

# A young scholars' perspective on the 3<sup>rd</sup> ISA Forum of Sociology in Vienna

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## 1 Introduction

From July 10<sup>th</sup> to 14<sup>th</sup> 2016 the 3<sup>rd</sup> Forum of the International Sociological Association (ISA) took place in Vienna. The motto of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Forum “The futures we want” invites us to take a closer look from the perspective of young researchers and students – thus, from the “future of sociology”. The ISA Forum provided young sociologists with the unique possibility to take part in a vibrant debate on the future(s) of our society with scholars from all over the world. In the following article, we point out specific opportunities and offers the congress held for young researchers, but we would also like to draw attention to some obstacles for young participants at the Forum and suggest some possible improvements for future ISA fora.

## 2 Facts and Figures

Before we depict some of the special offers the ISA Forum held for young researchers, we first take a look at student attendance at the Forum. According to the number of participants the 3<sup>rd</sup> ISA Forum of Sociology was so far the biggest ISA Forum in history as 4231 persons were attending. For the 1<sup>st</sup> ISA Forum in Barcelona (2008) the ISA-Forum Statistics declare 2549 participants and for the 2<sup>nd</sup> ISA Forum in Buenos Aires (2012) 3592 persons (see Table 1). But while the participation figures steadily rose from 2008 to 2016, students' participation did not

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**Table 1** ISA Forum-Participation (2008–2016). Source: ISA (2016)

	1 <sup>st</sup> ISA Forum (2008, Barcelona)	2 <sup>nd</sup> ISA Forum (2012, Buenos Aires)	3 <sup>rd</sup> ISA Forum (2016, Vienna)
Total number of participants	2549	3592	4231
Number of students	528	1199	1017
Share of students	20.7%	33.4%	24.0%

follow the same pattern: While the number of students rose from the 1<sup>st</sup> to the 2<sup>nd</sup> Forum (from 528 to 1199 attending students), it declined slightly at the 3<sup>rd</sup> Forum (1017 students). This decline on the 3<sup>rd</sup> Forum gets even more obvious when students' participation is related to the total number of participants: While the share of students rose from 20.7% at the 1<sup>st</sup> Forum to 33.4% at the 2<sup>nd</sup> Forum, it declined again to 24% at the 3<sup>rd</sup> Forum.

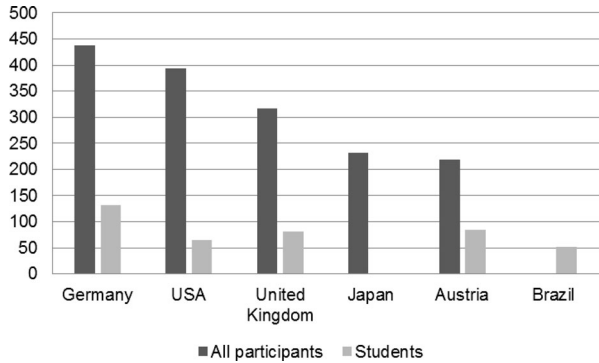
Data do not give us any indication for the reasons of the high but declining students' participation rate. One explanation could be the fact that travelling to and accommodation in Western Europe is quite expensive: The cheapest accommodation in Vienna started from 30 € per night. In addition, the registration fees – even though they are divided according to the Gross National Income of the economy of countries – could have kept some students from participating. In general these fees should be financed by universities or funding authorities. But there are a lot of students who either do not have this affiliation or their financial support is very limited.

Some financial support was given to the students via registration grants (either from Research Committees [RC], Working Groups [WG] and Thematic Groups [TG] or the Local Organizing Committee [LOC]). But the total number of grants remained quite small ( $n = 37$ , around 4% of student attendants).

When looking at the top 5-countries the Forum attendees came from, we see slight differences between the students (see Fig. 1) and all participants: For all participants, Germany ranks on top, followed by the USA, the UK, Japan and Austria. Students were also most likely to come from Germany, followed by Austria, the UK, the USA and Brazil. Thus, a huge part of the participants at the 3<sup>rd</sup> ISA Forum came from the Global North, but – at least when considering the students' attendance – one country from the Global South (Brazil) also reached high participation rates.

