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## Calling Brussels: An Innovative Teaching Project

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### ABSTRACT

This innovative teaching project brought students and professionals working at or with the European Union (EU) together via video-conferencing. The idea was that by having students talk to policymakers this would add to their understanding of the EU and allow them to practice their interview skills. These interviews would be incorporated in a regular first-year course on the political system of the EU. Students had to do the necessary research and prepare questions beforehand. Introducing this activity to the course made it more interactive, gave students a more practical orientation and added yet another international element to the already international group of students. In political science and legal courses there is rarely time for field research. Including long-distance interviews added an element of qualitative research with real persons, who are involved in EU policy making. Students not only had to prepare for the interviews but also practiced their research skills under realistic conditions (with a stranger who is an expert on a certain subject). It also contributed to the fulfillment of the Bologna agenda goals of internationalization and digitalization.

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## Introduction

The Calling Brussels Project was part of a course on policy making in the EU at the University College of the University of Groningen, the Netherlands. Twelve liberal arts students, all studying in Groningen but originally coming from five different countries participated in the course. The culturally and educationally heterogeneous group made a research-oriented learning approach promising (Lueg and Lueg 2014). These 12 students were to interview six persons connected in some way to EU politics using video-conferencing. In the end, five interviews were successfully conducted. All interviews were done in English. As a reaction to earlier evaluations of the same course, it was decided that a more interactive approach to teaching EU politics was needed (see also Kenyon 2017). One of the challenges of academic teaching is to show students how the theoretical considerations that we make in class correspond to political practice (Lee 2015, 458). Studying the assumptions of intergovernmentalism, neo-functionalism,

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multi-level governance or the neo-institutionalisms does not mean that students can identify or assess the practical implications of these theories outside of the classroom. Thus, the idea of the Calling Brussels Project was to have students learn about the EU decision-making process in a more practical manner by making them engage with actors connected to the EU, via video-conferencing (Lo Iacono, Symonds, and Brown 2016). Often undergraduate interview assignments are done on campus with other students as interviewees. This might be a good approach and convenient when it comes to learning interview techniques and interview design but it is impossible to learn about the working of a political system or organization this way. By interviewing real political actors, students could acquire unique insights into the working of the EU and hopefully this would make the EU a less abstract organization for them.

Another purpose of this project was to teach students how to conduct interviews. They had to learn interview techniques, collect background information, prepare questions, arrange an interview appointment, and write a report on the interview. We opted for semi-structured narrative interviews as this seemed to be the best method to employ with students conducting their first ever interview. In order for the project to work in the limited time of 9 weeks, we recruited the interviewees beforehand by approaching friends, former students, acquaintances or just by writing emails to lobby groups.

Although the focus of this project was the political system of the EU, there is no reason why this project could not be replicated in a national context or in other fields of the social sciences. This contribution supplies a short checklist of how to execute such a project in general, it then describes how the project was executed more specifically, from how the project was designed, to the final reports of the students.

## **The project in short**

The project required some preparation by the lecturers before it really started as well as guidance during the project. The necessary steps together with possible problems can be found in the following checklist (Table 1).

The rest of this contribution will illustrate these points with the help of a more detailed description of how we handled the project.

## **Preparation for the project**

In order to be able to fulfill our goal of having the students learn more about the EU in a less abstract manner and about conducting interviews we had to do work behind the scenes to ensure success. This involved us finding interviewees for the students to have an interview with. This was based on our own networks that we had in the EU or with those who engage with the EU and was done 2–3 months before the course started. Finding interviewees was surprisingly easy and we were able to find six interviewees for our project (having two students, as a team, per interviewee) without receiving any rejections. We can only recommend to try it out, it might be easier to find interviewees than one thinks. These were two staff members of the European Commission, a lawyer from a law firm located in Brussels, a public relations representative for a regional governmental interest group, a staff member of the Council of Ministers, and a former

**Table 1.** Checklist for a video-interview project.**Preparation for the project**

Teacher finds interviewees

- Making use of one's network to find interviewees in your field
- Conduct a basic search to see what students can find on their interviewee

Teacher arranges material(s) on how to conduct semi-structured interviews

- Find material, that is fitting for students, on how to conduct interviews

Teacher determines how the project will be weighed in relation to the overall course

- How much will the different aspects (presentation, reports etc.) be worth?

Teacher arranges video-conferencing platform for the students

- Determine which platform you will make use of (Skype, BlueJeans etc.)
- Keep in mind privacy rights (e.g. making anonymous Skype accounts)

Teacher determines a timeline for the project

- Determine when each part should be completed (contact, interview, etc.)

