

Background and approach

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. Thus, a central aim of this paper is to investigate how the contemporary higher education 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 institutions and students themselves.

The paper is based on a critical review of the extant literature on higher education students across Europe, drawn from the disciplines of education, sociology, politics, social policy, geography and youth studies. It analyses qualitative and quantitative research, and both comparative and single-nation studies.

Key arguments

The paper argues, on the basis of our current knowledge, that, despite assumptions on the part of European policymakers that there are now large commonalities in the experiences of students across Europe (evident in pronouncements about Erasmus mobility and the operations of the European Higher Education Area), significant differences exist both between countries and, by social actor, within individual countries. Evidence is drawn from four main areas.

Students as consumers. Extant literature suggests that the extent to which the higher education student is understood as a consumer differs by welfare regime, with this construction being significantly stronger in nations with stronger neo-liberal norms. However, even in countries such as England, with a strong neo-liberal orientation, there is evidence that this understanding is not shared by all social actors. In English policy texts, students are clearly constructed as consumers. Indeed, the significant increase in fees in 2012 was predicated upon the assumption that prospective students will: see a degree as a private investment (rather than a public good); be prepared to accumulate significant debt in order to acquire it; and actively ‘shop around’, comparing institutions and courses to secure the ‘best’ possible education (BIS, 2011). However, there is less consensus about whether or not students have taken up this consumer identity. For example, Nordensvärd (2011) suggests that even within a neo-liberal consumer framework, students are required to assume roles beyond that of the consumer – as a ‘manager’ of their own life, future and CV, and as a ‘commodity’, which is both invested in and managed by the state. Furthermore, there is compelling evidence to suggest that students do not act as the rational economic actors assumed by most policy texts (Dodds, 2011; Tomlinson 2015).

Students as political actors. Research has also focused on the extent to which students' roles as political actors have changed over recent years. In some European nations, such as Germany, students are understood as influential agents who have been successful, for example, in bringing about the withdrawal of tuition fees (Muller and Rischke, 2014). In contrast, in other nations, students' political engagement has been negatively affected by the growth of consumerist agendas, with fewer spaces available in which to take collective action and effect change (Brooks et al., 2015; Rochford, 2014). Indeed, Klemenčič (2014) has argued that the efficacy of national students' union movements in bringing about change varies significantly according to dominant cultural norms.

Students as family members. The paper also considers variation (primarily between European nations rather than within them) in relation to the extent to which understandings of the student are linked to transitions to adulthood. For example, while in much of Europe it is common to remain living in the parental home for higher education, in the UK, for the middle classes at least, moving out of the family home for higher education is often seen as an important step towards taking on a more independent, adult identity. Similar differences also emerge with respect to parenthood. Different types of financial support by nation-state for students in general, and those who become parents during their studies in particular, can also affect understandings of what it means to be a student. Research in Denmark, for example, has indicated that some students actively choose to start a family during their degree, because of the relatively high level of financial and practical support available (Brooks, 2013). In other nations, however, student and parental identities are much harder to combine (ibid.).

Students as workers. Finally, the paper explores the extent to which our understandings of the higher education student are bound up with issues to do with employment and labour force participation. There are differences, by nation state, both in the extent to which higher education students are seen, within policy texts, as primarily ‘future workers’. However, there are also significant differences in the extent to which a student identity becomes enmeshed with a ‘contemporary worker’ identity – both in countries where many students study alongside their degree, to be able to afford tuition fees and the cost of living, and also in nations in which it is common to interrupt one’s degree in order to engage in a period of paid work (Darmody and Smyth, 2008).

Implications

The considerable variation in understandings of the student, evident both across and within nation-states, extends academic work that has, to date, shown how understandings can differ by type of higher education institution (Reay et al., 2010), but not yet explored in any systematic way differences between (and also within) nation-states. It also raises important questions for policymakers and higher education leaders, within the European Commission and national governments, about the extent to which we can assume commonalities of understanding across the European Higher Education Area.

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