

Young Journal of European Affairs (YJEA)

2022, Issue 2, 10-28

DOI: 10.5282/yjea/54

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Received 06.07.2022/Accepted
31.10.2022/Published 19.12.2022

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(Un)settled? – How German students with settled status experienced the United Kingdom leaving the European Union

Abstract

This paper explores the experiences of three German students living in the United Kingdom (UK) post-Brexit. The study focuses on a specific subset of citizens of the European Union (EU) who have lived in the country for more than five years and thus received settled status under the Brexit Withdrawal Agreement, which grants them the continued right to live, study and work in the UK. Using semi-structured online interviews and thematic analysis, this study finds that the participants did not change their career plans and did not face higher tuition costs because of Brexit. However, despite the limited effects of Brexit on their legal status, all three participants recounted experiences of uncertainty, inbetweenness and discrimination that contributed to their unsettledness. This paper contributes to the literature on the experiences of EU citizens in the post-Brexit UK by emphasising that EU citizens are not a homogenous group. Their experiences differ substantially depending on their legal status under the withdrawal agreement. Moreover, the study illustrates the emotional impact of the referendum.

Keywords: Brexit, EU students, Qualitative Research

Cite this article: Broeg, Louisa (2022): (Un)settled? – How German students with settled status experienced the United Kingdom leaving the European Union. In: Young Journal of European Affairs, Issue 2, 10-28, 10.5282/yjea/54

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Introduction

Several recent surveys have found that fewer EU citizens are choosing to study in the UK. Universities and Colleges Admissions Service figures show a 43% drop in applications from EU students in 2021 compared to 2020 (Dedman and Rigby, 2021). The British Council (2021) also found that Brexit negatively impacted young Germans' intention to study in the UK. Existing explanations of this trend have neglected that EU nationals are not a homogenous group or equally affected by Brexit. Unlike other EU citizens who face higher tuition fees, visa applications and National Health Service (NHS) surcharges, students with settled status are unaffected by these bureaucratic and financial hurdles. Nevertheless, recent data published by the Independent Monitoring Authority for the Citizens' Rights Agreements (2021) suggests that one in ten EU citizens with protected rights consider leaving the UK. This is confirmed by Falkingham et al. (2021, p. 139), who find that "EU students are significantly more likely than non-EU students to plan on leaving the UK upon graduation" following the announcement of the UK triggering Article 50. To explore this group's motivations and experiences, I interviewed German students in the UK with protected rights.

The Brexit Withdrawal Agreement set out the rights of EU citizens living in the UK after Brexit. It created special protection for those living in the UK before the end of the transition period on 31 December 2020. The agreement distinguished between three groups: (1) those who had lived in the UK for more than five years were granted settled status, (2) those with less than five years of permanent residency were granted pre-settled status, which protected their rights for a limited time, and (3) EU nationals without prior residence were not granted protected rights. The first (settled status) group is unique since Brexit did not legally affect them in the same way as their fellow citizens: they continue to enjoy freedom of movement and the right to work and live in the UK indefinitely. Therefore, while the negative reaction of EU citizens living in the UK to Brexit and its disruptive impact on their lives has been widely established (Lulle, Moroşanu and King, 2017), the experience of this subgroup of EU citizens requires further investigation. The research question for this project is thus: How do German students with settled status experience the United Kingdom after it has left the European Union?

The article proceeds as follows: Firstly, I summarise the previous findings on the experiences of EU citizens in the post-Brexit UK from the literature and theorise how these might apply to the German students in my sample. Secondly, I outline the data collection and analysis methods used in this article, focusing specifically on research ethics and reflexivity. Thirdly, I summarise the findings from my interviews, focussing on the prominent themes of uncertainty, inbetweenness and discrimination, and tie these back to the literature in the subsequent discussion section. The findings are consistent with the argument that Brexit has had little material impact on German students with settled status living in the UK: the interviewees did not change their plans because of Brexit or consider leaving the UK. However, the study highlights a strong emotional impact of the referendum on the sense of belonging in the UK within the sample, which was, in some cases, shaped by experiences of marginalisation or

discrimination. Due to the limited sample size, this study should be seen as a first step that identifies blind spots in the literature and illustrates ways forward, particularly in methodological terms. The conclusion summarises my findings and outlines the study's limitations and avenues for future research.

Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

The Brexit referendum marks a turning point for EU citizens living in the UK, who fear the reversal of their status as equal citizens into that of migrants (D'Angelo and Kofman, 2018; Guma, 2020). A rich literature has explored the experiences of EU citizens following the referendum, asking how it has affected their sense of feeling at home in the UK and whether they are likely to stay in the country (Lulle, Moroşanu and King, 2018; Botterill and Hancock, 2019; Guma and Dafydd Jones, 2019; Lulle et al., 2019; Ranta and Nancheva, 2019; Sredanovic, 2022). Three themes have emerged in the literature: uncertainty, belonging, and discrimination. Each of the themes is discussed in turn.

Brexit has been linked to great uncertainty among EU citizens regarding their ability to continue to live and work in the UK (Lulle, Moroşanu and King, 2018; Guma and Dafydd Jones, 2019; Lulle et al., 2019; Ranta and Nancheva, 2019). For many EU citizens, the result of the referendum vote was a shock that triggered a strong emotional response (Lulle, Moroşanu and King, 2018; Botterill, McCollum and Tyrrell, 2019; Guma and Dafydd Jones, 2019; Ranta and Nancheva, 2019). This emotional response has been interpreted as a sign of the emotional toll and shattered sense of security among EU citizens after Brexit (Botterill and Hancock, 2019; Mas Giralt, 2020; Zontini and Però, 2020). Moreover, Teodorowski et al. (2021) find that Brexit and the associated uncertainty have negatively impacted the mental health of EU citizens living in Scotland.

Guman and Dafydd Jones (2019) argue that Brexit should be understood as a process of othering that affects EU migrants' sense of identity and belonging. Similarly, Mas Giralt (2020, p. 29) finds that Brexit has disrupted the sense of belonging among EU citizens living in the UK through two processes: "the acquisition of 'migrantness' and the non-recognition of the contributions and efforts made to belong." However, Brexit has not only disrupted EU citizens' sense of belonging to the UK but has also led to greater consolidation of this group and a shared European identity (Ranta and Nancheva, 2019; Vathi and Trandafoiu, 2022).

There is an emerging consensus that Brexit has increased the hostility and violence faced by EU nationals living in the UK (Virdee and McGeever, 2017; Guma and Dafydd Jones, 2019; Rzepnikowska, 2019). Some have argued that this discrimination had built up over a long period of time and was only exacerbated by Brexit (Balch and Balabanova, 2016; D'Angelo and Kofman, 2018). Many Western Europeans experienced discrimination for the first time following the Brexit referendum (Lulle, Moroşanu and King, 2018; Rzepnikowska, 2019; Brahic and Lallement, 2020). Still, not all EU citizens

have encountered discrimination. Instead, hostility towards migrants appears to be stratified based on nationality, race, and class (Kilkey, 2017; Benson and Lewis, 2019; Botterill, McCollum and Tyrrell, 2019; Lulle et al., 2019). Fox, Moroşanu and Szilassy (2012) find that Eastern European migration in particular has been racialised through the UK government's immigration policy and tabloid journalism.

All three factors have raised questions among EU citizens and especially students about whether they should remain in the UK. The effect of Brexit appears particularly strong for the future plans of young EU citizens living in the UK, who are more able to move (Lulle, Moroşanu and King, 2018; Falkingham et al., 2021). Lulle, Moroşanu and King (2018, p. 1) find a diversity of plans among Irish, Italian and Romanian young people living in London: they choose "either to stay put using 'tactics of belonging,' or to return home earlier than planned, or to move on to another country." An increase in the public display of xenophobia and discrimination has been shown to deter international students from applying to UK universities (Dennis, 2016) and incentivise those already in the country to leave the UK upon graduation (Falkingham et al., 2021). Moreover, uncertainty over tuition fees, funding opportunities and the economic consequences of Brexit are likely to influence students' perceptions of the UK as a destination for higher education (Falkingham et al., 2021; Mayhew, 2022) and have led many to question whether they want to stay in the UK (Sime, 2020).

