

Serial number	0168
Title	'There's a lot of us, if we wanted to make a difference we could': Exploring undergraduate students' understandings of themselves as 'political actors' in England and Ireland.
Session	From 'youthquakes' to 'university bribes': Understanding Higher Education as the locus for classed, gendered and national repertoires of young people's political agency (Finn)
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'There's a lot of us, if we wanted to make a difference we could': Exploring undergraduate students' understandings of themselves as 'political actors' in England and Ireland.

Unfortunately talking about like the political aspect of things and how much leverage students have got, we haven't really got a lot, so...it's kind of you know they're passive rather than active people of change, so I think that's a bit of a shame really (England, HE11, FG1)

Since the early 1960s, Higher Education (HE) students have been conceptualised in part, as political actors, as agents at the forefront of social and political movements both within and outside of universities (Williams, 2013). HE is often seen as a breeding ground for liberalisation. A place where young people's views are challenged, enabling them to develop critical perspectives. Whilst this politicisation of students has been prevalent across Europe, arguably the extent and nature of it may be visible to different degrees in different parts of the continent (Brooks, 2017).

This paper draws on some early findings from the *EuroStudents* project which explores the conception of the HE student in six countries in Europe (Denmark, England, Germany, Ireland, Poland and Spain). The study, consisting of four interrelated strands, considers the extent to which understandings of 'the student' are shared in each country by different social actors (policy makers, higher education institutions (HEIs) and staff, the media and students themselves). This paper focuses specifically on data collected from 18 focus groups with undergraduate students at 6 different HEIs across England and Ireland. It also draws on analysis of policy documents and speeches by key policy actors in the two countries. Whilst the study overall considers various constructions of the student, this paper focuses in particular on the idea of the student as a political actor and the extent to which students understand themselves in these terms.

Initial findings suggest that many students feel they have the potential to be influential politically, perceiving themselves as a large 'mass' that can easily be mobilised. They also discuss how, due to their education, they may act as important sources of knowledge to be drawn upon to further societal development. Many spoke of feeling empowered upon arriving at university and being in what one student described as a 'liberal bubble'. One interesting distinction noted between the students in England and Ireland though, was the extent to which they felt that their voices were actually heard. As the opening quote suggests, the students in England tended to be quite pessimistic about their potential for leading change in society. They described feeling insignificant to policy makers, as two students in one focus group in England discussed:

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

Student 2: Yeah, like with the protests, I feel like when people protest, like we want like fees to be lowered or whatever, we're, like in the media we're talked about like it's students that are doing this, it's not like adults, we're not classed as that. And we're supposed to be like the next generation that's going to you know have a say in politics and stuff, but I don't think at all that's what we're recognised as. (England, HE1, FG2)

As is illustrated in this excerpt, many students in England felt as though they were treated like children by policy makers. Interestingly one student in this same focus group reflected on how this lack of consideration towards the student voice may be related to a perception of them as lacking power to cause disruption in society through protest:

I think the reason it's like that though is because we're not actually affecting anyone else. For example, like if train workers, if they stopped working to protest, then everyone notices because nobody can use the trains, or nurses, like they have to listen to them...But students, I mean they see us as like not contributing to anything, like if we stopped learning, the only people we're affecting is ourselves. (England, HE1, FG2)

In contrast to these sentiments, we noticed a different narrative coming from some of the students in Ireland. There appeared to be a greater degree of optimism around their power to sway political issues. Students discussed feeling that they did have a voice and that this was listened to when they came out in mass to stand up for issues they believed in. Interestingly this related to issues wider than the student body and they discussed the active role students played in recent movements such as the 'yes' vote on the referendum around gay marriage rights and repeal the eighth (campaign pro women's abortion rights):

The [Gay] Marriage Referendum, like a year or two ago as well was massively like influenced by students, like it was spread by students, like students really got behind it. (Ireland, HE1, FG3)

Whilst it is generally assumed that due to the neoliberal, marketization of HE in England and Ireland, what it means to be a student is largely similar in both countries, this paper provides a critique of this narrative through highlighting one way in which constructions of 'the student' may differ. In this paper we reflect on the potential explanations for these sentiments, paying particular attention to the different levels of success these respective groups of students have had in their attempts to challenge policy. We also draw upon analysis of political speeches and documents in England and Ireland which were found to be largely reflective of the themes emerging from the focus groups. In Ireland the policy documents present the Irish Students' Union (ISU) as an important political actor, whilst in England policy makers adopt a more paternalistic view about the National Union of Students (NUS), explicitly setting up an external body to govern them (the Office for Students). Drawing upon the theorising of Pierre Bourdieu we consider the two fields of HE in England and Ireland and explore the ways in which they may provide differing degrees of fertility for students to feel empowered and recognised.

References

Brooks, R. 2017. 'Understanding the higher education student in Europe: a comparative analysis', *Compare: A journal of comparative and international education*, early online access.

Williams, J. 2013. *Consuming Higher Education. Why learning can't be bought*. London: Bloomsbury.