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Higher education students as political actors: evidence from England and Ireland

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ABSTRACT

Higher education (HE) students have often been viewed as important political actors in wider society, stemming largely from their activities in the 1960s. Nevertheless, like much of the literature on *youth* political participation, research has rarely explored the extent to which student political participation varies across nation-states. This article begins to redress this gap by drawing upon data collected from focus groups with undergraduate students in England and Ireland, alongside an analysis of relevant policy documents from both countries. Overall, we argue that, whilst English and Irish students expressed similar desires to be politically active, they differed in the extent to which they felt empowered to take up such roles and the perceived scope of their influence. Similar differences were evident, to some extent, in the way in which students' political activity was seen by policymakers. These cross-national differences are explained with reference to contextual factors and, in particular, variation in the degree of HE marketisation in the two countries. There is also evidence to suggest that students are sensitive to the way in which they are constructed in policy, which affects their sense of themselves as political actors.

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Introduction

Higher education (HE) students have often been viewed as important political actors in wider society, stemming largely from their activities in the 1960s. Indeed, despite only a relatively small proportion of students taking part in the 1960s protests, there remains – in many countries of the world – an expectation that students should be involved in politics and, as Williams (2013) has argued, a perceived need to offer explanations for their lack of involvement. Such debates have recently been entangled with others about students as part of a 'snowflake generation', unable to engage in rigorous political debate with those who hold different political views and in need of 'safe spaces' within higher education (Finn 2017; Furedi 2017) – while an alternative body of work has suggested, in contrast, that students have often been at the forefront of many contemporary protests, both on and off campus (Brooks 2016). Nevertheless, like much of the literature on youth political participation, research has rarely explored the extent to which student political

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participation varies across nation-states. This article begins to redress this gap by drawing upon data collected from focus groups with undergraduate students in England and Ireland, alongside an analysis of relevant policy documents from both countries. It first discusses our extant knowledge in this area, with respect to the political participation of young people in general and students in particular (cognisant that not all students are young). It then outlines the methods used, before exploring key themes from the data. The various cross-national differences we identify are then explained with reference to contextual factors and, in particular, variation in the degree of HE marketisation in the two countries. We also draw on the focus group evidence to suggest that students are sensitive to the way in which they are constructed in policy, which affects their sense of themselves as political actors.

Background

Although not all students can be categorised as ‘young people’, many of the debates about the political participation of youth are relevant to the themes pursued in this article. Over recent decades, scholars from the disciplines of sociology and politics, as well as youth studies, have examined changing trends in young people’s political participation – stimulated in part by politicians and social commentators’ concerns about the low turnout rate among younger age groups in elections and their alleged political apathy. Such scholars have tended to adopt a more positive position, often arguing that, despite a lack of engagement in formal politics, young people continue to be interested in political issues – broadly conceived – and have developed alternative political repertoires including, for example, signing petitions, consuming in an ethical manner and becoming involved in single-issue campaigns (e.g. Hustinx et al. 2012). Recent research has, however, suggested that there has not been any growth in these alternative or non-formal kinds of political participation over recent years and they tend to be taken up by only a minority of young people (Pilkington and Pollock 2015). Moreover, non-formal political participation appears to be higher in countries where formal participation (by young people) is also relatively high (Elchardus and Siongers 2016). Nevertheless, while the decline in formal political participation does not seem to have been offset by a corresponding increase in non-formal participation, scholars have argued that young people remain interested in politics and are not complacent about democracy, but are often highly critical of the ways in which formal politics is practised (Pilkington and Pollock 2015; Stoker et al. 2017).

Much of the literature in this area has focussed on single-nation studies – often conducted in the US and UK – and assumed that the patterns evident in these contexts can be generalised to other nations of the Global North (Garcia-Albacete 2014). There are, however, a small number of cross-national studies that have begun to tease out differences, across national borders, in the way in which young people engage with politics. Vromen, Loader, and Xenos (2015) have shown how young people’s participation – in the US, UK and Australia – was influenced by their everyday experiences of social and economic change, and that the issues they took up were often dependent upon the particular contexts in which they lived. They thus argue that it is important to analyse young people’s participation comparatively, ‘seeing it through the prism of the social and economic changes occurring within their locations’ (545). Garcia-Albacete’s (2014) analysis of

participation across 17 European countries makes similar claims about the importance of attending to national variation. For example, she contends that the UK and the Netherlands are the only two countries in which young people's participation is lower than older adults in both formal and non-formal politics. She argues that this exception 'illustrates the necessity of using a comparative approach to assess the general trend of participation' (231) – noting that while most of the research about young people's political participation in Europe over recent years has used the UK as a case study, her data suggest that the patterns evident in the UK are not generalisable to other national contexts.

