

Understanding the higher education student in Europe: a comparative analysis

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Abstract

Higher education (HE) is of considerable importance to policymakers across Europe. Indeed, it is viewed as a key mechanism for achieving a range of economic, social and political goals. Nevertheless, despite this prominence within policy, we have no clear understanding of the extent to which conceptualisations of ‘the student’ are shared across the continent. To start to redress this gap, this article explores four key aspects of contemporary higher education students’ lives, considering the extent to which they can be considered as, variously, consumers, workers, family members and political actors. On the basis of this evidence, it argues that, despite assumptions on the part of European policymakers that there are now large commonalities in the experiences of students across Europe – evident in pronouncements about Erasmus mobility and the operations of the European Higher Education Area – significant differences exist both between, and within, individual nation-states.

Keywords: higher education, Europe, consumerism, politics

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Introduction

Higher education (HE) is of considerable importance to policymakers within Europe – both those formulating policy for the European Union (EU) and those working at a national level. Indeed, it is viewed as a key mechanism for achieving a range of economic, social and political goals. In relation to the EU, in particular, higher education has assumed much greater prominence in policy in the 21st century, largely as a result of the Bologna Process, which aims to establish a common European Higher Education Area, and the EU's research policy, which has sought to bring about substantial reform of institutional and research management in Europe's universities to strengthen the region's 'knowledge economy' (Keeling, 2006). Underpinning this shift has been a reconceptualisation of the purpose of education, seeing it increasingly as an important economic driver, and no longer primarily a means of achieving further European integration (Walkenhorst, 2008). Nevertheless, despite the importance attributed to HE within policy, we have no clear understanding of the extent to which understandings of 'the student' are shared across Europe. Implicit (and sometimes explicit) assumptions are made about common understandings of 'the student' across the continent – underpinning, for example, initiatives to increase cross-border educational mobility and the wider development of a European Higher Education Area – but are rarely supported with any empirical evidence. Furthermore, many studies of HE students are located within a single nation, and fail to draw comparisons with other countries. Thus, a central aim of this article is to bring together disparate literatures to investigate the ways in which contemporary higher education students are understood and the extent to which these understandings are likely to differ both within nation-states and across them.

A common-sense understanding of the student is perhaps as a learner, an individual who is, above all else, dedicated to his or her studies. Indeed, Williams (2013) argues that this is one of two dominant images associated with students prior to the middle of the 20th century that emerge from an analysis of historical sources. (The other is that of young men from wealthy families engaged in hedonist, rather than intellectual, pursuits.) She goes on to argue that dominant constructions have changed over time – for example, with students coming to be understood as important political actors in the second half of the 20th century. This article focuses on four constructions of the student which, while not exhaustive, have resonance in contemporary society: students as consumers, workers, family members and political actors. They have been chosen because they are four of the most dominant constructions within the extant literature, and also articulate with various policy debates conducted across Europe. It is not assumed here that these constructions are mutually exclusive. Indeed, in many cases they overlap – it is clearly possible to be constructed as both a consumer and a worker, for example. While the article does not focus specifically on the sizable literature that discusses ‘students as learners’ (largely because this particular construction has been examined well elsewhere), all four understandings have implications for how being ‘a learner’ is understood – and these are explored explicitly in the various sections (for example, in teasing out whether understanding students as consumers leaves any room for the maintenance of a learner identity), and returned to in the concluding discussion.

Students as consumers

The construction of students as consumers (or clients, which can be seen as broadly synonymous) first emerged in the 1970s in the US, when the federal government introduced a raft of market-based mechanisms, including an increase in tuition fees. Under these reforms,

state aid was no longer paid directly to higher education institutions (HEIs), but to students (Naidoo et al., 2011). Similar initiatives were introduced in Australia and the UK in the following decades, underpinned by the assumption that universities needed to reconfigure themselves as customer-focussed business enterprises (ibid.). For example, in England, the recent radical changes to HE funding (namely allowing institutions to charge up to £9000 per annum in tuition fees) are predicated upon the assumption that prospective students will: see a degree as a private investment (rather than a public good); be prepared to accumulate significant debt in order to acquire it; and actively ‘shop around’, comparing institutions and courses to secure the ‘best’ possible education (BIS, 2011).

