

Higher Education Timescapes: Temporal Understandings of Students and Learning

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Abstract

This article draws on data from six European countries (Denmark, England, Germany, Ireland, Poland and Spain) to explore the higher education timescapes inhabited by students. Despite arguments that degree-level study has become increasingly similar across Europe – because of global pressures and also specific initiatives such as the Bologna Process and the creation of a European Higher Education Area – it shows how such timescapes differed in important ways, largely by nation. These differences are then explained in terms of: the distinctive traditions of higher education still evident across the continent; the particular mechanisms through which degrees are funded; and the nature of recent national-level policy activity. The analysis thus speaks to debates about Europeanisation, as well as how we theorise the relationship between time and place.

Keywords

Europe, higher education, place, policy, students, time

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Introduction

Sociological analyses of time have often emphasised the importance of schooling in inculcating particular tempos and orientations to time-keeping required in later life. More recently, scholars have focused on the accelerated nature of ‘university time’ as part of a more general critique of the impact of neo-liberalism on the higher education (HE) sector. Such analyses have tended, however, to focus on single nation-states (or indeed even single institutions) in developing their arguments. As a result, we know little about how ‘student timescapes’ differ between nations. This is important in relation to claims that student life across the world has become increasingly similar because of the widespread implementation of market reforms and, in the case of Europe, the Bologna Process and the creation of a European Higher Education Area – both of which have aimed to standardise structures across the continent and facilitate movement (of students and staff) between nation-states (Corbett and Henkel, 2013). It also articulates with broader theoretical arguments about the role of place in understandings of time (May and Thrift, 2001).

In this article, we contribute to the literature on the inter-relationship between time and place by examining the nature of ‘higher education timescapes’ in six European nations. We draw on data from students themselves, as well as HE staff and relevant policy actors, to explore how such timescapes were understood and the extent they differed within and between nations. After discussing some of the literature that provides an important background to our analysis in the section below, we describe our research methods before going on to outline three distinct temporal understandings of students and learning that emerged from our data. We then offer explanations for the observed patterns, making reference, *inter alia*, to the different cultures of HE that continue to exert influence across the continent; the particular mechanisms through which degrees are funded; and the nature of recent national-level policy activity.

Background

Education has long been associated with analyses of ‘social time’ – that is, the recognition that time is multiple and heterogeneous, and varies both within and between societies – dating back to Thompson’s (1967) seminal essay, which argued that schools were a central means of inculcating ‘time thrift’ among the population in the 18th century, and thus reinforced the ‘clock time’ brought about by the industrial revolution. Indeed, Adam (1995: 64) has argued that:

The requirement in Western-style societies to produce good work fast, at the correct rate, to deadlines determined by timetable and calendars . . . is underpinned by quantitative time. It is this dominant time, so central to our adult social life, which gets habituated during childhood, through the time discipline promoted in education: time has to be used effectively and budgeted with care.

Such time discipline, she asserts, is part of the hidden curriculum in schools; ‘school is the place where the puritan, utilitarian approach to time is absorbed and utilised’ (Adam, 1995: 64). Recent research has extended such analyses from school to other parts of the

education system, including HE. A key focus of this body of work has been the increasingly fast-paced nature of university life. Education has been accelerated, it is commonly held, because of wider social change that has quickened the pace of life, often linked to the influence of time–space compression (Castells, 1989), and associated social imperatives to become more efficient and compete with others in neo-liberal societies (Rosa, 2015; Vostal, 2015). From this perspective, time has become commodified; working more quickly thus becomes a method of saving both time and money (Adam, 2004). Such changes have ushered in a new ‘temporal politics’ in education through, for example, changes to methods of accounting for class-time, which has left many school teachers feeling ‘out of time’ with the new expectations of their work (Thompson and Cook, 2017), and shifts to policymaking, in which an emphasis on contextual specificity and rigour of evidence is abandoned in favour of fast, ready-made examples of ‘what works’ (Lewis and Hogan, 2019; Peck and Theodore, 2015). With respect to HE, in particular, scholars have noted the increased pace with which academic staff are expected to work (Guzmán-Valenzuela and Barnett, 2013) and the associated rise of ‘distressed’ time, as well as the disparagement of time frames of longer duration (that are often required for book-writing and other research-related pursuits) (Barnett, 2008). Scholars have also noted the shame that can arise from a perceived failure to meet new time imperatives (Shahjahan, 2020). Although the majority of work in this area has focused on staff rather than students, a small number of studies, conducted in countries where students have historically had some discretion about the length of their studies, have shown how students have come under increased pressure to complete their degrees at a faster pace (Nielsen and Sarauw, 2017; Ulriksen and Nejrup, 2020).

