Constructing the Higher Education Student

Gupta, Achala, Brooks, Rachel

Published by Bristol University Press


Project MUSE. muse.jhu.edu/book/101188.

For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/101188

For content related to this chapter
https://muse.jhu.edu/related_content?type=book&id=3175440
Introduction

There are currently over 35 million students within Europe and yet, to date, we have little knowledge of the extent to which understandings of ‘the student’ are shared. A central aim of *Constructing the Higher Education Student: Perspectives from across Europe* is thus to investigate how the contemporary higher education (HE) student is conceptualised and the extent to which this differs both within nation-states and across them. This is significant in terms of implicit (and sometimes explicit) assumptions that are made about common understandings of ‘the student’ across Europe – underpinning, for example, initiatives to increase cross-border educational mobility and the wider development of a European Higher Education Area. It is also significant in relation to exploring the extent to which understandings are shared within a single nation and, particularly, the degree to which there is congruence between how students are conceptualised within policy texts and by policymakers, and the understandings of other key social actors such as the media, HE staff and students themselves. Should nations be understood as ‘coherent educational entities’ (Philips and Schweisfurth, 2014) – or is there, instead, a high degree of contestation within nation-states about what it means to be a contemporary HE student?

To help contextualise the arguments that follow in this book, in this introductory chapter we discuss previous scholarship that has explored, first, the extent to which students have become increasingly similar as a result of processes of globalisation and, with respect to students in Europe in particular, Europeanisation. We then consider some of the dominant ways in which students have been constructed and analysed in the academic literature. Following this, we provide detail about the empirical research upon which *Constructing the Higher Education Student: Perspectives from across Europe* is based, before giving a brief overview of the countries in which we collected data and the structure of the book.

**Increasingly similar students?**

The arguments we make in *Constructing the Higher Education Student: Perspectives from across Europe* articulate with extant debates – conducted across the disciplines of education, sociology, geography and social policy – about the extent to which educational processes have been globalised and the experience of being a student has become increasingly similar worldwide.
Some scholars have argued that, in contemporary society, education policy and practice have both been profoundly changed by globalising pressures. Usher and Edwards (1994), writing almost three decades ago, asserted that globalisation had undermined the modernist goals of national education as a unified project and, as result, education could no longer control or be controlled. Some scholars have contended that the state’s capacity to control education has been significantly limited by the growth of both international organisations and transnational companies (Ball, 2007). Ozga and Lingard (2007) suggest that one consequence of this questioning of the nation-state as the ‘natural’ scale of politics and policy has been the emergence of alternative interpretive frames – some of which draw on more localised traditions and values. With respect to HE in particular, Sam and van der Sijde (2014) have contended that the three traditional models of university education in Europe (Humboldtian, Napoleonic and Anglo-Saxon) have been replaced by a single Anglo-American model, characterised by, inter alia, competition, marketisation, decentralisation and a focus on entrepreneurial activity. Moreover, policy convergence in such areas has been explicitly encouraged by the European Union (EU), through its desire to create a European Higher Education Area and the Bologna Process, which has aimed to achieve ‘harmonisation of the overarching architecture of European higher education’ (Dobbins and Leïsytė, 2014: 989). Indeed, Slaughter and Cantwell (2012) have argued that the European Commission is committed to ‘reverse engineering’ Anglo-American HE models. While much of the literature in this area has focused on national policies, institutional structures, governance and management, a small number of studies have suggested that students, themselves, have been directly impacted. Moutsios (2013), for example, has argued that, as a result of reforms introduced through the Bologna Process, students across Europe have increasingly been positioned as consumers – and as part of a ‘knowledge industry’ rather than a traditional university. Similar arguments about the rise of consumerism have been made by other scholars, reflecting on how funding reforms, and particularly the introduction of tuition fees, in many European nations have changed what it means to be a student (for example, Kwiek, 2018). (We return to these points below.)

Nevertheless, this analysis – of increasing convergence of HE across Europe around an Anglo-American model – is not shared by all. Many writers contend that the demise of the nation-state has been overstated and that national governments retain considerable influence – in shaping education policy within their own borders, as well as upon the nature of globalisation itself (Green, 2006). For example, not all European nations have sought to establish elite universities or maximise revenue through attracting international students, and significant differences remain in how HE is funded (for example, Hüther and Krücken, 2014). Moreover, there is variation in the extent to which European nations have embraced marketisation (see
Dobbins and Lešytė, 2014), and the nature of the Anglo-American model of HE that has been implemented in different national contexts (Sam and van der Sijde, 2014). In explaining such variations, scholars have pointed to differences in political dynamics, politico-administrative structures and intellectual traditions, as well as the flexibility and mutability of neo-liberal ideas themselves (for example, Bleikie and Michelsen, 2013). However, much research to date has focused primarily on the extent of convergence (or divergence) with respect to top-level policies; as a result, little work has explored the perspectives of social actors – and particularly students themselves. Our knowledge of the ‘lived experience’ of HE across Europe is thus partial.

**Dominant constructions of the student**

When we turn to the literature on conceptualisations of the HE student, in Europe and elsewhere, the majority of discussion has tended to focus on a relatively small number of constructions. In this section, we introduce four of the most prominent of these – students as consumers (rather than learners), political actors, future workers and socialites.

