Constructing the Higher Education Student

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Threats and objects of criticism

Introduction

Issues concerning threats and risks have been extensively explored in youth studies. In such discussions, youth is often described as a risky period during which young people might pose a threat to social stability and/or to themselves (for example, Dwyer and Wyn, 2001; France, 2007). In this chapter, we focus on the notions of threat and risk within HE settings specifically. On one hand, discourses of risk and threat with respect to HE students echo those documented in youth studies, especially when the perceived threat is associated with a failure to transfer existing values and social conventions to the next generation (Fyfe and Wyn, 2007; Jones, 2009). On the other hand, they also represent something of a departure from them – where the discourse of threat is associated with questions about the academic qualities of students, in the context of the massification of HE and an increasingly heterogeneous student body. This chapter explores the ways in which students are constructed as a threat or object of criticism – with respect to the quality of education, and to society more broadly. While these constructions differ across and within the six countries, we argue that behind these constructions are assumptions about an ‘ideal’ or ‘implied’ student, to which those who are criticised are seen as not conforming.

The extant literature on idealised notions of students has explored a range of desirable attributes with the aim of identifying the expectations students face when entering academic and disciplinary communities (Llamas, 2006; Ulriksen, 2009; Wong and Chiu, 2020). These are brought together in Ulriksen’s (2009) and Wong and Chiu’s (2019) concepts of the ‘ideal’ and ‘implied’ student. Idealised notions of students have been shown to underpin various HE-related myths, such as ‘more means worse’ (an increase in the number of students lowers academic standards), ‘traditional student’ (a homogeneous category to which the majority of students belong), and ‘millennial student’ (self-interested and emotionally fragile) that tend to dominate the popular and academic literature, and contribute to perpetuating a discourse of ‘moral panics’ about students (Macfarlane, 2020; Finn et al, 2021; Sykes 2021). Furthermore, a relatively large body of literature has critically analysed different power relations and discriminatory practices generated and maintained through the notion of the ‘ideal student’, as well as associated myths that define academic cultures and pedagogical practices.
(for example, Leathwood, 2006; Hurst 2013; Loveday, 2016; Burke et al, 2017). Our aim in this chapter is not to analyse the different characteristics attributed to the ‘ideal student’, but rather to show that constructions of students that position them as threats and objects of criticism are consistently based on images of ‘implied’ or ‘ideal’ students divorced from the existing socio-political context, as well as biased in terms of (although not exclusively) social class, generational disparities and false stereotypes. While the notion of the ‘ideal’ or ‘implied’ student can be associated with many of the other constructions discussed in the earlier chapters, in this chapter we use this notion as an analytical lens to show how it frames what are deemed to be acceptable and legitimate ways of being a university student (Ulriksen, 2009).

The chapter proceeds as follows: we first explore three constructions of students articulated by media, staff members and policy actors that position students as a threat and object of criticism. We start with the construction of students as ‘lazy and incompetent’ – evident across the dataset – and associated with massification of HE and a discourse about a ‘loss of quality’. We highlight the image of the ‘independent learner’ behind this construction, and discuss its consequences for an increasingly diverse student population. In the second section, we show how students’ political activism is constructed as a threat to ‘free speech’ and democratic society in newspaper discourses. We discuss how political acts are delegitimised by linking them to the image of the ‘snowflake student’ in England and Ireland, and to violence in Spain. The third section examines how students’ lifestyle choices and expectations are placed under scrutiny and associated with generational disparities in the narratives by staff members and policy actors. In analysing the similarities and differences across these narratives, we show that the image of the ‘ideal student’ is linked to one in the past, in the future or abroad. In the final section we turn to students’ own perspectives to explore their perceptions of how they are seen by other social actors, and consider the consequences of the critical constructions for the lived experiences of students.

**Lazy and incompetent students lacking academic abilities**

In the context of mass HE, debates about who can be a student and who cannot, and whether opening up HE for the ‘masses’ has resulted in a loss of quality and declining academic standards, have been ongoing for several decades (for example, Morley, 2003; Leathwood and O’Connell, 2003; Macfarlane, 2020). In this section, we show the continuing prevalence of these debates evident in the construction of students as ‘lazy and incompetent’ across the six countries and different strands of our study: in the media, policy documents, and in the interviews with policy actors and staff members.

Across many newspapers, the quality of the student population was discussed in several articles – often linked to points about the growing size and
diversity of this population. In a number of articles in the German newspaper *Die Welt*, *The Irish Times* and the Polish paper *Rzeczpospolita*, students are criticised for lacking the interest, skills or intellectual capacity to study at the required level and, for instance, being ‘more interested in the screen of a mobile phone than what the lecturer says’ (*Rzeczpospolita*, 27 January 2015). In some articles, academics are interviewed who explain how the larger and more socially diverse student body has changed the demands and nature of their work: with teachers having to spend more hours teaching basic skills, such as writing, for example. In one article in *The Irish Times*, an academic expresses their concern about these changes, and contends that accepting too many less academically inclined students has led to a ‘dependency culture’ (30 January 2016). These accounts of students as not working hard enough, unable to meet the academic demands of the university and not interested in learning were common to many of the newspapers and were typically seen as a threat to the academic and intellectual ethos of the university. However, these discourses were not equally evident across the countries. They were most prevalent in the Danish newspapers, where the harshest language was also used. In Poland, Germany and Ireland, a number of articles were dedicated to the topic, whereas in the English newspapers only a few texts touch upon it, and in the Spanish newspapers it was largely absent.

