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# International student mobility

## Interview with Christof Van Mol

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Christof Van Mol is a Professor at the Department of Sociology at Tilburg University, where he teaches several courses including Theoretical Perspectives on International Migration, and has been, since 2019, affiliated to the Faculty at the Centre for Higher Education Internationalisation (Catholic University Milan). He chairs the Cost Action “European Network on International Student Mobility: Connecting Research and Practice (ENIS)” (2021-2025), and co-coordinates an IMISCOE Standing Committee on Education and Social Inequality. Van Mol’s scientific interest are mainly focused on international migration processes, patterns, and outcomes, with a specific focus on intra-European mobility flows, and on innovative forms of mixed-method research and online survey methodology. In 2022 he published three articles on student mobility: “An experimental study on the impact of contact design on web survey participation”, “Exploring explanations for the gender gap in study abroad: A case study of the Netherlands”, and “Intra-European student mobility and the different meanings of ‘Europe’”.

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**Keywords** Student mobility, international migration mobility, intra-European mobility flows, COST Action, mixed-method research.

**Título** Mobilidade internacional de estudantes

Christof Van Mol é professor no Departamento de Sociologia da Universidade de Tilburg, onde ensina várias disciplinas, incluindo Perspetivas Teóricas sobre Migração Internacional, e integra, desde 2019, o Centro para a Internacionalização do Ensino Superior (Universidade Católica de Milão). Preside a COST Action “European Network on International Student Mobility: Connecting Research and Practice (ENIS)” (2021-2025), e coordena o Comité Permanente da IMISCOE sobre Educação e Desigualdade Social. Os seus interesses científicos centram-se principalmente nos processos, padrões e resultados das migrações internacionais, com um enfoque específico nos fluxos de mobilidade intraeuropeia, e em formas inovadoras de investigação de métodos mistos e metodologia de inquérito *online*. Em 2022 publicou três artigos centrados na temática da mobilidade estudantil: “An experimental study on the impact of contact design on web survey participation”, “Exploring explanations for the gender gap in study abroad: A case study of the Netherlands”, e “Intra-European student mobility and the different meanings of ‘Europe’”.

**Palavras-chave** Mobilidade de estudantes, mobilidade migratória internacional, fluxos de mobilidade intraeuropeia, COST Action, investigação com métodos mistos.

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**Emigration Observatory (ahead OEM) – I would like to thank you very much for doing this interview with us. Could you tell us a bit of your background, academic and personal – if you think it's relevant – and how you gain interest in the in the field of migration?**

**Christof Van Mol (ahead CVM) –** So, my name is Christof Van Mol, I'm from Belgium, but I work in the Netherlands, and I've lived a bit everywhere Europe: Spain, Norway, UK, Poland, and Austria. Not during childhood, I grew up in Belgium, but my father was actually the one that founded the first reception centres for North African newcomers in Belgium, in the 60s, so that means that from a very young age, I've always had foreigners at home who would speak different languages that I would not understand. Afterwards, my parents, from the age of five onwards, always sent me to what we call 'Belgium concentration schools' – which are schools where more than 80% is of foreign origin – so, until the age of 12, I've always been surrounded by migrants; I never considered them migrants, they were just my friends. Then, when I went to secondary school, I didn't really notice that anymore; it was very white and didn't have any migrants. In college, I studied history at the University of Antwerp, and afterwards, I wanted to do something different, and I saw this international master on migration studies at the University of Valencia in Spain – in combination with the University of Lille – and so, I enrolled in that master, which was very nice because I started to reconnect with ideas from my childhood, and that's how I got really interested in migration theories and all different aspects of international migration. After finishing the program, I started working for the International Organization for Migration, where I was responsible for voluntary return programs of migrants, but that was during the crisis of 2008, and then the government decided that the money shouldn't go anymore to the most vulnerable migrants, but to just anyone who wanted to return, and so, there was an ethical issue there for me, because I signed up for humanitarian work with migrants, and basically, it suddenly became, to my feelings, an expel program, right? "We want to get rid of them, so just use the money for that"; basically, that was the message. At the University of Antwerp, where I had studied, Christiane Timmerman – who also worked quite a lot together with people here – asked me several times if I wanted to do a PhD, and that's how I then ended up again in Antwerp doing a PhD on International Student Mobility. After finishing it, I moved to the Netherlands where I joined the Netherlands Interdisciplinary Demographic Institute (NIDI), first as a postdoctoral researcher, and from 2015 onwards as senior researcher. So, this was a shift then from working with migration scholars in Antwerp, to working with demographers and sociologists, at the NIDI, now I work at the Tilburg University, again with sociologists; so, also in terms of disciplines, I really got in touch with many different people that were working on international migration. I was also heavily engaged in the IMISCOE network, where I had a group on International Student Mobility, and I was also co-leading the standing committee on Education and Social Inequality, and we noticed that many people became interested on International Student Mobility. When I started my PhD in 2008, or 2009 I think, there

