Enthusiastic learners and hard workers

Introduction

A number of sociological analyses of European HE have argued that processes of marketisation and neo-liberalisation, enacted through various HE policies, have adversely impacted how students learn (for example, Moutsios, 2013). However, such claims have been subject to limited empirical investigation. Moreover, much of the empirical research on the marketisation of HE and its impact on students’ engagement with their studies has focused on England, and there is a dearth of comparative studies exploring this topic across different European nations. Are the findings stemming from empirical studies focused on England applicable to other European nations? Are there similarities in how student learning is discussed by policy actors, the media, university staff, and students themselves? This chapter explores these questions.

We will begin by discussing how student learning was problematised in staff, policy and media narratives – often in line with the scholarship mentioned above. We will contrast this with students’ own perspectives, highlighting how they placed considerable emphasis on their commitment to learning and claimed that they derived great enjoyment from engaging with the material on their course. We will also illustrate how students emphasised the hard work and effort they put into their studies, viewing this in largely positive terms. In doing so, we will problematise the construction of students – in scholarship as well as in some of our own data – as either focused on getting a degree certificate and job, or being passionate and driven learners, arguing that this is a false and unhelpful dichotomy. The chapter will then go on to illustrate how students felt that in policy, media and broader societal narratives, some students were viewed as being superior learners compared to other students, based on various perceived hierarchies relating to discipline of study and, in some cases, institutional affiliation. Finally, we will examine how social class inflected students’ learner identities.

Are students passive and instrumental, or enthusiastic and driven?

Passive and instrumental learners: prevalent constructions of students

Scholarship about the instrumentalisation of learning at the HE level has a long history in the context of the US, with studies on the topic being
published from the 1960s (for example, Clark and Trow, 1966). In the European context, in contrast, it is only more recently that this topic has attracted substantial scholarly attention, typically in relation to discussions of how policies of marketisation and neo-liberalisation have impacted the experience of being a student.

With respect to England, studies have illustrated how a raft of national HE policies position students as consumers, and HE as a commodity in which they will be willing to invest for personal gain (Naidoo and Williams, 2015; Brooks and Abrahams, 2018; Raaper, 2018). This is perceived as having had significant impact on student identities, pedagogical practices and relationships, curricula and learning outcomes (Molesworth et al, 2009; Nixon et al, 2010; Moutsios, 2013; Naidoo and Williams, 2015). An important theme in such studies is that students have come to see themselves as consumers and hence approach learning in an instrumental and passive manner. For instance, according to Molesworth et al (2009), the marketisation of HE in England has meant a shift in the mode of existence of students from being a learner to having a degree, and, as a result, contemporary students are primarily focused on learning what they need in order to do well enough on assessments to get a degree and secure a ‘professional’ job, rather than being driven by a desire for subject mastery and self-transformation. Research on European HE systems beyond England has linked similar trends to the Bologna Process and the establishment of the European Higher Education Area, which have been discussed by a number of scholars as being underpinned by a neo-liberal agenda (Amaral, 2008; Dobbins, 2011). According to Moutsios (2013), for instance, the Bologna Process has placed severe constraints on how learning takes place. As a result, he sees the contemporary university as being a far cry from the Humboldtian ideal of a university: a space marked by Lernfreiheit (the freedom of learning) in which students can engage in their studies guided by their own interests and free of any external constraints. While much of this scholarship has been based on a policy-level analysis, an emerging body of scholarship has explored the perspectives of staff and students themselves. Some of these studies have lent support to the arguments made above (for example, Nixon et al, 2010, 2018; Nielsen, 2015; Wilkinson and Wilkinson, 2020).

Echoing some of the arguments made in the studies described thus far, in all six countries in our study, a major theme in staff narratives was that, compared to past generations, students had become more instrumental in their approach to HE – both in terms of being more likely to see HE as a path to a job, and being less enthusiastic and engaged learners. While a focus on future jobs and careers was not necessarily discussed as a bad thing by all staff members, most were critical of what they viewed as being a more instrumental approach to learning on the part of many students, which was not always seen as being an outcome of an increased focus on jobs (as we
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will discuss in what follows). Staff described how rather than being self-directed learners who sought to explore their subjects in depth and learn for the sake of learning, contemporary students were more focused on tests and exams, and doing what they felt was expected of them in order to obtain a degree. Furthermore, most staff felt that it was important for students not to focus solely on their study programmes, but also to explore subjects outside the curriculum, and become involved in the wider life of the university, participating in extra-curricular activities and interacting with people from other disciplines and backgrounds (although they stressed that participation in these other aspects of university life should not be to the detriment of one’s studies). However, they believed that contemporary students were much less likely to do this, and, as a result, the experience of being a student had become more circumscribed.

In some countries – supporting the scholarship described above – the perceived instrumentality in students’ engagement with their studies was attributed to specific HE policies. For instance, in Germany and Denmark, the Bologna Process reforms, and national HE policies such as the Danish Study Progress Reform (see Chapter 1), respectively, were pinpointed. In both these countries, staff explained that changes to the pace and structure of degree programmes – often framed as a loss of academic freedom and flexibility in terms of being able to ‘individualise’ one’s study programme, organise one’s time as one wished, and study for as long as one wished – were responsible for shifts in how students viewed HE, and how they engaged with their courses and their HEI. The constraining of students’ freedom and flexibility in this way was seen as making education less about Bildung and Dannelse – that is, education in a broader sense of self-development – and reducing the likelihood of students being driven by an interest in their fields of study and a desire for personal development. In Denmark, staff additionally discussed how national policies had brought about an increased focus on employability. Staff said that students were pressured to give back to society by quickly entering the labour market, and universities were incentivised to promote student employability (see also Jayadeva et al, 2021).

