Constructing the Higher Education Student

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Introduction

In general, and as we have shown in various of the preceding chapters, the students who participated in our research saw themselves in largely positive terms, emphasising their enthusiasm for their studies, their willingness to work hard and their desire to contribute in an active manner to the society around them. However, such understandings were sometimes held in tension with a number of less upbeat constructions. Indeed, across the sample as a whole, students were often seen, by themselves and others, as stressed (often acutely) – with negative consequences for their academic studies and wider lives.

In this chapter, we explore this construction in detail, examining some broad trends that held across most of the six nations in our research. We also consider the exception of Poland, where there was a notable absence of any reference to stress or related conditions, and the curious case of Spain, where stress was discussed at length by students but not reflected at all in the narratives of other social actors. We first situate our discussion within the extant research on students’ mental wellbeing (noting, however, the relative dearth of comparative studies in this area). Although stress, in itself, is not a mental illness and can sometimes have a positive impact, from a biomedical perspective, prolonged stress can increase the risk of mental ill health. Moreover, student stress is commonly viewed as impacting negatively on general wellbeing and is often conflated with mental illness (for example, YouGov, 2016). We then examine the prevalence of the construction of students as stressed across the dataset, showing that it was common in all countries apart from Poland. Following this, we explore the likely reasons for this prevalence, often drawing on the explanations offered by our participants. These include a range of immediate concerns – such as the need to juggle multiple commitments, the pressure to work harder and faster, and apprehension about moving from education into full-time work – as well as broader societal phenomena such as an increase in societal individualism and competition, and changes to social norms around disclosure of mental distress.
Understanding students' mental wellbeing

The mental wellbeing of HE students has become of increasing interest to policymakers and HE practitioners over recent years. There has been concern at the high prevalence of mental health problems (particularly depression and anxiety) among HE students as well as at their rate of increase (Storrie et al, 2010; Neves and Hillman, 2018; Duffy et al, 2020). There is less consensus, however, about whether students are more likely to suffer mental ill health than their non-student peers. While UK and Australian research has indicated that, on average, students had lower mental distress scores than the general population (Cvetkovski et al, 2019; Tabor et al, 2021), not all studies have reached the same conclusion (see, for example, Larcombe et al, 2016). Nevertheless, irrespective of whether the student population differs from the wider population in this respect, mental ill health affects a relatively large number of individuals – 20 per cent of all students involved in Auerbach et al’s (2016) research reported mental health problems over a 12-month period – and has been shown to be associated with particular campus-wide problems. For example, Hirsch and Khan (2020) argue that the widespread sexual assault that has taken place within American universities can be considered both a cause and consequence of students’ mental health struggles. While, as noted above, stress is not, in itself, a mental illness, the two are often closely bound together. For example, concern about the prevalence of mental health conditions has resulted in a wide variety of university-led interventions intended to build resilience and reduce susceptibility to stress, anxiety and the like (for example, Holdsworth et al., 2018; Pappa et al., 2020). Furthermore, both stress and mental health struggles are seen by some as part of the collective identity of being a university student (Ask and Abidin, 2018), reinforced through media discourse (Williams, 2011; Calver and Michael-Fox, 2021).

While much of the literature in this area tends to explain student stress and other potential threats to students’ mental health and wellbeing by recourse to individual-level psychological attributes, a small number of scholars have employed a wider analytical lens and explored the impact of social, economic and institutional factors. Writing with respect to the US, Walsemann et al (2015) have argued that the taking on of loans to finance HE courses can have an adverse effect on students’ mental wellbeing while, in Australia, Larcombe et al (2016) contend that caring responsibilities and hours available for study both impact on students’ experiences of psychological distress. Bristow et al (2020) make similar arguments on the basis of their English research, arguing that students have been placed in new positions of vulnerability through ‘the dominance of a moral economy within the university that emphasises neoliberalism and competition’ (p 93) and the structural inequalities that have been thrown into sharp relief by efforts to widen participation. They also suggest
that changing cultural idioms of distress may be at play. They write: ‘Explaining difficulties in terms of mental fragility and compromised wellbeing may be, we suggest, propagated and sanctioned by the very university policies designed to redress the problem’ (p 97). Drawing on the concept of ‘cognitive availability’ (that is, the idea that an action, response or description becomes available to an individual when they are exposed to that idea), Bristow et al contend that the discourses used within HE institutions and broader society may encourage students to turn to psychiatric and psychological vocabularies to make sense of their university experiences. Here, there are parallels with those who have argued that students are increasingly positioned by the media, politicians and policymakers as vulnerable and fragile (Finn et al, 2021) and that this alleged vulnerability has driven a ‘therapeutic turn’ in education (Ecclestone and Hayes, 2009) (we discuss this further in Chapter 7). (See also the ‘safetyism’ mentioned in Chapter 1, in relation to putative ‘culture wars’.)