While some writers have responded to the pressures outlined above by advocating ‘slow scholarship’ – suggesting that the first step in developing a critical analysis of HE must be to slow down (O’Neill, 2014) – others have observed that the ability to work at a reduced pace is socially patterned. Indeed, Mendick (2014: n.p.) has argued that ‘slow’ is both classed and gendered; it ‘naturalises a particular relationship to self which requires not just stability of employment but an individualist way of being, constituting selves that calculate and invest in them-selves for the future’. Moreover, Martell (2014) maintains that speed in itself is not the problem, it is merely one symptom of the lack of control and power experienced by staff in the marketised university. In contrast, Vostal (2015) has argued that university staff are often quite ambivalent about processes of acceleration. He contends that while some of his (UK-based) interviewees were resentful of the perceived pressure to work faster, others valued what they saw as ‘energetic, accelerative moments’ of research discovery and the opportunities offered by new technologies for completing tasks at a faster rate (see also Shahjahan, 2020). Vostal (2015: 309) asserts, ‘Not only is acceleration, in a circumscribed sense, valued and embraced, there is a general concern with slowness as something undesirable in academia.’

Other scholars have noted the complexity of temporalities within HE, suggesting that: imperatives to work faster in some domains are held in tension with reforms that promote slowness in others (Guzmán-Valenzuela and Di Napoli, 2015); there can be significant disconnects between the time perspectives dominant in different parts of a university (Ylijoki and Mäntylä, 2003); and individuals, even doing similar jobs in the same part of an HE institution (HEI), can have markedly different views of time (Ylijoki, 2013).

There is also now a relatively large body of work that has emphasised the ways in which hegemonic ‘university time’ may fail to recognise the alternative temporalities of some groups of students, particularly those from non-traditional backgrounds (e.g. Bennett and Burke, 2018; Bunn et al., 2019). Such studies echo wider critiques of time–space compression that have emphasised the ways in which the remaking of temporalities is ‘a multi-dimensional, uneven and always partial process’ (May and Thrift, 2001: 10).

While the studies cited above provide a useful insight into the temporalities of the contemporary university, they have typically confined themselves to one particular nation-state and, in some cases, a single HE institution. They have also tended to focus on the perspectives of HE staff rather than students. In contrast, we adopt a comparative lens, by exploring how student temporalities are played out across six European countries. In doing so, we draw on the concept of ‘timescape’ as articulated by Adam (2004), to emphasise the way in which time is inextricably linked to space, context and matter, and acknowledge that ‘time is irrecoverably bound up with the spatial constitution of society (and vice versa)’ (May and Thrift, 2001: 3). Just as Lingard and Thompson (2017) have argued that some educational initiatives (such as the Programme for International Student Assessment, run by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, which requires pupils to sit tests on the same day) have helped to forge timescapes that extend beyond the borders of the nation-state, we explore whether the various European educational reforms implemented over recent decades – such as the Bologna Process and the creation of the European Higher Education Area, which have sought to standardise numerous aspects of HE – have helped forge common European timescapes. Moreover, by focusing on the temporal work done by HE policies and practices, specifically, we respond to Shaw’s (2001) call for a greater focus on mid-range factors that link pace or temporality to place.

Research Methods

We draw on data that were collected as part of a five-year European Research Council-funded project that explores the ways in which HE students are understood across Europe, paying particular attention to similarities and differences between and within nation-states. Fieldwork was conducted during 2017–2019 in six countries – Denmark, England, Germany, Ireland, Poland and Spain – chosen to provide diversity in terms of relationship to the European Union, welfare regime, mechanisms of funding HE and the type of financial support offered to students (see Table 1 in the online Appendix). We are cognisant of some of the critiques of comparative research that uses the nation-state as the unit of analysis. These tend to argue that such an approach reinforces methodological nationalism – that is, the assumption that the nation is the natural social and political form of the modern world (Wimmer and Glick Schiller, 2002). However, while employing a cross-national design, as discussed above, our research was aimed at assessing students’ perceptions about higher education and their role as students in a Europe where policy over the past two decades has been intended to bring about convergence of HE systems and, it is argued, has led to the conceptualisation of students in increasingly similar ways (e.g. Moutsios, 2013). Moreover, our research design was planned to question explicitly whether nations, themselves, should be considered as

‘coherent educational entities’ (Philips and Schweisfurth, 2014), through exploring the perspectives of different social actors in each nation. Indeed, the following methods were used across the six countries:¹ analysis of 92 HE policy documents; interviews with 26 ‘policy influencers’ (including government officials and representatives of national students’ unions,² graduate employers’ organisations, and bodies that represent university leaders); interviews with 72 members of HE staff; and 54 focus groups with (a total of 295) undergraduate students.

The staff and students were sampled from three HE institutions in each country. These were chosen to represent something of the diversity of its HE sector, as we were keen to explore the extent to which common views were held across institutions with different histories, reputations and student bodies. For example, in Spain, we chose one private university as well as two public institutions; in Ireland, an institute of technology as well as two universities; and, in England, three universities occupying different market positions (as England has the most vertically differentiated HE sector in the sample). In some countries, because of this approach to sampling, not all institutions covered the same range of disciplines – in both Germany and Denmark, for example, we included one institution that was primarily vocationally oriented in the programmes it offered.

