Conclusion

Introduction

The preceding chapters have presented six key ways in which HE students have been understood by policy actors, the media and HE staff – as well as students themselves – across Europe. Some of these, such as the construction of students as future workers (Chapter 5) and political actors (part of the discussion of citizens in Chapter 3), have been prominent themes in the extant literature on students, as discussed in Chapter 1. Others, however, are newer and have been much less well examined in relevant scholarship – for example, conceptualising students as hard-working and enthusiastic learners (Chapter 4) and as stressed (Chapter 6). Moreover, our discussions of students as ‘in transition’ (Chapter 2) and as threats or objects of criticism (Chapter 7) develop themes that have been well-rehearsed within youth studies (for example, Dwyer and Wyn, 2001; Lesko, 2012) but not necessarily within research on HE specifically. Taken together, the various constructions discussed in the earlier chapters provide important new knowledge about how HE students are understood.

The conceptualisations that we have discussed in Constructing the Higher Education Student: Perspectives from across Europe may appear to some extent contradictory. For example, the upbeat and optimistic accounts of student life described by our focus group participants in Chapter 4, where we focused on students as enthusiastic learners and hard workers, can seem in tension with their positioning as stressed and as threats and objects of criticism, which we discussed in Chapters 6 and 7, respectively. In general, however, the constructions that emerged from our student data appeared broadly coherent and consistent, notwithstanding some of the differences between countries that we discuss in subsequent sections of this chapter. In relation to the example above, for instance, students noted how the stress they experienced (Chapter 6) was often related to the hard work they were putting into their studies (Chapter 4). Moreover, they resented being criticised as lazy (Chapter 7) primarily because they were working so hard. Indeed, a picture emerges across the six preceding chapters of students who consider themselves to be rounded individuals, committed to their academic work, who are developing personally, and as citizens – and not mere ‘economic resources’. They are often, however, under pressure – feeling stress and aware that they are sometimes conceived of as a threat by others and/or not taken
Constructing the Higher Education Student

seriously as contributors to civic and political society. The contradictions and disconnects that are evident are largely between the views of students, on the one hand, and those of other social actors, on the other. This is a key finding of our research, which we discuss further below.

In this final chapter, we draw together arguments from the previous chapters and explore some cross-cutting themes. We first consider the distinctiveness of a student identity. Implicit in most of the discussion in the book so far is an assumption that there is something distinctive about being a student, and how students are understood has social consequences. However, we draw on data from Poland to note that this distinctiveness is not necessarily played out in the same way in all contexts. The chapter then moves on to explore the extent to which dominant constructions across and within nation–states were similar, engaging with the debates introduced in Chapter 1 about the degree of homogenisation of HE across Europe, and the extent to which nation–states can be considered ‘coherent educational entities’. We suggest that there are also other important axes of difference to consider – beyond national boundaries and type of social actors – related notably to academic discipline, HE institution, and students’ social background. The chapter subsequently explores the impact of constructions, maintaining that they are not merely of academic interest, but have direct and material effects, before looking to the future and considering how Constructing the Higher Education Student: Perspectives from across Europe can help to inform a future research agenda.

The distinctiveness of a student identity

In most cases, our research participants were able to identify what they considered to be distinctive features of a student identity – and it is these data that we have reported in the preceding chapters. Moreover, a student identity was considered to be a significant one – whether related, for example, to the process of becoming an active citizen or political actor, as explored in Chapter 3, or the object of societal criticism, as covered in Chapter 7. Nevertheless, it was notable that this view was not shared equally in all contexts. Indeed, as mentioned in Chapter 6, in Poland, there were a number of students (albeit a small minority) who believed that there were few characteristics, if any, that differentiated them from the population more generally. For instance, one focus group participant made a plasticine model of a ‘regular person’ to depict what being a student meant to them (Figure 8.1), explaining, “I’ve made a regular person [for my model] because I think that every student is just a regular person and the fact that you are attending university doesn’t make you special in any way” (HEI2_3).

Other Polish students focused on particular characteristics that they had, which had no obvious connection to being a student. One explained, “I have
made a person [in plasticine] because I see myself as an outgoing person and someone that needs other people to feel good and I am always at the centre of attention” (HEI2_3). This kind of comment was wholly absent from the focus groups in the other five countries where, typically, all participants considered that there was something specific about being a student, even if the nature of this differed. This lack of distinctiveness was also evident in the media data in Poland: there were relatively few newspaper articles that covered student-related issues specifically, and no TV shows or films that featured students prominently.