Although these researchers have helpfully shifted the focus away from individually focused explanations to those that are more structural and/or collective in orientation, to date there are few studies that have explored the extent to which stress and other potential threats to students’ wellbeing may vary across nation-state. Eskin et al’s (2016) study is a notable exception but includes only three European countries in its sample and focuses solely on very severe psychological distress. Bregnbaek’s (2016) ethnography of students attending two of China’s top universities describes vividly the psychological strains experienced by this ‘fragile elite’ as a result of the pressure placed upon them by their parents and the state and does relate this to the specific national context, namely China’s one-child policy (that was in place from 1979–2015) and the particular political system. Nevertheless, without comparative data, it is hard to draw any conclusions about the extent to which their stress and anxiety should be considered unique. The remainder of this chapter begins to fill this gap.

**Stressed as common construction**

As noted above, across our dataset, one of the most common understandings of students was as stressed. This was evident in all countries with the exception of Poland (considered below), although in Spain it was discussed only by students rather than the other types of social actor (explored in a later section of the chapter).

In some cases, this construction was bound up with contentions about the poor mental health of students more generally. This was particularly pronounced in England, where newspapers ran stories with headlines such as ‘Bristol student deaths highlight campus crisis in mental health’ (*The Guardian*, 26 November 2016), and ‘Universities need to do more to protect students’ mental health. But how?’ (*The Guardian*, 22 September 2016), and
the TV series *Fresh Meat* depicts Vod, one of the main characters, visiting a therapist at the university wellbeing centre. Moreover, a member of staff at one of the English HEIs in our sample claimed that it was important that HE taught students how to become more resilient, as so many of them had mental health problems – echoing Bristow et al’s (2020) contention that the responsibility for responding to what it presented as a mental health ‘crisis’ in England often falls on the HE sector. Similar themes were prominent in Ireland, within the media in particular, emphasising the importance of universities in supporting students’ mental wellbeing – evident in Connell’s visit to the university counselling service in *Normal People*, and numerous articles on this theme in *The Irish Times*.

In other nations, while research participants typically talked about stress (and sometimes anxiety) rather than mental ill health, they were often describing equally serious conditions as those mentioned in England and Ireland. This is evident in the student focus group excerpts below.

‘On my degree course they [students] are very stressed. The majority have a lot of physical problems … because of the stress. In essence, actual illnesses caused by stress.’ (Focus group, Spanish HEI2_2)

‘Five of my friends have been to A&E [hospital accident and emergency department] and all of them were sent home after being told that what had happened to them was caused by stress. I think there is a real health problem in Spain related to stress and it is principally apparent in students.’ (Focus group, Spanish HEI2_2)

‘I was in the library recently a student literally collapsed … it hit home because I was thinking “I’ve been in situations when I could have collapsed because I was feeling so stressed …”.’ (Focus group, German HEI1_2)

In other cases, students described stress that was perhaps less severe but which nevertheless was prevalent and often had a significant impact on their lives:

‘I’m kind of like sinking into the ground because I am always so busy and stressed.’ (Focus group, Danish HEI3_3)

‘My parents see me as … being a little overwhelmed and lost – stressed and short of time.’ (Focus group, Spanish HEI1_1)

Indeed, a Spanish student made a model with a fallen head (see Figure 6.1) and explained, “Its head has fallen because it’s very stressed” (Focus group, Spanish HEI3_2).
Assertions about the widespread prevalence of stress among students were also made frequently by staff and the media. The examples below represent only a small selection of such data from Denmark, Germany, England and Ireland:

‘Half of the students at the University of Copenhagen are plagued by stress’ (Politiken, 2 February 2014)

‘Many of the students are reporting a lot of stress. … They feel very stressed.’ (Staff member, Danish HEI3_4)
‘And what I unfortunately must say is that I think what … being a student right now means … being stressed a lot of times.’ (Staff member, German HEI3_2)

Although there were a small number of exceptions (including some of the students’ union leaders), policy actors were, in general, less likely than the other groups to whom we spoke to make reference to stress, anxiety and mental ill health on the part of students. This may be explained, in part, by a desire to emphasise the positive features of the HE systems for which they were responsible.

