

European higher education students: contested constructions

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Increasingly similar students?

- Neo-liberalisation and marketisation have impacted higher education systems across the world
- Learning has been commodified (Kenway, 1992)
- Students increasingly positioned as instrumental, employment-focused consumers, as a result of:
 - Specific policy technologies (e.g. high fees) (Kwiek, 2018)
 - Policy discourses (Lomer, 2017)
 - Redefinition of education as means to various non-educational ends (Williams, 2013)

Molesworth et al. (2009): Inculcation of a consumer identity (in UK) has brought about a more passive approach to learning, in which students place much more emphasis on their rights rather than their responsibilities, and on *having* a degree rather than *being* a learner

Increasingly similar European students?

- Assumptions implicit in Erasmus scheme
- Bologna Process and European Higher Education Area
 - Aim to 'reverse engineer' an Anglo-American model across Europe (Slaughter and Cantwell, 2012)?
- Increasingly similar systems?
- Impact of policy on student subjectivities
- Emergence of students as consumers as result of of Bologna reforms?
 - Bologna Process (specifically introduction of corporate management): 'disintegrating the academic community, subduing the staff as a workforce under surveillance and positioning students as consumers' (Moutsios, 2013: 40)



But some notes of caution....

- Policies not always translated simply into student subjectivities (Nielsen, 2011)
- European higher education policy sometimes acts primarily as a 'cultural script' (Capano and Piattoni, 2011)
- Nations not always 'coherent educational entities' (Philips and Schweisfurth, 2014), e.g.
 - Institutional differentiation within single nations (Reay et al. 2010)
 - Different perspectives between groups of students (Ball et al., 2002)

The Eurostudents project (2016-22)

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

- Data collection in six nations (Denmark, England, Germany, Ireland, Poland and Spain)
- Three HEIs per nation
- Three focus groups per HEI (54 focus groups; 295 students)
 - Included plasticine modelling



Dominant constructions of students

Similarities across all six nations

Learners

Hard workers

Jugglers

Community members

Cross-national differences

Depressed, disappointed and
critical

Consumers

Just like anyone else

Differences by institution

Students as learners



I've been really surprised by how much I feel like my subject has come to like define me and how much genuinely of what I talk about is about my subject and things that I've discovered that I'm really interested in, and to be proud of that ... (England, HEI 2)

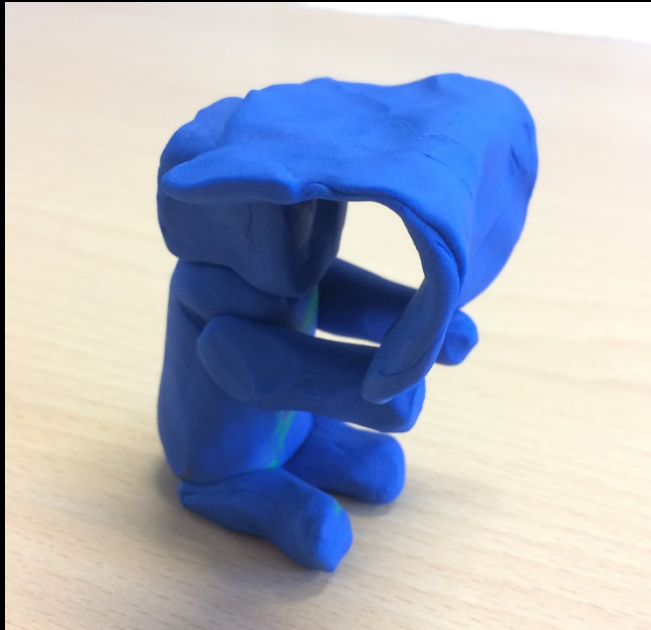
And mine is this little fellow with a big brain ... you get a lot of knowledge all the time and you're, sometimes your brain is bigger than your face and you can't control it! (Denmark, HEI 1)



