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## **Higher education timescapes: temporal understandings of students and learning**

Rachel Brooks

University of Surrey, Guildford, United Kingdom

### **Research Domains**

International contexts and perspectives (ICP)

### **Abstract**

This paper draws on data from six European countries (Denmark, England, Germany, Ireland, Poland and Spain) to explore the higher education timescapes inhabited by students. Despite arguments that degree-level study has become increasingly similar across Europe – because of global pressures and also specific initiatives such as the Bologna Process and the creation of a European Higher Education Area – it shows how such timescapes differed in important ways, largely by nation. These differences are then explained in terms of: the distinctive traditions of higher education still evident across the continent; the particular mechanisms through which degrees are funded; and the nature of recent national-level policy activity. The analysis thus speaks to debates about Europeanisation, as well as how we theorise the relationship between time and place.

### **Full paper**

#### Background

Sociological analyses of time have often emphasised the importance of schooling in inculcating particular tempos and orientations to time-keeping required in later life. More recently, scholars have focussed on the accelerated nature of ‘university time’ as part of a more general critique of the impact of neo-liberalism on the higher education (HE) sector. Scholars have noted, for example, the

increased pace with which academic staff are expected to work (Guzmán-Valenzuela and Barnett, 2013) and the associated rise of 'distressed' time, as well as the disparagement of time frames of longer duration (that are often required for book-writing and other research-related pursuits) (Barnett, 2008). Researchers have also identified the shame that can arise from a perceived failure to meet new time imperatives (Shahjahan, 2019). Although the majority of work in this area has focussed on staff rather than students, a small number of studies, conducted in countries where students have historically had some discretion about the length of their studies, have shown how students have come under increased pressure to complete their degrees at a faster pace (Nielsen and Sarauw, 2017; Ulriksen and Nejrup, 2020).

While the studies cited above provide a useful insight into the temporalities of the contemporary university, they have typically confined themselves to one particular nation-state and, in some cases, a single HE institution. As noted above, they have also tended to focus on the perspectives of HE staff rather than students. In contrast, we adopt a comparative lens, by exploring how student temporalities are played out across six European countries. In doing so, we draw on the concept of 'timescape' as articulated by Adam (2004), to emphasise the way in which time is inextricably linked to space, context and matter, and acknowledge that 'time is irrecoverably bound up with the spatial constitution of society (and vice versa)' (May and Thrift, 2001, p.3).

## Methods

We draw on data that were collected as part of a five-year European Research Council-funded project that explores the ways in which HE students are understood across Europe, paying particular attention to similarities and differences between and within nation-states. Fieldwork was conducted during 2017-19 in 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. The following methods were used across the six countries: analysis of 92 HE policy documents; interviews with 26 'policy influencers' (including government officials and representatives of national students' unions,, graduate employers'

organisations, and bodies that represent university leaders); interviews with 72 members of HE staff; and 54 focus groups with (a total of 295) undergraduate students.

## Findings

Our data suggest that there are important differences, by nation-state, in the ways in which students and their relationship to time is understood. Indeed, we distinguish between three main timescapes. The first, evident in Denmark and Germany, is characterised by a belief, among students, that student timescapes should, and have been in the past, flexible and loosely-bounded – but that this distinct ‘university time’ is now under threat because of very different ‘official’ temporalities that have recently been introduced by policymakers. This is then contrasted with student perspectives in England, Ireland and Spain. Here, ‘university time’ is also viewed as distinctive, but students do not assert the need to determine the pace and duration of studies themselves and draw relatively tight boundaries around what constitutes ‘university time’. In their narratives, contestation of ‘official’ HE temporalities are largely absent. Finally, we examine student timescapes in Poland. Again, students see ‘university time’ as distinct. In common with their peers in England, Ireland and Spain, there is no assertion of the right of a student to determine the pace and duration of their own studies but, unlike the students in these nations, and in common with those in Denmark and Germany, the boundaries around ‘university time’ are expansive.

We explain these different timescapes in relation to: distinctive traditions of HE still evident across the continent; the specific mechanisms through which degrees are funded; and the nature of recent national-level policy activity. In doing so, our analysis contributes to wider debates about globalisation and European homogenisation, showing that, with respect to student timescapes at least, some important variation remains evident. It also speaks to broader debates about the relationship between time and place, suggesting that the nation-state continues to exert some influence in how a key social group – HE students – conceptualise time.

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