Although market-based reforms have now been introduced across the world and there is evidence that, even in countries outside the Global North, students are often seen as consumers (e.g. Sinlarat, 2005), the prevalence of consumerist discourses is differentiated by nation-state. For example, within continental Europe, although many national governments have implemented policies to increase competition between institutions and increase vertical differentiation (Tavares and Cardoso, 2013; Willemsse and de Beer, 2012), and the Bologna Process can be seen as an attempt to increase Europe’s overall market share of HE (Naidoo et al., 2011), it is less apparent that this has led to a strong consumerist discourse (Tomlinson, 2016). Modell (2005) has argued that the early adoption of consumerist discourses by governments in Anglo-Saxon countries was not replicated in Sweden, for example – because of greater contestation over such policies (and the political struggles that followed) – and various technical constraints. As a consequence, the consumerist emphasis that characterised some proposed HE policies was diluted. Moreover, there is evidence that even in countries like England, where a consumer discourse is strongly embedded in policy pronouncements, such understandings are not shared by all social actors. With respect to the media, Williams’

(2011) analysis of 20 articles (from both broadsheet and tabloid newspapers) shows how newspapers in the UK constructed students as consumers to some extent, but also as infantilised, because of the elongation of the period of financial dependency brought about by higher fees. Furthermore, within popular culture, Fisher et al. (2008) have argued that, although HE is often portrayed in stereotypical terms – taking place in an elite environment in which entry is determined by class and wealth – representations of students do not always conform to stereotypes. Indeed, they maintain that the university students in ‘Homer Goes to College’ (an episode of *The Simpsons* – an American TV programme, but one which is shown across Europe) are not portrayed as rebellious, political, lazy or addicted to wild living but, instead, ‘well behaved, respectful and intent on studying hard’ (p.165).

Some scholars have suggested that in contexts in which national and institutional policy is predicated on market norms, and promotes the idea of student-as-consumer, it is inevitable that students themselves come to understand their identity in this way (Molesworth et al., 2009). For example, it is argued that – as a result of the introduction or increase in fees – students have come to conceive of higher education as a private good, and thus believe that as ‘paying customers’ they have a right to a particular kind of education and educational outcome. From this perspective, the value attached to attending HE is equated to the cost of participating, with students having a similar (transitory) relationship to their degree as they have to other consumer goods and services (Tomlinson, 2016). It is also assumed that pedagogical relationships will be fundamentally altered. Indeed, Molesworth et al. (2009) have argued that the market discourse prevalent in the UK promotes a mode of existence where students seek to *have* a degree rather than *be* learners. This, they suggest, has wider implications:

A *being* orientation within education requires academic professionals to act as sovereign but a market orientation – a *having* mode – must satisfy the desires of student consumers. Thus a marketised higher education environment prevents those who have the capacity to co-create a pedagogically sound experience from doing so. (p.285)

Newson (2004) develops this argument, contending that institutional practices have the effect of further entrenching a consumerist disposition by, for example, not challenging students' views, and imposing on staff requirements to protect the institution from potential litigation (for example, by posting all course materials far in advance of the actual teaching, thus reducing flexibility).

Nevertheless, more recently, a small number of empirical studies have started to tease out – through collecting data from students themselves – the extent to which they have, in practice, assumed a consumer identity. These have highlighted heterogeneity in students' responses, and suggest quite strongly that there is no simple correspondence between policy constructions and those taken on by students. In England, for example, where the student-as-consumer policy discourse is strong, some students do seem to have adopted what Tomlinson (2016) calls an 'active service-user attitude', emphasising both their rights and the importance of obtaining value-for-money (see also Nixon et al., 2016). Indeed, Phipps and Young (2015) suggest that the strong individualist orientation, implicit in such consumerist understandings, has also pervaded relationships between students themselves. However, other subject positions are also evident. A considerable number of students in Tomlinson's study, for example, were explicit about their active rejection of consumerism, believing that it undermined their status as students, and inculcated values that were in tension with the overall goal of academic development. Reflecting an earlier point above, they conceived of consumerism as bound up with a largely passive approach to learning, which restricted the

role that could be played by students and signalled lower intellectual merit. (Similar findings emerged from Brooks et al.'s (2015b) research on student union leaders who were trying to find ways to resist what they believed to be the consumerist imperatives of their institution.) Tomlinson's study also identified a third position (the most common in his study) – what he calls 'positioned consumerism', characterised by ambivalence and partial identification with dominant discourses. The students in this group had internalised the discourse of student rights, but still distanced themselves from the position of the consumer. While they believed that they were increasingly important stakeholders in HE, with considerable bargaining power, they also acknowledged that they had personal responsibility for their learning.

