from the countries mentioned. In this this case, they provide context.

2.2.2 Liquid migration and "intentional unpredictability"

Moving onward to King's[53] third theoretical framework that is called *liquid migration and "intentional unpredictability"*. Liquid migration is considered a modern kind of lifestyle where it is important to stay flexible, always being ready for changes in life. Fixed notions such as stable families, social class and the nation-state can be replaced, depending on what is going on in life. This means that migrants adjust their lifestyles after economic opportunities that might arise, often for 6 or 12 months when staying in a new country. Some factors that have made this temporary lifestyle possible are the increase in demand for temporary or part-time jobs with short-term contracts within the EU, the trend of individualisation where today's youth many times are given the freedom to "go their own way" and not obligated to follow for example the parent's or belonged social group's footpaths, and lastly the

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[51] Ibid, p. 3-4.
[52] Ibid.
[53] Ibid, p. 5-7.

development of communication technologies, making it much easier to plan the arrival to a new country as well as keep in contact with family and friends online.

2.2.3 Youth transitions and migration: processes of "becoming", "unbecoming", and "rupture"

The fourth theoretical formulation is called *youth transitions and migration: processes of "becoming", "unbecoming", and "rupture"*, which is more about youth moving abroad with the aim of "finding oneself" or as King[54] is explaining it, "the process of becoming". This becoming process is related to being young, which itself can be both self-identified or a category which has been socially and culturally constructed. But since the concept of youth is evolutionary – meaning that humans grow older – there will also be a "process of unbecoming" or no longer being in their youth. At the time of this transition, a double migration might occur, which often means moving back to the home country again. With "ruptures" King[55] is referring to interruptions of different sorts in life that will lead to changes in the migration patterns, for example political happenings such as Brexit, or individual incidents such as illness or an insufficient income. He also brings up "multiple becomings", meaning that some young people are flexible regarding their future pathways and might undertake several international migrations in a row – for example studying in one country and getting an internship in another.

2.2.4 Youth migration and lifestyle

King's[56] last theoretical formulation is the *youth migration and lifestyle*. Its starting point is that European youth migration not always is initiated by career opportunities or a better income but sometimes by a search for another lifestyle, much for the sake of the personal experience. In the European youth context, the migration is often associated with culturally vibrant big cities such as London, Paris, Brussels, Berlin, Amsterdam, and Barcelona where characteristics such as openness, multiculturalism and cosmopolitanism are searched for. Lifestyle migration can however be connected to migration back to the home country too, if

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[54] Ibid.
[55] Ibid.
[56] King, Russel. 2018. Theorising New European Youth Mobilities. *Population, Space and Place*, 24 (1),p. 8-9.

the migrant is moving back for a change of lifestyle, e.g., a more relaxed way of life back home or a more accepting religious environment.

3 Method and material

Qualitative interviewing together with qualitative data analysis has been chosen as a method for this study. Interviewing seemed to be the most relevant way to collect material that can answer our research questions. By interviewing youth that have gone through the experiences of traineeships at the EU-institutions I will get a view from their perspective.

3.1 Qualitative interview

According to Brinkmann,[57] the human is a conversational being since the earliest conversations in its life occur prior to the own sense of itself, already as a child. The relationships humans create with other humans are conversational and these conversations can be seen as social and personal sources of knowledge. Both Brinkman[58] and Kvale[59] explains how in social sciences, conversational knowledge, and the process of reaching it, has been conceptualized as interviewing. An *inter-view* stands for an interchange between two people who shares interest in the same subject, where the interviewer attempts to obtain information, opinions or beliefs from the interviewee or interviewees. Flick[60] explains it in a similar way, that an interview provides a personal experience of a participant that gives us understanding for the experience of people in similar situations.

Brinkmann[61] explains that researchers often make a distinction between structured, semi-structured and unstructured interviews. When choosing the structure that you want to follow for your interview, it may be advantageous to stay somewhat flexible and be able to adapt to different situations since this might lead to a better understanding of what the interviewee wants to say. A degree of flexibility will also allow the interviewee to raise questions and to add things from their own point of view.

For this thesis I have chosen to do semi-structured interviews. Brinkmann[62] shares that it is the semi-structured interviews that is used the most frequently in human and social sciences,

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[57] Brinkmann, Svend. 2022. *Qualitative Interviewing: Conversational Knowledge Through Research Interviews*. 2nd edition. New York: Oxford University Press, p. 1-3.

[58] Ibid.

[59] Kvale, Steinar. 2007. *Introduction to interview research*. SAGE Publications, Ltd, E-book.

[60] Flick, Uwe. 2018. Verbal data. (Vols. 1-0). SAGE Publications Ltd, E-book, p. 96.

[61] Brinkman, Svend. 2022. *Qualitative Interviewing: Conversational Knowledge Through Research Interviews*. 2nd edition. New York: Oxford University Press , p. 16-18.

[62] Brinkmann, Svend. 2022. *Qualitative Interviewing: Conversational Knowledge Through Research Interviews*. 2nd edition. New York: Oxford University Press

and additionally, this format is often associated with qualitative interviews. Moreover, Kvale[63] describes the semi-structured interview as a way to obtain "descriptions of the life world of the interviewee with respect to interpreting the meaning of the described phenomena". In comparison to structured interviews, semi-structured interviews give the interviewer a possibility to shape the context through leading the conversation into what is relevant for the research topic. Structured interviews might be more useful for contexts when the interviewer wants to compare answers, such as in quantitative research, without focusing too much on the interviewee's opinions and attitudes, which would not align with the aim of this thesis. Unstructured interviews on the other hand could be interesting since it would allow the interviewee to talk freely and to give a story, a narrative, [64] of his or her experiences as a trainee, but it might be more complicated for an inexperienced interviewer to undertake unstructured interviews since there are no questions to fall back on when the conversation is going slow.

I also chose to do individual face-to-face interviews, rather than group interviews. Group interviews are according to Brinkmann[65] more flexible, dynamic, and closer to everyday conversations. Individual interviews are however easier for the researcher to lead in the wanted direction, and the interviewees might find it easier to share personal experiences and opinions since it allows for more confidentiality. Furthermore, face-to-face interviews were facilitated since the interviewees were in Brussels in all cases except from one, that I did with the help of a video-call, since the trainee could not participate in a face-to-face interview. Face-to-face interviews might have some advantages to telephone or internet interviews since facial expressions and body language can be read. Awareness exists that it would have been better if all of the interviews would have been made the same way, but with a video-format of the interview facial expressions and body language could still be somewhat read.

To prepare for the interviews I prepared an interview guide. Magnusson and Marecek[66] and Flick[67] explain that the interview guide's most important purpose is to work as a memory aid for the interviewer, making sure that nothing important is forgotten about. The exact wording of the questions should be in the interview guide, but it is not necessary for the interviewer to

[63] Kvale, Steinar. 2007. Introduction to interview research. SAGE Publications, Ltd, E-book, p. 6.
[64] Brinkmann, Svend. 2022. *Qualitative Interviewing: Conversational Knowledge Through Research Interviews*. 2nd edition. New York: Oxford University Press, p. 17-18.
[65] Ibid, p. 23-27.
[66] Magnusson, Eva and Marecek, Jeanne. 2015. Designing the interview guide, in *Doing Interview-based Qualitative Research – A Learner's Guide.* 46-57. Cambridge*:* Cambridge University Press.
[67] Flick, Uwe. 2018. Verbal data. (Vols. 1-0). SAGE Publications Ltd, E-book, p. 102.

follow it or to ask every single question if they are not relevant for the given situation. Some advice from Magnusson and Marecek[68] that I considered when forming my interview questions were to avoid yes/no-questions, to include open-ended questions, meaning that the interviewee can relate to memories and offer opinions, and lastly to produce follow-up questions when possible. The authors also made a point on using your own personal experience when deciding topics for your interview guide as it might help you to form relatable questions, as well as to do so in a language that the interviewees will be familiar with.

