Constructing the Higher Education Student

Gupta, Achala, Brooks, Rachel

Published by Bristol University Press

Gupta, Achala and Rachel Brooks.
Constructing the Higher Education Student: Perspectives from across Europe.
Project MUSE. muse.jhu.edu/book/101188.

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

Over the past few decades, there has been increasing interest on the part of many policymakers around the world in measures to inculcate ‘citizen behaviours’ among school pupils and HE students. Such initiatives have often been developed in response to: the demise of the welfare state in many developed nations and an associated emphasis on the importance of citizens taking care of their own wellbeing; an increase in the diversity of many countries and an attendant perceived need to strengthen social cohesion; a concern about young people’s political knowledge and skills; and unease at the rise of individualism (Brooks and Holford, 2009). Within Europe, these have been played out at the regional level, through the actions of the European Commission and the Council of Europe, as well at the level of nation-states (Hoskins, 2006; Keating, 2014). In this chapter, we show that many of the participants in our research engaged with ideas related to citizenship in some capacity, although there was not always consensus between social actors in the extent to which students should be seen as citizens or the nature of this citizenship.

The chapter begins by briefly outlining some of the ways in which the ‘student as citizen’ has been understood in the extant literature. We then go on to examine the perspectives of students themselves, arguing that they often positioned themselves clearly as citizens – with a responsibility to think and act critically. While acting as a citizen was not necessarily viewed as synonymous with being politically engaged, many students did also consider themselves to be – potentially at least – significant political actors, but believed that their capacity to effect change in this way was often constrained by others. We then compare these student perspectives with the views of other actors, contending that while a certain degree of ambivalence is evident in media portrayals of students, staff and policy actors were much more likely to reject the construction of students as active and engaged citizens.

Conceptualising the student as citizen

There is now a large literature on education and citizenship. Much of it is informed, to some extent at least, by debates about active citizenship. The
shift to talking about students as active citizens can be seen as part of a broader movement, evident within both scholarship and policy development, away from legalistic and narrow definitions of citizenship (focusing primarily on rights and legal status) towards broader conceptualisations that emphasise the importance of active involvement within a civic community and, equally, of being recognised as a full member of that community (Evans, 1995; Harris et al, 2021). Thus, for some scholars and policymakers, active citizenship is a progressive concept, which signals a turn away from understanding citizens solely as passive rights-bearers. It has also informed various policy initiatives, not least European-level programmes to develop ‘active citizenship’ within HE, and enhance the ‘civic competence’ of students (Hoskins, 2006).

The focus on active citizenship has not, however, been uncontentious. Taken at face value, there may seem substantial merit in encouraging citizen-like behaviours on the part of students across the world. However, such policy measures and educational initiatives have frequently been critiqued – for obscuring the importance of individual rights through an over-emphasis on responsibilities, and tending to privilege non-contentious forms of ‘active citizenship’, such as volunteering, over more overtly political forms, such as protesting and taking direct action (Ahier et al, 2003; Coffey, 2004; Cunningham and Lavalette, 2004). Scholars who have charted the rise of more ‘activated’ forms of citizenship across social policy in general have argued that while they have often drawn on social democratic and communitarian conceptions of the citizen, they have tended to be dominated by the neo-liberal concern to ‘liberate’ the individual from the state (Clarke, 2005). Similarly, university programmes aimed at inculcating a global active citizenship often have a strong neo-liberal orientation, linked closely to promoting an institutional brand in a competitive HE marketplace and/or enhancing the production of ‘globally competent workers’ (Hammond and Keating, 2018: 927). Such programmes are also more likely to be taken up by those from more privileged backgrounds.

Writing with respect to European HE specifically, Biesta (2009) has argued that its emphasis on promoting active citizenship is problematic because it is functionalist (that is, it approaches citizenship from the putative ‘needs’ of the socio-political order); it assumes that individual action (rather than collective action, or action on the part of the state) is the main solution for collective problems; and it tends to see democracy in consensual terms – active citizens are those who subscribe to the existing political order and actively work to ensure its reproduction. On the basis of this analysis, Biesta argues that the EU has tended to promote a ‘socialisation’ model of civic learning, which aims at ‘inserting’ individuals into a pre-existing socio-political order. He advocates instead what he calls a ‘subjectification’ model, whereby greater recognition is given to collective and political concerns, and alternative
conceptions of democracy, liberty and equality are explicitly recognised. This critique of citizenship learning informs our discussion below.

In the rest of the chapter, we make reference to these debates, and explore some of the various ways in which our participants talked about students as citizens – providing a more nuanced picture than is sometimes evident in the extant literature. Given some of the ambiguity and contestation associated with the term ‘active citizen’, we refer primarily to the broader term of ‘citizen’.

**Responsible citizens: the perspectives of students**

**Strong self-identification**

A common theme within much of the literature that has charted the increasing marketisation of national HE systems is the passivity of students. Scholars have argued, for example, that as students have increasingly had to make significant financial contributions to their own HE, their interest in wider social issues has declined (for example, Morley, 2003; Pusey and Sealey-Huggins, 2013; Della Porta et al, 2020). Indeed, writing with respect to the UK, Williams (2013: 110) has contended that:

> Today’s active campaigning students, who are heralded as agents of change within their institutions, are quick to learn the bureaucratic language of agenda items, assessment patterns, learning outcomes and programme monitoring, and are more likely to be found sitting on Staff-Student Liaison Committees than on picket lines. This domestication of the student voice and limiting of campaigning confirms the consumer identity of students rather than challenging it.

