Introduction

With the growing massification of HE in Europe – as well as across OECD countries more generally – and the majority of students entering HE fairly soon after completing their compulsory schooling, HE students are often seen as ‘in transition’. In our study, this was common, too. Moreover, students were also conceptualised, by themselves and other research participants, as people undergoing a series of potentially transformative changes. In this chapter, we explore this conceptualisation of HE students, examining how they are understood as ‘in transition’ and how this construction varies within and across our six countries.

We first draw on the extant literature to help contextualise the subsequent discussion of students as ‘in transition’. We then outline how many students in our study considered attending university to be a rite of passage and examine two common ways in which the idea of being ‘in transition’ is understood in our data: as preparation for the labour market and as a personally transformative experience. Here, we explore both commonalities and variations within and across countries, suggesting that the HE funding regime, national traditions of HE, cultural norms, and other socio-historical factors may all affect how the construction of students as ‘in transition’ is understood. We then discuss the implications of this construction, maintaining that by positioning students as in a transitional period of their lives and thus ‘not fully adult’, their roles as political actors and citizens may be marginalised.

Understanding higher education students in transition

While most of the literature on HE and transition focuses on students’ transition to university, there has been relatively little discussion of the construction of students within HE as in transition. The limited research on this topic unveils a variety of aspects pertaining to students’ transitional experiences – both personal (for example, as students entering adulthood) and professional (for example, as HE students preparing for future jobs) within university settings. We will now discuss both of these aspects in turn.

Transitioning to adulthood is one of the main ways in which HE students are discussed in this literature. For example, based on their research in the UK, Bristow and colleagues (2020) show that students are often seen by
academic staff as dependent and fragile children who need to be socialised into adulthood roles (noted, too, in Gravett et al., 2020). Various other studies have also suggested that HE is a critical turning point in students’ lives as it offers them space to inculcate new habits and practices (Blichfeldt and Gram, 2013) and, as a result, they come to craft their understanding of their role and purpose in society (O’Shea, 2014). These experiences of transitioning are, however, often patterned by students’ social characteristics such as gender, race and social class. Christie (2009) notes that the formation of a student identity commonly intersects with one’s class position and related sense of belonging – or exclusion – within the university space. For many young students who entered university from non-traditional routes (and who had participated in an access to HE course before pursuing a university degree) in Christie’s study, for example, the transition was not necessarily about ‘leaving home and developing a new identity as an (independent) adult’ (p 131) – in contrast to what appeared to be the case for many of their peers who studied full-time, lived on the university campus and were middle class. Instead, these students spoke about how, as ‘day students’ who would commute to university and had a full-time job, being a student was only one of their many identities (see also Reay et al., 2010).

Another common way in which students are considered to be in transition is with respect to graduate employment. Although this topic has been explored well from policy perspectives (see, for example, Tomlinson, 2013; Brown et al., 2020 – we discuss these further in Chapter 5), recent research has begun to engage more closely with the views of students themselves. For example, in a study conducted with marine sports science students in a relatively new HEI in the UK, Gedye and Beaumont (2018) documented several changes to how students understood their employability – their views shifted over their degree programme ‘from those that centred on what employers want (extrinsic) to what the student had to offer the employer (intrinsic)’ (p 406). In another study, Donald and colleagues found that while students considered themselves to be employable, they felt less confident about getting jobs when they factored in the competition in the labour market (Donald et al., 2018). Both of these studies (and others, such as Berg et al., 2017; McManus and Rook, 2021) allude to the transition within the university as crucial and life-changing ‘identity work’ – a broader process in which students form ideas about who they are and what they want to become. Developing a career identity is held to be a critical part of this work. Such processes are, however, again often affected by students’ social characteristics – with social class, in particular, often exerting a significant influence on how students envisage their future career path and identity (Roberts and Li, 2017; Bathmaker, 2021).

The nature of transition within HE is conceptualised in different ways within the literature. Gale and Parker (2014), for example, delineate three
key approaches, evident in both education policy and HE research: transition as induction (a period of students adjusting to HE settings); transition as development (a trajectory or a life stage at which students mature and form their career identity); and transition as ‘becoming’ (something that is not specific to HE students and instead is a part of a lifelong process of change). The authors suggest that the first two ways of understanding transition – more common in policy and in research – tend to view students as relatively passive actors, assuming that they need to be moulded in a specific way throughout their degree programme to ensure successful outcomes. In contrast, viewing transition as ‘becoming’ may provide a more nuanced understanding of the transitional experiences of individual students. We use this framework in this chapter to understand differences in conceptualisations of the changes students experience during their time in HE.

While the research in this area offers valuable insight into the complexity of being a student in transition, to date, we have had no clear understanding of how this complexity plays out across countries. Therefore, in the subsequent discussion, we focus on how students are thought of – in relation to ideas associated with transition – by the social actors in our study, identifying similarities and differences within and across our sample countries.

University as a ‘rite of passage’ – normalising students as ‘in transition’?

