

## Submissions Abstract Book - All Papers (Included Submissions)

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Higher Education Students as People in Transition? Evidence From a Six-Nation European Comparative Study

Achala Gupta<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>*Southampton Education School, University of Southampton, Southampton, United Kingdom*

**Research Domain:** International contexts and perspectives (ICP)

**Abstract:** Drawing on original research, conducted with students, staff, policymakers, and media, between 2016-20, in Denmark, England, Ireland, Germany, Poland and Spain, this paper explores the construction of students as people in transition. It focuses particularly on two most prominent themes in the data: 1) students' progression to the labour market and 2) personal transformation students undergo during higher education. Moreover, the paper discusses the participants' narratives of students' life stage and the implications these may have for the understanding of students' current role and purpose within higher education and society more broadly. When discussing these themes, the paper highlights some notable differences in understandings of students both between nation-states and within them, and explain such differences in terms of a range of historical, social and political factors, including the degree of marketisation evident in the higher education sector.

**Paper:** While transition to higher education has been examined widely in the literature, there has been relatively little discussion of students' transition within higher education (HE). To redress this gap in the scholarship, this paper explores the construction of students as people in transition. It draws on original research, conducted with students, staff, policymakers, and media, between 2016-20, in Denmark, England, Ireland, Germany, Poland and Spain.

We found that many of our research participants tended to conceptualise students as people undergoing a series of potentially transformative changes. This was articulated most commonly in two specific ways. Firstly, various research participants discussed students as individuals transitioning from education to a professional career. Most students spoke about university as a place where they acquire knowledge and skills that help them prepare for 'high-skilled' 'office' jobs. In this way, they valued HE for facilitating their entry to the graduate labour market (Donald et al., 2018; Berg et al., 2017). While this theme was common in our sample, there were specific country-level differences. Social actors in England, Ireland, and Spain – where students pay fees – were more likely than their counterparts in Denmark, Germany and Poland to understand their transition to the labour market as a matter of personal investment and benefit.

A second way in which various social actors saw students was as people on a journey of self-discovery, in the process of developing critical thinking and broadening one's horizons (Ecclestone et al., 2009; Gale & Parker, 2014; Bristow et al., 2020). However, again, there were notable country-level differences. Many students and other social actors in England, Ireland and Poland, spoke at

length about how they believed HE represented a period of transitioning to adulthood. Students spoke about their HE experiences as transformational and articulated this in the form of learning to care for themselves and gaining social and emotional maturity. In our Spanish dataset, views of students as people in transition-related primarily to students' dependence on their family and the extent of parental involvement in students' everyday lives. Many Danish participants in our study viewed Danish students as more mature than their counterparts in other European countries. This may be because Danish students tend to be older than their peers elsewhere in Europe on entry to higher education and they are more likely to have already achieved some of the traditional markers of adulthood, such as living with a partner in independent accommodation and being less financially reliant on their parents. Within our German dataset, there were also relatively few discussions about students' transitions to adulthood. This may have been because of the prevalent Humboldtian concepts such as *Bildung* in students' understanding that considers changes during HE as a part of the lifelong process of self-cultivation.

Moreover, when discussing students in transition, many of our research participants also spoke about its relevance to students' life stage. Many students in our study felt that they were neither children nor 'fully adults'. Indeed, some students characterised this phase as 'a pause' between being a child and an adult. At the same time, students saw this as a period of growth, learning and possibilities, and they emphasised the flexibility that being an HE student brings with regards to time management, career and life planning (Arnett, 2004). Students felt that at university, they are *gradually* being prepared to think for their future selves by delving deeper into subject knowledge on the one hand and explore who they are and how they would position themselves in the world as individuals, on the other. Hence, instead of framing this as a way to delay the inevitable future, students considered that this 'extended period' of exploration allowed them to gain a greater understanding of the 'real world'.

Hence, we find both commonalities and variations across countries, suggesting that the HE funding regime, national traditions of HE, and cultural norms may all affect how the construction of students as people in transition is articulated.

Finally, we also found that the assumptions often underlying this construction – that students are not yet fully formed adults – often tend to construct a deficit discourse around students. Students, for example, felt while they are valued for what they would become and how they would contribute to the labour market and society in future, their current role and contribution to society as students are undervalued. Such ways of viewing students take away the legitimacy of students' voices and undermine the formative processes involved in this transitional phase in students' lives.

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