In England, in contrast, changes to the experience of being a student were attributed largely to the impact of high tuition fees on student behaviours and practices. Staff said that because of the large financial contributions that students had to make, they had come to think and behave like consumers who felt entitled to ‘value for money’ and a certain kind of education experience and outcome, rather than like learners pursuing knowledge for its own sake. In addition, staff believed that the high tuition fees that students paid had put pressure on them to think of their degrees as a path to employment. This, and the fact that a large number of students needed to undertake paid work to support their living expenses (leaving them with limited time to spend on their studies), was seen as further contributing to
passive and instrumental learning practices among students. Some staff also discussed how they felt forced to adopt teaching practices primarily aimed at effectively transmitting set information, rather than engaging students as partners in the learning process, because of a pressure to ensure good rates of student progression and completion, and protect the university from being sued by dissatisfied students. This, too, was seen as reinforcing passive and dependent student learning behaviour.

Apart from specific HE policies, staff from all six countries discussed a number of other factors as contributing to an instrumentalisation of student learning. Several interviewees described how the school system primed students to think of their education instrumentally. For instance, an Irish staff member discussed how, at school, there was a “points race” to get into university, and students were trained to be exam-focused, rather than “Newman-esque” in their way of thinking and operating (Staff member, Irish HEI2_4). According to some staff members across the six countries, for contemporary students, being a student was not as big an identity as it had been in the past, and the HEI was less of a key space in their lives. This was attributed to many students working alongside studying and also students having other opportunities and spaces for socialising. Such a perceived de-centring of the student role and the university from the lives of contemporary students – and an attendant fall in the time students spent on their studies – was thought to contribute to instrumental and passive learning behaviour, as well as limited student engagement with their HEIs. Finally, a few staff members discussed how massification had led to a rise in students with an instrumental approach to HE. For instance, according to a Polish staff member (HEI1_1), during her time as a student, fewer people had gone to university and these university-goers had been typically interested in learning for its own sake. She felt that at present, while there were still some students who were very engaged and interested in what they were studying, there were also a large number who were more focused on improving themselves for the labour market. Similarly, a Danish staff member observed that increased participation in HE had led to:

‘a larger than average degree of students who are not here in pursuit of … of knowledge in the very true and beautiful sense, a lot more instrumental learners, a lot more […] students that are here to take exams in order to get a good job, to get a good salary, to buy a house in the suburbs and make a family.’ (Staff member, Danish HEI1_2)

In contrast to staff narratives, in policy documents and interviews – particularly in Denmark, England and Poland – students were constructed as future workers much more than they were constructed as learners (see Chapter 5). In England and Denmark, especially, even when students were
constructed as learners, this was mainly framed in relation to becoming equipped for the job market. Furthermore, in all six countries, student learning was problematised; similar to staff narratives, in policy documents and interviews too, students were often constructed as being dependent, passive and instrumental learners – people who learned by rote (Ireland), suffered from ‘learning bulimia’ (Germany), and memorised rather than questioned what they were learning (Spain). Such learning behaviour was sometimes presented as a problem specific to non-traditional students (see Chapter 7 for further discussion on this theme), while in other cases the HE system was faulted. However, unlike in staff narratives, in policy narratives, problems with the HE system were typically not seen as the result of the effects of specific policies but, rather, poor teaching and/or approaches to learning. For instance, according to the Spanish government interviewee and a representative of the Spanish HE leaders’ organisation, the Spanish HE system was characterised by a focus on memorisation, and students were not taught to think critically and question what they were learning. Moreover, some Spanish policy documents claimed that students were not active and independent learners because the policies that have aimed at promoting student-centred learning have been poorly implemented, and staff had failed to engage students as active participants.

Thus, in line with some of the scholarship described above, in our staff and policy data, student learning was often critiqued as instrumental. Although it was not as big a theme as in our staff and policy data, in a number of the newspaper articles we analysed too, students were discussed as passive and entitled learners (see also Finn et al, 2021). We will now turn to the perspectives of students themselves. Were students mainly concerned with obtaining good grades, degree certificates and jobs, rather than being interested and engaged learners?

**Enthusiastic and driven learners: students’ own perspectives**

As we will discuss in greater detail in Chapter 5, in all six countries, a number of students discussed how getting a degree would improve their career prospects or at least save them from unemployment. This theme was strongest in England and Ireland, where students were most likely to foreground career-related reasons for choosing to enter HE, and to discuss the purpose of HE as being related to securing employment. Nevertheless, this did not mean that students, including in England and Ireland, viewed and approached their degrees as merely a path to a degree certificate, job and income, or that they attempted to move through these programmes of study taking the path of least resistance.

Even when students foregrounded career-related goals for entering HE, many did not speak simply in terms of wanting to obtain a degree in order
to get a well-paid job, but rather saw a degree as a path to entering a field or career that they were passionate about, and/or felt was a good match for their talents and interests (see O’Shea and Delahunty (2018), for similar findings in an Australian context). In many cases, students spoke enthusiastically about the field they wanted to enter, and the contribution they wished to make through this field. It was also not uncommon for students to see HE as an opportunity to discover their professional calling and figure out where their talents and interests lay.

There were also students who discussed entering HE in order to explore a particular subject in greater depth. For instance, two Spanish students described how they had enjoyed studying philosophy in school and now wished to study it at a “higher level”, a Danish student described coming to university because he “just want[ed] to learn all there is to learn about history!”, and a student from an English focus group described how he wished to “bath[e] in [his] subject”. Even some students who were following courses that led to specific professions (for example, nursing) emphasised that they were very interested in the subjects they were studying (for example, illness, the human body) and were not just aiming at getting a job upon graduation. In discussing their interest in embarking on a detailed exploration of a subject through their degrees, a few students reflected on how university-level studies were designed to enable student-led in-depth learning, and this was what distinguished HE from school. For instance, a student from Poland observed that in the previous stages of education, students were mainly receivers of knowledge, but at university they were also researchers and discoverers of knowledge in a specialised area, and became part of a “community that’s engaged with a particular field of study” (Focus group, Polish HE13_1).