The Polish data can, perhaps, be explained by considering changes to the HE sector over the past decade. As noted in Chapter 1, Poland differs from most of its European neighbours by the sharp rate of increase in HE participation that has occurred over the past 30 years. In 1989, for example, only ten per cent of each age cohort progressed to university, whereas now the comparable figure is about 50 per cent. While the current level is not significantly higher than in many other European countries, the rate of increase has been notably steeper. This may have led to a perception among some Poles that now ‘everyone’ is going to HE and it is no longer associated with any special social status. A survey conducted in Poland indicated that 78 per cent of those interviewed believed that ‘everyone can study’ (Kwick, 2018: 20) – perhaps linked, not only to the sharp increase in the percentage of each cohort progressing to HE, but also the ease of accessing most courses,
even those in prestigious universities, because of policies of ‘almost open access’ (Kwiek, 2018: 21). In addition, it is possible that the prevalence of paid work alongside studies, in the lives of many Polish students, affected their perspectives. Although the level of student employment in Poland is similar to that in some of our other countries (Eurostudent, n.d.), the apparent belief among the population at large that a degree has low labour market value (Kwiek, 2018) may encourage students to foreground their worker identity rather than that associated with their studies. Indeed, research that has asked students (who have engaged in paid work during their studies) whether they identify primarily as a student or worker has indicated that the percentage choosing the latter is high in Poland (48.4 per cent, compared with 25 per cent in Ireland and only nine per cent in Denmark, for instance) (Eurostudent, n.d.).

Nevertheless, it is important to note that not all Polish students shared this view. As mentioned above, they constituted only a relatively small proportion, and many of their peers were able to identify features that distinguished students from other people – as has been evident from the discussion in the preceding chapters.

**Increasingly similar students? The impact of the nation-state**

*Significant commonalities across nations*

As explained in Chapter 1, one of our main aims in this book has been to engage with debates about the extent to which HE across Europe has been converging as a result of specific policy measures, such as those associated with the Bologna Process and the European Higher Education Area, as well as through neo-liberal globalisation more generally.

As will have been evident from the book so far, our research has revealed some important commonalities across the six nations in which we collected data. For example, Chapter 2 demonstrated the widespread view that HE constitutes an important rite of passage, which is now considerably more accessible to students from a range of different social backgrounds than in the past. Chapters 2, 4 and 5 all emphasise that many students from across Europe position themselves, to some extent at least, as future workers, even if they reject the ideas about human capital that underpin this construction within policy (Chapter 5). Nevertheless, in most cases, they object to being seen by others as only future workers; instead, they value the opportunity to become committed learners (Chapter 4), develop personally (Chapters 2 and 5), and learn how to effect change in the world around them (Chapter 3). In contrast to some assumptions in the extant literature, the majority of the students involved in our research saw no contradiction between being focused on securing a job post-graduation (and thus seeing HE as a transition
Conclusion

to employment – see Chapter 2), and valuing various non-instrumental aspects of their HE experience. Thus, understanding oneself as preparing for the labour market was not necessarily seen as incompatible with being an enthusiastic learner and/or an active citizen.

These commonalities, across Europe, in how students understood their own role as students, were reflected in their views of how they believed they were seen by others. Common across the six countries was a sense that they could be marginalised as a result of being seen as ‘in transition’ or ‘not a fully formed adult’ (Chapter 2) and only a future citizen (Chapter 3) by policymakers and other social actors – and that being criticised as being lazy and/or a threat to society could have material impacts on their everyday lives (Chapter 7). Indeed, there were also clear commonalities across the nations in the views of others – and how, in many cases, these contrasted with the views of students themselves (this is a key point we return to below). As evidenced in Chapter 3, HE staff and policy actors typically did not view students as citizens – comparing their political activity and other forms of civic engagement less favourably to previous generations. Similarly, in Chapter 4, we showed how HE staff and policy actors across Europe tended to view students as instrumental in their approach to learning, apparently not recognising the enthusiasm that was so key to the students’ accounts. The positioning of students as objects of criticism was also common across the six nations, as Chapter 7 demonstrates, with students frequently positioned (by HE staff, policy actors and the media) as lazy, incompetent and/or a threat to society.