By taking a look at the countries the students came from who received a grant through a RC, WG or TG, we see some signs for special support for participants from the Global South: With 4 registration grants India ranks on the top, followed by South Africa, Germany and the USA (3 each) and Canada, Japan and the UK (2 each). The 16 registration grants through the LOC were given to (local) Austrian students. Still the above-mentioned gap in the participation rates between the Global North and the Global South was only marginally balanced through these registration grants.

**Fig. 1** Top 5-countries (students and all participants). Source: ISA (2016)



### 3 Student Volunteer Program

In addition to the 16 students that were given grants by the Austrian LOC to serve as liaison persons for the Research Councils, Working Groups and Thematic Groups, students from many Austrian universities applied to attend the ISA Forum as student volunteers. These volunteers were granted free admission to the conference in exchange for max. 20 h of work during the ISA Forum. About 180 students made use of this possibility to visit the ISA Forum. Work for the student volunteers mainly consisted of technical support during sessions (e. g. with computers and microphones). Additional benefits for the student volunteers were a lunch pack on every working day and a certificate for having worked at the ISA Forum. Student volunteering was a good opportunity to visit the Forum without having to pay the rather high conference fee. While the volunteers could not choose which session they supported, in their free time they were able to attend all sessions they found of interest.

Through the Volunteer Program the students got to know the broad spectrum of topics presently discussed in sociology worldwide. Sessions at the ISA Forum ranged from big plenary sessions in which sociologists from all over the world discussed topics like the “Multiple crises in Europe and beyond” over a range of common sessions following the Forum’s motto “The Futures we want” to various sessions from 55 Research Councils, 4 Thematic and 4 Working Groups. One point that could be questioned is that a lot of the student volunteers did several tasks that might otherwise have been carried out by paid (student) assistants. For further congresses, it might be an option to offer such a Volunteer Program in connection with grants for travel and accommodation to facilitate more student attendance from various regions.

### 4 Special Program for Young Researchers

Regarding content, the ISA Forum had – in addition to the above-named stunning (session) program – some offers which were of special interest for students and young researchers. Several Research Councils, Working Groups and Thematic Groups organized special sessions or workshops for students, and the ISA Task Force

on Early Career Sociologists held special sessions for students entitled “In Conversation with Senior Sociologists: Making Connections, Bridging Generations”. These sessions were organized in the form of round tables and provided the students with the opportunity to get in contact with well-established and renowned sociologists in a more informal setting. Starting with some introductory remarks from a senior sociologist at each round table, the session was then opened for questions from the students. Each table had a moderator who facilitated a focused discussion. Moreover, young researchers also made use of the possibility to present their own work at the conference. The Forum provided the chance to present one’s own research to and get valuable feedback from experienced sociologists from all over the world.

In addition to these thematic sessions, there were some other offers in the area of “Professional Development”, which were not specifically addressed to junior researchers but might have been particularly attractive for them; for example one session on “ISA Print Publications” with the opportunity to meet editors and one on “International Academic Publication”, dealing with the specific challenges of international publications. Austrian universities also offered information points for those interested in studying sociology in Austria. Thereby students were able to get to know the different Austrian universities and their sociology programs.

Last but not least, there was also a social program organized by the Student Organizing Committee. It included “Sociological Tours”, like “The ‘Red Vienna’ – a tour through the social democratic Vienna” and various social events. For example, participants of the ISA Forum were given the opportunity to learn how to waltz or take part in a Coffeehouse Crawl. This social program offered some events that were especially attractive for young researchers as they had been mainly organized by students themselves and offered a good opportunity to connect with (young and not-so young) scholars all over the world. Of course, the ISA Forum also included a conference party where the students could celebrate together with their professors.

## 5 Conclusion and future prospects

To summarize, it can be stated that the ISA Forum held some offers that were of special interest to young researchers and students. With the Student Volunteer Program especially the Austrian students could get a glimpse of the procedures in the academic world. Moreover, advanced students or young researchers were able to connect with other young and also older colleagues from all over the world. For many young scholars the ISA Forum was probably one of the first international conferences they attended and certainly one of the biggest. It will undoubtedly leave a lasting impression.

However, one barrier to participation might have been the comparatively high costs. Thus, more registration grants especially for young researchers could help to work towards equal participation opportunities for scholars from the Global South on the one hand and young scholars and students on the other hand. Another opportunity to attract more young scholars (especially from the Global South) could be the implementation of Special Awards for outstanding young scholars which include not only registration grants, but also support for traveling and accommodation.

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