was nothing available; we had Russel King, who wrote a couple of pieces, but I think we had 10 papers or so available, and nothing else in the migration. At IMISCO, we would be put at the conferences together with the Aging Migrants group, like two strange groups, where everything was about late migration refugees, and then we would be in a back room somewhere with a couple of people listening to us. But then, over the past decades, research on International Student Mobility really started to grow, and now it's one of the most fast growing topics in International Migration Studies. So, there was momentum there to say "Let's go for a COST Action, and engage everybody in the field" – because in IMISCOE we could bring together some people working on International Migration and working in International Student Mobility – but then, I felt, together with some colleagues, that there were many different people, in many different fields, who were also working on it and not being connected, not participating also in IMISCOE, and that, in terms of really advancing the field, it would be necessary to create more synergies to get everyone together.

**OEm – Thank you. That was actually one of the questions that I had in here to ask you, that was, what were the main drivers that led to this COST Action, that you have already explained a bit.**

**CVM** – There's a little bit more there, because on the one hand, it was this... sometimes I call it these islands of research; so you have people that will work on similar International Student Mobility topics on their own, that work in Spain, Norway, Iceland, Belgium, but they would not know each other, which leads to a lot of reproduction of the same things, right? So that was one thing that the field could advance much more quickly if these people would just simply get in touch with each other. Also, we know this, or I strongly observed this, that many PhD students would be very isolated, so they would work in departments where their supervisors would not be experts on International Student Mobility; they would also not really have an interest in it; they would accept the topic, but they wouldn't really feel it. And then when I would go to the IMISCOE conferences or other conferences, they were always like: "Well, finally, we meet somebody who thinks this is a valuable topic, because if I present this at my department, then everybody's like: yeah, there she is again talking about international students". Also there, we thought we could provide more support to them and for them in their development process; if they want to develop as scholars, it goes much more quickly if they can connect to people who already have more experience. And then a third point was also that, of course, my career started with practice with the International Organization of Migration, and then slowly you get into the ivory tower of science, which is very nice, I'm not going to deny that, but very often, I was thinking like: "why don't we connect anymore, back to practice, in a rigid way?", because what we very often do, as scientists, also with migration studies, I believe, is that we write our papers, and then we see in the guidelines: Oh, and you have to provide

