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Paradise lost or created? How higher-education staff perceive the impact of policy on students

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores how university staff in Denmark, Germany, and England perceived higher education (HE) policy as impacting the experience of being a student in their respective countries. While, in each nation, different policy mechanisms were identified as having triggered transformations in the experience of being a student, the transformations themselves were described in a strikingly similar manner across all three countries: staff stressed that students had become more instrumental in their approach to learning; that the student experience had become more circumscribed; and that students were under greater stress. We analyse how staff's narratives about the impact of policy on the experience of being a student were mediated by their own ideas about what constituted 'good education', which in turn were strongly rooted in national traditions. Furthermore, in each country, staff's assessment of the impact of specific policies on HE differed sharply from those of policy actors. Our findings contribute to the scholarship on the marketisation of HE, through drawing attention to how the rationality underpinning policy does not determine how it is engaged with by key stakeholders on the ground, and by demonstrating how the neoliberalisation of HE can unfold in different formats, some more explicit than others.

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Introduction

It has been widely argued that processes of marketisation and neoliberalisation enacted through various higher education (HE) policies – including specific national policies and European policies associated with the Bologna Process and the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) – have not only had major implications for how students behave and see themselves, but have also led to a significant degree of homogenisation of HE systems and student experiences across Europe (Voegtle, Knill, and Dobbins 2011). However, such claims have been subject to limited empirical investigation. Much of the empirical research on the marketisation of HE, and its impact on what it means to be a student, has focused on England, and there is a dearth of comparative studies exploring

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this topic across different European nations. Are the findings stemming from empirical studies focused on England applicable to other European nations? Are there similarities in how those on the ground – for instance, university staff and students – in different European nations perceive HE policies as impacting the experience of being a student? This paper will begin to examine these questions through a focus on the perspectives of university staff members in Denmark, Germany, and England.

In the remainder of this article we will first describe how extant studies have discussed marketisation and neoliberalisation, enacted through HE policy, as impacting the experience of being a student in various European contexts, and outline the contributions our paper will make to this literature. We will then offer an overview of our research methods. Following this, we will illustrate how the university staff members we interviewed all discussed the experience of being a student in their respective countries as having been significantly transformed by specific HE policies. While, in each nation, different policy mechanisms were identified as having triggered these transformations, the transformations themselves were described in a strikingly similar manner across all three countries. We will analyse how staff's narratives about the impact of policy on the experience of being a student were mediated by their own ideas about what constituted 'good education', which in turn were strongly rooted in national traditions. Furthermore, we will show how, in each country, staff's assessment of the impact of specific policies on HE differed sharply from those of policy actors. We will conclude with the implications of our findings for the scholarship on the marketisation of HE in Europe.

Context

A number of studies have analysed how HE policies rooted in neoliberal ideals are transforming how HE systems in Europe (and beyond) operate. These studies have highlighted how HE policy may be informed by a neoliberal agenda in different ways, with the policy landscapes of different countries being characterised by a wide range of market mechanisms – from state disinvestment in universities and the reframing of higher education as a private investment rather than a public good, to systems for ranking institutions, disciplines, departments, and individuals, to the rise of an 'audit culture' (Shore and Wright 2017; Jongbloed 2003).

In each of the three countries in our sample, staff members identified different policy reforms – characterised by different types of market mechanisms – as having transformed the experience of being a student. Staff in England made reference to a raft of market-informed national policies; German staff pinpointed the Bologna Process reforms; and Danish staff made reference to national policy reforms, particularly the Danish Study Progress Reform. In the rest of this section, we will focus on these specific policy reforms identified by staff, and outline how these reforms and their impacts on the experience of being a student have been discussed in the scholarship thus far.

Marketised HE policy in England

A number of studies have illustrated how HE policies in England – through the introduction of a range of market mechanisms including high tuition fees, student charters (contracts between students and their higher education institutions (HEIs)), student

satisfaction surveys, and institutionalised complaint mechanisms – construct students as customers, and HE as a commodity in which they will be willing to invest for personal gain (Naidoo and Williams 2015; Brooks and Abrahams 2018; Raaper 2018). It has also been argued that these policies have had a significant impact on student identities, pedagogical practices and relationships, curriculums, and learning outcomes (Nixon, Scullion, and Molesworth 2010; Naidoo and Williams 2015; Molesworth, Nixon, and Scullion 2009; Moutsios 2013).

An important theme in such studies is that students have come to see themselves as customers and hence approach learning in an instrumental and passive manner. For instance, Molesworth, Nixon, and Scullion (2009) argue that the marketisation of HE in England has meant a shift in the mode of existence of students from *being* a learner to *having* a degree. They describe how students have come to experience HE as a commodity that they must acquire in order to obtain a job and a consumer lifestyle. According to Molesworth, Nixon, and Scullion (2009), as a result, contemporary students are primarily focused on learning what they need in order to do well enough on assessments to get a degree and secure a 'professional' job, rather than being driven by a desire for subject mastery and self-transformation.

