



# ASSERTING THE NATION

The dominance of national narratives in policy influencers' constructions of higher education students

# BACKGROUND

## European Higher Education Area (2010)

- Attempt to standardise many aspects of HE & ensure competitiveness of Europe within a global market
- Foregrounding of values traditionally associated with Anglo-American model of HE (Slaughter & Cantwell, 2012)

Convergence among policy actors across Europe in relation to how they see HE students?

Significant in terms of assessing extent to which European HE is homogenising, but also because of impact of policy actors' views

Argument of presentation: significance of distinct 'national narratives'

# NATIONAL NARRATIVES

Within education: emphasis on textbooks & curricula (e.g. Kotowski, 2013)

Articulate with a larger body of work across arts & social sciences e.g.

- Important parts of projects to create & justify new forms of governing (Anderson, 2006; Della Salla, 2016)
- Nations need to be *imagined* as most people will never meet fellow citizens (Anderson, 2006)
- Political myths important for legitimising forms of governance, & establishing & reinforcing community bonds (Bouchard, 2013; Flood, 1996)
- Means of securing 'ontological security' for nation-state (Della Salla, 2016)

# NATIONAL NARRATIVES

Key features (e.g. Anderson, 2006; Bouchard, 2013; Della Salla, 2016):

- Claims to exceptionalism
- Emphasis on transformational processes
- Articulation of a utopian future
- Delineation of the 'Other'
- May be informed by or reinforce wider geopolitical inequalities
- Often backward-looking but not necessarily fixed

Increasingly anachronistic in globalized world?

- Little evidence that supranational organisations have had success in developing competing narratives of own (Della Salla, 2016; Kolvraa, 2016)

# METHODS

Eurostudents project (2016-21): how students are constructed across Europe

Data collection in Denmark, England, Germany, Ireland, Poland & Spain

Multi-strand project: 54 student focus groups (295 students); interviews with 72 HE staff; analysis of 180 HEI websites; 1159 newspaper articles; TV shows/films; and 92 policy documents

Here focusing primarily on interviews with policy actors (26)

- In each country, representative of: government; national students' union; graduate employers' organisation; university leaders' organisation
- Series of increasingly specific questions; response to policy extract



# UNDERSTANDING STUDENTS THROUGH NATIONAL NARRATIVES

Employment-focused

Politically apathetic

(Interested in only academic qualifications)



# EMPLOYMENT-FOCUSSED

Common theme across data in all six countries was that students had become more employment-focused

'Future worker' common trope in policy documents (Brooks, 2019)

But typically discussed & explained in national terms, often with reference to very specific national histories

# EMPLOYMENT-FOCUSED: IRELAND

Ireland's very big on employment [within higher education policy] you see because we've had such a long history of unemployment and under-employment, **it's deep in the policy DNA here, in a way it mightn't be in other countries.** Like we are all about how do we get jobs, how do we keep jobs, how do we fill jobs! How do we ... that's our central core mission. (Civil servant, responsible for HE policy)

We actually take great pride in our system, you know, education generally in Ireland is held in very high regard for as much a part of our history and culture as anything else. I mean we're sort of, **we were sort of colonised, very poor country, and education was, education and religion was the way out of it.** .... And that value, that cultural value we put on education in this country is really hard-wired. (Representative of employers' organisation)

... the expectations that the education system is the solution to ... success and happiness are very high, and **that's been deeply engrained in the Irish psyche for 150 years, I mean since, since sort of the famine,** when farming was seen as the least good option. (Representative of university leaders' organisation)



# EMPLOYMENT-FOCUSSED: POLAND

I think that the Polish student population .... are markedly different than their counterparts in, in Western Europe where the markets, you know, this whole capitalism thing has been for hundred ... for decades! And [in Western countries] ... this attitude towards finding your ... your success on the labour market perhaps is not as pronounced. (Civil servant, responsible for HE policy)

In my opinion, the demands [of students] are too high. It might be **because of the opening of the Polish borders after the fall of the Communist regime**. When I was a student in the 1990s, it was not so easy to cross the border as a student and to spend one year or six months abroad. Now it is, and the living standard is of course much higher in Western countries, and being able to look at a better life – it might be the reason why students have become more demanding. But in my opinion this is unfortunate; it is a bad way, really – because it takes time to learn how to work. (Government minister)

# POLITICALLY APATHETIC

Many (although not all) policy interviewees commented on what they perceived to be lower levels of political activity among students