A number of students also described entering HE because of a desire to study and learn, framing this desire not in terms of a specific subject or field, but more broadly. For instance, students described how they were “thirsty for knowledge”, “hungry for getting to learn something”, and “addicted” to learning. Finally, across all six countries, some students said that they had entered HE in order to broaden their thinking and develop as individuals. Students spoke about how HE equipped one to acquire “another vision of the world”, a chance to “discover yourself”, “develop [oneself] as a person […] and awaken concerns also”, “challenge [one’s] thinking”, “expand [one’s] horizons” and “evolve as a person”. The kind of learning and development that students spoke of was not seen as happening exclusively through a study programme: some students also described the learning that took place through interacting with other students from diverse backgrounds, doing internships and other extra-curricular activities, and so on.

Many students did not frame their desire to explore a subject, learn and develop themselves in terms of increasing their employability – or, at least,
not solely in these terms. Some noted that even if they were already assured an ideal job, and therefore did not need a degree for this purpose, they would still go to university because, as one student put it, “The process would really interest me, it is not just a case of obtaining a certificate” (Focus group, Spanish HEI3_1). Even when students foregrounded a desire to increase their employability, this did not necessarily mean that they did not also speak of enjoying their degrees and of being interested in their subjects, learning and personal development. The centrality of learning in students’ identities also powerfully emerged from the plasticine models that they made to represent how they saw themselves. While a number of students made models of books, laptops, brains, trees and flowers to symbolise learning, knowledge acquisition and growth, there was a notable absence of models that foregrounded employment or more instrumental concerns (for more detailed analysis, see Brooks and Abrahams, 2021). Although students did not explicitly position themselves as ‘co-producers’ or ‘partners’ (Matthews 2018), many certainly appeared to view themselves as playing an active role in the learning process.

Further emphasising their non-instrumental engagement with their studies – or, at least, their belief that instrumental learning approaches were problematic – a few students complained about the instrumental learning behaviour of other students (sometimes unfavourably comparing contemporary students with previous generations of students) and attempted to distance themselves from such learners. For instance, one student observed:

‘I think that in the current education system, yes, there is a typical student which is a student who comes here as a means of transit to the world of work and this, simply, is the [acquisition of] knowledge you will need in order to find a job which will support you. But I don’t think that I, for example, am the typical student because I don’t see … the university as being simply a tool required for work, rather a space of knowledge in which to create yourself … and to improve as a person.’ (Focus group, Spanish HEI1_1)

Even more commonly, a number of students complained that they felt constrained in their ability to study, learn and explore their subjects in the manner that they wished. In Germany and Denmark, participants complained that while students in the past had had the freedom and flexibility to immerse themselves in their subjects and chart their own learning, contemporary students were under a great deal of ‘performance pressure’ as a result of reforms to speed up the time students took to complete their degrees (see Chapter 6). This, together with inflexible schedules and regular assessment, were spoken of as diminishing the richness of the student experience and negatively impacting learning. The following quotations are illustrative:
‘The consensus is that you should finish your degree as quickly as possible and then enter the labour market as quickly as possible. It’s no longer about assimilating a wide range of knowledge by adding several semesters that you don’t need but that would help you grow as a person and broaden your knowledge, it’s just important to get through as fast as possible.’ (Focus group, German HEI1_2)

‘[T]here has to be a purpose! That’s the most important part, sort of in the political discourse, that we can’t just, can’t just get smarter […] for the sake of getting smarter […] Yeah, and it has to be measurable […] you have to sort of be able to tick a box when, when … with education.’ (Focus group, Danish HEI1_2)

Here, the complaints of students in our study strongly resembled those of the Danish students interviewed by Nielsen and Sarauw (2017) and Sarauw and Madsen (2020); the participants in these studies are described as viewing changes implemented as a result of the Danish Study Progress Reform as restricting their possibilities for learning, impoverishing their experience as students.

In England and Ireland, while students did not complain about not having any discretion over the pace at which they had to move through their degrees, some complained that they were incentivised to focus mainly on assessments. For instance, an Irish student (Focus group, Irish HEI2_3) noted that while in the past (“like 600 years ago”), HE constituted people “philosophising” and learning in a room together, today it seemed to be mainly focused on enabling students to get good grades. She observed: “it’s training you to get a piece of paper, it’s training you to be an employee rather than to have a well-rounded education, which I think is what we should have”. In Spain, some students from the two public HEIs in our sample believed that the quality of education was poor, which came in the way of them experiencing their studies as enriching and enabling of personal development. For instance, one student made a model of a “frustrated doll” to depict how she viewed herself:

‘Well, mine is like a sad and frustrated doll, because I believe they have to change the teaching methodology that they use in class, it has to be more dynamic, different, not the typical one of coming here, sitting down, warming your seat and listening to all they tell you.’ (Focus group, Spanish HEI3_3; see Figure 4.1)

Indeed, some believed that the poor quality of education in Spain contributed to Spanish students being viewed as inferior learners compared to or by students from other European countries. Finally, across all six countries, a
large number of students discussed and criticised how learning for its own sake, and knowledge for the sake of knowledge, were often constructed, by the people around them – and, in some cases, in political discourse – as a problematic goal for a student to have (we will return to this point later). Many described being advised by family and friends, as well as school career guidance counsellors, to choose study programmes with good job prospects and not to study something for its own sake. A number lamented how they received questions from family and friends about what they were planning to do with their degree and after their degree, and not many questions about whether they were enjoying the degree itself.