In addition, it has been suggested that through the constraints they place on academic staff and their teaching practices, HE policies in England also have an *indirect* impact on students' identities and learning behaviour. For instance, some scholars have argued that extensive monitoring procedures and the pressure placed on staff to protect themselves and the HEI from student complaints, and ensure student satisfaction and the favourable position of their institution in league tables, may lead to pedagogically-poor teaching practices, which further reinforce a consumerist disposition and learning style among students (Molesworth, Nixon, and Scullion 2009; Naidoo and Jamieson 2005; Newson 2004). Instead of being able to productively challenge students' views and guide them through a potentially transformative journey of learning, staff may feel forced into a mode of 'safe teaching' (Naidoo and Jamieson 2005) where they transmit to students the material they need to pass assessments.

While much of this scholarship has not been based on empirical research with students or staff, there is an emerging body of empirical studies on these themes. Some of these studies have suggested that HE policies in England have not transformed student identity in a straightforward manner, illustrating instead that students exhibit varying levels of identification with a customer identity, with many rejecting the idea that they are customers (Tomlinson 2017; Brooks and Abrahams 2018; see also Universities UK 2017). However, other empirical studies have supported the view that marketised HE policies in England have directly impacted student identities and practices. For example, Nixon, Scullion, and Molesworth (2010) and Nixon, Scullion, and Hearn (2018) argue that contemporary students in England view themselves as consumers and HE as an easy process of credential acquisition to increase their employability. Students are described as seeking the path of least resistance to obtain a degree, expecting to be 'spoon-fed' by staff, and demonstrating marked disinterest in learning anything that would not be assessed.

The Bologna Process reforms

Research on European HE systems beyond England have linked similar trends to the Bologna Process and the establishment of the European Higher Education Area. These

reforms have aimed at ensuring comparability between HE systems in Europe and beyond through, for example, introducing comparable degrees (based on two main cycles); implementing a system of European learning credits (European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System or ECTS); supporting the mobility of students and staff; promoting co-operation in quality assurance; and encouraging a European dimension within the curriculum (Soltys 2015). While scholars vary in terms of how they evaluate the merit of these reforms, most are in agreement that they are underpinned by a neoliberal agenda. It has been argued that as a result of such initiatives HE has become more aligned with the needs of the labour market, there is a greater focus on promoting student employability, and universities have come to be seen as engines of economic growth and international competitiveness (Wright and Ørberg 2017; Brooks 2021a). Some scholars have even suggested that such policy reforms are attempting to 'reverse engineer' an Anglo-American model of HE across the continent (Slaughter and Cantwell 2012).

Once again, these reforms are discussed as having impacted students' identities, their understandings of the purpose of HE, and their study practices. According to Moutsios (2013), for instance, an important and understudied impact of the Bologna Process reforms on HE systems in Europe (and beyond) is the dismantling of academic autonomy – with respect to the creation and imparting of knowledge, and the governance of the university – which he views as being *the* main characteristic of the European university. He argues that through a series of methods ranging from state legislation to funding-based leverage to evaluation techniques, the Bologna Process has placed severe constraints on how teaching and learning take place. As a result, he sees the contemporary university as being a far cry from the Humboldtian ideal of a university: a space marked by *Lernfreiheit* and *Lehrfreiheit* (the freedom of learning and teaching) in which students and staff can engage in their studies, research, and teaching guided by their own interests and free of any external constraints.

Various empirical studies have focused on a range of themes pertaining to how the reforms associated with the Bologna Process and the creation of a European Higher Education Area are experienced on the ground – including how academic staff experience these reforms (Bahia et al. 2017; Sin and Amaral 2017); and the impact of these reforms on study duration, academic performance, and employment outcomes of students (Hahm and Kluve 2019; Ertl 2013). However, there are fewer studies – at least published in the English language – about how these reforms may have impacted the everyday experience of what it means to be a student.

The Danish Study Progress Reform

The Danish Study Progress Reform was implemented in 2014 to increase the pace at which students progressed through their degree programmes. According to Nielsen and Sarauw (2017) and Sarauw and Madsen (2020), this national reform has made use of a key feature of the Bologna Process reforms, namely ECTS – an ostensibly neutral means of measuring a course's workload – to accomplish the country's own objectives, namely: reducing the cost of education (incurred by the state) and ensuring that students enter the labour market quickly. These objectives are in part achieved through regulating duration of study; since 2014, students are incentivised to complete their courses within

the prescribed time limit: they must sit exams after completing a certain number of ECTS points and are allowed to be only a specific number of ECTS points behind schedule before they lose access to financial support. HEIs have in turn made courses more standardised, with fewer optional elements, in order to ensure efficiency and quick completion. Alongside this, a modularized and competence-based curriculum is being used to promote the future employability of students.

Studies by Nielsen and Sarauw (2017) and Sarauw and Madsen (2020) are some of the few to have empirically explored the impact of this reform on the experience of being a student. The students they interviewed felt that the time pressure they were under restricted them to a very superficial and instrumental engagement with their studies. In deciding what to study, they picked 'safe routes' which would allow them to pass exams, and indeed the demands of assessments dictated their approach to learning, with most wanting to be given well-defined learning goals and instructions for achieving them. Importantly, students felt that the faster pace at which they were moving through their studies was at the cost of other educational experiences that they viewed as being valuable, including having the time and freedom to explore their subjects in an open-ended manner, to participate in non-compulsory courses and non-assessed learning activities, to take part in extra-curricular activities, and to do internships. According to Nielsen and Sarauw (2017), the ways in which the Danish Study Progress Reform incentivised students to engage with their studies and their HEI had resulted in the university being transformed into a 'non-place' (Augé 1995), an impersonal place of transit like an airport, a motorway, or a supermarket.