Enduring national differences

These significant commonalities have, however, to be set against the various differences, by nation, that we have documented in some of the chapters. These suggest that despite arguments about the homogenisation of the European HE space, constructions of students remain, to some extent at least, inflected by national distinctions. In this section, we discuss some of the national-level differences reported in previous chapters and examine some of the likely causal factors.

As the preceding discussion has made clear, some national differences can best be explained with reference to relatively long-term historical and cultural trends. In several chapters we have noted the enduring influence of the Humboldtian model of HE in some of our nations, particularly Denmark and Germany. In Chapter 2, for example, we showed how German students tended to view their ‘transitional status’ in rather different terms from their counterparts in other nations. Influenced by the Humboldtian concept of Bildung, they did not see HE as a discrete stage of life, very different from those before or after, but as part of a process of ongoing personal development
and change that would be lifelong. Similarly, as noted in Chapter 4, in their understanding of themselves as learners, Danish and German students, but not their peers elsewhere, placed considerable importance on being able to determine for themselves the pace at which they studied – associated with the Humboldtian idea of *Lehrnfreiheit* (the freedom to study – see Chapter 1). The most explicit invocation of Humboldtian principles is in Chapter 5, where we have argued that German and Danish students drew on the concept of *Bildung* as a means of resisting what they perceived to be dominant economistic policy discourses. Instead of endorsing the model of the student as an accumulator of human capital, they emphasised the importance of HE for personal development and the inculcation of critical dispositions. We have also suggested that, in England, there remains strong cultural attachment to the ‘residential’ model of HE – where students move away from the parental home for their studies. Although, in practice, a large number of English students now choose to ‘commute’ to their local HEI, the residential ideal remains strong, as Chapter 2 has evidenced. Indeed, in this chapter we demonstrated how English social actors, more so than those in other countries, tended to place considerable importance on HE as a time for learning to live independently, away from the parental home.

National differences can also be explained by different HE policies implemented in the various countries in the sample, and the principles underpinning them. To some extent these map on to the different welfare regimes discussed in Chapter 1 (see in particular Table 1.1). For instance, in Chapter 5, we contended that the ‘future worker’ construction was most closely aligned with ideas about human capital development within policy in the countries where neo-liberalism has had greatest purchase. Different mechanisms for funding HE, underpinned by different principles and values, also inform some of the national variation. For example, in Chapter 7, we argued that Danish students, in particular, were criticised by the media and policy actors for not always being ‘deserving’ of the welfare benefits they received – through their study grants. Although students in most other countries were also ‘objects of criticism’, only in Denmark (with the most generous student support system – see Table 1.1) was this couched in terms of ‘welfare deservingness’. Moreover, as we outlined in Chapter 2, in those nations where all or most students paid fees (England, Ireland and Spain), students (and other social actors) were more likely to see their transition to the labour market as a matter of personal investment and benefit than in the other three countries. In Denmark, Germany and Poland, in contrast, greater emphasis was instead typically placed on societal contribution and benefit (see also the discussion of societal contributions in Chapter 3). Such differences are likely to be related both to the payment of fees (or not) and also to wider social norms about the purpose of HE – principles of public good are typically articulated more frequently and explicitly in systems that have
retained public funding models. The extent to which national HE policies have promoted vertical differentiation of institutions is also significant, as some constructions – particularly those related to learners and learning (see Chapter 4) – differed by institution. Such differences were most marked in England, which has the most hierarchical system in the sample, underpinned by long-standing market-based policies encouraging institutions to compete against one another (McGettigan, 2013). (We discuss this further below.)

While the values and principles underpinning HE policy are clearly important in explaining some of the national differences in constructions of the student, so too are other aspects of social policy and state provision. We discussed this in Chapter 2, with respect to differing perspectives on students as ‘in transition’. Specifically, we suggested that, in Spain, because of long-standing traditions of ‘familialised social citizenship’ (Chevalier, 2016) whereby parents have been held responsible for the support of young adults, HE is less commonly seen as a distinct period of preparation for adulthood – not least because many Spanish students remain living in the parental home throughout their degree programme. This can be contrasted with the position in Denmark, where many students have already transitioned to independent living before embarking upon their degree, facilitated by state support that is underpinned by assumptions about the importance of ‘individualised social citizenship’ (Chevalier, 2016).