Students as learners

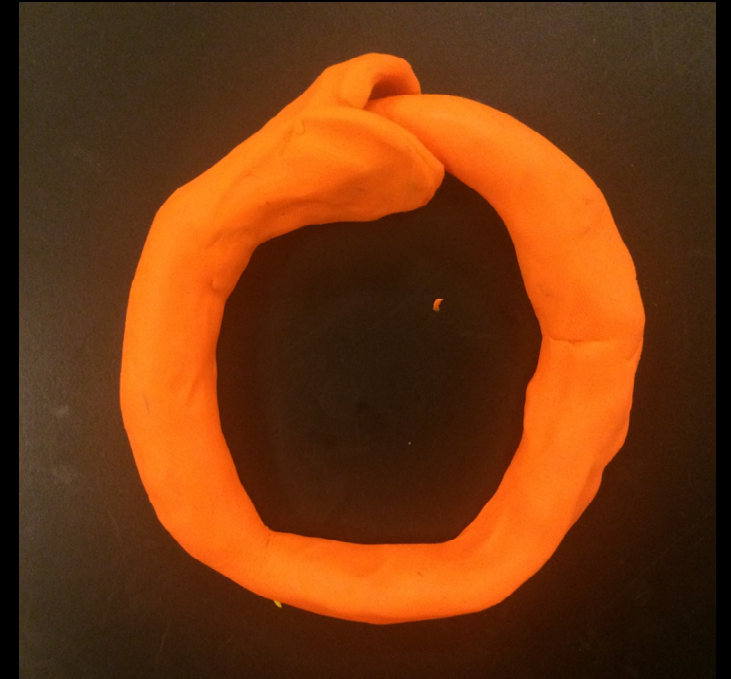
- Lack of evidence of instrumentality, even in countries with more marketised systems
- Contrast with ways in which student seen by policymakers (and, to a lesser extent, staff)
- Also with common portrayals in the literature, as first and foremost consumers aware of their rights (Kwiek, 2018; Molesworth et al., 2009; Moutsios, 2013)
- See value in knowledge and truth even in supposedly 'post-truth' times
 - cf. Williams' (2013) argument about the liberal purpose of HE having been 'squeezed out'
- Positive view of higher education – primarily valued for its impact on their intellect and view of the world

Students as hard workers



That's me with a laptop! That's basically what I do all day, that's how I fall asleep, that's how I wake up! Basically I study, I programme, that's it, there's not much else and there's not much time for anything else. (Ireland, HEI 2)

It's a snake eating its own tail ... even though I'm moving forward, I might be learning more, but then I realise I still need to learn more, I still need to improve. (Denmark, HEI 3)



Students as hard workers

- Emphasis on hard work suggests students do not see degree as a consumer product that can be bought (cf. Nixon et al., 2018)
- No attempt to position selves as 'effortless achievers' as means of underlining 'authentic intelligence' (cf. Jackson and Nystrom, 2015)
- Hard work (alongside aspiration) as key moral imperative of austere meritocracy (Mendick et al., 2018)
- Resonance with higher education policy:
 - 'Hard working' students addressed explicitly by UK politicians (Brooks, 2018)
 - Critique in Denmark of 'lazy' students who progress through their studies 'too slowly' (Ulriksen, 2016)
 - Aim of Bologna reforms as played out in many countries to increase 'efficiency' with which students move through degree programmes (e.g. restructuring of degrees in Germany and Spain)

Students as depressed, disappointed and critical – Spain

I see myself alone in the middle of nothing, I have no idea about anything nor how I am going to finish what I'm studying nor what to do afterwards nor what I like. (Spain, HEI 1)



I have made a kind of dead figure, like a skull, I don't know if you can see it, but the face is a skull and it is dragging itself along in desperation because it's trying to arrive and it can't, and it has wings but they are drooping. (Spain, HEI 3)

Students as depressed, disappointed and critical - Spain

Possible explanatory factors:

- High rate of youth unemployment in Spain



I have made a briefcase which symbolizes work, and a 'tick', which represents good qualifications and grades. All is encircled but there's narrow opening. So, I see myself as one of the thousands of young Spanish people who work, who study, who get good results, but in the end we are all inside the same circle and there is only a narrow exit, so it is a competition, more, more and more, always more, it's never enough. (Spain, HEI 3)

Students as depressed, disappointed and critical - Spain

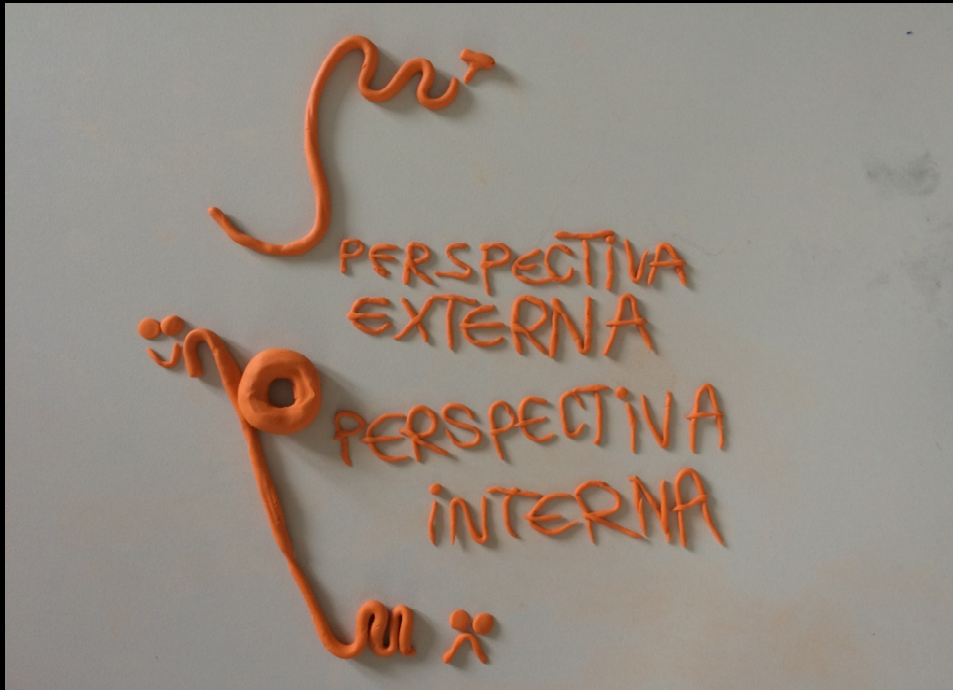
Possible explanatory factors:

- High rate of youth unemployment in Spain
- Combination of perceived poor pedagogy and relatively high fees



Well, mine is like a sad and frustrated doll, because I believe they have to change the teaching methodology that they use in class, it has to be more dynamic, different, not the typical one of coming here, sitting down ... and listening to all they tell you.
(Spain, HEI 3)

Students as consumers - Spain



supposedly, you ascend [to the top of the slide] because you learn, [but] when you get to the top you have a series of problems, [and] they find a way to make you finish up as a consumer product for the system. (Spain, HEI 3)

I feel about myself as if I was what I have tried to make, a cardboard box to show that I feel like a piece of merchandise in this educational situation, which in the end is more of an attempt at the commercialisation of education than learning. (Spain, HEI 1)



Students as consumers - Spain

- Interesting paradox as:
 - Marketisation more firmly established in other countries (esp. England)
 - Students not addressed as consumers in Spanish university websites (Lazetic, 2018)
 - Spanish policymakers were strongly opposed to consumerist discourse
 - Marketisation discussed least in media in Spain (most in England)
- Possible explanatory factors:
 - Resistance to and heightened sensitivity about marketisation as reforms are relatively new (cf. England)
 - Aware of trajectories elsewhere in Europe
 - Looking for explanation for their poor experiences (other students in fee-paying countries much happier with teaching)