Research that has focussed on the way in which students behave (rather than how they identify themselves) has also raised important questions about the extent to which they act as the rational economic actors assumed in policy texts. Drawing on data from international students in Denmark, Nielsen (2011) argues that introduction of fees had little impact on the subjectivities of those involved in her research, and they were certainly not transformed into passive consumers. Furthermore, UK studies have shown that there is no simple relationship between the provision of information about HE and the knowledge acquired by prospective students (Dodds, 2011): 'official' information from universities is often mediated by a range of social factors (Reay et al., 2005), with more affluent groups having greater capacity to 'shop around', unencumbered by financial concerns or the 'identity risks' of moving away from home (Patinotis and Holdsworth, 2005). Similar findings have emerged from other countries (e.g. Baldwin and James, 2000). In Portugal, for example, Tavares and Cardoso (2013) have argued that the consumer metaphor has had some influence (and is increasingly dominant within policy) but does not explain well how students go about making their higher education choices. Indeed, they argue that while economic factors were considered by their

respondents when deciding whether or not to go on to higher education, such factors had little or no influence on their decision which university to attend or which subject to study. Taveres and Cardoso also highlight the ways in which consumerist positions are often socially-patterned. In their research, young men and those considering studying science subjects were more likely to adopt consumerist behaviour than young women and those intending to follow arts programmes.

Similarly, those attending prestigious universities may be less likely to be subject to strongly consumerist discourses than their counterparts attending lower status institutions. Naidoo et al. (2011) contend that an institution's position in the field of higher education will determine how quickly and to what degree consumerist discourses penetrate and restructure its practices and culture. While higher status HEIs are not, they argue, immune from consumerist pressures, they are typically able to draw on high levels of social capital to delay, minimise or reshape such pressures. These differences have been borne out in empirical work. In elite institutions, 'student receive the message that they are in receipt of an elite education, whose knowledge is sacred and of high social value, and that conformance to the elite pedagogies is imperative if they are to succeed in this environment' (Tomlinson, 2016, p.4). In lower status institutions, however, consumerist discourses tended to be much more pervasive, as a result of occupying a less strong market position, and also because of their greater historical emphasis on providing students with more applied knowledge (ibid).

This body of evidence thus suggests that while consumerist discourses have become more prevalent across Europe, their impact on student behaviour and identity is not played out in a straightforward manner. Differences are evident at the level of the nation-state, and

also within individual nations – patterned by students’ social characteristics, the institutions they attend and perhaps also their own individual orientations to learning.

Students as workers

A large body of literature has now demonstrated that employment, whilst a higher education student, has become increasingly common across both Europe (e.g. Callender, 2008; Pinto, 2010) and other parts of the world (Hall, 2010; Neill, 2015). Indeed, in over half European countries at least 40 per cent of the student population is engaged in paid employment (Eurostudent, 2015). Studies across the continent indicate that there are typically three main reasons for engaging in paid work whilst a student: to cover the costs of living (and studying); to reduce reliance on one’s family; and/or to accumulate useful experiences and contacts for the future – to help secure professional employment and distinguish oneself from other graduates of mass higher education (Antonucci, 2016; Eurostudent, 2015). Moreover, the expansion of distance and online education, facilitated by developments in ICTs, have made it easier for full- and part-time workers to access higher education. In general, working during higher education has been shown to have a negative impact on academic performance, particularly for those working more than a small number of hours per week (Body et al., 2014; Beffy et al., 2009; Callender, 2008), largely because of the reduced time available for studying (Eurostudent, 2015). Moreover, term-time employment is disproportionately taken up by students with no prior family experience of higher education and/or who are older than average (Darmody and Smyth, 2008; Moreau and Leathwood, 2006). Nevertheless, these overall patterns mask some important differences between countries. For example, the employment rate of students is particularly high in Ireland (where 85 per cent of students work), the Netherlands (75 per cent) and the Czech Republic and Estonia (both 67 per cent)

(Eurostudent, 2015). In contrast, less than a quarter of the student population is engaged in paid work in Armenia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Lithuania and Serbia (ibid.). Such differences can be explained by factors such as the way in which higher education is funded, the availability of part-time work, the socio-economic profile of students, and also the ways in which learning is organised (Antonucci, 2016; Body et al., 2014; Darmody and Smyth, 2008).

These different patterns suggest that the extent to which higher education students consider themselves to be ‘workers’ is also likely to differ across Europe. Further evidence about variation in student identities and the importance placed on engaging in paid employment is provided by a number of detailed studies of individual nation states. The case of Estonia, in particular, is instructive. Drawing on a survey of students from 24 Estonian HEIs, Beerkens et al. (2011) argue that the patterns of term-time employment, and motivations for engaging in such work, differ markedly from those that have been identified in many western European countries. Specifically, they point to the very high proportion of students engaged in paid work, the long hours they work, and the absence of any apparent negative impact on academic progress. Moreover, across the country, students from more privileged backgrounds were as likely to work as their less privileged peers, and were *more likely* to work long hours. In explaining these patterns, Beerkens et al. firstly discount the theory that Estonian students are seen as independent adults, and thus their family background is irrelevant to their decisions about whether or not to engage in paid work. They note that this is unlikely to be the case, as students typically *do* receive money from their families (and those from more affluent backgrounds usually receive more). This, they argue, suggests that the high employment rate is not a consequence of the financial aid system in place, and working does not seem to be a necessity for some students. In assessing the apparent absence of any negative impact of long working hours on academic performance,