In Spain, the emphasis on familial dependence is also bound up with wider debates about Europeanisation. As we discussed in Chapter 7, Spanish students were criticised by various (Spanish) policy actors and staff members for being less independent than their peers from other European nations – with German students held up as an example of the ‘ideal independent student’. Moreover, Chapters 4 and 6 documented how some Spanish students believed that the quality of the education they were receiving was lower than that available elsewhere in Europe, and led to them being viewed as comparatively inferior learners, with worse employment prospects than their peers elsewhere in Europe. Implicit in such claims is a sense that Spain has much to learn from other European nations, echoing the argument of scholars such as Bonal and Tarabini (2013) (discussed in Chapter 1) that Europeanisation is often presented within Spain as a route to social and economic development and a means of becoming ‘real Europeans’ (see also Moreno, 2013; Brooks, 2021).

National norms relating to health and health policy are also relevant. In Chapter 6, we explained how Poland differed from the other five countries in the sample with respect to the absence of any discussion of stress – by students or other social actor. This may relate to the points made previously in this chapter about the ‘student’ not being seen as a distinctive a social identity in Poland when compared to the other countries – and thus students not perceived as being under more pressure than any other members of society.
However, it seems likely that it can also be explained, to some extent at least, by national norms about disclosure of mental ill health and psychological distress. As we noted in Chapter 6, there remains considerable stigma attached to such disclosures in Poland (likely related to its Communist past), which differentiates it from many of its European neighbours.

Some national differences can also be related to the economic situation at the time of our data collection. As we explained in Chapter 1, graduate unemployment was considerably higher in Spain than in the other five nations when we conducted our research (see, for example, Table 1.5). Although stress was widely reported across our sample (see Chapter 6), it was most closely related to students’ concerns about their future employment in Spain, with participants remarking on what they believed to be the small number of opportunities available to graduates. Moreover, in Spain – but not elsewhere – students feared competition with graduates from other European countries, further emphasising a sense of being on the periphery of Europe, and comparing poorly to other Europeans, mentioned above.

Finally, it is likely that some of the national differences outlined in the preceding chapters can be explained by various shorter-term factors. For example, it is possible that particular reforms – that had been recently implemented at the time of our research – may have informed some understandings. In Denmark, for example, the construction of students as ‘lazy’ can be linked to policies of massification (see Chapter 7), while the Danish students’ emphasis on their ‘hard-working’ nature (Chapter 4) can perhaps be read as a direct response to what they perceived to be a critique of them, within policy, as moving too slowly through their studies. Indeed, during our period of data collection in Denmark (most of which was in 2017–18), the Study Progress Reform (see Chapter 1), originally introduced in 2014, was still being embedded in the Danish HE system, and courting considerable controversy. Similarly, the very rapid expansion of HE in Poland between 1989 and 2014 may, as we have suggested above, have played into the sense among some students (although not all) and the media, that there is now relatively little that is special about being a student. It will be interesting to explore whether these views persist once these reforms in Denmark and Poland are fully embedded and normalised. Indeed, very recent research on the identities of Danish HE students has not highlighted issues to do with hard work and commitment to learning (Gregersen et al, 2021), suggesting that some constructions may be relatively malleable in nature even in the short term.

**Degree of convergence within nation-states**

Alongside examining the extent to which understandings of HE students were similar across different European nation-states, our research has sought
to explore the degree of convergence *within* individual nations. Although various scholars have noted differences by stakeholder in, for example, policy perspectives (for example, Ashwin et al, 2015), there is also a tendency — perhaps informed by methodological nationalism (*Wimmer and Glick Schiller, 2002*) — within both research and practice to assume at least some degree of national homogeneity in numerous aspects of HE.

Nevertheless, as the preceding discussion in this chapter has already highlighted, our research indicates that there were relatively few examples where constructions of students were shared by all of the social actors in our study (policy actors, media, HE staff as well as students themselves). One exception is the understanding of students as stressed, discussed in Chapter 6. Students were viewed in this way by all social actors in all countries apart from Poland (where stress was not brought up in any of the interviews or documents — see discussion above) and Spain (where it was brought up only by students). Understanding students as preparing for work was also relatively common across all social actors. However, as we argued in Chapter 5, this was played out in different ways, with students in some countries drawing on ideas associated with vocation and personal development to critique constructions of the ‘future worker’ informed by human capital, and others emphasising the importance of credentialism.