Such arguments have been rehearsed outside Europe, too. Shin et al (2014) have argued, for example, that in South Korea, student activism has narrowed in its focus – to be primarily concerned with education-related issues – after the introduction of tuition fees. Moreover, Nissen (2019) has shown how, in New Zealand, increasing levels of HE-related debt have had considerable impact on students’ political activity. She outlines how the students in her research, who had taken on debts to fund their studies, felt shame at their financial position, which discouraged them from being open about their situation and concerns. This, in turn, made collective action harder. Moreover, their need to earn money during their degree programme reduced the time they had available for other activities, including political participation. And, for those who did find time for such activities, their overriding concern to do nothing to jeopardise their employment prospects on graduation led them to pursue cautious and non-controversial forms of politics, measured by what they believed actors external to the
university (such as employers) would consider acceptable. Focusing more on pedagogical change, Grant (2017) has contended that market-informed pedagogies introduced across the Global North in the past few decades – including the disaggregation of learning into semesters and modules, and the introduction of regular student evaluations of teaching – have shifted students’ concerns. In her analysis, a commitment to the communal good has come to be replaced with ‘a sense of personal entitlement’ (p 139).

Nevertheless, the students in our research – across all six nations – presented a rather different picture. On the whole, they tended to view themselves as active and engaged citizens, who were making an important contribution to their societies at present, and/or were developing the skills, knowledge and dispositions to enable them to make such a contribution in the future. Such identities were clearly important to them and, in some cases, fundamental to their understanding of what it meant to be a student. In Denmark, for example, focus group participants often made explicit reference to their status as citizens when asked a general question about how students in their country should be understood. The following two excerpts, both from focus groups at Danish HEI3, illustrate this point well:

Interviewer: How should students be understood?
Focus group participant: As citizens, as we are the new generation, we are going to be the, the leaders; whatever we’re going to do, we’re going to lead the future in some way.

Focus group participant: What we learn today is actually going to form the future that we’re going to have.
(Focus group, Danish HEI3_2)

‘What an education does is also to educate you kind of to be a citizen in society, and in the society that you grow up in or that you live in. So I think it’s, it doesn’t only educate you to become a worker or to do some kind of job, but it also educates you in, yeah, societ[al] aspects, in how to be a citizen, how to be, for example democratic … and what it means.’ (Focus group, Danish HEI3_3)

Explicit reference to students as citizens was also made in Spain, with one focus group participant commenting that, alongside knowledge acquisition, the role of the university is “to develop you as a citizen” (Focus group, Spanish HEI3_2). In other cases, students did not make explicit reference to being a citizen, but drew on ideas commonly associated with this term, through emphasising their own agency (rather than the passivity often alluded to in the literature mentioned above) and ability to effect societal change. An English participant, for example, described how she believed HE played an important role in
fostering beliefs, first, that change is possible and, second, that individuals need to play their role in bringing such change about. She explained:

‘[I say to myself] well if I do it and no one else does it, nothing’s going to happen, but if we all think that way, then obviously nothing’s going to happen, so [university helps] develop this mindset that you, you are yourself and you have an opinion and you have a choice and you have the chance to effect, effect change. … if this mindset is developed in university … then it’s more likely change or anything will be brought about, rather than you know if we all passively sit and wait for things to happen.’ (Focus group, English HEI3_3)

Democratic participation was also discussed by some students in terms of their understanding of what it meant to be a student:

‘[T]he idea of making, of not just creating workers and bringing students in and teaching them about whatever subject they’re studying and then send them out into the workplace, but making people politically aware that when they’re living in their house and it comes to the general elections, so you know like how to vote, what [your elected representatives] are going to kind of give to you.’ (Focus group, Irish HEI1_3)

In this quotation, the participant acknowledges the construction of students as learners and future workers (see Chapters 4 and 5, respectively), but suggests that – alongside this – they are also citizens who are increasing their political knowledge and ability to participate in democratic society.

**The responsibility to be critical?**

As we noted above, a key debate within the literature on citizenship, as it has been played out in education, and also with respect to youth generally, is whether young people’s responsibilities have tended to be emphasised at the expense of their rights. Numerous scholars have argued that educational programmes, in schools as well as universities, have typically focused on responsibilities – and ‘active citizenship’ proffered as a means of ameliorating what are deemed to be students’ ‘deficient’ citizenship values and practices (for example, Landrum, 2002; Ahier et al, 2003; Pole et al, 2005). This sits in tension, however, with moves within HE policy to encourage students to be more aware of their rights and entitlements (in England couched in terms of their ‘consumer rights’) as a means of improving the quality of teaching and learning (Naidoo et al, 2011; Bunce et al, 2017; Nyland and Tran, 2020). Within our data, there was, however, relatively little discussion
by students of their rights. Indeed, when citizenship was discussed explicitly, or referred to implicitly, it was articulated much more commonly in terms of participants’ responsibilities – to their local communities, nation-states and, in some cases, the world in general (see discussion below). To some extent, this emphasis on responsibilities, rather than rights, can be seen as largely in line with what Biesta (2009) has termed the ‘socialisation’ model of civic learning. In the extracts below, for example, we see students emphasising the importance of volunteering, supporting social norms and contributing to society as it exists around them.