**Consumer not learner?**

In much of the scholarship, within education and other cognate disciplines, it is often assumed that students are, first and foremost, learners. There is clearly a substantial amount of research devoted to enhancing the teaching and learning that takes place within higher education institutions (HEIs), typically underpinned by the belief that this is the primary function of the sector. However, over recent years, various scholars – as well as a range of social commentators – have asserted that students are understood less as learners and more as consumers (for example, Morley, 2003; Cardoso et al, 2011; Woodall et al, 2014). Typically such arguments are advanced as part of a critique of the neo-liberalisation of the HE sector. In countries such as Australia, the US and the UK, high fees are often seen to have inculcated more consumerist behaviours on the part of students, and led to their clear positioning as consumers by both HE institutions and policymakers (Tight, 2013). This has been brought into sharp relief in the UK by the government’s encouragement of students unhappy with their degree programme to seek redress through the Competition and Markets Authority – a governmental body that ensures that ‘consumers get a good deal when buying goods and services, and businesses operate within the law’ (CMA, 2020: np). In countries in which fees are either not payable by HE students or have been kept at a low level (such as across much of mainland Europe), similar arguments about the emergence of new forms of student identity are also
advanced, suggesting that the widespread introduction of principles of new public management (even if payment has not shifted to the individual) has had a similar effect of encouraging a broad range of HE stakeholders to view students as consumers of an educational product (Moutsios, 2013; Kwiek, 2018). Some researchers have suggested that a shift to more highly marketised systems, particularly those in which students pay fees, has had a direct impact on how the process of learning is understood by both students and staff. Molesworth et al (2009), examining developments in the UK, have argued that students have come to conceptualise learning in highly transactional terms – as a product to be bought, rather than a process that requires a considerable amount of effort on their part and that might, in places, be difficult and challenging. In such analyses, the previously dominant construction of student as learner is seen to have come under significant pressure through the reconfiguration of the HE sector along market lines.

There is now, however, an emerging body of work that questions some of these assumptions and provides more nuanced accounts of the impact of market mechanisms within HE (for example, Budd, 2017). Research conducted in the UK by Tomlinson (2017), for example, has shown that while some students have embraced a consumer identity that informs their approach to their studies, a considerable number of their peers actively reject this construction on the grounds that it fails to recognise the effort they themselves put into their learning, and has the potential to undermine their relationships with lecturers (see also O’Shea and Delahunty (2018) who have made similar arguments with respect to Australian students). Research has suggested that constructions may differ at the institutional level, too, with higher-status and more financially secure universities better able to insulate themselves from the pressures of marketisation and thus protect their students from being positioned as consumers (Naidoo et al, 2011). Comparative research by Muddiman (2020) has evidenced differences – across nations – by discipline, as well: in her study in Singapore and the UK, students studying business were more likely to assume consumer-like orientations to their degree than their counterparts in sociology departments. Nevertheless, intra-European comparisons are rarely conducted, while research on the impact of market mechanisms on student identities is uncommon outside nations with neo-liberal welfare regimes and that charge high tuition fees. Our study sought to fill both these gaps.

**Political actor**

The construction of ‘student as consumer’ is often held in tension with that of the student as a political actor. Indeed, in many societies, there is now an assumption that students *should* be politically active, driving social change and challenging enduring inequalities, and students are often criticised – by journalists, HE staff and other interested parties – when they are perceived
Introduction

not to be acting in this way (Brooks et al, 2020b). Nevertheless, as Williams (2013) has argued, this conceptualisation of students as political actors became common only in the 1960s, and is frequently based on a misreading of that particular period – a misreading that incorrectly assumed a majority of students were involved in the US and European campus protests of the 1960s and early 1970s (Sukarieh and Tannock, 2015). Such contemporary constructions also tend to operate with a relatively narrow understanding of political engagement. While involvement in on-campus activities associated with formal politics tends to be limited, and students’ unions in a number of countries of the world have become less ‘activist’ in their orientation (for example, Rochford, 2014; Nissen and Hayward, 2017), students nevertheless have a relatively high level of political interest (Abrahams and Brooks, 2019; Brooks et al, 2020b) and graduates are more likely than others to be politically engaged in later life (Olcese et al, 2014). Moreover, comparative work in Australia, the US and UK has shown that small student societies can play an important role in encouraging students to develop their political identity and emerge as ‘student citizens’ (Loader et al, 2015).

Future worker

Studies across the Anglophone Global North have indicated that, within national policy, students are frequently constructed as ‘future workers’ – typically as part of a broader ‘human capital’ discourse in which the primary purpose of HE is increasingly presented as labour market preparation – and are assumed to be motivated primarily by employment-related concerns (for example, Waters, 2009; Allen et al, 2013; Moore and Morton, 2017). In the wider European context, increasing the ‘employability’ of students has also constituted a key focus of the Bologna Process and informed various national-level policies (Stiwne and Alves, 2010). Within Denmark, for example, Nielsen and Sarauw (2017) have argued that there has been a growing demand on the part of policymakers that students ‘focus on and work towards their future employability from the day they enrol at the university’ (p 162) and move through their studies quickly to enable prompt labour market entry.

There are, however, some subtle differences in how this ‘future worker’ focus is played out, which are related to national models of HE funding and broader education policy traditions (about the role of public funding and the position of universities in national development). Antonucci (2016) notes that in what she calls the ‘social investment’ model of HE, which typifies Anglo-Saxon countries such as England (and also Australia, New Zealand and the US, although they were not covered by her research), students are constructed by policymakers explicitly as individual investors in their future careers and, as such, are expected to make significant private contributions
to their HE fees and living costs. In contrast, in the ‘public responsibility’ model of HE funding that characterises the Nordic countries, this language of individual investment (in becoming a future worker) is largely absent. Instead, and as noted above, students are expected to develop skills relevant to the labour market and move quickly through their studies into a job, to repay the public investment in their education.

**Socialite**

Finally, students have often been viewed – by others, if not often by themselves – as socialites, ‘party animals’ or even hedonists, interested primarily in the social opportunities afforded by HE. This particular construction tends to be stronger in nations with a dominant ‘residential’ model of HE, in which it is common for students to leave their parental home in order to pursue their studies and live in dedicated student accommodation or shared private houses. Williams (2013) has argued that this specific construction has a long history within the UK particularly, dating back at least to the first half of the 20th century. However, some scholars have suggested it has taken on new significance in contemporary society, as a number of HE institutions have chosen to stress their ‘party credentials’ as a means of differentiating themselves from their competitors and thus attracting students who prioritise social life over study. This is articulated well in Armstrong and Hamilton’s (2013) ethnography of a large state university in the US, entitled *Paying for the Party*. They identify various ‘pathways’ that students can take through the university, but argue that it is the ‘party pathway’ which is dominant. It is, they suggest ‘the main artery through the university’, and the primary means of attracting ‘those whose dollars fuel the university’ (p 21). By stressing the highly developed social life of the campus and the correspondingly modest academic demands, the university targets extremely affluent students with middling academic records. As a result, Armstrong and Hamilton contend, it fails to support those from less privileged backgrounds who are more focused on their academic studies. Writing with respect to the UK, Sykes (2021) has shown how students often feel that they have to live up to the stereotype of the partying student in how they present themselves to others, even when their day-to-day lives are focused almost exclusively on studying and work.