Many of the studies discussed thus far have drawn attention to the gap between the intended outcomes of certain policies – all of which have ostensibly aimed at improving the student experience and the quality of HE – and the effects that they have generated on the ground, at least with respect to the everyday student experience (e.g. Nielsen and Sarauw 2017; Sarauw and Madsen 2020; Molesworth, Nixon, and Scullion 2009; Naidoo and Jamieson 2005; Nixon, Scullion, and Molesworth 2010; Nixon, Scullion, and Hearn 2018; Naidoo and Williams 2015). In the case of Germany, too, studies have highlighted how the Bologna Process reforms have had impacts on the experience of being a student and on employment outcomes, which are not always consistent with its intended objectives (Ertl 2013).

In this paper, we will contribute to the emerging empirical scholarship on the impact of HE policy on the student experience in Europe – which has thus far focused mainly on England and tended to foreground student voices – through comparative focus on the perspectives of university staff in Germany, Denmark, and England. We have chosen to focus on the perspectives of staff members for a number of reasons. To begin with, given their age, the staff members we interviewed typically had experience of the HE system in their country over an extended period of time, having first experienced it as students themselves and then as staff members. As a result, the transformation in the experience of being a student was a major theme in staff interviews. Indeed, although staff members were not prompted by us to discuss the impact of HE policy on the experience of being a student – but rather, were asked about the experience of being a student in a more general sense – they repeatedly made reference to specific policies in order to explain what they perceived to be transformations to the student role.

Moreover, we contend that examining how university staff members perceive the impact of various HE policies on what it means to be a student is valuable for understanding how these policy reforms are enacted on the ground. Following scholars such as Ball et al. (2011) and Nielsen (2011), we believe that understanding how policy is enacted requires a focus on not just the perspectives and actions of policymakers, but also on how policy is understood and engaged with by the populations at which these policies are directed. For instance, Ball et al. (2011) draw attention to the 'policy work' of school teachers, illustrating how they may engage with policy reforms through a number of different roles and positions. At one end of the spectrum, teachers may be 'narrators', who play a key role in explaining and articulating policy, and 'entrepreneurs' and 'enthusiasts', who champion particular policies and embody these policies through their practice. At the other end of the spectrum, they may be 'critics', who produce or maintain counter-discourses which challenge policy reforms, or 'receivers', whose efforts are mainly centred on coping with and defending themselves against the impact of these reforms. Ball et al. (2011) demonstrate how through a range of policy positions – some of which involve a more celebratory and enthusiastic engagement with policy than others – teachers mediate policy enactment in important ways. In this paper, through a focus on how university staff members discussed the impact of specific policy reforms on HE in their respective countries, we seek to contribute to an empirically-grounded understanding of how these policies were perceived by those on the ground. We will argue that staff members' understandings of what constituted 'good education' – which were strongly rooted in national traditions and in their 'field of memory' of 'different times' (Foucault 1972) – implicitly or explicitly informed their assessments of the impact of policy reforms on the experience of being a student. In doing so, we will demonstrate how policy constructions are not taken up in a straightforward manner by members of staff.

In order to further highlight how the objectives underpinning policy reforms cannot predict how key stakeholders on the ground apprehend and engage with these reforms, we will briefly draw on interviews we conducted with policy influencers in the countries in our sample to show how despite the fact that, in each country, both policy influencers and staff members identified the same policies as having significantly impacted HE and the student role, they differed starkly from each other in their evaluation of the merit of specific policies. Finally, through comparative focus on three European countries, we will examine the extent to which perceptions of the impact of HE policy on the experience of being a student were shared by university staff members across these different national contexts, and thereby investigate claims of a homogenisation of the student experience across Europe.

Research methods

This paper draws on research conducted for the Eurostudents project, a comparative study aimed at examining how HE students are conceptualised in six European countries. In this paper, we will focus mainly on data collected in Germany, Denmark, and England,[1] between 2017 and 2018. These three countries were chosen in order to provide variation in terms of: relationship to the European Union; welfare regime; and mechanisms for funding HE. We draw mainly on interviews conducted with staff but also make use of data from policy documents and interviews with a range of 'policy influencers'.

Across the three countries in our sample, we conducted interviews with 36 university staff members, sampled from three HEIs in each country, which were chosen to represent some of the diversity of that country's HE sector. The staff interviewed included academic staff representing a range of disciplinary affiliations as well as staff in management or professional services roles. We also conducted an analysis of 48 relevant policy documents and interviews with 12 policy influencers deemed to be key stakeholders with respect to higher education policy.

