Constructing the Higher Education Student

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Future workers

Introduction

The discourse of human capital, which positions HE students as future workers and as a key economic resource, has been evident in various national and European policies introduced over the past two decades (Brooks, 2021; Keeling, 2006). At the institutional level, there has been a clear emphasis on adjusting study programmes to labour market needs, evident both on HEI websites (Bennett et al, 2019; Lažetić, 2019; Fotiadou, 2020) and in the ideas that circulate within university management (Boden and Nedeva, 2010). Students’ perceptions of and identification with this discourse (especially in relation to notions of employability) have been studied previously (Tomlinson, 2007, 2010; Bonnard, 2020); nevertheless, broader cross-country comparative insights are yet to be made. In particular, the use of alternative contesting discourses by students and staff, which question human capital norms, have remained largely obscured.

In this chapter, we first outline how students are constructed as future workers within a dominant narrative of human capital development – evident in policies and, to a lesser extent, media narratives – in our six countries, and explore the degree to which this discourse is internalised by students and staff. Second, we identify how the future worker construction is reinterpreted by students within a strong discourse of credentialism; and, finally, we outline ways in which both students and staff discursively reject this future worker construction. In rejecting an understanding of ‘future workers’ based on human capital principles, students and staff draw on the concepts of vocation and Bildung to create alternative visions of the relationship between education and the world of work.

Discourse of human capital development

In the history of ideas, there are few with as much potency to shape global political discourse around education, economics and development as the idea of human capital. Although with much older intellectual roots (Brown et al, 2020), its modern conceptual and discursive underpinning is based on the theory proposed by economists Schultz (1961) and Becker (1975, 1993) (for a comprehensive overview see Brown et al, 2020). In essence, the theory is
simple: it stipulates that education drives the marginal productivity of labour, and this marginal productivity then drives earnings (Marginson, 2019).

This economic theory has reshaped understandings of education at both the individual and macro-economic level. At the individual level, within human capital theory, the value of investment in education is defined in terms of the lifetime earnings of educated labour. Employers are understood to choose their future workers based on information about their skills and knowledge on the assumption that this will increase the productivity of their businesses. Consequently, students are encouraged to exercise rational choice and obtain skills and abilities that are desired by employers and which will therefore maximise their earnings.

Human capital theory asserts that, at the macro-economic level, investment in education not only triggers private enrichment, which leads to individual higher earnings, but also underpins national economic growth and development. This assumption has placed education and, in particular, higher education at the heart of economic policy in many developed and emerging economies (Brown et al., 2020). Education systems have been seen as key to producing human capital and thus enhancing workforce productivity and economic competitiveness. Universities, informed about the skills required in the labour market, have been expected to develop the right type of attributes and competencies in their students.

As a result of these ideological shifts, education has become ‘economised’, and discursively underpinned by the language of ‘employability’, ‘skills’, ‘competition’, ‘entrepreneurship’ and ‘outputs’, within an overarching framework of markets (Tomlinson, 2013). Reflecting this ideological shift, the functions of HE as a system of workforce training and preparation of future ‘knowledge workers’ in a ‘knowledge economy’ have come to be prioritised above humanistic and liberal purposes of, for example, developing critical and responsible citizens (see Chapter 3) or facilitating personal development (Chapter 2). From this perspective, students are seen primarily as economic resources who should optimise, in rational choice terms, their individual efforts in and aspirations for education – for the benefit of both their own economic prosperity and that of their national ‘knowledge economy’ (Tomlinson, 2013; Marginson, 2019; Brown et al., 2020).

**Students as future workers within policy**

The construction of students as future workers, informed by ideas associated with human capital, is clearly reflected in HE policy in our six countries – although with different emphases on particular elements of the narrative and different levels of presence (high in England and Denmark, slightly lower in Poland and Ireland and lowest in Germany and Spain). Chapter 2 provided examples of how this discourse was present in interviews with policy actors
when they spoke about the transition of young people into the labour market, but it is equally present within the analysed policy documents.

The construction of students as future workers in line with the assumptions of human capital strongly infuses the English policy documents (Brooks, 2018b) and many interviews with English policy actors in which they emphasised skill formation as the primary function of HE. Furthermore, English policy documents present ‘graduate outcomes’ and ‘the graduate premium’ (that is, the extra pay received by graduates in work compared with non-graduates) as synonymous, and it is assumed that differences in graduate premiums depend exclusively upon variations in the quality of teaching and employment preparation offered by HEIs (Brooks, 2018b). In Denmark, the policy discourse (among government and business) is informed by the logic of human capital development even more so than in England, and constructs students as not sufficiently employment-focused, blaming both students and institutions for the overly long time students take to complete their studies (see also Chapter 7). The main emphases of recent policy initiatives in Denmark are the central regulation of the number of places made available for study, based on a labour market analysis (closing programmes with low graduate employment rates); incentivising completion of a degree within a prescribed period of time; promotion of internships; and the end of a legal right to transition straight from undergraduate to postgraduate study (see Chapter 1). These have been framed in terms of arguments about the importance of optimising generous taxpayer investment in HE. Moreover, there is a strong emphasis on matching more closely the supply of graduates to labour market needs, promoting entrepreneurship, building a strong ‘employability’ focus into curricula, and improving employment rates in subjects where it has been low (Danish speeches 1 and 2; Danish government document 4). Similar sentiments are expressed in Poland (although to a lesser extent than in England and Denmark). For example, Polish government document 3 declares the central aim of reform to be improving graduate employability because many students have chosen the ‘wrong’ subjects (humanities rather than STEM) and are not prepared for the labour market by the curriculum they follow. It calls for curricula to be co-produced with employers (as discussed in Chapter 4 in relation to discussion about hierarchies between disciplines).