Beerkens et al. argue that this means either Estonian students are very hardworking or that their higher education programmes are not very demanding. As the number of hours spent on academic work per student is lower in Estonia than in any other country in Europe, they suggest that the latter is the more plausible explanation. They develop this argument by contending that, as HEIs are short of money, they minimise student drop-out (and thus loss of income) by ensuring that courses are not too demanding. As a consequence, merely having a degree is not a sufficient signal to employers of intellectual capability or productivity. It is for this reason, Beerkens et al. maintain, that so many students take up term-time employment – to indicate their motivation and ability to future employers, and access learning opportunities that are rarely offered in the higher education system. Very similar arguments are made by Apokin and Iudkevich (2008) in relation to the propensity of Russian students to engage in paid employment during their time in higher education. While the authors of neither study asked their respondents directly about their relative identifications as a student and/or worker, in both cases it seems that, for many students, their identity as a worker may have been foregrounded – as it was associated with more challenging activities in the present, as well as seen as the route to fulfilling labour market destinations in the future.

Dominant national discourses may also help to shape student identities in different ways. In her cross-national research on the lives of students, Antonucci (2016) distinguishes between three main models of higher education funding and associated discourse. In the ‘social investment’ model, which typifies Anglo-Saxon countries such as England, students are constructed explicitly as investors in their future careers and, as such, are expected to make significant private contributions to their higher education fees and living costs. In contrast, in the ‘public responsibility’ model of HE funding, which characterises the Nordic countries, and the ‘minimal public intervention’ model prevalent in continental and southern

Europe, the language of investment as workers-in-the-making is rarely drawn upon and is thus perhaps less likely to be taken up by students in these countries (Antonucci, 2016).

These different funding models also have implications for the day-to-day experience of work in the lives of students across Europe. Antonucci's nuanced study, based on interviews with students as well as questionnaire data, evidences a strong relationship between funding model and motivations for engaging in paid work. In particular, she contrasts the position of her Swedish and English respondents:

Sofia, from Sweden, relies on state sources and works during the summer, while Sharon and Mark, from England, need to complement their state sources (loans and grants) with working in retail during the academic year, as state sources are not sufficient to enable them to sustain themselves independently from their families. (p.135)

Students such as Sharon and Mark experienced precarity at close quarters; without the income from their retail jobs, it would have been very difficult for them to continue their studies. Zero hours contracts, common among the British students in Antonucci's research, made financial planning hard, and often induced extreme anxiety. For these students, work was understood in very different terms from when it was pursued merely as a means of gaining future advantage and/or supporting oneself during the summer vacation (as in Sofia's case). It is important to recognise, however, that patterns of working also differ within nation-states. Indeed, as noted above, research has shown how term-time work often varies by socio-economic status, with those from less privileged backgrounds typically working significantly more than their peers (Darmody and Smyth, 2008; Moreau and Leathwood, 2006; Reay et al., 2010).

The evidence drawn upon in this section has indicated that, while paid work is increasingly being combined with higher education studies across Europe, it is patterned differently between and within nations. Students from less privileged backgrounds, and in countries in which less state support is provided for higher education, are more likely to have to engage in paid employment. For these students, work can take up considerable time and energy, and distract them from their studies. While this may not be of much consequence in Estonia, in which labour market participation appears to provide better signals than educational qualifications to future employers, in other nations, long hours of paid work can adversely affect academic progress and restrict opportunities to develop wider parts of ‘traditional’ student identities associated with, for example, extra-curricular pursuits and other types of informal learning outside the classroom (Brooks et al., 2016).

Students as family members

The increasing salience of paid work to higher education students has been accompanied by an increase in the importance of family support. Indeed, Antonucci (2016) argues that we have witnessed a process of ‘southern Europeanisation’ of policies across Europe. By this, she means that the reliance on the family to support young people’s engagement in HE, which has historically characterised countries in southern Europe, has now become much more widespread as governments adopt funding policies that assume a significant contribution from families (or indeed complete reliance on family sources). Nevertheless, national differences endure. For example, while in Italy, the family plays a central role in funding higher education, in England it is an important complementary source (alongside state loans), and in Sweden and other Nordic countries it provides more of a safety net in case of particular need (ibid). The extent to which young adults are dependent on the financial

support of their families can have a significant influence on their experience of being a student. For example, empirical work has shown how those most dependent on their family often feel considerable pressure to succeed (so as not to let their family down) as well as a sense of guilt (ibid.). Moreover, policies that assume some degree of familial support can help to construct studenthood as a period of semi-dependence, and exacerbate inequalities between students. In countries such as Italy, for example, where a high degree of familial support is assumed, students without access to such resources find it more difficult to access HE and progress in their studies (ibid.) (see also Doolan (2010) who makes similar arguments with respect to Croatia).