two recommendations for policy, for example, or some recommendations for practice. And then we just sit at our desk and we draft the recommendations that we submit, and that's it. First of all, it might very well not be feasible in terms of practice, because we do not know practice, what kind of limitations these people have. And secondly, also, they do not read our papers, because they're behind paywalls, they do not have access, and also, when it's publicly available with open access, they're very involved, very technical, so that does not really work. And so, then there was a project, a book project that I had with Anthony Ogden, from Wyoming University and two on-site visitors from George Washington University, two US scholars, whereby we said: "okay, all that research on International Student Mobility, that has such important ramifications for practice that we do not really use", so, we edited volume, whereby we brought researchers and practitioners together to really write chapters together – that was very often a challenge, because you have to get to know the language, and there was also a lot of editing involved, but that led to beautiful book with chapters 5000 words max., providing an overview of the global literature on Student Mobility for young researchers, like: "What are the future directions for research, but also what are the implications of practice developed together with the practitioners?", which is very different, but we thought that in terms of on a larger scale is still missing, and so, with the ACTION we really also want to include practitioners – there's quite a large share of the ACTION who are practitioners – so that when we develop, over the next years, papers – and also beyond that scope, that's what we hope for – and we have to write such recommendations, we think this can be relevant for practice; instead of inventing them and just throwing them out there, we really have a soundboard, and that we can ask them like: "Okay, what do you think? Is it feasible or not?", so that you develop them together with the practitioner; and the other way around, for stakeholders, if they have urgent questions that they don't know about, we can help them with it. So, the idea is really to create these synergies and these breaches, and not only in the direction of science to practice, because that would be very classical, but also really practitioners connecting two sides, so that we really get this integration much more consistently.

**OEm – And the results that you're seeing, since the beginning of this COST Action, are they being good?**

**CVM –** Yes. Yeah. So, everybody's extremely enthusiastic, and everybody really sees the value of that. Of course, there are a lot of researchers, which can lead you to fall into the trap of only focusing on researchers, but with the practitioners involved, as well as with the Management Committee, we really try to make sure that there's always the synergies I explained before between them.

**OEm – That’s very good, thank you for sharing. I would like to ask you three questions about the book that you published in 2014 *Intra-European Student Mobility in International Higher Education Circuits*. You felt that Intra-European Student Mobility remained under studied and you felt that you had to write a book that could investigate. I'm going to read a bit of the abstract of your book, that it's: “empirically investigates the mobility decision, social network formation, sense of European identity and migration aspirations of higher education students”. So, the first question that I would like to ask you is, what were the main conclusions that you've reached with this book?**

**CVM –** The first conclusion that I reached, contrary to what I was thinking, was that European programs do not always get out of the exchanges they want to have. That's the reason that actually led me to start my research career when I was doing this Master in Migration Studies. When I was living in Spain doing this international master, I noticed that afterwards everybody was moving across Europe, and were all very mobile, and then I read the principle of the Erasmus program, and so, one of the two main ideas is that Erasmus should promote European identity and should promote future migration behaviour. But then, the thing was, I started to look for papers on the topic, and there was very little available, which I thought was strange, because, at that time, there was more than 20 years that Erasmus program was in place, and nobody had any information on whether they reached their goals, so that's actually how I started my PhD, looking at that knowledge gap. And what I particularly discovered is that the Erasmus program, and exchange programs in general, are preaching to the converted, right? So the people that participate in these programs are very often already more European minded, and so, of course, it provides them with possibilities, but in that sense, they already have that tendency. The same with future migration aspirations, they're much more likely also already, without a program, to be mobile in their future careers, because that's a tendency that they have. And so, in that respect, more could be done to try to engage those with lower European identities, for example, but also those who have less possibilities to participate, because that's also a social selectivity that came forward, which led to the question on how to improve the participation of students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds.

**OEm – You already said that you've seen an increase of research on Intra-European student mobility and international mobility of students. Besides this increasing of research that is happening, what do you think that has changed most on research in this topic, between the time you've written this book and now?**

**CVM –** I think, particularly over the past three, four years, there have been quite some promising developments. I think that now we have much better knowledge of the social scientific processes that take place, so, there is much more solid empirical research. When I did my PhD, it was still fairly rare to include control groups of mobile students. But of course, if you ask a

student after his Erasmus experience what they think they have learned, they will say: “this and that”, because you subjectively, of course, always justify the choices that you make, right? That's very subjective measurement of the outputs. So, there's much more objective research right now that really measures if the students achieved what they want from the programs, on the one hand, and then there is also much more research into social selectivity processes, which really uncovers social inequalities that are inherent in student mobility, which was something that was not really a topic when I started my research career.