A somewhat similar comparative study of young people's political participation in Europe has been conducted by Soler-i-Marti and Ferrer-Fons (2015). They focus on the impact of 'youth transition regimes' (YTRs) i.e. the way in which transitions to adulthood are shaped, at a national level, by the role of the state. More specifically, they contend that youth transitions happen in different ways in Europe, which can affect the place young people take up in social space – and that this positioning can affect propensity to become involved in formal and non-formal politics, or to remain passive. They examine the relationship between political participation and (i) young people's exposure to risk and vulnerability (using the percentage of young people not in education, employment and training as a proxy); (ii) the length of the pathway to adulthood (using the average age of leaving the parental home); and (iii) the role of the welfare state (in terms of its overall generosity, and the extent to which its policies and funding are oriented to the young). On the basis of this analysis, they argue that in countries where young people occupy more central positions in social space – as a result of actions taken by the state to reduce their vulnerability and divert resources to them – levels of political participation (and formal participation in particular) are higher. In nations where young people occupy more peripheral positions, political *passivity* is more evident. The relationship with protest activities is, however, more complex. Soler-i-Marti and Ferrer-Fons (2015) note that:

'on the one hand, the most integrated YTRs favour protest like any other form of participation; on the other hand, it seems that in more precarious YTR contexts, the fact of being politically involved is a more determining factor for protest as, probably in these contexts, political involvement is more associated [with] feelings of grievance' (112).

This emphasis on the impact of the wider policy context is built upon in later stages of this article when we consider the impact of HE policies, in particular.

The body of work that has explored the political participation of *students*, specifically, is considerably smaller than that which has examined that of young people more generally, and has also tended either to focus on particular national contexts, or to make generalised claims about the political participation of students. Several studies have emphasised the role that higher education institutions (HEIs) can often play in the development of political identities and political groupings. Harris (2012) has argued that campuses are important sites for bringing together those with different perspectives and fostering encounter with difference; indeed, she contends that they can constitute 'micro publics' in which young people can come to terms with diversity and forge new solidarities. Similarly, Crossley and Ibrahim (2012) have contended that universities have a crucial role to play in developing the political participation of the young – by bringing together enough people of similar views to enable political networks to form, and providing resources to support

such emerging networks (e.g. rooms to meet in, and paper and photocopiers to facilitate campaigning). Loader et al. (2015) have suggested that the impact of HE in fostering political identities is felt most acutely within smaller student societies, as they provide a relatively safe context for students to develop their habitus as a 'student citizen'. More broadly, scholars have pointed to the key role played by students in protests in various countries across the world – in relation to both HE-specific concerns (most commonly the proposed introduction of or increase in tuition fees), and wider political issues – such as the delays to democratic reform in Hong Kong (Macfarlane 2017) and the conservatism of the ruling party in Turkey (Uzun 2016). Indeed, a HE degree remains a good predictor of propensity to engage in political activity – an association that holds across many European countries (Olcese, Saunders, and Tzavidis 2014).

However, there is also a body of literature that gives a less positive account of students' political participation. First, some scholars have suggested that, far from enabling cross-cultural encounter and the formation of new political alliances, campuses can often reproduce the divisions evident in wider society (e.g. Andersson, Sadgrove, and Valentine 2012), while some campus networks can serve to close down political debate and engagement (Brooks et al. 2015a; Hensby 2014). Indeed, Phipps and Young (2015) have argued that relationships between students on campuses are often infused with individualist, rather than collective, values – which clearly militate against the formation of the kind of political networks described by Crossley and Ibrahim (2012). This line of argument is also pursued by Giroux (2011), pointing to the neo-liberal norms now instantiated on American campuses. Second, others have argued that many student protests are essentially conservative in nature and narrow in focus. Sukarieh and Tannock (2015), for example, maintain that, rather than addressing fundamental societal inequalities, student protests have typically concentrated on protecting the existing system from proposed restructuring or rolling back current policies to an earlier period of welfare provision. Williams (2013) and Shin, Kim, and Choi (2014) have noted the increasingly narrow focus of students' political concerns, in relation to the UK and South Korea respectively. Williams attributes the shift in the UK, at least, to the consumer identity of many students. Third, research has pointed to changes in the nature of student representation. Although students are now more likely to be involved in university governance than in the past, Klemenčič (2012) argues that student representation in general has shifted from being conceived of as a political position, defending the collective interests of the student body, to an entrepreneurial role, dedicated to giving advice to senior university managers with respect to quality assurance and service delivery. Studies of student unions' in specific national contexts have documented similar shifts as such associations have become more closely aligned with university management (Brooks et al. 2015b; Nissen and Hayward 2017; Rochford 2014). Finally, some scholars have pointed to the difficulty of articulating a single collective student voice in a massified HE system with an increasingly diverse student body (e.g. Klemenčič 2014).