This literature provides an important point of departure for the chapters that follow. Indeed, in a number of chapters, our arguments articulate with some of the points made above. We also, however, introduce some new constructions that are captured less well in the extant literature. Moreover, we demonstrate the complexity of such conceptualisations, by showing how some understandings differed *within* as well as across nations.
Researching understandings of the student

The subsequent chapters of this book draw on data that were collected as part of a European Research Council-funded project – ‘Eurostudents’ – that explored how HE students are understood across Europe. The research was designed to enable us to make comparisons between the ways in which students were constructed by different social actors within individual nation-states, as well as across nations. To facilitate cross-national comparisons, data were collected from six countries – Denmark, England, Germany, Ireland, Poland and Spain – chosen to provide diversity in terms of relationship to the EU, welfare regime, mechanisms of funding HE, and the type of financial support offered to students (see Table 1.1). We provide more detail about the specific policy contexts in each of these countries at the time we were collecting data later in the chapter. To compare the perspectives of different social actors within the same nation, we analysed how students were understood in policy and the media, and by HE institutions and students themselves. Fieldwork was conducted during 2017–20, and a full list of all the data collected can be found in Table 1.4.

We are cognisant of some of the critiques of comparative research that uses the nation-state as the unit of analysis. These tend to argue that such an approach reinforces methodological nationalism – that is, the assumption that the nation is the natural social and political form of the modern world (Wimmer and Glick Schiller, 2002). However, while employing a cross-national design, as discussed above, our research aimed to assess the perspectives of students and other stakeholders in a Europe where policy over the past two decades has been intended to bring about convergence of HE systems and, it is argued, has led to the conceptualisation of students in increasingly similar ways (for example, Moutsios, 2013). Moreover, our research design was intended to question explicitly whether nations, themselves, should be considered as ‘coherent educational entities’ (Philips and Schweisfurth, 2014), through exploring the perspectives of different social actors in each nation and being aware of likely inter-dependencies between the global, national and local levels (Kosmützky, 2015). No a priori assumptions were thus made about the relative importance of national borders. We now discuss each of the four strands of our research in turn.

Policy perspectives

The first strand of the research focused on the understandings of the HE student held by policy actors and disseminated through relevant policy documents. In each of the six countries, between 12 and 16 policy documents were selected, produced by government (including key strategy documents and speeches given by HE ministers); national unions representing HE staff and students;
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Welfare regime</th>
<th>Accession to the EU</th>
<th>Tuition fees for full-time undergraduates (2017/18)</th>
<th>Student support for full-time undergraduates (2017/18) – with amounts per annum</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Denmark</td>
<td>Social democratic</td>
<td>1973</td>
<td>No tuition fees</td>
<td>c.85 per cent receive needs-based grants (of up to €9703); loans available to those entitled to state grant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>England</td>
<td>Liberal</td>
<td>1973 (left in 2020)</td>
<td>High fees, typically €9250 per year</td>
<td>No grants; loans available to all</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Germany</td>
<td>Corporatist</td>
<td>1952</td>
<td>No tuition fees; administrative fee of up to €300 per semester</td>
<td>c.25 per cent of students receive need-based grants (up to €8820 – includes integrated loan)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ireland</td>
<td>Catholic corporatist</td>
<td>1973</td>
<td>No tuition fees; 'student contribution' of €3000 per year</td>
<td>c.44 per cent of students receive need-based grants (up to €5915); no loans available</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poland</td>
<td>Post-Communist</td>
<td>2004</td>
<td>No tuition fees; one-off administrative fee of c.€47 per year</td>
<td>c.16 per cent of students receive need-based grants (€1244) and eight per cent merit-based grants (average €1113); loans available to those on lower incomes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spain</td>
<td>Mediterranean/ sub-protective</td>
<td>1986</td>
<td>c.71 per cent of students pay fees; average amount of €1213 per year</td>
<td>c.30 per cent of students receive need-based grants (up to €6682); no loans available</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
and bodies representing graduate employers. Documents were chosen based on the extent to which they focused on students, specifically; their national significance; and their date of publication (the most recent documents that met the first two criteria were chosen). In total, 92 documents were analysed. Where they were not available in English, they were translated prior to analysis.

Interviews were conducted in each of the countries with a similar range of stakeholders, representing government (a civil servant working on HE policy and/or a government minister); unions (in most countries a leader of the national students’ union, although in Spain we interviewed a leader of a union representing staff); and graduate employers/business organisations. In addition, we interviewed a member of staff from the national body representing universities (often called ‘rectors’ conferences’ in mainland Europe). In total, we interviewed 26 such policy actors across the six countries. All interviewees were asked a similar range of questions about how they understood students in their own country and the extent to which their understandings had changed over time. They were also asked about specific ways in which students have been understood by others (for example, as consumers, political actors, future workers) and the degree to which they shared such views. Additionally, they were asked to respond to an extract from a key policy document from their own country. All interviews were conducted in English and lasted, on average, an hour.

In the subsequent chapters of the book, policy documents are referred to in terms of their country of origin and type (for example, German government document, Polish union document). Full references can be found in the Appendix, along with a list of all 92 documents analysed. The interviews are referred to by giving the country and type of organisation the interviewee represented.