My interviews started with a few background questions on the trainee as well as questions on the internship, such as why they applied for it and their view of the workplace. I then moved onto more political questions regarding hierarchy, European problems and more, following questions on culture and lifestyle, such as identity related questions. Lastly, one open last question was added to give the interviewees a possibility of adding anything if they want, but only one of the trainees had something to add.

Attention was brought to how the trainee reacted to the different kind of questions. If any discomfort regarding a certain subject was noticed, I moved on to next question. I also asked the trainees for clarifications or elaborations on certain answers.

The interviews have been recorded and thereafter transcribed. To make sure that the interviewee's were aware of what would happen with the material, a consent form was created where the interviewees consented to being recorded and for the record to be transcribed and used in the analysis part of this thesis.

3.2   Data and sampling

The empirical material for this study consists of information collected through qualitative interviews with current and former (but recent) international trainees that undertook their traineeships at the various EU-institutions in Brussels. The choice to do interviews with current trainees and trainees that finished their traineeships within the last 6 months was made so that the information and impressions would be fresh in their memories. To narrow down the selection further, a choice was made to only interview trainees from EU countries, but not from Belgium, as this would increase the chances of the trainees having moved to

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[68] Ibid, p. 47, 52, 54.

Brussels for comparable reasons, and their background being more alike. Furthermore, only traineeships undertaken in Brussels have been studied since this will give us a more homogenous group, than if traineeships from EU institutions situated in other cities or countries would have been included in this study.

Attention was however put into finding trainees from different EU countries, doing traineeships at different Brussels-based institutions, as the purpose of this study is not to study only one country or institution. This might mean that differences observed in the interviewee's answers will be harder to explain, as they might derive from several different aspects.

The interviewed trainees were found through various contacts in Brussels, by asking around if acquaintances were willing to attend interviews and randomly choosing to ask people that I knew had undertaken traineeships recently or were currently doing one.

Among the interviewed interns four are females and one is male. It would have been better to have a more even gender balance, but the inequality will be taken into consideration in the analysis in cases where the gender might affect their answers. The interviewees were between 23 and 26 years old and came from the Netherlands, Bulgaria/Spain, Latvia, Spain, and Poland. Their different internship positions were at the European Economic and Social committee (EESC), the European Commission (EC), and the European Parliament (EP). All internships were five months long and two out of the five were ongoing during the interviews.

3.3 Analysis of interview

As a first step in my data analysis coding was used. In most studies a code refers to a word or short phrase that is symbolically assigned to the most important essence of language-based or visual data. This can mean the sum of a certain short phrase, what the person is symbolically implying by what they are saying or be used as a means to sort out the most essential content in the collected data. The data in this thesis consists of interview transcripts but may in other cases consist of journals, field notes, drawings, photographs, internet sites or other.[69]

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[69] Saldaña, Johnny. 2013. *The Coding Manual for Qualitative Researchers*, 2. ed. SAGE, p. 3-4.

Coding requires the researcher to wear an analytic lens and the way you understand what is happening in the data will depend on what kind of filter that lens has. Saldaña[70] has an example of how these filters can work with an example of a statement from an interview: "There's just no place in this country for illegal immigrants. Round them up and send those criminals back to where they came from." A scientist who is trying to keep the data in the interviewee's own language might code the statement as *no place*, where an urban ethnographer might code it as *immigration issues* and critical race theorist as *xenophobia*. Taking the example in mind, in this thesis we will have our own analytical lenses based on our theories on youth mobility and the concept of European youth identity. The coding process will however look a bit different for the three different research questions as the questions are meant to analyse somewhat different subjects.

After the initial coding the codes will be organised, and similarly coded data will be grouped together into categories. The process of coding and categorizing will most of the time have to be done several times as it demands a detailed attention to the used language. Going over the data several times will also make the codes and categories better and more conceptual.[71]

For the preparation of the analysis of this thesis, the process for coding started with underlining words and phrases in the transcript that were the most essential or seemed to capture an opinion or experience as a whole. After having underlined words and phrases I came up with codes that explained what had been said. Where similar topics or opinions were expressed, I wrote down the same codes so that they would be easy to find in the long document. The codes were revised once more and after that it was easier to see the different categories of the codes. See an example below.

I would say that it was definitely one of the most, perhaps laid back institutions that I could encounter. I had a positive experience working there. I thought that the people that were my colleagues were very interesting and kind. And they also had the same multicultural background. They came a bit from all over the place, which made me feel at home and I feel like it was an institution that really tried to be close to European citizens, probably more than other EU institutions. And that's something that I really felt for.[72]

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[70] Idid, p. 7.
[71] Ibid, p. 9-12.
[72] Transcript, interview 1.

The code words in this phrase were *laid back institution, positive experience, interesting and kind colleagues, multiculturalism, comfortable (felt at home), institution close to European citizens.*

The category depended partly on which research question they would help answer, but also the different topics that would be brought up under the different research questions. For example, I chose to relate *laid back institution* to the first research question on perception on the EU and European power structures, and I grouped it together with other trainees' view on institutions and discussed them at the same place. *Institution close to European citizens* were brought up in the same place. The rest of the code words from this quote I categorised as personal experiences.

There were however cases where the codes would overlap and could belong in more than one category which might mean that the same codes can be analysed in more than one way, depending on what analytical lens that is being worn. *Multiculturalism* is an example for this as it is brought up in two places, since it relates to both the personal experiences as in enjoying Brussels for its environment, but also the identity aspect since the trainee felt comfortable, or at home, with international colleagues, meaning that she felt a belonging.

3.4   Critical reflection

Qualitative semi-structured interviews were chosen as a method as they allow us to go deeper into the trainee's experiences and opinions. I am aware that not enough trainees have been interviewed for the results of this study to be exhaustive. Awareness also exists that the choice of interviewing trainees from different institutions and countries has its limitations. Variation in answers might be derived from the trainees having different national backgrounds or different experiences from the traineeships. Since the group were rather homogenous, in this case meaning that the interviewees moved to Brussels for similar reasons, the smaller number of interviews stay somewhat relevant. However, a choice could have been made to interview more trainees for a more comprehensive study, but then some questions would have had to be removed. And furthermore, a study with surveys could have been interesting and would most likely have provided more significantly relevant results but then the qualitative aspect would have been lost.

Brinkmann[73] shares that when conducting interviews, it is easy to end up with many pages of transcripts and not knowing how to transform this material into a good quality analysis. Often too much effort is put into the interviewing itself, while too little emphasis is placed on preparing for the interviews and, later, analysing the empirical material. When preparing for the interview it is therefore important to see the interviewing part as a social practice of sharing knowledge.

Even with this in mind, it is challenging to do interviews as an inexperienced interviewer. With lack of experience there is a risk that some of the questions are unnecessary and will not be used for the analysis. Doing interviews is also very time-consuming, as it takes a lot of preparation and work after the interview with transcribing and analysing the answers, in addition to the time spent on doing interviews in the first place. In contrast, semi-structured interviews were a good choice for an inexperienced interviewer since they allow flexibility to adapt questions after the interviewee and to add questions if it is noticed it is needed for a better understanding.

When creating the interview guide, I was concerned that some questions might be too leading, forcing the interviewees into topics they normally would not associate to their traineeships. Brinkman[74] expressed however that "there is no such thing as non-leading questions. All questions lead the interviewee in certain directions". In an attempt not to create very leading questions, some of my interview questions could be understood in different ways instead, sometimes leading the interviewees into different topics. This might also be a flaw. For example, when asking the trainees about diversity at the workplace, some of them discussed diversity among the trainee group, and some on a more general level among the staff or even the members (of the EESC). I choose to see this not only as a flaw but also as an advantage as it shows how the trainees took notice of different things during their traineeships, giving us a bigger variation of answers.

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[73] Brinkmann, Svend. 2022. *Qualitative Interviewing: Conversational Knowledge Through Research Interviews*. 2nd edition. New York: Oxford University Press, p. 4.
[74] Brinkmann, Svend. 2022. *Qualitative Interviewing: Conversational Knowledge Through Research Interviews*. 2nd edition. New York: Oxford University Press, p. 8, 16.