In the remainder of this article, we draw upon data from England and Ireland to consider the extent to which students consider themselves to be efficacious political actors and how their political activity is understood in relevant policy texts. We thus engage with debates about both students' political participation and the nature and degree of any cross-national differences.

Methods

This paper is based upon evidence provided by undergraduate students who took part in focus groups in England and Ireland (9 groups in each country), alongside analysis of 32 policy texts from the two nations. (The fieldwork in England and Ireland constituted part of a larger project that explores how undergraduate students are conceptualised in six European countries.) The focus groups were conducted in three HEIs in each country, which were sampled to reflect the diversity of the national HE sector – in terms of hierarchical positioning and geographical dispersion (these are referred to as HEIs 1–3 in the subsequent sections of the paper). The focus groups were comprised of mainly national students.¹ Whilst we attempted to include students from a broad range of disciplines and backgrounds, females were over-represented in our achieved sample, and relatively few mature students or those from ethnic minority backgrounds took part (see Table 1 for details). In terms of subjects studied, our sample varied in accordance with what type of courses were offered in each institution but, overall, we managed to achieve a good level of diversity, including natural sciences, humanities, social sciences, the arts and vocational subjects such as nursing and teaching. During the focus groups, participants were asked a range of open-ended questions about their identity as higher education students, and how they thought they were seen by others (including politicians and other policymakers). They were also asked some more specific questions about the extent to which they saw themselves as political actors. Policy texts chosen for analysis in each country comprised ministerial speeches and key strategy documents produced by the following groups: government bodies; HE staff and students' unions; and representatives of graduate employers. Both focus group transcripts and policy texts were coded in NVivo using inductive and deductive codes.

Potential or actual political actors?

There were notable differences between the students in England and Ireland in terms of the extent to which they felt like empowered political actors whose voices were listened to. Nevertheless, there were also some striking cross-national similarities in students' feelings about themselves as political actors more broadly. In line with some of the studies discussed above (Crossley and Ibrahim 2012; Olcese, Saunders, and Tzavidis 2014), students in both countries spoke of the liberalising and politicising effect of university. They told us that this occurs through a process of mixing with people from a variety of

Table 1. Characteristics of focus group participants.

	English focus groups	Irish focus groups
Total number of participants	52	51
Female	41	41
Male	11	10
Under 21 at start of degree	50	45
21 and over at start of degree	2	6
Ethnic minority background	8	8
White	44	43
At least one parent had HE experience	29	30
Neither parent had HE experience	17	21
Not sure about parents' education	6	0

backgrounds and perspectives, opening their minds to different issues, and encouraging them to engage and campaign on a wide range of topics. One student commented that it was like being in a 'liberal bubble':

Yeah, I feel like I only kind of became politically minded when I came into university, and was suddenly surrounded by so many people, and it's such, it's very empowering, you're like, these are people my age, and the things that they're saying, and I want to be part of that and ... (agreement) it's really that like, it's a powerful community I think. (Ireland, HEI3, FG1)

In contrast to the belief often-articulated by politicians and social commentators that young people are apathetic and disinterested in politics and society, students in our research believed that they had an important role to play politically. They saw themselves as an educated group and as such a resource for society and their communities. They told us that their education meant that they were informed and critical, which provided fertile ground for the development of liberal beliefs and the potential to be politically active and challenge the establishment. Some students also commented that this meant that they were a threat to the government as: 'it's much harder to sway an educated group than it is to sway an uneducated group because if people don't know any better, you could just tell them whatever and they'll buy it' (England, HEI3, FG3). Students felt that they should be understood as important political actors because 'they are the future'. They discussed needing to be taken seriously and listened to, and felt that they had valid contributions to make to society. Furthermore, as was also noted by Crossley and Ibrahim (2012), students in our focus groups reflected on the ease with which the student body, as a large mass, can potentially be mobilised in the pursuit of collective action. For example, one student in a focus group in England commented:

There's like loads of them [students], so if they really believe in something, they could really push it, which means they're pretty dangerous as well. You know, they can put so much influence over so many people ... I just, I think they're really strong, powerful. (England, HEI2, FG3)

However, whilst students expressed a strong belief in their *potential* to be influential politically, there was an evident tension between this and their *actual* political voice. This was something that appeared to distinguish the two countries. In England it was quite clear that students felt that they lacked any political power to make a change. This is illustrated in the following excerpts:

Interviewer: Do you think that students have like an influence on society?
 Student 1: No, not particularly.
 Student 2: No, I don't think so.
 Student 3: Yeah, I can't think of an example, so clearly ...!
 Student 1: I mean if you look at the fact that you know students protested about raising the tuition fees, they did it, doesn't make a difference. (England, HEI1, FG1)

Here, the students make reference to the increase in tuition fees. They felt that they had taken a stand against something but were ignored. This issue was also raised in another focus group in England:

Student 1: I think we do [have a say], but we're not taken as seriously, like there's loads of like protests and everything that students do, whereas we're not being listened to by the Government.

Student 2: Yeah, like with the protests, I feel like when people protest, like we want like fees to be lowered or whatever, we're, like in the media we're talked about like it's students that are doing this, it's not like adults, we're not classed as that. And we're supposed to be like the next generation that's going to you know have a say in politics and stuff, but I don't think at all that's what we're recognised as. (England, HE11, FG2)

It is interesting how students in this quotation believe that they are not taken seriously because they are seen as 'students' rather than adults. This resonates with a narrative present in the English policy texts which constructs students as 'needy children' (Brooks 2017). This was particularly evident with respect to the way in which the National Union of Students (NUS) in England was discussed. There is notable criticism of it in both the green and white papers (BIS 2015, 2016) and an underlying expression of concern about its efficacy and representativeness. This quotation from the white paper is illustrative:

Where taxpayers' money is funding [students' union] activities ... then there should be robust scrutiny and transparency about how that funding is used. At present, many but not all students' unions and guilds are regulated as charities by the Charity Commission. This makes it difficult to determine how effectively the current oversight of the sector is working. There are some areas where further work can be undertaken. This could include establishing a central register of students' unions, strengthening the rights of redress for students, and reviewing how effectively the existing statutory provisions regarding students' unions are being upheld. We will discuss this work with interested parties, and consider what further steps should be taken as we establish the OfS [Office for Students]. (BIS 2016, 60)

As this quotation indicates, the government proposes addressing their concerns through the establishment of a new 'Office for Students', a body which is arguably constructed as a more effective means of articulating the 'student voice' than elected representatives. In this way, the policy texts construct students as a vulnerable group, much like children – a construction that was also articulated by the focus group participants. Indeed, when we asked the students how they felt they were understood by policymakers, they often mentioned being treated like children or not taken seriously:

I also just feel like ... they think of us as children but we're not, we're adults, but it's in that weird position where it's like, like we don't have a job, well not everyone, like for younger students, not necessarily have like a family or anything or stuff, but we're living independently and we're like over eighteen, so adults, but they still think of us as children and they can you know easily take money from us and stuff like that, they just like ... undermine us kind of, yeah. (England, HE11, FG2)

Students tended to feel that this construction of them as children renders them an easy group for politicians to dominate. One student in a focus group in England said: 'We're like an easy group for them to sort of enforce policies on, to sort of push us around'. Another student in the same focus group argued that the reason students are not listened to is because they have no economic leverage:

I think the reason it's like that though is because we're not actually affecting anyone else. For example, like if train workers, if they stopped working to protest, then everyone notices because nobody can use the trains, or nurses, like they have to listen to them ... But students, I mean they see us as like not contributing to anything, like if we stopped learning, the only people we're affecting is ourselves. (England, HE11, FG2)

Here, it seems that students are measuring themselves and their influence partially in terms of the financial contribution they are making to society. There is an interesting contradiction in their narrative here. When we asked students in England how they were seen by policymakers, the most common response to this question was as ‘money’ or ‘cash cows’ – in terms of being a future source of income through paying taxes, and/or an immediate source of income via tuition fees. Arguably then, if students withdraw their labour and ‘stop studying’, they will be withdrawing fee payment and finances. Following this logic, the new fee structure should provide students with enhanced economic leverage and a political voice. Nevertheless as illustrated in the above quotation, students in England did not express a feeling of empowerment due to this. Overall then, in England, whilst students believed that they had the *potential* to be influential politically, they felt distinctly disempowered as actual political actors; instead, they believed that they were treated as children whose voices were ignored or viewed purely as a source of income.