Interviews with both staff members and policy influencers began with open-ended questions which explored our respondents' understandings of what it means to be an HE student in their country. Following this, they were asked about four specific understandings of students – as customers, political actors, future workers, and dedicated learners – and the extent to which students in their country were seen in this way. Policy influencers were asked explicitly about the reforms that had been implemented in their country in the past ten years which they thought had had the most significant influence on students. Staff interviewees were not directly asked about the impact of higher education policies on the student experience, however – as will be discussed below – they regularly made reference to various policy reforms when discussing what it meant to be a student in their country.

All interviews were conducted in English. Policy documents were translated into English where necessary. Data analysis was conducted using NVivo, drawing on inductive and deductive approaches.

Further details about our study participants, the policy documents analysed, and our research methods are provided as Supplemental Online Material.

Being an HE student today: a transformed experience?

Germany

A major theme in the German staff interviews was that the Bologna Process reforms had fundamentally altered the experience of being a student through bringing about changes in the structure and pace of HE. Staff members described how, prior to these reforms, students had been able to study for as long as they wished and had been able to 'build [their] own studies' (Teaching Staff, Social Work) or tailor their study programmes to their interests. Most of the staff members in our sample had themselves studied under the previous system and portrayed the experience as having been marked by a freedom and flexibility which had required – and enabled – students to be self-directed learners.

With the implementation of the Bologna Process reforms, staff told us that HE had come to be characterised by a significant degree of regulation. For instance, there were compulsory modules that all students needed to complete, a certain number of credit points that had to be achieved every semester, and compulsory assessments spread throughout the course of the degree programme all of which contributed to a student's final result. Students were also expected to finish their degrees within a certain time frame. According to staff, such changes in the structure and pace of education have made the university experience resemble the experience of being at school. For instance, as one staff member put it: 'what makes it more like school [. . .] is that you have a very, very planned course of study, so it is very clear what you have to do to earn your degree, and

it's kind of clear when you have to do it. And it's kind of easy to say when you fall behind [. . .].' (Management/Professional Services staff, Higher Education). Furthermore, the 'channelled' and 'standardised' nature of courses was discussed as having increased students' perceived workload. Staff explained that although studying for a degree had not necessarily been more 'relaxed' in the past, students had felt less under pressure because they had had the flexibility to organise their studies as they wished.

According to the staff members we interviewed, as a result of these changes to the HE experience, students had become more instrumental in their approach to learning. They were far less likely to explore their subjects in depth; rather, they thought of their studies in terms of 'efficiency and economy', in terms of credit points rather than in terms of content. For instance, one staff member observed:

> I think since the Bologna Process [. . .] the meaning of being a student today has changed very much [. . . students] think very efficiently, economically, they don't go so deep inside the subjects [. . . They think:] how can I have the biggest outcome with the smallest input? (Teaching Staff, Social Work)

According to this staff member, it was this kind of 'economical thinking' rather than 'critical thinking' that was encouraged by the system. A number of staff members said that they needed to remind students that 'studies take time'. Furthermore, although students were still technically allowed to explore topics and modules outside their curriculum and attend lectures and seminars which were not a compulsory part of their study programme, they were typically too busy to actually do this. As one staff member explained 'because there's so much that you have to do as a Bachelor's student, it is hard to afford just checking around and . . . for example working or attending lectures of a completely different discipline that are maybe quite unrelated to what you're doing' (Teaching Staff, Psychology).

The demands that the HE system, post the Bologna Process reforms, put on students were also viewed as preventing them from making the most of 'student life', including becoming meaningfully engaged in student politics. In addition, combining studies and paid work was described as having become very difficult because study programmes were so structured and inflexible. From the perspective of many staff members, the Bologna Process reforms thus narrowed the field of possibilities available to a student both within and outside the university, and student life, post-Bologna, was described as being less multifaceted than it had been in the past. In sum, as some staff members put it, while HE in Germany had once been about 'Bildung' (i.e. a larger project of self-development), it had now become a narrow pursuit of credentials.

Finally, staff discussed how the increased structure and pace of HE had increased stress levels among the student population substantially. Sentiments like this one were widely expressed:

> I have the feeling they are really like stressed. Stressed because they want to reach [. . .] their Bachelor degree in three years, and then they have the feeling, 'oh I have to be really fast now'. (Management/Professional Services staff, Education)

Denmark

Our Danish staff respondents emphasised that the student role in Denmark had undergone a major transformation, which they attributed to national HE policies. Similar to the German staff members interviewed, staff in Denmark described how, in the past, Danish HE students had had a great deal of freedom and flexibility: it had been possible to 'generate their own path [and] follow whatever seem[ed] interesting' (Teaching staff, Physics), do more than one course at the same level, and take 'detours' in the course of one's study as one's interests evolved. Students had viewed HE as a student-led and uncharted exploration of a subject, and as a path to develop their thinking and become change agents.