4 Result and analysis

The result and analysis part is divided into three sections that aims to analyse the material in a way that allows us to answer the three research questions. The codes have therefore been divided into the three different sections depending on the subject. It ends with a discussion part that is meant to discuss and summarize the result.

4.1 Perception of the EU institutions and European power relations

When I asked whether the trainees wanted future careers within the institutions or not, they seemed somewhat sceptical in most cases.

> I think now that I have tried working in the institutions for in short time,
> but I have done it. I would like to explore also other options. Yeah, for
> example in private sector and *maybe later come back*.[75]

As in the quote above, some mentioned however that they might be interested in *coming back to work for the institutions later* in life, expressing things like: "I'm still quite young, so maybe I would like to try out different things, but then maybe […] go back".[76] This may be related to King's theory on *youth transitions and migration: processes of "becoming", "unbecoming", and "rupture"* in the way that the traineeship functioned as a way to "become", but the coming back part is a way of anticipating the "unbecoming", when you are no longer a youth, but ready for a long-term contract. It can also be seen as a lifestyle choice, where Brussels could be a place where the trainees can see themselves having another way of life, in the future, when they are ready for it. According to Frändberg[77] study, the coming back to work for the institutions could also be a part of the individualisation trend in our society, where there exists a big degree of flexibility in making personal mobility choices, not having to think too much about following the parents' steps.

On the same topic, at two circumstances the process of getting a job at the institutions were brought up. One interviewee referred to it as a *slow and bureaucratic* process[78] and another mentioned that "the job that it would require to get one, like the studying for the EPSO [tests]

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[75] Transcript, interview 3.
[76] Transcript, interview 5.
[77] Frändberg, Lotta. 2015. Acceleration or Avoidance? The Role of Temporary Moves Abroad in the Transition to Adulthood. *Population, Space and Place*, 21,
[78] Transcript, interview 1.

or whatever is something that I'm not willing to do right now"[79], focusing more on the admission test[80] that needs to be passed before becoming an EU official (meaning getting a permanent employment contract). We can understand this as that the trainees felt like *nonmonetary sacrifice*, as Zhong et al[81] calls it, they would have to go through in order to get a job for the EU, is not worth it for them at the moment. Here the sacrifice would consist of much on time and energy spent on studying for the tests and going through the whole employment process.

There were a few differences in how the interviewees spoke about the institutions they had done their traineeships at. The two trainees who had been to the EESC said that it was "one of the most, perhaps, *laid back* institution"[82], that it was "an institution that really tried to be *close to European citizens*, probably more than other EU institutions[83]" and that it suffered an *inferiority complex[84]* towards the other institutions. They also expressed some *critique on the efficiency* of the EESC in its advisory role. One of them spoke about the group dynamic among the members of the EESC,[85] where she said that group III, representing the civil society organisations, were more "keen on using the platform" than the other two groups[86] and one of them spoke about how the opinions created by and voted on the EESC members do not get properly heard:

> …from what I understand is that the, the actual job the Committee [EESC]
> does is to propose opinions for the Parliament [EP] to improve their
> legislation. And most of these opinions not actually reached the Parliament.
> So I think there should be a better way of trying to actually get these
> opinions heard. I just don't know how.[87]

The trainee that had done the traineeship at the EP also spoke about the institution as the one being the *closest to the citizens*, explaining that the EP was her first choice of place. She also

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[79] Transcript, interview 4.
[80] EU Careers. EPSO tests. *European personnel selection office*. https://epso.europa.eu/en/selection-procedure/epso-tests (2023-08-10).
[81] Zhong, YunTing, Murphy, Kevin, Khalilzadeh, Jalayer, Smith, Riana Madison and Weinland, Jeffrey. 2022. A European student perspective of international internship value. Journal of Teaching in Travel & Tourism, p. 1-25.
[82] Transcript, interview 1.
[83] Ibid.
[84] Transcript, interview 1 and 4.
[85] The EESC is a consultative EU body that represents the organised European civil society. Its 329 members, appointed on proposal by the member states, create and adopt opinions, either by request by other institutions, or create their own-initiative opinions. - European Economic and Social Committee. About. *EESC*. https://www.eesc.europa.eu/en/about (2023-08-13).
[86] Transcript, interview 1.
[87] Transcript, interview 4.

spoke about the interdependency of the different institutions but seemed to think that the EP is *inferior* to the European Commission and the European Council.[88] Furthermore, something she had in common with the trainee from the EC was that they both mentioned that their institutions *cooperate too little with other institutions.*[89]

> For me, the main concern is maybe sometimes lack of cooperation between them, that it seems unnatural to me that they are doing a lot of things that are very, it's like, very similar, but they don't join it like, especially when it comes to youth policy.[90]

Both mentioned that the fields of youth could be a good subject on which their institutions could cooperate:

> European Parliament has the European youth events now taking place in Strasbourg in June, and then the Commission has its youth week that is gonna take place in 2024. So it's, like they all have things. But I feel that they have their own target groups and they don't share, they don't cooperate, which is rather sad because in the end those two institutions should be working together for the youth to be empowered, for the youth to participate, for the youth to be active citizens...[91]

The trainee from the EC was the only one that spoke about the *physical environment* of the workplace. She explained how "the buildings are terrible"[92] and emphasised the fact that the trainees of her unit were all put on the same floor, three floors above the officials.

> …so we kind of need to force ourselves to go to the third floor in the morning, say good morning or something. How are you doing? Try to be social because I feel that at this point the trainees are rather inexistant. I mean, if you if they don't see you, they don't know you exist. Which is sad, especially if you're aiming to work towards a potential career in the institutions, because that's how people might remember, like 'we had this trainee that was super proactive, and maybe he or she is interested in coming back to the Commission so we can offer a position'. To that person.[93]

This could be considered one of the many *nonmonetary* sacrifices that the trainees have to go through during their internships, that Zhong et al.[94] refers to. In this case it is cultural

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[88] Transcript, interview 5.
[89] Transcript, interview 2 and 5.
[90] Transcript, interview 5.
[91] Transcript, interview 2.
[92] Transcript, interview 2.
[93] Ibid.
[94] Zhong, YunTing, Murphy, Kevin, Khalilzadeh, Jalayer, Smith, Riana Madison and Weinland, Jeffrey. 2022. A European student perspective of international internship value. Journal of Teaching in Travel & Tourism, p. 1-25.

adaptation into the institutional professional environment with its hierarchy and competition, rather than a cultural adaption to a new country.

This leads us into the subject of *trainee status.* Three out of the five trainees spoke about how they felt that they were treated as a trainee.

> All our colleagues knew that we weren't going to stay and that there wasn't really that option to offer a prolonged contract after the internship, so they didn't care so much as to make us grow per se or get new responsibilities in the […] *hierarchy.*[95]

> Last week I was invited to do two tasks that were more for like, officials. And then because of my status as Blue Book trainee [EC trainee], they didn't allow me […]. And I was very, very happy because I'm a very proactive person. I like doing these kind of things, being in front of people, speaking to people, whatever. And they wouldn't allow me just because of my *status* and I was very, very sad.[96]

Here one of the trainees explained how she felt that she was temporal and therefore didn't get enough responsibilities. The second shared a concrete example of when she got a task that she wanted, but in the end was not allowed to go through because of her status as a trainee.

The other two trainees said however that they never felt like they were the lowest in the team. They both expressed that they were treated like any other colleague.

> Even if they knew that I'm staying there for five months or so, they welcomed me as one of their team members, like one of their real colleagues and didn't view me as 'OK, anyways, whatever, you are here temporary'.[97]

This is probably evidence of the fact the traineeships can vary much between different institutions, units, and teams. No real conclusion can be drawn from these cases regarding how trainees felt like they were treated.

This topic relates much to the discussions about *hierarchy* that I had with the trainees. A recurring statement was that tasks always go through a long list of people before reaching the top.