There was also no discussion of students as stressed by any of the social actors in Poland. Comparative studies within the field of health indicate that Poland has one of the lowest rates of mental health disorder in Europe (OECD, 2018). However, such rates may be related to greater stigma attached to reporting, and lesser awareness of, mental health concerns in former Communist countries (Winker et al, 2017; OECD, 2018; Doblyté, 2020). Indeed, Poland’s approach to mental health has been criticised for failing to reduce the stigma attached to a diagnosis, and relying too heavily on medical rather than psychological or social solutions (Gierus et al, 2017; Szukalska, 2020). Such concerns may make it less likely for students to feel comfortable discussing stress in a focus group setting (because of its association with mental ill health), and for it to be a common cultural trope (see discussion of ‘cognitive availability’ below) drawn upon by the media and HE staff. The absence of this construction may also relate to some specific educational factors. Polish students differed from their peers in other countries by emphasising more frequently that there was nothing particularly distinctive about being a student (Brooks and Abrahams, 2021; discussed further in Chapter 8) – a view that can be explained with reference to the sharp recent increase in HE participation rates in Poland (see Chapter 1), and an ensuing societal view that now ‘everyone’ is a student (Brooks and Abrahams, 2021). It is perhaps unsurprising that, in such a context, student life is not seen as particularly stressful – as it is perceived to be a common pursuit that can be undertaken by most people.

In the remainder of the chapter, we return to those countries where students were commonly understood as stressed, to explore some of the explanations for this construction as articulated by our participants.

Juggling multiple commitments

One key source of stress, as identified by students themselves, and also other social actors, was what they believed to be the necessity to juggle multiple commitments. Despite their focus on studying hard (as outlined in Chapter 4), many of the focus group participants spoke of feeling like...
they were being pulled in different directions by the various activities with which they were engaged.

‘I think it’s very stressful to … both study and come to class and see my friends and, yeah, there’s a lot of stressful things – you have to be social as well [as study] and you have to do some sport as well and all those things.’ (Focus group, Danish HEI2_2)

‘So, your part-time job at the café, or putting together a PowerPoint presentation, that’s not at all stressful in itself. But with everything together, keeping an overall eye on it the whole time, I find that quite hard.’ (Focus group, German HEI1_3)

This emphasis on juggling numerous commitments and the attendant stress is also articulated clearly in the English TV series *Fresh Meat*. One of the main characters, Vod, is forced to take up paid employment to support herself, while also attempting to have an active social life, and, at least sometimes, engage with her studies. First, she works as a hotel cleaner, which keeps her very busy and then, later on in the series, she struggles to combine her part-time job in a pub with the writing of her dissertation. In addition, in the Spanish TV series *Merlí*, an Argentine student, Minerva, is portrayed as suffering from stress because of her multiple commitments. In particular, she finds it hard to balance her time between her job at the university library (which is tied to her scholarship) and her studies.

The pressure to take on multiple commitments in this way was explained, by some students and other social actors, in terms of their understanding of HE as a time of transition (see Chapter 2), and expectations that they would have an active social life, engage in a range of extra-curricular activities and make friends for life. For others, it was more directly related to the need to earn money to finance their studies and/or living costs. Furthermore, some believed that, given the congested nature of the graduate labour market, it was necessary to take up a variety of activities beyond the classroom, to help distinguish their CV from others’ (see also Chapter 5). In these accounts, we see played out the increasing importance of paid work to students across Europe, not only for funding one’s HE (Antonucci, 2016), but also for developing the ‘personal capital’ required by many graduate employers (Brown and Hesketh, 2004). Staff and policy actors, who were more able to make comparisons between generational groups than students themselves, often asserted that the pressure – or requirement – to engage in paid work and other pursuits alongside studying had become particularly acute over recent years because of changes both to HE funding in several of the countries in our sample, and to the graduate labour market following massification.
It was believed by many of those to whom we spoke that feelings of stress, associated with juggling different aspects of one’s life, were particularly common among those from less affluent backgrounds who often had to work long hours to be able to support themselves financially, as they had fewer familial resources to fall back on. This is illustrated clearly in the following excerpt from a Spanish focus group as part of a discussion about stress, studying and paid work: “[Affluent students] are never overwhelmed like the others who have to find the money to pay for their course, or those who depend on a grant from the ministry” (Focus group, Spanish HEI3-2). A small minority also highlighted that the stresses of juggling could be particularly acute for older students, too, echoing the findings of Larcombe et al’s (2016) Australian study:

‘Typically, those who are older and working and have family will experience more stress, just because of the time and life demands. Those who are … younger and come from, maybe perhaps coming from more affluent backgrounds, meaning they may not need to work as much, or they have funding from the government because they qualify, or they might have stipends of some sort, that obviously eases their sort of … at least these outside demands on, you know, making a living.’ (Staff member, German HEI1_4)

We see similar themes being played out to some extent in media texts. The stress experienced by Vod in Fresh Meat is linked partially to her financial concerns, while in Normal People, Connell becomes stressed when he loses his job for the summer and is thus unable to pay his rent. Both characters come from low socio-economic groups and have no familial experience of HE.