The empirical data supports these findings: Amuedo-Dorantes and Romiti (2021) find that Brexit has lowered application numbers from EU students to UK universities by 14%, and Falkingham et al. (2021, p. 140) find that following the triggering of Article 50, "EU students are about 18 percentage points more likely than non-EU students to plan [on] leaving the UK upon graduation." However, Brexit has been found to trigger the opposite reaction among some EU citizens who have considered applying for UK citizenship to protect their rights (Godin and Sigona, 2022; Sredanovic, 2022). Godin and Sigona (2022, p. 1135) argue that naturalisation is "framed by many EU citizens as a response to a perceived loss of status (defensive narrative) and threat (protective narrative)." Their main incentive, according to the study, is to avoid a hostile environment and being labelled an immigrant (Godin and Sigona, 2022). However, many EU citizens remain ambivalent about applying for UK citizenship and question the desirability of remaining in the UK (Sredanovic, 2022).

A problem with the existing literature on the effects of Brexit on EU citizens living in the United Kingdom is that it neglects the heterogeneity within this group. As Mas Giral (2020, p. 42) points out, "a diversity of personal characteristics and circumstances will have a bearing on their experiences in the context of Brexit and its aftermath as well as their opportunities to negotiate or resist forms of exclusion and im/mobility." For instance, not all EU citizens face uncertainty regarding their legal status. As Sumption and Fernández-Reino (2020, p. 7) explain, "people who have lived in the UK for at least five years are eligible for 'settled status', which entitles them to live permanently in the UK and later apply for UK citizenship if they choose to." The impact of Brexit on EU students living in the UK has been particularly neglected. Given that most EU citizens living in the UK are young and highly educated (Sumption and Fernández-Reino, 2020),

understanding the effect of Brexit on this group of students is crucial for understanding the wider dynamics of movement among EU citizens post-Brexit. Moreover, Mas Giralt (2020) suggests that further research considering socio-economic backgrounds and residence periods is needed to explore this diversity of experience.

How might the experience of German students in the UK be different from that of other EU citizens in a way that warrants studying this group? Firstly, as D'Angelo and Kofman (2018, p. 338) point out, EU citizens with settled status, like the German students in the sample, "continue to enjoy equality of treatment in relation to employment and welfare benefits." Existing research has found that the formal recognition of migrants and their rights to work and live in the country indefinitely is conducive to their sense of security and belonging (Alexander, Edwards and Temple, 2007; Ervine, 2008). However, as Burrell and Schweyher (2019, p. 194) point out, some questions have been raised over how reliable the protections offered by settled status are, given the "evidence of ingrained and calculated Home Office incompetence and illiberal instincts when interpreting laws and guidelines." This is exacerbated by efforts of the UK government to incorporate EU citizens under existing and more restrictive immigration rules (D'Angelo and Kofman, 2018). Thus, in-depth interviews are needed to understand the complex relationship between the security created by having obtained settled status and the uncertainty created by hostile government actions.

Secondly, there is some indication that time spent in the United Kingdom is positively correlated with the likelihood of staying even after Brexit (McCarthy, 2019). Given the time these students have spent in the UK, especially during their formative years, their feeling of belonging to the UK might be stronger than that of other EU nationals living in the UK. Furthermore, Tyrrell et al. (2019) find that young people born in Central and Eastern Europe who belong to the 1.5 migrant generation living in the UK experienced a sense of inbetweenness after Brexit. Given the length of time the participants in my sample have spent in the UK, we might expect them to experience similarly conflicted feelings of belonging.