Our research thus joins a growing number of studies which have challenged the dichotomous manner in which students are often discussed within and beyond scholarship: as being either active, passionate and dedicated learners or instrumental, entitled, passive and interested only in non-academic goals. For instance, with respect to first-generation students in the US, Hurst (2010, 2013) and Grigsby (2009) have shown that it is possible for students to care about knowledge for its own sake while also wanting their education to improve their career prospects. In the context of England, scholars have argued that students exhibit varying levels of identification with a consumer identity (Tomlinson, 2017; Brooks and Abrahams, 2018), and that identifying as a consumer and/or having career-related motivations for doing a degree does not necessarily mean that students have become entitled and passive learners (Wilkinson and Wilkinson, 2020; Finn et al,
Similarly, our research suggests that despite the fact that job or career-related concerns and motivations were prominent or foregrounded in many students’ narratives – and despite some students discussing how their ability to learn in an explorative and open-ended manner was constrained by various factors (in some cases echoing staff narratives) – an interest in learning, personal development and bringing about positive change inform many contemporary students’ decisions to enter HE and their experience of HE. Indeed, we would argue that framing only non-job-related motivations for entering HE as representative of an appropriate learner identity is elitist, especially in contexts of increased private investment in HE and uncertain labour market outcomes for graduates.

To a large extent, students’ accounts of how they perceived and engaged with their studies contrasted sharply with how they are often constructed not just in scholarship, but also in the narratives of other key stakeholders, such as HEI staff and policy actors, who have considerable influence and impact over how universities operate. Nevertheless, student complaints about feeling constrained in their ability to learn in the manner that they wished, and their attempts to distance themselves from instrumental learning styles they felt were exhibited by some other students, suggest that there are some overlaps between how staff and students conceptualised what constituted good education and an appropriate learner identity. Moreover, while an ‘instrumental’ approach to learning was decried by staff and students across all six countries, there was some variation between countries in terms of how it was felt learning ought to take place at the HE level, which related to national traditions of HE (see also Brooks et al., 2021a). For instance, in Denmark and Germany, reforms that have restricted students’ ability to determine the length of their studies and to prioritise their own time during their degrees – features that have long characterised HE study in these countries – were discussed as impoverishing student learning. Meanwhile, in the other countries in our study, where the right to prioritise one’s own time or decide on the length of one’s degree has not been normalised, students and staff did not discuss the fixed length of degree programmes as impinging on students’ ability to learn in a self-directed and explorative manner.

**Students as hard workers**

In the plasticine models that students made to depict how they saw themselves and how they were seen by others, an important theme was the amount of hard work that being a student involved (see also Brooks and Abrahams, 2021). Many students made models of books and laptops to portray how they saw themselves as hard workers, and some also felt that they were seen in this way by those around them. Although several students emphasised how working so much could lead to stress, exhaustion and limited time for other activities
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and responsibilities (see Chapter 6), most presented their busy student lives in positive or at least neutral terms. The following quotes are illustrative:

‘That’s me with a laptop! That’s basically what I do all day, that’s how I fall asleep, that’s how I wake up! Basically I study, I programme, that’s it, there’s not much else and there’s not much time for anything else.’ (Focus group, Irish HEI2_3; Figure 4.2)

‘My family, like my close family […] are just baffled at the amount of time I spend in front of a screen, typing or reading and stuff, so …! […] So yeah, [I made a model of] my computer screen.’ (Focus group, English HEI2_2)

It is possible that students’ emphasis on their hard work was partly a reaction to wider narratives of them being lazy and societal discourses about the neoliberal imperative to ‘work hard’ as frequently articulated by politicians and other policymakers (Littler, 2013; Mendick et al, 2018). In all six countries, a large number of students made models to depict how they were seen as lazy by people they knew, but also ‘society’, politicians and the media (see Chapter 7 for a more detailed discussion). Strikingly, this was one of the most prominent ways in which students felt they were seen by others. In line with students’ perceptions, our analysis of policy documents and the
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interviews we conducted with policy actors showed that students were frequently constructed as not working hard enough. This was most explicit in Denmark, where a major theme in many policy documents was that students were not spending enough time on their studies, which was seen as especially problematic given that they were beneficiaries of the government (through the receipt of free education and maintenance grants). Indeed, the figure of the ‘lazy’ student has been used as a foil for introducing a range of reforms intended to encourage students to move through their studies at a faster pace (see also Brooks, 2021; Ulriksen and Nejrup, 2021). Similarly in Spanish policy narratives, various explanations were put forward to explain a supposed lack of hard work among students – from not being sufficiently encouraged by teachers to not feeling pressured enough by the cost of their education to put a lot of effort into their studies, given that they typically lived with and were supported by their parents. In contrast, in the English policy narratives, students were presented as being very hard-working precisely because of the pressure that they felt as a result of paying high tuition fees. Nevertheless, even here, an implicit contrast was drawn between those students who work hard and are thoroughly deserving of their degree outcome and others who have not shown such commitment and yet have been unfairly rewarded with a ‘good degree’ as a result of ‘grade inflation’ (Brooks, 2018b; see also Chapter 7).