Within each institution, we recruited students through a variety of means including sending out email adverts, attending lectures ourselves and asking staff members to advertise the research during their own lectures and classes. All participants were required to be undergraduate students and a national of the country in which they were studying. All those interested in taking part were asked to complete an initial screening questionnaire and, on the basis of this, we invited selected individuals to attend the focus groups. While we aimed to secure a sample that was broadly representative of the overall student population at each institution, women and students studying social science subjects were over-represented, and we had relatively few individuals from ethnic minority backgrounds (see Table 2 in the online Appendix for full details of the sample).

The individual interviews lasted, on average, an hour, while the focus groups took about 90 minutes each. All the individual interviews were conducted in English. The focus groups were conducted in English in Denmark, England and Ireland; in the other three nations, they were conducted in the national language before being transcribed and translated. Both focus group participants and interviewees were asked a series of open-ended questions about how they understood students, before moving on to ask them about particular constructions, such as whether they saw students as consumers, political actors and/or future workers. While we did not ask about time specifically, it was a theme that was often raised spontaneously, and which came to constitute an important focus of our analysis. All data were imported into NVivo and coded using both inductive and deductive methods. A coding framework was developed for the project as a whole, which comprised descriptive codes derived from the literature and those that emerged from our close reading of the transcripts. After all the material had been coded, descriptively, more thematic codes were generated and applied to the data (Saldaña, 2015). These were used to identify key patterns, and generate explanations. With respect to the focus of this article, during the first phase of analysis, we applied the code ‘time and pace of learning’ (which had been derived inductively) to relevant parts of the dataset. In the second phase, we then analysed in more detail the data that had been labelled under this code, by

comparing responses from different institutions and countries, and across social actors (policymakers, staff and students). More specific, thematic codes were derived and applied at this stage (such as ‘flexibility’, which referred to whether or not student timescapes were perceived as being temporally ‘flexible’), which were again compared across actors, institutions and countries. This led to the identification of the different timescapes discussed below.

In the sections that follow we focus primarily on the understandings of students themselves, derived from the focus group data. However, where relevant, we compare this to the understandings held by the other social actors. It is important to note that, while focus groups offered many advantages in this study – for example, they enabled us to speak to a relatively large number of students across Europe, and access collectively agreed accounts of particular social phenomena – they were less effective at facilitating the exploration of differences between individual group members. Thus, in this article we focus primarily on data generated by groups. This allows us to make some important points about cross-national similarities and differences, but we acknowledge that there may well be finer-grained differences – evident at the individual level within our six nations – which we are unable to access through our chosen methodology. Moreover, while we do not make claims that the patterns we found are nationally representative, we do seek to develop inferential, theoretical generalisations (Payne and Williams, 2016; Ritchie and Lewis, 2003) based on our qualitative data. Indeed, we suggest that the differences across nations that we identify below speak to particular differences in national context which are likely to be shaping students’ timescapes. Our ability to generalise in this way is linked to our sampling – that is, our inclusion of as wide a range of institutions as possible – and is supported by the fact that there was typically a high degree of congruence in the findings from the student focus groups and from the staff interviews in each nation. We are also building on cumulative knowledge of national differences in conceptions of time (e.g. Shaw, 2001).

Understandings of Students and Time

Our data suggest that there are important differences, by nation-state, in the ways in which students and their relationship to time is understood. Indeed, below we distinguish between three main timescapes. The first, evident in Denmark and Germany, is characterised by a belief, among students, that student timescapes should be, and have been in the past, flexible and loosely bounded – but that this distinct ‘university time’ is now under threat because of very different ‘official’ temporalities that have recently been introduced by policymakers. This is then contrasted with student perspectives in England, Ireland and Spain. Here, ‘university time’ is also viewed as distinctive, but students do not assert the need to determine the pace and duration of studies themselves and draw relatively tight boundaries around what constitutes ‘university time’. In their narratives, contestation of ‘official’ HE temporalities are largely absent. Finally, we examine student time-scapes in Poland. Again, students see ‘university time’ as distinct. In common with their peers in England, Ireland and Spain, there is no assertion of the right of a student to determine the pace and duration of their own studies but, unlike the students in these

nations, and in common with those in Denmark and Germany, the boundaries around ‘university time’ are expansive. These national distinctions held across the three institutions in each country in our sample, despite their different profiles, discussed above. Moreover, there were no obvious variations in perspective between focus groups comprised of students from different disciplines or year groups. While some focus groups did contend that they believed experiences of time were differentiated by social characteristic – and we discuss this briefly in the discussion that follows – the majority of our analysis is devoted to exploring and explaining the significant cross-national variation.