**OEm – I was reading a bit of the book, and you said that it was expected that 10% of all graduates would have had a mobility experience by 2010. And my question is, would you like to do a new research based on this, but with the goal of the 20%, that was set for 2020?**

**CVM –** I'm really not interested on whether they have reached their goals, but I think it is an illusion when looking at the international migration numbers. There is a normative thing there that is “why should everybody go on an international experience?” Many people are fine not going, we should not push people who are not willing to go, that's one thing, but if you want to reach that goal, you also should do something about the social inequalities that exist, because for people from lower socio-economic classes it's very often much more difficult to participate. And of course, there is often the: “but we do not play Robin Hood, everybody needs to get the same scholarships”. I'm not really in favour of that approach, I think a much more differentiated approach could be relevant over there. And so, I'm much more interested, I think, in kind of the dynamics and the mechanisms that explain the reasons of not achieving the 20% instead of looking at: “Okay, do we get to the 20%?”. But if you know that on a global scale, 3% of the world is a migrant, then why would we expect it to be different for students, right? There is a tendency, a natural tendency, despite the absolute numbers going up, to stay as close to the place where you live as possible.

**OEm – Thank you. Still focusing on this book, you talk about the relationship between International Mobility and Identity, especially on what concerns European identity. But this was also something that you've started to write before in 2013, and then you kept exploring it after in 2018, and 19. Why your research keeps returning into this relationship?**

**CVM –** The focus was really with this, as I told before, this subjective idea that I had on European identity that you see it's one of the main aims, and then repeatedly, you see that returning the whole time. If you look at the latest programs of Erasmus+, you would still very often see students to feel more European, more European citizens, but very often this is based on these subjective assessments that they ask students, after the experience, if they feel more European afterwards, and of course they tick the box of ‘yes’, because it is logical, that's a feeling you get when you are abroad. But so, what were really still missing were these more

longitudinal measurements, for example, whereby we say: “How do European students feel before going abroad?”. Because in the 2014 book, what I did was compare the levels of Europeanness, if you can say that, or identification with Europe and European Union, among different groups of students: those who went abroad, who were definitely going abroad, who still doubted, and then those who did not want to go abroad, and then I noticed differences. But in the other studies, I very much more focus on doing a test before they leave, after they leave, and then a control group of those who do not leave at all, and do we then see if there are any differences, just to provide a much more fine-grained analysis of: Does it matter? Does it have the impact that they want to have or does it not? But lately, I'm not focusing on the issue anymore. I think that the 2018 or 19, the 2019 paper was the last one. In the 2019 paper, I also noticed that, in all these questionnaires, that are more general European identity research, we asked students like: “do you identify with Europe? What is Europe?”, right? So, and nobody really tried to untangle like: “When people talk about you, and what are they really talking about?”, and so, then I discovered that you actually have the political dimension, the experiential dimension, the social and the cultural dimension, which are very different. So, then we could also check if the Erasmus experience would impact them differently on these different dimensions. So, it's really about refining a bit that measurement.

**OEm – You co-wrote with Yvonne Riaño and Parvati Raghuram the paper: “New Directions and Studying Policies of International Student Mobility and Migration”. In this article you developed an analytical framework to study international student mobility policies. What were the drivers that led you to write this and what does this analytical framework consists of?**

**CVM –** What we did in IMISCOE, in the group on international student mobility, was to look at what we miss in terms of knowledge, right? What kind of knowledge gaps do we have on international student mobility, and together with Yvonne and Parvati, we notice that there was a lot of research emerging on the experiences of international students themselves: how do they feel? What are the impacts? Why do they care? What are the processes that they go through when they are abroad? But not a lot of focus on how policies impact the lives of students, as well as on how our policies on international student mobility developed: Are they developing in a similar way compared to migration policies? Because it's a picture, it has to do with migration, but it also has to do with education. So, it's kind of different. That's when we decided to bring a group of people together in Neuchâtel and based on that we had a special issue, and with the paper, we just wanted to provide an overview of the reason we brought this group of people together, basically, and why more analysis of student mobility processes was necessary.