> You are in touch with your manager, with your supervisor and maybe with your head of unit. And then besides that, everybody else like, you don't really see anybody else, so it's a bit of a, you know, these people exist and

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[95] Transcript, interview 1.
[96] Transcript, interview 2.
[97] Transcript, interview 3.

> sometimes you might have met them once, but you don't really, you're not really in contact with them. So, it's like nets of people that you are supposed to respect, yeah.[98]

The trainee above seemed to feel that they only were in contact with the closest superiors and that they barely met the ones in the top. Another trainee said similar things, mentioning that decisions go through a chain of people:

> You can see that there is this kind of distinction between the highest levels and people who are just working on the more, on the ground and you can see that like, decisions of course have to be made and passed through the whole chain of people.[99]

A third trainee gave a similar and telling answer:

> One of the first things that my supervisor told me was like 'don't be stressed about the tasks you do, because whatever you do will be revised by at least five other people'. So, you can clearly see how whatever you do goes to your supervisor. Then your supervisor sends it to someone, and then that someone maybe sends it to maybe the head of unit and then the head of unit says no. Or maybe the head of unit says yes and then it goes to the director of the DG and then that person says, oh, this needs to be changed that that, that, that and then, maybe at some point it goes to the cabinet of the Commissioners. I mean, it's like an exhaustive process and it's, it's never ending. And I think that's a general issue within institutions there, there is no space for flexibility. I mean, it's terrible like, you have to wait a lot of time to get something approved and then maybe when you get an approval you actually forgot about what you sent.[100]

Apart from hierarchy, the quote above also relates to what has been brought up earlier, when some of the trainees related the institutions to being *bureaucratic and slow.*

One of the trainees related the question on hierarchy to the question of *equality*.

> What bothered me in the hierarchy was that I felt there was still some older remnants of male dominated workplaces. So in my unit, for instance, we were 12, and of these 12 people, there was, I believe, ten women and the director of the unit was a man. And if you looked at the general hierarchical structure like we had a paper where you could see this, everywhere on the top, it was men.[101]

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[98] Transcript, interview 4.
[99] Transcript, interview 5.
[100] Transcript, interview 2.
[101] Transcript, interview 1.

It was in fact something that more of the trainees brought up. Several seemed to have noticed that the *top posts often were occupied by men* and lower posts by women. It was also brought to the attention that these men often were *older.*

> I must admit that they really stress a lot the importance of having like, 50/50 let's say of men and women at the highest positions. And like within the team, in my team, we are like, I don't know, 80% women. And […] I'm not sure, but it seems to me that in general there is more women than men, but not at the highest positions. But they yeah, they have a strategy of like, making it 50/50 by I don't know, 2030 or something like this.[102]

In some teams there are more women than men, but there are still more men at the higher positions. Here it might however be good to keep in mind that four out of the five interviewees were women. It is possible that this is something that women notice more than men in their work environment. The male interviewee had however come to the same conclusion as the rest of them. He shared that among the trainees at the EESC there were more women than men and that among the members of the EESC are mostly men.

> Within the trainees, there were more women than men, but within the higher, the higher ranks […] and like the members of the committee, they are all men.[103]

It is worth mentioning that even though the trainees brought up the uneven occupation of different kind of posts, none of them seemed to have had any direct negative personal experiences because their gender.

When I asked the trainees about diversity, some of them brought up *diversity among the trainees*:

> From what I saw in like the intern group. It was diverse, different backgrounds, personal interest. Also age to some extent so you could see that there really is an effort. To to try and achieve diversity as much as possible within the boundaries of like who applies as well, which can be another related problem that some people might not get the information about available traineeships.[104]

This trainee considered the trainee group diverse, within the boundaries of who apply. Another interviewed trainee had a different view:

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[102] Transcript, interview 5.
[103] Transcript, interview 4.
[104] Transcript, interview 1.

> I mean, when we had the like the, let's say a meeting of all the trainees from the Schuman and the Blue Book, and all I also, I think there was the Economic and Social Committee, that it really caught my attention that we are almost all white. So in these terms, I wouldn't say that it's super diverse and it doesn't represent the whole, yeah, the actual state of people who live in Europe.[105]

I relate this to Fligstein's[106] and Hauvette's[107] concepts on privilege and migratory elite. The ones that apply for EU traineeships are already privileged according to Fligstein[108] since it is necessary to be well educated, speak more than one language, and have the legal right to stay in Belgium, for applying for these traineeships. Furthermore, it is necessary to have the financial needs to travel to Brussels and get a housing. This can also be related to the trainees, and other staff too, having similar backgrounds and a support for the EU, also something that Fligstein considered connected to this privilege since travelling and interacting with other Europeans fosters this.

Another trainee interpreted diversity as *different nationalities*:

> Diversity, as in nationalities. I think that my unit is a bit of a special case because we have, I mean the majority is people from Greece, Cyprus, and Bulgaria. And that might influence somehow how, how people perceive that unit. But other than that, I don't think that there are major issues within the Commission when it comes to nationality. Of course, there are some countries that are underrepresented, […] and they told us 'for underrepresented countries, you're gonna have some sort of priority'.[109]

She got into the subject of national underrepresentation within the institutions and how some countries might have priority because of this.

The ones that spoke about diversity more generally within the institutions, and not only among the trainees, said: "it's not so common that you see people from different […]

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[105] Transcript, interview 5.

[106] Fligstein, Neil. 2009. Who are the Europeans and how does this matter for politics? In J. Checkel & P. Katzenstein (Eds.), European Identity (Contemporary European Politics, pp. 132-166). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

[107] Hauvette, Marion. 2010. Temporary Youth Migration and European Identity. In: Cairns, David. (eds) Youth on the Move. VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften.

[108] Fligstein, Neil. 2009. Who are the Europeans and how does this matter for politics? In J. Checkel & P. Katzenstein (Eds.), European Identity (Contemporary European Politics, pp. 132-166). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

[109] Transcript, interview 2.

backgrounds"[110] and that "there was none [diversity]."[111] Similarly, another trainee spoke mentioned described the institutions as an *elitist environment.*

On the same subject, three of trainees spoke about them being *privileged*. This means that the trainees have a certain awareness of their privilege. One of them said:

> I don't know, it it's hard for me to talk about diversity. I think when I come from, if we compare, the rather privileged backgrounds to even be able to apply to Blue Book [EC traineeship]. Yeah, I don't know what to say. [112]

The other three were saying similar things, but with focusing more on the fact that not everyone is aware about the opportunity to apply for EU internships, like I brought up earlier. One of them expressed it in relation to the *EU bubble:* "whoever is within this bubble, like, they know that it's not that easy to get in."[113]

The interviewees expressed that working for the EU institutions is appealing because of the *comfort* and the "good working contract"[114] it brings. However, some of the interviewees spoke about how hard it is to get a job within the institutions when you are *young and inexperienced:* "as a younger person, it might be harder to be taken seriously […] as they don't offer concrete career opportunities for young people"[115]

It was also mentioned that a traineeship within the institutions brings *job opportunities* and "looks good on the CV"[116].

> […] after doing a training ship in the institutions you, I mean it will be easier for you to get a job afterwards, maybe not within the Commission. Because we all know that's very hard. But maybe outside […][117]

When I asked about what they think is the most relevant European problem two of them spoke about *lack of knowledge about the EU*.[118] Things they said was that EU being *complex*, that *too little communication* is reaching the average citizen and that there is a la*ck of transparency*. This led them into talking about *lack of active citizens* and even that the EU might have a bad reputation among certain circles.

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[110] Transcript, interview 5.
[111] Transcript, interview 4.
[112] Transcript, interview 3.
[113] Transcript, interview 5.
[114] Transcript, interview 1.
[115] Transcript, interview 1.
[116] Transcript, interview 5.
[117] Tanscript, interview 2.
[118] Transcript, interview 1 and 2.