Familial support can include the provision of accommodation, not merely direct financial contributions. In the UK, for example, the massification of higher education has been associated with significant change to student housing (Tight, 2011), with an increasing proportion of students living in the parental home. Again, however, there are important differences between countries. These mirror, to some extent, more general patterns of housing with respect to young people, in which we see enduring differences by welfare regime (Arundel and Ronald, 2016). Living in the parental home is the most common form of student housing in many southern and south-eastern European countries (over 70 per cent of students live in this form of accommodation in Armenia, Malta, Italy and Georgia) but much rarer in the Nordic countries (where no more than 12 per cent of students live with their parents) (Eurostudent, 2015; Thomsen and Eikemo, 2010). There is similar variation in the proportion of students living in designated student accommodation – ranging from 40 and 35 per cent in Ukraine and Slovakia, respectively, to no more than 5 per cent in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Armenia, Malta and Italy (ibid.). Patterns also vary within nation-states, most commonly by socio-economic status, with those from lower socio-economic groups more

likely to reside with their parents (e.g. Sa et al., 2012). There is also some evidence that male students are likely to spend longer living with their parents, during higher education, than their female counterparts (ibid.).

There is now a significant body of literature on the extent to which different living arrangements impact on student identities, although much of this work is UK-focussed and therefore not necessarily generalisable to other contexts in which housing patterns are different. This has shown that while moving away from the parental home for university is often accorded greater cultural value than pursuing a degree locally (Holdsworth, 2006), living at home can help to minimise the ‘identity risks’ for working class students associated with studying within a predominantly middle class institution (Clayton et al., 2009). Students who choose to remain ‘local’ by living with their parents may struggle to reconcile their student and non-student identities (Holdsworth, 2006) but, as Abrahams and Ingram (2013) have argued, can sometimes derive considerable benefit from their positioning between two somewhat contradictory fields – occupying a ‘third space’ between that of local residents and HE students (see also Holton, 2015). Moreover, while living in student accommodation can facilitate easy access to a range of student activities and social events, it may also tend to reinforce quite traditional student identities. Taulke-Johnson (2010) has argued that heteronormativity is often reinscribed within student housing, for example.

Although less commonly discussed in the literature, students’ identities can also differ significantly with respect to whether or not they have dependent children of their own. Eurostudent data reveal considerable variation between countries in the proportion of higher education students with children, ranging from under three per cent in Ukraine, Greece and Italy to over 15 per cent in Norway, Sweden, Finland and Ireland (indeed, in Norway, over a

quarter of students (25.2 per cent) were also parents). To some extent, these patterns can be explained by the differing average age of students between nations: older students are, unsurprisingly, more likely than their younger counterparts to have children. However, qualitative research has suggested that institutional structures and gender norms are also influential. A cross-national comparison of the experiences of students with dependent children in Denmark and the UK revealed clear disparities between the financial support, childcare provision, parental leave and availability of flexible modes of study in the two countries – with Danish students better served in all respects (Brooks, 2012). Cultural and attitudinal differences also emerged: Danish institutions appeared to be more aware and welcoming of those with parental responsibility (*ibid.*). In large part, these patterns seem in line with the broader literature on the experiences of parents in the two countries. Scholars have highlighted considerable differences by welfare regime, including the high level of support for employed mothers and dual-earner families within social democratic regimes, such as Denmark, and the much lower levels of state support evident within neo-liberal regimes such as the UK (Crompton et al., 2007). Indeed, Denmark spends a greater proportion of its GDP on childcare and early years education than any other country in the OECD (OECD, 2014). As a result, it is able to offer parents very affordable nursery places and has a high proportion of children under three years of age in formal day-care. Such differences can also affect the extent of gender differentiation. In the study discussed above, for example, while, in Denmark, the experiences of mothers and fathers with dependent children were broadly similar, in the UK, ‘student mothers’ tended to struggle significantly more than ‘student fathers’ (largely because, in the UK, mothers rather than fathers were expected to assume primary responsibility for childcare, and could draw on much less state and institutional support than their Danish equivalents) (Brooks, 2013).