**Pressure to work harder and faster**

All four types of social actor claimed that the stress and anxiety experienced by students were related, to some extent at least, to the increased pressure they faced, when compared to previous generations, to study harder and faster. This is a central theme of the German film, Wir Sind Die Neuen. As explained in Chapter 4, the drama revolves around a group of three students who share a flat, all of whom study extremely hard. As the film develops, their excessive studying is shown to have negative consequences for both their physical and mental health. Moreover, their behaviour is contrasted with that of their neighbours – three pensioners who shared a flat many years ago when they were students themselves, and have decided to reconstitute their living arrangements – and who now spend their time partying, relaxing and seeking new experiences. They end up helping their younger neighbours establish a more balanced life. Although a comedy, the film can also be read
as a critique of the pressurised and stressful lives of contemporary German students (in contrast to the more laid-back approach taken by previous generations). The students we spoke to in our focus groups made links themselves between the pressure they felt to work harder and/or faster and their general health. The plasticine model of a book (see Figure 6.2) was made by a participant in an English focus group to represent how hard she felt she had to work all the time. She commented: “I just see myself as studying all the time because. ... My course is just so intense ... I thought university would be more fun. ... So yeah, it’s just stressful” (Focus group, English HEI3_3). Similar comments were made in Germany and Spain. Indeed, in Spain, one focus group participant commented, “There are quite high levels of stress on any degree course” and “You can never rest, because you finish one day and, on the following day, it’s ‘Read this, read that … prepare that, study for the exam’” (Focus group, Spanish HEI3_2).

In explaining what was often perceived to be a new pressure to work harder and/or faster, some respondents pointed to the impact of massification of HE. Various interviewees believed that because around half of each cohort was now progressing to HE, it was no longer enough
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just to have a degree – it had to be a good degree (see discussion of credentialism in Chapter 5) – and that hard work and long hours were required to achieve such a result. In England, this was thought by staff to be exacerbated by the high fees that students were paying; they needed a ‘good degree’ to demonstrate that their time at university had been worthwhile. These sentiments were also reflected clearly by the students themselves. For example, one English focus group participant commented, “If you’re conscientious and want to gain a good degree out of it, then you are dragged into this sort of spiral of stress and deadlines” (Focus group, English HEI3_3). Moreover, in Denmark, staff remarked on the contradictory messages that were often communicated to students: on the one hand emphasising that making mistakes was an important part of the process of learning and, on the other hand, that, under current labour market conditions, high scores were very important.

In Denmark and, to a lesser extent, Germany, these pressures were explained in terms of recent policy changes that had required students to move through their studies at a faster pace. The reforms are both linked to the Bologna Process, although in Denmark they are typically referred to as the Study Progress Reform (see Chapter 1). While in general, the government officials we interviewed tended, unsurprisingly, to be supportive of recent policy initiatives, in Germany, even the government official remarked on the pressure experienced by contemporary students as a result of the Bologna reforms. He talked, for example, about a widespread belief in the prevalence of what he called ‘bulimia learning’, in which students raced through material as fast as they could, and then regurgitated it for the exam. Similar sentiments were expressed by the German students’ union interviewee and German staff. For example, when discussing the impact of the Bologna Process, one German member of staff asserted:

‘I have the feeling they are really like stressed, stressed because they want to reach their diploma, their bachelor degree in three years, and then they have the feeling, “Oh I have to be really fast now”, so … they don’t relax. … it’s a little bit different when I was a student, yeah, it was like, “OK, you go to the university and you have maybe four and a half years”… but nobody cares if you need six years or whatever, so it doesn’t matter, nobody talks about how long you did it. And now it’s always like, oh the students are really in a rush.’ (Staff member, German HEI2_2)