‘[Students] should be viewed as someone who want to learn and want to … find the best way possible for us to contribute.’ (Focus group, Danish HEI1_3)

‘I think there’s an expectation from your parents and those around you to be a contributing member of society. And I think that university is kind of where they want you to start, if that makes sense. I think you’re kind of, it’s not so much about what you can get from it but what you can then give to others.’ (Focus group, Irish HEI2_2)

Such sentiments were also echoed by the focus group participant who made a model of a book and a quill (see Figure 3.1), explaining that it

Figure 3.1: Book and quill
represented her belief that ‘everything that I am learning is something that I’ll be able to give back to other people and help them progress’ (Focus group, Irish HEI2_2).

For some participants, while they talked about the importance of making a social contribution, this was seen as inextricably linked to the job they hoped to take up on graduation. Such accounts were relatively common in England and Ireland, although not in the other four countries.

‘I think we are preparing ourselves to contribute to the society. [Agreement from other members of focus group.] Like it’s just how we’ve chosen to go about it, like because one of the reasons why we do come to university is so that we can have a better future, so that we, well my job, well I feel like I will be definitely contributing to society because I’ll be teaching the young generation, so … but I can’t contribute, I can’t make that contribution without coming to university and getting a degree and being trained in doing so.’ (Focus group, English HEI3_3)

‘So yeah, I think we are preparing ourselves to be workers, you know, we are being scrutinised by employers, hence why we’re being scrutinised by employers and politicians and whatever, because we are being conditioned to become a worker, to gain our role in society and be an active citizen and all that.’ (Focus group, English HEI3_3)

In these narratives, citizenship appears to be elided with labour market participation, and the citizen reconfigured, to some extent at least, as a worker-citizen (Isopahkala-Bouret et al, 2014). (See Chapter 5 for a more extended discussion of students as future workers.)

Nevertheless, it would be wrong to assume that the foregrounding of responsibilities was always associated with this ‘socialisation’ perspective. Indeed, it was striking that across many of the focus groups and various different nation-states, participants emphasised the responsibility they felt – as students, who were benefiting from a higher education – to be critical and to play an active role in changing society, rather than just accepting the state of affairs they saw around them.

‘[The] university [experience] must be to produce citizens having a critical faculty, with critical thought.’ (Focus group, Spanish HEI3_2)

‘We also learn to be critical, we learn to be critical of the state, we learn to be critical of society in general.’ (Focus group, Danish HEI3_2)
‘[Students should be seen as] young people that are trying to learn something, like learn a lot and get a lot of knowledge, so they can come out there at the other side and maybe make the society even better than it is right now.’ (Interview, Danish HEI2)

‘[We are not here] like to see, like not just engage in society but kind of here to improve it and where we’re going … [To] think outside the box as well.’ (Focus group, Irish HEI1_1)

In some cases, participants contrasted this view of students – as critical and activist citizens – with the construction of them as future workers, which they felt often dominated debates within their nation (see Chapter 5). This is articulated in the extract below – along with an explanation of how the participant thought the experience of HE encouraged students to develop more critical perspectives on the world around them:

‘Yeah, and I think it’s not just become a worker, but like be an activist and like an active citizen and just having our own voice because we kind of develop our own mindset here [agreement from others in focus group], as opposed to like people that are not at university. We have all these experiences, different cultures all thrown at us, and then we come out like with our own mindset and things, and we have a, like a voice and are kind of leaders in our own right, which makes us different to those that maybe didn’t go to university, not all but … yeah, some.’ (Focus group, English HEI3_3)

In comments such as these, the students appeared to affirm the contentions of those who have argued that HE campuses can act as important spaces for social mixing (Altbach, 1997; Bennett et al, 2017), akin to what Massey (2005) has referred to as the ‘thrown-togetherness’ of public space.

Taken together, the data presented above suggest that while the students tended to focus primarily on their responsibilities rather than their rights, these responsibilities were often – although not always – framed in a critical manner. Although, as we discussed previously, various scholars have argued that a conception of citizenship that places primary importance on individuals’ responsibilities rather than their rights is commonly associated with a conservative political stance, and frequently invoked by governments as a means of rolling back the welfare state (Coffey, 2004; Pickard, 2019), our data demonstrate that students often understand their responsibilities differently, constructing active citizens as those who subject social norms and current practices to critical scrutiny, with the aim of effecting change. In such cases, students appear to understand the role of HE and their place
within it as much closer to Biesta’s (2009) progressive ‘subjectification’ model of civic learning, than its conservative ‘socialisation’ alternative.

National citizens?