Staff emphasised how this was no longer the case. They explained that national policies, particularly the Danish Study Progress Reform, had sped up the pace of HE: students were incentivised to enter HE immediately after school and to complete their degrees within a stipulated time. This in turn had led to more structured and regulated degree programmes because universities were under pressure from the political system to show accountability. As one staff member put it, the contemporary Danish HE student entered a system where 'there's boxes and you need to check them [...] every year you need to be in a specific place [at a] specific time ... you can't do it in reverse order' (Teaching staff, Physics). National policies were also discussed as having brought about an increased focus on employability. Staff said that students were pressured to 'give back to society' (Management/Professional Services staff, Admissions) by quickly entering the labour market, and universities were incentivised to promote student employability. Indeed, several staff members described how the pressure that students faced to think of HE in terms of increasing their employability meant that those who had chosen a Humanities or Social Science study programme felt that they had to justify their choice of subject and that they were answerable to 'everybody else' (Management/Professional Services staff, Career and Guidance).

According to staff, because of the pressure students faced to finish their studies quickly and enter the labour market, they had become focused on outcomes and results; they were 'chasing the necessary exams [and] doing what they think is expected from them' (Teaching staff, Physics), rather than engaging deeply with their subjects. A staff member lamented: 'So from being at a knowledge institution, where you were [...] expected to acquire your own knowledge and ask the right questions, we now have an institution that asks the questions to the students and expect them to answer' (Teaching staff, Law). Similarly, another staff member explained:

> The students today, they're very ... (pause) how do you say that ... entangled into this almost new public management way of thinking about things, that, OK, I take this course, there's this way of, of evaluating the course in the end as this type of exam. So in order for me to pass the exam and get a grade, a good grade, I have to do this, this and this. I'm not going to do any of the other things because they're not on the exam, I need to pass the exam in order to produce the amount of ECTS I need to produce in order to secure my scholarship, which will allow me to continue studies. So they're very focused on knowing what it is they have to do, and not necessarily focused on learning anything. (Management/Professional Services staff, Geography)

Staff members also pointed out that students were far less likely to have cross/inter-disciplinary profiles because they were not allowed to study more than one course at the same level or take too many 'detours'. In addition, students' instrumental approach to their learning was viewed as impacting how they engaged with the HEI. A number of staff members lamented that it was difficult to get students to participate in extra-curricular activities or do volunteer work. For instance:

> it's difficult to get them to . . . to be activists, to do something for a cause. [. . .] they'll say, what do we get out of it? [. . .] it's almost impossible to get them to participate in extra-curricular activities. Like we have something called Social Fridays and we, it's almost impossible to get them to come because [...] they will then ask us, is it relevant for exams? We will say, no, it's not part of the curriculum, and then they're off. (Management/ Professional Services staff, Social Work)

On the whole, there was a feeling that going to university was becoming less and less about 'Dannelse' – i.e. education in a broad sense of self-cultivation and development.

Finally, several staff members discussed stress as the defining feature of the contemporary Danish student experience. Students felt that they had no room for error and the pressure to pick the 'right' course, finish it within an appropriate time, and enter the labour market impacted on students' mental health. Staff described how anxiety and depression had risen and how more students were applying for exemptions because they were unwell from the stress. They also emphasised that there were more dropouts, both because of stress and because students dropped out the minute they started to feel that their course was not a good fit for them, thinking there was no time for detours.

England

In England, a major theme in staff interviews was that policies of marketisation had transformed the student role 'beyond all recognition' (Teaching staff, Media and Communications) as one staff member put it, and made students instrumental, dependent and demanding learners. This was described by staff as happening through several routes. First, given that students were making a substantial financial investment in their education (and many would graduate with debt) as a result of high tuition fees, staff said that a large proportion of students had come to behave like customers. They were not inclined to think of HE as a chance to embark on a challenging and uncertain journey of learning, but rather viewed themselves as entitled to a certain kind of educational experience and outcome, and thought of their education in terms of value for money. Examples were given of students expressing dissatisfaction with the quality of education they were receiving as if it was a customer product or service and even feeling that they were entitled to pass exams because they had paid for their degree. In addition, staff described how a major concern for contemporary students was their future employability or getting a return on their financial 'investment'. As one staff member observed, students felt, 'if I'm paying this much money, what am I going to get at the end of it?' (Management/Professional Services staff, Student Recruitment). A number of staff members reflected on how different the experience of being a student had been when they themselves had been students. Comments like these were typical:

> [When I was a student, HE was all about] learning about yourself, learning knowledge for the sake of learning knowledge, and maybe finding out what you might like to go on to do later. (Teaching staff, Media and Communications)

> [M]y generation's probably kind of the last generation that certainly started university very much thinking, oh great, we're at university, this is going to be the best time of our lives, like it's all about the now, rather than thinking forward (Management/Professional Services staff, Student recruitment)

> In contrast, staff felt that contemporary students approached their degrees more strategically and were very focused on the 'end point'. One staff member complained: 'they know exactly what they want, which is a piece of paper at the end, and they want to get there along the path of least resistance' (Teaching staff, Accounting).