In Ireland, instead of employers being presented as in need of/deserving high-quality graduates, there is a recognition that they benefit significantly from HE and therefore should pay a higher contribution to the costs of study (this argument is made explicitly in Irish government document 3). This can be linked to ideas within Irish policy about students helping to strengthen the national economy rather than deriving personal (financial and labour market) advantage. In Spain and Germany this type of discourse is, in comparison, much weaker. We found it only in the calls for employer
involvement in curriculum design, and mostly in policy documents issued by relevant business associations.

We can thus see that the construction of students as future workers within policy, informed by ideas associated with human capital, has been most evident in the countries where neo-liberalism has strongly influenced public sector reforms (for example, England and post-Communist Poland), and also the smaller countries in which human capital is seen as a key competitive economic asset (for example, the Irish ‘Celtic tiger’ economy and the Danish ‘knowledge economy’). In Spain and Germany, openly economically focused policy discourse about education has not been part of mainstream discourse, due to strong historical understandings of the role of HE in the education of responsible citizens for a democratic society (see Chapter 3). These cross-country differences also indicate the different ways in which HE is positioned as a public (or private) good.

**Media discourse on students as future workers**

Within the newspapers analysed in our project, ‘students as future workers’ were often discussed. However, there were notable differences across the papers – for example, this construction was most prominent in the German newspaper *Die Welt* and Polish newspaper *Rzeczpospolita*. The most visible theme, linked to this construction, and in line with the logic of human capital, centres on the topic of practical skills and experience. In the view of many media outlets, there is a shortage of such skills in the labour market, and HEIs are failing to cater for this need by providing too theoretical an education. This stance is illustrated in the following two examples of newspaper headlines:

‘German students call for mandatory internships; Current preparation for a specific occupation is too short, according to the survey. University should follow more strongly the practice of polytechnics’ (*Die Welt*, 27 October 2014)

‘Students are not prepared to work in companies’ (*Rzeczpospolita*, 8 September 2016)

When the issue of degree subject is discussed in the media, the construction of students as rational choosers typically underpins the discourse. Students are often called upon to make careful strategic and rational decisions based primarily on employment, career prospects and likely future earnings. This is a notably strong narrative in England and Poland. Nevertheless, in most newspapers there are also alternative discourses where the logic of rational choice is challenged and wider purposes of HE – not related to human capital
development — are foregrounded (both for individuals and nations). This is particularly the case in Denmark, where there is much discussion about the government trying to limit student choice and focusing on only the economic benefits of study programmes; and in Spain, where the emphasis in the media is on lack of jobs rather than students making ‘wrong’ or ‘irrational’ choices. The following articles highlight the limits of rational choice logic when it comes to students’ decision-making processes:

’S’Students do not know what they can become’ (BT, 11 February 2015)

‘Studying the future; You can make a career even in unusual subjects if important trends are identified’ (Die Welt, 28 November 2015)

A variation of the construction of students as rational choosers, in the media, is the construction of disillusioned students who do not get the expected economic returns, despite having invested in their studies and made the ‘right’ choices. This is particularly strong in England in the context of tuition fees; however, similar examples can be found in newspapers in the other five countries. Within this type of article, such individuals are often perceived as future graduates at risk of unemployment, and institutions (and in some cases governments) are blamed for inadequately preparing them for the labour market.

‘Students expect better jobs than they’ll get, survey shows’ (The Guardian, 26 June 2014)

‘Too many people risk ending up with a useless education’ (Politiken, 12 September 2016)

‘A doctor [PhD] is poorer than an engineer’ (Gazeta Wyborcza, 26 February 2014)

‘70,000 graduates are working in jobs which do not demand any formal qualifications’ (El País, 8 July 2014)

Student perspectives on their collective economic framing as human capital

Despite the strength of human capital discourse within policy and some newspapers, students rarely viewed themselves as a collective economic resource or as a part of an economic competitiveness story. However, when
they did so, several notable cross-national differences appeared. We discuss these minority views in this section.

In Ireland, England and Poland, in contrast to the other three countries that will be discussed below, there was very little discussion of being understood as a collective economic resource.

In Ireland, when it was mentioned in focus groups, students tended to repeat dominant policy narratives about the importance of a ‘knowledge economy’ to a small country such as Ireland. Some Irish students understood the purpose of HE as creating capable and educated workers (Focus groups, Irish HEI3_3 and HEI2_1) and spoke of politicians seeing students as the future labour force (Focus group, Irish HEI2_2). Occasionally, this view was critiqued by some Irish students, commenting that the government focuses only on their economic value (Focus group, Irish HEI2_1). In England and Poland, this macro-economic growth discourse (emphasising benefit to the nation-state, for example) was less present than in Ireland, reflecting policy and media narratives in both countries where emphasis is placed on individual returns from HE, not those that might accrue to wider society. Indeed, the Polish students in our focus groups never discussed themselves in macro-economic terms. In England, on rare occasions when a macro-economic framing of students appeared, it was typically part of a criticism of politicians who were accused of viewing students as “a source of income for the future, we’re the people who will be making the money for them” (Focus group, English HEI2_1) or, framed more positively, as a resource crucial for long-term economic stability (for example, the country needs “students who can earn a good deal of money to pay for social care for the older generations” (Focus group, English HEI1_2)).

