

What does it mean to be a student in European higher education?

Students are all too often thought of as a homogenous bloc. Drawing on a new book, Rachel Brooks discusses the different ways in which students are imagined by themselves, as well as by policymakers and educators in Europe.

Assumptions are often made within policy, as well as by academics, that what it means to be a student in Europe today is common across nation states – driven by the increase in cross-border educational mobility (through the [Erasmus scheme](#)), the development of a [European Higher Education Area](#), and the widespread impact of marketisation and expansion of higher education.

Nevertheless, cross-national empirical evidence is rarely cited in support of such assumptions. To address this gap, over the past five years, with colleagues, I have been conducting [detailed research in six European nations](#) (Denmark, England, Germany, Ireland, Poland and Spain) about how the contemporary higher education student is conceptualised – drawing on perspectives from policy, the media and higher education staff, as well as students themselves.

Significant commonalities across nations

Our research has revealed some important commonalities across these six nations. For example, many students positioned themselves, to some extent at least, as future workers, even if they rejected the ideas about human capital that typically underpin this construction within policy. Nevertheless, in most cases, they objected to being seen by others as *only* future workers; instead, they valued the opportunity to become committed learners, develop personally, and learn how to effect change in the world around them as citizens.

Moreover, in contrast to some assumptions in the academic literature, the majority of the students involved in our research saw no contradiction between being focused on securing a job post-graduation and valuing various non-instrumental aspects of their higher education experience. Thus, understanding oneself as preparing for the labour market was not necessarily seen as incompatible with being an enthusiastic learner and/or an active citizen.

Such commonalities across Europe in how students understood their own role as students were reflected in their views of how they believed they were seen by others (another focus of our research). Common across the six countries was a sense that they could be marginalised as a result of being seen as ‘in transition’ or ‘not a fully formed adult’ and only a *future* citizen by policymakers and other social actors – and that being criticised as being lazy and/or a threat to society (which they felt was common) could have material impacts on their everyday lives.

Indeed, there were also clear commonalities across the nations in the views of others – which often contrasted with the views of students themselves. For example, higher education staff and policy actors typically did not view students as citizens – comparing their political activity and other forms of civic engagement less favourably to previous generations. Similarly, both groups tended to view students as instrumental in their approach to learning, apparently not recognising the enthusiasm about education that was often central to the students’ accounts.

Enduring national differences

These significant commonalities have, however, to be set against the various differences, by nation, that our research also revealed. These suggest that despite arguments about the homogenisation of the European higher education space, constructions of students remain, to some extent at least, inflected by national distinctions.

Some national differences can best be explained with reference to relatively long-term historical and cultural trends. For example, within Denmark and Germany, the Humboldtian model of higher education remains influential. In their understanding of themselves as learners, Danish and German students, but not their peers elsewhere, placed considerable importance on being able to [determine for themselves the pace at which they studied](#) – associated with the Humboldtian idea of *Lehrfreiheit* (the freedom to study), and often drew on the concept of *Bildung* (which emphasises the key role of education in personal development and self-cultivation) as a means of resisting what they perceived to be dominant economic policy discourses.

National differences can also be explained by different higher education policies implemented in the various countries in the sample, and the principles underpinning them. For instance, in those nations where all or most students paid fees (England, Ireland and Spain), students (and other social actors) were more likely to see their transition to the labour market as a matter of personal investment and benefit than in the other three countries.

In Denmark, Germany and Poland, in contrast, greater emphasis was instead typically placed on societal contribution and benefit. Such differences are likely to be related both to the payment of fees (or not) and also to wider social norms about the purpose of higher education – principles of public good are typically articulated more frequently and explicitly in systems that have retained public funding models.

While the values and principles underpinning higher education policy are clearly important in explaining some of the national differences in constructions of the student, so too are other aspects of social policy and state provision.

In Spain, for example, because of longstanding traditions of '[familialised social citizenship](#)' whereby parents have been held responsible for the support of young adults, higher education was less commonly seen as a distinct period of preparation for adulthood – not least because many Spanish students remain living in the parental home throughout their degree programme.

This can be contrasted with the position in Denmark, where many students have already transitioned to independent living before embarking upon their degree, facilitated by state support that is underpinned by assumptions about the importance of '[individualised social citizenship](#)'.

Our research thus highlights that, despite homogenising pressures exerted through the Bologna Process and the establishment of a European Higher Education Area, as well as more general trends towards massification and marketisation, the ways in which we understand higher education students, and they understand themselves, are also affected by specific national cultures, histories and policy trajectories.

This is significant not just for helping us to understand better the lived experiences of students across Europe, but also for our wider knowledge of processes of Europeanisation and, in some cases, the persistence of significant national norms. We should not assume that young people moving across national borders for all or part of their studies share the same understanding of what it means to be a student today – and ensure that our institutional practices and pedagogies are sensitive to this.

For more information, see the author's recently published Open Access book, [Constructing the Higher Education Student: Perspectives from across Europe](#), (co-authored with Achala Gupta, Sazana Jayadeva, Anu Lainio and Predrag Lažetić)

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