**Media perspectives**

The second strand of the research concentrated on how HE students were represented in the media, with respect to newsprint and popular culture. Our decision to focus on newspapers was informed by the belief that the views of print journalists, and how they construct HE students within newspapers, are significant. As Williams (2011) notes, journalists ‘are subject to the same influences as other people and in order to sell articles, pieces must chime with the opinions of at least a section of the population’ (p 170). They thus reflect dominant understandings of what it means to be a student, but can also ‘help reconstruct ways of being a student for new generations’ (Williams, 2011: 170). In each of the six countries, two national newspapers were selected for analysis (see Table 1.2). When sampling the newspapers, we chose to include only national – not regional or local – publications, and restricted ourselves to those that were available through an online database or
Constructing the Higher Education Student

Table 1.2: Sampled newspapers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Name of newspaper</th>
<th>Tabloid/broadsheet</th>
<th>Political orientation</th>
<th>Other information</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Denmark</td>
<td>Politiken</td>
<td>Broadsheet</td>
<td>Centre left</td>
<td>Largest circulation of broadsheets</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>BT</td>
<td>Tabloid</td>
<td>Centre right</td>
<td>Largest circulation of tabloids</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>England</td>
<td>The Guardian</td>
<td>Broadsheet</td>
<td>Centre left</td>
<td>Third largest circulation of broadsheets</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Daily Mail</td>
<td>Mid-market/tabloid</td>
<td>Right</td>
<td>Second largest circulation of all newspapers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Germany</td>
<td>Süddeutsche Zeitung</td>
<td>Broadsheet</td>
<td>Centre left</td>
<td>Largest circulation of broadsheets</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Die Welt</td>
<td>Broadsheet</td>
<td>Centre right</td>
<td>Third largest circulation of broadsheets</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ireland</td>
<td>Irish Independent</td>
<td>Mid-market/tabloid</td>
<td>Centre right</td>
<td>Largest circulation of all newspapers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The Irish Times</td>
<td>Broadsheet</td>
<td>Centre left</td>
<td>Second largest circulation of all newspapers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poland</td>
<td>Gazeta Wyborza</td>
<td>Broadsheet</td>
<td>Centre left</td>
<td>Largest circulation of broadsheets</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Rzeczpospolita</td>
<td>Broadsheet</td>
<td>Centre right</td>
<td>Second largest circulation of broadsheets</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spain</td>
<td>El Pais</td>
<td>Broadsheet</td>
<td>Centre left</td>
<td>Largest circulation of broadsheets</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>ABC</td>
<td>Broadsheet</td>
<td>Right</td>
<td>Fourth largest circulation of broadsheets</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

archive. Two different newspapers from each country were sampled: either ‘a tabloid’ and ‘a broadsheet’ newspaper, or two broadsheets that differed in terms of political alignment.

We then searched for articles that were published between 2014 and 2016 using search terms (for example, students, higher education, university) relevant to each national context. In total, we gathered 1159 articles from the six countries, which were analysed using (largely qualitative) content analysis. On the basis of this content analysis, a sub-sample of the articles was chosen for more detailed discursive analysis. When material was not available in English, it was translated using Google Translate or professional translators.

In the second part of this strand, up to two popular films or drama-based television programmes that feature students prominently were selected from each country, where available (see Table 1.3). We included only those that had been made in the last ten years, and which had been widely distributed and/or
had high viewer numbers. Popular culture texts are created and consumed mainly for the purposes of entertainment but may, nonetheless, help to inform dominant societal constructions of the student (Farber and Holm, 2005) and can be analysed as a source of ‘public narratives’ (Thornham and Purvis, 2005). In Denmark and Poland, no such films or TV shows were available and only one was found in Ireland. Moreover, both series that comprised the English sample were produced in the UK (rather than England specifically). With respect to language, all the material was either in English or had English-language subtitles. The analysis of these texts employed a discursive approach, paying attention to the visual and aural landscape, as well as the words that were spoken. Summaries of the plots of the films and TV series are provided in the Appendix. When we refer to the media data in the chapters that follow, we focus on the ways in which students are represented or constructed – and do not assume that these are necessarily accurate portrayals.

**Institutional perspectives**

The third strand of the research focused on institutional perspectives, that is, how HE students are constructed through official university texts and staff understandings. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with staff members from three HEIs per country. In general, the institutions were chosen to represent key elements of the diversity of the relevant national HE sector. However, in some cases, our choice was limited by logistical factors, such as where we were able to secure access and the practicalities of travel. In Denmark, we chose two universities of different ages (one established

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Format</th>
<th>Date of production</th>
<th>Other information, including genre</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>England (or UK)</td>
<td>Clique</td>
<td>TV series</td>
<td>2017–2018</td>
<td>Psychological thriller; two seasons</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Fresh Meat</td>
<td>TV series</td>
<td>2011–2016</td>
<td>Comedy; four seasons</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Germany</td>
<td>13 Semester</td>
<td>Film</td>
<td>2009</td>
<td>Romantic comedy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Wir Sind Die Neuen (We Are the New Ones)</td>
<td>Film</td>
<td>2014</td>
<td>Comedy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ireland</td>
<td>Normal People</td>
<td>TV series</td>
<td>2020</td>
<td>Drama and romance; one season</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spain</td>
<td>Fuga de Cerebros (Brain Drain)</td>
<td>Film</td>
<td>2009</td>
<td>Romantic comedy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Merlí: Sapere Aude (Merlí: Dare to Know)</td>
<td>TV series</td>
<td>2019</td>
<td>Drama; one season</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
after the Second World War, the other earlier) and a university college with a vocational focus. In England, which has the most vertically differentiated system in our sample, we included three institutions of different ages, which mapped onto different league table positions. One belonged to the ‘Russell Group’ of ‘research intensive’ universities, a second conducted both research and teaching but was not a member of the Russell Group, and the third was a relatively recently established institution, with a strong teaching focus. The German sample comprised one large, old and prestigious institution, one younger (post-war) mid-sized university, and one university of applied sciences. In Ireland, we chose one institute of technology, as well as two universities of different statuses – one that was considered prestigious, and another that was less so. In Poland, we included one large technical university and two more general universities located in cities of different sizes in different parts of the country, and of different ages (one established post-war, the other older). The Spanish sample comprised two public universities (in different parts of the country – one established post-war, the other older) and one private university. (We say more about the structure of the HE sectors in each country below; see also the Appendix, which shows the label we gave to each HEI.) In each institution, four members of staff were selected – giving a total of 72 staff across the project as a whole. We aimed to include two members of staff who had teaching-related roles and two employed in professional services and/or leadership roles. However, in some HEIs this was not possible for logistical reasons. While we tried to ensure that a wide range of disciplines was represented among staff, this was sometimes limited by the nature of the HEI: in both Germany and Denmark, for example, as noted above, we included one institution that offered primarily vocationally oriented programmes.