The various groups who participated in our study tended to normalise the idea of students in transition – through viewing HE as a transitional period and a rite of passage in people’s lives. For example, several policy actors, media and staff across the six countries viewed progression to HE as an increasingly typical transition in one’s life course. Moreover, many students themselves spoke about pursuing tertiary education after secondary schooling as an ‘obvious next step’ rather than a deliberate choice (as also discussed in Chapter 5). Indeed, many of our participants attributed these views to what they held to be the widespread societal norm regarding entering HE, which they considered to be a direct result of the massification of HE over recent decades. Although students from non-traditional backgrounds remain under-represented in most national HE systems (Weedon and Riddell, 2015), students across the six countries – including those from non-traditional backgrounds themselves – spoke about what they held to be a general societal view that it was necessary to pursue a university degree in order to improve one’s life chances. The following quotations are illustrative:

‘Well, I think that I began studying because that’s just what you’re expected to do, because everyone else starts studying, eventually
someone has a gap year, but he/she is still planning on studying. Nowadays virtually everyone goes to the university and after graduating from high school […]’ (Focus group, Polish HEI2_1)

‘[I decided to go to college] To be able to get a job, to improve our lives, and as well, I think it’s kind of just what everyone does, like you’re kind of expected to finish school and then either go join a trade or go to college.’ (Focus group, Irish HEI1_1)

Alongside comments about social expectations about entering HE, there was also a high degree of consensus across the focus groups that gaining a university education is ‘a lot more accessible’ for contemporary students than used to be the case for previous generations. For example: “[B]efore you … like you were very … lucky if you got to university, whereas now it’s a lot more accessible, so a lot more people have degrees. … So I think it’s, it’s almost like a rite of passage to a lot of people” (Focus group, English HEI1_3).

Many students across the six countries (and from a variety of different social backgrounds) suggested that, while in the past HE had been considered a transitional space for only those from privileged backgrounds, more recent developments – such as the increasing number of students from lower income families and minority ethnic groups, and an increasing belief that a degree was necessary to access even quite low-level jobs – had made the idea of university education as a normative transitional phase more widespread in society (see also Chapter 5). In our sample, we found little evidence to suggest that progression to HE was considered ‘normal’ only by those with family experience of HE – indeed, well over a third of our student participants were first in their family to enter HE (see Appendix). This tends to support Harrison’s (2019) argument that the massification of HE and the perceived need for a university degree in order to secure even relatively low-level work has reconfigured the perceived social and financial risks associated with attending HE among lower socio-economic groups. We acknowledge, however, that these are the views of the students who were already enrolled in HE and that there remain many young people from more disadvantaged backgrounds, across Europe, who do not progress to HE (Powell et al, 2012; Haj et al, 2018; Irwin, 2020) and may thus have very different views.

There were, nevertheless, some differences by institution in the extent to which students’ entry to university was normalised. For example, many students from the most nationally prestigious universities in our sample, most notably in Ireland (HEI3), discussed how attending such institutions was deemed a ‘tradition’ in their families. For example:

‘I wanted to go to university because my father had gone to university, that’s why I think … [HEI3], my dad came here, my brothers and sisters,
all my family came here, so it’s kind of a bit of a joke like through the years, like oh … you’ll have to go to [HEI3], but I actually wanted to come here because I had seen the experiences that they’d had.’ (Focus group, Irish HEI3_1)

Moreover, our data indicate that the students with more privileged schooling experiences and family backgrounds may have had more resources to draw upon to transition successfully – to and from – HE (in alignment with studies by Ball et al, 2002a and Bathmaker et al, 2013, for example). Nevertheless, the perception that it is commonly expected by society for young people to gain a university degree – alongside the massification of HE – appears to have led to a general view among students (in our research at least) that their transition within university is a critical phase in their lives. Indeed, for many of our participants, HE was deemed a crucial period for facilitating preparation for future work and life more broadly – although, as we discuss below, these understandings of students in transition varied within and across countries.

Students in transition to the labour market

As noted above, constructing students as in transition was a common theme across our dataset. This was articulated most prominently in terms of preparation for professional work in the future. Research participants discussed how HE provides avenues for students to make a transition from education to gainful employment. This section will discuss how students and other social actors conceptualised students as people entering the labour market, as well as how this conceptualisation varied cross-nationally.

Students’ perspectives

Across the focus groups, most students positioned themselves as in transition to future employment, and most of them foregrounded this when discussing their reasons for pursuing HE (as discussed in detail in Chapter 5). They spoke, for example, about university as the place where they would acquire the knowledge and skills for graduate jobs in a variety of fields. For many of our student participants, a university degree was a pathway to secure ‘high-skilled’ ‘office’ jobs – and the experiences students had while at university were believed to be essential to achieving this goal. This view is illustrated in the following excerpts from our English and Irish focus groups.

‘[T]hey [at university] are trying to prepare us for more like office jobs now, it’s like less jobs that are kind of like hands-on, like in labour and things like that. Coming here gives you the experience and like
they set [you] up more for an office job or something similar to that.’
(Focus group, English HEI1_2)

‘Well I think it [HE] trains you how to work in a workplace as well, like you know you learn a lot of skills that are obviously helpful, obviously we couldn’t just walk into a lab if we didn’t go to college.’
(Focus group, Irish HEI1_1)

Comments such as these show how students perceive university as a facilitator of their transition from HE into the labour market (Berg et al, 2017; Donald et al, 2018). Implicit in many of the focus group discussions was the idea of transition as ‘development’, suggesting that students believe they go through ‘qualitatively distinct stages of maturation’ during their HE (Gale and Parker, 2014: 738, italics in original). Here, maturation relates to the formation – and growth – of students’ career and professional identities as they progress through their degree programme, and engage in various other activities such as mentoring and field placements.