Thirdly, an extensive literature has considered how inequalities of nationality, race and educational background create different experiences among migrants. Antonucci and Varriale (2020) find that core-periphery inequalities among European migrants feed into forms of racialisation that frame Western European migrants living in the UK as superior and more culturally similar to the UK. Similarly, Fox, Moroşanu and Szilassy (2012) suggest that stigma is unequally distributed among Central and Eastern Europeans, with Romanian EU migrants particularly vulnerable to stigmatisation. Since all three participants in my sample are white and German citizens, the literature would suggest that they are less likely to be exposed to discrimination. Moreover, Lulle et al. (2019, p. 1) find "diverging trajectories between the more highly skilled and high-achieving EU citizens and the more disadvantaged low-skilled labour migrants" in their ability to deal with the consequences of Brexit. Given the high educational achievements of the interviewees, we can thus expect them to be more able to handle bureaucratic hurdles and avoid marginalisation. Universities in particular have been found to create a protective bubble for students and staff, in which they are shielded from many of the

negative consequences of Brexit (Luthra, 2021). However, Luthra (2021, p. 203) suggests that “even highly skilled migrants [...] experience vulnerability and a feeling of unwelcome in response to the 2016 referendum” (p.203).

Moreover, even those EU citizens previously considered privileged, such as the Polish population in the UK, are affected by anti-immigrant sentiments exacerbated by the Brexit vote (Botterill and Hancock, 2019; Rzepnikowska, 2019). Similarly, Burrell and Schweyher (2019, p. 193) explore how Polish citizens living in the UK, who have been “cushioned by Europeanness, whiteness and the special rights and freedoms of EU citizenship, but also increasingly exposed to an intensifying illiberal immigration policy impetus,” have experienced Brexit. The authors find that despite their secure migration statuses, Brexit has had a strong emotional effect on Polish citizens living in the UK (Burrell and Schweyher, 2019). In-depth interviews are needed to explore whether these findings hold for German students with settled status.

The study adds to the existing literature on the diverse effects of Brexit on EU citizens by evaluating its impact on German students. The participants had a great degree of privilege: they are white and highly educated and might thus experience greater cushioning from the negative effects of Brexit than the EU citizens interviewed in previous studies. Moreover, the participants’ settled status entails even greater protection of their legal status in the UK and an increased sense of belonging since they have lived in the country for at least five years.

Methods

Data Collection

I conducted semi-structured interviews as they are particularly suitable for gaining insights into the personal experiences and decision-making of the participants in a more flexible way (Opdenakker, 2006). The interviews were held in German since the advantage of using participants’ native language has been widely established, particularly for culturally sensitive topics (Barnes, 1996; Twinn, 1997). Conducting the interviews on Zoom allowed me to interview students studying in different cities across the UK, which is a unique advantage of such methods (Howlett, 2021). Additionally, it enabled me to follow social distancing guidelines.

Participants were recruited via a Facebook group for German students studying in the UK with 1100 members. From the group of volunteers, interview partners were selected based on the time they had spent in the UK to ensure the richness of the data, thus combining convenience and purposive sampling. Given the sought-out group consisted of young people, recruiting via social media did not impose as significant sample bias as it might have for older populations (Hamilton and Bowers, 2006).

To be included in the study, participants had to be current students who moved to the UK for educational purposes. The study was restricted to participants with settled status

due to the permanent nature of their status. Moreover, those with settled status have lived in the UK for a much longer period and might thus have stronger cultural ties. Participants had to be under the age of 35 to ensure they had experienced free movement in Europe for most of their lives. German students with dual British nationality were excluded. All participants were PhD students who had studied in the UK before their current degree.

The sample was well-suited for this project for two reasons. Firstly, in 2016 German students formed the largest group of EU students in the UK, with 13,640 students attending university there (Higher Education Student Statistics, 2021). Understanding the experience of German students is thus essential for putting survey data on EU students' educational choices into context. Secondly, all participants were from cities with a sizeable German student population that are popular destinations for German citizens studying in the UK (Simon, 2016).