Flexible and Loosely Bounded Student Timescapes under Threat (Denmark, Germany)

Time was a key theme in the focus groups in both Denmark and Germany. In large part, students’ responses were closely linked to reforms that had been implemented in their countries in the recent past and which had courted considerable controversy within the HE sector. In both nations, politicians have explicitly attempted to quicken the pace of study and reduce the average length of a Bachelor’s programme through tying degree completion within a specific period of time to both student grants and university funding and altering qualification structures. These have been linked to the Bologna Process, which has sought to increase the comparability of degree programmes across Europe, but have also been informed by national priorities – including concerns, some of which predated the Bologna Process, about the cost of HE and the time it was taking students to complete their studies (Ertl, 2013; Sarauw and Madsen, 2020). Time was also mentioned by HE staff and policy influencers in these countries, and constituted an important focus of a number of the analysed documents (particularly those from Denmark).

Like their counterparts in the other European nations (see below), Danish and German students typically saw ‘university time’ as distinctive, and different from that they had experienced at school. However, while students from other nations believed that this distinctiveness lay in the increased freedom they had, when compared with school, to decide how they spent their time on a day-to-day basis, for Danish and German students it was bound more closely to discretion over the pace at which they moved through their studies and the duration of a degree. They also held, however, that this distinction was being eroded because of the reforms to encourage students to progress more quickly and complete their degrees within a shorter period of time. Students contended that, whereas in the past, they had had considerable flexibility and autonomy about how they spent their time, this had now been lost as a result of the need to progress more quickly through their studies and complete a particular number of credits each academic year. These imperatives, they believed, had had a direct and negative impact on learning:

The consensus is that you should finish your degree as quickly as possible and then enter the labour market as quickly as possible. It’s no longer about assimilating a wide range of knowledge by adding several semesters that you don’t need but that would help you grow as a person and broaden your knowledge, it’s just important to get through as fast as possible. (German HE1)

Similar sentiments were expressed by Danish students:

the way that students are pushed at the moment, that there is not that much room to get new ideas and to kind of study new subjects and [. . .] there is a whole bunch of . . . truth and of knowledge and of stuff that we miss because we are so focused on the, on the other side, and everyone around us is so focused on getting us to the other side. . . . we're pushed all, all the time from all sides, to be . . . not as smart as we can but being as smart as we have to, but do it quick. I think that's a . . . not good way of viewing students. (Danish HE11)

Students believed that, while such changes affected all of their peers, they impacted particularly severely on those from low income families and those who had caring responsibilities. In Germany, for example, focus group participants noted that, as state financial support was available for only six semesters of study, those dependent on this experienced considerable time pressure to complete their studies before this ran out, while those from more affluent families could take longer over their degree. Others explained that students who were also parents had found it particularly difficult to adjust to the new imperative to move quickly through one's studies. In addition, the Danish students' union representative held that the reforms were potentially discriminatory, as they failed to take into account the different speeds at which students learn. Here, he pointed to the experiences of some disabled students, in particular.

A similar loss was articulated in relation to the perceived impact of the reforms on the day-to-day allocation of time. Spending time on volunteering, engaging in paid work and travelling abroad were all considered by focus group participants as potentially important aspects of the broader experience of being a HE student, which enhanced formal learning. However, they believed that these had become much harder to pursue because of the requirement to move more quickly through their studies:

if you . . . get a good job [during your degree] and make good connections there, that that will increase the speed that you get a job afterwards. And with this [after the reforms], there are no opportunities to, to take the time to take like, have a year or three months to focus on a job. (Danish HE11)

Here, we see the boundaries of what it means to be a student defined widely, and certainly not tied only to formal learning. The positioning of paid work, in particular, as enhancing – rather than detracting from – learning is of note, given the concern that is often raised in Anglophone nations about the deleterious consequences of combining both (Callender, 2008) (see also discussion below).

This perspective was not, however, shared by various other stakeholders in Denmark and Germany, who did not view time spent on such extra-curricular pursuits as a necessary part of what it means to be a student. This was expressed clearly by the representative of a Danish employers' organisation. She asserted: 'I think that too much other stuff is taking up their time.' She went on to compare the practices of Danish students with their counterparts in other nations:

You know when I've studied in the US and in Sweden . . . you just, you're a student all the time, you talk about, oh I took that course and it was great, or that was really shitty, or have you

read that book or . . . You know you're in, it's not that, it's not even necessarily talk about you know whatever . . . text you're preparing for the day after, it's more that you're in this learning environment, and you're talking about your . . . you're talking about . . . like I talk about my work, that's the way you talk about what you study. It's primarily what you do.

More generally, policymakers in the two nations constructed students – implicitly, and in some cases, explicitly – as slow, taking too much time over their studies. In Germany, students were commended within policy documents for having improved the pace of their learning, implying that their past behaviour had been considered problematic (e.g. Confederation of German Employers' Associations, 2012; Federal Ministry of Education and Research, 2017), while in Denmark they were criticised for still being too slow: 'Danish students take longer to complete their education than what is intended . . . As such, there is still lots of room for improvement' (Ministry of Finance, 2016). Moreover, the Danish government interviewee asserted that this had been a problem with humanities students in particular:

And we had [students] in humanities . . . where a normal five-year programme would take nine years, on average. So you had a huge delay, and I think it was the culture just saying, you need to be almost a PhD to even consider doing your last final papers and your normal Master's degree . . . it actually [had been previously] a requirement that you're a full-time student, but that has just been anything above 10 hours a week or something like that.