> I think definitely identification to European not necessarily values, but systems and processes [are relevant European problems]. I feel like when I speak to people in France, they don't really know what the EU does and so they get mostly well, well, it's easier to discredit an institution than to understand it, right.[119]

Moreover, two of the trainees mentioned *youth policy* and *unemployment* as the most relevant European problem, but then agreed on "*urgent matters*"[120], such as *war* and *foreign affairs* being more important.

> But now personally I cannot I think, talk, about unemployment as a problem when there is a war going on at the borders of European Union, so I would say, yeah, war. And foreign affairs.[121]

These two trainees come from countries (Poland and Latvia) geographically closer to the ongoing Russian invasion of Ukraine than the others, which might explain why that it was mentioned by these two trainees and not the others.

4.2 Personal experiences

When asking the trainees about their reason behind applying for their traineeships at the EU institutions a recurring code I noted was *related studies.* Three of the interviewees talked about their studies in international relations and/or European studies.

> I found out about it like when I was studying because I was studying international relations. So like at the career service, yeah. Then we had a meeting about it, and it seemed like the perfect place to be after you finished international relations.[122]

> Well, as a person who has studied the international relations and also is currently doing a masters in European studies, it was kind of the place to start at.[123]

This can be related to what has been mentioned earlier on EU officials having similar educational backgrounds. Most likely, many of the applicants for the traineeships within the institutions studied similar things as these fields of studies make it so that the trainees have both knowledge and interest in politics and the EU. There are of course exceptions, however,

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[119] Transcript, interview 3.
[120] Transcript, interview 3 and 5.
[121] Transcript, interview 1.
[122] Transcript, interview 5.
[123] Transcript, interview 2.

as there exists many traineeship spots in other fields too. One of the interviewed trainees had for example done theirs in Human Resources.

Some of the interviewees were rather *neutral* in their emotions when talking about applying for their traineeships, saying that it seemed like "a good opportunity to get acquainted with the European institutions"[124], or that they "just wanted to try the competition"[125] while others had been "applying […] for EU traineeships for a while now"[126] or even "always wanted to apply for it"[127], seeing it more as a *dream* [*job*] that came through. Additionally, without me asking about it, two of the interviewees mentioned that it was not their first time they applied for EU traineeships. Some of them had also already undertaken traineeships in Brussels or elsewhere prior to this one, or stayed in Brussels after their traineeship to do a new one. This is what King[128] explained as "multiple becomings", meaning that there is a flexibility regarding the youths' future pathways, and often several international migrations are taken in a row. This adds to Zhong et al.'s [129] *functional* value, meaning that the several internships provide professional development and the *emotional* value, for the trainees that mentioned that they felt a feeling of accomplishment or pride. It can also be connected to King's[130] liquid migration theory, where migrants adjust their lifestyles after economic opportunities that arise.

Another recurring code was *new experience.* The interviewees discussed matters that much relate to King's[131] theory on youth migration and lifestyle in the way that they seemed to be interested in trying something new, much for the sake of the personal experience. In most cases it seemed however that the choice on moving to Brussels was more because of the main institutions being situated there, and only a few seemed to have chosen to move to Brussels for the sake of Brussels as a city. One of the trainees said that "as an international citizen, European, I felt that Brussels was a place to start from, so that's why first I moved here for another internship and then I started the one in the Commission."[132]

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[124] Transcript, interview 1.
[125] Transcript, interview 3.
[126] Transcript, interview 4.
[127] Transcript, interview 5.
[128] King, Russel. 2018. Theorising New European Youth Mobilities. *Population, Space and Place*, 24 (1)
[129] Zhong, YunTing, Murphy, Kevin, Khalilzadeh, Jalayer, Smith, Riana Madison and Weinland, Jeffrey. 2022. A European student perspective of international internship value. Journal of Teaching in Travel & Tourism,
[130] King, Russel. 2018. Theorising New European Youth Mobilities. *Population, Space and Place*, 24 (1)
[131] King, Russel. 2018. Theorising New European Youth Mobilities. Population, Space and Place, 24 (1).
[132] Transcript, interview 2.

The topic of them being *curious* and eager to *try something new* can also be connected to the same abovementioned theory, youth migration and lifestyle. Some of them saw the traineeship partly as a cool experience and a chance to try out something new. It can also be related to King's[133] liquid migration and "intentional unpredictability" where it is important to stay flexible and ready for changes. The quote below shows that the trainee was open for trying something new:

> I really wanted to see if it's an environment that I would see myself in. And so far, thanks to this experience, I'm getting to know if I like it or not.[134]

The interviewees often mentioned that they enjoyed Brussels *international environment.* According to Cuzzocrea and Cairns's[135] and King[136], young people are often interested in moving to vibrant big European cities for its openness, multiculturalism, and cosmopolitanism. Even though in this case, most of the trainees expressed that they moved to Brussels more for the sake of the institutions than for the city itself, it might be considered a positive aspect with moving.

Some of the interviewees talked about their *tasks* during the traineeship. One of them explained it as she was mostly *helping and assisting* and another one as *impactful and purposeful.* This shows that every experience is unique, and probably also depending on the individual's way of seeing it.

> The only job you can pretty much do is administrative tasks be in front of the computer, right, some communication, help and assist your supervisor with something bigger that he or she is doing so.[137]

> …I saw what a big impact my work has there. That I worked hands on with the Erasmus Plus projects and I saw that even at the time as a trainee, my little tasks could make a big impact and I think that's what I really enjoy to work very close, either with the European projects or policies, and to see that it brings some actual result. [138]

In a more general matter, one of the interviewees explained her traineeship as *fast and intense:*

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[133] King, Russel. 2018. Theorising New European Youth Mobilities. Population, Space and Place, 24 (1).
[134] Transcript, interview 5.
[135] Cuzzocrea, Valentina and Cairns, David C. 2022. Mobile moratorium? The case of young people undertaking international internships. Mobilities, 15(3), 416-430.
[136] King, Russel. 2018. Theorising New European Youth Mobilities. *Population, Space and Place*, 24 (1),p. 8-9.
[137] Transcript, interview 2.
[138] Transcript, interview 3.

> When we started, they told us, hey, we have like 2 months to see where you
> are, then the 3rd and the 4th you will know what you're doing and then the
> fifth month you will be gone.[139]

Two of the trainees said that they had prejudices about working for the EU institutions, prior to this experience. They expressed that it was not as *formal/strict* as they thought.

> I had the impression that it would be very, very *formal* and it would be hard
> to build some relationships with the colleagues and that the environment
> would be very *strict*, but actually no. It was very friendly and what
> surprised me […][140]

A recurring topic was about *colleagues*. The trainees said that they are: "very *comfortable* with the team [they] work with"[141], that "everyone was so *friendly* and so *welcoming*" [142] and that "the people that were my colleagues were very *interesting* and *kind*".[143] This adds to Zhong et al.'s[144] social value, under the "get" dimension and is considered one of the many positive aspects with doing an international internship.

Regarding *new skills* received during the traineeship they mentioned better *resilience, teamwork,* and *communication skills.* Zhong et al.[145] would consider this a functional value as it assists to their professional developments.

> As I said, it gave me this first step in the professional environment. So that
> built my *resilience*, I would say and gave me the expectations what I can
> see in my future career path and definitely of course, built more to my
> stress resilience, *teamwork*, trying to understand the different people[…][146]

Another trainee spoke about how the traineeship helped both "mentally and physically" and how it was good for her to move after COVID-19 and rebuild her *confidence*, which I relate to Zhong et al's[147]emotional value.

> I think it really helped me. I mean in my case in particular I was I already
> living abroad before my traineeship, and that was right after COVID. So

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[139] Transcript, Interview 2.
[140] Transcript, interview 3.
[141] Transcript, interview 2.
[142] Transcript, interview 3.
[143] Transcript, interview 1.
[144] Zhong, YunTing, Murphy, Kevin, Khalilzadeh, Jalayer, Smith, Riana Madison and Weinland, Jeffrey. 2022. A European student perspective of international internship value. Journal of Teaching in Travel & Tourism, 1-25.
[145] Ibid.
[146] Transcript, interview 3.
[147] Zhong, YunTing, Murphy, Kevin, Khalilzadeh, Jalayer, Smith, Riana Madison and Weinland, Jeffrey. 2022. A European student perspective of international internship value. Journal of Teaching in Travel & Tourism, 1-25.