Students as just like anyone else - Poland



I've made a regular person because I think that every student is just a regular person and the fact that you are attending university doesn't make you special in any way. That's it. (Poland, HEI 2)

I have formed a person because I see myself as an outgoing person and someone that needs other people to feel good and I am always at the centre of attention. (Poland, HEI 2)



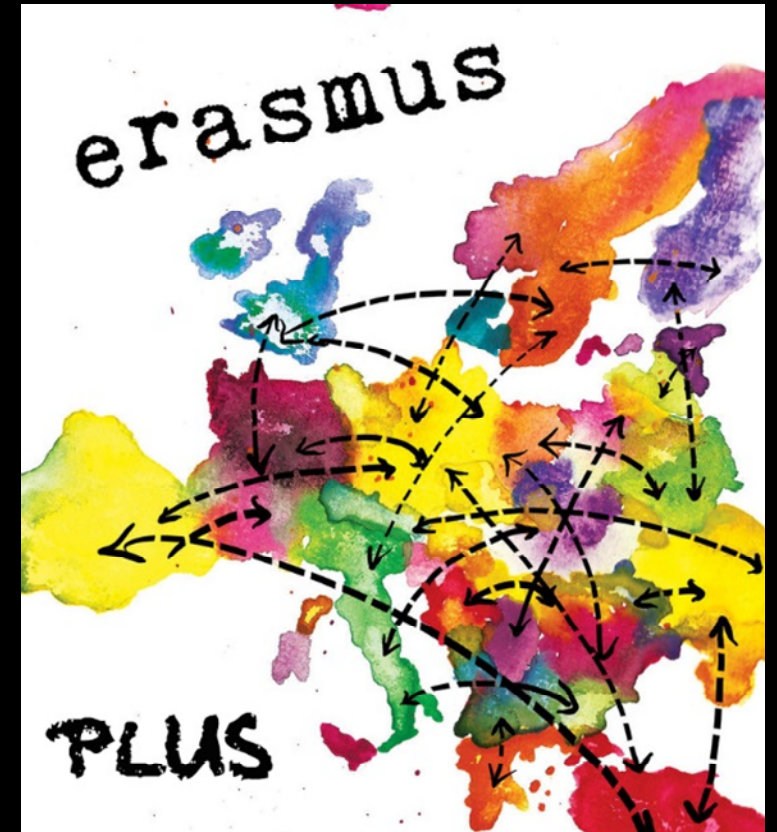
Students as just like anyone else - Poland

- Possible explanatory factors:
 - Very sharp increase in HE participation rate – subsequent impact on perceptions and discourse?
 - Common narrative that ‘everyone’ is now going to higher education, although participation rate is not very different from other European countries
 - Egalitarian Communist legacy
 - Strength of worker identity (similar to Beerkens et al.’s (2011) analysis of Estonian students)
 - Institutional assumptions: absence of social spaces (but cause and effect hard to determine)



Conclusion: increasingly similar students?

- Some commonalities: learners and hard workers
- But also important points of difference by nation:
 - Negative conceptualization: only in Spain
 - Student as consumer: only in Spain
 - Student as insignificant social category: only in Poland
- Raise questions about assumptions about European homogenisation, and reconfiguration of European HE around an Anglo-American model
- Disconnect between policy and student understandings



Conclusion: students as consumers?

- Ambivalence
 - Influence of neo-liberal imperatives: 'hard work' as moral position
 - But in tension with this: non-instrumental 'love of learning'
- Consumer as explicit identity only evident in Spain
 - Poor relationship with *degree* of marketisation and/or market discourse (cf. England, Denmark)
 - Importance of local economic and political context
 - Particular stage of marketisation?
- Student understandings cannot simply be read off policy pronouncements

To find out more.....

Project website: www.eurostudents.net

Twitter: @eurostudents_



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