In these nations, then, student timescapes were highly contested.

Limited and Tightly Bounded Student Timescapes (England, Ireland, Spain)

While time was a key point of contention in how students and their lives should be understood in Denmark and Germany, it was discussed in much more consensual terms in England, Ireland and Spain. Understandings were typically shared by all or most social actors; students' perspectives were, on the whole, echoed by HE staff and policy influencers. Moreover, much tighter temporal boundaries were drawn around students and student life.

Many focus group participants in these three nations remarked on what they believed to be the distinctiveness of 'university time' when compared to 'school time'. The former was typically characterised as much freer, largely because of the open-ended nature of some learning tasks and the often-substantial reduction in the number of contact hours, requiring better self-discipline and strong time management skills. The following quotations are typical:

My perception of a day has changed massively from school [. . .] the concept of a day is just completely warped, like I can't remember when I used to have a day of 10 lessons and just thought that was normal, and now it's . . . like more than two or three hours of lectures would be shocking! (English HEI2)

I think university has really re-framed the way that I think about my day and how I spend my time . . . It was very by the book in secondary school, primary school, and there was, you know,

your expectation of what would happen in a day would . . . be what it was . . . [At university] you can embrace . . . the less structured way of experiencing the day. (Irish HEI3)

Students noted, however, that the nature of ‘university time’ was often differentiated, to some extent at least, by subject and year of study. Students studying science subjects were believed to have less discretion than arts, humanities and social science students about how they spent their time – because of the requirement to be in laboratories as well as attend lectures and seminars. Moreover, it was commonly held that pressure on time ramped up when assessments were due, and particularly towards the end of degree programmes. Nevertheless, such distinctions were not seen to undermine the broad distinction that was drawn between ‘university time’ and that experienced at earlier stages of education. For some students, it was also substantially different from how they expected to experience time in the future. It is significant that this ‘specialness’ of university time was not thought to be compromised by the requirement – in these three countries – to complete a degree within a specific, and relatively short, period of time (three or four years for a Bachelor’s degree). While their peers in Denmark and Germany also emphasised the distinctiveness of university time, as we argued above, this was held – by students, if not other social actors – to be severely compromised by the reforms to incentivise degree completion within a specific time frame (similar to that already in operation in the other four nations).

A further difference between the two groups of countries can be seen in students’ and others’ view of the position of paid work – and, relatedly, the time that should, ideally, be devoted to formal education. As we have shown above, the students who participated in our focus groups in Germany and Denmark, and the respective students’ unions, had a strong view that part of the distinctiveness of university time was related to the opportunity it offered to engage in a wide variety of activities and follow one’s own interests, not only pursue formal learning. Indeed, university education was believed to be enhanced by becoming involved in volunteering, overseas exchanges and also paid work. In contrast, students in England, Ireland and Spain tended to draw much tighter boundaries around ‘learning time’ and typically thought that time spent in paid work should only be considered as part of their education if it related directly to their studies or desired future career. Many students spoke of having little choice but to work in order to be able to afford their HE but often believed that it had had a detrimental effect on their university education.

This was a view shared by various members of HE staff. For example, one interviewee at an English HEI commented that she would like to see students reading more widely but thought that this was no longer possible for many, because of the competing demands on their time:

I mean, if you have to do paid work to supplement your income, if you’re looking ahead for future careers, getting internships or work experience, I don’t think you can get away with just doing that [devoting your time to studying]. And a lot of our students, even if they are from a privileged background, are working all summer to get money to come back for term. (Staff member, English HEI2)

Although she refers here to such pressures applying to all students, our student data would suggest that it was those from low income families who experienced them particularly

acutely. Similarly, a Spanish member of staff described how term-time jobs could affect the subject choices available to students, as well as their academic performance more generally, commenting that: ‘it’s very difficult to, to do engineering or medicine and [paid] work at the same time . . . so you have to have the [family] resources to be a full-time [student]’ (HEI2). Indeed, in Spain, paid work was believed by many of our respondents to have increased as a consequence of the reduction in the total number of studentships available, and a shift in emphasis from financial need to merit (see also Ross et al., 2016) – impacting particularly adversely on those from less privileged backgrounds. In contrast to participants in Denmark and Germany, and in line with those in England and Ireland, employment during the course of a degree was rarely seen as a positive and integral part of what it means to be a student.