In Denmark, Germany and Spain, a macro-economic framing of students was problematised by students, in some cases in very strong terms and with different rationales. Danish students felt that the policy reforms aimed at speeding up their progress through their degree made them feel more like workers-in-the-making, as the government was pushing them to get out of HE and into the labour market faster, so they could start paying taxes sooner. In contrast, they considered themselves as a resource for society on the basis of their critical thinking, not just their economic contribution: “I don’t want to be a [resource] for industry, I want to be a [resource] for society” (Focus group, Danish HEI3_2). The main way in which Danish students talked about their role in society, with respect to the labour market, was in terms of them benefitting the country by becoming educated and making Denmark more globally competitive as a ‘knowledge society’ (deemed particularly important because of the country’s small size). In this way, the connection with the labour market was usually discussed at a societal – rather than individual – level.
Interestingly, students also spoke of getting a free education and feeling that they should return this investment by working for society. Thus, Danish students did partially recognise and accept a macro-economic role, but this was typically discussed in collective and social democratic terms, with respect to giving back to society and the welfare state. They were not, therefore, reproducing an understanding of the future worker informed strictly by human capital theory.

Similarly, in Germany, although students acknowledged that they were indeed potential employees and employers, they believed that the emphasis of the state, and wider society, on them as future workers was a reductive view. They rejected the macro-economic construction of them as the future labour force (informed by human capital ideas) on humanistic grounds, asserting that the “human dimension is missing somewhat” when they are understood merely “as a machine in the economic system” (Focus group, German HEI3_3).

The most vocal criticisms of macro-economic framings of students as the future workforce came from Spanish students, who did sometimes position themselves as an economic resource but spoke about this in terms of exploitation and “working for the system” or, as evident in the excerpt below, just a “coin”.

‘Well, I think that right now we are a coin [a unit of currency] in that we are not being used but we are all going to facilitate others to make money, let’s say. This is not going to be useful only to us but we are going to make money for others who are going to use us. This is what I think it is to be a student.’ (Focus group, Spanish HEI3_3)

In similar critical tones, Spanish students discussed being seen by the country and politicians as a resource for the national economy, which is then wasted when highly skilled workers leave Spain because they cannot find jobs there (a view echoed by some staff). In this way, the (over-)optimistic discourse of human capital development reaches an ironic turn, faced with the harsh economic realities of graduate labour markets.

In summary, we saw in the previous sections that policy discourse and, to a lesser extent, media narratives in all our countries tend to construct students collectively as a macro-economic asset, in line with the economic theory of human capital development (although this is much less evident in Germany and Spain). However, staff and students (especially those in Denmark, Germany and Spain) tended to reject a macro-economic construction of themselves collectively as a future productive labour force. In the next section, we move to a more micro-level perspective to discuss the framing of students as rational choosers, in line with the logic of human capital theory.
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Students’ perspectives on themselves as rational choosers in search for high incomes

Within human capital theory-informed discourse, students are typically constructed as future workers and as individual, rational choosers who weigh up the costs and benefits of participating in education (Becker, 1993). Each student is seen primarily as a ‘Homo economicus’ who makes decisions in a utilitarian and self-optimising manner to maximise their labour market potential (Tomlinson, 2008). They are held to prioritise higher earnings (graduate premiums) and/or better occupations with greater earning potential in the future. We have seen in previous sections that framing students’ decisions in terms of rational choice is evident within policy and parts of the media.

In contrast, our focus group data indicate that it was relatively rare for students to discuss their own (individual) HE paths and biographies in terms of rational choices aimed at maximising incomes and career prospects (see also discussion in Chapter 2 on transitions to adulthood and in Chapter 4 on approaches to learning). Rather than pursuing instrumental choices in line with the assumptions of human capital theory, the HE decisions of many students across all six countries were very similar to what Hodkinson et al (2013) call ‘pragmatically rational choices’. Rationales for study were typically structured around the options that they perceived to be available to them, and were closely bound to their inner learning biographies, that is, retrospective stories about learning and self-discovery (Tomlinson, 2008). They also acknowledged that their HE choices had often been influenced by peers and family, too. Typical of such narratives are students’ comments about having “no other options than to go to university”; a belief that university is the “normal thing to do after school”; attitudes such as “it was taken for granted that you will go to university”; university as an “obvious choice”, presumably “because that’s just what you’re expected to do, because everyone else starts studying”; and, finally, simply “I was raised in that manner” (see also Chapter 2). In many previous studies, such rationales have been described as characteristic of middle-class narratives about HE (Reay et al, 2009) although, in our data, as we explained in Chapter 2, we found little connection between socio-economic background and these kinds of statement.

While such types of narrative were the most common explanation of why the students in our research chose to pursue HE, other rationales were also given. For example, some participants explained their decision in terms of positional competition in the labour market (a ‘need to stand out’) and the belief that, for almost all occupations nowadays, one needs an educational credential (discussed below in relation to credentialist understandings of the ‘future worker’). Others explained how they had decided to progress to HE because of a passion for a particular subject and/or the aim of
following a specific profession (a vocation discourse). Equally, some students framed their decision to pursue HE as part of an individual personal and professional identity journey (consistent with the discourse of Bildung) (see also Chapter 4).