In the English newspaper, the *Daily Mail*, the positioning of students as a threat to a high-quality education is associated with the discourse of grade inflation. Several articles report, in a rather sensationalist manner, the problem of grade inflation, suggesting that not all those students who receive a high grade deserve it. Instead, as the quotations below indicate, grade inflation is seen a consequence of the marketisation of HE, and HEIs are criticised for rewarding students with high grades, regardless of the students’ ‘profile’, in order to compete in the market:

Record numbers of top degrees are being handed out amid suspicions universities are lowering standards to boost their reputations and attract students. (*Daily Mail*, 17 January 2014)

Research last year suggested one in six [universities] – including Oxford, Exeter and Warwick – were awarding more firsts and 2:1s than would be expected based on the profile of their students. (*Daily Mail*, 16 January 2015)

Even though this criticism is directed at the HE providers for inflating grades, Finn et al (2021) argue that the figure of the student implicit within this discourse is that of a passive consumer and entitled learner. In the extant literature, the construction of ‘student as consumer’ is often discussed as a problematic shift away from what HE and students used to be (Molesworth...
et al, 2009; Nixon et al, 2018; Macfarlane, 2020), suggesting that consumer and learner identities are mutually exclusive. While other scholars have challenged this claim as unproductive and creating a false dichotomy (for example, Hurst, 2013; Budd, 2017; Finn et al, 2021; see also our discussion in Chapter 4), media discourse tends to reinforce the norm of the ‘ideal student’ as detached from a consumer identity.

As mentioned earlier, the construction of the ‘lazy and incompetent’ student is most prevalent in the Danish newspapers, and the language used here is notably harsh – for example, students are labelled as ‘lazy’ and ‘stupid’. It is often academics and sometimes fellow students, interviewed by journalists or writing opinion pieces, who are most vocal with these views. However, as the headlines below illustrate, these are picked up by journalists, and circulated in newspapers more broadly:

‘More students are not suited for university.’ (BT, 27 March 2015)

‘This is how we put an end to the stupid and lazy [student].’ (Politiken, 7 April 2015)

In many of these texts, a dichotomy between students who should belong to the university and those who should not is articulated. Those who do not belong are alleged to be lazy, unmotivated and even stupid, and positioned as a risk to high-quality education. For example, in the following quotation, an academic interviewed for an article entitled ‘Many students do not understand the least bit’ suggests that there is a group of students who should not belong to the university because they are not only ‘incompetent’ but also unwilling to learn, and not serious and independent learners:

There is just one group that should never have been at university. It is stupid students who would rather have teaching that is entertaining and does not contain so many formulas and such things […] If they are lazy and do not want to work, they should not be at university […] we must raise the bar for access, in order not to damage those who actually belong at university. (Politiken, 21 March 2015)

The presence of ‘incompetent’ students at the university is depicted as a threat to the value of university education, and this is then seen as a legitimate reason to exclude such individuals from certain activities or from the university altogether. For example, an academic interviewed in the Danish newspaper BT suggests that ‘unwilling learners’ should not be allowed to complete course evaluations because ‘to be heard, you must know what you are talking about’ (18 March 2015). Likewise, the exclusion of ‘incompetent’ students from the university is justified in terms of preserving the ‘academic
elite of society’, to use the words of one student who wrote an opinion piece (Politiken, 16 April 2014). In other texts, it is justified with respect to the high cost of HE to the taxpayer (for example, Politiken, 1 April 2016).

In contrast to the Danish newspaper narratives, the interviewed staff members in Denmark disagreed with this view of students but they did, however, acknowledge that these discourses are common in the Danish media, and are shared by some of their colleagues and policy actors. Indeed, there are strong parallels in the Danish policy documents with the media discourses. In the Danish government documents, in particular, students are seen as too numerous and not of sufficient quality, as well as too slow and not putting enough effort into their studies (Danish speech 1, Danish government document 2) (for more detailed analysis, see Brooks, 2021). In the policy documents as well as in the newspapers (as mentioned earlier), criticism of students is linked to the welfare support students receive (free education and grants), making claims such as ‘Tax-funded higher education is a unique privilege’ (Danish government document 1). The problematisation of students in the Danish context, then, can be at least partly explained by the HE funding model, whereby tuition fees and education grants are covered by the state (see Table 1.1). For students, these discourses remind them of their responsibilities as ‘good’ citizens, and question whether they are all equally deserving of welfare (Van Oorschot, 2006).

When turning to our interview data from staff members and policy actors, we can see similar patterns to that within the newspapers. Some of our interviewees talked about the ‘loss of quality’ and associated an assumed decrease in the academic quality of students with the increased diversity of the student population. Many of our interviewees in principle advocated for an inclusive university and placed high importance on equality in opportunities to study, yet some of them commented on how, in comparison to the past, there has been a decline in the quality of students. For example, one Polish staff member (HEI2_2) estimated that nowadays a third of the student population has ‘no ability’ to be even an average student. In a similar vein, a Spanish staff member was critical of students lacking the knowledge or skills needed in university, asserting that “they don’t know how to write … they lack basic skills … the most basic ones!” (HEI1_3).