In these three countries, there was little evidence of the contestation of timescapes that we outlined above with respect to Denmark and Germany; no student raised any concern about either the length of their degree programme or the pace at which they were being asked to progress. In Ireland and England, while respondents spoke of changes to how time was allocated, noting the increasing prevalence of paid work, there was no evidence of changes to the pace or duration of degrees. Indeed, an Irish government official remarked that both Ireland and the UK had been very effective at getting students through the HE system quickly, ‘without all the coming and going and dropping out you see in other European countries’. In Spain, however, the time required to complete a Bachelor’s degree had been shortened from five to four years in 2007, and then to three years in 2015.³ The advantages of moving to a shorter Bachelor’s degree were articulated by government officials and business organisations, focusing particularly on the reduction in cost. However, the same policy was critiqued within documents produced by the national students’ union and by the union interviewee. They claimed that the shift to a three-year Bachelor’s degree had devalued the nature of the qualification. Moreover, they asserted that, because the shorter degree was not perceived by employers as equivalent to the longer version, students felt pressure to progress to a Master’s to be able to secure the same kind of jobs that had previously required only a Bachelor’s. In these accounts, we see value being associated with the time taken to complete a qualification, even if the learning outcomes remain constant. Nevertheless, these changes were not remarked on by any of the Spanish students in our sample. As we have shown elsewhere (Jayadeva et al., 2020), they were much more anxious about what they perceived to be the poor links between university and the labour market and, for some, the quality of their HE. Time was not a key concern for them, other than when the time that they believed should have been available for study was encroached upon by the demands of paid work.

Limited and Loosely Bounded Student Timescapes (Poland)

In Poland, as in the other five nations, students indicated that they considered ‘university time’ distinctive. This was explained in different ways, although comments typically related to the allocation of time on a day-to-day basis (as in Ireland, England and Spain) rather than the overall duration and pace of their degree (as was evident in Denmark and Germany). Students spoke, for example, about time ‘flying by’ (Polish HEI1) when one

was studying alone with often nothing tangible to show for it, and about the new freedom university offered to decide how time was spent. Several talked about how they had learnt to become more responsible in the way they allocated their time over the course of their degree, with relatively less time spent partying:

Participant 1: At first, there was this syndrome of loosening the leash; without our parents' control, we do what we want. But now I am a bit bored by that

Participant 2: Yeah, it was similar for me. The first year was about letting off steam, but after my first year I started to work in my free time and in the second year I have started to work regularly and now there is even more responsibility. (Polish HE11)

Like their counterparts in England, Ireland and Spain, no Polish student problematised the pace at which they were expected to move through their degree programme or the overall length of their programme. However, they differed from them with respect to the boundaries they drew around their studies. In particular, engagement in paid work was seen as an important part of being a student, and not something that compromised one's ability to learn well. Thus, unlike in England, Ireland and Spain, boundaries were not drawn tightly around understandings of 'the student'; work was considered an important part of the experience of being a student (to help prepare an individual for the labour market, as well as providing useful financial support in the present) rather than something that detracted from their ability to concentrate fully on their degree programme. Here, in valuing employment highly, and considering it as an intrinsic part of being a student, we see parallels with Denmark and Germany. Unlike these countries, however, Polish students did not see their preferred time allocation as under threat or in tension with that advocated by policymakers. In the quotation above, for example, a key aspect of being a 'responsible' student is choosing to spend one's time in paid work, rather than on partying. Indeed, other studies have indicated the centrality of paid work to Polish students' identities. Although the level of student employment in Poland is similar to that in some of our other countries (Eurostudent, n.d.), 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%, compared with 25% in Ireland and only 9% in Denmark) (Eurostudent, n.d.). This has been explained with reference to the very fast expansion of HE in Poland over recent years, and a common perception that, as a result, a degree has lost much of its labour market value (Brooks and Abrahams, 2020).

Discussion

The three timescapes outlined above can each be seen to be constituted by three key elements. First, a clear distinction was made by many of the students in our sample between 'university' or 'student' time, on the one hand, and 'school' time, on the other. This related to the perceived degree of autonomy or flexibility an individual has in deciding how their time is spent with 'university/student' time associated with a much greater degree of discretion. In England, Ireland, Spain and Poland, this was discussed in relation to day-to-day decisions, while in Denmark and Germany it was typically related to

decisions about the length of a degree and the pace at which an individual studied. Second, student timescapes typically encompassed the specific allocation of time – what time, during a degree programme, is actually spent on. Here, there were significant differences between countries, as we have shown above, with respect to whether certain activities, such as paid work and volunteering, were seen as a key part of ‘student time’ or whether boundaries around student time were drawn more tightly, with paid work, for example, being viewed as limiting the time available for learning and thus an encroachment on student time. Third, timescapes were related to both the pace of study and duration of a degree. Again, differences between nations were evident – flexibility about both was considered a crucial constituent of ‘university time’ by students in Denmark and Germany, but not elsewhere, and were key elements of contestation with other social actors in these two nations. In this section, we explore these various aspects of timescapes further, in a more comparative manner, and offer some explanations for the various patterns observed.