More common — as will have been evident from much of the discussion in the previous six chapters — were differences in perspective by type of social actor. The most pronounced differences were between the perspectives of students, on the one hand, and media, staff and policy actors, on the other. For instance, in Chapter 3, we showed that while students, across all our six countries, considered themselves to be active citizens, committed to bringing about social change, staff and policy actors tended to see them, in contrast, as more passive, and often politically disengaged, while the media commonly took a more ambivalent view. Similar patterns were played out with respect to understanding students as learners, as outlined in Chapter 4. A prominent theme among HE staff across all six countries was that students had become more instrumental in their approach to learning, and less likely than previous generations to become involved in the wider life of the university. In some countries this was ascribed to particular policies such as the Study Progress Reform in Denmark, the impact of the Bologna Process in Germany, and the introduction of very high tuition fees in England. Policy actors tended to position students primarily as future workers rather than learners. However, they also sometimes problematised students’ approaches to learning, with some commenting, for example, on their reliance on memorisation and rote learning — typically attributing this to poor teaching rather than specific policies. In contrast, students understood themselves as enthusiastic and motivated learners. Interestingly, while staff tended to
believe that an overriding focus on employment, on the part of students, had driven out a commitment to learning, students themselves often saw the two as entirely compatible. As we argued in Chapter 4, even when students foregrounded issues related to their future employability in the focus group discussions, this did not mean they were not also interested in their subjects and stimulated by the new knowledge they were gaining. Indeed, in Chapter 5, we contended that students were involved in acts of everyday resistance to what they saw as their positioning as economic resources by policy actors, by drawing on discourses of ‘vocation’ and self-development (associated with the concepts of Bildung and Dannelse) as opposed to human capital.

Chapters 4 and 7 also emphasised significant differences between social actors in the extent to which students were conceptualised as hard-working (with respect to their studies). In these chapters we demonstrated that the construction of the ‘lazy’ and ‘entitled’ student was a common trope among the media, HE staff and even, in some cases, policy actors. This contrasted quite starkly with the centrality of ‘hard work’ to students’ self-conceptions – evident in both the focus group discussions and many of the plasticine models made by the students (see Chapter 4). Moreover, students were typically aware that they were not seen as hard-working by others – and believed that such negative views often had substantial consequences. The conceptualisation of students as a threat, discussed in some detail in Chapter 7, also brings into sharp relief differences in perspective between students, on the one hand, and staff, policy actors and the media, on the other – despite some national differences in how this threat was perceived. Again, students were aware of such differences – and able to articulate what impact they believed they had. We return to this discussion below.

Finally, in Chapter 6, while in most countries – as noted above – there was a high degree of similarity between social actors in their construction of students as ‘stressed’, Spain provided an interesting exception. Here, while stress was a very prominent theme in the student focus groups, it was almost entirely absent from the media (the newspaper articles as well as the TV series and film we analysed), policy texts, and our interviews with policy actors and HE staff. As we explored in Chapter 6, this disconnect raises some questions about the ‘cognitive availability’ thesis – that is, the idea that the increase in students (and others) reporting psychological distress can be explained, at least to some extent, by the prevalence of discussion about mental health in wider society (Bristow et al, 2020). We suggested that the lack of wider debate about student stress and mental health in Spain may be related to social expectations that problems are resolved within the family (see discussion above about ‘familialised social citizenship’ in Spain). Moreover, students’ pessimism about their future employment (in light of the high level of graduate unemployment) and the pressure many experienced
through juggling paid work and studies provoked severe feelings of stress irrespective of the wider societal discourse.