The small sample size was determined before the commencement of data collection. Sim et al. (2018) suggest that this is problematic because an a priori approach, among other things, makes use of inappropriate statistical assumptions. However, prior studies have shown that qualitative studies can reach "saturation within a narrow range of interviews [...], particularly those with relatively homogenous study populations and narrowly defined objectives" (Hennink and Kaiser, 2022, p. 1). This is likely to be the case here due to the stark homogeneity of the studied group in terms of age, educational background, degree level, location, and time spent in the UK as well as the small overall population of German students in the UK that fulfil the requirements for settled status. Moreover, assessments of when saturation is reached have varied significantly across time and disciplines, and some have argued that as little as three participants can be sufficient (Dukes, 1984; Parse, 1990; Smith, 2000). Nevertheless, the sample size significantly limits generalisability, and the study should thus be seen as a first step that identifies blind spots in the literature and illustrates avenues for future research, particularly in methodological terms, through subgroup analysis.

Ethics and Reflexivity

While participants were not explicitly asked about experiences of discrimination, such incidents were mentioned in all three interviews. Interviewees were reminded that they had the option to interrupt or withdraw from the interview at any point. Moreover, following Currier's (2011) suggestion, I decided to omit one emotionally charged event experienced by a participant from the analysis because it could easily be misconstrued. To ensure confidentiality, all references to names, degree programmes or institutions were removed. Since the research involved the collection of participants' political opinions, data security was a particular concern. Thus, all data related to the project was encrypted, and personal information was stored separately. Following Kvale's (2012) suggestion that "written agreement on the informed consent of the interviewee to participate in the study and the future use of interviews" is preferable, I sought written

consent from all participants via email in advance and reaffirmed this at the start of each interview.

As a German citizen with pre-settled status who has lived in the UK for over three years, I was aware that I would likely share some of the experiences of the interviewees. As Townsend-Bell (2009) suggests, one's identity as a researcher can strongly affect both the assumptions that guide one's research and the questions one asks, as well as how interview participants perceive the interviewer. In this case, my nationality, academic background, and age likely had the strongest effects.

Since the interviews were conducted in German, the nationality I shared with the participants was particularly salient. Given the recruitment strategy, participants also knew that we were members of the same scholarship programme. This in-group connection was especially strong with one participant since we had both done competitive debating at university, even though we had not known each other before the interview. This was reflected in her use of debating jargon and references during the conversation. This poses the problem that participants might have answered the questions in a more socially acceptable way (Paterson, 1994; Qu and Dumay, 2011). However, it might have meant that they were more willing to share negative attitudes towards the UK and Brexit with me than they would have been with a British person or when answering in English. I was aware of the power disparity created by the difference in age and educational level. Participants were between 3 and 12 years older than me and were advanced PhD students. As Orbals and Rincker (2009) argue, power disparities can affect data collection and results. While this can create ethical dilemmas (Fujii, 2012), the dynamic was counterbalanced by the in-group factors mentioned above.

Data Analysis

The audio of all interviews was recorded, manually transcribed, translated, and subsequently analysed using thematic analysis. Thematic analysis was chosen because it is particularly suited to capture experiences, meanings, and participants' lived reality (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Following Attride-Stirling's (2001) framework of constructing thematic networks, I developed basic themes based on the repeated reading of the transcripts. These basic themes were grouped into organising themes, which ultimately formed the global theme (Attride-Stirling, 2001). I adopted Fereday and Muir-Cochrane's (2006) hybrid approach of inductive and deductive coding and theme development, which involved developing, testing, and then applying both data- and theory-driven basic themes to the remaining transcripts. To ensure transparency, I included the codebook in the appendix, which provides a detailed account of the analytical process (Saldaña, 2015).