Respondents were asked about their own conceptualisations of HE students in their countries, the extent to which these had changed over their career, and the factors they believed had informed these understandings. As with the policy actors mentioned above, staff were also asked for their views about some of the common ways in which students were understood by others. These interviews lasted, on average, an hour, and were all conducted in English. In the subsequent chapters, when we refer to members of staff we provide an identifier that relates to the institution for which they worked (see Appendix for details). Further information about staff members’ roles, discipline, years of experience, and gender are provided in the Appendix.

Student perspectives

The fourth strand examined the constructions of HE students held by students themselves. Three focus groups were conducted in each of the 18 HE institutions where we also conducted staff interviews (see above). Thus, in total we conducted 54 focus groups, involving 295 undergraduate students.
Although numbers varied, on average there were five or six participants in each focus group. All were undergraduate students who held citizenship of the country in which they were studying. We aimed to select participants so that the focus groups were broadly representative of the undergraduate population at each HEI. However, for logistical reasons this was not always possible. Across the sample as a whole, mature students and those from ethnic minority backgrounds tended to be under-represented, while women and those on arts and social science courses were over-represented (see Appendix for further details of the sample composition).

The focus groups lasted, on average, 90 minutes. Participants were asked a wide range of questions about their understandings of what it means to be a student today. An open, semi-structured approach was used to ensure that the conversation was led by students themselves. We also made use of plasticine modelling. This creative method, as discussed by Ingram (2011) and Abrahams and Ingram (2013), is a useful tool for eliciting rich data on a subject such as social constructions, as it enables participants to make tangible relatively abstract ideas, and allows greater time for reflection. At the start of each group, we asked all participants to make two plasticine models: the first focusing on how they understood themselves as HE students, and the second on how they thought others viewed them. Students were subsequently asked to talk us through what they had made and why. In addition, towards the end of the focus group, participants were asked for their views about specific constructions discussed in the academic literature (such as student as consumer, political actor, future worker and learner), and examples of representations (of students) drawn from the sampled policy and newspaper texts (see above) were introduced as prompts to encourage discussion. The focus groups were conducted in English in England, Ireland and Denmark. In Germany, Poland and Spain, they were conducted in the national language, with the transcriptions translated into English prior to analysis. We also conducted one individual interview with a student in Denmark, as she was the only participant to turn up to one of the planned focus groups. Although we rescheduled this group, she could not make the new time but was nevertheless keen to take part in the project. When we report the focus group data, we note the relevant country and have given each of the three HEI focus groups a number.

A note about language

Throughout our data collection (see Table 1.4 for a summary of all data collected), we were aware that various terms, including some of those central to our research, such as student and worker, have different connotations in particular languages. To increase our awareness of these, sometimes key terms were discussed explicitly as part of the interviews and focus groups. This was particularly the case for the
German word *Bildung* and the Danish word *Dannelse* – neither of which have a direct equivalent in English but refer to the idea of personal development or self-formation through education. In the chapters that follow, we refer to these two concepts (and a small number of additional terms) in the original language. Elsewhere, we use English translations. The extracts we present from focus groups in Germany, Poland and Spain have been translated into English, as have the quotations we use from newspaper articles from the four countries where English is not the national language and some of the policy extracts (others had English-language official versions).

### National policy contexts

In the chapters that follow, we show how some understandings of students were common across the six countries in our study. We also, however, demonstrate that in some cases, particular conceptualisations were informed by the specific national policy context. To help situate these arguments, as well as provide more detail about the contexts in which our data collection took place, in this section we outline various key features of the HE sectors in the six nations. We also discuss some of the particular reforms which, our analyses suggest, had exerted influence on how students were understood. This overview is not intended to be exhaustive, but rather to highlight salient points to inform the reading of later chapters.

**Denmark**

The Danish HE sector is relatively small compared to the other five countries in the sample, comprising just over 310 000 students in 2018. Nevertheless, it
is characterised by a high level of spending (2.45 per cent of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) in 2017) and a generous funding system, whereby the cost of tuition is covered by the state and students typically receive a non-means-tested grant for the duration of their studies (see Tables 1.1 and 1.5). Around 43 per cent of the 25–34-year-old population in Denmark has at least a bachelor’s degree, and the age profile of students is rather higher than the other countries in the sample, with just under a quarter of those enrolling on bachelor’s programmes aged 25 or over (see Table 1.5). HE programmes are offered by universities, university colleges and academies of professional education. Denmark, in common with many other countries in central, north and eastern Europe, has been influenced by the Humboldtian model of the university – which emphasises the unity of teaching and research, academic freedom, institutional autonomy (despite funding from the state), freedom of study for students (Lernfreiheit), and the ideal of self-cultivation or Bildung (Anderson, 2004). We discuss these ideas in greater depth in Chapter 2 (with respect to students’ transitions), Chapter 4 (in relation to learning) and Chapter 5 (in our examination of work).