The rarest responses to the question of why our participants had chosen to embark on HE were those that were purely economic in nature and in line with the assumptions of human capital theory. Very few students justified their decision to study in terms of higher future incomes, for example, “better money in the long term” (Focus group, Irish HEI1_2) or “I just wanted a bigger pay rise, when I get my job!” (Focus group, English HEI1_2). In other rare instances where student narratives were aligned with human capital discourse, participants tended to focus on the concept of ‘good jobs’, understood as those that are well-paid or provide “enough money to move out of [the] house” (Focus group, English HEI3_2). Such comments were invoked to describe both their individual desires with respect to social mobility, and also their understanding of the purpose of HE. This extract from an Irish focus group (Irish HEI1_1) illustrates such economic rationalisations by students:

Focus group participant: Yeah, it’s very hard to get a job in this country if you don’t have a degree. [agreement of the rest] And well it’s like, you will get a job, but a well-paid job … Just, well, like, the price of living in this country is particularly high, so you really need a job that pays well to kind of have a good life.

Interviewer: OK and that’s, for you, college is the way to get that, is it?

Focus group participant: Hopefully! [all laugh]

Such instrumental voices came primarily from focus groups in England and Ireland (and Denmark, to some extent) – and, in these countries, from students at institutions offering more applied studies. Laughter and humour often accompanied such claims, indicating a sense of discomfort. Such interventions can be understood as a means of students trying to distance themselves from a materialist narrative when they enact subjectivities promoted by the dominant policy discourse (Maguire et al, 2018). Such behaviour also perhaps hints at some implicit mistrust among students in public discourses about the economic value of their degrees. As we will see in the following section, this mistrust was very often linked to perceptions about increased positional competition and credential inflation – both of which were believed to make future work pursuits challenging.
Credentialist discourse

One of the major findings of our research is that European students do not internalise constructions of themselves as future workers in terms of the human capital discourse propagated by policy and parts of the media. However, with some national variations, they share a very credentialist understanding of HE and how labour markets function. In this section, we outline the key conceptual differences between human capital theory and credentialism.

In contrast to human capital theory, those adhering to credentialism view the labour market as based on the principles of occupational closure (Weeden, 2002), in which access to occupations is limited to holders of specific credentials. Authors such as Collins (1979) argue that the spread of educational credentials adds little or no value to individuals’ human capital in terms of actual competences and skills, and explain the expansion of HE (and the consequent growth in credentials) as caused by the expansion of the middle classes, who have become involved in positional competition (Bourdieu et al, 1977; Brown, 2013). This explains both the growing pressure for individuals to acquire further credentials to access jobs, and the reduction of educational credentials to having primarily a symbolic value – merely a ‘piece of paper’ or ‘a tick in the box’. As Tomlinson (2008) explains, ‘instead of reflecting an increase in the skills and knowledge demands needed to do jobs, the upsurge in higher education credentials simply means that the stakes have been raised for what is needed to get jobs’ (p 50).

Another characteristic of credentialist discourse is its understanding of the labour market in terms of screening and signalling theory (Spence, 1973; Bills, 2003), in which employers have difficulty recognising the actual skills and abilities of candidates due to an asymmetry of information (Spence, 1973). Unable to assess the productivity of potential employees, employers rely on proxies, signals and/or previous experience when recruiting. Educational credentials from different institutions serve as important signals for general abilities and a willingness to learn, but do not indicate actual concrete skills or abilities. Aside from educational credentials, employers may value other symbols including social characteristics (such as family background), appearance, letters of recommendation and previous experience (Weiss et al, 2014; Rivera, 2015).

Understanding the education/labour market relationship in terms of intensifying positional competition, constructs students, individually, as constant seekers of distinction and, collectively, as people forced to participate in fierce competition in a very congested labour market (Brown, 2013). In such markets, the value of credentials for the purposes of signalling and distinction has declined (Brown and Souto-Otero, 2020), and thus graduates
are pressured to find other ways to stand out (higher degrees, better grades, extra-curricular activities, more experience on the CV, and so on).

Our study found very clear elements of a credentialist view of the relationship between education and employment among students in Europe when they were asked about the purpose of education, their individual goals, their labour market chances and their role as future workers. Given the massification of HE in most of our countries (with the exception of Germany) and the associated increased pressure in the graduate labour market felt by our respondents, a credentialism discourse is to be expected. This was, however, less present in Denmark, Germany and Poland than in Ireland, England and Spain – reflecting the fact that the former typically have more specialised degrees than the other three countries, with clearer routes into the labour market as a result (Teichler and Kehm, 1995; Teichler, 2009). In such occupationally specialised labour markets, concerns about credential inflation and social congestion are weaker than in less occupationally specialised and more flexible labour markets, such as in many Anglophone countries and Spain (Gangl, 2001; Müller and Gangl, 2003). Indeed, concerns were articulated particularly clearly within the Spanish focus groups, where perceptions about labour market congestion in the graduate labour market were heightened by the economic crisis and high youth and graduate unemployment (see Chapter 1).