This view of HE, staff felt, had impacted how students engaged with their study programmes and their HEI, making them instrumental, passive and dependent learners. Staff discussed how students expected to be hand-held by them and were interested in learning only to the extent that it was needed to perform well on assessments. One staff member joked that while students might get a chemistry calculation wrong, they would be able to calculate 'precisely what fraction this mark is going to contribute to a degree' (Teaching staff, Chemistry). Similarly, staff lamented at how many students did not get involved in university life and make use of all the opportunities that the university could offer beyond a study programme. They spoke about how transformative it could be to become involved in the various societies and clubs and interact with a diverse range of people. One staff member observed that when students saw that they were paying £9250 a year, 'they think that is for my course, they don't realise that is for the whole experience' (Management/Professional Services staff, Teaching and Learning). We were told that most students got involved in campus life only to the extent that it was helpful for building their CVs, and indeed building their CVs through accumulating work experience, internships and so on took up a lot of students' time and energies and caused them considerable stress. According to one staff member, the big change in what it meant to be a student in England was that students were now not just students but also 'job hunters' and 'entrepreneurs' (Teaching staff, Geography).

A number of staff highlighted how the pressures of increasing their future employability, together with the demands of paid work which high tuition fees forced many students to have to undertake, reduced the time students had to spend on their studies, which meant that they were less likely to become deeply engaged in their subjects. When staff members expressed frustration that students did not immerse themselves in their subjects, they also noted that contemporary students had competing priorities:

> You know there's a lot of competing . . . tensions I guess in their life, a lot of things that they have to do that maybe I didn't. I got a grant, I got my fees paid, I was the stereotypical lazy student who didn't go to lectures and . . . But . . . a lot of the time when students don't come to teaching sessions here [. . .] I'm aware it's because they're at work. (Teaching Staff, Media and Communications)

These external pressures were described as contributing to students being focused mainly on assessments, and expecting teaching staff to tell them exactly what they needed to do in order to perform well on them.

A second way in which staff described the marketisation of HE as having impacted students' learning practices and approach to HE was, indirectly, through the impact of metrics on teaching practices. Because staff were judged on metrics such as student progression, retention, and completion – and income flows into the university depended on these metrics – as a coping mechanism, many staff had developed an instrumental approach to teaching. For instance, they 'spoon-fed' (Teaching Staff, Media and Communications) students and delivered material in a manner that would produce good end results. A few staff members also felt that such methods were resorted to because universities were focused on 'getting bums on the seats' but there had not been an accompanying increase in the resources needed to maintain a good quality of education. It was felt that these methods did not engage students as independent learners and partners in the education process and instead contributed to them becoming passive and dependent learners. Linked to this, some staff members also discussed how teaching had been impacted by legal requirements such as the Student Contract. Universities had to be very careful about promising anything to students that they might not be able to deliver because they could be sued, which had resulted in the content of courses becoming inflexible and 'set in stone' (Teaching staff, Chemistry) for years. Instead of staff and students being partners who together shaped what happened in the classroom, a predetermined course structure defined the teaching and learning that took place.

Comparing Germany, Denmark and England: different policies, similar outcomes

In all three countries, staff believed that students had become more instrumental in their approach to learning and to HE; the student experience had become more circumscribed; and students were under greater stress than before. Thus, changes to the student role which extant studies have mainly described as taking place in England, and which have been attributed to England's policies of marketisation, were also perceived as having taken place in European countries where education is free (Germany, Denmark), and where students are 'paid to study' (Denmark).

However, in addition, in each country these changes were attributed to different policies. While in Germany, the Bologna Process reforms were foregrounded, in Denmark these changes were attributed to national HE policies such as the Danish Study Progress Reform, and the Bologna Process was not discussed at all. Finally, in England, national policies of marketisation were presented as the main source of changes in the student role and experience. These different policies were seen as having transformed the student experience in distinct ways. In Germany and Denmark staff explained that changes to the *pace* and *structure* of degree programmes – often framed as a loss of academic freedom and flexibility in terms of being able to 'individualise' one's study programme, organise one's time as one wished, and study for as long as one wished – were responsible for shifts in how students viewed HE, and how they engaged with their courses and their HEI. The constraining of students' freedom and flexibility in this way was seen as making education less about 'Bildung' and 'Dannelse' – i.e. education in a broader sense of self-development – and reducing the likelihood of students being independent learners who were driven by an interest in their fields of study and a desire for personal development. In Denmark, staff additionally felt that the pressure students

faced to quickly enter the labour market further contributed to students viewing HE in a strategic and calculating manner.

In England, in contrast, changes to the experience of being a student were attributed largely to the impact of high tuition fees on student behaviours and practices. Staff said that because of the large financial contributions that students had to make, they had come to think and behave like customers who felt entitled to 'value for money' and a certain kind of education experience and outcome, rather than like learners pursuing knowledge for its own sake. This in turn had led to passive and instrumental learning practices, which were further promoted by the fact that a large number of students needed to undertake paid work to support their living expenses, leaving them with limited time to spend on their studies. The requirement to complete a degree programme within a stipulated time period and the standardised content of courses – features that have long characterised the HE system in England – were not perceived as limiting academic freedom, and were certainly not seen as adversely impacting the learning behaviour of contemporary students or students in the past. In contrast to the staff in Denmark and Germany, the only time that staff in England spoke about a loss of academic freedom and flexibility was with respect to teaching practices (rather than learning practices). For instance, staff discussed how they felt forced to adopt teaching practices primarily aimed at effectively transmitting set information, rather than engaging students as partners in the learning process, because of a pressure to ensure good rates of student progression and completion and protect the university from being sued by dissatisfied students.