Over recent years, some in Denmark have argued that these principles have been undermined by various government reforms – particularly those

---

**Table 1.5: Salient higher-education-related data, by country**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Denmark</th>
<th>England (figures given for UK as whole)</th>
<th>Germany</th>
<th>Ireland</th>
<th>Poland</th>
<th>Spain</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total number of students enrolled in tertiary education, 2018 (thousands)*</td>
<td>310.9</td>
<td>2467.1</td>
<td>3127.9</td>
<td>231.2</td>
<td>1492.9</td>
<td>2051.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25–34-year-olds with tertiary education (bachelor’s level or above) (%), 2019**</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New entrants to bachelor’s programmes below age of 25 (%)**</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>87</td>
<td>83</td>
<td>89</td>
<td>87</td>
<td>91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unemployment rates of 25–34-year-olds with tertiary education (%), 2019**</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public expenditure on tertiary education (as % of GDP), 2017*</td>
<td>2.45</td>
<td>1.44</td>
<td>1.25</td>
<td>0.97</td>
<td>1.08</td>
<td>0.93</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Sources: *Eurostat (2019a); **OECD (2020)
known as the ‘Sizing Model’ and the ‘Study Progress Reform’. The ‘Sizing Model’ was introduced across the Danish HE sector in 2014 and aimed to link the annual student intake in specific subjects to the number of graduates from that subject area who successfully secured work on graduation. Caps on admissions were introduced for programmes which, according to the model’s calculations, had ‘systematic and striking excess unemployment’ (Madsen, 2019: 73). ‘Excess’ unemployment was defined as two per cent or more above the average unemployment for all Danish graduates in the fourth to seventh quarters after leaving university, while unemployment was categorised as ‘systemic’ if it was evident in seven of the last ten years (Madsen, 2021). Degree programmes in the arts and humanities were the main casualties of this initiative (Madsen, 2019). The Study Progress Reform, also implemented in 2014, aimed to increase the pace at which students progressed through their degree programmes. It made use of a key feature of the Bologna Process reforms, namely the European Credit Transfer System (ECTS) – an ostensibly neutral means of measuring a course’s workload – to accomplish the country’s own objectives, namely reducing the cost of education (incurred by the state) and ensuring that students enter the labour market quickly (Nielsen and Sarauw, 2017; Sarauw and Madsen, 2020). These objectives are in part achieved through regulating duration of study. Since 2014, students have been incentivised to complete their courses within the prescribed time limit: they must sit exams after completing a certain number of ECTS points and are allowed to fall only a specific number of ECTS points behind schedule before they lose access to financial support. HEIs have, in turn, made courses more standardised, with fewer optional elements, in order to ensure efficiency and quick completion. Alongside this, a modularised and competence-based curriculum has been introduced to promote the future employability of students, and students have been encouraged not to assume that they will automatically progress to a master’s degree (as has been the case in the past). Empirical examinations of the impact of these reforms have suggested that students feel they are sometimes restricted to a superficial and instrumental engagement with their studies, choosing ‘safe routes’ through their studies, to maximise their chances of passing their exams and completing their studies in the required time (Nielsen and Sarauw, 2017; Sarauw and Madsen, 2020). Moreover, there is often a poor match between how ‘study time’ is understood within policy and by students themselves (Ulriksen and Nejrup, 2021).

England

England was chosen as a case study country rather than the whole of the UK because HE is governed separately in the four ‘home nations’ that make up the UK, and because of the differences in funding structures in England,
Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland. For example, at the time of our data collection, English undergraduates studying at English HEIs had to pay very high fees (£9250) while Scottish undergraduates studying in Scottish HEIs paid no fees at all. Nevertheless, HE data are often collected at the UK level (see Table 1.1), and so in this section we discuss both the UK in general as well as England, specifically.

As Table 1.5 indicates, the UK has a relatively large number of students as a whole, when compared to other European countries (although fewer than Germany), and most are quite young (87 per cent of those starting a first degree were under the age of 25). In 2019, 44 per cent of the UK population between the ages of 25 and 34 had attained at least a bachelor’s degree and, in 2019, very few graduates were unemployed (only two per cent). Despite the high fees charged to students (see Table 1.1), public expenditure on tertiary education as a proportion of GDP is the second highest in our sample, at 1.44 per cent (Table 1.5). As noted above, the English HE sector (as well as that of the UK as a whole) is more vertically differentiated than in many countries (Hazelkorn, 2015), with divisions typically drawn between larger, older, ‘research intensive’ universities (commonly members of the ‘Russell Group’ mission group); smaller, research-focused universities, which held university status prior to 1992; and more modern, often teaching-focused institutions, which gained university status in 1992 or later.

The English HE sector differs from many of its European counterparts with respect to its early embrace of marketisation and its associated decision to charge individual students a high level of fee (albeit with the option of taking out a loan, the repayment of which is tied to future earnings) (see Table 1.1). Indeed, a number of studies have illustrated how HE policies in England – through the introduction of a range of market mechanisms including student charters (contracts between students and their HEIs), student satisfaction surveys, and institutionalised complaint mechanisms, as well as high tuition fees – construct students as consumers, and HE as a commodity in which they will be willing to invest for personal gain (Naidoo and Williams, 2015; Brooks and Abrahams, 2018; Raaper, 2018). As discussed earlier in this chapter, it has also been argued that these policies have had a significant impact on classroom practices and the learner identities taken up by students themselves (for example, Nixon et al, 2010; Naidoo and Williams, 2015). These analyses of the contemporary English university often stand in stark contrast to the ‘idea of a university’ proffered by the theologian John Henry Newman in his classic text of the 19th century, and which has exerted a significant influence, historically, on how HE has been understood in England. In this, he argued that university scholars should be engaged in intellectual pursuit as an end in itself, not for any external purpose. Moreover, he advocated a broad, liberal education, focused on teaching students to think, reason, compare, discriminate and analyse, and was
critical of narrow vocational education (Newman, 1996 [1858]). Such ideas have not vanished entirely from the English HE system, and were referred to by some of our research participants (see Chapter 4). Over recent years, the English HE system has also been caught up in the so-called ‘culture wars’. Influenced by ideas from the US (Bloom, 1987; Lukianoff and Haidt, 2018), various politicians and journalists have expressed concern that free speech is being compromised on campus and students’ learning is being adversely affected by an emphasis on ‘safetyism’ (for example, protecting students from potentially challenging ideas). Nevertheless, these accusations are strongly contested by many within the HE sector, and studies have suggested that students themselves are broadly supportive of how their HEI promotes freedom of expression (Grant et al, 2019). We engage with this debate in Chapter 7, in particular.