In the rest of this section, we outline some forms that the credentialist discourse took among the students in our focus groups. They often discussed HE degrees as having been reduced to their symbolic values: a ‘certificate’ or ‘piece of paper’ needed for positional advantage in the labour market. This view of certificates as symbolic currency within positional competition is expressed through three different types of student narrative. The first narrative places emphasis on comparisons with people without degrees and the relative chance of success if one does not have a degree. The second narrative focuses on credential inflation, perceived in largely negative terms, and deemed to have been exacerbated by the behaviour of employers. Finally, the third narrative foregrounds the increased competition among students caused by credentialism and its perceived negative consequences.

Comparative chances of success without a degree

Students, particularly in Spain, Ireland and England, discussed university degrees as tools that give them a positional advantage in the labour market compared with people who do not have such qualifications. Acquisition of these tools was identified as one of the reasons for going to university. Focus group participants saw HE as something “to aspire to and which would improve their social status”, allowing them to “have more advantages than other people who could not go to university and study” (Focus group,
Spanish HEI1_3). Students, especially in these three countries, often viewed credentialism as a rampant trend, remarking that many occupations that now require a university certificate did not ask for one previously (Baker, 2011).

Possible alternative paths to obtain useful credentials for the labour market, other than a university degree, were typically seen as not sufficiently rewarding or as undesirable in the positional competition by students in Poland and Spain. Options such as apprenticeships in Denmark, England or Ireland were barely even mentioned, likely because, in these countries, vocational training is already organised within specialised HE institutions (institutes of technology in Ireland, universities of professional studies in Denmark) or under-developed institutionally (England).

**Credentials as ever-inflating 'pieces of paper'**

When asked about the purpose of HE, students in Spain, England, Ireland and (in one focus group in) Germany typically expressed a credentialist understanding of HE – that is, they viewed it as a means of acquiring ‘pieces of paper’ which allow them entry to the labour market and thus the competition for jobs. Here, degrees are largely seen in terms of providing a positional advantage in the graduate market, similar to findings from previous research (Tomlinson, 2008). Again, in line with signalling theory, what is actually learnt at university is often described as not very relevant for labour market success. In this extract, for example, Spanish students describe credential inflation and discuss an ongoing scandal at one university that awarded a master’s degree illicitly to a politician, which led to a wave of investigations into politicians’ degrees. Again, humour and laughter show discomfort with the perceived necessity to pursue credentials in this way, while employers are largely blamed for this situation.

**Interviewer:** What do you think is the purpose of university?  
**Focus group participant 1:** To obtain a piece of paper which says that you have studied something.  
**Interviewer:** To have a certificate.  
**Focus group participant 1:** There are so many of us. I believe there has been a fashion for getting a degree in general, so there has been a deluge of students and there comes a time when you have so many with degrees, that it doesn’t matter if you’ve been to university or not these days, it’s the most common thing in the world, so it has lost its value.
Focus group participant 2: Now you have to have a master’s degree, all the time higher qualifications, higher, higher. [Laughter]

Interviewer: Are you describing a particular case? [Laughter]

Focus group participant 3: The people who have finished [their degree] say to you, ‘No, all that you learned at university doesn’t count for anything, because when you start work you’re like … you haven’t learned anything’. And you would think that if you have studied for four years, then when the day arrived to enter the labour market it would be of some use to you.

Focus group participant 4: Then when you arrive to begin your work experience, they say to you, ‘OK, go and serve coffee,’ and you say, ‘But what’s this?’

Focus group participant 5: And more so these days when a master’s is worth more than a [bachelor’s] degree, so it seems.

Focus group participant 6: OK, recently I think they [master’s degrees] have been devalued a little, above all those from the university of [name of the other university in their city], ha, ha, ha. [everybody laughs].

(Focus group, Spanish HEI3_1)

Similar examples can be found in England and Ireland, especially among students from lower-ranking institutions. A slight variation in the general narrative about credential inflation is evident in Poland and Germany, while it was least present among Danish students. In Poland, the discourse of wanting ‘a piece of paper’ was discussed more in terms of the characteristics of perceived ‘instrumental’ students who choose business degrees and social sciences over STEM subjects and students who ‘don’t care, they don’t work hard’. In general, Polish students did not reduce their potential degrees to only pieces of paper, typically viewing them instead in terms of the skills, abilities and/or knowledge for which they have to work hard. In Germany, on the other hand, credentialism (“You just have to have the piece of paper”, Focus group, German HEI3_3) is placed within the overall political and social ethos of the so-called ‘performance society’ (Leistungsgesellschaft), propagated by centre-right German governments as a German version of the ideal meritocratic society (Böhme, 2010). From this perspective, education
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and training efforts are valued highly as genuine symbols of merit and performance as long as they are formally certified so they can be verified by bureaucratic procedures in the public and private sectors. Within the ‘performance society’ ideal, individual merit and effort are almost always rewarded if properly certified in compliance with bureaucratic rationality. Consequently, people are encouraged to secure certification in every activity they do. As a practical consequence, in the German labour market it is quite usual for employers to request certification for every single item mentioned on a graduate’s CV and application.