Findings

Throughout the interviews, three common themes emerged. The participants had experienced both positive and negative *discrimination*, their sense of belonging was one of *inbetweenness*, and while the settled status addressed some of the *uncertainties* they faced, others remained. These findings are illustrated in figure 1.

Uncertainty

For all three participants, the outcome of the Brexit referendum was unexpected and created emotional confusion. Participant 1 recalled a moving address by Scotland's First Minister and leader of the Scottish National Party Nicola Sturgeon that illustrated this state of emotional uncertainty:

P1: "I remember the Scottish government did a campaign after Brexit [...], where Sturgeon stood up and addressed the international students and said, 'we want you here, don't let anyone tell you otherwise [...].' I remember being incredibly touched by that, [although] I'm not usually so responsive to sappy empathy messages."

All participants mentioned worries over continued access to rights and services, such as the ease of travel and the ability of friends and family to visit ("*Will there be anything going on with the borders? Will my parents need a visa if they want to come here?*" - P1). Participant 1 was particularly worried about her continued access to the NHS:

P1: "I was mostly worried about the NHS, my health insurance. I was afraid that they would kick me out of the health insurance."

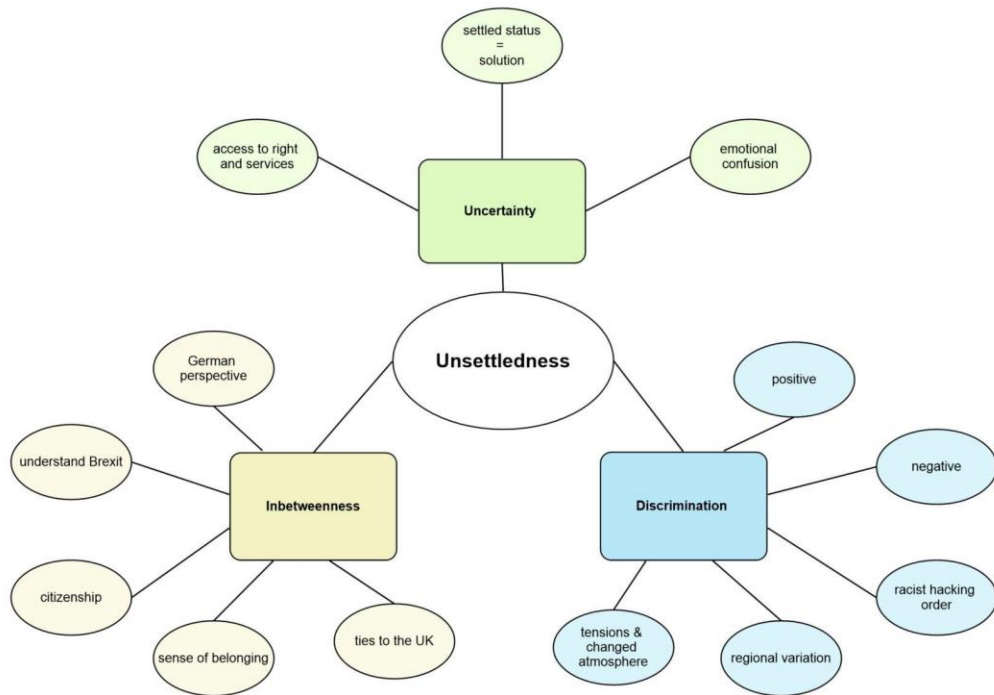


Figure 1: Thematic Map

Being granted settled status took these worries away, although Participant 2 expressed concerns about the durability of the status (“*It is only a current decision, a political decision that can be changed if necessary*” - P2). The settled status as a solution became particularly clear in the following interaction:

I: Did you also feel this uncertainty yourself when you thought about what to do next?

P3: Yes, for a while. I really didn't know what would happen next and that's why I thought about where I might continue my academic or professional career afterwards. [...] And fortunately, these uncertainties [...] were then relatively quickly taken out of the world with this settled status.

