

Submissions Abstract Book - All Papers (Included Submissions)

0270

Constructions of Higher Education Students as Threat and Object of Criticisms Across Six European Countries

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Research Domain: International contexts and perspectives (ICP)

Abstract:

Drawing on data from six European countries and from different social actors (policy actors, media, higher education staff, and students) this paper explores the ways in which students are constructed as threat and object of criticisms - with respect to the quality of education, and to society more broadly. The paper outlines three critical constructions of students associated with academic qualities, political activism and generational disparities. Moreover, the paper discusses students' own perceptions of how they are seen by the other social actors. While the critical constructions differ across and within the six countries and the datasets, behind these constructions are assumptions about an 'ideal' or 'implied' student, to which those who are criticised are seen as not conforming. The paper discusses how these idealised images tend to reinforce understandings of students that are exclusionary, and which overlook structural, cultural and socio-economic factors that can have a significant impact on being a student.

Paper:

Drawing on data from six European countries and from different social actors (policy actors, media, higher education staff, and students) this paper explores the ways in which higher education students are constructed as threat and object of criticisms - with respect to the quality of education, and to society more broadly. The paper outlines three constructions that position students as threat and object of criticism and discusses students' own perceptions of how they are seen by other social actors. While the critical constructions differ across and within the six countries and the datasets, we argue that behind these constructions are assumptions about an 'ideal' or 'implied' student (Wong & Chiu, 2019; Ulriksen 2009;), to which those who are criticised are seen as not conforming.

The first construction is students as 'lazy and incompetent' - and was evident across the datasets and the countries. The 'lazy and incompetent' student, whose suitability for university studies is often questioned, is described as unwilling or incapable of independent learning, not interested in academic knowledge and, in general, less academically inclined. Simultaneously, it is suggested that the competent student is independent, motivated, hard-working, and naturally academically able. While such statements make transparent some of the expectations of the 'ideal' student (Wong & Chiu, 2019), they leave other aspects of this ideal profile hidden. The 'incompetent student', then, appears to be understood as inherently 'deficient' in the university setting, lacking the cultural knowledge and skills that determine good academic performance (O'Shea, 2015; Yosso, 2005; Burke et al. 2017).

Second construction is related to students' political activism which is seen as a threat in the newspaper discourses in England, Ireland and Spain. Common to all these three countries is that certain forms of political acts were seen as a threat to 'open debate' and 'free speech', and the students involved in these acts were accused of censorship and depicted to falling short of the 'ideals of academic debate' or correct ways to engage politically. However, the discourse behind this threat was not the same in the three countries. In England and Ireland, it is related to the image of 'snowflake student' whose political activism is reduced to expressions of emotional sensitivity rather than recognised as a legitimate form of political action (Finn et al, 2021). In the Spanish newspapers it is about framing certain protests as violent which position the student activists on the edges of acceptable forms of political engagement (Cagnon, 2018), and constructs an image of the students as out of control and 'mindless' (Ahmed 2014).

The third construction is about generational narratives and outlined in the interviews with staff members and policy influencers. We found that some of our interviewees criticised students of prioritizing materialistic lifestyles and what was seen as students' desire for an easy life - which were seen in conflict with certain ideals of learning and ways of being a student - framing the current generation as 'spoilt' in comparison to previous ones. Regardless of the emphasis on the generational differences - the image of the 'ideal' student was not always the one the past, but also what students should be in the future (for example more efficient) or students abroad, namely in line with peers in other European countries. These various articulations all tend to overlook the structural, cultural and political circumstances shaping young people's lives, and instead seek to legitimate an image of a student influenced by the interviewees' own understandings of what constitutes an 'ideal' student (Hurst, 2013; Jayadeva et al, 2021).

Students, in our data, were aware of many of the critical constructions outlined by the other social actors. Across all countries students also talked about another negative construction of how they thought they are viewed that was not widely evident in the data from other actors: students as hedonistic and nuisance. Our analysis of the focus group discussions show that students were not only aware of these constructions, but they placed a strong emphasis on the harmful and negative impact these what they saw 'false stereotypes' have on their lives.

Taken together, the critical constructions and the images of the ideal student are not only 'innocent' ideas circulating in the society. Instead, they tend to reinforce understandings of students that are exclusionary, and overlooking structural, cultural and socio-economic factors that can have a significant impact on being a student. Furthermore, the power of stereotypes is not only in producing and disseminating 'false images' but can have direct and material effects on students themselves, and the limited subjectivities made available for them.

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