**Positional competition and its consequences**

To some degree in all our countries, there was a recurring perception in the focus groups that students are required to obtain HE degrees in order to stand out in the labour market, and that this includes competing for credentials:

‘I think a little of it is credentialism for credentialism’s sake, that is, “If you don’t have a certificate, you’re not going to get a decent salary,” so it doesn’t matter what you study. To study is a means of gaining entry to a group of people who can earn a little more than the people who haven’t studied … I think they are all formalities, including a master’s degree.’ (Focus group, Spanish HEI1_3)

In the four countries where the credentialist discourse is strongest (Spain, Ireland, England and to some extent Poland), emphasis was placed on gathering extra value and distinction for HE credentials through participating in extra-curricular activities, optional projects and so on. This was seen as a way of ‘standing apart’ from other graduates with similar profiles and achievements: “You’ve got to have the degree but then you’ve got to have the bonuses on top of it as well” (Focus group, English HEI3_2). Student narratives in England were much more individualised than in the other five countries, with responsibility for obtaining these additional ‘bonuses for the CV’ seen as lying solely with students themselves. In other countries where this ‘standing out’ discourse was strong, namely Spain, Ireland and Poland, students viewed it more as a shared responsibility of both students and institutions.

In Germany, this issue is discursively framed around differences in the value of bachelor’s and master’s degrees, following reforms introduced by the Bologna Process (see Chapter 1). In particular, it is discussed in terms of the contested issue of whether a bachelor’s degree is sufficient for competition in the labour market or whether a master’s degree is required. Some students considered the bachelor’s to be “half a degree” and felt that students “have to do a master’s in order to make anything of yourself”. At the same time,
others stated that employers insist that students do not pursue an additional degree: “You don’t really need a master’s, it won’t be of any use to you anyway. We’ll teach you everything you need to know. And um, there’s no point in doing a master’s” (Focus group, German HEI3_1). Students felt that employers say this because they can pay less to those who do not hold such a qualification.

Increased positional competition has consequences in terms of interpersonal relations between students and levels of stress (see Chapter 6). Students in Spain and England reported very high levels of fierce and stressful competition – for higher marks in Spain (“You don’t know the trauma I had”) and for activities to add to their CV in England (“I felt a massive pressure to, you know, sort of make myself worthwhile for employers”): “I have noticed that there is a lot of competitiveness in the university, between the students, [who are not willing] to lend you their notes because [they say]; ‘I want to have better marks than you and stand out more’ ... it’s like everybody looks after themselves and that’s it” (Focus group, Spanish HEI3_3).

As we can see from the data presented so far in this chapter, the construction of students as future workers is strong. Nevertheless, students do not understand this construction in terms of the human capital approaches that dominate policy and some media discourses about HE. Instead, the majority of students – especially in England, Ireland, Poland and Spain – viewed the relationship between HE and work very much in credentialist terms. Becoming a future worker is thus seen not as something that automatically follows from personal investment in HE (as the human capital approach would suggest) but rather as an identity realised only through fierce positional competition, based on credentials and other symbols. The students we spoke to felt forced to participate in such competition, but uncomfortable about doing so – blaming employers for creating such conditions and institutions for not offering sufficient support to obtain the much-needed advantage.

**Discourses of opposition: vocationalism and Bildung**

Acts of discursive contestation of, and disagreement with, the dominant policy discourse can come in many forms. We have seen, for instance, that the discussion of HE in terms of human capital or descriptions of the pursuit of credentials were very often accompanied by humour and laughter (as well as sarcasm and irony) which can be interpreted as acts of ‘everyday resistance’ and a means of distancing oneself from aspects of reality that are considered disturbing (Scott, 2005 in Amoore, 2005). A sizeable minority of our student and staff participants go further, however, criticising contemporary policy constructions of students as future workers much more actively.

In these expressions of opposition to dominant discourses, staff and students rely on different discursive strands coming from non-economic
ideas about education itself: those associated with vocation and Bildung. Here we outline these two major alternative discourses, which contest the construction of student as future worker. Both are based on the assumption that the understanding of students as ‘future workers’ has been hijacked by a pervasive narrative of human capital development, which foregrounds economic rationality. These contra-discourses see students as future workers guided by more internally driven values about life and work (vocation) or as a result of processes of self-development and self-realisation (Bildung); moreover, both emphasise the contribution of education to the public good and wider society, rather than to individuals.

**Vocation**

The term ‘vocation’ in the context of HE is a highly charged word, yet it implies a very specific understanding of the role of education and its links with the world of work. Originating from both Catholic and Protestant religious traditions, the ancient Greek concept of κλησις (klēsis) (‘vocation’ or ‘calling’; in German *Beruf* or *Berufung*) was reinterpreted by Luther and Calvin in the sense of the spiritualisation of worldly activities, and subsequently politicised by Weber in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (Frey, 2008). The concept of a vocation is thus secularised and yet, simultaneously, the concepts of study, work and career choice are understood in terms of devotion and passion. Without this conceptual understanding of vocational pursuits, it is hard to comprehend fully the discussions about passion in our student focus groups – which were most prominent in Ireland, and then Poland, Denmark and England. In a vocational understanding of the world, individuals should find and then fulfil their own unique calling. Universities are places where one finds one’s true calling and passion for a subject and/or an interest in a profession (another Latin term with religious etymology). Alternatively, in the case that a vocation is found before entering HE, universities become places to obtain the necessary training and certification that enable that vocation to be realised. Moreover, the labour market is not seen as a place of competition but, rather, one where vocation becomes materialised in the form of a profession and, preferably, a lifelong career. Material rewards are of secondary concern.