**Germany**

The German HE sector is the largest of the six in the research, with over three million students (Table 1.5). Nevertheless, the proportion of young people with at least a bachelor’s degree in Germany is joint lowest – at 33 per cent. This is largely due to the enduring strength of the vocational sector in Germany, with many young people choosing to take up an apprenticeship or other form of vocational education or training rather than enrol in HE. Those who do progress to HE are typically quite young – with 83 per cent of new entrants on bachelor’s programmes below the age of 25 – and are very likely to move into employment on graduation (the unemployment rate for graduates under 35 was only three per cent in 2019) (Table 1.5). HE is not predominantly regulated at the national level in Germany, but by the 16 individual states (Länder). There are, however, some important commonalities across the country: tuition fees are not payable and means-tested grants are available to those whose family income is below a certain level (around a quarter of students are eligible for such funding) (see Table 1.1).

Three main types of institution make up the German HE system: universities (including some that specialise in particular areas, such as technical universities); universities of applied sciences (that are practically oriented, and include a period of paid practical training); and colleges of art, film and music. There is a strong vocational system in Germany and, as noted above, many young people opt to pursue an apprenticeship rather than an HE qualification. Although, historically, the German HE system has been a relatively ‘flat’ one, with few status differences between institutions, since 2005, steps have been taken by the German government to introduce more vertical differentiation into the system. This has been done through the ‘Excellence Initiative’, which has concentrated funding in a small group of
HEIs, with the aim of enabling them to compete more successfully with comparable ‘top performers’ from other countries (Kehm, 2013).

Currently, a bachelor’s degree takes three years or six semesters to complete and a master’s degree usually two years or four semesters. However, it is only since the early 21st century that bachelor’s and master’s qualifications have been available in Germany, as a result of the Bologna Process. Previously, students studied for a Diplom or Magister and, because these allowed students to study very flexibly, they often took a long time to complete (Ertl, 2013). Indeed, since the turn of the century, there has been a concerted effort in Germany to encourage students to move faster through their degree programme – bearing some similarities to the Danish reforms discussed above. German politicians have been concerned at the cost to the taxpayer of slow completion (Ertl, 2013). Student support is now available only for the number of semesters it is expected to take a student to complete a degree (six for most bachelor’s programmes). After this time, students are still able to continue with their degrees, but have to fund their studies themselves. As in Denmark, there has been considerable opposition to these reforms, with students believing they are being rushed through their studies, and denied the freedom to decide on their own pace of learning. This opposition is often framed in terms of the Humboldtian principles upon which German HE was built and particularly the idea of Lernfreiheit (the freedom to learn) (see Brooks et al (2021a) for further discussion).

Ireland

The Irish HE sector is the smallest of the six covered by the research, with just over 230 000 students (Table 1.5), and government spending in this area is fairly low (0.97 per cent of GDP). However, Ireland has the highest participation rate in the study, with 63 per cent of 25–34-year-olds having gained at least a bachelor’s level qualification (Table 1.5). Irish students tend to be young, with 89 per cent of those starting bachelor’s programmes under 25, while unemployment among graduates has been relatively low (four per cent in 2019). Although Irish students do not officially pay tuition fees, they do have to pay a reasonably high ‘student contribution’, which, at the time of our research, stood at €3000 a year. Means-tested grants are available for students from low-income families; when we collected data in Ireland, around 44 per cent of students were entitled to such grants, up to a maximum of €5915 (see Table 1.1).

The Irish HE sector is comprised of universities, institutes of technology, colleges of education and some specialist institutions. However, it is generally considered a binary system, with distinctions made between universities on the one hand and institutes of technology on the other. Institutes of technology are largely teaching-focused, and the majority of
their students tend to be undergraduates. Although there are only nine universities in Ireland, these are differentiated to some extent, with Trinity College Dublin and University College Dublin – founded in 1592 and 1854, respectively – considered the most prestigious. Ireland is sometimes seen as similar to England in relation to the marketisation of its HE system, having introduced various aspects of new managerialism (Lynch et al., 2012; Fleming et al., 2017). Market reforms have, however, been less thoroughgoing. For example, the student contribution has remained relatively low when compared to the fees charged in England and other Anglophone nations of the Global North (Clancy, 2015). Moreover, Hazelkorn (2015) has argued that the underpinning model of HE in Ireland adheres to social democratic, rather than neo-liberal, norms. She notes that unlike the emphasis within neo-liberal models on vertical differentiation between HEIs with the aim of creating elite institutions able to compete internationally, social democratic models seek to balance excellence with support for good quality institutions across the country. Thus, while as we noted above, there are some status differences between HEIs, these are largely related to the different institutional histories and profiles, rather than specific steps taken by the government to increase vertical differentiation. Ireland has also, historically, been influenced by Newman’s view of university education (see above). Indeed, his *The Idea of the University* is a collection of lectures he delivered on becoming the first rector of the newly founded Catholic University in Ireland in 1851.

**Poland**

Polish HE has a long history, with the first university established in the 14th century. It has been influenced by both Humboldtian principles (see above), and the country’s Communist past (Antonowicz et al., 2020). It has, however, undergone significant change over the past three decades since the end of Communist rule in 1989. Although the HE participation rate is now similar to that seen in many other European countries (43 per cent of 25–34-year-olds held at least a bachelor’s degree in 2019 – see Table 1.5), the rate of expansion has been much higher. During the Communist period, HE was centrally planned, with places strictly linked to labour market need and, by 1989, despite massification in many other parts of Europe, only about ten per cent of each cohort went on to HE (Kwiek, 2016). Within 15 years, however, the participation rate had risen to over 50 per cent – a process that Kwiek (2016) describes as both abrupt and uncoordinated. The main drivers of this expansion were changes within the labour market, which required a more highly educated workforce, and greater demand for HE from the population (and an increased ability to pay fees, as salaries increased post-Communism) (Kwiek, 2016).
Much of this increase in demand was absorbed by less prestigious public sector universities and a large number of new private institutions – facilitated by a laissez-faire state policy, and the willingness of academic staff to work across both public and private HEIs (Kwiek, 2016). Higher-status institutions also developed new part-time, fee-based courses to cater for the increase in demand – although such courses were often of lower quality than those available to full-time, state-funded students, and tended to be taken up by students from lower socio-economic backgrounds (Kwiek, 2016). Since 2006, however, a sharp demographic decline in the number of young people in Poland has led to a contraction of the private sector (Kwiek, 2016). Alongside the decline in the number of private institutions, Poland’s public HEIs are becoming increasingly stratified – driven by the concentration of research funds in a relatively small number of universities through Poland’s own ‘Excellence Initiative’ (Kwiek, 2016). The sector currently comprises private and public HEIs. The latter includes comprehensive universities, specialist universities (focusing, for example, on technical subjects, medicine and economics), specialist academies and small higher vocational schools.