While this view of constructing students as immersed in a period of planning, preparing and training for future jobs was prevalent in most of our focus groups, there were some notable country-level differences. Students in England, Ireland and Spain were more likely than their peers in the other three countries to understand their transition to the labour market as a matter of personal investment and benefit (also see Donald et al, 2018). This emphasis on individual gain is likely because, in these countries, many students make a significant contribution to the cost of their education through paying tuition fees (see Chapter 1), and therefore it is understandably important for students to realise returns on their investment through securing a graduate job. In contrast, while students in Denmark, Poland and Germany – where students do not pay fees – also viewed themselves as in training for future high-skilled jobs, they were more likely to understand this as a way to contribute to society rather than solely a path to realise their personal goals. This variation by country regarding whether this period of transition was considered a subject of private investment or a public good also emerged in the policy documents and the narratives of the policy actors, which we now discuss.

**Views of other social actors**

Policy documents from all six countries often constructed students as in transition to the world of work. Many of these documents, for example, were premised on the discourse of viewing students as ‘workers-in-the-making’ – and, therefore, they positioned HE students first and foremost as individuals preparing for the labour market (this stance has been problematised in
the literature on student identity formation – see, for example, Daniels and Brooker (2014) – and we will return to this specific construction of students as future workers in Chapter 5). In alignment with this discourse, constructing students as in transition to the workforce emerged strongly in the narratives of many policy actors we interviewed and is exemplified in the following excerpts from interviews with English and Irish policy actors.

‘[W]e see students as a very important contributor to the skills, needs and productivity of the country, so ... higher education and the products from higher education, i.e. trained and educated students are sort of a critical part of the UK’s skills ... supply.’ (Representative of English government)

‘[W]e want the cultivated, well-rounded citizen because it just so happens they’re the ones that bring the biggest contribution to the workplace.’ (Representative of Irish employers’ organisation)

While this theme was common across all six nations in our sample, there were specific country-level differences in whether the policy actors discussed its importance in terms of public good or private commodity. These differences mirror the variations in students’ stances mentioned previously. In Denmark, Germany, and Poland, policy actors often spoke about students as people who have a responsibility to contribute to societal progress through realising their role as citizens and integral members of the future national workforce. The stress on responsibilising students in this way is likely because, in these nations, students’ pay no or low fees. As such, students are understood as beneficiaries of societal investment and thus have particular obligations to the taxpayer. This dynamic is articulated in the following excerpts from interviews with policy actors in Poland, Germany and Denmark:

‘I think if students, particularly students with their intellectual potential, they should be expected to contribute far more to society than just being a student and just reading books and passing exams and then clutching to an employer.’ (Representative of Polish government)

‘[The role of higher education students is] to get a job. But of course it’s also to be a good democratic person that can enlighten ... it’s also to be a part of the workforce and be part of how we’re going to have a society afterwards.’ (Representative of Danish government)

‘Of course we want also all this knowledge these people get and all their competencies they achieve, they should also bring into society,
I mean that’s the idea of education, it’s not just for them and not just for their … income.’ (Representative of German government)

The theme of HE students as preparing to contribute to society more broadly, as a future worker and citizen, was particularly prominent in Denmark – the country that spends a higher proportion of GDP on tertiary education than any other in our sample (see Table 1.5). The role of the state in managing students’ transitions through university was evident in interviews with the Danish policy actors and in the Danish media. For example, the Danish newspapers, Politiken and BT, covered a wide range of topics on this theme, noting for example: government initiatives to shape students’ choice of disciplines (in line with projected future earnings), changes to the HE system to make it more closely aligned with labour market demand, and the state’s view that students lacked skills at securing jobs.

The jungle of nearly 1,500 higher education programmes currently offered in Denmark must definitely be cleared up as they do not always provide the best prospects for finding a job … the government is prepared to push universities to educate fewer on those programmes where there are no jobs waiting after the final exam. (Politiken, 28 April 2014)

It is ‘very pleasing that the young people have chosen education with good future prospects,’ says Ulla Tørnæs, Minister for Higher Education and Science. … ‘We have long had a particular focus on education targeted at engineers, teachers and IT at the universities, thus it goes to show that our work to ensure a better match between education and jobs is working,’ she says. (Politiken, 7 July 2016)

The above excerpts show how, within media discourse, students are commended when they are perceived to be making ‘rational choices’ about HE – by taking into account their future employability. They reflect not only the ways in which the alignment between the HE sector and the demand for skilled labour is articulated in Denmark, but also the extent to which the state intervenes to ensure a strong link between education and work (see also Wright and Shore, 2017).