This view occurs relatively frequently among students. For instance, in our focus groups in all countries, a vocal minority of students described their reasons for studying in terms of having a vocation in mind (teaching, journalism, urban planning, veterinary science and so on), or wanting to study for a vocation from a young age, for which a degree was a requirement. This is not always linked to a typical profession but could also be a passion for a specific subject: “I felt I had a vocation. I don’t know, I felt it was something I had to do and I did it, I don’t believe I have made a mistake.
… Yes, I wanted to study philosophy and I would like to dedicate my life to it” (Focus group, Spanish HEI3_1).

The vocational world view is in conflict with both human capital discourse (and its concept of the future worker as a rationally calculating economic resource), and credentialism (in which the future worker is one who wins a positional competition through the acquisition of numerous certificates and other symbols). Unlike these two perspectives, a vocational perspective sees value beyond mere material and/or positional gain. This is played out in our data. For instance, students asserted that viewing them as future workers was only a good thing “if you’re doing something that you’re really passionate about” (Focus group, English HEI3_2); that people who do not have this passion “end up hating it [their job] in the future and end up regretting it immensely” (Focus group, Irish HEI3_2); and that one should do “something that you like, because then you can get a job in it and it won’t be a job, it will be something you like doing” (Focus group, Irish HEI2_2).

Along similar lines, students (particularly in Poland) were often critical of purely credentialist motives: “Somewhere at the end they want to get this piece of paper. … It’s all devoid of meaning. … They don’t become students because of some calling, because they decide on that, but because everyone else goes” (Focus group, Polish HEI3_2).

Similarly, staff also used vocational arguments to express their opposition to the construction of future workers as individuals who act opportunistically in the labour market and do not have a calling. They believed that such constructions encouraged students to focus solely on studying to secure a job, which then often divorced them from their passions – “they come away from their interests” (Staff member, Irish HEI2_1). One Polish staff member articulated her challenge to the construction of students as instrumental future workers clearly in vocationalist terms:

I think you should study, you should always study a course that you are interested in, not because perhaps I will find a job later on if I do a degree in this and that, because if you’re not interested in what you do, you will never be good at it, in my opinion. (Staff member, Polish HEI1_2)

Although the vocationalist worldview foregrounds work as an important part of human existence, it reinterprets the construction of students as future workers. Within a vocation discourse, fulfilment through the world of work remains an essential aim, but this aim is understood as a passionate fulfilment of a calling or vocation. It is thus in clear opposition to the economic logic of human capital that sees students primarily as ‘Homo economicus’.
One should not underestimate the role of education as a primary social institution (Baker, 2014), which not only follows the needs of the economy and wider society but redefines them with its underlying values and philosophy. Educational philosophy can shape understandings of student (and staff) identities and the roles they play both within universities and when they enter the world of work. One of these fundamental educational ideologies is centred around the German concept of Bildung (Danish Dannelse) that cannot be translated directly into English, but loosely means ‘cultivation’, ‘edification’, ‘personal development’, ‘self-formation’ or ‘character formation’ (see Chapter 1). This is a concept with both educational and political dimensions and has a very long history in European philosophy centred around the question of what constitutes an educated or cultivated human being (Biesta, 2002; Horlacher, 2015; Rømer, 2021). It is central to the Humboldtian university model and the pedagogical approach called Didaktik that underpins European continental teaching practice, from early schooling to university (Hopmann, 2007; Hudson, 2007; Hansen, 2008).

Students and staff, particularly in Germany and Denmark, used the ideology underlying the concept of Bildung to contest the discourse of student as future worker and related policies that seek closer alignment of education with immediate labour market needs. Inherent in Bildung is the idea that humans are beings with ‘potential to become self-motivated and self-directing’, while the task of education is one of bringing about or releasing this potential ‘so that subjects become fully autonomous and capable of exercising their individual and intentional agency’ (Edwards and Usher, 1994: 24–25) and do not unthinkingly conform to pre-set external social and economic expectations. (This has some similarities to the concept of ‘subjectification’ that we discussed in Chapter 3.) The Enlightenment answer to the question of what constitutes an educated or cultivated human being is not given in terms of discipline, society or morals – as an adaptation to an existing ‘external’ order (including the demands of the labour market) – but in the understanding of Bildung as the cultivation of the inner life, that is, the human mind or human soul: self-Bildung (Biesta, 2002). In the open-ended educational process of Bildung, people become world-wise by finding themselves and their place in the world (Rømer, 2021). The words that characterise this discourse, and that were also often mentioned in the focus groups, are ‘personal development’, ‘growth’, ‘open(ing) minds’, ‘providing different angles’, ‘broad(en ing) horizons’, ‘self-reflection’, ‘finding one’s own path’, ‘personal journey’, ‘engaging (actively) with the world’, ‘whole person’ and so on. We find these words in many of our students’ narratives (see also the discussion about Bildung in Chapter 2 in relation to the growing
up/being grown-up discourse in Germany and Denmark, and in Chapter 4 with respect to non-instrumental approaches to learning).