In the data derived from our focus groups, particular spatialities are evident. In most cases, it appeared that when participants were referring to the particular communities or societies to which they hoped to ‘give back’ or ‘change for the better’, they had in mind either their nation-state or a more local community. The former was evident, for example, when they spoke about the important part HE played in furthering their knowledge of democracy and the role played by their elected officials. The latter was often implicit and sometimes explicit in narratives about engaging in voluntary activity near where they lived. There were, however, a small minority of cases where focus group participants made reference to larger-scale communities, which crossed national borders. In the following examples, students talk about making change that helps the world, and the importance of paying attention to the inter-dependencies between nation-states:

‘[I want] to be enlightened about ideas that can move the world to a better place, and not just a job. It’s something deeper.’ (Focus group, Danish HEI3_1)

‘And I don’t think we have a perfect society, far from it, [and] there are lots of problems in the world that are not [related to] the labour market. And I think that’s more important [that education prepares us to solve these other problems, not just for entering the labour market]. … An earthquake in … in Thailand doesn’t, maybe doesn’t really affect our labour market here in Denmark or in some part of Copenhagen, but it’s still important to the world.’ (Focus group, Danish HEI3_1)

‘Well, I chose my degree because I feel like I could really, like it’s in my interest and I want to help people with what I’m studying, so […] I wanted to go on and do nutrition after my course and I want to help the world, you know, the whole [world] make a change!’ (Focus group, Irish HEI2_3)

Interestingly, and linking back to the earlier discussion about ‘worker-citizens’, the first two extracts above contrast an interest in or commitment to global change with what the participants saw as the narrower perspective associated with viewing students only as future workers. The third extract, however, positions the two as more interlinked: it is through securing a particular job that change can be effected. In general, however, despite the
emphasis on promoting ‘global citizenship’ in many HE institutions across the world (Hammond and Keating, 2018) and a recognition that younger generations are more likely to be interested in global social and political issues (Devinney et al., 2012; Sloam and Henn, 2019), relatively few participants had such geographically expansive horizons, irrespective of how they understood the relationship between citizenship and paid work.

**Merely future citizens?**

Notable in much of the data presented above is an emphasis on the future. As has been evident from the preceding discussion, when our participants talked about themselves as active citizens, this was often in relation to developing the knowledge, skills and critical capacities to prepare them for life after graduation. Some, however, argued that this future orientation, particularly when deployed by policymakers and other social actors, obscured the important ways in which they were engaging as active citizens in the present (see also discussion in Chapter 2). Participants from Danish HEI2, for example, drew attention to the action they were taking now, maintaining that, if this was recognised more fully, students may be understood differently:

‘[Students should be seen as] an asset, like … right now there’s all this … refugee problems and there’s one place [name] that they are trying to make like these places to live, where students can live cheaply and then they can live with the refugees and they can like help refugees integrate more in the society and stuff like that. And I think stuff like that is … like … well a different way of seeing students.’ (Interview, Danish HEI2)

Indeed, a commonly articulated theme was that students were often not treated as full citizens, with views of equal worth to other adults. The following excerpts from Ireland and Poland are illustrative:

‘I think I’d like to see students taken more seriously above all […] because I feel like a lot of people either dismiss students’ views or opinions or things like that […] I don’t think anyone’s views should be … or opinions should be discounted because they’re just students, it would be nice to I think see, yeah, to be viewing students as members of society, already participating.’ (Focus group, Irish HEI3_3)

‘I would say that the society, in general, has this feeling that young people don’t know anything and they shouldn’t speak their minds. Even if some protests occur or some marches and a young person speak his mind, then on the internet or in another place they show different speech of someone who is saying “Oh, he is young, he doesn’t know
anything, why he is speaking at all. If he lives for as long as I have lived …’’ (Focus group, Polish HEI2_2)

Here, we can see strong echoes of previous research on citizenship and education that has emphasised the ways in which students and pupils are often addressed as ‘proto-citizens’ or ‘citizens-in-the-making’ rather than individuals (or indeed groups) able to make substantial contributions to their society in the present (Pickard, 2019). This is often reinforced by social policies that have tended to reduce the welfare rights available to young people (because they are not viewed as fully formed adults) and so increase their dependence on their families (Furlong and Cartmel, 2007).

**Political participation**

A further way in which students articulated ideas associated with citizenship was in relation to political participation. As we explained in Chapter 1, we asked our participants specifically about whether they considered students to be significant political actors, and this was also a theme that came up spontaneously in other parts of the focus groups. Some talked about the political activity they were currently engaged in – relating to both formal and informal modes of engagement. As an example of the latter, a focus group participant at Irish HEI2_3 made a model of a fist (see Figure 3.2) to represent her political activism.

The vast majority of the students we spoke to believed that they had the potential, at least, to be significant political actors – a view that was echoed, to some extent, in the staff interviews. Students from all six countries described themselves as the political future of their country. In part, this was linked to the particular knowledge and skills they had gained through their degree programmes, as the quotations below illustrate.

‘[S]tudents have an influence on politics because they represent a large number of young people who bring new ideas into the world but who are old enough to stand up for these ideas and to consider them logically and to bring forward logical arguments.’ (Focus group, German HEI3_2)

‘[W]e’re informed … like the older people would just have a view from when they were younger and what they were told, but they didn’t know all the facts, whereas we would be more knowledgeable.’ (Focus group, Irish HEI1_1)

Moreover, some focus group participants typically saw the space of the university as an important site, in itself, for political activity, while others
emphasised the unique opportunity HE presented, in terms of both time and space, for such engagement.

‘I think university students, as well as being adults and therefore having a little wider conception of things than students in secondary education … as a student you … have a little more time and you can organise [more easily] because of your proximity [to your fellow students].’

(Focus group, Spanish HEI1_2)

Nevertheless, across most of the focus groups, our participants also spoke of the factors that limited their political activity or prevented them from being as engaged as they wished to be. They described feeling ignored and infantilised by politicians and others with power. In Spain, however, although it was more common for students to believe they were taken seriously as a political force by politicians, they also asserted that the state sometimes took steps to limit their political impact. They commented:

‘It's in the psyche of society that students are seen as a bomb that can explode at any time, but if they [the students] are skilfully manoeuvred and modified they can become another tool for the system and fall into the hands of the politicians so that the country can function.’