Implicit and sometimes explicit in our respondents' narratives of educational transformation in their respective countries were understandings of what constituted good education, which were very much rooted in national traditions. In both Denmark and Germany, staff viewed the freedom and flexibility to decide the length, pace and content of one's studies – to be in the drivers' seat of one's education, so to speak – as being pedagogically important and crucial for producing meaningful learning. In both countries, staff expressed frustration at what they viewed as being a move away from such a Humboldtian education system to a more restricted and constrained learning experience. In contrast, the ideal to which English staff harked back in their narratives of the transformation of the student role did not relate to the manner in which degree courses had been designed, but rather to the impact of funding structures and the personal circumstances of individuals on the experience of being a student. For instance, staff reflected on how students in the past, because they had not made substantial financial investments in their education, had not viewed themselves as customers and had not been strategically focused on the future. Instead, they had entered HE with the aim of embarking on a journey of learning and enjoying the present. Staff also stressed how students had had the freedom to immerse themselves in their studies, often acknowledging that this was because they did not need to undertake paid work to support themselves. Staff's beliefs about what constituted good education strongly mediated their assessments of and responses to HE policy reforms and how they perceived the impact of these reforms on the experience of being a student.

While across all three countries, to some extent staff discussions of the experience of being a student in the past felt like 'golden-age' narratives, this was not always the case. In Germany, for example, staff members observed that the current system was probably better suited to a range of learning styles and approaches, and many students had got

'lost' in the previous system. Similarly, in England, while some staff were critical of what they perceived to be an increased focus on jobs, others viewed these developments neutrally. For instance, one staff member said that it was 'old fashioned' (Teaching staff, Chemistry) to dismiss the importance of transferrable skills and of creating employable graduates. At the very least, most staff members were sympathetic to students, feeling that they had every right to be focused on the job market outcomes of their degrees, given that most would be graduating in debt.

Nevertheless, it is safe to say that the 'enthusiasts' and 'entrepreneurs' identified by Ball et al. (2011) – keen to champion and promote government reforms – were notably absent in our data. Instead, the majority of the staff members we interviewed were more akin to Ball et al.'s 'critics' or 'receivers'. While staff members' criticisms of the impact of policy reforms on the experience of being a student – and their related views of how HE should function – could be seen as maintaining a counter-discourse that critiqued these reforms, most did not appear to feel that they had the power to meaningfully challenge them. Indeed, in England, particularly, staff members presented themselves as primarily seeking to cope with and adapt to the impact of these reforms. The antipathy expressed by many of the staff members to the reforms in their country could have a significant influence on how policy is enacted. Motivated by a desire to protect students from what they perceive to be harmful new initiatives, such staff members may well act as effective breaks on policy implementation, or at least barriers to rapid transformation. Our research thus joins that of scholars such as Ball et al. (2011) and Nielsen (2011) by illustrating how understanding policy impact requires close attention to how policy is engaged with and experienced by the populations at which it is targeted.

Resonances and dissonances between the views of staff and those of policy influencers

The particular ways in which policies were framed by the staff interviewees were also played out within the policy texts and our interviews with policy influencers. For example, the impact of the Bologna Process reforms was a dominant theme in both the analysed documents and interviews from Germany, but almost entirely absent from the same sources from Denmark and England. Instead, in Denmark, discussion centred on the Study Progress Reform while, in England, it tended to address various policies associated with marketisation. However, within each nation, there were significant differences between policy actors in how these various reforms were evaluated. In general, the views of the national students' unions reflected quite closely those of staff, outlined above. In contrast, those of the other groups – government, employers, and university leaders – tended to be more positive about the reforms, typically emphasising the 'official' rationale for implementation. For example, in England, a civil servant responsible for HE policy spoke about the importance of treating students as consumers. She explained:

> it recognises that they've got legal rights to ... [...] because [...] ... they're paying, potentially paying quite a lot of money, so it's right that they are, you know, that their experience is what they were led to believe it would be.

While it may be expected that those responsible for implementing reforms, such as civil servants, viewed them positively, their perspectives were often shared by other policy actors. In Denmark, the interviewee from an employers' organisation referred to the Study Progress Reform in this way:

> there's a lot of focus on, and I think that's fair . . . . having people being focused on their studies and you know, getting the students to finish their education within . . . the time that's set out. Because there's been such a long tradition in Denmark for, if you were at the university it was fine, you know, fourteen years, who cares, you know, whatever! And . . . I don't think it's OK, but it's less of a strain on the public expenditure when it's you know 5% of a youth population going into university, but when it's 30%, it's a completely different ball game.

Similarly, in the German policy interviews and documents, the Bologna Process was discussed in positive terms – as ushering in effective mechanisms to ensure students completed their studies in a standard period of time (e.g. BDA 2012) and promoting student mobility (e.g. Federal Ministry of Education and Research 2017), for example.