Given the strength of Bildung traditions, particularly in Germany and Nordic countries, it is unsurprising that the Bildung discourse was found in many staff reactions to the construction of students as future workers and in opposition to the perceived credentialist reality of ‘studying just for a degree’. In most cases staff realised it is also an “old way of thinking” (Staff member, Danish HEI1_3) and an unrealised ideal that people do not necessarily follow in practice (Staff member, German HEI3_1). The Bildung discourse of contestation of the reductive ‘anti-human’, ‘not transformative enough’ future worker construction is almost always formulated in the ‘Yes, but …’ or ‘It is also …’ forms, as illustrated in these two extracts:

‘But there’s still a very strong sense between the students, also [within] academia in Denmark, but also on the political level of Denmark, that pursuing a university programme is also the shaping, shaping your personality somehow, in Danish we call it Dannelse. And that’s also a role of, of university students. It’s not only to learn the academic trade.’ (Staff member, Danish HEI1_1)

‘I do think education, higher education certainly as, yes preparing for a labour market, but also personal development … When you look at the word “education” in the Latin original, it means to educe, to draw out. Not to stuff in! Not push forward, to draw out what is already there and to help develop that and unfold it. … The labour market is part of what we’re dealing with, but it’s not all there is to being a student.’ (Staff member, German HEI1_4)

The Bildung discourse and implied vision of education as personal development is also very visible in student narratives about the purposes of HE and when asked about whether they understood themselves as future workers. Again, similar to staff, Bildung discourse was strongest among Danish and German students and some students in Spain. Danish students spoke of becoming a ‘better human’ through HE and ‘evolving’, or described the purpose of education in Humboldtian terms – contending that societal development could and should be achieved through personal development (see also the discussion of the transition to adulthood in Chapter 2): “I think it [the purpose of HE] is to develop society! [agreement] Just keep growing and doing something new, yeah. Discovering new things. But just not for the society, only … also for yourself, like personal development” (Focus group, Danish HEI1_3).

Similarly, German students saw university as a place to develop “as [a] person … how a person defines him or herself and what their attitude is to the world” (Focus group, German HEI3_2). Spanish students in some
cases (when not talking about credentialism) also explained the purposes of university as “cultivation and … personal improvement” (Focus group, Spanish HEI1_1).

Students, particularly those in Germany and Denmark, used Bildung discourses to criticise the construct of students as future workers and studying just to be a professional. One Danish student, for instance, used a tree metaphor (reflecting the various nature and plant analogies often used in the Enlightenment and Bildung philosophy):

‘It’s not just, OK, you’re studying nursing so you’re going to become a nurse and, you know, be valuable, and then if I don’t do that, you know, I’m just trash. It’s not like that, no. We’re not just a bucket you can just fill up, we’re still … We’re like a tree, we can grow different ways, you know …! And no matter what, we’ll be beautiful! Well, personal growth, you know, that’s … a big thing.’ (Focus group, Danish HEI2_1)

German students also used the idea of Bildung as self-formation to criticise attempts to shape HE in accordance with the need of the labour market, under the influence of companies:

‘The important thing is that you’re there to serve a commercial purpose and nothing more, that you’re not studying to achieve something for yourself but for others, for the economy, and I find that really annoying because it’s not my idea of studying, which is about forming and educating yourself.’ (Focus group, German HEI1_3)

They felt also that the ‘future employee’ narrative stifles the intellectual development of people, and their creativity, with its focus on imminent labour market needs. One student, for example, stressed, “We are, or at least were, a nation of poets and thinkers … Of course, we still have a pioneering role intellectually … we also have the opportunity to aspire to individual achievements which promote ideas, irrespective of which facets prevail” (Focus group, German HEI2_3).

As we can see, the discourse of Bildung is a clear case of how rich educational and intellectual traditions can profoundly shape understandings of student and staff identities and can be used effectively to contest macro narratives of human capital development and related constructions of students as future workers.

**Conclusion**

This chapter has shown how the construction of students as future workers is important to all the social actors involved in our study. Within policy
and, to a lesser extent, the media, future workers were understood in terms of human capital – and this was common across all six countries in our sample. This discourse was strongest in England, Ireland, Denmark and Poland – and weakest in Spain and Germany. (To some extent this reflects the wider welfare regime in the various nations. Neo-liberal ideas have, to date, been less influential in the HE sectors in Spain and Germany than in the other four nations.) Nevertheless, students mostly did not enact the prescriptions of human capital discourse. They did not position themselves as rational choice-makers seeking higher earnings, nor did they see their wider collective role as a national economic resource. Instead, they understood themselves as future workers in an almost procedural and formal way, viewing work and employment as a ‘natural’ next stage of their lives. Moreover, human capital discourse was critiqued by students for overpromising – offering prospects without any guarantee that they would be realised. Labour market realities were perceived, instead, in terms of an increasingly congested positional competition (Brown, 2013) based on credentials. Such perceptions were strongest in countries which have less occupationally and educationally specialised graduate labour markets (England and Ireland) or that have experienced devastating effects of economic crisis on youth employment (Spain).

We have also shown how both students and staff offered substantial critiques of an understanding of ‘future workers’ grounded in ideas associated with human capital. These critiques – underpinned by the concepts of vocation and Bildung – were evident in many narratives from staff and students, across all six countries. They were particularly marked, however, in Germany and Denmark due to specific deeply rooted cultural traditions about education in these countries. These counter-discourses emphasised the non-economic value of both education and work, and constructed students as future workers in more humanistic terms – guided by more internally generated values about life and work (vocation) – or as engaged in a process of self-development and self-realisation (Bildung). Both emphasise the public good contribution and societal impact of education and work, rather than individual gains. They thus represent strong indications that alternative policy realities are both possible and feasible in contemporary Europe.