(Focus group, Spanish HEI1_1)
Thus, despite the importance they placed on acting as critical and active citizens (discussed above), participants in all countries believed that specific constraints tempered their ability to exert political influence as students. Here, there is significant continuity with previous research (albeit in youth studies rather than education) conducted over the past few decades that has suggested that young people in general are acutely aware of the limitations of the political systems around them. Indeed, Pilkington and Pollack (2015) have argued, with respect to the young people in their cross-national European research, that a paradox exists whereby youth ‘are not so much “anti” politics but profoundly disillusioned with the current democratic system while continuing to be, in principle, supportive of democratic reforms of government and seeking to “be heard” through it’ (p 8).

Variation between and within nation-states

In many ways, the students we spoke to across Europe held quite similar views to one another: they frequently drew on the construction of the citizen in explaining how they understood the role and identity of HE students and, while they typically associated this with the carrying out of responsibilities, these were often framed in terms of criticality and bringing about substantial change, rather than the affirmation of societal norms. While a minority discussed this citizenship in terms of global society, most appeared to relate it to their nation-state or local community and, despite critiquing politicians for viewing them as merely citizens-in-the-making, often held a strong future orientation themselves (here, there are links to the understanding of students as in transition, discussed in the previous chapter). Students also commonly saw themselves as political actors, with the potential to make a significant contribution to their communities through various types of political engagement, including both formal and informal means.

Nevertheless, despite these commonalities across the sample, there were also differences between nations and within them. It was notable that, as mentioned above, it was only in England and Ireland that participants made implicit reference to the figure of the ‘worker-citizen’. Moreover, it was striking that Danish students tended to place more emphasis on their contributions to wider society and the importance of collective action than their counterparts in the other nations. These differences map on the different welfare regimes evident in the six nations (see Chapter 1), with neo-liberal norms more entrenched in Anglophone nations than elsewhere and social democratic influences remaining relatively strong in Denmark (despite the introduction of some market-based HE reforms). Such differences have been observed in other studies, too. Indeed, Della Porta et al (2020) have contrasted student political activity in England which, they argue is influenced by the construction of students as
consumers, with that evident in continental Europe, which has more in common with wider social movements. It is also possible that the funding of HE in Denmark – with the state covering both fees and living costs (see Chapter 1) – encourages students to conceive of HE as a public good and emphasise their future societal contribution.

With respect to political engagement, specifically, differences were also evident. For example, while Danish students typically considered involvement in politics to be an important element of what it means to be a student, this view was not shared in all nations, and was particularly rare in Poland. Such variations relate not just to the welfare regimes discussed above but also to the particular histories of student politics in the various nations. In Denmark, for example, students’ unions have a strong and long-standing tradition of influence, with access to significant material resources, and formal and informal links to government actors (Klemenčič, 2014; Della Porta et al, 2020). In contrast, Polish unions have, since the 1990s, become increasingly corporatist in nature, moving from being seen as a social movement-type organisation to a professional association (Antonowicz et al, 2014). As a consequence, the Student Parliament (the national body representing students) has been criticised for not defending well students’ interests, and has also found it hard to mobilise students in general (Antonowicz et al, 2014).

Some within-nation differences were also played out in our data. For example, with respect to political engagement specifically, although not broader discussions of citizenship, students at some of the more prestigious institutions in the sample (particularly in England and Germany) tended to be more optimistic about their future political influence than students at the less prestigious institutions – possibly linked to the social characteristics of the students who attend such institutions, and differences in institutional habitus. As Della Porta et al (2020) have argued, elite universities often convey different messages about the importance of citizenship-related activities than less prestigious institutions which, by virtue of their different market position, have to be more commercially oriented. Moreover, because of structural inequalities in access to both HE and the labour market, graduates from elite institutions are more likely to take up positions of political influence after graduation. In Spain, political activity appeared to be higher at the two public universities in our sample than the private institution. As the majority of the activity the students talked about was related to protests against higher fees, it is likely that those attending a private institution would be less concerned about this, as they have already made a positive choice to attend an institution charging higher fees, than their peers within the public sector (see Brooks et al (2020b) for a fuller discussion). Finally, some differences were also observed at the disciplinary level, with students studying social sciences often apparently more politically engaged and interested than those from other
disciplines. Differences in political interest and engagement by discipline may, of course, be because students who are already more interested in politics and political issues tend to choose to study such subjects. However, there is also some evidence that social science subjects can inculcate greater political interest, awareness and engagement – not necessarily by making more time available to explore political issues, but by bringing about more profound changes in how students think about the world and their own place within it (for example, Abbas et al, 2016; Muddiman, 2020).

**Contestation within media**

When we turn to other social actors, we see a rather different view of students emerge. With respect to the media – TV series and films as well as newspaper articles – students were often discussed as citizens, either implicitly or explicitly, but there was considerable ambivalence about both the nature of this citizenship and its impact.