Similarly, in the newspaper articles we analysed, a major theme was that a large proportion of students were not suited to HE and were not hard-working and committed to their studies. The presence of these supposedly inferior learners was often linked to the massification of HE. Such a framing of students was most pronounced in Denmark, but visible in the other five countries too (see Chapter 7). While, across all six countries, there were also a number of articles that presented portraits of students and their achievements, implicitly highlighting their hard work, only certain students – those studying STEM subjects (science, technology, engineering, mathematics) or management – were portrayed in this way (we will return to this point). In England alone, a few newspaper articles explicitly framed students as hard-working, in some cases almost as if to challenge a prevalent contrasting view. For instance, one article titled, ‘Who says students are lazy!’, offered a portrait of a very hard-working student who balances studies with running her own business, introducing the student like this: ‘[she] doesn’t fit the modern student stereotype of all play and very little work’ (Daily Mail, 12 October 2016).

Most focus group participants took exception to being constructed as lazy and did not see such constructions as being harmless. Many emphasised how such constructions made invisible the hard work that the majority of students invested in their studies (often outside of ‘visible’ contact hours), and the high levels of stress many experienced as a result of the demands of their study programmes, and having to balance these demands with paid
work, internships and family responsibilities (see Chapter 6). Thus, our study participants did not seek to present themselves – or to be viewed by others – as ‘effortless achievers’, in order to demonstrate ‘authentic intelligence’ or portray an image of being ‘cool’, as has been documented in some other studies which have explored the relationship between learner identities and narratives of hard work and effort (for example, Jackson and Nyström, 2015). They also did not try to position themselves as ‘stress-less achievers’ or people who were cruising through their degrees, ably balancing academic and non-academic activities and pursuits (for example, Nyström et al, 2019). Indeed, some students (particularly at the more elite universities in our sample) rejected constructions of themselves as highly intelligent because they felt such constructions suggested that it was easy to be a student and failed to acknowledge their hard work. It is also important to note while some previous studies (for example, Brown et al (2016) writing about England and France) found that students at elite HEIs discussed hard work as being the defining feature of an elite education, we did not encounter much inter-institutional differentiation in narratives of hard work among our participants. Rather, across HEIs and countries, our study participants appeared to view hard work as part of a successful or, at least, legitimate learner identity.

We also encountered more sympathetic constructions of students. For instance, while some staff members were critical of students’ lack of investment of time and effort in their studies, many were rather sympathetic towards students, noting the pressures the education system placed on them, and how hard most worked. In the films we analysed, too, students were largely portrayed as hard-working and driven (although some students more so than others). The theme of students as hard workers was especially foregrounded in the German comedy, Wir sind die Neuen. The film tells the story of three pensioners who move into a flat together, below a flat occupied by three university students. The pensioners are portrayed as fun-loving people, who like to throw parties and seek out new experiences. They are keen to befriend the students, whom they imagine would be similarly inclined, but soon realise that this is not the case: the students are extremely focused on their studies, want to be left alone, and immediately start complaining about noise from downstairs (see Appendix for further details). The plot of the film is intended to be humorous because it reverses the typical roles associated with pensioners and university students. However, this role reversal can also be read as a comment on how contemporary students are very studious and hard-working, and university studies are extremely demanding. There is also a suggestion that this was not always the case; one character, Thorsten, makes a comment blaming the previous generation for not having taken their studies seriously enough, which has led to a situation where contemporary students are given a restricted amount of time to complete their degrees.
In the next section, we will explore how a number of students felt that the manner in which one was seen by others – as either hard-working or lazy, impressive or useless – was mediated by the subject one studied, and, in some cases, by the HEI which one attended. We will also examine the impact of social class on students’ learner identities.

A hierarchy of learners?

Hierarchies between disciplines of study

In student focus groups in all six countries, a major theme was that the manner in which one was viewed by others – ‘society’, the government, family, friends, other students – depended on the subject one was studying. Students from a range of disciplinary backgrounds discussed how those studying humanities or social science subjects were viewed as problematic, and inferior to students studying STEM subjects, for a number of reasons (see also Jayadeva et al, 2022).

First, according to students, humanities and social science courses were widely seen as being ‘useless’ and ‘pointless’ because they were not thought to lead to employment, or, at least, not to good careers (see also Brooks et al, 2021b). Many students discussed how, for this reason, prior to entering HE they had received advice from family, friends and their school career guidance counsellors to study a STEM subject, and had been strongly discouraged from studying humanities or social science subjects. Students who were enrolled on humanities or social science courses described how they were constantly confronted with questions, from their friends, family and even classmates following other programmes, about the value and legitimacy of their study programmes. For instance, a student from a Spanish focus group observed:

‘[W]hen you go to a family meeting and they ask you about what you are studying and you say, “information technology”, they say, “very good, very good money”, but if you say, “sociology” or “social work”, they ask, “Will it give you any opportunities?” [And you reply:] “Listen, why don’t you ask me if I am happy doing my course or if I like it, instead of if it will give me opportunities or allow me to make money”’. (Focus group, Spanish HEI3_2)

Similarly, a student in England, studying English and art, made a model of a bucket without a bottom to depict how she was viewed by her family and school friends as:

‘doing a degree [that is] kind of pointless, like a bucket without a bottom! [others laugh] […] the first question I get asked is, well what are you going to do with that? [agreement] And I’m like, ooh, don’t
Figure 4.3: Bucket without a bottom

know. And they say, oh do you want to be a teacher? I’m like no. […] And you can either see the judgement in people, or they just say it and say, well that, you’re going to be in loads of debt, waste of money, you know just pointless.’ (Focus group, English HEI3; Figure 4.3)

Another reason why some students felt social science and humanities courses were seen as useless was because the subject matter was thought to be not particularly valuable to anyone. As one Polish student noted: “Students of humanities and social sciences have the worst image. They are viewed as some kind of parasites and society would be okay without them” (Focus group, Polish HEI2; Figure 4.3). A few students felt that such negative stereotypes surrounding students of these subjects also stemmed from people simply not knowing enough about what these subjects involved and the kinds of jobs to which they could lead.