> COVID happened when I lived abroad and then I had to leave my my
> traineeship so that actually impacts, like I was doing nothing. I was really
> like at home doing nothing. And then going out really help me do stuff, see
> stuff. You know, you have to fend for yourself. And it was really helpful
> mentally and physically.[148]

Furthermore, the trainees explained that the traineeship was a *transformative, positive, satisfying,* or *great* experience. This could be associated to both the emotional value, as a feeling of accomplishment, and to the functional value, as a professional development[149]

> I think the first time that I lived abroad was the most like transformative.
> But now as well, like and especially that this is something that I really
> wanted to do and for years. And I always had it in mind. I mean, I wasn't
> obsessing about it, but like whatever I was doing, like my, you know,
> academic academic career or like some work experience, I always had it in
> mind what this might contribute to getting this experience now at the
> Schuman [EP traineeship], so it just feels super satisfying that I made it.[150]

They also expressed that they felt like they were *taken more seriously* after the traineeship, that it helped to better "understand job positions […] in the *EU bubble*"[151]. In general, they seemed to see the internship as *a first step in their careers:*

> That's the whole idea of, of internships, you know, instead of hiring junior
> people, you hire interns for as long as they are willing to be hired and, and
> then like year, like 2 or 336, you get hired in a in a proper position so but
> yeah, and you have to go through the hoops of traineeships.[152]

Another topic was the grant the EU institutions' trainees receive. Three of the five agreed on the *grant not being enough* for living *comfortably,* mentioning that Brussels is expensive. One mentioned that she needed support from home:

> Like if I didn't do anything besides going to work and eating, I could cover.
> But you know, you wanna travel. You wanna do things [...] Like in
> Brussels, you wanna go to a concert? You wanna go to a club? You wanna
> go for beers in Brussels? So in the end, there are some months that I do
> need help from my parents and at the beginning, for sure like, the deposit
> and the first plane tickets were covered by them.[153]

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[148] Transcript, interview 4.
[149] Zhong, YunTing, Murphy, Kevin, Khalilzadeh, Jalayer, Smith, Riana Madison and Weinland, Jeffrey. 2022. A European student perspective of international internship value. Journal of Teaching in Travel & Tourism, 1-25.
[150] Transcript, interview 5.
[151] Transcript, interview 4.
[152] Transcript, interview 4.
[153] Transcript, interview 4.

Some of them also mentioned that they saved up money prior to arriving in Brussels:

> I would say it would have been possible to live with that money, but then it would be almost like. Just surviving with that money. I wouldn't live so comfortably if I hadn't saved up money because. I remember also many trainees were talking about that. It's unfair that. With the inflation, they don't also make like a drastic increase in the trainee salary.[154]

The two exceptions were one who said that the grant was enough, if you had saved up money before moving since it was needed for the flights and apartment deposit, and the other one had a special living situation, where she lived in her mother's old apartment and therefore did not have to pay rent.

Lastly, when I asked the trainees in the end of the interviews if there was anything they wanted to add, the only trainee that wanted to say something was the interviewee from the EP:

> Well, I, I don't know if the public will read that, but something that I always say is that, like, I recommend this traineeship to anyone who is thinking about it. I think it's a great, *great experience*.[155]

4.3   European identity

When speaking about the reason for having moved to Brussels, one of the interviewees started the phrase with "as a European international citizen…"[156]. After our contextualisation of European youth identity this is a clear example of someone expressing that they feel a European identity and a belonging as a citizen. This is a way of the trainee categorising themselves as a European and as someone international, after their time living abroad and getting international experiences.

Another trainee spoke about how she finds that "identification to European, not necessarily values, but systems and processes"[157] is a relevant European problem. This means that she sees an importance in having knowledge about Europe and how systems work. As

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[154] Transcript, interview 3.
[155] Transcript, interview 5.
[156] Transcript, interview 2.
[157] Transcript, interview 1.

Pavlopoulos, Kostoglou and Motti-Stefandidi[158] implied, a better knowledge often leads to a more active citizenship.

The same trainee also spoke about her having grown up in a *multicultural environment* with parents who had worked for the institutions, which might lead to stronger European feelings than the rest of the trainees. She expressed that it made her feel like home having international colleagues.[159] When growing up in a setting with international networks around oneself the European identity can grow stronger, according to Habib and Ward.[160]

Erasmus was mentioned by three different trainees. Mazzoni et al.[161] implied that travels across European nations and the feeling of a European identity have a correlation. One of them even used the term *Erasmus bubble*:

> …most of my friends are *international* and within this, like I don't know,
> *Erasmus bubble*, let's say we can call it, because I think this is like the
> traineeships and institutions are also something that attracts people from
> this kind of environment.

The code *Erasmus bubble* implies by itself that it is a categorisation of a group of people that have the same experience of studying abroad. They share a common understanding and feel a belonging with each other.

Furthermore, some of the interviewees spoke about them having many *international friends*. It might strengthen the feeling of having a European identity when you share experiences with others likeminded. It seemed however that the interviewees generally had gotten these friendships during university, Erasmus, or internships as most of their older childhood friends did not have the same interest in travelling to a new country. One of the trainees said that her friends from home had expressed that they also want to travel abroad, but not for work but for leisure:

> But I don't think that they feel comfortable going somewhere by themselves
> going through the bureaucratic process and stuff […] For example, I have a
> friend, he, he didn't go to university. He did like some sort of other studies.
> He was already working and every time we see each other he's like, 'oh, my

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[158] Pavlopoulos Vassilis, Kostoglou, Dimitra and Motti-Stefandidi, Frosso. 2019. From Political Interest to Participation in EU-related Actions: The Mediating Role of European Identity and Political Efficiency. Psychology, 24 (2), 102-121.
[159] Transcript, interview 1.
[160] Habib, Sadia and Ward, Michael. R. M. (Eds.). 2019. Identities, Youth and Belonging. International Perspectives. Springer International Publishing
[161] Mazzoni et al.2020. Cross-border mobility, European identity and participation among European adolescents and young adults. *Youth Citizenship and the European Union*, 15(3), 324-339.

> God, you're so brave for, for being abroad and I don't know how many
> times I've said that to you, but you go out of your comfort zone and I'm so
> proud of you and that's something that I wouldn't be able to.' So I think that
> they see some sort of barrier […] Like I feel that sometimes you're a bit
> judged for been doing all this at the same time that you're putting some
> extra work that maybe they are not willing to do. They're like, yeah, I'm.
> I'm working here now, but I want to go abroad with my girlfriend and it's
> not as if you were alone. Because right now I'm alone here. My parents are
> somewhere else. And yes, I do have friends. But it's not the same as if
> you've been with your partner.[162]

I partly interpret this part as the interviewee feeling unique and brave for leaving the home country for their international experiences. This has much in common with Frändberg's[163] study that showed that Swedish youth that go abroad sees it as a highly personal choice and that this choice makes them differ from others in the same age. The experience provides a symbolic capital, which in this case could be the feeling of pride.

According to Zhong et al.'s[164] study, this could also be considered an emotional value that the internship brought, in the sense that the trainee felt proud and good about herself for having done something different.

Furthermore, the trainee expressed that it is uncomfortable leaving the home country but seemed to see it as a part if the 'internship package', as Cuzzocrea and Cairns[165] calls it, where the negative aspects of moving abroad for an internship are accepted since the positive aspects weigh heavier.

One of the interviewees spoke about how *Spaniards don't feel European:*

> In Spain, there is a sense of not being European, you know, like we talk
> about the rest of Europe. We talk like every like. Everything north of the
> front of the border is Europe. We are not. We as obviously are part of the
> European Union, but we don't really think about that. We don't feel like.
> And this coupled with doing a volunteer, an European volunteer, the
> previous to the traineeship, really help me see what the EU is, what the EU
> does and it really, yeah, it definitely improves my EU citizenship.[166]

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[162] Transcript, Interview 2.