Inbetweenness

All three participants had strong ties to the UK, such as close friendships, and expressed an affinity for the country (“*I stayed because I really liked England*” - P3). Participant 1 had particularly strong ties to the UK:

P1: "I come from Hannover, the school has always had a lot to do with Great Britain. The school I went to was built by the British military."

Some of the interviewees felt more at home in the UK than others. For instance, Participant 1 stressed that she had spent all her early adult life in the UK and *"was never an adult in Germany,"* while Participant 2 described her experience as one of *"a warmly welcomed guest."* Nevertheless, all three participants wanted to apply for dual-UK citizenship. Reasons for this were both administrative (*"it just makes admin so much easier - it sucks [...] to do this paperwork"* - P1) and emotional (*"it's really more of an emotional thing for me"* - P3).

All three participants had some understanding of why British people voted for Brexit. However, they all recounted experiences of dissonance between British and German discourse on UK politics that made them feel *"in between"* the two countries:

P1: "Germany made fun of it when they planned this one airfield as a lorry parking lot for the border. A friend of mine planned that. He came to me at some point and said, 'For God's sake, what are you discussing right now?' [...]. That's an example of how I stand in between, where I think that somehow this is not just my country, these are my friends."

While all three participants stated that this inbetweenness did not affect their future plans substantially and all of them were considering staying in the UK, this feeling was reinforced for Participant 2 by a loyalty to the European project.

I: "Did Brexit influence your future plans in any way?"

P2: "That's a difficult question. Well, my first answer would be no, on the one hand. On the other hand, I think I feel a bit more at home in the EU. And that's just not the case in the UK. It's difficult to say, objectively no, predominantly no, but there is this small emotional factor."

Discrimination

Experiences of discrimination varied among participants. The most severe instances of discrimination were experienced by Participant 1, who recounted instances of negative comments from other students.

P1: "A lot of people were like - not like a hate crime - but more like 'Yeah, we don't need your fucking Volkswagen.' Things like that. So much more subtle, stupid shit and stuff like that. But when it piles up, it's a lot of microaggressions all the time."

These comments were part of a larger change in the social atmosphere that made it more "tense". All three interviewees stated that what was acceptable to say had changed (*"I think that after Brexit, the tolerance level has somehow risen, and it has become more acceptable to express that."* - P2).

The participants acknowledged that their experiences were likely affected by the social environments they were in (*“Cambridge is an island, a very multinational, open-minded island, where one particular social class is heavily over-represented.”* - P2). This led to a stark contrast between the public debate in tabloids and what they experienced privately.

All three interviewees also experienced positive discrimination based on their citizenship status or university (*“I simply benefited from being in Cambridge”* – P2). Most noticeably, all three participants expressed a firm belief that they would not get kicked out of the country but that this might be different for other EU citizens. Some of them described this as a clear *“racist hacking order”* which affected them less because they were German:

P1: “I had always thought quite honestly that on the hacking order of people they kick out, I think I am so far down... I’m not getting kicked out here! I’m highly educated, white, German, female, of marriageable age. I won’t get kicked out.”

Discussion

The three interviews provide a rich understanding of the Brexit experience of German students with settled status. The study has shown that the participants have experienced few material changes as a result of Brexit: they did not change their career plans and did not face higher costs. This stands in stark contrast to the findings by Lulle, Moroşanu and King (2017), who argued that Brexit had a disruptive impact on the lives of EU citizens. This is consistent with findings in the wider literature that EU citizens living in the UK are not a homogenous group. Instead, the findings suggest that the interviewees did not face the same material consequences as the participants interviewed in earlier studies. Furthermore, the sample showed no evidence that EU students are now more likely to leave the UK upon graduation (Falkingham *et al.*, 2021) or of EU citizens with protected rights considering leaving the UK (IMA, 2021). Finally, the findings are consistent with Simon’s (2016) argument that German students study in the UK due to British universities’ reputation and close supervision.