**Manual for the interview**

Teacher writes a project manual for students explaining the course and tasks

- Provide a single document explaining how the course is graded, what materials to read (ensure the literature is accessible), the timeline etc.

**Course of the project**

Teacher matches students with interviewees

- This can be done by lots or students' choice (we found lots to be best)

Students find background information on their interviewees

- Students do research on their interviewee in class so you can assist if needed

Students formulate questions for the interviews

- Review and provide feedback on the students' questions

Students contact their interviewees and arrange interview times

- Make sure students approach their interviewees professionally
- Have students inform you about their progress to identify any problems
- Some video-conferencing software requires a time and date to be set-up

Students conduct the interviews

- Have students inform you about their progress

Students present their findings

- Students can practice their presentation skills and share their findings

Students write an interview report

- Improves students writing skills and helps with your assessment

Students write a reflection report

- Problems can be identified and fixed for the year after.

Teacher provides feedback

- Give detailed feedback on all tasks

Teacher emails interviewees

- Thank your interviewees and ask them if they would participate again

deputy minister of justice from a likely future member state. Admittedly, having taught and researched on the EU for years made it easier to find interviewees. A lot of former students are working in Brussels (LinkedIn came in handy finding them) and the authors are familiar with the institutional landscape in Brussels, like trade unions, business groups, legislative committees and law firms. Utilizing the networks of colleagues also helps, just ask them if they know potential interviewees. If you found willing interviewees, ask them if any of their colleagues would like to participate as well. Thus, picking a political system the lecturer knows intimately well is extremely useful. Without having a network and good knowledge, finding interviewees might be more difficult, but in the time of the internet one should be able to identify interesting governmental and non-governmental actors that can then be approached via email or telephone. We can only speculate about the possible success of such an approach, this surely depends on how open governmental bodies are to the public. EU institutions have the reputation of being very accessible to researchers, and would probably be quite willing to participate even without personal connections. We were aware that not finding interviewees

could be the end of the project before it even begins. Therefore, the course was designed in such a way that it could have been given without the interview element, if we could not have found enough interviewees. With the interviewees found, we were able to move forward and focus on how to teach students about interview techniques and put on paper what we wanted them to do.

For the interview techniques we supplied some rather basic texts and guidelines on semi-structured interviews (Adams 2015; McCammon n.d.). These two sources provided the basic knowledge the students needed in order to prepare interview questions for their interviewee. We prepared a manual for the students in which we explained the purpose of the project.<sup>1</sup> It laid out how to get started, how to find background information, how to formulate questions, how to arrange interviews, how the interview and the interview report should look, and it contained the general timeline we wished students to follow.

## **Manual for the interviews and course of the project**

### ***Purpose and getting started***

Students were told that they have to conduct an interview with a person involved in political and/or legal matters of the EU. The project manual provided to the students laid out the purpose, expectations and schedule of the project and contained information on how to conduct semi-structured narrative interviews. At the same time we let them know that the reason for this whole project was to make the EU feel more real to them. The interviews would be completed as a team, in groups of two. Students were assigned their interviewees via lots, as we wanted to avoid long discussions and assumed that students had too little knowledge about EU institutions to make an informed decision on who they want to interview anyway. Each student took a slip of paper with the name of their interviewee. Those with the same name were grouped together as a team to work on the Calling Brussels Project. To make students more enthusiastic about the interview, the interview and interview reports made up 25% percent of their final grade. Giving no grade for this important element of the course would most likely have devalued it in the eyes of the students (Friedland 2002, 171). The interviews were supposed to be no longer than 30 min, forcing the students to formulate questions to the point. Students had to get in touch with their interviewee and engage with them in a professional manner. We did make clear that despite the fact that we wanted students to take the lead in the interview process, we would provide assistance concerning interview questions, interview appointments and technical issues. The students were to read the texts from Adams and McCammon to help them prepare the interview guidelines and give them some guidance on how to conduct the interview. After having been assigned an interviewee and a team member by sheer good or bad luck, students were ready to gather background information on their interviewee.

### ***Finding background information***

Now, in possession of the name of the interviewee and the organization he/she worked for, students collected rudimentary information on their interviewee, on the policy field

their interviewee was engaged in, and on the organization their interviewee worked for. In fact, this phase was conducted in class with them in the first session after assigning them an interviewee. We had already conducted the background search for ourselves to see what kind of information could be found about the interviewees. LinkedIn, personal websites, and the websites of the institutions, firms, or organizations the interviewees worked at provided the necessary information for designing the interview guidelines.