[163] Frändberg, Lotta. 2015. Acceleration or Avoidance? The Role of Temporary Moves Abroad in the Transition to Adulthood. *Population, Space and Place*, 21, p. 564-565.

[164] Zhong, YunTing, Murphy, Kevin, Khalilzadeh, Jalayer, Smith, Riana Madison and Weinland, Jeffrey. 2022. A European student perspective of international internship value. Journal of Teaching in Travel & Tourism, p. 1-25

[165] Cuzzocrea, Valentina and Cairns, David C. 2022. Mobile moratorium? The case of young people undertaking international internships. Mobilities, 15(3), 416-430.

[166] Transcript, Interview 4.

The trainee did however acknowledge that he *felt more European* after the traineeship, coupled with a previous European volunteer experience. Another interviewee said this on the same topic:

> …you experienced this whole institutional environment first hand and yeah, and this is something that will, it will stay with me, like, forever. Like I don't know. Now like while watching the news and hearing something about the institutions like, of course I already have the background that I was there. I took part in some, I don't know, conferences in the plenary sessions and everything, so I think it gives me like a, it's a big addition to my way of perceiving anything that is happening at the institutions. From now on that I have experienced it.[167]

From this quote I wrote down the code the *environment feels European* and that the trainee's *perception changed*. Habib and Ward[168] explain it as a person's identity is related to a feeling of belonging. They refer a belonging to places that have value or meaning to the person, which seems to be the case for this trainee. I interpret it as this trainee feels a belonging to the institutions, since she was there physically and took part in conference among other things.

It might not be surprising that all the interviewed trainees had *lived abroad before* doing this traineeship, interviewee nr 4 with the least experience, only having lived abroad once before. Research by Frändberg[169] and Flanagan[170] explained how young people are among the most likely to travel or move abroad for shorter periods. One reason might be what Flanagan explained, how they are in a time of their lives with more freedom. We can also take Fligstein's [171] research into consideration, about those who feel more European often are rather privileged and therefore can afford to travel and interact with other cultures more. This also leads to a bigger interest in the European project and the EU. Lastly, we can relate the undertaking of several migrations in a row to King's "multiple becomings" and a way for the youth to find themselves and transitioning into adulthood.

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[167] Transcript, Interview 5.
[168] Habib, Sadia and Ward, Michael. R. M. (Eds.). 2019. Identities, Youth and Belonging. International Perspectives. Springer International Publishing. E-book, p. 5-7, 12.
[169] Frändberg, Lotta. 2015. Acceleration or Avoidance? The Role of Temporary Moves Abroad in the Transition to Adulthood. Population, Space and Place, 21, 553-567.
[170] Flanagan, Constance. 2020. Who among European youth are active citizens at the EU level and why? *Youth Citizenship and the European Union*, 15(3), p. 358.
[171] Fligstein, Neil. 2009. Who are the Europeans and how does this matter for politics? In J. Checkel & P. Katzenstein (Eds.), European Identity (Contemporary European Politics, pp. 132-166). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press E-book

4.4 Discussion

Regarding the youths' perception of the EU institutions and European power relations it seems to vary somewhat depending on what institution they undertook their traineeship at. The trainees from the EESC expressed criticism on the efficiency of the EESC in their advisory role. This kind of criticism was not expressed by the other trainees. Moreover, one of the trainees from the EC was the only one that discussed the physical environment of the place and expressing that the trainees were grouped together several floors away from their supervisors and colleagues, which made the networking aspect harder.

Nevertheless, all the trainees seemed to have noticed a tall hierarchy consisting of many steps in decision-making processes. In some cases, they explained their organisations as slow and bureaucratic.[172] The trainees also expressed that they mostly were in contact with the closest superior[173], which is another proof that decisions or tasks go through a chain of people and that the one in the bottom not necessarily is in contact with the one in the top. Relating to this, three of the trainees felt like they were treated as trainees, making it sound like quite a negative experience, especially in the case when one of the trainees were thrilled about doing a certain task and then was constrained from doing it at the last moment.[174]

When it comes to gender equality within the institutions, the trainees seem to have taken notice of an unequal representation of men and women within different hierarchical levels, where men were much more likely to sit at the top positions. The trainees mentioned however that in general there might be more women than men[175] which might mean that the future will look different regarding the EU institutions' gender representation.

The reason behind what the trainees explained as a lack of diversity[176] might however be related to a lack of knowledge and interest in the institutions among the European population. As Habib and Ward's[177] and Fligstein's[178] research shows, international mobility of this sort is more common among the privileged in our society. Fligstein articulated that support for the European project is related to this, meaning that those who travel more are more likely to feel

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[172] Transcript, interview 1, 2 and 4.
[173] Transcript, interview 4 and 5.
[174] Transcript, interview 2.
[175] Transcript, interview 1, 4 and 5.
[176] Transcript, interview 1, 4, 5.
[177] Habib, Sadia and Ward, Michael. R. M. (Eds.). 2019. Identities, Youth and Belonging. International Perspectives. Springer International Publishing. E-book.
[178] Fligstein, Neil. 2009. Who are the Europeans and how does this matter for politics? In J. Checkel & P. Katzenstein (Eds.), European Identity (Contemporary European Politics, pp. 132-166). Cambridge: Cambridge

European. Furthermore, the individualisation trend that Frändberg[179] and King[180] discussed might be widespread in certain countries, meaning that some countries might have more youth travelling abroad to make their own choices regarding career and lifestyle.

The most relevant European problem according to the interviewed trainees has to do with the lack of knowledge about the EU, which is grounded in the system being complicated and the communication to the citizens not reaching far enough. This lack of knowledge leads to inactive citizens and in some cases bad reputation.[181] They also spoke about how they believe that youth policy and unemployment are important, as well as foreign affairs and war. [182]

The interviewees' personal experiences in relation to the "EU bubble" seems to relate much to King's[183] theories on liquid migration and "intentional unpredictability" as well as youth migration and lifestyle. In a general matter the trainees expressed that they were ready to adjust their lifestyles after opportunities that arise, that they were curious to try new things and that they wanted to go their own way. They much enjoyed Brussels international environment and found the traineeship as both a good step in their career and as a fun, personal experience. The part about them wanting to go their own way is related to what Frändberg's[184] individualisation trend, where today's youth often have more freedom in choosing careers and where to live. One of the trainees explained this by talking about how it was her dream to do this internship.[185]

The trainees expressed that the EU bubble is a peculiar place with saying things like there is a process to "understand job positions […] in the EU bubble"[186] and that "it's not that easy to get in[to the bubble]"[187]. By saying this they confirm that the EU bubble is not approachable for everyone, much in line with Fligstein's research saying that the EU is "an elite project that mainly has benefited the educated". [188]

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[179] Frändberg, Lotta. 2015. Acceleration or Avoidance? The Role of Temporary Moves Abroad in the Transition to Adulthood. *Population, Space and Place*, 21.

[180] King, Russel. 2018. Theorising New European Youth Mobilities. Population, Space and Place, 24 (1).

[180] Frändberg, Lotta. 2015. Acceleration or Avoidance? The Role of Temporary Moves Abroad in the Transition

[181] Transcript, interview 1 and 2.

[182] Transcript, interview 3 and 5.

[183] King, Russel. 2018. Theorising New European Youth Mobilities. Population, Space and Place, 24 (1).

[184] Frändberg, Lotta. 2015. Acceleration or Avoidance? The Role of Temporary Moves Abroad in the Transition to Adulthood. *Population, Space and Place*, 21.

[185] Transcript, interview 5.

[186] Transcript, interview 4.

[187] Transcript, interview 5.

[188] Fligstein, Neil. 2009. Who are the Europeans and how does this matter for politics? In J. Checkel & P. Katzenstein (Eds.), European Identity (Contemporary European Politics, pp. 132-166). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press E-book

On the same subject there is also the Erasmus bubble. Several trainees mentioned that they had been on Erasmus exchanges in the past, with one of them mentioning the "Erasmus bubble"[189], implying that they already undertook short-term migrations in the past as well as that they already were part of a European community.