In four of the seven TV series and films we analysed (see Chapter 1 for details of the sample), students’ political activity was referenced quite frequently – including student protests, elections for students’ unions, and debates and discussion about political matters between key characters. These suggest that the trope of ‘student as political actor’ is reasonably strong across various European nations. Students’ political activity was also referenced, at least to some extent, in the newspapers in our sample. Here, however, there were quite significant differences by country. In both Spanish newspapers, for example, over a third of the articles referred in some way to students as political actors, whereas under ten per cent of the articles in the German newspapers discussed students in this way. This articulates, to some extent, with previous research that has shown that in southern Europe (and also France) protest actions by young people are more likely to be covered by newspapers than elsewhere in the continent (Loukakis and Portos, 2020). Moreover, in Spain students had assumed an important political role in the years preceding our period of data collection, by initiating anti-austerity protests and helping to mobilise other social actors to this cause (Zamponi and González, 2017). Such protests were more significant in Spain than in the other countries in the sample because the impact of the crisis was worse, and this legacy may have informed ongoing newspaper perspectives.

In some cases, media representations of students as political actors and/or citizens more broadly were positive. For example, in the Spanish TV series, *Merlí: Sapere Aude* (referred to as ‘Merlí’ hereafter), students’ political activity is depicted as stemming from their genuine care for the society in which they live. Some of the main characters participate in various sustained discussions about political issues, including the impact of colonialism in contemporary society. They also take part in student protests and strike
action (by not attending class). Moreover, in the newspaper articles, students’ political activity and other forms of social action are often framed in a positive manner, and as a justified response to inequalities in society. This is discussed, for example, in the Polish paper *Gazeta Wyborcza* with respect to student action in response to the sexual harassment experienced by female students; in the Spanish papers *El País* and *ABC*, in relation to student protests against the inequities brought about by the changes to the structure of degrees; and in *The Irish Times* with respect to students’ concerns about environmental degradation.

Such perspectives were not, however, shared in a consistent manner across the media. Indeed, there is also a clear critique of student political activity that pervades some of the TV series and newspaper articles (see also Chapter 7). Apathy and/or general disinterest in wider societal issues is mentioned in a small minority of articles, echoing some widely documented policy discourses on this theme (*Marsh et al., 2007*). This is evident in the German newspaper, *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, for example, where several articles focus on alleged apathy, with headlines such as, ‘Only one in three students has a keen interest in politics’ (29 October 2014). The paper’s editorial on the same day notes, disapprovingly, that ‘[t]he politically active and belligerent have shrunk to a splinter group’ in universities across the country. More common, however, is criticism of the nature of students’ political engagement. The English TV series, *Fresh Meat*, for example, devotes a considerable amount of time to covering students’ politically related activities, including protests at what are perceived to be the damaging environmental policies of the oil company BP, and students’ union elections. Nevertheless, such activities are presented as often being immature, driven by self-interest and largely ineffective. For example, during the elections for the students’ union president, one of the main characters stands as a candidate for the ‘Cheap Chips’ party and, despite her absurd policy ideas, receives many more votes than candidates with more serious manifestos. Another candidate stands primarily to please his father and has no interest in students’ concerns or political issues more broadly. Moreover, while student politics is a central theme of the second series of the UK thriller *Clique*, it is again depicted in somewhat negative terms – with two groups of students presented as pursuing oppositional and antagonistic political agendas, leaving no space for dialogue or resolution of the issues that are important to them. Similarly, within the newspaper articles, students’ political activity is sometimes criticised for being violent. This is evident in a number of articles in the Spanish newspaper *ABC*, for example, with headlines such as, ‘They entered with their faces covered and one of them attacked a security guard with a bat; Incidents in Zaragoza and Valencia during a student strike which had little support’ (9 May 2014). Another relatively common criticism is that students’ political activity – particularly that related to ‘no-platforming’ and the insistence
on ‘trigger warnings’ – is serving to limit freedom of speech on campus, evidenced by headlines such as the following:

‘Professor says free speech is stifled’. (Daily Mail, 30 November 2015)

‘The mollycoddled students who fuel campus zealotry’. (Daily Mail, 20 February 2016)

‘Life can be rough. Our students must learn that’. (Irish Independent, 5 April 2016)

‘The boycott of the debate at the Autónoma [Autonomous University of Madrid] has been widely condemned’. (El País, 21 October 2016)

This particular problematisation of student political activity is a prominent theme in England, Ireland and Spain, which we discuss further in Chapter 7.

Students are framed as citizens not only in relation to their political activity, however. A relatively common point of discussion in some of the newspapers was whether students should have particular rights to education. This is pursued, for example, with respect to whether education should be a public good in The Guardian (as part of a broader discussion about the high level of fees in England), and whether students should have the right to choose their discipline of study and progress to postgraduate study in BT and Politiken (in relation to Danish reforms that have introduced change in both areas – see Chapter 1) and to pursue a second subject free of charge, in Rzeczpospolita. In addition to constructing students as rights-bearers, many newspapers also framed them as citizens by virtue of their future labour market contribution. This construction of students as ‘economic citizens’ was evident in many countries including Denmark, Ireland and Poland – with Rzeczpospolita, for example, focusing on this in its article ‘Young people offer a lot to companies’ (26 March 2016). Often, however, this construction was held alongside others that foregrounded the civic learning undertaken by students within HE, and which emphasised a more expansive view of citizenship. A clear example of this is an article in Politiken (19 January 2014) where considerable space is given to critics of government policy, who emphasise the importance of ‘ideals of enlightenment, including free thinking, democracy and moral development’ for HE students and outline concerns that these will be damaged as a result of the Study Progress Reform (see Chapter 1). Thus, across the sample, media perspectives were complex. Although students were quite frequently constructed as citizens in the newspaper articles, TV series and films, the nature of this citizenship often differed considerably, as did the way in which it was evaluated.
Staff and policy perspectives