Familial relationships – whether sustained through continuing to live in the parental home or by having children of one’s own – can clearly affect the experience of being a student, and how this identity is understood. Again, however, the impact is complex. Living in the family home may, in some nations, be accorded lower cultural value than moving into student or private accommodation, and be seen as extending the period of dependence for young adults. However, in other nations it represents a much more common way of being a student and can also offer a means of successfully negotiating the transition to university, particularly for students from non-traditional backgrounds. Similarly, students with dependent children of their own may find that their family circumstances have relatively little impact on their studies and/or student identity where significant financial and/or practical support is provided by the state or private sources. For other students, however, combining studying and parenting can often be both practically difficult and emotionally challenging (Brooks, 2015). Empirical evidence suggests that this is particularly likely for those with relatively limited family resources, living in neo-liberal welfare regimes.

Students as political actors

Students have a long history as political actors, stretching as far back as the medieval period, when they were involved in the governance of their institutions. Universities have been seen as important spaces for developing a political identity among young people – through encouraging them to think critically about the world around them, and bringing together a critical mass of students with political interests (Crossley and Ibrahim, 2012; Loader et al., 2015; Olcese et al., 2014). However, the extent to which a student identity has been seen as synonymous with a political one has changed over time. As noted previously, Williams (2013) has argued that it was only really foregrounded in the 1960s; previously, students

were seen as either devoted to their studies, or as rich young people who prioritised their social life. Indeed, she maintains that it was only at this time that the word ‘student’ became associated with more active, political nouns, with the terms ‘student activist’ and student revolt’ both being used in print for the first time in 1969. From this point onwards, however, constructions of the student changed, and ‘an emotional commitment to political principle was considered by many students to be more important a statement of their identity than the conclusions of dedicated and painstaking scholarship’ (Williams, 2013, p.108.)

In contemporary Europe, some common trends have been evident. Firstly, the early part of the 21st century has witnessed a variety of student protests across the continent (in Austria, Croatia, Germany, Ireland, the UK, Spain and Italy) – against the marketisation of higher education and, specifically, the introduction of or increase in tuition fees for students. Students have also been closely involved in other forms of protest, which have not been overtly focussed on education, for example, through the Occupy movement. Secondly, recent data suggest that higher education remains a good predictor of propensity to engage in political activity, and this holds true across different European countries (Olcese et al., 2014). Thirdly, with respect to student political activity within higher education governance, we have seen a shift in the role commonly assumed by students. While student representation *per se* has been an important pillar of much European policy, the nature of representation has shifted as university governance, across Europe, has moved away from a collegiate model to a managerial one (Klemenčič, 2012). As a result of the Bologna Process, for example, the number of students sitting on governing bodies in many universities has increased (e.g. Antonowicz et al., 2014; Chirikov and Gruzdev, 2014). Nevertheless, they have typically taken on a consultative role within these new structures, rather than as an equal partner or indeed as a political actor.ⁱ

A more fine-grained analysis, however, reveals some differences between nation-states in both the political role taken on by students and societal responses to political activity on the part of students. With respect to student representation, there are significant differences across Europe in both the resources available to students, and the historical legacies that, in some cases, shape contemporary ways of working. Students' unions in the Nordic countries are very well-established, with long histories of automatic and/or mandatory membership and significant resources to draw upon (Klemenčič, 2014). In contrast, however, students' unions in Eastern Europe can sometimes operate as service organisations rather than political actors, in large part due to their history as labour unions. Chirikov and Gruzdev's (2014) analysis of students' unions in Russia, for example, has shown how – as a result of this type of historical legacy – unions tend to focus only on issues related to social benefits, such as financial aid and student housing, rather than a broader range of political concerns. This, the authors suggest, has a significant effect on student life within Russian universities. Klemenčič (2014) has argued that across Europe three different relationships between HEIs and representative student structures are evident. Firstly, she identifies what she calls an 'authoritarian-paternalistic' approach. In this model, typical of Croatia and other countries that constituted the former Yugoslavia, some form of student government is incorporated into institutional structures and is given limited discretion on issues related to students – but only in an advisory capacity. Students thus remain positioned as junior members of the academic community, not co-decision makers. In contrast, in the second model – that of 'democratic-collegiate governance' – students do take on the role of co-decision-makers, and unions are typically autonomous bodies (often with their autonomy enshrined in law). This model, Klemenčič contends, has been common in much of Western Europe from the 1960s onwards, and is still evident in the Nordic countries. Finally, she outlines the 'managerial/corporate