Students discussed how, apart from social science and humanities courses being viewed as useless, they were also considered to be less challenging than STEM courses, both because the subject matter was perceived as being less difficult, but also because these courses typically had fewer contact hours. As a result, students following such courses were thought to be not very intelligent and rather lazy. In Poland and Spain, particularly, students discussed how studying humanities and social science was seen as the last refuge of those people who were not talented enough to study STEM subjects but wished to enter HE. As one student put it, people were seen as studying humanities subjects “not by choice but out of necessity” (Focus group, Polish, HEI1; Figure 4.3). Similarly, a Spanish student noted: “In my experience of sixth form, the social [sciences] were for the stupid, this was being said all the time”
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(Focus group, Spanish HEI1_1). In the plasticine models students made to represent how they felt they were seen by those around them, a number of humanities and social science students from all six countries made models of beds, bottles of alcohol, three Zs to denote sleep, and so on to depict how they were seen as lazy and hedonistic.

Students following humanities and social science courses spoke about how, in contrast, STEM students were viewed as being intelligent, hard-working, higher achievers and people with bright futures. This was discussed as being a product of STEM courses being widely viewed as challenging, valuable and leading to good careers. Many of our participants following STEM courses made models of books, graduation caps and spectacles, to portray how they were viewed positively, and often linked this to their subject of study. For instance, a medical student made a model of a pair of spectacles and a number of books to depict how she was seen by others and explained the model like this: “I have made a pair of spectacles and a lot of books […] because if you study Medicine they see you as a clever girl who studies a lot, who will be a good medic, who will contribute a lot, who will cure people” (Focus group, Spanish HEI1_2).

While the humanities and social science students in our focus groups did not typically agree with the negative ways in which their disciplines were viewed, many expressed frustration at being positioned as inferior learners. Some students felt that the widespread valorisation of STEM subjects, together with the related view that a degree should lead straightforwardly to a specific career, led to many students choosing subjects that they were not interested in or well suited to study.

Particularly in Denmark, Poland and Spain, some students discussed how STEM subjects were promoted as the most worthwhile fields of study by both politicians and the media. Our analysis of policy and media narratives from all six countries do indeed demonstrate a valorisation of STEM subjects. In policy narratives in some countries, linked to the construction of students as future workers, was concern about whether students were choosing the ‘right’ study programmes. For instance, in several of the Polish policy documents, concern is expressed that students are picking the ‘wrong’ subjects – humanities courses (which are not seen to prepare them well enough for the labour market), rather than STEM courses which are seen as valuable in this regard (see also Stankiewicz, 2020). The expansion of the number of students opting for social science and humanities courses is discussed as ‘the dark side’ of massification (Polish speech 3). Recent reforms have aimed at providing students with more information about the relationship of courses to the labour market in order to enable them to make better decisions regarding subject of study. Similarly, recent reforms in Denmark have sought to direct funding away from courses with perceived low labour market relevance (see Chapter 1). In Spain, Germany, Ireland
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and England, although such significant attempts have not been made to divert students into STEM study programmes, the importance and value of STEM subjects was still emphasised in different ways in policy narratives, most importantly through an emphasis on the importance of these subjects for the economy.

Furthermore, in a number of newspaper articles, STEM subjects were presented as valuable for the country (economic prosperity, international competitiveness) and the individual (good job prospects), and the popularity of STEM courses among students was celebrated – or, in some cases, limited student enrolment in such courses was problematised. Another category of newspaper article that we encountered was inspirational stories of students who had participated in various national and international competitions or made other notable achievements. Strikingly, the students focused on were almost always STEM students (or, in some cases, management students). The social sciences and humanities were the focus of just a few newspaper articles. These articles, published in Polish and Danish newspapers, focused on the fall in student numbers on specific humanities programmes, and the threat to these subjects as a result of policy reforms, respectively.

In the films and TV series we analysed, although the hierarchies between subjects were not a major focus, there were a number of references to the perceived superiority of some subjects over others. For instance, in the English comedy, *Fresh Meat*, Vod, a student studying for an English degree, downplays her good grades by suggesting that English is not a very challenging subject (“read some books, had some opinions. It’s English, it’s not hard”). In the German comedy, *13 Semester*, a student named Dirk observes that in order to be successful in the upcoming economics exam, a lot of hard work is needed – after all, it is economics they are studying, not social work. In the first episode of the Spanish drama, *Merlí*, one of the lecturers welcomes the new philosophy students by humorously remarking that a philosophy degree is the “official degree with no prospects”, and references are made to the philosophy programme having a high drop-out rate (although the TV series itself takes pains to emphasise the beauty of philosophy and present the discipline in positive light).

Studies thus far have examined students’ relationships to their subjects of study (for example, Bradbeer et al, 2004; Ashwin et al, 2016), and have shown that different disciplines have different pedagogical cultures, which can mediate students’ understandings of their learner identities (for example, Nyström et al, 2019). However, what has been less studied is how students feel that their subjects of study are perceived by relevant others, and how such perceptions might mediate the manner in which they are viewed. Our research thus addresses an important gap, illuminating the extent to which the valorisation of STEM subjects, and an attendant problematisation of humanities and social science subjects – through HE
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policies, media representations and strongly entrenched societal stereotypes attached to different disciplines – can impact the experience of being a student.