A more straightforward rejection of understanding students as active and engaged citizens was evident among HE staff and many of the policy actors we interviewed. Our staff interviewees, across all six countries, tended to articulate this in three main ways. First, many claimed that students had become more demanding about their education – questioning, for example, why they have not received higher grades, and expecting immediate responses from teaching staff – and yet more passive in their broader civic and social orientations. Although they noted that some students were now more aware of their rights (as students), they tended to view this not as a manifestation of citizenship, but more as evidence of what they viewed as an ‘entitled’ consumer mindset (see also Chapter 4). Second, and relatedly, staff members claimed that students’ interests were narrow, and that it was only those that related directly to their education that animated them:

‘[I]t’s almost always something [like], please don’t touch our grant from the government and please don’t put too much pressure on us, on completing our studies on time, and sometimes it’s very hard to be a student nowadays […] They are focused mainly on taking care of their own position in society, that they don’t have to pay for study programmes, that they don’t have to complete their studies too quickly … that the society should procure better dormitories, etc.’ (Staff member, Danish HEI1_1)

‘Students [are] not engaged with politics, they [are] engaged with their own local politics, so our students are concerned about, you know, they pushed for a fifteen day turnaround for assessment, they want the library open 24/7, they want, you know that sort of thing, and that’s what they talk to us and that’s what [students’ union leaders] get elected on, so they’re not being elected on a Communist or a Tory or a … so we don’t have a lot of political debate at a national level.’ (Staff member, English HEI3_1)

These accounts mirror the arguments of some extant research that has suggested that, in various nations, the scope of students’ political engagement has reduced significantly, often coalescing around issues that impact directly on them as students (see, for example, Shin et al, 2014).

The third theme, outlined by staff, was that there had been a marked decline in collective political activity by students, when compared to the past – and that this was a negative development. This was a strong discourse in all six countries, and is illustrated in the following quotations:
‘So formerly, the, well in the sixties of course obviously, but also, I think also still later they were kind of a force, so the … extra parliamentary opposition that was mainly student driven, but now I think there is no such thing as students as a political voice.’ (Staff member, German HEI2_4)

‘I think that students played an essential role, for example 30 years ago, or even 40 years ago, and in Europe since the revolution of the sixties, seventies […] I think that the students played a central role in politics. And I think that that’s not the case anymore. I think that not only in Spain but also in the rest of Europe.’ (Staff member, Spanish HEI3_3)

In such references to a putative ‘golden age’ of political participation, there is little recognition that those who took part in the campus protests of the late 1960s comprised only a small minority of students (Sukarieh and Tannock, 2015). Moreover, there is an implicit assumption that students (perhaps more so than other social actors) should engage in political activity, typically understood as that stretching beyond educational issues.

The policy actors tended to frame students in less pejorative ways but, like the staff members, also raised questions about the extent to which they could be viewed as active citizens – making particular reference to what they perceived to be their reluctance to become involved in political activity. Moreover, as with the staff interviewees, contrasts were often drawn between the perceived apathy of current students and the more engaged behaviour of previous generations. For example, the Spanish government representative claimed:

‘[H]istorically, yes, [students’ political activity] was very important in Spain. But nowadays … it’s a very small percentage of those, that they’re really involved in politics and in social problems and so on. The great majority, they’re more fixed in their degree … and they’re not so worried about the other things.’

In explaining such views, there were some differences between the two groups of interviewees. Staff members across all six countries – but, perhaps unsurprisingly, not the policy actors – typically made reference to recent, market-led reforms of HE, suggesting that the entitlement and self-absorption on the part of students, which they described, was inextricably linked to processes of marketisation. The following quotation from a staff member in Danish HEI2_3 makes this point clearly:

‘[T]he neo-liberal kind of regime has touched a lot of our students into being more compliant and more, ‘It’s not our responsibility, it’s someone else who has to do it … the other ones could do something’.”
And then there’s the service providing, so if you see the university or the school as someone providing a service, you don’t feel responsibility to change anything, because they’ve got to do it.’

Staff also commented on the reduced time available for students to engage civically and/or politically – because of the increasing amount of paid work they had to do to be able to fund their HE, and/or as a result of reforms to incentivise quicker completion of their degree (Brooks et al, 2021a; see also Chapter 1). The following quotations are typical:

‘They don’t […] have time to be political, they do not have time to watch the news because they are so stressed about everything else. And I wish they could be more political, I see it as a … oh they should be the ones getting involved in politics, but when … like when should they do this? Between their working schedule and […] exams [what can] I expect from them?’ (Staff member, German HEI2_3)

‘I think students are very busy […] I mean they have a lot to study […] they have a lot of … practices, teaching, the lessons, the essays, exams! And then an increasing number of students are working, so that reduces the time to engage in, in movements.’ (Staff member, Spanish HEI3_4)

Other explanations were also offered, and here there was more agreement between staff members and those involved in policy. For example, a number of interviewees believed that the composition of the student body had changed considerably over recent decades, and that this had had a direct impact on citizen-related activity. Echoing observations made by Klemenčič (2014) and Nissen (2019), they noted that the increasing diversity of the student body had meant that it was harder to identify common grievances and speak with a common voice. One staff member from Polish HEI2 claimed, “There is no such thing in Poland as students as a group who share political views; there are rather some individuals who try to take part in debates”. Similarly, a Spanish staff member commented: “Young people are not important political actors in the society … they don’t share values or identities, interests or platforms” (Spanish HEI1_1). Moreover, the Polish Student Parliament leader explained that his organisation specifically avoided campaigning on a large number of issues precisely because there was no common view among the student population.