**Students in the process of personal transformation?**

Many social actors across our six countries spoke about students as individuals in transition, not just in relation to the production of workers for the labour market or the training of people for particular professions, but also in terms of the development of the self – a journey of self-discovery, advancement
of critical thinking and broadening of horizons. However, again, there was notable geographical variation. While in England, Ireland and Poland, the construction of students in transition was viewed by many of our participants through a predominantly ‘developmental’ lens – deeming that students are in transition to the life stage of adulthood – it was spoken about primarily as a form of ‘becoming’ in Denmark, Spain and Germany; that is, as a process of growth and development more broadly, and without mapping this on to any particular life stage (Gale and Parker, 2014).

**Students in transition to adulthood: England, Ireland and Poland**

Many students and other social actors in England, Ireland and Poland spoke at length about how they believed HE represented a period of transitioning to adulthood. Many students in these countries discussed the HE transition as a process of finding their own identity as individuals (Ecclestone et al, 2009) and growing socially and emotionally as independent adults (Bristow et al, 2020). There were notable similarities, as well as some differences, between the three countries – both of which will be explored here.

Many staff members in these three countries viewed students as people undergoing a deeply personal transformation while at university. They said that students were preparing for their future lives, not merely learning about the subjects they were studying and training for future jobs. Several staff members articulated this preparation in terms of becoming an independent adult and growing as a person. For example, one English staff member characterised the university experience as comprised of ‘magical’ years, a period of tremendous growth, transformation and transition:

‘I think it shouldn’t … just be about study, no, not at all, it’s a really magical … three years in your life, you’re an adult, you’re learning to be an adult, you’re learning about yourself, what you want to do and who you want to be. You’re making friends, who might potentially be your friends for the rest of your life. You’re learning skills, finding hobbies that will be almost your salve at some times … I don’t think university should ever just be about dedicating yourself to study.’ (Staff member, English HEI1_1)

This interview excerpt captures the views of many other English staff members that suggested that the experiences one gains while in transition during HE impact not only future employment opportunities but also one’s life more broadly. Similarly, Irish and Polish staff members also spoke about the importance of HE, beyond curricular learning, for development and transition to adult life.
Such staff views were in close alignment with the perspectives of students themselves. Many of our participants in England, Ireland and Poland viewed themselves as in the process of becoming independent adults. They spoke about their HE experiences as transformational and discussed this in terms of learning to care for themselves (such as ‘how to cook’) and gaining social and emotional maturity (such as ‘how to be sociable’ and ‘how to survive’). Many of these accounts were used by students to illustrate what they believed were their more ‘adult-like’ ways of living, being and doing things. In this way, the transition was understood as a combination of various elements of student life. The following focus group excerpts are illustrative.

‘I made a frying pan [see Figure 2.1] … It [represents] independence and being on your own, having to look after yourself, whilst carrying out like the things that you need to do for everyday life and stuff like that.’ (Focus group, English HEI1_2)

‘[F]irst year was for purpose of letting off steam, it was fun to experience this, I was partying but okay now it is time to change your life and it can be like that for all the time. I moved to [name of the city] and it is time to gain some independence. If I spend all 5 years of studies on parties it will be really hard for me to start a regular job, get up at 6 am, go to the office, provide for myself, cook for myself, do laundry, etc. Of course, this change wasn’t fast and easy but it was very needed.’ (Focus group, Polish HEI1_2)

‘I think it’s about like becoming more independent, you know like OK, obviously you’re not totally independent, because like most of us, our parents are paying for things. But certainly like I’ve always had jobs throughout college, sometimes more than one at a time! And like it’s about kind of learning to manage everything. But then it’s also kind of like being able to get a job at the end of it, hopefully.’ (Focus group, Irish HEI3_3)

Notably, though, the conceptualisation of students as in transition – associated primarily with independent living and moving out of the parental home – featured most prominently in England. Many of our English student participants made plasticine models of food, kitchen equipment and beds to show that they had been moving from being reliant on their parents or other family members for basic everyday needs to being independent. Many students in the English focus groups commented on what they deemed to be their own and their peers’ ‘baby-ish’ behaviour – such as not knowing how to take a bin out, boil water, or not to put foil in a microwave – as ‘normal’. This normalisation was also evident in the depictions of students
in the TV series *Fresh Meat*, set in England. Various scenes in *Fresh Meat* illustrate the social, emotional and behavioural changes that students may go through. Many characters leave their parental home (and hometown) to go to university in a new location and start to live together in a shared student house, where they socialise, cook and ‘hang out’ together. In the early episodes of the series, we see students negotiating house rules and beginning to take responsibility for particular chores. Although studies show that many English students may not actually move out of the parental home for HE (see, for example, Abrahams and Ingram, 2013; Donnelly and Gamsu, 2018; Holton and Finn, 2018), this emphasis on ‘moving away’ in both the TV series and the focus groups is likely informed by the historically dominant cultural norm of a ‘residential model’ of university education in England that remains pervasive (Whyte, 2019).

Similar cultural norms do not operate in Ireland and Poland. Moreover, not many Irish and Polish students opt for living independently. In both of these countries, a significant proportion of students (39 per cent in Ireland and 41 per cent in Poland) live with their parents, and only a minority of students move into student accommodation (19 per cent in Ireland and 11 per cent in Poland) (Eurostudent, 2018). Nevertheless, in our study, those Polish and Irish students who had chosen to move out of their parents’ home
considered this decision as instrumental to their personal growth and crucial for their transition to adulthood.