We emphasized the importance of this phase, explaining to them that it ensured that they did not waste time later with questions the answers to which could easily be found on the internet. We provided some basic questions for students to keep in mind while looking for the background information:

- What is the interviewees biographical background?
- What kind of organization does the interviewee work for?
- What position and tasks does the interviewee have in the organization?

After they had conducted their research, students shared their findings with the rest of the class. This gave every participant an idea of the project as a whole and was a way for participants to learn from each other's findings. This allowed everyone in the course to also see what information other groups have found and they have not but still should. In addition, it gave students a good idea about the kind of topics being discussed in the EU at the moment. Moreover, it gave us the opportunity to ensure that they had gathered enough information that would help them with formulating their questions for the interview.

### ***Formulating questions***

Based on this background information, students prepared the questions that they wished to ask their interviewee. The questions were to focus on the professional engagement of their interviewee with EU affairs. They had to come up with open questions which required the interviewee to answer in their own words. We stressed that “yes” or “no” questions must be avoided. We made clear that the personal background of the interviewee must not be the focus of their questions, though some questions on the interviewee's personal history would be needed to start the interview. Questions that they already found the answer to, should be avoided in order to make efficient use of the limited time. They had to anticipate possible answers and think of follow-up questions to answers they could receive. We did point to the sometimes disturbingly haphazard nature of interviewing. Not every question can be prepared beforehand and improvisation is needed. If answers need further clarification, follow-up questions need to be formulated on the spot during the interview. Despite having students write the questions out on their own, we gave them feedback before they did the actual interview. A wise decision on our part, as the quality varied and some students needed more guidance than others. The two main issues were low quality questions and missing structure. Early lists contained too many questions about issues that one could easily find on the internet. Moreover, some of the lists gave the impression that the students had done insufficient research on the topic and their interviewee. These students were told to

consult more literature and official documents on the policy field their interviewee was engaged in and rewrite their questions. Some lists were rather unstructured, meaning that topically related questions were not grouped together. Students were asked to pick three major points of interest and group them accordingly (for example, academic background, concrete recent policy developments, daily work patterns). This worked well and produced clearer interview questions.

### ***Arranging an interview***

It was left up to the students to arrange the time and date of the interview, we did remind them, though, that they must be professional when corresponding with their interviewee. Before they sent their first emails they received feedback on contents and form. Interviews were to take place outside class hours at a time convenient for the interviewee. Students had to contact their interviewee as soon as possible to ensure that a date and time for the interview could be found within the course weeks.

While the students were arranging interview times with their interviewee we went about arranging Skype accounts for the students. As the whole idea behind the project was to use long-distance communication, Skype or some other cheap means of video-conferencing was needed. This ensured that there was no costs for the students nor for the interviewee, except for their time. To ensure the privacy of our students and the interviewees we set up special Skype accounts for the interviews; in that way students did not need to provide their own Skype accounts to their interviewee and would not have the interviewee in their contact list if they did not want to. However, for the two interviewees from the European Commission we used the BlueJeans video-conference system. This was due to privacy and security concerns from the European Commission. This was not an issue at all, as our university offers this service to us, via the Law Faculty (both authors are primarily based there). After providing the Skype or BlueJeans details to the students they were able to conduct the interview.

### ***The interview***

The interviews were not recorded. Students had to take notes during the interview, after they received the permission to do so from the interviewee. The fact that they were conducting the interviews in teams of two, made taking notes easier. It was important for us to ensure that students understood that privacy rights and general professional manners must be upheld. As this was a team project, both team members had to ask questions using the interview guidelines that they had prepared together. We highly recommended to have a back-up system in place when it comes to technical devices, for example, the interviewee's phone number, an extra laptop in-case one fails, an additional skype account, etc. While preparing the students for the interviews, we made clear that doing interviews can be stressful but that this project is designed for their benefit. We also made clear that the interviewees wanted to voluntarily share their experiences and knowledge with them and that they are not out to get them. Not all interviews went smoothly. In one case the interviewee preferred a phone interview so the students conducted their interview solely via phone. In another

case, no interview took place at all. Moreover, a team using BlueJeans encountered technical issues at the beginning because of a missing administrator password. They cleverly started their interview on a mobile phone and switched to video as soon as they received the password halfway through the interview.