A number of staff members and some policy actors also highlighted how the more diverse student body poses challenges to traditional teaching and learning methods. Some staff members explained, with a sense of disappointment, how they had had to lower the difficulty level of their teaching in order to cater for a more diverse body of students. The following quotation from an Irish staff member illustrates this:

‘If you have, you know … 25 per cent of your individuals who the university environment really, really suits, and then you have 50 to
which it’s kind of, you know, they’re somewhat ambivalent, and 25 per cent who aren’t, that is going to kind of, you know, change the overall ethos in terms of engagement. And as a lecturer, you have to lecture to the median in your class. Whereas if you have a group of, you know, … very bright students, you know, you will change how, the material how you deliver it, perhaps the pace at which you deliver it, and you can challenge them more, you know, so that does influence it.’ (Staff member, Irish HEI2_4)

What we can see in the accounts from staff members is that some students are viewed as not well suited to university; they are viewed as lack an appropriate level of academic competence, thus lowering the standards of teaching. Associating this ‘loss of quality’ with the expansion and increasing diversity of HE, as well as referencing ‘past students’ as being of higher quality, implies that it is the ‘new entrants’ who are seen as a risk to high-quality education. While staff members did not explicitly state who the ‘new entrants’ are, some policy actors in Denmark, Germany and Poland were more specific. They claimed that it was especially students from ‘non-academic’ families who had more passive approaches to learning and a more instrumental view of education. This was seen as problematic because these students struggled to ‘adapt’ to academic expectations and preferred to do ‘something more hands-on’ or were driven more by a desire to establish a professional career than contribute to societal change. One Danish policy actor suggested that the increasing diversity of the student population might be leading to changes in what it means to be a student:

‘And I believe also the universities have some anxiety or feel that, that I mean that we risk going from being students to being more like pupils in the way that when you have that … greater intake of students, you also have a broader … they have a broad social background and different backgrounds and some of them might demand more … more teaching and … and perhaps more structured teaching, instead of that you have to take responsible yourself for your learning … but there is a, maybe there is a shift from the … original meaning of student, as I see it.’ (Representative of Danish HE leaders’ organisation)

Here, the original meaning of a university student is held to be associated with responsibility and independence – qualities that students from non-academic backgrounds are believed not to possess. This distinction is present not only in the quotation above but also in the examples discussed throughout this section. The ‘lazy and incompetent’ student, whose suitability for university studies is often questioned, is described as unwilling or incapable of independent learning, not interested in academic knowledge
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and, in general, less academically inclined. Simultaneously, it is suggested that the competent student is independent, motivated, hard-working, and naturally academically able. While such statements make transparent some of the expectations of the ‘ideal student’ (Wong and Chiu, 2019), they leave other aspects of this ideal profile hidden. In fact, many have argued that the image of an ‘independent learner’ is inherently masculine, western, white and middle class, which, in the era of mass HE, does not apply to a large number of students (Leathwood, 2006; Reay et al, 2010; Bathmaker et al, 2013). In other words, describing the ‘ideal student’ primarily in terms of their approaches to learning means treating them as an ‘unspecified body’, without considering their ‘access to power, privilege and opportunity structures’ (Danvers, 2018: 558). The ‘incompetent student’, then, appears to be understood as inherently ‘deficient’ in the university setting, lacking the cultural knowledge and skills that determine good academic performance (Yosso, 2005; O’Shea, 2015; Loveday, 2016; Burke et al, 2017). With an increasingly diverse student population, constructing the competent student in these terms may help perpetuate discourses that reward privilege and exclude those who do not meet the qualities of the ‘ideal’ from being seen as truly belonging in HE.

Students’ political activism as a threat

In Chapter 3, we showed the ambivalent representations of students as political actors across our dataset. We also discussed how students’ political activism was not always depicted in a positive light in the media. In this section, we extend this analysis by exploring the ways in which newspaper narratives position students’ political activism as a threat to academic ideals, and to society more broadly. Interestingly, discourses of threat in relation to students’ political activism were not evident across all the countries in our study. Instead, they were prominent only in England, Ireland and Spain (we will return to this point later). Furthermore, what was considered as a ‘threat’ was also played out differently in these three contexts: in England and Ireland, students were constructed as ‘over-sensitive and immature’ whereas in Spain, students were seen as posing a threat to the university and society through violence.

England and Ireland: over-sensitive and immature students

Over recent decades, the term ‘snowflake’ has increasingly been linked to the contemporary student population in the Anglo-American context, with young people denounced as overly sensitive and unable to deal with oppositional ideas (for example, Bloom, 1987; Furedi, 2017; Lukianoff and Haidt, 2018). These accusations are commonly associated with particular
forms of protests, such as ‘no-platforming’ (a protest against or a decision not to provide a platform to a speaker representing ideas that are deemed to be harmful), or practices such as ‘trigger warnings’ (warning of possibly distressing material) and ‘safe spaces’ (space for discussion without the threat of violence, harassment or hate speech). While the discourse of ‘over-sensitive and immature students’ was evident in both newspapers in England and Ireland, perhaps unsurprisingly, this discourse was most pronounced in the English right-wing tabloid, the *Daily Mail*. In many articles students are labelled as the ‘snowflake generation’ who are demanding ‘safe spaces’ and ‘trigger warnings’ (see also Chapter 3). An extreme degree of concern or even rage is expressed at this image of the student, for example suggesting that students are ‘the new fascists’ (20 November 2015) or that ‘they can’t handle the truth’ (20 February 2016). Students and the forms of protests they engage with are seen problematic as they are believed to threaten the essence of the university as a place for free speech and debate:

> I would argue that it is this fixation with safe spaces and trigger warnings that is helping to erode the traditional liberal ethos of our universities. In place of openness, there is now internal policing of thoughts and words. Sadly, those age-old principles of challenge and debate are being replaced by the new censors. (*Daily Mail*, 31 October 2015)

The image of the ‘snowflake student’ as a threat is also presented in the Irish newspapers. Here, the risk students are seen to pose expands from the space of the university to society more broadly. Similar to the *Daily Mail*, political acts such as ‘no-platforming’ or ensuring ‘safe spaces’ are problematised because they are seen to produce ‘thin-skinned graduates’ who are unable to ‘deal with the rough and tumble of the ordinary outside world’ where it is normal to ‘be offended occasionally’ (*The Irish Times*, 5 May 2016). In these statements, students’ attempts to engage with and initiate discussions about power and injustice are ignored and the focus is shifted instead to the threat students are seen to represent. A good example of how the content of the message is ignored is in the *Irish Independent* where the agenda of the campaign ‘Rhodes Must Fall’ (a movement based at Oxford University aiming to decolonise university buildings and curriculum) is interpreted in the following way: ‘Looking at his [Cecil Rhodes] statue was far too triggering for our Generation Snowflake’ (*Irish Independent*, 5 April 2016).