Overall, this conceptualisation of students as becoming adults in our study resonates strongly with the work by Bristow and colleagues (2020), who show that students are cognisant of the changes to their lifestyle during university and often see them as integral to what they perceive to be part of their HE transition. They contend that students consider learning practical life skills as important opportunities offered by their university education. These narratives in our English, Irish and Polish datasets also reflect Gale and Parker’s (2014) categorisation of transition as ‘development’: maturation and moving from one stage of life to another, defined by ‘linear, cumulative, non-reversible movement’ (p 738). Transition in this sense involves the personal transformation of students as they mature into adults and form their own social, personal and professional identities.

**Contested views: Spain, Denmark and Germany**

Within the extant literature, transition in HE is often understood primarily as transition to adulthood – a construction that was also prevalent in England, Poland and Ireland (as shown in the preceding discussion). This way of conceptualising transition was, however, notably absent in the other three countries in our sample. The reasons for this varied across Spain, Denmark and Germany, as we will now explain.

**Spain: students as dependent children?**

In our Spanish dataset, views of students as in transition related primarily to their perceived dependence on their family and assumptions about the relatively high degree of parental involvement in students’ everyday lives (also discussed in Chapter 7). Spanish policy actors often framed students as part of a family unit rather than individuals with rights of their own; similarly, many Spanish newspaper articles in both El País and ABC alluded to the reliance of HE students on their parents – evident in reports about parents’ involvement in degree programme choices, and their provision of financial support (see Lainio and Brooks (2021) for further discussion). In addition, many Spanish staff members reflected on parents’ concern about students’ academic performance and their tendency to “protect their children”. They spoke about how this often had the effect of infantilising students and dissuading them from taking on the responsibility that university students should, in their view, assume as adults. One interviewee, for example, suggested:

‘Every year I gave the speech to the new students, many of them came with mum or dad, and I always said, mum and dad remember,
I may not tell you the grades of your son, because they’re adults … the administration will never give you any information about them. Sorry for that but it’s how it works. Ah, my kid! My little kid! No, your … your kid is eighteen years old. … [I]t’s not that they are more infantile and more childish, maybe it’s just society as a whole treats them that way, we are more protective, more, more infantilising.’ (Staff member, Spanish HEI1_1)

Hence, in the narratives of staff members in Spain, we find a general assumption that students should be becoming independent and a belief that HE should act as this space of transition, alongside a belief that this may not be the reality for a majority of Spanish students. Assumptions about the dependence of students – and general views about them being child-like – were also linked to staff reflections on students’ typical living arrangements. Furthermore, many Spanish students in our study spoke themselves about living with their parents or relatives, with very few renting accommodation of their own. This is broadly in line with trends documented nationally: within Europe, Spain has one of the highest proportions of students living with their parents or relatives, with very few individuals in university halls of residence (Eurostudent, 2005).

Some Spanish participants in our study made explicit contrasts between what they saw as the familial dependence of Spanish students and what they believed were the more independent attitudes of students elsewhere in Europe. For example, some staff compared Spanish students with their counterparts in England and Germany, arguing that many Spanish students lack ‘typical’ university experiences, such as learning to take responsibility for themselves, living independently, and making decisions autonomously. Moreover, the majority of Spanish students we spoke to suggested that while they were growing as individuals and creating their own personal and professional identities, their lifestyle was not drastically different from how it had been when they were in school. These and other observations presented in this section align with Chevalier’s (2016, 2018) contention that social citizenship – with respect to young people in particular – is played out differently across Europe. He suggests that the welfare regime dominant in Spain, alongside cultural and historical factors linked to the influential role of the Catholic Church, has led to the rise of what he calls ‘familialised’ (rather than ‘individualised’) citizenship. In this conceptualisation of citizenship, parents, rather than the state, are held legally responsible for financially supporting their children (see also Lainio and Brooks, 2021). These various factors perhaps explain why many Spanish students in our study did not perceive themselves as undergoing a ‘transformational change’ in the ways described by others – and particularly those from England.
Denmark: students as already grown up?

Many Danish participants in our study viewed Danish students as more mature than their counterparts in other European countries. This is likely to be related to the average age of Danish students and prevalent cultural norms. As shown in Table 1.5, Danish students tend to be older than their peers elsewhere in Europe on entry to HE. Relatedly, our data suggest that views about Danish students as ‘already adults’ were linked to a perception that the majority of them are more likely to have already achieved some of the traditional markers of adulthood, such as living with a partner in independent accommodation, and being less financially reliant on their parents. Indeed, many Danish students compared their lives with those of their counterparts in other European countries and concluded that they were ‘more mature’ than many of their European peers.

‘[M]aybe we Danes are like more adult than [students in other European countries] … because we have to like get an apartment maybe really sooner than other student[s] … even though we get payment we still have to have work to get it like going on. So yeah, I think we’re like really mature and … But again, I have some co-students who is like really helpless … it’s shocked me because how can you do this study … if you don’t know how to research for yourself and do some proactive things by yourself?’ (Focus group, Danish HEI3_3)

Moreover, some Danish staff members and policy actors went further, suggesting that ‘being a student’ is only one of many identities of HE students in Denmark. This is illustrated in the interview extract below.