However, the interviews have illustrated the emotional impacts of the referendum. All three interviewees had questioned their sense of belonging in the UK and recounted an experience of inbetweenness. Moreover, some participants experienced discrimination in a tense societal atmosphere, ranging from unpleasant experiences to microaggressions. This extends to Tyrrell *et al.*’s (2019) finding that Brexit has created a mixed identity and feeling of “in-between-ness” among young Central and Eastern Europeans by outlining the explicit experiences that have led to this feeling.

Thus, the experience of the participants in this study is one of *unsettledness*. While they face few material consequences, the uncertainty and tension surrounding Brexit have made them question their sense of belonging. This need for belonging might be one

explanation for their wish to apply for citizenship, an issue further research should explore.

The variation of experience in the sample was notable. One possible reason for this is that the participants were perceived differently by their environments. For instance, Participant 2 described an experience of being British-passing (*“you can’t see or hear that I’m not British. If I don’t spell my first name, then no one knows that I’m not English, even from my accent, and that’s unusual”*). It was not possible to consider this during sampling, but future studies could explore how the experience of EU citizens varies depending on their accents.

The requirement to conduct interviews online imposed some limitations on the study. As Deakin and Wakefield (2014) point out, while online interviews allow for greater flexibility, they come at the risk of disruptions depending on the interviewees’ environment. Such disruptions occurred in two of the three interviews due to connection issues and a message that the participant had to respond to. While these interruptions were short, they distracted the participants and disrupted the natural flow of the interview.

The results were affected by the identity of the researcher, and the use of thematic analysis might have led to an overstatement of the coherence of experiences among the participants (Lamont and Swidler, 2014). Language ambiguity was a further issue since the word for uncertainty and insecurity is the same in German and required interpretation during the translation. The participants all live in the Southeast of England. While this is representative of the German student population, a greater diversity of participants would have likely provided richer data. Given Sim et al.’s (2018) argument that determining qualitative sample size a priori is an inherently problematic approach, future studies should explore this research question using a larger sample to reach saturation. Moreover, comparisons with the experiences of students with pre-settled status or visas might prove interesting, as would comparisons with EU students of other nationalities.

Conclusion

While settled status appears to have protected the German students in the sample from the material impacts of Brexit, such as higher tuition fees, loss of access to the NHS and the right to live, work and study in the UK, it did not protect them from the emotional effects of the referendum result. All three participants had a strong emotional reaction to the outcome of the referendum, experienced a feeling of inbetweenness and considered applying for UK citizenship to further reduce the uncertainty they faced. This was partially exacerbated by negative experiences of marginalisation and discrimination. Nevertheless, all three participants acknowledged that their unique position as highly educated university students and Western Europeans cushioned the impact Brexit had on them. This is consistent with the wider literature, which suggests that while settled status and positions of privilege can offer some protection from the

negative effects of Brexit, this protection in no way precludes the emotional impact of Brexit on EU citizens living in the UK (D'Angelo and Kofman, 2018; Burrell and Schweyher, 2019; Luthra, 2021). It suggests that while EU citizens' experience of Brexit is not homogenous, the emotional impact of the referendum on this group might be more similar than the literature has argued thus far. Further studies that compare the experiences of different groups of EU citizens are needed to explore this in depth.

The findings add to our understanding of the impacts of Brexit by highlighting the separate pathways, material and emotional, through which the referendum has taken an uneven toll on EU citizens living in the UK. Given the continued debate over the effects of Brexit in the higher education sector (Falkingham *et al.*, 2021; Mayhew, 2022), this study provides additional insights into the thought processes of German students studying at British universities. The variation within the sample highlights the importance of qualitative studies for understanding the multitude of factors that contribute to the heterogeneity of experiences. This study offers the first step in this direction by highlighting the different experiences of a particular subgroup, German students with settled status living in the UK after Brexit, and how they compare to the existing findings in the literature. The findings highlight the need for a more comprehensive understanding of 'affectedness' and how it interacts with degrees of privilege.

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