**OEm – Thank you. What consequences do you think that the pandemic had – if any – on intra-European student mobility, and on the policies for international student mobility and migration, short and long term?**

**CVM –** I think it was very hard for international students and also for regular students. The thing is that the main focus has been mainly on international students and how hard it was for them. Very often, we have focused on international students, but it was hard for everybody; I think that can not to be denied. But of course, many of them could not return to their homes, they would be alone in these large halls, without anybody else, they would not have a social support. So, in that sense, for them, it has been very hard. And then we see contrasting patterns in terms of how the pandemic impacted, because in some countries, you see that numbers of international students drastically went down, and in other countries, like Sweden for example, you see an increase in international students, and we still do not know why that is the case. And that's one of the aims of the Action: to investigate. Okay, the pandemic had an impact on the flows of international students, it had an impact on the integration process, it had an impact on inequalities, on labour market outcomes, but we're not so far yet that we have the knowledge together; so, there's still a lot to learn there. We hope to present the first results by the end of September.

**OEm – What are you currently working on and what are your projects of research for the future?**

**CVM –** I'm expanding my scope a bit in the sense that I do not only work in international student mobility anymore, but I broaden that up to internationalization more generally, because if we consider, particularly the social inequality issue, there has been all this institutional rhetoric on inclusive internationalization, internationalization for all, comprehensive internationalization. So, you have all these different terms and different strategies, and then we say like "Okay, look, we are going to implement a lot of internationalization at home activities so that everybody can participate" – because, of course, practitioners and researchers know that there is a social selectivity issue, so the intention is good – so, we say "let's do this, and let's implement these activities". But then what I discovered and found very strange is that there's a lot of research on the outcomes of internationalization of activities, and then you see that nowadays people develop interculturality, they get more professional competences, global citizenship; yeah, many of these outcomes. But there as well, I was wondering "okay, but shouldn't the first question be just the same, like with European identity?". If the aim is to broaden up, to be socially inclusive, and allow all students to have access to international activities, why don't we investigate whether students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, whether students from a migration background, also participate in these activities? And so, I have a first paper now, together with Adriana Perez-Encinas, where we actually showed that, again, we are preaching

to the converted, and that many students from lower social-economic backgrounds and migration backgrounds are actually also not participating in these other activities, because they are very often offered outside of the curriculum. These people have a lot of barriers already in terms of finances, in terms of the time; for example, many of them have to work, also to pay for their studies, so, if you ask them to come every Tuesday night to a language cafe, just to name one example, they're not going to go because they have other responsibilities like to take care of family members, and they also have different socialization within the institution; so, that is one thing that we noticed. And I'm also, in terms of qualitative research, right now working on a project to try understanding the reasons and what mechanisms can explain why they participate less – because statistically we observed they do participate less; so, that's one project I'm working on. I'm also working on another project, which is on the impact of Erasmus program on the careers of students; we know from empirical research that career impacts are not as large as expected, but we want to investigate with employers how students can promote best their mobility experience on their curriculum, so, we're going to conduct a correspondence study where we send identical CV's to real jobs that open up in four different countries, whereby we will systematically change the content of the motivation letter: in the one the international experience is not mentioned; in the other one, the international experience is mentioned only through naming the institution where it was developed; in the other one, the international experience is mentioned through naming the institution where it was developed and the competences leaned. We're still developing the methodology, but our aim is to see if, first of all, it matters? That's already an interesting question. But secondly, is it interesting to also, in terms of practicality afterwards, to be able to teach students like: okay, look, our results indicate that, either it doesn't matter, so do not invest time in describing or negate, or that it makes a huge difference if you really describe what the advantages are of going abroad. So, my research now focuses much more on also scientific questions that can have practical ramifications, I think.

**OEm – Okay, thank you very much. Is there anything else that you want to share?**

**CVM –** No, no, I do if there is anything that you need to know?

**OEm – No. Thank you very much for this interview.**

**CVM –** Thank you for the invitation

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