What is notable in the newspaper discourses is that, first, students’ political activism is reduced to expressions of emotional sensitivity rather than recognised as a legitimate form of political action (see also Finn et al, 2021). By neutralising students’ political agency, students are framed as a threat to the existing traditions of the university and society. Second, the voices heard in these texts are exclusively figures of authority – academics,
journalists and political actors – whereas students’ own voices are rarely included. This allows these authority figures to dominate the discussion and represent students’ motivations as ‘censorious, separatist, and contrary to the pedagogical values of the University’ (Waugh, 2019: 160).

In the other English newspaper, The Guardian, the discussions about this topic are more analytical and subtle, and also include students’ voices. In contrast to the discourses presented above, the topic is framed in terms of politics. This is evident in the following quotation from a local students’ union leader who is commenting on safe spaces:

There are lots of prejudices in society: racism, sexism, homophobia, transphobia … Students are not shielded from these in their day-to-day lives, and, in some cases, they experience them a lot. So why not try to make the campus environment a bit more progressive, and different from those negative, prejudicial experiences? (The Guardian, 10 March 2016).

Nevertheless, despite this invitation to consider students’ actions as a form of political discussion, advancing social justice and democratic ideals, it is presented only as one possible interpretation of students’ actions. The other interpretations offered in the article are about students being ‘less mature’ than previous generations, and that students’ actions to make the university a more inclusive environment are a consequence of the emergence of the ‘therapeutic university’ which treats students as ‘vulnerable subjects’.

The constructions of students as overly sensitive and vulnerable subjects reflect wider debates about a ‘therapeutic culture’ that is seen to foster cultural decline and enable new practices of social control (Wright, 2008). For critics of the ‘therapeutic culture’, vulnerability is problematic because it is held to turn young people into ‘anxious and self-preoccupied individuals rather than aspiring, optimistic and resilient learners’ (Ecclestone and Hayes, 2009: i; see also Chapter 6). This therapeutic framing can further depoliticise student movements – when action is linked to mental fragility and framed as a cultural problem, rather than paying attention to the social, structural and economic problems that motivate these movements (Leaker, 2020). Furthermore, the portrayal of students as vulnerable and fragile creates an expectation of an ‘ideal student’ with a certain degree of resilience to enable them to thrive and achieve their potential (Waugh, 2019). As is evident in the newspaper discourses, the ‘snowflake generation’ is depicted as lacking resilience and positioned as a threat to traditional ideals of academic debate. In this way, particular forms of protest come to be seen as a cultural problem. Labelling other forms and spaces of communication (such as safe spaces) as censorship ‘naturalises the dominant voice of the institution while pathologizing the alternative’ (Hill, 2020: 5; see also Ahmed, 2015).
Spain: students as a violent threat

In Chapter 3, we noted the prevalence of the representation of students as political actors in the Spanish newspapers; for the most part, students’ political activism is depicted in positive or neutral terms in the newspapers (as well as in the Spanish television drama Merlí). However, in a number of newspaper articles, a starkly different image of students is drawn. Similar to the discourses discussed earlier in the English and Irish contexts, Spanish students are criticised for ‘shutting down the debate’ and devaluing democratic principles. In both papers, ABC and El País, this discourse is articulated by constructing students as a violent threat.

In the two newspapers this representation is related to a single event (although not the same one). Several articles in ABC cover a student protest aiming to stop a local politician teaching at the University of Lleida. Students are reported to have called the politician a ‘fascist’ and criticised the People’s Party (a conservative Christian–democratic political party in Spain) that she represents. Similarly, a number of articles in El País report a protest against two influential conference speakers in the Autonomous University of Madrid whom students accuse of corruption, abuse of power and widening inequalities in Spanish society. In both cases, students are portrayed as a violent threat:

[Some students burst into her class, insulting her and threatening her […]
Since then … Manso [the local politician] travels to the university with a triple escort […] It was in this kind of atmosphere that Manso fulfilled her commitment to her students yesterday afternoon. There were no incidents, but there did exist a certain air of defeat. A sense of abandoning one’s principles in face of threats from the violent. (ABC, 24 May 2016)

About 200 violent demonstrators, many of them with their faces covered with masks and hoods, have forced the suspension of a conference which was to be given this Wednesday at the Law Faculty of the Universidad Autónoma de Madrid by ex-president of the government, Felipe González, and the president of Group PRISA [Spanish media company], also editor of El País, Juan Luis Cebrián. (El País, 19 October 2016)

In these texts, and in other articles regarding these events, it is not explained what kind of violent acts the students are accused of. Moreover, the voices of the students participating in the protest are not included in the articles. Whereas the articles in ABC are written by journalists, in El País academics, other students and authority figures also express opinions about this event, claiming the students to be a threat to free speech. For example, the protest is judged severely as ‘a total contradiction of democracy’.
Even though students’ political activism in the Spanish papers is not reduced to expressions of emotion, as in the English and Irish papers, they are portrayed as a threat to ‘free speech’ and ‘open debate’ on campus. The discourse of threat questions the legitimacy of the protest and positions the student activists on the edges of acceptable forms of political engagement (Gagnon, 2018). Moreover, through positioning the protest and the students as violent, an image of them as out of control and ‘mindless’ is constructed. Ahmed (2014) argues that the labelling of protests as ‘mindless’ is used when ‘we don’t want to hear what is it that they [protesters] are saying’ (p 165). Indeed, in the newspaper discourses, the actions of the protesters are depicted as ‘mindless acts’ in opposition to ‘free speech’. Only the violence is discussed; no space is given to the voice of the protesters.

