

# Constructing the Higher Education Student

Comparisons across and within European countries

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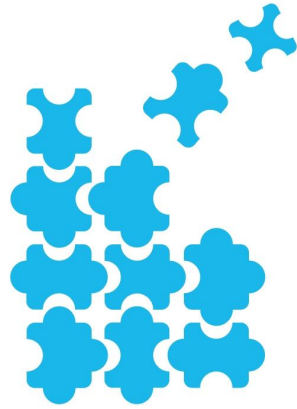


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**EUROPEAN**  
Higher Education Area



The „European Higher Education Area“ consist of the 27 states of the European Union and 20 of its neighbouring countries. It covers the whole of Europe and large parts of Asia.

The European Higher Education Area (EHEA) is the result of the political will of 48 countries which, step by step during the last eighteen years, built an area using common tools. These 48 countries implement reforms on higher education on the basis of common key values – such as freedom of expression, autonomy for institutions, independent students unions, academic freedom, free movement of students and staff.

Through this process, countries, institutions and stakeholders of the European area continuously adapt their higher education systems making them more compatible and strengthening their quality assurance mechanisms. (www.ehea.info, 2016)

# Research questions

How are understandings of the HE student produced, shaped & disseminated by (i) policymakers, (ii) the media and (iii) HE institutions?

To what extent do these understandings differ within & across European nations?

How do students of different national & social backgrounds understand the role of the HE student?

To what extent are their understandings consonant with those produced, shaped & disseminated by policymakers, the media & HE institutions?

# Six-nation comparative study

Data collection in six European countries

Denmark, England, Germany, Ireland, Poland & Spain

Chosen to provide diversity in:

Welfare regime

Date of accession to European Union

Level of tuition fees

Nature of student support system

# Four strands of data collection

## 1. Policy constructions

Policy texts

Interviews with policymakers

## 2. Media representations

National newspapers

Popular films or drama-based TV programmes

## 3. Institutional perspectives

Institutional websites

Interviews with staff members

## 4. Student understandings

Focus groups

# Constructions of students

Consumers

Workers

Family members

Political actors

Degree of variation across and within European nations?

Impact on identity as learners?



# Students as consumers



First emerged in US in 1970s

Prevalence of consumer discourse differentiated by nation-state

Differences among social actors in same country

E.g. media – alternative constructions

E.g. students – even in UK considerable variety (Tomlinson, 2016); different capacities to be ‘active choosers’

And differences by institution (less prevalent in high status universities)



# Students as workers



Paid work increasingly common across Europe

More likely to be taken up by students with no family HE experience and/or who are older

Considerable variation in:

- employment rates

- significance of 'worker identity' (e.g. Estonia)

- national discourses: investment in 'workers-in-the-making'

Impact on academic progress and wider aspects of student life

# Students as family members

Increasing importance of family support – process of ‘Southern Europeanisation’ (Antonucci, 2016)

Financial support & housing

But enduring differences by welfare regime

Also variation re dependent children

E.g. Greece & Italy vs Norway & Sweden

Impact on student identities (but likely to differ in relation to national norms)



# Students as political actors



Foregrounded only in 1960s

In 21<sup>st</sup> century, more political activity on part of students across Europe

Shift in student representation

But differences by nation

- In representation

- In responses to student politics

And by social characteristics

Impact of increased diversity?

# Deconstructing the 'European student'

Considerable diversity in way students live their lives

Related to national policy and norms – processes of 'recontextualisation'

Implications for 'learner identities'

E.g. competing demands of paid work and family (relative to normative constructions)

Difference by social characteristics

Raises questions about assumed homogeneity within European policy

But little research on students' own understandings of role

To be continued.....

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