Others suggested that ‘non-traditional’ students were less inclined to engage with broader social and political issues because they were more concerned with the material rewards of HE (as a result of the significant social and financial costs of attending – see Ball et al, 2002b) – or because
of a belief that it is elite groups who tend to lead protests and other forms of civic engagement:

‘[In the past, students tended to be] reasonably wealthy and you know they had loads of time to be […] young and idealistic and … go and march and all the rest of it, brilliant, lovely. It’s a bit different these days! They’re from different backgrounds, they’ve got you know, got their own problems to sort out.’ (Staff member, English HEI1_2)

‘I kind of miss the times when being a student meant being part of an elite that also sort of assumes the role of … of agents that work for positive change … and try to have an influence or to have an impact on [society], to influence it, in order to push it towards … better … solutions, outcomes. This was, this was very visible in Poland in the eighties, when the students were often … the first to show up in, on street demonstrations for example, protesting against … the old authorities. And right now, students don’t seem interested in that anymore.’ (Representative of Polish government)

Interviewees also asserted that students – along with people in general – tended to have a more individualised outlook on life, which militated against taking collective action. An English staff member (HEI1_2) contended that students’ alleged lack of civic and political engagement was because “they think about issues on an individual level”, while an interviewee from the same institution commented, similarly, “our culture now is not idealistic, it’s quite self-orientated, I think – it’s Thatcher’s legacy”. Despite the interviewee here attributing individualism to a specific moment in UK political history, similar comments about a shift to more individually oriented cultures were made by staff members in Germany and Spain. (See also the discussion of individualism in Chapter 6.)

Others pointed to the impact of the wider social and political context, claiming that students were often disillusioned with the types of political engagement they saw around them:

‘I don’t see [students] as very much, how can I say, committed to politics. I mean we had a hard period with politics in Spain, so some of … I mean many of us are a little bit fed up of you know … maybe this government will do better, that’s what I think. … And somehow these issues with the corruption in the national government and everything is feeling of disappointment with politics.’ (Staff member, Spanish HEI2_3)

‘The students aren’t politically active now, generally speaking. … I think a lot of young people are disenchanted with politics.’ (Staff member, Irish HEI2_1)
In explaining this disconnect between the views of students, on the one hand, and staff and policy actors, on the other hand, it is possible that the relative visibility of citizenship-related activity is relevant. Individual, non-formal actions are perhaps less likely to be observed by staff and other social actors than collective activities, and less likely to be formally recorded than turning out to vote in an election. In addition, in some of the staff narratives there are suggestions that pressing for education-related changes (such as improved turnaround times for assessment) and engagement with wider social issues are mutually exclusive. This is not a perspective that the students appeared to share. Moreover, as we have indicated above, unfavourable comparisons with previous cohorts of students sometimes seemed to be based on a misreading of political activity in the 1960s and 70s – and an incorrect assumption that in previous decades the majority of students had been involved in protests both on campus and off.

Whatever the reasons for this disconnect, it is certainly the case that, in general, we can see some stereotypical views of students being played out in the narratives of staff and policy actors. Indeed, although there is now a large academic literature on the ways in which young people in general, as well as students in particular, are politically engaged (for example, Vromen, 2003; Marsh et al, 2007; Vromen et al, 2016), views about their alleged apathy appear quite stubbornly engrafted within the views of those interacting on a day-to-day basis with students (in the case of staff) and those formulating policy that directly affects the lives of students. There thus appears to be a high degree of continuity with previous research that has documented claims of youth apathy made by politicians, social commentators and others with social influence (Marsh et al, 2007; Klemenčič and Park, 2018; Bessant, 2020).

Conclusion

This chapter has highlighted a significant disconnect between the perspectives of students, on the one hand, and those of other social actors, on the other. In line with much of the extant literature on HE reform, the staff we spoke to tended to believe that, as a result of shifts towards more market-based HE sectors, students’ interests had narrowed and, while they were often more aware of their rights, these were more likely to be articulated in an assertion of ‘entitled consumerism’ rather than a more rounded citizenship identity. They also believed that students’ political activity and collective action had declined notably when compared to previous generations – a view that was shared by many of the policy actors we interviewed, and echoed in some (although not all) of the media texts.

Students, however, presented a very different picture – often constructing themselves and their peers as active citizens making a contribution to their communities (local and/or national, rather than global). While they tended
to focus primarily on their responsibilities rather than their rights, such responsibilities were often framed, not in terms of conforming to social norms, but with respect to analysing critically the society around them as a first step towards effecting meaningful change. In this way, the students’ views seem close to Biesta’s ‘subjectification’ model. Students were also, however, aware that their own perspectives were not always shared by others in society, noting that their potential to contribute as political actors as citizens more broadly was often constrained by assumptions that they were not yet fully formed citizens able of articulating an informed and reasoned voice. We return to this apparent disconnect in Chapter 8.