*Hierarchies between higher education institutions*

In all the countries in our study, with the exception of Germany, some students also discussed how the HEI to which one belonged mediated the type of learner one was imagined to be by relevant others. This theme emerged most strongly in England. To some extent paralleling students’ views about how one’s subject of study mediated the manner in which one was viewed by others, English students discussed how the HEI a student attended might be seen as an index of their intelligence, work ethic and likely future success (see also Jayadeva et al., 2022). Regardless of the HEI they attended themselves, students discussed how everyone from politicians, to ‘society’ and ‘the public’, to many of their own friends and family members tended to view students studying at the top universities more positively. According to some students, the university one attended could even trump the subject one was studying, when it came to the way one was perceived by others. Students at what were perceived to be the ‘top’ universities were viewed as hard-working, especially intelligent and destined for success. Comments like these were typical:

‘[T]here’s this whole perception that I’m going to get a better job because I have a [name of university] degree.’ (Focus group, English HEI2_2)

‘I think, obviously, the students who go to like [names of elite universities], [politicians] kind of think, oh yeah, well they’re going to potentially be in the government in a few years’ time. [Agreement]’ (Focus group, English HEI3_1)

Our participants also discussed how students at lower status institutions might be seen as lazy, hedonistic, not very intelligent, and, all told, less serious learners. For instance, one student from the high-status university in our English sample contrasted how students from her university were treated with respect, while those from the university in the city where she was from (a lower-status university) were seen as drinking and doing drugs, being rowdy and ‘floating’ through their time in HE (Focus group, English HEI2_1). This was a view also expressed by students from the less high-status institutions in our sample. For instance, one student reflected:

‘I just think that, if I’m honest, I think society just now sees […] especially universities that are not […] the Russell Group universities
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[…] I definitely think that people just see it as just, oh well, go from school straight into uni, there you go, just go and do an extra three years.’ (Focus group, English HEI1_1)

Given the hierarchical manner in which students felt HEIs were organised in the national imagination (and beyond), some discussed the pressure they had felt to secure admission to a high-status HEI. One student said:

‘So there’s a lot more universities recently, and so there was a lot of pressure to be quite selective, like a consumer, and sort of affiliate with more prestigious brands of university […] I think there’s a lot of pressure before going to university to make sure that you get yourself somewhere good, that’s recognisable, that isn’t just going to leave you [agreement from other students] sort of, people going like, who, where … where did you get that university degree from?’ (Focus group, English HEI3_3)

In some cases, students described how they had chosen to study at their university, despite the fact that it was not one of the elite universities in the country, because it had offered a study programme that particularly interested them, but had then felt that they had to continually justify their choice of university to their friends and family.

A number of students from all three English universities problematised the construction of students from ‘top’ universities as superior to those from ‘lesser’ universities. Some students ridiculed how their admission to a high-status HEI had immediately transformed them in the eyes of those around them. Once again, such stereotyping of students based on institutional affiliation was not seen as harmless but as having material impact. For instance, a student from one of the less prestigious universities in our sample discussed how employers were willing to pay students from the ‘classic universities’ or ‘Russell Group’ universities more than they were willing to pay those who attended less prestigious institutions, not because the students in the former group possessed superior skills but because they were imagined to do so (Focus group, English HEI3_3).

The prominence of this theme in England compared to the other countries in our study is unsurprising, given the differences in how the HE systems of these countries are structured. England can be said to follow a ‘neo-liberal model’, where resources are concentrated in a small number of elite institutions such that there is a high degree of vertical or reputational differentiation between universities (Hazelkorn, 2015). In contrast, the HE systems in some of the other countries in our study, such as Germany, could be seen as characterised by a ‘social democratic model’ where all universities are supported to pursue high-quality teaching and research (Hazelkorn, 2015). Nevertheless, even in countries with ostensibly ‘flatter’ HE systems, some students discussed how
HEIs, and their students, were hierarchically ordered. While in England and also Ireland hierarchies were typically drawn between older and newer HEIs, in the other countries in our study, and also in Ireland, other axes of differentiation were also visible. For instance, in Ireland and Denmark, some students made distinctions between universities, on the one hand, and universities of applied sciences (Denmark) or institutes of technology (Ireland), on the other hand, and it was felt that university students were viewed more positively (see also Reimer and Thomsen, 2019, for some evidence of stratification in Denmark along the lines of university age and location). In Spain, students at elite private universities were sometimes discussed as being seen as superior to students from public universities, although some public universities were also discussed as highly selective and prestigious.

While hierarchies between HEIs were not a major theme in the staff and policy interviews, or in the policy documents and newspaper articles we analysed, they were referenced to different extents in the Irish drama, *Normal People*, and the English comedy, *Fresh Meat*. In *Fresh Meat*, one of the protagonists, the rich JP, an alumnus of the elite Stowe School, is presented as attending the fictional Manchester Medlock University because he could not get into a ‘proper’ university. In the Irish drama, *Normal People*, the elite status of Trinity College Dublin permeates the entire series. For instance, of the two protagonists, the affluent Marianne has always assumed that she would study at Trinity (just like her mother), while the other protagonist, working-class Connell, had never imagined that this would be an option for him, until he is encouraged by Marianne. At several points in the series, we see supporting characters, from Connell’s hometown, express awe at the fact that Connell will be/is attending Trinity.

**Social class**

Social class mediated students’ learner identities in various ways. This seemed to be especially pronounced in England and Ireland, where variations were apparent between how students from the different HEIs in our sample spoke about their reasons for entering HE. In England, students attending the lowest status HEI (HEI1) were more likely to discuss coming to university in relation to improving their job prospects, while the students in the elite university (HEI2) were more likely to foregrounded their intrinsic motivation to be at university, and their desire to study “for the love of it” as one student put it. Some students even explicitly distanced themselves from employment-related motivations. Similarly, in Ireland, students at the elite university (HEI3) were much more likely than the students at the two other universities to describe coming to university because they were interested in a subject, or wanted to expand their knowledge on a topic. However, unlike in England, they typically also discussed how the
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knowledge they had gained might be valuable for getting jobs they might want to do in the future.