Furthermore, the trainees experience in the "EU bubble" gave them new skills and professional experience that according to themselves will help them advancing in their careers. It was generally explained as a positive experience with new friendships. But once again, the trainees' experiences implies that even a traineeship at the EU institutions is not for everyone, as it requires financial savings or financial support from parents or elsewhere to be able to move abroad and start a new lifestyle.

When it comes to the question on what impact the internships had on the youth in understanding themselves in relation to Europe and their European identity, the result of this thesis shows that their time spent in Brussels and at the EU institutions most likely affected them into feeling more European. However, their time spent at the EU institutions might have made them notice national differences to a larger extent. One of the trainees even connected diversity to national diversity, thinking about the uneven national representation among staff.[190] Working in a multicultural environment might likewise have made them aware of cultural differences to a bigger degree, for example when hearing different languages.

It seems however that the trainees felt a sense of a European common ground. Research by Frändberg[191] and Cuzzocrea and Cairns[192] and Fligstein[193] shows a link between mobility and a sense of Europeanness. According to Fligstein it has much to do with the social interactions during the time abroad, where the trainees get to know "the other" and feel that they have things in common. Perhaps after having welcoming and kind colleagues and a feeling of fellowship with the other trainees, coupled with new international friendships achieved from co-living or through networks of various kinds contribute to a sort of emotional attachment, which fosters this feeling of Europeanness.

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[189] Transcript, interview 5.
[190] Transcript, interview 2.
[191] Frändberg, Lotta. 2015. Acceleration or Avoidance? The Role of Temporary Moves Abroad in the Transition to Adulthood. *Population, Space and Place*, 21, p. 564
[192] Cuzzocrea, Valentina and Cairns, David C.2022. Mobile moratorium? The case of young people undertaking international internships. *Mobilities*, 15(3), p. 427.
[193] Fligstein, Neil. 2009. Who are the Europeans and how does this matter for politics? In J. Checkel & P. Katzenstein (Eds.), European Identity (Contemporary European Politics, pp. 132-166). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press E-book

They might also feel a stronger connection to the EU as an institution after having worked there. One trainee talked about how her experience made her perceive things differently, giving an example of hearing news about the institutions would make her feel a connection to the place since she had been physically there. Habib and Ward[194] explained how we feel a belonging with those that we share physical places with. Moreover, their traineeships might have led to a higher degree of institutional trust, something that according to Flanagan[195] correlates with a stronger European identity.

While keeping in mind that identity is something self-made, Habib and Ward[196] brought up how young people frequently are "negotiating their relationships with people and place". This might mean that youth are more susceptible to influence than adults who are no longer in, what King[197] calls it, "process of becoming" with the aim of finding themselves. Youth might therefore accept a European group membership easier.

It might be worth mentioning again that studying a group of youth that undertook traineeships at the institutions will not give us an answer of the "general youths" believes since the group studied is too small. The group is also more EU-interested than the average young European, and willing to live outside their home countries to an extent that most youth probably are not. The interviewed youth might also have considerably similar backgrounds education wise and taking Fligstein's[198] and Hauvette's[199] research into account, they are more privileged than the average citizen and belong to a migratory elite.

To summarize, the trainees expressed somewhat critical views on the EU institutions hierarchal structures, gender inequality and lack of diversity, with a few exceptions where the trainees expressed that had not taken notice of it. The trainees are aware of, and sees it as a problem, that the general public has a lack of knowledge about the EU and the institutions and believe that better communication could solve this. In the context of the ongoing Russian invasion on Ukraine the trainees think that war and foreign affairs are the most relevant

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[194] Habib, Sadia and Ward, Michael. R. M. (Eds.). 2019. Identities, Youth and Belonging. International Perspectives. Springer International Publishing. E-book.

[195] Flanagan, Constance. 2020. Who among European youth are active citizens at the EU level and why? *Youth Citizenship and the European Union*, 15(3),

[196] Habib, Sadia and Ward, Michael. R. M. (Eds.). 2019. Identities, Youth and Belonging. International Perspectives. Springer International Publishing. E-book.

[197] King, Russel. 2018. Theorising New European Youth Mobilities. *Population, Space and Place*, 24 (1

[198] Fligstein, Neil. 2009. Who are the Europeans and how does this matter for politics? In J. Checkel & P. Katzenstein (Eds.), European Identity (Contemporary European Politics, pp. 132-166). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press E-book

[199] Hauvette, Marion. 2010. Temporary Youth Migration and European Identity. In: Cairns, D. (eds) *Youth on the Move.* VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften,

European problem. The trainees' personal experiences in the "EU bubble" is partly related to their way of seeing it as a happy coincidence that they arrived there since they were flexile and open for new international experiences. Most of them chose to go to the "EU bubble" for the sake of their interest in politics and the EU institutions. Brussels being an international and interesting city was seen more as a bonus. Their time in the "EU bubble" gave the trainees new skills, professional experience, and friendships. They are in general aware that not everyone can enter the bubble and would in some cases consider themselves lucky for getting their traineeships there. It is possible that certain aspects of living in Brussels and doing an internship at the EU institutions made the trainees aware of national differences to a bigger degree than they were before. Nonetheless, stronger than this is probably the feeling of a European group membership reached through social interactions and shared physical place with other Europeans.

5 Conclusion

In order to answer the three research questions on EU-interested youths' perception of the EU institutions and European power relations, their personal experiences in connection to the "EU bubble", as well as what impact the internships had on the youth in understanding themselves in relation to Europe and their European identity, I have interviewed five trainees and analysed their opinions, views and experiences. The trainees had undertaken, or were in the middle of, a five-month long traineeship at three different EU institutions or bodies, namely the EESC, the EC or the EP. The trainees had all moved to Brussels for similar reasons, but some had however moved there a few months prior for other Brussels-based internships. The analysis has been made with the help of a theoretical framework based on research on European youth identity as well as theoretical formulations on youth migration. The findings show that EU interested youth have somewhat critical views on the EU institutions hierarchal structures, gender inequality and lack of diversity, with a few exceptions where the trainees expressed that had not taken notice of it. The youth are aware of, and sees it as a problem, that the general public has a lack of knowledge about the EU and the institutions and believe that better communication could solve this. In the context of the ongoing Russian invasion on Ukraine the trainees think that war and foreign affairs are the most relevant European problem. The trainees' personal experiences in the "EU bubble" is partly related to their way of seeing it as a happy coincidence that they arrived there since they were flexile and open for new international experiences. Most of them chose to go to the "EU bubble" for the sake of their interest in politics and the EU institutions. Brussels being an international and interesting city was seen more as a bonus. Their time in the "EU bubble" gave them new skills, professional experience, and friendships. They are in general aware that not everyone can enter the bubble and would in some cases consider themselves lucky for getting their traineeships there. It is possible that certain aspects of living in Brussels and doing an internship at the EU institutions made the trainees aware of national differences to a bigger degree than they were before. Nonetheless, stronger than this is most likely the feeling of a European group membership that was reached through social interactions and shared physical place with other Europeans.

5.1 Further research

As briefly mentioned in the theory section, an idea for further research would be to further explore King's[200] first two theoretical concepts that worked as useful background information in this thesis but were not fully applicable to our research questions. A similar study could be made by exploring the country of origin of labour migrants or international interns where these theoretical conceptions would be interesting.

Additionally, this study could have been made with the use of another method, for example a discourse analysis. It could have been an interesting way of studying the trainees' conducted discourses and linguistic expressions regarding their time and experiences at the EU institutions.

A similar study also could have been conducted with the help of other theoretical conceptions than the ones I chose to use, for instance with a bigger focus om identity. One option could be to study national versus European identity and how these evolve and change when undertaking international mobility and traineeships abroad.

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[200] King, Russel. 2018. Theorising New European Youth Mobilities. *Population, Space and Place*, 24 (1), e2117.

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