




EUROSTUDENTS PROJECT: 2016-2021

Higher education students' aspirations for their post- university lives

Evidence from six European nations

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Background

Assumptions that appear to underpin many HE reforms in European countries

- Obliging students to move more quickly through their studies;
- Encouraging employers to have a more direct input into curricula;
- Tying tax data to specific degree programmes;
- Incentivising students to take up places on STEM courses;
- Reducing the number of places available in subject areas that are deemed not to serve well the labour market (see, for example, Degn and Sørensen, 2015; OfS, 2020; Sarauw and Madsen, 2020, Walsh and Loxley, 2015).

Moreover, students have also often been positioned discursively as first-and-foremost 'future workers' within many European HE policy documents (Brooks, 2018b; 2019).

The academic literature

Focussed on aspirations for employment

- Transitions into the labour market strongly patterned by social characteristics (Bathmaker et al., 2016; Hurst 2018; Ingram & Allen, 2019)

Debates about the extent to which HE systems across Europe have converged (Moutsios, 2013; Sarauw and Madsen, 2020)

National differences endure and the European space remains differentiated (e.g. Brooks, 2019a, 2019)

- Power et al. (2013): significant differences between graduates from an elite HE institution (HEI) in the UK and France



This
presentation

Contributes to the discussion on HE students' aspirations

- Examining the hopes of young people enrolled in degree-level study across Europe

Considers what students anticipated their HE would lead to and discusses the extent to which such aspirations were similar across different national contexts, institutions and subjects of study

Methodology

Data collected in 2017-18
focus group discussions

295 students in six European countries
(Denmark, England, Germany, Ireland, Poland
and Spain)

- Three HEIs in each country
- Domestic, undergraduate students: different disciplines and a variety of socio-economic backgrounds
- Open-ended questions about a variety of topics & their views about some common constructions.
- Plasticine models to represent identities: self-perception and others' views

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Varied
aspirations:
individual
and
collective

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*In my opinion, it's always worth having a diploma. It **enables our development**, not only having this diploma but moving on, going further.*

(Polish focus group)

*...I wanted to **further my knowledge** on certain subjects and like I wanted to see the world with what I was interested in...*

(Irish focus group)

*I see university [...] as a **process of cultivation and of personal improvement**, and that is what I wanted to come and do here, to learn...*

(Spanish focus group)

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Varied aspirations: *National variations*

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*Somehow it's all about progress ... it's about advancing different subjects in order to widen our knowledge or to refute old findings and thus always ... Yes it's basically about getting closer to 'true knowledge', perhaps to **make work easier for people in the way that we build new things and how you design new things**, so by planning roads in such a way that people are happier and that **they are more in harmony with nature, that the economy runs more smoothly.***

(German focus group)

We're such a small country, we have to do well ... we're such a small people [population] so we have to do better because there are so many people around the world who do better than us. So we have to work even harder to compete with them.

(Danish focus group)

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Centrality of aspirations for employment

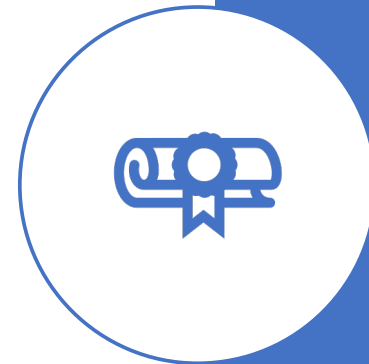
- University degree as a crucial step towards future employment
 - Members of society saw them as 'successful' and 'accomplished'
 - Success in this context was seen as having 'better employment prospects'



Staircase



Compass

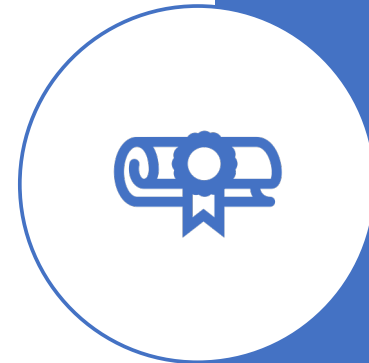


Centrality of aspirations for employment: differences

*I saw it very clearly, I finished my A levels and when I finished, I knew I would like to go on to study journalism...so I decided that **the best way to do the degree and to work as a journalist or in the media, had to be via university** (Spanish focus group)*