The discussion presented in this section shows that in all three countries the reports focus on political activism that is about students’ demanding change, but it is framed as a threat to ‘free speech’. It is important to ask whether small groups of students raising awareness about injustices and aiming to make campus environments more inclusive really constitute a threat to free speech and democracy as the newspaper discourses suggest. As mentioned, this framing is problematic because by labelling student activism as censorship, students’ own messages remain unheard. Moreover, media representations also suggest that students exert substantial power within the university – typically ignoring the considerably greater power wielded by politicians, media moguls and university leaders (Leaker, 2020). It appears, then, that by framing student protests as a threat to ‘free speech’, wider power imbalances are concealed.

While it is impossible to provide a conclusive explanation for the prominence of the construction of political activism as a threat only in these three countries of our study, we can speculate about some possible reasons. In the case of England and Ireland, the discourse of the ‘snowflake generation’ can be seen as part of broader debates related to identity politics and ‘culture war’, originating in the US (for example, Lukianoff and Haidt, 2018; see Chapter 1). It has not been as widespread (at least at the time of our analysis) in the campuses of continental Europe. The ‘violent acts’ reported in the Spanish newspapers, on the other hand, can be read in the context of broader social movements in Spain over the last decade, in which students have played a leading role (in the anti-austerity protests as well as the mobilisations for independence in Catalonia) (Zamponi and González, 2017) – rather than linked to identity politics. In that sense, these events can be understood as part of ‘traditional’ left-wing student politics where independent groups protest against the ideologies particular political figures represent. The political orientation of the newspapers also has a role to play: ABC as a right-wing paper and supportive of the conservative views of the People’s Party, and El País as a long-standing supporter of the former
prime minister Felipe González. In light of the stark differences between the English newspapers in the tone used when reporting about ‘over-sensitive and immature students’, we can see that, at least in the case of Spain and England, the political orientation of the newspaper appears to inform how students are talked about.

**Lifestyle choices and expectations: a generational criticism**

Alongside being criticised for their political activity, students were also appraised negatively for their lifestyle choices and expectations of the future – and compared unfavourably to previous generations. This was particularly evident in the interviews with staff members and policy actors in Denmark, Ireland, Poland and Spain. Although this was a much less prominent theme than the one discussed previously – and many staff members and policy actors also expressed sympathetic and positive views about students (see Chapters 4 and 6; see also Jayadeva et al, 2021) – it tended to be articulated in three main ways, which we outline below.

**Students prioritising materialistic lifestyles**

The first way in which students’ lifestyle choices and expectations were criticised, evident across the four countries, was with respect to their assumed materialism and independence. Some staff members made judgemental comments about students’ desire to be independent, especially when seen as aspiring to sustain a materialistic lifestyle. For example, staff members criticised students for what they perceived to be their decision not to engage fully with their studies but, instead, work and earn money to fund a certain lifestyle. The following quotation is illustrative:

‘[C]ompared to when I started teaching, I would say … the majority of my students do some type of part-time work. A large portion of those students are doing it so that they can support themselves with having a good car, with having … access to smartphones, with the ability to go on their holiday … So they kind of want to do it all, they want to have the lifestyle, and they want to be a student, and sometimes their being a student can suffer because they want to have the lifestyle.’ (Staff member, Irish HEI1_1)

In this quotation and in other similar accounts, students’ (alleged) materialistic values are compared to the interviewees’ experiences of the past: either their own experience of being a student or their experience of former students. Gabriel (1993) has noted that nostalgic accounts and yearning for the ‘good
old days’ should be understood not as an objective description of the past but rather as an idealisation of it in light of the discontents of the present. In that sense, and following Ylijoki (2005), these nostalgic laments can be seen as ‘a form of institutional remembering and forgetting’ (p 560), maintaining and transmitting the ‘moral order’ of the academic field. Thus, our interviewees’ references to the past do not necessarily mean that the ‘past student’ was better than the current one, but they do imply that the ‘ideal student’ is a serious learner dedicated exclusively to their studies (Brooks, 2018c), and that this is incompatible with a materialistic lifestyle.

In one narrative in Denmark, criticism of students’ lifestyle choices was linked explicitly to the welfare benefits they receive (free education and study grants), reflecting some of the earlier discussion in this chapter. The interviewee from the employers’ organisation believed that Danish students were quite spoilt, and did not realise how lucky they were to have these benefits. She questioned whether the independent and ‘adult-like’ lifestyle that state benefits enable are essential for students, for example in terms of being able to travel for holidays and living in apartments rather than dormitories:

‘[S]tudents expect not to live in a dormitory, we’ve not built dormitories so that they … I mean you could also say we’re going to build all these dormitories and then you live there for five years, and then you get an apartment afterwards, you don’t have to have the, you know living standard of … the equivalent of a graduate, you know, you’re a student, and that’s for a limited time of your life.’

Here, there is no explicit reference to the past; however, it is implied that it is the current generation of students who are ‘privileged’, although students in Denmark have enjoyed state benefits for a long time. By linking negative views of students to the welfare they receive raises questions, as discussed in the first section of this chapter, about whether students are seen as deserving of these benefits and the lifestyle they enable. According to Van Oorschot (2006), beneficiaries of welfare who are considered as likeable, grateful, compliant and conforming to set standards are seen as more deserving than those who do not fit this description. Indeed, the interviewee’s comments that question the necessity of such a high level of independence while a student, position students as ‘less deserving’ as they do not appear to exhibit ‘ideal’ dispositions. In contrast to the nostalgic laments discussed earlier, the focus here is perhaps on the ‘ideal future student’: one who is more efficient, modest and grateful.