Evidence such as this suggests that nations should not necessarily be seen as ‘coherent educational entities’ (Philips and Schweisfurth, 2014), at least with respect to how HE students are understood. There are clearly some important disconnects between the perspectives of students themselves and those of other social actors. In explaining these differences, it appears that, in some cases, critiquing students is effectively a means of critiquing broader phenomenon. For example, in Chapter 4, we suggested that although staff and students had radically different views about the extent to which students were enthusiastic learners and hard workers, staff were typically sympathetic to the position students found themselves in, and believed that their instrumental behaviour was a direct response to the policy environment around them. Oversimplifying perspectives – for example, constructing students as solely instrumental future workers, and viewing commitment to both learning and employability as mutually exclusive – can be seen as an attempt to convey the gravity of their concerns more clearly. Indeed, as Tight (2013) has argued, recourse to simplified metaphors is often essential to the way we think, and can help us evaluate our own understanding of social processes. Criticisms of students were also, in some cases, linked to broader generational critiques. This is evident in Chapter 3, where we described how numerous stakeholders compared contemporary students unfavourably to what were held to be their more politically active counterparts in previous decades. Similarly, in Chapter 7, we discussed how current students were criticised for their materialist lifestyles – with unfavourable comparisons again drawn with previous generations. The disconnects, documented throughout this book, between the views of students and others, suggest also that there is often a lack of knowledge of the realities of the lives of contemporary students – evidenced in staff members’ ignorance of the enthusiasm with which students approached their studies (Chapter 4), various actors’ lack of awareness of students’ commitment to change society for the better (Chapter 3), and the absence of any societal debate in Spain about the apparent high levels of stress experienced by many students (Chapter 6). While such disconnects cannot be easily changed, they do speak to a pressing need at least to increase the voice of students in public debate across Europe.

Other axes of difference

So far in this chapter, we have explored the extent to which conceptualisations of students differ by nation-state and specific social actor. There are also, however, other axes of difference apparent in our data – in particular, differences by academic discipline, HE institution, and students’ social class, which we focus on in this section. It is important to note, however, that
these are not entirely unrelated to the points we have made above – indeed, some of the patterns we report here were evident across most or all of the six countries in the study and so feed into the discussion above about commonalities across nation-states.

First, in a small number of areas, there were significant differences by the discipline students were following. As we noted in Chapter 3, social science students were often more politically engaged and interested than their peers from other disciplinary backgrounds, and so were more likely to position themselves as significant political actors. In addition, in Chapter 4 we discussed in some detail how students believed that the type of learner they were thought to be (by others) was often closely related to their subject of study. In general, students from all disciplinary backgrounds held that those enrolled in STEM courses were viewed as superior learners to those in the arts and humanities – because of assumptions about likely employment outcomes, the difficulty of courses, and the inherent value of particular subjects. Students from all six countries expressed similar views about the ways in which academic discipline inflected perceptions of students. Moreover, in Denmark, Poland and Spain, in particular, our analysis of policy texts and newspaper articles demonstrated how the valorisation of STEM subjects was also played out in public discourse.

Second, alongside discipline, institution attended was also associated with differences in constructions of the HE student. In various cases, however, it is hard to disentangle the influence of HEI from that of social class: in many countries, students from privileged backgrounds are considerably more likely to attend prestigious universities than their peers without a similar level of social advantage. Thus, it is likely that a lot of the differences between HEIs evident in our data are related to differences in their social class profile. (It is also the case that our use of focus groups with students – rather than individual interviews – prevented us from analysing perspectives at an individual level, sensitive to a participant’s social class.) In Chapter 2, we noted that students from some of the most prestigious HEIs in the sample were more likely than their peers at other HEIs to conceptualise the ‘transitional’ nature of HE as part of a familial tradition. Similarly, in Chapter 3, students attending the more prestigious universities in England and Germany were more likely to be optimistic about their future political influence than their counterparts at other institutions in the same country. The students to whom we spoke – but not the staff or policy actors – also believed that the type of learner one was held to be was affected by HEI attended. In Chapter 4, we noted that students typically thought that those attending what were perceived to be ‘top’ universities were thought to be ‘better’ learners, while those studying at lower-status institutions were more often seen as lazy, hedonistic and not committed to learning. Although such views were most common in England (the sector that has the most
vertically stratified system – see Chapter 1), they were also evident in nearly all other countries, even those with much ‘flatter’ systems, with much less pronounced status differences between institutions.

Differences by social economic status were also discussed explicitly by some of our respondents, independent of the points made above (in which institutional status can be seen as something of a proxy for social class composition). For example, as we discussed in Chapter 4, staff in all six countries commented on the fact that not all students had equal capacity to devote themselves completely to their studies – because of the need, in many cases, and particularly among those from lower socio-economic groups, to engage in paid work alongside their degree programme. This differentiation was also a theme in various of the analysed TV series and films. Similarly, in Chapter 6, we documented how this need to work alongside studying was felt to contribute to the widespread stress experienced by students. In addition, Chapter 6 highlighted how, in some cases, a sense of ‘habitus disconnect’ was believed to exacerbate feelings of stress – for those students who had moved from low-income families into the predominantly middle-class milieu of the university. Finally, in Chapter 7, we argued that while socio-economic status was rarely mentioned explicitly in constructions of students as threats or objects of criticism, it was often a strong implicit theme. Indeed, we suggested that the ‘incompetent’ students, identified by a range of social actors in many of the six countries, were often assumed to be those who have gained access to HE as a result of massification – and were thus less likely to have a family history of degree-level study. Moreover, we contended that discussions (among policy actors, HE staff and the media) about ‘loss of quality’ within the student body were often linked (implicitly and sometimes explicitly) to having a more socially diverse intake.