### **The reports**

After having presented their findings in class, usually in the next class after the interview took place, students had to write two reports. First, each group had to write a 2000–3000 words interview report in which they reported their substantial findings (the questions they asked and the answers they got from their interviewee). In addition, they had to hand in a short report of 500–800 words in which they reflected on the interview process. This reflection report had to address the following questions:

- How did the preparation go?
- How was the interview?
- Where you happy with the questions you asked?
- What could you have done better?

Also to be included was a description of what they learned about the EU that may not have been taught in class and/or what they learned in class that was discussed with the interviewee. Reflection reports are only one tool of many to evaluate interview performance of students, it is nevertheless a very useful one. Depending on the learning outcome of an interview project, self-reflection could be combined with other methods of assessment, such as direct observation, a videotaped performance test or a multiple choice exam about interview techniques (Grosberg 2006).

### **Timeline**

To help students understand when they should have completed certain steps and to complete the project in a timely manner, the project manual contained a schedule of these steps. Matters such as when the interview would actually take place could be changed if it suited the interviewee to do so. The original time schedule was as follows:

- Week 1: Background research
- Week 2: Interview guidelines
- Week 3: Interviews
- Week 4: Writing the reports
- Week 5/6/7: Presenting findings to the rest of the course

### **Outcome of the project**

The timeline was handled in a rather flexible manner toward the end. As soon as a group had done the interview, they would give a short informal presentation in class, sharing their findings with their fellow students. Waiting for students to finish their



written reports as planned was not feasible as some interview appointments were in the later weeks of the course. This approach also meant the oral interview reports were nicely distributed over several weeks of the course, making classes more varied. As not all students had conducted their interviews by the end of week three, writing the report was also done later than in the original timeline. However, this was not a problem as the course was 9 weeks in total so there were some extra weeks available. In some cases, making the interview appointments was easier than in others. All of the interviewees have busy schedules and so apparently do the students. In the end, five of the six teams conducted their interview successfully. One team had failed to reach their interviewee on two different occasions. The interviewee was annoyed and withdrew her/his participation but as the course was coming to an end anyways, we used this incident as a good example of the problems one encounters when arranging and conducting interviews. This, in the end, did influence the grade of this team negatively. Not because they could not get a hold of their interviewee as such but because of the insufficient communication between the two team members, between the team and the interviewee and between the team and the lecturers. The team did not work well together, only one was present at the scheduled time for the interview. After first difficulties arose the lecturers got involved and the interviewee supplied his private phone number and his WhatsApp details to the students (work number and skype account was already known) so he could be reached in different ways for the now rescheduled interview. However, the team did not communicate in a timely manner with their interviewee. Moreover, the team did not make use of the lecturers who would have assisted in any way possible, if they would have actually been informed about the time of the interview beforehand. No substitute assignment was given, instead they had to write individual reflection reports instead of a team report.

### ***Students' interview reports***

The interview reports were of a high quality. The preparation the students did prior to the interview proved to be very valuable. Their questions showed interest and (some) knowledge in and of the field the interviewee was working in. They reported their findings by summarizing the answers they received, sometimes with some quotes from the interviewee mixed in. They also included the original interview guidelines they had formulated. The questions ranged from the general to the specific, they included questions about how a working day of the interviewee would usually look, about specific issues of the respective policy field, and about the interviewee's opinion on certain issues. In addition to work related issues, students seemed very interested in the career paths of the interviewees. This is not very surprising as, on the one hand, asking someone how he/she ended up in Brussels, is a casual ice-breaking question that would come up almost naturally at the beginning of an interview in one way or another. On the other hand, the students were genuinely interested in what it takes to work in Brussels, for example, what subjects to study and what languages to speak. The idea of a more focused approach, for example by providing a list of topics students should and should not address, was abandoned early on when designing the project. Students were to make it their own project, exploring topics how they saw fit. As planned, the interviews took around 30 min and students managed to

cover a broad range of issues and basically address all the points they had prepared in their interview guidelines. Nevertheless, the time restraint meant that students had the feeling they could not ask all the follow-up questions that came to mind during the interview. There is no doubt that they all got a better idea of what lawyers, lobbyists and EU officials do. This also becomes clear from their reflection reports.

### ***Students' reflection reports***

In the reflection reports, students described their experiences with the project. The purpose of these reports was twofold, first, to make students more aware of what they learned in addition to the facts from the interviews, and, second, to help evaluate the quality of the project. Not only were they to critically reflect on the work process, teamwork and skills acquired, they could also use it to suggest improvements to the project. All students praised the practical nature of this project and how it made them delve deep into the workings of the EU and EU related organizations in order to seriously prepare for the interview. They did appreciate the help they received with formulating the first contact letters and the feedback they got on the interview guidelines.