German students also made direct links between the stress they experienced and the requirement to move quickly through their studies: “There are days when I am feeling mega-stressed because of all the demands pulling on me from all directions … and I’ve got to write my dissertation because otherwise I won’t be in the recommended period of study” (Focus group, German HEI1_2).
Very similar sentiments were evident within our Danish data. Both Danish newspapers, for example, made direct links between the Study Progress Reform – and specifically the requirement for students to move more quickly through their studies – and stress and mental ill health. Articles on this theme include: ‘Progress reforms destroy students’ (Politiken, 1 June 2015); ‘Students: it’s a reform from hell’ (Politiken, 19 November 2015); and ‘Students fear more stress after the reform’ (BT, 11 May 2015). The same connections were made by Danish staff and the representative of the Danish national students’ union, and by many of the students who participated in the Danish focus groups. The following quotations are illustrative:

‘[I]t’s more stressful to be a student now because they have to complete [their degrees] more quickly.’ (Staff member, Danish HEI1_1)

‘The Study Progress Reform in Denmark … it has put pressure on students to go really quickly through education … [and has led to] many students feeling severe stress.’ (Danish students’ union leader)

‘It’s very stressful … because I think society thinks we should run really fast, we should go through our study really fast, we don’t have time to just focus on our work, on being good at it, we have to get fast.’ (Focus group, Danish HEI2_2)

To some extent, the prominence of this theme in Denmark and Germany can be linked to what many respondents in these countries viewed as a significant shift away from a long-held belief that students should have discretion about how fast they move through their studies. Indeed, as we have outlined in previous chapters, Germany and Denmark, in common with many other countries in central, north and eastern Europe, have both been strongly influenced by the Humboldtian model of the university, which emphasises the importance of Lernfreiheit – the freedom to learn and the right to prioritise one’s own time (Sarauw and Madsen, 2020). Affected by this, students have typically taken much longer to complete their studies in these two countries than in other parts of Europe. The challenges of adjusting to a new tempo can, as has been shown in other studies (for example, Shaw, 2001), be experienced as dislocating and stressful. While our Danish and German students were not necessarily accustomed to the tempo they felt ought to be an integral part of ‘university time’ (having recently left school), it appears that their expectations of what ‘university time’ should look like, based on national traditions of HE, led them to experience the lack of freedom to study for as long as one wanted, at the pace one wanted, as challenging (see Brooks et al (2021a) for a more extended discussion).
It is also possible that the perceived pressure to work harder and, in some cases, faster – and the stress and anxiety that often seemed to follow – are related to broader societal discourses about the neo-liberal imperative to ‘work hard’ as frequently articulated by politicians and other policymakers (Littler, 2013; Mendick et al, 2018), and which we discussed in Chapter 4.

**Habitus disconnect**

As we noted above, some scholars have argued that an increase in the stress reported by students is associated with processes of massification and, in particular, the greater difficulty of transitioning to HE for students from lower socio-economic backgrounds with no familial experience of university, when compared to their more privileged peers (Bristow et al, 2020). Although this is related to specific material factors such as the need to engage in paid work (discussed previously), it may also be associated with a ‘habitus disconnect’ – that is, a lack of fit between the dominant dispositions, assumptions and culture of the HE space, and that of such students’ homes and families (Reay, 2017). This is a prominent theme in the TV series *Normal People*. Across the 12 episodes, we follow the story of Connell, a young man from a single-parent, working-class background who struggles with several aspects of the middle-class culture that surrounds him during his studies at Trinity College Dublin. In many of the episodes, Connell is depicted as stressed and anxious: he feels homesick, lonely and alienated by the institutional culture, and is very self-conscious about expressing himself in seminars and in front of his (upper middle-class) girlfriend’s friends. Although the stress he faces in the series is also related to various financial problems, such as losing his part-time job and therefore being unable to pay his rent, the sense of cultural disconnection he experiences is brought out strongly.

Similar themes were raised within some of our focus groups. For example, a German student described her own difficulties at talking about her university experience with her parents, and linked them explicitly to feelings of stress:

‘I come from a working-class background where nobody has an academic degree or the *Abitur* [highest German school-leaving qualification]. The awareness of what studying means, what it gives you, just isn’t here; there’s a complete lack of comprehension about why you might need it and, in particular, why I myself would. And I found it difficult to enter into a conversation with my parents on the subject, because there was just no basis there for it. They insisted emphatically on their opinion that it would be better to go out into the commercial world and earn some money, and it was always about earning money, not about the fact that I can enrich myself by learning something. […] I found that really stressful.’ (Focus group, German HEI1_3)
The stress associated with feeling unable to talk about university life with one’s family was also articulated in Ireland:

‘I’m the first one [in my family] to go [to university] … and they’re proud of me for going but I can’t talk to them about it because they don’t really know. … They don’t understand that I’m actually under a lot of stress and it’s really hard. … They just assume that I’m this genius who can do it all.’ (Focus group, Irish HEI2_3)

In this extract, however, it is not the inability to talk to one’s family that is seen as stressful per se but rather that the family does not provide a forum for discussing stress (and thus, presumably, helping to alleviate it) because of what the student felt was her family’s lack of understanding of the pressures of HE and their incorrect assessment of her abilities. Nevertheless, across the dataset as a whole, such disconnects – and their impact on mental wellbeing – were described by only a small number of participants. More common was the belief that family background was related to stress through various material factors and, in particular, the level of economic resources to which students had access – which required the kind of ‘juggling’ discussed above.

**Concerns about the future**

A further explanation provided by our participants – albeit again a relatively small minority – for the stress experienced by students was related to concerns about the future, and primarily about securing a job.\(^1\) Such concerns are played out in the English TV series *Fresh Meat*. Several of the main characters are portrayed as stressed and anxious as they come to think more about their lives after graduation: Howard is anxious about not being able to find a job because of what he perceives to be his poor social skills, while his house-mate Kingsley appears stressed when he discovers how difficult it is likely to be to pursue a career in the music industry. Similarly, Oregon, another central character, is portrayed as stressed after failing her final exams, disappointing her parents and not receiving a scholarship for postgraduate study.

For some of our focus group participants, concerns about future employment were linked to what they perceived to be greater competition between graduates as a result of massification (see also discussion of credentialism in Chapter 5). The plasticine model made by a participant in Danish HEI3_1, for example, was meant to represent competition for jobs, with the frame including a large number of highly educated people (see Figure 6.3). In describing this model, the student claimed there are “all these great candidates but there are no jobs for them, which kind of makes me a bit stressed and a bit worried for the future, which is why [the people in the model] are all a bit sad”.

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These concerns – and particularly the need to differentiate oneself from other graduates – often appeared to drive the ‘juggling’ described previously. In Spain, but not in the other countries, some participants spoke of their concerns about increased competition, not just from fellow nationals, but also from graduates from other countries competing in a global labour market. The representative from the Spanish HE leaders’ organisation commented that he thought students felt under pressure “because of their knowledge about their future responsibilities and the uncertainties that global competitiveness is bringing to all sectors”. Moreover, Spanish students talked explicitly about competition with students from other nations, and felt that they would be at a disadvantage because of what they perceived to be the poorer quality of their HE (see also Chapter 4). Participants in a Spanish focus group (HEI3_1), for example, spoke about the stress associated with following a course that they thought was overly academic in orientation, and would not provide them with the practical, transferable skills that they believed their peers in other European nations were receiving.

In some cases, this stress was exacerbated because of concerns about economic conditions more generally. Again, this was articulated primarily in Spain. In the following quotation, for example, a Spanish student describes the plasticine model (Figure 6.4) they made to represent what they perceived to be the very few job opportunities available in Spain and, as a result, the huge degree of competition:

**Figure 6.3: Frame containing candidates for jobs**

![Image of plasticine model](image-url)
‘I have made a briefcase which symbolises work, and a “tick”, which represents good qualifications and grades. All is encircled but there’s narrow opening. So, I see myself as one of the thousands of young Spanish people who work, who study, who get good results, but in the end we are all inside the same circle and there is only a narrow exit, so it is a competition, more, more and more, always more, it’s never enough.’ (Focus group, Spanish HEI3_1)

The prominence of this theme in Spain appears to be directly related to labour market conditions. Indeed, as we noted in Chapter 1, at the time of our data collection, graduate unemployment was considerably higher in Spain than in the other five countries in the sample. Only 77.9 per cent of Spanish graduates were in employment, compared to an EU average of 85.5 per cent (Eurostat, 2019b). All of the other countries in the sample were above this EU average (Eurostat, 2019b).