It is notable that, despite the variation in timescapes described above, in all six nations many of the students who participated in our focus groups understood ‘university time’ as different in important ways from ‘school time’. It was valued highly – largely because of the greater freedom it offered to make decisions oneself about how to spend time. For some students, this allowed them to develop particular intellectual interests (by taking extra classes in a particular subject, or reading extensively on a particular topic); for others, it enabled them to move at a different pace – one that was determined by them rather than their teachers or parents. As we have shown above, a key element of Danish and German students’ opposition to the recent reforms in their nations focused on the potential loss of ‘university time’ and the encroachment of ‘school time’ into all parts of the educational system. In their eyes, the different components of timescapes were closely inter-related: increasing the pace of study and shortening the average duration of a degree were believed to have a direct impact on the autonomy of individual students in deciding how to spend their time. It is interesting, however, that a very similar distinction between ‘school’ and ‘university’ time was drawn by students in England and Ireland – where the total length of time for a degree has been tightly prescribed for a long time, and all students are expected to move through their studies at the same pace. This pervasive differentiation between school time and university time raises some important questions about the way in which ‘educational time’ has been conceptualised. As we noted previously, various scholars (e.g. Adam, 2004; Thompson, 1967) have argued that ‘school time’ is particularly important because it tends to instil a specific form of ‘clock time’ that remains with us for the rest of our lives. The evidence from our European students suggests, however, that for those who progress to HE (now around half of the relevant sector of the population), other timescapes become dominant – which may still require them to ‘produce good work fast’ (Adam, 2004: 64) – but often allow greater flexibility and autonomy.

While this differentiation, between school and university time, was common across the sample, the three timescapes we identify above demonstrate that, in other ways, understandings of time were linked closely to place and, in particular, the nation-state. In this way, we can see something of the ‘radical unevenness in the nature and quality of social time’ (May and Thrift, 2001: 5) played out across what some perceive as a

common European educational space (Lawn, 2009). To some extent, these different understandings can be explained by the different historical traditions that underpin HE in the six nations. Germany and Denmark, in common with many other countries in central, north and eastern Europe, have both been strongly influenced by the Humboldtian model of the university, which emphasises the importance of ‘Lernfreiheit’ – the freedom to learn and the right to prioritise one’s own time (Sarauw and Madsen, 2020). Thus, while students across the six nations valued the increased autonomy in how they spent their time at university, it was only in Germany and Denmark that it was articulated as a fundamental principle underpinning HE. Influenced by this, students have typically taken much longer to complete their studies in these two countries than in other parts of Europe. Indeed, Ertl (2013) has noted that German politicians were concerned about such disparities in degree completion for a long period of time, dating back to before reunification. In contrast, England, Ireland and Spain have not been similarly influenced by Humboldtian principles and, as a consequence, despite the positive evaluation of ‘university time’ discussed above, the *right* to prioritise one’s own time or decide on the length of one’s degree has not been normalised in these nations. These differences have implications for the overall duration and pace of studies, but also for the ways in which time is allocated during the period of being a student. With degrees of longer duration, there is clearly more time available to take up volunteering opportunities, paid work and other activities – playing into a relatively expansive definition of studenthood. Such arguments speak to other research that has emphasised the importance of the national space in understandings of time. Shaw (2001), for example, has contended that the pace of life differs geographically, with the average time taken to complete routine tasks differing between countries, and considerable variation in social norms about time-keeping (including the acceptability of being late). In her analysis, national culture plays a key role in linking pace to place.

The different national timescapes are also closely associated with activity in the policy sphere. The high level of contestation evident in Germany and Denmark is linked to the ways in which time has been foregrounded within recent reforms (see above). Thus, in some ways, students’ emphasis on time can be seen as a direct response to the perceived threat to *Lernfreiheit* brought about by the reforms. In contrast, although Poland’s HE system has also been strongly influenced by the Humboldtian system (Antonowicz et al., 2020), it has not brought in any recent reforms that attempt to change either the pace at which students study or the duration of a degree.⁴ In England and Ireland, no reforms relating to the duration of a degree or the expected pace of student progression have been introduced in the recent past; indeed, in both countries, being a student has long been seen as a relatively short-term, bounded identity. In Spain, although one union interviewee expressed concern at the reduction in degree length, and protests about this had taken place over the last decade (e.g. Elias, 2010), our focus group participants appeared unworried about this particular change.

This emphasis on the significance of *change* to the construction of timescapes articulates with the broader literature on acceleration, discussed previously. Given that the particular pace and duration of a degree being ushered in in Denmark and Germany was broadly in line with that already in operation in the other countries, the high degree of contestation in these two nations can be related to concerns, on the part of most students

and many staff, about acceleration. The challenges of changing to a new tempo have been recognised in other research. Reflecting on data from individuals who had been forced to work in different places with varying rhythms, Shaw (2001: 124) writes 'Because time-keeping is profoundly embedded in everyday life, habits and values, accommodation to a different tempo challenges what is expected and can produce intense feelings of dislocation in those forced to march at an unfamiliar pace.' While our Danish and German students were not necessarily accustomed to the tempo they felt ought to be an integral part of 'university time' (having recently left school), it appears that their *expectations* of what 'university time' should look like, based on national traditions of HE, led them to experience the lack of freedom to study for as long as one wanted, at the pace one wanted, as challenging.