In Ireland, initially, students expressed a similar sentiment in that when asked what politicians thought of them, the most common response was a feeling of being overlooked or ignored. They said that they were not a priority and often believed that politicians did not think about them enough. The following two excerpts illustrate this point:

Interviewer: What do you think that politicians think of students?

Student: I don't think they think enough about us, I think we're kind of overlooked really. (Ireland, HE1, FG3)

Interviewer: What do you think politicians think about students?

Student 1: When do they think about students?

Student 2: They don't! (all laugh) (Ireland, HE2, FG1)

Nevertheless, in contrast to the sentiment expressed by the English students of being disempowered, students in Ireland, regardless of their feelings of being overlooked politically, appeared to be more confident in and optimistic about their potential to impact society through protesting and campaigning for change:

Interviewer: Some people might consider students to be important political actors in society, to what extent would you agree with that?

[...]

Student: I think that would be pretty accurate (agreement), but I just, with the big things, with like the gay marriage referendum last summer, and then like the Repeal the Eighth maybe coming up, I think a lot of them are kind of spearheaded by students as well. And like there was such, I remember talking to my mam about the ‘yes’ vote and she was like, oh I don't think it's going to go through, like there's just, there's just not that many numbers that like would be pro-gay marriage, but I was like, no, it's 100% going through because I just saw everything that was going on here. (Ireland, HE1, FG1)

Students in Ireland often made reference to these two campaigns. The first was the vote to legalise gay marriage in the 2015 referendum. This was an important moment in Irish history because, as a result of the vote, it became the first country in the world to enshrine marriage equality through a written constitution. Young people, in general, were particularly active in this campaign, including the Union of Students in Ireland (USI), which worked to increase student voter registrations (Murphy 2016). Second, students discussed

the then upcoming campaign, 'Repeal the Eighth', to legalise abortion and contraceptive rights for women in Ireland. In both cases, the students believed that they were influential and, when they came out to protest, their voices were heard and change could be achieved. It is also notable that the type of influence they described reached beyond higher education issues, affecting the population more broadly. We pursue this in more detail below.

Scope of influence

Students in England and Ireland appeared to see themselves as having very different scopes of influence. In England, there was some variation by institution. For example, in HEI3, students spoke a lot about not being listened to or taken seriously even within their own university. They recalled how, recently, they had protested (in conjunction with the students' union) against a redevelopment on campus but had been ignored by university management; the plans had gone ahead regardless and they had been left feeling disempowered. In HEI2, focus group participants believed they had influence within the institution but not beyond it:

Everything's so within university, within a university level, it doesn't engage people beyond university, such as the local city [...], we're never like going to be like politically active enough in [city], other than just representing each other, like other students. I think we keep in quite a bubble, yeah. (England, HEI2, FG2)

In contrast, and as discussed above, Irish students were involved in challenging a wider set of policies. This was exemplified in their active participation in the campaign for gay marriage to be legalised and their plans to support the legalisation of abortion. These two issues were discussed in all focus groups in Ireland, and many participants felt strongly about them. Mobilisation was not, however, limited to these two campaigns. For example, one focus group participant spoke about students campaigning for teachers' rights:

I remember for the teachers, they get, the newly qualified teachers get paid less than the other qualified teachers, and loads of students went out to march for that because my sister was training to be a teacher at the time, and she went to a good few in fairness, so they do, they're willing to go out and ... ! (Ireland, HEI1, FG1)

This pattern is mirrored in the policy documents. In Ireland, the USI is constructed as a respected political actor that campaigns for a broad range of issues, not just those related to education. For example, the then Minister for Education and Skills, Jan O'Sullivan, spoke respectfully about the union, positioning it as an important partner in political activity:

Since I became Minister for Education and Skills in July last year I have had a genuinely positive relationship with the USI, and in particular with your president Laura Harmon [...] I want to thank her for the positive manner in which she has advocated on behalf of all students in Ireland. [...] I want to take as a starting point the USI's 'Education Is ...' campaign. Firstly, can I congratulate USI on this campaign. It was designed not to preach but to provoke – and it certainly achieved that goal. (24 March 2015)

Here O'Sullivan makes reference to the USI's 'Education Is ...' campaign for the 2016 general election. In its manifesto (of the same name), the USI explicitly states: 'While our

student manifesto is focused on education issues we have outlined a broad range of areas we feel should be addressed by the next Government' (USI 2016, 2). These include: 'extension of voting rights to 16 year olds', 'introduction of the living wage', 'legislative action on climate change' and 'transatlantic trade and investment partnerships' (USI 2016, 3). In contrast, the NUS in England concentrates primarily on higher education-related issues. Although it does have a number of campaigns that could be perceived as touching on broader issues, they still focus primarily on HE and/or students – for example, students are encouraged to switch off their lights in student residences as part of the NUS' 'sustainability' campaign.

Overall then, whilst students in England and Ireland expressed similar desires to be politically active, they differed in the extent to which they felt empowered to do so and the perceived scope of their influence. Whilst neither group felt particularly noticed or respected by politicians, students in Ireland were more optimistic about their power to influence policy through protest and campaigning. There are also differences, we suggest, in the way in which students' political activity is seen by policymakers – evident in some of the documents we have cited above. In the next section we explore the possible relationship between these two perspectives (i.e. of students and policymakers) as part of a broader discussion of the impact of the wider political climate and context in each nation.

Discussion

As we noted previously, much of the literature on young people's political participation assumes that patterns are broadly similar across nation states, at least those in the Global North and, as Garcia-Albacete (2014) has argued, often tends to generalise from research conducted in the US or the UK. The data we have outlined above certainly indicate some similarities in the perspectives of HE students in England and Ireland, most notably in relation to their interest in politics and belief in their potential to be significant political actors. However, we have also identified some important differences in their views and in the way they are discussed by others in speeches and key policy documents – particularly with respect to the extent to which they believed their potential to exert political influence could be realised, and the scope of any such influence. Irish students were more optimistic than their English counterparts about their political agency, and the scope of their political activity was broader. As outlined above, these differences in students' perspectives were mirrored to some extent within policy pronouncements – with Irish students apparently being accorded greater respect as political actors than English students. In the following sections, we tease out some of the possible reasons for these differences, focussing in particular on the likely impact of higher education policy in the two countries. In this way, we extend the arguments of scholars who have advocated paying greater attention to both the impact on young people's political participation of specific contextual factors and the ways in which these can differ across national borders (Garcia-Albacete 2014; Soler-i-Martí and Ferrer-Fons 2015; Vromen, Loader, and Xenos 2015).

Our data also speak to the debates about changes in the political participation of the young (noting that although students are not synonymous with young people, the vast majority of our focus group participants were 'traditional age' students rather than

older adults). As the quotations above from our participants have indicated, many had a strong interest in politics and believed that students, as a group, had the potential to exert considerable influence. Some also described how their political awareness had increased since arriving at university – offering support to those who have argued that the higher education campus facilitates both political awareness and engagement by bringing together a relatively large number of people and, as a result, exposing them to diverse perspectives on the world (Crossley and Ibrahim 2012; Harris 2012). Nevertheless, in both England and Ireland students thought that they were largely overlooked and ignored by politicians. These sentiments tend to support the position of those who have claimed that – far from there having been a decline in young people’s political interest – young men and women have considerable interest in political issues but are often put off by the particular structures and means through which formal politics is practised (Pilkington and Pollock 2015; Stoker et al. 2017). Relevant to broader debates about political participation are also the students’ views about the ways in which it is possible to exert political influence. As we noted above, some of the English students believed that their political influence was limited because they did not have any labour to withdraw. This suggests a rather narrow conceptualisation of political influence and a view that other methods of political engagement, such as voting in general elections, demonstrating and occupying university buildings, are unlikely to produce change. Again, this articulates with those studies, cited above, that have pointed to young people’s frustration with existing political mechanisms.