**Societal individualism and competition**

A relatively common theme across all our participants was that the stress experienced by students was not related only to factors specific to the HE system but to changes in wider society and, in particular the rise of competitive individualism. In one Danish focus group, a participant claimed, “I notice a lot of students get stressed – but then I notice that in
every layer of society, so it’s not only student-related” (Focus group, Danish HEI1_3). Several Danish students claimed that stress was experienced equally commonly by pupils at lower levels of the education system:

‘In high schools they want to achieve really high[ly] and they get all stressed about it if they don’t get an A.’ (Interview, Danish HEI2)

‘I think that just generally being stressed is quite normal for students in Denmark, even in high school.’ (Focus group, Danish HEI3_1)

Many of the different social actors involved in the research believed that there was now more pressure on students to be academically successful. The staff we interviewed in Denmark, England, Germany and Ireland all spoke of this kind of pressure, with some making reference to what they saw as an unhealthy ‘culture of performance’ within which students (and others in society) were operating, and which often led to feelings of stress and anxiety if individuals were not confident about reaching their goals. Students in these four countries tended to espouse similar beliefs, recognising that a lot of the stress they felt was linked to the expectations they had of themselves, or those that they believed others had of them:

‘Sometimes the stress can be just what you expect from yourself, and sometimes the stress can be what is expected from you.’ (Focus group, Danish HEI1_3)

‘I’m madly stressed out at the moment, under an awful lot of pressure, because I have such high expectations of myself.’ (Focus group, German HEI1_1)

‘It’s hard work, it’s really stressful, you’re under a lot of pressure because if you don’t finish your degree you’ll feel bad, you’ll feel like you’ve let people down, so there’s a lot of pressure.’ (Focus group, Irish HEI1_1)

This kind of reasoning is also reflected in some of the media data – with articles such as ‘Student leapt to death after she didn’t get a first’ (Daily Mail, 28 January 2016) and ‘Fight the massive focus on performance’ (Politiken, 20 July 2015). The latter article presents a strong critique of what is perceived to be an unhealthy and limited understanding of what constitutes a meaningful life. Related to this was a sense, noted most commonly in Denmark, Germany and Spain, that students now more frequently compared themselves to others than had been the case in the past – and that this could also be contributing to feelings of stress and anxiety. Developing this theme, one student commented, ‘It’s very typical for students to be stressed and to be
… kind of intimidated by all the other students and all the super students’ (Focus group participant, Danish HEI3_1). Similar observations were made by other respondents, including this German interviewee:

‘The individual has got a much higher responsibility to … to prove that he or she organises his or her own life and studying in the most effective way, yeah and … if he or she fails, it’s an individual problem. And that … produces stress. If you don’t function well enough, it produces stress. If you haven’t got enough time to study because you are doing a job besides studying, it produces stress. If you don’t really know how to position yourself in society, it produces stress. […] Because the welfare state starts retreating … it’s a very high grade of individualisation and the system, the competition has become stronger.’ (Staff member, German HEI1_1)

These narratives echo various studies from across the social sciences that have argued that poor mental health tends to be more common in highly individualised societies in which ambition and aspiration are valorised, competition is encouraged, and inequalities are evident (Wilkinson and Pickett, 2010; Greenfield, 2013). There is certainly evidence to suggest that individualism has penetrated university campuses – affecting students’ relationships with one another with respect to both their learning and their wider lives (Brooks, 2007; Phipps and Young, 2015).

**Increased disclosure and 'cognitive availability'**

As mentioned previously, some scholars have argued that the increased disclosure of stress, anxiety and other mental health problems among students can be explained, in part, by the increased societal openness about such issues, as well as ‘cognitive availability’ and changing cultural idioms of distress (Bristow et al, 2020). Such arguments were also rehearsed by some of the staff members in our research who spoke about changing attitudes towards disclosure of stress, anxiety and mental ill health. This quotation is illustrative of the perspective of a number of staff members in Denmark, England, Germany and Ireland:

‘You know in the past, in the Irish context it was very much you didn’t talk about it, you know. So if something was happening, if something was happening within your family, within your community, it was almost … kept there, you know. But now students … students know it’s OK to say, I’m struggling. It’s OK to say, well actually I’m not feeling good, or I feel mentally challenged, I feel weak, I feel that I need to talk to somebody, maybe they don’t need to talk to somebody, but need to be encouraged to do that, you know. So it’s,
it’s just … I think from a mental wellbeing point of view, students are more keenly aware of the need to … to look after their mental wellbeing, but also to express when they’re not feeling well.’ (Staff member, Irish HEI1_3)

Moreover, various media depict stress – alongside anxiety and other mental health concerns – as being ‘normal’ rather than a sign of weakness. This is evident, for example, in newspaper articles such as that published in The Guardian: ‘Students: where to get help for your mental health’ (4 April 2014) – which suggests that mental health problems are extremely common and likely to be experienced by a vast majority of students. It is also a recurring theme in Normal People, during which the two main characters, Connell and Marianne, both experience significant mental health struggles throughout the series. Although Connell’s are linked to his class position (see earlier discussion), and Marianne’s are related to her problematic family relationships, the frequency with which stress, anxiety and emotional issues are depicted across the 12 episodes tends to underline a sense that mental health struggles are common among students, and evident not only among those from low socio-economic groups.