To some extent, these institutional differences may be seen as mapping onto social differences. As discussed in the previous section, the HE system of England exhibits a high level of stratification compared to the other countries in our study. ‘Research intensive’ institutions (such as ‘Russell Group’ universities, and HEI2 in our sample) are richer, more selective and occupy higher positions in national and international league tables than HEIs which have more recently obtained university status (such as ‘post-92’ universities or HEI1 in our sample). A number of studies have highlighted how students from lower income families are more likely to attend lower-status institutions, while privileged students are over-represented in the intakes of higher-status institutions (Reay et al, 2010; Boliver, 2013). Our sample of students in England reflected this pattern. While the Irish HE system is arguably less hierarchically organised than in England (Hazelkorn, 2015), HEI3 is one of the most rich, selective and prestigious in the country and, of the three HEIs in our sample in Ireland, it had the most privileged student intake. The differences we observed in England and Ireland with respect to how students framed their reasons for entering HE could thus be attributed, at least to some extent, to their socio-economic backgrounds. For instance, previous studies have shown how, given the greater financial and social risks that undertaking a degree involves for them, students without a family history of HE are likely to emphasise future job opportunities rather than a love of learning for its own sake (Ball et al, 2002b). It could also be argued that because students from higher socio-economic backgrounds attending elite HEIs feel more confident about getting attractive jobs upon graduation, they are less likely to emphasise job-related motivations for entering HE.

In addition, other studies have highlighted how social class can be mediated by institutions, through drawing on the concept of ‘institutional habitus’. Reay et al (2010) discuss how the institutional habitus of an HEI, specifically the learning environment and culture that characterise it, can impact the learner identities that its students develop. In their study of working-class students attending four different types of HEIs in England, Reay et al found that those at the elite HEI in their sample were most likely to develop a strong sense of themselves as successful learners, because they led lives that revolved around their degree programmes and the university as a physical and social space. Unlike students in the lower-status HEIs in their sample, who needed to undertake paid work alongside their studies, and typically lived with their families, students at the elite HEI were expected by the university – and were able – to devote themselves to their study programmes and university-related activities. Thus, being a university student was likely to become their primary identity, while the learner identities of the students at
the lower-status HEIs remained fragile and in competition with their other roles and identities. Similarly, other research focused on first-generation students in the US, Canada, UK and Germany (Spiegler and Bednarek, 2013) as well as Australia (O’Shea and Delahunty, 2018) has highlighted how such students may view themselves as imposters, both because they do not feel entitled to attend university, and because they often have more limited engagement with their universities, as a result of working alongside studying and living off-campus. It is possible, then, that another reason the students at the elite universities in our sample in England and Ireland were more likely to foreground learning–related goals or motivations for entering HE, was because they saw themselves as successful learners, and their learner identities were their most prominent identity.

Related to this, staff in all six countries described how not all students could afford to focus completely on their studies because of the need to undertake paid work to support themselves or finance their education. Except for in Denmark (where students receive grants to cover their living expenses while studying), staff discussed how an important reason – but by no means the only one – for which many students worked was financial need. Staff described how not all students were able to access funding to support themselves because of limited funding options and, in some cases, because funding was tied to academic performance rather than need. While most staff members felt that balancing work with studies could be a valuable experience for students – especially if the job was related to one’s field of study – they complained that many students, especially those from lower socio-economic backgrounds, were forced to work so much that their academic performance suffered.

These themes were also visible in the films we analysed. For instance, in the English comedy, *Fresh Meat*, the two most well-off students, JP and Oregon, are portrayed as people who did not need to worry about the kinds of jobs they would be able to find upon graduating, while this was a major concern for many of the other main characters. Furthermore, while Oregon is depicted seeking out work experience solely in order to build her CV, other less well-off characters are shown having to work in jobs unrelated to their courses in order to support themselves, and having to balance studies and work. In the Irish drama, *Normal People*, working-class Connell initially plans to study a course that would have good job prospects (law), until his girlfriend, Marianne, convinces him to study the subject in which he is really interested, English. At university, while Marianne and her friends are portrayed as not needing to work, and being able to spend all their time on their coursework and ‘wider university experiences’, Connell is shown working two different jobs (both unrelated to his degree) in order to support himself, until he manages to get a scholarship. In the Spanish drama, *Merlí*, the uncertain career prospects attached to a philosophy degree is a recurring
theme. Of the group of philosophy students we meet, the most affluent, Rai, observes that he is the only person studying philosophy who does not have to worry about future prospects, since he is already rich. His interest in studying philosophy is revealed to be completely disconnected from employment-related interests. Thus, in media narratives too, social class was depicted as shaping students’ experiences of HE.

**Conclusion**

In this chapter, we have attempted to illustrate how, despite prevalent constructions of students being instrumental and passive learners – visible in policy and media narratives of students, as well as in the narratives of staff members we interviewed – an interest in and commitment to learning and hard work was emphasised by most students. This emerged powerfully from students’ narratives of their motivations for entering HE, but also from their complaints about various factors that constrained their ability to learn in the manner that they wished. We argue that such learner identities and an interest in more ‘instrumental’ concerns such as jobs and grades, are not necessarily mutually exclusive. Furthermore, we highlight how particular hierarchies – based on discipline, institutional affiliation and social class – appear to exert significant impact on the experience of being a student. Most notably, across all six countries, students following humanities and social science courses felt that they were viewed as inferior learners compared to students following STEM courses. Our findings also reveal some national variations; we show how institutional hierarchies and social class were experienced as mediating students’ learner identities most strongly in England and Ireland, and how national traditions of HE strongly informed understandings of ‘good learning’ and ‘good students’.