governance' approach, a model that has become increasingly dominant across Europe over the last decade. Here, students' unions are involved in networks of institutional governance alongside other stakeholders, but their role is more akin to a consultant than a joint decision-maker. In this model, students' unions tend to become increasingly professional in their operations; at the same time, more political groups within the unions are marginalised. While Nordic countries, with more mature forms of student representation, have attempted to bring elements of the second and third models together, nations with less mature forms (such as Poland) and/or that have embraced managerialist reforms more enthusiastically (such as the UK) have seen a more wholesale shift in forms of representation towards the managerial/corporate model (Antonowicz et al., 2014; Brooks et al., 2015c). In these cases, the role of the student representative has been reconfigured; a political focus has been replaced with one that foregrounds professionalism and entrepreneurship, focussing on performing advisory functions to improve service delivery and quality assurance (Klemenčič, 2012). Such shifts in student influence – away from broader political and societal concerns and towards 'service delivery' within their own institutions – have implications for the extent to which students are understood as political actors. Indeed, research in the UK has suggested that student union leaders themselves rarely see themselves as 'activists' or engaged with broader social issues (Brooks et al., 2015c).

There is also significant variation in the way in which governments across Europe respond to student politics and protest more broadly conceived, and thus the extent to which students are understood as influential political agents. For example, while German students successfully campaigned to have tuition fees removed and free public education restored (Muller and Rischke, 2014), their counterparts in the UK were not able to prevent the introduction of significantly higher tuition fees, despite large-scale protests, occupations and

parliamentary activity (Hensby, 2016; McVitty, 2016). These differences are closely related to the wider political context – encompassing, firstly, the structure and norms of the higher education system and, secondly, the wider culture. With respect to the first, Cini (2016) has shown how different responses to student political activity in Europe – in this case in the UK and Italy – can be explained by differences in university governance. He contends that the nature of power relations within universities (which often differs across nation-states) has an important influence on the kind of strategies university leaders adopt when they are required to face what he calls ‘internal challengers’. ‘Academic leaders’ (i.e. those elected from among the professoriate – the means of selection in Italian universities) need to sustain good relationships with students in order to maintain their institutional position. Thus, they are likely to favour negotiation and compromise over more adversarial responses. In contrast, Cini suggests, ‘academic managers’ (i.e. those appointed to leadership positions through open competition – the common means of selection in British universities) are less reliant on the goodwill of students and thus seek to minimise what they perceive to be the ‘reputational damage’ to their institution brought about by student protest through more repressive and confrontational tactics. Klemenčič’s (2014) analysis places more emphasis on cultural norms (i.e. the shared values, beliefs and meanings of higher education actors, and those prevalent in society more generally). These inform the type of governance implemented in particular nation-states and also the extent to which policymakers feel they need to accommodate the views of protesting students. Thus, Klemenčič suggests, the UK government persisted with its proposal to increase tuition fees significantly, in the face of student opposition, because it was confident that the population at large had not rejected marketisation and other elements of neo-liberal reform. In contrast, in other nations (such as Germany, and also Chile and Canada outside Europe), where there was widespread support of students’ oppositional stance, governments felt less able to push through unpopular reform. As she argues,

‘Understanding cultural attitudes towards questions such as whom higher education serves, who should pay for higher education and what role universities have in society can offer important insights into understanding the political developments and outcomes in higher education’ (2014, p.408).

There is also variation *within* countries with respect to political participation. Research on students’ unions, in particular, has suggested that there are important differences by gender, social class and ethnicity – with middle class, white males more likely than other students to take on leadership roles (Brooks et al., 2015a). Others have suggested that the increasing diversity of student bodies, across Europe, have made it harder for students to forge a common political identity around a set of mutually-agreed interests; as a consequence, some student voices are heard louder than others (Chirikov and Gruzdev, 2014; Klemenčič, 2014). This variation in the degree and nature of political engagement – at the level of the individual as well as the nation – again points to differences across Europe in the extent to which students see themselves, and are seen by others, as significant political actors.

Discussion: deconstructing the ‘European student’

Cross-national differences

Despite claims that European higher education has become increasingly homogenised, and assumptions implicit in many European policy documents that students are able to move unproblematically across the continent as part of the same degree programme, the preceding sections of this article have argued that there is considerable diversity in the way in which students live their lives. There are differences both between and within countries in the extent

to which students see themselves as consumers, engage in paid work, live within families and take up political causes. Some of the cross-national variation appears to correlate well with differences in welfare regime (i.e. the degree of decommodification and social stratification evident in a particular nation) (Esping-Anderson, 1990) and the extent to which higher education is positioned as a private or public good within national policy. For example, as discussed above, consumer discourses (which emphasise higher education as a private investment) have been strongest in countries, such as the UK, with a strong neo-liberal orientation, and have faced more resistance from states with a social democratic regime, such as Sweden. Similar patterns are evident in relation to students as political actors. The enduring differences in the political role taken on by students and the response of wider society are configured largely by welfare regime, with significant differences evident between social democratic countries (such as Denmark, Norway and Sweden), post-Communist states (e.g. Poland), and nations that have embraced neo-liberalism and market reform most fully (e.g. the UK). The cross-national differences noted with respect to family relationships are also patterned in a comparable way.