Polish students are typically young, with 87 per cent of those entering bachelor’s programmes below the age of 25 (see Table 1.5), and most go on to find jobs at the end of their studies (the unemployment rate for 25–34-year-olds with tertiary education was three per cent in 2019 – see Table 1.5). Students attending public HEIs do not have to pay tuition fees, only an annual administration fee which, at the time of our data collection, was around €47. A small number of needs- and merit-based grants are available to students; in addition, loans are offered to those from low-income families (see Table 1.1 for further details). Those attending private HEIs pay for their tuition; they typically study on a part-time basis and engage in paid work at the same time. Fees are also payable for those studying on a part-time basis in public HEIs.

Spain

Despite the Spanish HE sector being relatively large (in terms of the size of its student population), only a third of those in the 25–34 age group have a bachelor’s degree or above, and public expenditure on the sector is the lowest of all our six countries (see Table 1.5). Those who do go on to HE are typically young, with 91 per cent of new entrants to bachelor’s programmes under the age of 25 – the highest proportion across the sample. One of the factors that distinguishes Spain from the other five countries in the research is the relatively high level of unemployment (see Table 1.5). At the time of our data collection in Spain (2017–2018), the youth unemployment rate was 34.3 per cent – more than double the EU average of 15.2 per cent and the highest of all the countries in our study (Eurostat, 2019a). Moreover, Spain
Constructing the Higher Education Student

was also one of the four EU Member States with the highest rate of graduate unemployment (running at 22.1 per cent), while all the other countries in our study had a graduate unemployment rate below the EU average (of 14.5 per cent) (Eurostat, 2019b). This was largely a result of the 2008 global recession, which hit Spain, along with other countries in southern Europe, particularly hard (Martínez-Campillo and Fernández-Santos, 2020).

The majority of Spanish students (around 70 per cent) pay fees – at the time of our data collection the average annual amount was €1213 (see Table 1.1) – and a relatively small proportion (about 30 per cent) are eligible for needs-based grants. No loans are available to cover either tuition fees or living costs, and student support was cut back quite substantially following the 2008 recession (de la Torre and Perez-Esparrells, 2019). As in Denmark and Germany, there have been some substantial reforms to the Spanish HE system as a result of the Bologna Process (Elias, 2010; de la Torre and Perez-Esparrells, 2019). For example, the time required to complete an undergraduate degree was shortened from five to four years in 2007, and then to three years in 2015 – although universities still have the right to offer a four-year degree if they wish. While these changes were controversial at the time of introduction (Phillips, 2008; Elias, 2010), they were commented on by only a very small minority of our interviewees, and appeared to have been largely accepted by the time of our data collection (see Brooks et al (2021a) for further discussion). In general, European policies have been viewed favourably by politicians and policymakers in Spain. Bonal and Tarabini (2013) have contended that Spanish official discourse (in education policy as well as elsewhere) consistently underlines the advantages of Europeanisation as a means of advancing both social and economic progress: ‘in order to become “real Europeans” it is crucial to follow the reforms already implemented by other European countries’ (p 337).

**Structure of the book**

In the subsequent chapters of the book, we draw on the data collected in the Eurostudents project to explore six of the most dominant constructions of HE students that emerged from our data. Not all of these were equally strong in all of the countries in which we conducted fieldwork – and, where relevant, we explore the reasons for this variation. Moreover, we also examine differences in the extent to which the particular conceptualisations were evident among the various social actors in the research; indeed, a key part of our overall argument is that there is often a significant disconnect between the understandings of students themselves and those of others in society.

The first construction we discuss, in Chapter 2, is that of students as ‘in transition’ – understood in terms of transition to the labour market, but also a period of self-development. While, in general, being ‘in transition’ was
viewed positively, we suggest that it sometimes has the effect of marginalising students, through their positioning as ‘not yet fully adult’. Chapter 3 picks up some of these themes in its exploration of students as citizens. This was a key way in which students constructed themselves – emphasising what they believed was their responsibility to think and act critically for the benefit of society. We also show, however, that their views were not always shared by other social actors, with staff and policy actors more likely to reject the construction of students as active and engaged citizens. In Chapter 4, we focus on students as ‘enthusiastic learners and hard workers’, again contrasting students’ own accounts, which emphasised their high degree of engagement with their learning, with those of other stakeholders who were more likely to stress passivity and instrumentality. Chapter 5 focuses on students as ‘future workers’, contending that while this is a common construction across the dataset, it is played out in different ways. While policy discourses tend to foreground ideas associated with human capital, students themselves understand the ‘future worker’ in more divergent terms – stressing, for example, the importance of vocation and self-development. In Chapter 6, we demonstrate how in almost all the countries in our research students were couched as stressed. This was typically understood in negative terms, and explained in terms of HE-specific factors as well as broader societal trends. Chapter 7 shows how students were often seen by other social actors as threats and/or objects of criticism, and then examines the impact these negative constructions had on the students to whom we spoke. Finally, in Chapter 8, the conclusion, we draw together various themes from the preceding discussion, considering their significance for both academic debate and HE as it is lived on the ground.

Different authors have taken a lead on particular chapters, so some variation in authorial voice may be evident across the book. However, we have all shared the analysis across both country and data strand, and discussed the content of each chapter together in considerable depth. Constructing the Higher Education Student: Perspectives from across Europe should thus be considered very much a common endeavour.