‘[I]n Denmark, being a student is [only] part of your identity. So I studied to be a nurse, but I’m also living in my own flat with my girlfriend that does something completely different. We have people over for dinner, I have a job … You know it’s, it’s sort of like being a student in Denmark is not … our identity.’ (Representative of Danish employers’ organisation)

This view, common across the Danish dataset, can be explained in terms of the wider social, political and cultural norms we discussed above in relation to Spain. Indeed, Chevalier (2016) asserts that Nordic countries follow the logic of ‘individualised citizenship’ (as opposed to ‘familialised citizenship’ in the case of Spain), linked to Protestant traditions and values. As a result, young people are typically viewed as independent social citizens, the state provides support to facilitate early independence, and parents tend not to have legal obligations to support their children after compulsory schooling.
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(see Lainio and Brooks (2021) for more details). Furthermore, across the Danish focus groups, students’ narratives about transition were often linked to the concept of Dannelse – which understands the value of education in a broader sense, beyond inculcation of academic skills and knowledge, and which involves various ethical, cultural and philosophical dimensions of personal growth and enrichment (see Chapter 1). From this perspective, the HE transition is thus conceptualised as part of a lifelong experience, in some ways similar to Gale and Parker’s notion of ‘becoming’, rather than a ‘developmental’ stage with an end goal of moving into adulthood. We found somewhat similar narratives in Germany, as we discuss below.

**Germany: a more expansive understanding of student transition?**

Within our German dataset there were also relatively few discussions about students’ transitions to adulthood. This may have been because of the particular age profile of our focus group participants and the influence of Humboldtian concepts such as Bildung and Lernfreiheit (see Chapter 1). While many students in Germany enter university soon after compulsory schooling (see Chapter 1), the age profile of the students in our sample was more diverse (see Appendix). Moreover, some of our participants also reflected on the increasing enrolment of students with substantial professional experience. For example, an employer interviewee noted that “25 per cent of all our students already have a qualification in the vocational training sector” – for many of these students, the interviewee continued, HE offers a route to explore a new career path or enhance their skills and knowledge to excel in their chosen field of work rather than merely facilitate transition to the labour market (for the first time) or adulthood. Students also acknowledged how the nature of transition may differ for particular student groups. For example: “[S]ome people are already adults but some have only just left home and are in the process of turning into independent adults and it’s all part and parcel of that, the fact that you have to deal with things yourself and learn as you go along” (Focus group, German HEI2_3). Many German students acknowledged that while, for many younger students, transitioning in HE means progressing towards adulthood (similar to their counterparts in England, Ireland and Poland, as discussed above), for older peers who have already reached this life stage, this will not be the case. Furthermore, irrespective of age, we found that many of our German student participants viewed themselves as undergoing a more profound personal transition than just maturing or growing up, as the following excerpt illustrates:

‘[A]t university you have the opportunity to dip your toe into other things, perhaps to think about things more deeply, things people
wouldn’t normally think about and perhaps that’s a little bit of what university has to offer, the opportunity to delve into other topics … how a person defines him or herself and what their attitude is to the world.’ (Focus group, German HEI3_2)

This perspective is informed by the Humboldtian concept of Bildung – a process of self-cultivation (see Chapters 1, 4 and 5). Reflecting on the application of Bildung in contemporary society, Biesta (2002) defines this as a ‘lifelong challenge and a lifelong opportunity’ (p 343). The core principle of this German tradition of education, Biesta argues, transcends the simplistic ideas of education as a process of gaining skills and acquiring knowledge and instead brings to the fore the nurturing experience of education that produces an individual subjectivity in terms of ‘becoming and being somebody’ (Biesta, 2002: 343). Furthermore, linked closely to the Humboldtian concept of Lernfreiheit (the freedom to learn), there has been a tradition in Germany of students taking a long time over their studies while combining it with other pursuits, including paid work (Ertl, 2013) (see Chapter 1). As a result, HE has traditionally not been conceived of as a short and self-contained period between school and work but, rather, a longer period that is not so tightly bounded (see Brooks et al (2021a) for further discussion). Thus, broadly, we find that the ways in which transition is made sense of in Germany is, as in Denmark, rarely linked to ideas of ‘development’ (in terms of reaching a particular life stage) and more closely aligned to Gale and Parker’s (2014) understanding of transition as becoming, a lifelong process of self-formation.