**Poland and Spain: millennial students and the desire for an easy life**

The second lifestyle-related criticism, prominent only in Poland and Spain, was that students’ current and future expectations were unacceptable and
they desire an easy life. This was seen as a generational characteristic and compared to the interviewees’ own experiences during the Communist regime and Franco’s dictatorship. A few staff members explicitly labelled the current generation as ‘millennials’, ‘Y’ or the ‘me me generation’, seen as valuing materialistic lifestyles and having an easy life. For instance, a Polish government official asserted that students’ expectations of having a good job and a high salary after graduation were unacceptable. He explained how students should instead work from the bottom up, like he had to do in the past when he had started his career as a cleaner. Similar narratives were expressed by staff members where students’ assumed ‘easy life’ was also contrasted with their own experiences under previous political regimes:

‘You know I was born in Communist time, so at the beginning, when I was a child, everything was so hard to get. OK? I need to earn my own money to buy the small Lego set, it was so wonderful. And now they, it’s so easy to have everything today. It’s so easy. There are so many opportunities. […] They [students] think they should be given this and this and this. […] Entitled, they feel entitled. […] sometimes you need to … be positioned in worse condition to feel that … no, it’s not that everything is fine all the time. And maybe they, they had no chance to feel it.’ (Staff member, Polish HEI3_3)

In these nostalgic comparisons, students are homogenised as ‘millennials’ – a universalistic notion of a generation that tends to overlook social conditions and individual subjectivities (Woodman and Wyn, 2015). Indeed, in the staff members’ articulations of the ‘difficult past’ in comparison to the ‘easy present’, it is assumed that because some older forms of structural conditions and stratification have changed, it has resulted in universally better social conditions (Woodman and Wyn, 2015). Thus, not only do possible ‘newer forms’ of inequalities between and within generations remain hidden, but the construction of students as ‘entitled’ and ‘having an easy life’ underpins a mythical student of the past as the ‘ideal’ (Finn et al, 2021: 193).

**Ireland and Spain: dependence on family members**

In the third type of criticism, emphasis is placed on current students’ lack of independence, because of particular familial relationships. This theme was prominent only in Ireland and Spain where some of our interviewees believed that families treat students in infantilising ways, which prevents them from becoming mature and independent. They asserted that as most students live with their parents, they can avoid responsibility and are more needy and less independent than before. For instance, one Spanish staff
member was furious about what he saw as over-protective parents dealing with university administration on behalf of their child.

In other cases (and as we noted in Chapter 2), Spanish students were compared with other European students. Indeed, the familial dependence of Spanish students was contrasted with what some staff members and policy actors saw as the more independent nature of students in other European countries, such as Germany:

‘[In] most cases they are financed by their parents, I mean in some cases, these young people work, but I wouldn’t say, my perception is not that this is the majority at all. Unlike I mean other countries are different. … Because maybe a person that works in another country, in Germany for instance, and is very self-aware of how much it cost to go to university, how much he has to work to afford to study, maybe he’s more self-aware of everything, and he’s more focused at the end of the day.’ (Representative of Spanish HE leaders’ organisation)

Especially among the policy actors, differences from European peers were explained in terms of students’ engagement in paid work, and their living arrangements. Spanish students’ dependence was thus seen as a consequence of their lower propensity to work alongside their studies, and their assumed preference for living with their parents rather than alone or in dedicated student accommodation.

Similar narratives were also articulated in the Irish context, however only by the policy actors. Parents were sometimes seen as having too much influence on their children’s choices, and treating them in an over-protective way more generally:

‘I suspect that … politicians and large sections of Irish society … still see them as sort of barely grown-up children. … And they still need to be herded around and looked after to the n’th degree, which is understandable, and Irish mothers are notorious … for mothering their children to death, you know, as opposed to saying, right you’re off, here’s your handkerchief, wipe your own nose.’ (Representative of Irish HE leaders’ organisation)

In narratives such as these, there is little mention of how structural factors impact how students live their lives. In both countries, for example, tuition fees and grants are based on family income rather than treating students as individual citizens in their own right (Lainio and Brooks, 2021). Furthermore, both countries have a long history of strong familial relationships embedded within the Catholic tradition (Reher, 1998), which is not noted by our interviewees.
Comparisons of the Spanish students’ level of independence relative to their European peers also speak to the broader discourse of Europeanisation in Spain. Moreno (2013) maintains that due to the long international isolation of Spain, becoming a developed European country is regarded as essential for the modernisation of the nation-state. Therefore, he argues, Europe and Europeanisation have had a substantial impact in the formation of domestic policies. As pointed out in Chapter 1, the aspiration to become European is also an essential part of education policies; according to Bonal and Tarabini (2013), policy discourse in Spain emphasises the importance of following the educational reforms already implemented by other European countries in order to improve the ‘peripheral’ position of Spain within Europe (see also Brooks, 2021). In contrast to the ‘ideal student’ being one in the past or future, the imaginary ‘ideal student’ here is the one who is located abroad: the ‘independent European student’.

Taken together, these three different narratives about students’ lifestyle choices and expectations criticise students for failing to adhere to the values that are expected of them. As our discussion has shown, it is not only the values of previous generations, but also those associated with ‘welfare state deservingness’, and ideals adopted from abroad. These articulations all tend to overlook the structural, cultural and political circumstances shaping young people’s lives, and instead seek to legitimate an image of a student influenced by the interviewees’ own understandings of what constitutes an ‘ideal student’ (see also Hurst, 2013; Wong and Chiu, 2019; Jayadeva et al, 2021).

