

Submissions Abstract Book - All Papers (Included Submissions)

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Enthusiastic Learners or Instrumental Customers? Constructions of Students Across Six European Countries

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Abstract: A number of sociological studies of European higher education (HE) have argued that processes of marketisation and neoliberalisation have adversely impacted students' learner identities. However, such claims have been subject to limited empirical scrutiny, particularly outside England. This paper explores how students' learning behaviour was perceived by different social actors across six European countries. It argues that while university staff members and policymakers constructed students as passive and instrumental learners, students themselves placed considerable emphasis on their commitment to and enjoyment of learning. Moreover, we discuss how students' learner identities were mediated by discipline of study, illustrating how students felt that those studying STEM subjects were viewed as being more worthy and serious learners than social science students. Finally, we analyse how social class shaped learner identities in different ways, from impacting how students viewed the purpose of HE to the amount of time they could dedicate to their studies.

Paper: Introduction

A number of sociological analyses of European higher education (HE) have argued that processes of marketisation and neoliberalisation, enacted through various HE policies, have led to students engaging with their studies in a passive and instrumental manner (e.g. Moutsios, 2013). However, such claims have been subject to limited empirical investigation. Moreover, much of the empirical research on the marketisation of HE and its impact on students' engagement with their studies has focused on England, and there is a dearth of comparative studies exploring this topic across different European nations. Are the findings stemming from empirical studies focused on England applicable to other European nations? Are there similarities in how student learning is discussed by policy actors, the media, university staff, and students themselves within and across different national contexts? This paper explores these questions.

Methods

The paper draws on data collected as part of the *Eurostudents* project, a five-year-long (2016-2021) European Research Council-funded project aimed at examining constructions of HE students in six European countries—Spain, Poland, England, Ireland, Denmark, and Germany. It focuses mainly on an analysis of 92 policy texts, 26 interviews with policymakers, 72 interviews with university staff members, and 54 focus groups with university students conducted across the six countries by

members of the *Eurostudents* team. Data was analysed using NVivo and making use of both inductive and deductive approaches.

Findings

A major theme in university staff members' narratives was that, compared to past generations, students had become more instrumental in their approach to HE—both in terms of being more likely to see HE as a path to a job, and being less enthusiastic and engaged learners. In policy actors' narratives, too, students were problematised as being passive and instrumental in their approach to learning and were criticised for not working hard enough.

Such constructions of students contrasted sharply with students' own accounts of how they perceived and engaged with their studies. Although career-related concerns and motivations were prominent for a number of students in our sample, the paper will show how this did not mean that they did not also view and value HE as a context for exploring a subject, learning, and personal development. In addition, students emphasised the hard work and effort they put into their studies, speaking of this in largely positive terms. This research thus joins a growing number of studies which have challenged the dichotomous manner in which students are often discussed within and beyond scholarship: as being either active, passionate, and dedicated learners *or* instrumental, entitled, passive, and interested only in non-academic goals (e.g. Finn et al, 2021). It also reveals strong disconnects between students' own learner identities and the manner in which they are viewed by other social actors.

In addition, the paper explores how, across all six countries, a major theme in student focus groups was that the manner in which one was seen by others—as either hardworking and impressive, or lazy and useless—was shaped by the subject one studied. It was felt that students of STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Mathematics) subjects were viewed by others ('society', the government, family, friends, other students) as being more worthy and serious learners than those studying humanities and social science courses. Existing studies have examined students' relationships to their subjects of study (e.g. Ashwin et al, 2016) and have shown that different disciplines have different pedagogical cultures, which can mediate students' understandings of their learner identities (e.g. Nystrom et al, 2018). However, what has been less studied is how students feel that their subjects of study are perceived by relevant others, and how such perceptions might impact the manner in which they are viewed. This paper thus addresses an important gap, illuminating the extent to which the valorisation of STEM subjects, and an attendant problematisation of Humanities and Social Science subjects—through HE policies, media representations, and strongly entrenched societal stereotypes attached to different disciplines—can impact the experience of being a student.

Finally, the paper discusses how social class inflected students' learner identities. It shows how, especially in England and Ireland, the extent to which being a learner appeared central to students' identities correlated with social class. Furthermore, across all six countries, not all students had the luxury of being able to construct themselves as dedicated only to their studies, because of the way in which material pressures informed their day-to-day lives.

Throughout, the paper will highlight patterns of national and inter-institutional variations that emerged from the analysis, as well as possible reasons for these patterns.

References:

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