**Students in transition: entering adulthood or prolonging youth?**

A large number of our research participants discussed the construction of students as in transition in relation to students’ particular life stage. Notably, such discussions were least prominent in Germany and Denmark for reasons discussed above. Nevertheless, many students in our study felt that they were neither children nor ‘fully adults’ – and that they were in a distinctive transitional phase ‘in–between’ the two life stages. Being in this phase has been discussed in the HE literature using the concept of ‘liminality’ (Gravett, 2019). Indeed, some students in our study characterised this phase as ‘a pause’ between being a child and an adult. At the same time, the majority of students saw this period as a time of growth, learning and possibilities. The following extracts capture this in-betweeness in students’ narratives, as we see participants emphasising the flexibility that being an HE student brings with regards to time management, career and life planning, and (partial) dependency on one’s family despite starting to live independently and away from home.
‘I think like being a college student, you do have a bit of leeway to like oh but I’m only a student … you’re not fully an adult yet, you still have that small bit of excuse to act a small bit more like a child or not knowing where you’re going with life or what you’re doing.’ (Focus group, Irish HEI1_3)

‘For me it’s also just to enjoy … being young and being flexible with like my time schedule, as opposed to when I grow up and get like a job that requires more time.’ (Focus group, Danish HEI1_1)

‘It’s a good way of launching yourself, quite gradually actually, because it is something, even though it’s a big deal leaving home, we’re still back like half the year, so it’s a bit, it’s quite a good like halfway rather than friends of mine who have stayed at home, to then move out is kind of a bigger deal.’ (Focus group, English HEI2_1)

Notwithstanding the points made earlier about some research participants being very aware that not all students are of a ‘young’ chronological age, many of our focus group members saw themselves in a phase in-between a dependent child and independent adult. At the same time though, they usually articulated the idea of transitioning within university spaces as a stage in and of itself. This idea aligns with the concepts of ‘youthhood’ (‘an additional step [after adolescence and] toward adulthood’) (Côté, 2000: 4) and ‘emerging adulthood’ (Arnett, 2004). Côté argues that youthhood as a life stage emerged as an outcome of larger socio-economic shifts – such as the extension of compulsory education, the massification of HE and later labour market entry – that have changed understandings of maturity and identity. The transition to adulthood, therefore, Côté suggests, is often now effectively delayed and, as a result, can be more challenging for many young people. This aspect of transition as delaying adulthood was spoken about by many of the staff members in our study. Again, however, this was articulated differently across countries. For example, Spanish staff members were the most likely to view HE students as ‘young’ and ‘immature’. Many of them felt that while indeed HE offers students an opportunity to ‘cross the bridge’ between school (where they are ‘obligated’ to study) and university (where this decision is left to students), in reality, HE appears to be merely an ‘extension of childhood’ for Spanish students. This may be because of students’ living arrangements and wider cultural assumptions in Spain, as discussed in the previous section. In other countries, staff members were more likely to talk about postponing adulthood as synonymous with prolonging youth – as evidenced below.

‘It’s a phase of many, many questions, where do I head for and did I do the right … did I choose the right subject, etc., etc., a lot of
self-questioning, etc. It’s basically I think a prolonged phase of youth, which is typical for our society, and that phase which we call crossed adolescence might well last until the mid-thirties for many of them … unless they found their families, yeah, or start to job very soon.’ (Staff member, German HEI1_1)

‘I think for many of them, it’s almost prolonging their adolescence or holding off or suspension of their adulthood by coming here.’ (Staff member, Irish HEI1_3)

Views such as these, along with other aspects, such as extensive exploration of one’s identity, a focus on oneself, feelings of being in-between, and individualism, which staff members alluded to when discussing HE students, are described by Arnett (2004) as central features of emerging adulthood. HE was often seen by students themselves as an opportunity to try out new things, grow as a person, and shape their identity. Students felt that while at university, they are gradually being prepared to think for themselves by delving deeper into subject knowledge, on the one hand, and exploring who they are and how they will position themselves in the world, on the other. Hence, instead of framing HE as a way to delay the inevitable future, students considered that this ‘extended period’ of exploration offered them the opportunity to gain a greater understanding of the ‘real world’. The following quotations are illustrative:

‘I think of it as a fun transition period. It’s like being thrown from a plane with a parachute. Fall is not so quick then, you don’t come crashing down on the ground, but you are simply gliding through the air for some time. There is time to think things through, organise them.’ (Focus group, Polish HEI3_2)

‘It [university], it does shape you a lot as a person, you learn an awful lot. It’s like a kind of buffer time between entire … independence and being a child! And having independence, yeah, you do a lot of growing in that time. And it’s a definite like safe space to be trying out new things and seeing what works and what doesn’t.’ (Focus group, English HEI3_2)

‘And I was thinking that I kind of view myself … like a flower [see Figure 2.2] that blossomed throughout my education. And the reason why I used different colours for the different petals, because I think that … not only have I learned some nursing knowledge, but also I learnt a lot about myself [and] my social skills.’ (Focus group, Danish HEI2_1)
This idea of transition as self-discovery in preparation for the next phase of one’s life was common – although in some countries this was discussed as a part of students’ transition to adulthood more often and more explicitly than in others (as outlined in the previous section). Furthermore, we notice parallel narratives of transition in relation to students’ life stage. While for many staff members and some students, the HE period was understood as a way for students to delay growing up, becoming mature, and entering adulthood, many of the students, in contrast, identified being ‘in transition’ as a stage in itself, associated with a variety of positive experiences, not merely a phase between childhood and adulthood.

**Students in transition as a marginalising construction?**

So far, we have looked at the various ways in which HE students are constructed as in transition. This section explores how the assumptions often underlying this construction – that students are ‘young people’ and not yet fully formed adults – may marginalise students’ voices. Although, of course, there is no one single way in which students can be defined and understood – and, indeed, many students in our study offered a nuanced understanding of how experiences of being a student can be differentiated by social factors such as class, gender and age (see Brooks et al (2020a) for further discussion), this section focuses on how many narratives regarding the construction of students as ‘in transition’
may, in fact, have negative implications for students. We show how these narratives often tended to construct a deficit discourse around youthhood.