**Students’ perspectives: contesting constructions and the power of stereotypes**

So far in this chapter we have discussed three constructions of students that position them as a threat or object of criticism, outlined in the data from media, staff members and policy actors. In this last section we turn to the focus group discussions with students to examine their perceptions of how they felt ‘others’ (media, politicians, staff members, the general public as well as friends and family) see them. We show that our participants were aware of many of the critical constructions of them, and also discussed other stereotypes that they believed were common. Students were not only aware of these constructions and stereotypes, but also highlighted various harmful consequences these have on their lives.

**Denmark: students under surveillance**

The discourses constructing Danish students as incompetent and lazy, as well as those that question their deservingness of state benefits, were widely discussed by the Danish focus group participants (see also Jayadeva et al,
2022). They believed that they were viewed by the media, government and general public as lazy, privileged and a financial burden on taxpayers, and as ‘ungrateful students’ who spend the money they receive ‘wrongly’ on cafés, partying or travelling. The Danish students also talked about how they were seen as an expense and even a waste of money. This was associated with what they felt was a growing sentiment in the country that the educational grants students receive ought to be reduced and that students should contribute financially to their own education. For instance, one participant made a plasticine model of a ball and chain to depict how students were viewed as an expense and a burden. Another student made a dollar symbol and a clock (see Figure 7.1) and explained, referring to the Study Progress Reform (see Chapter 1), how students were seen as an economic burden – reliant on welfare and taking too long to finish their degrees.

Students talked about the harmful mental effect these negative constructions had for them. Reflecting the discussion in Chapter 6, a number of students described how they felt criticised for not working hard enough to deserve their educational grants, and that this scrutiny was stressful and placed huge pressure on them. For instance, one student illustrated this by making a model of an eye to represent how students felt that they were under surveillance. Focus group participants also talked about how they had to respond constantly to these negative and inaccurate constructions:
‘I feel like I have to defend myself all the time, I have to always … answer for the different stereotypes and different ways that society or the public debate or the [government] speaks of … And it just, like it’s really frustrating that they don’t actually acknowledge the amount of work that you actually put into it and … yeah, everything that you do to get your education … the work and the stress that you go through.’

(Focus group, Danish HEI3_3)

While the policy reforms in Denmark have had material consequences for students’ lives (for example, less time to complete their studies and a reduction in grants) (Sarauw and Madsen, 2020), the focus group discussions show how the image of students as lazy and privileged articulated by policy actors and circulated in the media also have a profound impact on students’ everyday experiences. In the quotation above, for example, the student expresses frustration at the public not recognising the hard work that studying entails. As discussed in Chapter 4, this positioning of themselves as hard workers can be seen as a direct response to the negative constructions that students believe others have about them (see also Brooks and Abrahams, 2021).

Spain: peripheral and marginalised students

Earlier in the chapter, we discussed how some staff members and policy actors referred to the ‘European student’ as a point of reference in conceptualising the ‘ideal student’ in Spain. Spanish students also articulated this framing of Europe as reference point – not, however, imposed by actors in Spain but by others outside Spain. This was especially evident in the plasticine models: some students made models to depict how Spanish students were viewed by the European general public and students as inferior to students from other European countries (see also Jayadeva et al, 2022). For instance, one student made a model of ‘a pile of shit’ and explained:

‘I’ve tried to focus on the view [of] the European general public [of] the Spanish situation. I think most of them knew some information about the corruption […] and all the social conflicts and the crisis, and everything is quite negative. I think […] that European students tend to think that Spanish students are like different [from] the real [European] students. … Basically they think Spanish students are something to be maybe protected and [to be] tak[en] away from the really bad situation in their country. […] it’s that my international friends think that you have to want to get out of Spain, maybe because [it] is a complicated situation for work.’ (Focus group, Spanish HEI2_1)
While students did not appear to be aware that staff and policy actors compared them to the ‘European ideal student’, the discourse of Spain as peripheral is also strongly present in their own accounts of how they believe they are viewed internationally. Even though students did not necessarily agree with the view they thought other Europeans have, the construction of Spanish students as somehow ‘lacking’ in relation to a more ‘developed’ Europe still appeared to have an impact on them.

Spanish students also recognised the media representation of students’ political activism as a threat. Several focus group participants described this view as inaccurate and argued that conservative newspapers in particular often frame political activity in terms of the disruption students are claimed to cause:

‘I think the more conservative media see us as a kind of threat, a force for radical change, that we want to set the world ablaze, that’s to say, when the conventional conservative media print a story you always see things like, “The gatherings of students who want to sabotage a meeting of something or other”.’ (Focus group, Spanish HEI2_2)

Students found this kind of sensational reporting manipulative and problematic because it emphasises what students have done at the expense of why they have done it. In many respects, students’ accounts of not being heard reflect what was discussed earlier in reference to Ahmed’s (2014) argument – that is, that calling protests ‘mindless acts’ serves to obscure the message protesters want to deliver.

Interestingly, media representations of students’ political activism as a threat were not discussed in the focus groups in England and Ireland. Perhaps the lack of discussion about this topic shows that the discourse about the ‘free speech crisis’ on campuses is largely imposed from outside the university rather than seen as a problem by the HE actors themselves (Leaker, 2020). Indeed, in England (as we noted in Chapter 1), studies have found little evidence of censorship taking place on campus or students being in favour of limiting freedom of speech (Grant et al, 2019; Finn et al, 2021). Regardless of this evidence, the UK government has recently decided to appoint a ‘free speech champion’ to monitor and sanction (when necessary) universities for violating free speech regulations (Tidman, 2021). This act speaks to the understanding of ‘free speech’ as an ideological tool, used by a range of political and other groups to justify statements, behaviours and policies (Leaker, 2020).