*I just wanted to go to university, partially because I didn't know **what I wanted to do**, like career-wise, so I thought it would like help out a bit. And I was also, I did sociology at A Level and I enjoyed it, so I just kept, wanted to carry on. (English focus group)*

*[W]hat [is] taught nowadays is that you need a degree to get most jobs, **anything other than low paying jobs** you know, as far I was educated anyway when I was at school. (Irish focus group)*





Impact of institution on confidence at realising aspirations

- A common belief that the ability to realise one's aspirations was closely linked to the institution attended
 - Employment outcomes would be mediated by societal assumptions about the status of their institution
 - Society (including employers) regarded graduates from higher-status universities as 'more knowledgeable', 'super-intelligent', and 'superior'



Impact of institution: differences by country

Played out differently, depending on the structure of the national HE system.

- In Spain, private university vs public university
- In Denmark: pedagogical approaches; applied sciences vs traditional universities

*Students here from [this institution] aren't the most well seen upon students in society, **some people think that we are not specialised enough** [...] that we can't be used for anything [...] lots of people tend to think that **we're just getting educated to go out to be [...] unemployed.***



Impact of institution: differences by country

- In England and Ireland: differentiation between older and newer institutions.

*... it has the best like teaching, it has the best staff, and [yet] **we constantly need to prove ourselves***

(Irish focus group, mid ranking HEI)

*I feel like **they're more willing to pay them** [students from older, more prestigious universities] a certain amount compared to students from other unis ... **even though we've learnt the same thing** and it's [meant to be] all about your abilities of what you can bring.*

(English focus group, mid-ranking HEI)



The relevance of discipline

Assumptions about the subject of study;
many spoke about

- A lack of public understanding of ‘non-STEM’ subjects
- Public assumptions that arts or social science degree led to difficulty in finding a job on graduation

The relevance of discipline

*I personally get the impression that other people, well, when I say: “Hey, I'm studying politics and sociology!”, they initially have absolutely no idea **what I'm doing and what I'll do at the end of it all.***

(German focus group)



*I have made a stone, because sometimes I feel that the people studying **Political Sciences**, not just me; everybody, it's as if they didn't even know that the course existed. It's like a stone that's lying there and nobody sees it because the **people don't know that it exists, nor what use it has...***

(Spanish focus group)



The relevance of discipline: subject hierarchy

*If you study **medicine** they see you as a **clever girl** who studies a lot, who will be a **good medic**, who will **contribute a lot**, who will **cure people**.*

(Spanish focus group)

*[People say] 'I'm sure that's hard work too,' but [they think] **it's not the same as a super-challenging course** with lots of ... I mean, 'It's really hard work and it's great, but **it doesn't have the same standing**.*

(German focus group)



The relevance of discipline: subject hierarchy

*I think that **the purpose of university education in our society has adopted a purely economic... economic objective because we're seeing that the humanities subjects are being scaled down and funding for the humanities has been drastically cut whereas the STEM subjects are being pushed hard and so **only subjects that are economically relevant, important for a society, whilst other subjects aren't.*****

(German focus group)




Final remarks

- Commonality across Europe when examining students' aspirations for their lives post-graduation.
 - HE would enable intellectual and personal development
 - HE would facilitate a smooth transition into the labour market (foregrounded): this corresponds to the dominant emphasis within policy and research
- This supports the argument that important commonalities are now evident across Europe (Cantwell and Slaughter, 2010; Moutsios, 2013).



Final
remarks

- Data indicate how aspirations were also sometimes shaped by particular national contexts:
 - The particular concern about labour market outcomes in the Spanish data
 - A greater emphasis placed on collective (rather than individual) aspirations, apparent in Denmark, Germany and Poland
 - Institutional effect



Final
remarks

- For most participants, a degree was significantly more than a qualification for the labour market
 - evident in the range of non-job-related aspirations
 - cogent critique of the economic focus of government policy and overly-narrow societal views
- A more expansive understanding of HE than that which is implicit and often explicit in the pronouncements of policymakers across Europe.

To find out more about the project...

Website: www.eurostudents.net



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Thank you!