Policy also plays into understandings of time through the specific funding mechanisms in operation in the various countries. In nations where many students are making significant financial contributions to their studies (England, Ireland and Spain – see Table 1 in the online Appendix), there is undoubtedly less incentive – at the individual level – to want to extend the period of study than in nations such as Germany where no tuition fees are payable and in Denmark where all students receive a grant to study. Moreover, in Spain, where grants had been reduced and fees increased following the 2008 global recession (Ross et al., 2016) and youth unemployment was, at the time of data collection, high (Eurostat, 2019), students' main concerns were ensuring they received a good standard of education and secured a decent job on graduation. As noted above, concern about changes to the duration of degrees were articulated only by the unions. Taken together, such differences suggest that policy can exert a significant influence on students' understandings – by affecting the extent to which temporality was seen as key to what it means to be a student (much more evident in Denmark and Germany than elsewhere) and the nature of the student timescapes (whether short term and bounded, or longer term and more expansive).

The different timescapes outlined in this article also speak to broader policy questions, including whether initiatives such as the Bologna Process and the creation of a European Higher Education Area have inculcated a common understanding of what it means to be a student across the continent. While, as noted above, Lingard and Thompson (2017) have suggested that various educational initiatives instigated by supranational bodies have had the effect of creating timescapes that extend beyond the nation, our data indicate that HE timescapes differ quite considerably between European countries. Although students from the six nations shared a belief in the distinctiveness of 'university time', particularly when compared to 'school time', they differed in the importance they attributed to specific tempos of education, the duration of degrees and the temporal boundedness of their lives as students. The national space – associated with different national histories and cultures of HE – appears to exert considerable influence on the nature of student timescapes. It is important to note, however, that these differences have been brought into sharp relief because of the introduction of policies intended to bring about more standardised models of HE across Europe. These may, in time, have the effect of normalising a model of HE in which a degree has to be completed in a particular, centrally prescribed time frame.

While this article has focused primarily on the centrality of the nation-state to the construction of student timescapes, many of our participants recognised that experiences

of time were also differentiated by social characteristics. Indeed, such points were marshalled by students and students' unions in Denmark and Germany to support their arguments against the recently introduced temporal reforms, arguing that progressing through one's studies at the pace expected by the government was harder for some groups than others – particularly those from low income families, with caring responsibilities or who are disabled. Moreover, in England, Ireland and Spain, both students and staff maintained that family background had a significant impact on whether or not individuals had to engage in paid work during their education and thus the time they could devote to their studies. As we have contended above, in these countries, allocation of one's time to paid work was rarely seen as a key part of a student identity, and thus working long hours was viewed as highly detrimental to learning. This evidence suggests that across all nations, there is at least some recognition that tensions often exist between the temporalities of particular groups of students and hegemonic university time – whether the latter is defined explicitly within government policy, as in the case of Denmark and Germany, or more implicitly, as in the other nations.

Conclusion

In this article, we have delineated three different European 'student timescapes' that were evident from our data. In most of our nations, research participants provided some evidence of the ways in which the timescapes inhabited by individuals differed according to social characteristics such as social class and disability, as well as whether they had caring responsibilities for others – which sometimes made adjusting to the rhythms of hegemonic university time difficult. Overall, though, *national* differences were more prominent. We have explained these in relation to: distinctive traditions of HE still evident across the continent; the specific mechanisms through which degrees are funded; and the nature of recent national-level policy activity. In doing so, our analysis contributes to wider debates about globalisation and European homogenisation, showing that, with respect to student timescapes at least, some important variation remains evident. It also speaks to broader debates about the relationship between time and place, suggesting that the nation-state continues to exert some influence in how a key social group – HE students – conceptualise time. Finally, it suggests that time itself plays a crucial role in informing students' sense of what is distinctive about their university lives, even if in some national contexts this is framed largely in terms of what they have lost or are afraid of losing.

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Author Contributions

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Supplemental material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

Notes

1. We also conducted an analysis of media articles and university websites, but they are not discussed in this article.
2. When we mention representatives of students' unions in the article, we are referring to the leaders of national students' unions (whom we interviewed as 'policy influencers') rather than focus group participants. Only a very small minority of focus group participants were involved in their institutional union, and none at national level.
3. Spanish universities still have the right to offer a four-year degree if they wish, however.
4. A law was introduced in Poland in 1990 to allow higher education providers to offer a Bachelor's degree in addition to a Master's. Such provision then became mandatory in 2000, as a result of the Bologna Process (Kwiek, 2014). No changes were made, however, to the overall duration of studies (for a Master's) or the pace at which students were expected to study.

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