Nevertheless, the evidence discussed in this article suggests that the relationship between policy and dominant constructions of students is often complex. For example, despite a strong consumerist discourse in UK policy pronouncements, British students seem not to have taken up a consumer identity in a uniform or straightforward manner. Similarly, the introduction of fees for international students in Denmark appears not to have a direct effect on student subjectivities. Moreover, education policy is often, in itself, messy and sometimes contradictory (Ball, 2007; Brooks, under review) and can bring about change unanticipated by policymakers – what Shore and Wright (2011) call ‘run away effects’. Indeed, across Europe, we see strong evidence of what Peck and Theodore (2015) call the

‘recontextualisation’ of policy at both national and local levels; policies do not move around the globe in neat bundles but in a much more haphazard and piecemeal fashion, reconfigured in particular ways, in particular places, for particular purposes.

While a considerable body of literature has discussed the heterogeneity of higher education policy across Europe – emphasising, for example, variation in the way in which higher education is funded (Eurydice, 2014) and the extent to which marketization has been embraced (e.g. Dobbins and Leišytė, 2014; Holtta et al., 2011), it has focussed primarily on the extent of convergence (or divergence) with respect to top-level policies; as a result, little work has explored the perspectives of social actors (such as staff working in higher education institutions, students, and the media), nor the ways in which policy may be ‘enacted’ locally, in ways that diverge from formal policy documents. Our knowledge of the ‘lived experience’ of higher education across Europe is thus partial.

Students as learners: differences by social characteristic

The four facets of student life discussed in the preceding sections of the article are clearly not exhaustive; nevertheless, they do relate to key areas in which – in many countries, if not all – we have seen change over recent decades and which, for some students, have an important bearing on their higher education experiences. As discussed throughout the article, these aspects of student life are likely to have broader implications for the extent to which students think of themselves as ‘learners’ and the type of learner identity they take on. On the basis of their UK-focussed study, Reay et al. (2010) have argued that both work and family commitments, in particular, have a clear and direct impact on learner identities. They contend that ‘where students have to manage competing demands of paid work and family

responsibilities with being a student, the students only partially absorb a sense of themselves as students, and their learner identities remain relatively fragile and unconfident' (p.115). In contrast, they maintain that students without these commitments develop a strong sense of themselves as academic learners. Reay et al.'s thesis appears predicated upon normative national constructions of students – for example, caring for dependent children may be seen as much more compatible with a student identity in the Nordic countries, where the proportion of students with children is relatively high (and support structures are good), than in other parts of Europe where very few students have children. Similarly, in countries where relatively few students live in the parental home, doing so may mark one as 'different'; in southern Europe and parts of the continent where a large majority of students live at home, the significance of doing so is likely to be rather different.

However, Reay et al.'s argument also addresses differences by social characteristic, and this *does* hold across different national contexts. Although there are some exceptions, across Europe, it tends to be less privileged students who are more likely to take up paid employment and live in the family home (and thus often have longer journeys to and from university) – in order to save money. While such commitments do not *necessarily* impinge on learner identities, they do reduce the time available for studying, and so seem likely to have some impact on the way in which individuals engage with their studies. Financial worries and the struggle to juggle competing demands can also have deleterious psychological effects (Antonucci, 2016). As discussed above, there are also differences by social characteristic in relation to both exposure to consumerist pressures, and propensity to engage in political activity. Those attending less prestigious institutions – who are overwhelmingly likely to be students from less privileged backgrounds – are less likely to be shielded from consumerist

pressures, while students from non-traditional backgrounds are less likely than others to become involved in campus politics.

Conclusion

By bringing together literatures from different disciplinary perspectives, this article has explored, in some detail, four key aspects of contemporary higher education students' lives, considering the extent to which they can be understood as consumers, workers, family members and political actors. On the basis of this evidence, it argues that, despite assumptions on the part of European policymakers that there are now large commonalities in the experiences of students across Europe (evident in pronouncements about Erasmus mobility and the operations of the European Higher Education Area), significant differences exist both between, and within, individual countries. However, while this does raise significant questions about the homogeneity often assumed within European policy, it is important to note that few of the studies discussed in this article have explored students' own perceptions of their role. For example, a student may spend many hours in paid employment, but not foreground this part of her identity, or indeed see herself as a worker at all. There is thus an urgent need for more research which explores how students themselves understand their identity and the extent to which this differs across and within European nations.

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ⁱ In this context, a political actor is understood as someone who defends the interests of a collective student body in relation to other interested constituencies.