Impact of constructions

As we explained in Chapter 1, examining how HE students are understood is important, as it can generate new knowledge about the extent to which we are witnessing homogenisation of HE across Europe and the degree to which nation-states can be seen as distinct and coherent educational entities – feeding into significant academic debates (for example, Slaughter and Cantwell, 2012; Dobbins and Leisyté, 2014; Sam and van der Sijde, 2014). It can also, however, enhance our awareness of the day-to-day lives of students as how they are constructed – by the media, policy and HE staff – can have material consequences (for example, Tran and Vu, 2016). Indeed, as Bacchi (2000) has argued, with respect to policy understandings in particular, governments do not respond to problems ‘out there’ but commonly construct such problems through the very policy proposals
that are offered as solutions. This perspective draws on a materialist view of language in which words are understood as doing more than naming things; they impose limits on what can be said and whose voices are viewed as legitimate. For example, as outlined in Chapter 4, some of the students who took part in our focus groups believed that the construction of them as lazy made invisible the hard work they put into their studies, the high levels of stress some experienced, and the challenges – for a considerable number – of juggling paid work alongside their studies. Chapter 7 explored these impacts in more detail, arguing that pervasive negative constructions of students can act as a ‘subjectifying force’ (Bhabha, 1983). For example, Danish students reported feeling under surveillance, and thus having to constantly defend themselves and reassert their identities as committed learners; Spanish students believed the impact of their political activity was minimised because of the ways in which the media focused on the type of action taken (that is, the violence sometimes used) rather than the reasons for the action; while English students reported that problems they faced were often trivialised or dismissed because of assumptions that they must be alcohol-related. In addition, students from Poland described how they had had problems finding accommodation because of prevalent stereotypes of the ‘hedonistic’ student. We have also suggested (in Chapter 4) that the ways in which constructions of students are sometimes inflected by discipline – and in particular the privileging of STEM subjects – can have direct impacts on students. Those not enrolled in STEM disciplines reported feeling like ‘lesser’ students, and were often worried about their future.

In Chapter 6, we considered explicitly the relationship between societal discourses and students’ perspectives, in our discussion of ‘cognitive availability’ – with respect to stress and mental health specifically. Although we drew on data from Spain to show the limits of this theory (noting that while students discussed stress a lot, this was not reflected in wider societal discourses), we also presented evidence that, in a small number of cases, students themselves thought that widespread assumptions that students would inevitably experience considerable stress did affect how students understood the challenges they faced in HE. These participants believed that they and their peers readily drew on vocabularies related to stress and anxiety as they were so widespread.

It is likely, also, that the constructions reported in this book will have had various effects of which students will have been unaware. For example, it is possible that assumptions by staff that students are largely instrumental and passive in their approach to their studies (as documented in Chapter 4), could contribute to them adopting classroom practices and pedagogies that may be ill-suited to students’ actual needs and motivations. Moreover, assumptions about students from lower socio-economic backgrounds being in some ways ‘less competent learners’ (as discussed in Chapter 7), may also
affect pedagogical practice, as well as potentially labelling such students in a damaging manner. At a more general societal level, the assumed generational differences evident in some of our data – for example, relating to political commitment and civic activity (noted in Chapter 3) and the alleged increase in materialism (Chapter 7) – may reinforce social division, and make inter-generational solidarity more difficult to achieve.