One of the clearest differences between the ways in which students in England and Ireland understood themselves as political actors was, as we have explained above, related to the scope of their political interests. This was considerably wider in Ireland than in England, and was evident in the policy documents, too. One possible hypothesis for this cross-national variation is the different amounts of time students have available to pursue political objectives. Indeed, Crossley and Ibrahim (2012) note that, as students engage in increasing amounts of paid employment alongside their studies, political participation on campus is likely to be adversely affected (see also Brooks et al. 2016). However, although the introduction of high tuition fees in England has been associated with an increase in term-time working (Antonucci 2016), rates of student employment in Ireland have also been high, despite significantly lower fees (Eurostudent 2015). This does not, therefore, seem a plausible explanation. More useful is reference to the wider political, social and cultural environment in which the students are located. It is argued in the literature that more marketised systems of HE have tended to drive a narrower set of student concerns. In their analysis of political struggles in South Korea, Shin, Kim, and Choi (2014) have shown how students’ political activity shifted from being externally-focussed (for example, campaigning against economic inequalities, undemocratic practices and unequal power structures) to predominantly concerned with campus/student issues after 2000, when tuition fees became a political issue. A similar argument has been made with respect to the UK (Morley 2003; Williams 2013). These scholars have contended that, since the introduction of high fees and other market mechanisms, students’ concerns have narrowed considerably. Williams (2013) writes:

Today’s active campaigning students, who are heralded as agents of change within their institutions, are quick to learn the bureaucratic language of agenda items, assessment patterns,

learning outcomes and programme monitoring, and are more likely to be found sitting on Staff-Student Liaison Committees than on picket lines. This domestication of the student voice and limiting of campaigning confirms the consumer identity of students rather than challenging it. (110)

Although the Irish higher education system has also, in many respects, been reconfigured on neo-liberal lines over recent decades (Lynch, Grummell, and Devine 2012; Fleming, Loxley, and Finnegan 2017), marketisation has been less thorough-going. Tuition fees, for example – a key contributor to the narrowing of students' concerns in some of the analyses discussed above – have remained relatively low (Clancy 2015). Moreover, Hazelkorn (2015) has argued that the underpinning model of HE in Ireland adheres to social democratic, rather than neo-liberal, norms. She notes that unlike the emphasis within neo-liberal models on vertical differentiation between HEIs with the aim of creating elite institutions able to compete internationally, social democratic models seek to balance excellence with support for good quality institutions across the country. Our research provides empirical support for those who have posited an association between a high degree of marketisation and a narrowness of student concerns.

Such differences in the broader institutional and policy context are also likely to explain the variation, evident when comparing our data from England and Ireland, in the role assumed by national student organisations (the NUS and the USI, respectively). As noted previously, the USI campaigns on a wide range of issues – evident in its manifesto for the 2016 election; in contrast, the vast majority of the NUS' work focuses exclusively on student-related concerns. While these differences may relate, in part, to the perspectives of the individual students who constitute the membership of the two unions, they are also likely to be associated with the specific pressures that are brought to bear, within the English and Irish systems, on representative organisations. Research on institutional students' unions in England, for example, has shown how such organisations often experience considerable pressure to focus on student-related issues through the National Student Survey (Brooks et al. 2015b). Since the inclusion in the survey of a specific question about the performance of the students' union at the institution attended by the individuals completing the questionnaire, and the use of survey data to compile league tables of students' union performance, student representatives have felt pressure to focus to a very significant extent on local, student-focussed issues (Brooks et al. 2015b). Such pressures have been exacerbated in some institutions by the actions of senior managers who have expected students' unions to foreground their 'representative' role to the exclusion of more activist-related campaigning activities (Brooks et al. 2015b). While comparable research has not been conducted, to date, in Ireland, the absence of an equivalent bench-marking process² and the lower profile of rankings in general (Hazelkorn 2015) would suggest that Irish students' unions do not face the same pressures as their English counterparts to focus exclusively on campus issues. Indeed, as noted earlier in the article, Klemenčič (2012) has argued that as countries' higher education systems move closer to a New Public Management³ system, associated with neo-liberal reform, so the formerly political role of the student representative typically changes to a professionalised or entrepreneurial one. She contends that, 'in line with new public management ideology, institutional leadership and governments have growing interest in professional student representative groups that can contribute competently and constructively in consultative, evaluative and service role[s]' (649–650).

