

## Symposia Abstract Book - Main Abstract Book with Submissions and Programme (All Symposia)

Constructing the Higher Education Student: Perspectives from across Europe ( 0115 )

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**Chair:** [Rachel Brooks](#)<sup>1</sup>

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**Rationale Text:** There are currently over 35 million students within Europe and yet, to date, we have no clear understanding of the extent to which understandings of ‘the student’ are shared. A central aim of this symposium is thus to investigate how the contemporary higher education (HE) student is conceptualised and the extent to which this differs both within nation-states and across them. This is significant in terms of implicit (and sometimes explicit) assumptions that are made about common understandings of ‘the student’ across Europe – underpinning, for example, initiatives to increase cross-border educational mobility and the wider development of a European Higher Education Area. It is also significant in relation to exploring the extent to which understandings are shared within a single nation and, particularly, the degree to which there is congruence between the ways in which students are conceptualised within policy texts and by policymakers, and the understandings of other key social actors such as the media, higher education staff and students themselves. Should nations be understood as ‘coherent educational entities’ – or is there, instead, a high degree of contestation within nation-states about what it means to be a contemporary HE student? The papers that make up this symposium draw on data that were collected as part of a European Research Council-funded project (‘Eurostudents’) that explores how higher education students are understood across Europe. To facilitate cross-national comparisons, data were collected from six countries – Denmark, England, Germany, Ireland, Poland and Spain – chosen to provide diversity in terms of relationship to the European Union, welfare regime, mechanisms of funding HE, and the type of financial support offered to students. To compare the perspectives of different social actors within the same nation, we analysed how students were understood in policy and the media, and by higher education institutions and students themselves. In total, across the six nations, we analysed: 92 policy texts; 1159 newspaper articles; seven films and TV shows; and 180 higher education institution websites. We also conducted: 26 interviews with policymakers; 72 interviews with HE staff members; and 54 student focus groups. In this symposium, we consider some of the key ways in which students were understood across the six nations, and by the various social actors. Each paper discusses a different construction, relating it to relevant conceptual debates within the sociology of higher education, as well as to broader theorisations of the European higher education space.

**Linked Submissions:**

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Higher Education Students as People in Transition? Evidence From a Six-Nation European Comparative Study ( 0116 )

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

**Paper 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.

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Conceptualising Students as Stressed and Anxious ( 0149 )

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

**Paper Abstract:** The mental wellbeing of higher education (HE) students has become of increasing interest to policymakers and HE practitioners over recent years. There has been concern at the high prevalence of stress, and anxiety and mental ill health amongst HE students as well as at the rate of increase of such problems. In an attempt to explain these patterns, some researchers have made use of the concept of 'cognitive availability' – asserting that the increased disclosure of mental health concerns is due to increased societal openness about such issues and the 'availability' of these frameworks for understanding particular experiences. In this paper we examine these claims, drawing on data from a five-year cross-national project intended to explore understandings of the HE student – conducted in Denmark, England, Germany, Ireland, Poland and Spain.

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Enthusiastic Learners or Instrumental Customers? Constructions of Students Across Six European Countries ( 0268 )

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

**Paper 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.

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Constructions of Higher Education Students as Threat and Object of Criticisms Across Six European Countries ( 0270 )

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

**Paper 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.

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