Our data provide some evidence to support the ‘cognitive availability’ thesis – in that there is a good match between the views of students and those of other social actors in Denmark, England and Ireland (where mental health constitutes a prominent discourse) and in Poland (where there is no mention of stress by any actor). Moreover, there is also some explicit consideration of mental health as a new cultural trope by students themselves (echoing some of the points made by Ask and Abidin (2018) about stress being part of the collective identity of students), as the following quotations illustrate:

‘I feel that society expects students to have a giant workload, to be sort of stressed, and we read about it all the time, all these students, how stressed [they are].’ (Focus group, Danish HEI3_3)

‘I get the feeling that stress is a term that is really overused and it crops up everywhere … I think that in our generation and in our society here in Germany, it’s on everyone’s lips … but I don’t get the feeling that our stress levels are higher compared to people who only work or who are only doing an apprenticeship.’ (Focus group, German HEI1_1)

Indeed, one participant in an Irish focus group went as far as to say that they believed claiming that you were stressed was an important part of a student identity, irrespective of what you actually felt. They asserted, “You tell them, ‘Oh, like I’m so stressed’, but secretly you’ve done your assignments and things” (Focus group, Irish HEI2_2).
However, our data also highlight some exceptions, which raise questions about the cognitive availability thesis. First, in Germany, students tended to be positioned as stressed more frequently by the media and staff than by students themselves (although some students did talk about the stress they felt, as the preceding discussion has shown). It is possible that this disconnect can be related to a lingering sense of stigma about talking about such issues, as German students were the only ones to mention explicitly taboos about mental ill health: “Oddly, we haven’t really spoken about it [stress] at all. Perhaps because it’s still something of a taboo” (Focus group, German HEI1_1). Second, in Spain, although stress was mentioned frequently by the students in our sample, there appeared to be no strong societal discourse. It was mentioned very rarely by staff members, by only one policy interviewee (and in this case very briefly) and not at all by the Spanish newspapers (despite a strong emphasis on the material concerns of students). The apparent lack of societal discourse can perhaps be explained by the enduring importance of the family in the Spanish context. Family care remains important in the treatment of mental ill health in Spain (Marqués and Navarro-Pérez, 2019), in common with other countries with a Mediterranean welfare model (Stein et al, 2015), while the family is also seen as a crucial means of support for HE students more generally (Lainio and Brooks, 2021). In this context, it is perhaps unsurprising that stress, anxiety and other mental health issues are not individualised nor (implicitly) positioned as the responsibility of students themselves as they often are in Denmark, England, Germany and Ireland. This explanation does not, however, explain why the students who participated in the study spoke so readily, and in such stark terms, about the stress they were experiencing. Taken together, the Spanish data suggest that, while ‘cognitive availability’ may influence student perspectives in some nations, it is not, of itself, an adequate explanation for all the stress described by students. Instead, it appeared that, for Spanish students, a high degree of pessimism about their future employment and the pressure of having to juggle paid work alongside study in order to survive financially, provoked severe feelings of stress, irrespective of wider discourses and cultural tropes.

Conclusion

In this chapter, we have shown how, despite the construction of students across Europe as citizens (Chapter 3) and enthusiastic and hard-working learners (Chapter 4), they were also commonly understood as stressed by staff members and the media, as well as by students themselves. While this is not identical to the mental ‘fragility’ discussed by Finn and colleagues (2021), it was often associated with broader concerns about students’ mental health. Participants typically believed the prevalence of stress among students was a relatively new phenomenon, linked to both HE-specific issues
(such as massification and imperatives for students to move more quickly through their studies) as well as broader societal trends including heightened individualism and competition.

In developing our analysis, we have highlighted various possible social causes for stress (such as the perceived pressure to work harder and faster, and the need to juggle multiple commitments), and also emphasised the role played by social constructions. Indeed, while this particular construction was very common in the data, its absence from Polish focus groups and interviews suggests that national norms (for example, about the acceptability of disclosure of mental health struggles) continue to pattern the ways in which HE students are understood. Nevertheless, its prevalence among Spanish students but not among Spanish staff or in Spanish newspaper articles or films emphasises the limits of the ‘cognitive availability’ thesis – as well as differences in understanding of students between social actors in a single nation-state.