We have argued in this article that students in England and Ireland differ, not only in the scope of their political activities, but also in the degree of influence on the wider political system that they believe they have. Students in England tended to believe that they had very little power to make change, whereas those in Ireland were more optimistic about their efficacy. To some extent, this can be explained by their reflections on previous attempts by students to achieve change. The English students recalled how protests against higher fees had had little impact, while their Irish counterparts – despite feeling sometimes overlooked by politicians – were able to cite several examples of occasions when students had been or were likely to be successful in bringing about change (in relation to gay marriage and women’s rights to abortion and contraception). However, the focus group data suggest that how they believed they were seen by politicians and policymakers also fed into their sense of efficacy. As we described previously, some of the English students thought they were understood by policymakers as children and merely a source of income, echoing our own analysis of relevant policy texts (Brooks 2017). Key government documents position students as dependent and in need of protection, with the voice of students to be articulated by the government-sanctioned Office for Students, rather than their own elected representatives. Here, we see clear evidence of congruence between the constructions of students evident in policy and those taken up by students, providing support for Lomer’s (2017) contention that the language and concepts used within such documents are likely to become part of dominant, widely-accepted discourses which, in turn, can affect how particular groups of people are thought about. As Ball (2013) has argued, policy discourses help to shape subject positions, which can limit the ‘horizons for action’ available to individuals. The students in this research, although critical of the ways in which they thought they were seen by government, also appeared to have internalised the view that there was little prospect of achieving change politically, precisely because of these dominant constructions. Vromen, Loader, and Xenos (2015) maintain that the young people in their research on political participation took on the language of policy, such that ‘Neoliberal ideas of opportunity and choice are prioritised within young people’s explanation, over notions of structured disadvantage and inequality’ (545). In our research, the students we spoke to were more explicitly critical of dominant policy discourses, and yet the impact of such discourses appeared significant. In this way, our research extends the arguments of Soler-i-Martí and Ferrer-Fons (2015) about the impact of how young people are positioned in social space. They argue that this positioning is primarily through youth transition regimes and the substantive social policies that underpin them. While our analysis suggests that the broader context is undoubtedly important – in informing how HEIs and national government respond to student protest, for example, it also indicates that policy *discourses*, i.e. how young people (in this case students) are spoken about, are also influential.

Conclusion

In this article, we have drawn on evidence from HE students in England and Ireland and an analysis of relevant policy documents to proffer four main arguments. First, we have built on previous research to demonstrate that students in both countries were interested in political issues and believed that their education had furthered this interest. There was little evidence, in our sample at least, of political apathy. Second, we have supplemented the small body of work that has explored cross-national differences in students’ political

participation to show that while English and Irish undergraduates shared an interest in politics and a belief in their own potential to affect change, national differences were also apparent. These related primarily to students' belief in their actual ability to bring about change and the scope of their political participation. Third, in explaining such differences, we have pointed to the likely impact of the wider HE system – thus broadening previous analysis about the influence of social policy, which has focussed only on youth transition regimes. Finally, we have suggested that policy discourses – as well as the substantive content of policies – can affect students' political participation, and this goes some way to explain the national differences documented in this article.

Our research has thus indicated that the more marketised and vertically stratified higher education system in England has circumscribed students' political engagement in ways that were not evident in the rather different policy environment in Ireland. In teasing out further the impact of such neoliberal norms on students' political participation, future research could usefully consider, first, the extent to which students with particular social characteristics are differentially affected and, second, the impact of specific programmes of study. For example, do age, gender, social class or race mediate some of the influences discussed in this paper? Are socially marginalised students more likely to be adversely affected than their more privileged peers? Moreover, to what extent do particular courses, topics and/or pedagogical approaches enhance or circumscribe students' political agency and interest? While beyond the scope of the current paper, these constitute important areas of enquiry if the impact of the wider social and political context on students' political activity and identity is to be more fully understood.

Notes

1. Whilst we excluded international students from our sampling framework, we did end up with one or two as the nationality of some had not been made clear prior to the focus group taking place.
2. The Irish Survey of Student Engagement was introduced in 2014 (after a pilot in 2013). However, unlike its UK equivalent, it does not include any questions about the performance of the students' union. Moreover, it places more emphasis on students' involvement in different learning-related activities and less on their 'satisfaction' than the UK version. Institutional-level data were only made publically-available in 2017 and have not yet been used in any league tables.
3. New Public Management is an approach used in state-run and non-profit organisations that draws on techniques and approaches more commonly found in the private sector. These often focus on maximising efficiency, introducing market mechanisms and focussing on 'customer service'.

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