Students across the focus groups mentioned how they are often seen by others as not ‘fully adult’ – this was evident in countries where the majority of students are relatively young (such as England) as well as in nations where, on average, students tend to be slightly older (for example, Denmark), albeit articulated rather differently. In England, students said that society, in general, perceives them as ‘naive’, ‘sheltered’, ‘mollycoddled’, and as ‘avoiding dealing with life’, whereas we found that many Danish students mentioned that (despite the previous discussion) staff members usually saw them as a ‘step behind being adult’. The following quotations from an English and a Danish focus group reflect this.

‘I think there’s an image of the student as kind of avoiding the real world … I think like some people do see us as quite naive because it’s like, well they haven’t had a job, they’re avoiding going into the world of work, you know, they’re in like a safe institute with a big pastoral like network that’s looking after them and … I think it’s easy to see us as kind of, kind of like mollycoddled, like you know, like wrapped up in cotton wool, like we’re kind of being protected from what we eventually will have to deal with.’ (Focus group, English HEI2_1)

‘I think they, at least what I’ve experienced, is that they [HEI staff] sort of see us as unfinished projects, their projects, which are exciting, you want to work on … And also that we’re just the step behind being responsible, the step behind being adults. I’ve heard several … of the staff telling us, you are adults and you don’t say to an adult, you are an adult! … that they sort of remind us what we are, that … but we aren’t quite there yet.’ (Focus group, Danish HEI3_3)

Focus group participants felt that considering them as merely in transition also meant that while they are valued for what they would become and how they would contribute to the labour market and society in the future, their current role and contribution to society as students is significantly undervalued. As a result, they believed their opinions and views as members of society were frequently overlooked (see also Chapter 3). Many Spanish students mentioned that they are often labelled as a ‘poor little thing’, and their political stances ‘ridiculed’ by the media (discussed in Chapter 7). Similarly, English students claimed that everyday infantilising practices often undermined their voices and authority as political actors.

‘I think they see you as a child because you have to study, they don’t think of any other possibilities so it’s like, “He’s a poor lad who’s
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growing up and doesn’t yet know anything about life”, when in reality you know many other things because the university give you the tools to enrich yourself, which you won’t find anywhere else and you probably consider yourself as someone who is growing strongly at a personal level.’ (Focus group, Spanish HEI1_2)

‘I feel like when people protest, like we want like fees to be lowered or whatever, we’re, like in the media we’re talked about like it’s students that are doing this, it’s not like adults, we’re not classed as that. And we’re supposed to be like the next generation that’s going to you know have a say in politics and stuff, but I don’t think at all that’s what we’re recognised as.’ (Focus group, English HEI1_2)

Students’ views also contrasted with those of other social actors who often perceived them as only ‘people with a promising future’, a key means of securing the economic and social prosperity of the nation-state (see Chapter 5 on the theme of students as future workers), rather than significant political stakeholders in the present as well. These tensions, associated with defining students in transition as being in a liminal position – and valuing them primarily in terms of what they would become after graduation – fail to acknowledge what ‘being’ a student in the here and now might mean. Indeed, Lesko (2012) has argued that young people have been defined as ‘always “becoming”, waiting for the future to arrive’ (p 131). (Here, the use of the word ‘becoming’ is not the same as Gale and Parker’s definition of this term, which recognises transition as becoming and occurring throughout one’s life.) This definition has provoked, she maintains, ‘endless watching, monitoring and evaluating’ (p 111) on the part of adults, and passivity on the part of young people as they are told that only the future matters, and that it is the end of the adolescent story that is key. It is important to note that, as mentioned in the previous section, some students themselves reinforced this deficit view (of students as ‘not yet adults’) in their own narratives. Such ways of viewing students may take away the legitimacy of students’ voices and, in doing so, undermine the formative processes involved in this transitional phase in students’ lives, which we have discussed above.

Conclusion

This chapter began by showing how it has become normal to see students as ‘in transition’ across our six countries. We then discussed three main themes in relation to this construction of HE students – transition to the labour market, personal transformation, and the understanding of students as entering adulthood or prolonging youth. This discussion has illustrated some important differences in how students are viewed. While students
are commonly seen as people transitioning to the world of work, we demonstrated that, in countries where students pay high fees, they were more likely to view this transition in terms of the desired return on their personal investment. In contrast, in nations where no fees were payable, students typically saw their transition to the workforce as a more collective endeavour, and a way to contribute to wider society. Moreover, we have shown that transition within HE is not just about the readiness to secure future jobs; it is valued highly for the personal transformation students undergo in this period. This also, however, is played out differently by nation-state – with variation according to social, cultural and historical factors as well as prevalent citizenship regimes. Finally, we have discussed how the ‘transitional’ status of students can be seen in more negative ways – including as ‘not yet adults’. Such an understanding of transition often marginalises students’ voices, fails to appreciate their current societal contributions, and potentially delegitimises their political activity.