They thought it was a good way to practice interview and communication skills. They addressed some of the technical difficulties, like quality and connection issues, and how to avoid them in the future. They reflected on their own interview skills, like their lack of flexibility when asking questions or not being able to find the interview guidelines at the start of the interview.

A student pointed out that not all interviewees actually work for the EU and that this was a little strange for a course on policy making in the EU. The selection of the interviewees was of course done on purpose. The idea was to show that the EU does not work in vacuum but that many outside interests are connected to it. So three EU officials and three non-EU interviewees seemed a good mix. Another critique concerned the assignment by lot. Students might have ended up with an interviewee whose expertise was not their primary interest. This was also done on purpose. A randomly assigned interviewee meant that students most likely had to prepare for an interview in a field they knew little about. It is also an immensely efficient way of allocating interviewees. A critique to be taken more seriously concerned a lack of guidance for writing the reports. Although, some guidelines were provided in the manual for the interviews, they were admittedly kept rather short. Students were supposed to be creative in how they write down their findings, providing a straightjacket in form of a template was consciously avoided. However, keeping in mind that students have probably never written an interview report before this course, a more detailed description of what these reports should contain might be warranted for the future. This being said, the reports the students handed in were of good quality, a lack of guidance did not seem to be a problem.

The team that did not manage to conduct the interview also reflected on the process. Naturally, they were disappointed and frustrated but at the same time said they learned a lot about the value of teamwork and what not to do when arranging interviews. Being familiar with the pitfalls of empirical research, we did anticipate the possibility that not all interviews would actually be held; thinking that such an outcome, although not the preferred one, would nevertheless be a valuable experience. It was.

## Conclusion

The Calling Brussels Project wanted to make teaching how policy is made less theoretical and at the same time teach academic skills that can be used in many other contexts. All of this was to be done without excessive costs and in a limited time. The project seems to have done what it was designed to do. Not only did students have an incentive to prepare well for the interview by trying to understand the position of an interviewee in an organization and take care of the necessary technical requirements, they also learned to communicate professionally in English. Nevertheless, such a project requires quite some preparation and guidance from the lecturer. The involvement of the lecturer ranges from recruiting the interviewees (a task that should probably not be left to first-year (or any) students), to giving feedback on students' interview guidelines, to helping them with setting up the video-conference. For small courses, this should, however, not be an insurmountable problem. Bigger courses will have their own challenges. Recruiting a sufficient amount of interviewees might be one of them. Interviewees could be asked if they are willing to do more than one interview. Presenting the findings can then be done in work-groups so that students will not hear the same information twice or in a comparative manner in the same meeting. Although two students per interview seem to be a good team size, in bigger courses more than two students could be assigned per interview. Students explicitly mentioned the added value of this project, not only in their reflection reports but also in the general course evaluation. When asked, what was most positive about the course one student wrote "The lecturer taught us many practical skills as well as professional skills during both paper writing and the amazingly interesting Calling Brussels undertaking" another one "That we got to do an interview with an EU official." No negative statements about the project were made in the evaluation.

A video-conference project like this one could, of course, also be used for teaching national and sub-national politics. If you can find willing interviewees the possibilities are almost endless: Calling Washington D.C., Calling Sacramento, Calling London, Calling Berlin and so on. Video-conferencing might also work for other fields of study, like law (talking to judges, lawyers and litigants), management studies or sociology of organizations (selecting a specific organization and trying to find out how it works). Transferring this project to other political systems or organizations should not be a problem as the checklist provided in section two would also be applicable. Official ethical approval was unnecessary for this project. Different rules might apply in different countries, we do not dare to give general advice on questions of ethical approval and leave this issue to the responsible lecturer. The project will most likely be repeated next year.

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## Note

1. A word file of this manual can be found under <[https://www.rug.nl/research/portal/publications/calling-brussels-student-manual-for-an-innovative-teaching-project\(8832a956-](https://www.rug.nl/research/portal/publications/calling-brussels-student-manual-for-an-innovative-teaching-project(8832a956-)

a3f7-41cf-9b7c-5b7be78b6040).html>. Anyone who wants to replicate this project can adjust, elaborate and rewrite this rather short manual to her or his liking. Alternatively, you can contact Tobias Nowak under [t.nowak@rug.nl](mailto:t.nowak@rug.nl). See also <<https://www.rug.nl/ocasys/ucg/vak/show?code=UCGSS111>> for the academic year 2018/19 for a general description of the course.

## Notes on contributors

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