However, while we have strong evidence from our study that some conceptualisations do have significant impacts on students themselves, our data also indicate quite clearly that students are not passive recipients of wider societal understandings – and have considerable capacity both to recognise how they are seen by others and to resist particular constructions. This has been evident in the discussion above and preceding chapters, where we have explained how students were conscious of the ways in which they believed they were seen by others and were able to articulate how they thought these were at odds with their actual experiences, behaviours and motivations. We have also discussed some specific cases of resistance. This is perhaps most evident in Chapter 5, when we explored how students often drew on ideas associated with vocation and self-development (typically discussed in terms of Bildung or Dannelse) to oppose their framing as solely economic resources. In this way, they were able to resist dominant policy discourses, which often conceptualise students primarily as human capital. Similarly, students’ assertion of themselves as enthusiastic learners and hard workers can be read as a clear rejection of their construction as instrumental, passive and, in some cases, lazy learners by many staff and policy actors (discussed in Chapters 4 and 7). In this way, our research reinforces Clarke et al’s (2007) contention that political subjects are not ‘docile bodies’; rather, they should be considered as reflexive subjects who can contest how they are constructed in policy, sometimes offering their own redefinitions. It also articulates with a growing body of work within higher education studies that has shown that policy constructions are not often translated straightforwardly into student subjectivities (for example, Nielsen, 2011; Tavares and Cardoso, 2013; Tomlinson, 2017).

Looking to the future

We hope that Constructing the Higher Education Student: Perspectives from across Europe has provided a detailed and informative insight into how HE students are understood across Europe, showing that while there are some key similarities in such conceptualisations, there are also crucial differences – most notably between the perspectives of students, on the one hand, and those of other social actors, on the other. We have also demonstrated that, despite homogenising pressures exerted through the Bologna Process and the establishment of a European Higher Education Area, as well as more
general trends towards massification and marketisation, understandings are also affected by specific national cultures, histories and policy trajectories.

Despite the breadth of our research, there are some student experiences that we have not been able to explore in this book. For example, we chose to focus on only undergraduate students, to keep the project manageable but acknowledge that the experiences and perspectives of and about postgraduates may be considerably different. Moreover, our focus on only domestic students (again, for reasons of manageability) clearly excludes international students, who constitute an important and sizeable population in several of the countries in our sample. Extant research would suggest that how they are constructed is likely to be significantly different from domestic students (for example, Sidhu, 2006; Lomer, 2017; Brooks, 2018a, 2018b). Similarly, for logistical reasons we collected data in only six countries. While our country choice captures well some key dimensions of difference in the continent (see Chapter 1), we cannot expect the constructions discussed here to be evident in other nations, even those within Europe. Future research could usefully consider patterns in other nations, as well as constructions of both postgraduates and those who cross national borders for HE.

Charting the stability of understandings over time would also constitute a worthy subject of study. Above, we have suggested that the constructions we have identified are influenced by various long-term factors (such as national cultures of education) as well as a range of shorter-term factors (such as particular policy initiatives). It would be interesting to see how these play out in the long term. Will some of the national differences we have outlined here become less prominent if nations move further towards a market model? Or will new differences between nations emerge, based on local political, economic and/or cultural factors? Moreover, other shifts in the HE landscape – that have taken place since our data collection – may come to exert a significant influence on conceptualisations of students. Since we conducted our interviews and focus groups, the UK has left the EU (and, as a result, the Erasmus+ mobility scheme) and the COVID-19 pandemic has hit. Both of these could potentially have a significant impact. With respect to the former, it seems likely that any impact on understandings of what it means to be a student will be felt most acutely in England (rather than the other five countries in our study). Although none of our English participants constructed themselves as ‘European’ during the focus group discussions, such positioning among students in general may become even rarer with reduced opportunities to study or work in mainland Europe, as a result of the UK’s withdrawal from the Erasmus+ scheme. Moreover, the absence of any discussion of students as Europeans in English policy documents, which we have explored elsewhere (see Brooks, 2021), seems likely to continue.

At the time of writing, the medium- and long-term impacts of COVID-19 on HE are still unknown. Nevertheless, if there is a substantial shift to greater
use of online learning, as a result of experiences during the pandemic, this may raise important questions about the extent to which understandings of what it means to be a student revolve around assumptions about a communal, embodied experience. Such ideas are touched upon briefly in our discussion of students as ‘in transition’ – but are likely to be thrown into sharp relief by greater reliance on virtual interaction and pedagogy. We would suggest that charting change in understandings of students is important – not only as an intellectual endeavour – but because of its implications for both policy and practice within higher education: to engage with students effectively, as a policymaker, member of HE staff, or even a member of the public, it seems critical that we comprehend their perspectives on the world, and their understandings of what it means to be a contemporary HE student.