Sometimes qualified – with respect to formal politics only

Accords with broader literature on political participation in Europe

- Young people less likely to engage in formal politics than in past
- Not because of uninterest, but because are critical of ways in which formal politics is practised (Pilkington and Pollock, 2015; Stoker et al., 2017)

Despite common patterns, interviewees drew on *national* explanations

# POLITICALLY APATHETIC: SPAIN

I think the social movement is less important than in previous times. For example, in the 1970s the social movement of university students was very important – they were **very much involved in the political transformation from a dictatorship to democratic society** – but nowadays they are much more calm and passive concerning cultural and even political features of everyday life. It is [significant] that they are not playing an active role in changing society. (Representative of national union)

Like the fact that, you know, all [students'] parents were born under the dictatorship and they have to work hard and ... and now everything is easy, we **have been born in democracy and of course that's so much better. But somehow we take it for granted** ... (Representative of university leaders' organisation)

# POLITICALLY APATHETIC: POLAND

National students' union representative: students rarely take action in relation to national issues

Explained largely in terms of Communist legacy:

One of the main ideas [in the Communist period, which has endured] was to [focus] on the university and don't be political ... this was the way that they avoided political problems'

# DISCUSSION

Despite steps to establish EHEA, dominance of national frames of reference (in explaining change) is striking

Not identical to 'national myths' but share various features e.g. uniqueness

Absence of narratives about transnational & global influences

- May serve to obscure such influences, which may have significant influence in lives of individuals
- Underplays commonalities across nation-states – implications for cross-national collaboration & working?

Corrective to assertions about death of the nation-state (Moes, 2009)

# DISCUSSION

Importance of boundary-making and identification of 'Others', e.g.

- Negative comparisons of own country to other nation state in Poland (& Spain to a lesser extent)
- More positive comparisons made by Irish & German interviewees

Implicit & sometimes explicit is sense of an 'Other' against which national understandings of students are constructed

Shed light on understandings of EHEA: national frames of reference not yet usurped by European ones

Language used by policy actors can have significant effects (Ball, 1990; Bacchi, 2000)

- Emphasis on students as distinct from those in other parts of Europe may impact how they are understood by other social actors, & by students themselves

# FURTHER INFORMATION



Project website: [www.eurostudents.net](http://www.eurostudents.net)

Twitter: [@eurostudents\\_](https://twitter.com/eurostudents_)

## Relevant publications:

Brooks, R. (2020) Asserting the nation: the dominance of national narratives in policy influencers' constructions of higher education students, *Sociological Research Online*, 25, 2, 273-288.

Brooks, R. (2019) The construction of students within higher education policy: a cross-national comparison, *Compare: A Journal of Comparative and International Education*. (Advance online access)

# INTERESTED IN ONLY ACADEMIC QUALIFICATIONS

In various countries, mass expansion of HE problematised by policy actors on grounds that it has led to emphasis on 'quantity not quality'- most marked in Denmark and Poland (Brooks, 2019)

But reservations about consequences of massification expressed by a wider group of interviewees

Common theme: increasing popularity of an academic education had led to decline in take-up of vocational education

Despite similarity of views across continent, again framed in largely national terms



# INTERESTED IN ONLY ACADEMIC QUALIFICATIONS: GERMANY

... I always thought that actually this, the fact that we had so many people opting for [the vocational] sector was proof of the high appreciation and good quality of the VET [vocational education and training] sector among the population in Germany ... .. But then a couple of years back ... something started to change and all of a sudden, the percentage of young people who opted for higher education kept going up and going up and going up

I always thought that something's going wrong in France because ... everybody feels obliged to go to university ... everybody tries to go to a university because ending up doing an apprenticeship is considered a failure. **And I always thought that it's different in Germany, and I thought that's very healthy that way and we should keep it that way.** .... but now the problem is that something has changed, and that we're beginning to resemble the French situation in the sense that you're considered, by your uncles and aunts and parents and everyone else, something of a failure if you don't get into higher education. (Representative of university leaders' organisation)

# INTERESTED IN ONLY ACADEMIC QUALIFICATIONS: POLAND

[If] you have a kid, you want him/her to study [in higher education]. This is **a curse of our system**, because it shouldn't be like that. It's not always the best way to evolve, to go to first and second degree studies just after high school. .... I think there are other ways [routes] which would be more efficient for some groups. (Representative of national students' union)