**Hedonistic and nuisance students**

Focus group participants in all six countries identified other negative constructions of how they felt others saw them, which were not dominant
themes across the data from other actors in this study. A recurrent theme among students was that they felt that society largely perceives them as hedonistic and a nuisance: drinking and partying a lot, making noise in the local neighbourhoods and having plenty of free time (see also Jayadeva et al, 2022). This view was often depicted in the plasticine models – including a drinking glass and a pint or a bottle of alcohol (see, for example, Figure 7.2). Indeed, students across the focus groups believed that a stereotypical perception of students is that they drink all the time, and are thus seen as having an ‘alcohol problem’.

Students also described how a common image of a student among the general public (and sometimes friends and family) is that of ‘a carefree student’ who has an enormous amount of free time and spends most of their day sleeping late instead of working hard. Students across the countries felt that these perceptions are mostly a cliché, and critiqued them as stereotypical and inaccurate. For example, and similar to the contestations by Danish students discussed earlier, many Spanish students felt that the view of them having an easy life and not studying hard was far from the reality, and instead, described how they work and study ‘24 hours a day’ (see Chapter 4). Especially in
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England and Ireland, but also in the other countries, students often blamed media (newspapers, films and television) for this misrepresentation:

‘I don’t think it’s right to assume that like every one of us in this room like does drugs and constantly drinks and things like that, but the media like to play a part and be like, this is what they were doing and this is all they do all the time. And they don’t realise like the hard work that we’ve got to do and things like that.’ (Focus group, English HEI1_2)

In the media strand of our study, this representation of students was a dominant theme only in the English data, in the TV series *Fresh Meat* and *Clique*, and in the tabloid the *Daily Mail*. In the two TV series, partying and (heavy) drinking are normalised as part of student life as many of the activities students are depicted as engaging with involve alcohol consumption (and sometimes also drugs) in various social settings. Also, a number of articles in the *Daily Mail* represent students as ‘party animals’, evidenced in the following headline: ‘Boozing games, bin bag outfits … Our finest young students at play!’ (5 May 2014). The prevalence of these representations in the English media data can perhaps explain why English and Irish students spoke about media misrepresentations more often than students in the other countries. Furthermore, aligned with students’ comments above, many previous studies have suggested that the media often represent students as party animals and living hedonistic lifestyles (for example, Hubbard, 2013; Tobolowsky and Reynolds, 2017; Calver and Michel-Fox, 2021).

Scholars have maintained that, due to the hegemony of drinking culture, reproduced even through university marketing, students who do not drink experience derogatory labelling, which can have a negative impact on their social identity (Andersson et al., 2012; Robertson and Tustin, 2018). Indeed, focus group participants talked about how the ‘partying student’ was often seen as a ‘norm’ that shaped their experiences. Students, mainly in England and Ireland, spoke about the pressure to conform to the norm of drinking and partying. They shared their experiences of not being considered an ‘authentic student’ and looked down upon if they did not drink alcohol and go out partying. For instance, one student said: “I’m told I’m a shit student because I don’t drink” (England, HEI1_1). Regardless of students contesting the image of a partying and drinking student, here we can see the power of the stereotype in constructing the ‘norm’.

Students discussed how these negative stereotypes also have implications for how they are treated by other people. In England, for example, one student explained how the stereotype of the drinking student led to the trivialising of student problems by dismissing them as alcohol-related. Similarly, Polish students mentioned how it can be hard for students to find accommodation, as some landlords do not even consider renting to
students because of stereotypes about wild behaviour. A prevalent theme among students studying in smaller cities and towns in Ireland and England was the relationship with local citizens. Students felt that because of media misrepresentations, local people see them as a nuisance, which is then often used as a reason to blame students for all possible noise, mess and unfortunate events. Students explained how this has also led to a ‘not-in-my-backyard’ phenomenon, as local people put together petitions to prevent student housing being built in their neighbourhoods.

The evidence from our student participants, presented in this section, suggests that negative constructions and stereotypes are not only producing ‘false images’, but also functioning, to some extent at least, as a subjectifying force (Bhabha, 1983; see also Tyler, 2013), in that the discourses have various negative implications for students’ lives and experiences. However, by resisting and contesting the stereotypes, students can also be seen to detach from them and reconstitute themselves as ‘subjects of value’ (Tyler, 2013: 214). Students repeatedly emphasised the realities of student life, and especially the hard work they were putting in, which can be seen as a response to criticism and an attempt to (re-)establish the value of being a student.

Conclusion

In this chapter, we have analysed three constructions of students that position them as a threat and object of criticism – often associated with the expansion of HE and the emergence of an increasingly diverse student population. We have shown that what underpins these critical constructions are images of an ‘ideal’ or ‘implied’ student, of which those who are criticised are viewed as falling short. We have suggested that the criticisms are explained by different factors, including assumptions about welfare ‘deservingness’ in Denmark; identity politics in England and Ireland; the legacy of dictatorship and Communism in Spain and Poland, respectively; and strong familial relationships in Spain and Ireland. We have concluded that the idealised images tend to reinforce understandings of students that are exclusionary, and which overlook structural, cultural and socio-economic factors that can have a significant impact on being a student. Furthermore, we have shown the ways in which the critical constructions produced and mediated by social actors can have direct and material effects on students themselves. The power of stereotypes is not only in producing and disseminating ‘false images’, but also in the harmful consequences these can have on students’ lives, and the limited subjectivities made available to them.