Conclusion

In the article thus far, we have shown how in Germany, Denmark, and England, staff members claimed that there had been major transformations to the student role as a result of HE policies. In each of these countries, staff members' descriptions of these transformations were largely consistent with the findings of the emerging body of scholarship on the impact of HE policy on student experiences in the respective country, which has focused on the perspectives of students themselves (e.g Nixon, Scullion, and Molesworth 2010; Nixon, Scullion, and Hearn 2018 writing about England; Nielsen and Sarauw 2017; Sarauw and Madsen 2020 writing about Denmark). Importantly, through our comparative focus on Germany, Denmark, and England, we have additionally demonstrated how staff in all three countries discussed transformations to the experience of being a student in strikingly similar ways. To some extent, then, our findings support the view that there is a perceived growing homogenisation of the experience of being a student across Europe (Voegtle, Knill, and Dobbins 2011).

However, through illustrating how in each country different policies were foregrounded as having triggered or contributed to transformations in the experiences of being a student, our findings also show how a range of policy technologies – characterised by different market mechanisms – may be seen as acting in distinct ways to produce similar effects on the ground, and thereby the neoliberalisation of HE may be experienced as manifesting in different formats, some less obvious than what is seen in the case of England. In addition, by highlighting the high stress levels among the student population that university staff members attributed to specific policy reforms and their implications, our research captures a relatively less-studied dimension of the perceived impact of HE policy on the experience of being a student. While the extant scholarship on the marketisation of HE has presented students as having been transformed into powerful actors whose satisfaction is prioritised by HEIs, this paper joins a small number of studies (e.g. Nielsen and Sarauw 2017) that additionally draw attention to the toll that the

restructuring of HE in accordance with neoliberal market principles is believed, by staff at least, to take on students' well-being.

Through highlighting the differences between the perspectives of staff and policy actors, and analysing how staff members' assessment of policy reforms is mediated by their own understandings of what constitutes good HE (which do not always align with policy conceptualisations of good HE), we also draw attention to the contested nature of educational reform across the continent. Although the positions taken up by policy influencers in the various nations are often similar – with, for example, students' unions and staff often critical of policies that are more typically embraced by government, employers' organisations and university leaders – they also show that, despite these similarities, policies that appear to have similar impacts on students are framed in very different ways. A key explanation for this difference in framing lies in the geo-political context within which the various policy actors were operating – and national norms relating to this. The strong emphasis on the Bologna Process reforms within Germany, for example, relates closely to the nation's position within Europe more generally. It was a founding member of key European association and has assumed a leading role in the 'European project' (Kundnani 2014). It is thus perhaps unsurprising that recent educational policies are also framed in terms of European imperatives, even when, as some scholars have argued, the Bologna Process was used by German politicians as a means of tackling policy problems – such as the relatively long time students took to complete their degree – that had been identified long before (Ertl 2013). Similarly, with respect to Denmark, although some scholars have argued that there are very close links between the Bologna Process and the Danish Study Progress Reform (Sarauw and Madsen 2020; Nielsen and Sarauw 2017), the complete absence of any reference to Bologna or European influences in the Danish data is in-keeping with the nation's 'soft Euroscepticism' (Degn and Sørensen 2015) – articulated by political parties on both the left and right of the political spectrum (Fitzgibbon 2013; Brooks 2021b).

Indeed, the national framing evident in both Denmark and England – where all of our participants tended to discuss HE reforms and their impact in terms of national reforms, rather than in terms of wider regional or global imperatives and pressures – can be seen as consonant with this political positioning. It also speaks to the frequent recourse to 'national narratives' across the dataset. It was notable that, within the policy influencer interviews in particular, trends that have been evidenced across the continent were often explained in terms of what the interviewees considered to be very distinct national histories, cultures and political journeys (see also Brooks 2020). Despite many of these policy influencers apparently engaging regularly with their counterparts in other European nations, and the well-documented cross-national nature of some of these trends (in both policy reports and academic studies), the reliance on national explanations was striking. Undoubtedly, the experiences and orientations of students across the nations in our research *are* informed, to some extent at least, by national histories, policies and priorities (see, for example, Brooks 2021a). However, the absence of recourse to narratives about regional, transnational and global influence is notable, and perhaps suggestive of the enduring importance of the nation-state in how we go about understanding HE generally and students specifically.

Our findings have a number of implications for the HE sector. While both policy actors and HE staff within the same nation-state drew on very similar frames to

discuss recent reforms, it was notable that their evaluation of the same reforms was markedly different. As we have indicated, most policy influencers (with the exception of the students' unions representatives) were broadly positive about how HE policy had changed over recent years; staff, in contrast, typically presented strong critiques of the direction of travel, maintaining that students had often been adversely affected. This suggests that, at the heart of the HE system in many countries, is fundamental disagreement about how best to serve students' interests and improve the quality of teaching and learning. The antipathy expressed by many of the staff members to the reforms in their country may have a significant influence on how policy is 'enacted'. Moreover, the strong national framing of policy discourse, despite many similarities in described experiences across Europe, may make it harder for both HE staff and policy actors to recognise the impact of supranational influences and to make alliances with potential collaborators – whether that is to resist or, conversely, strengthen current reforms – across national borders.

Note

1. In order to be able to enter into a useful level of detail about each national context, we decided to focus on three of the six countries in our study. We chose to focus on Germany, Denmark and England because in these three countries staff offered remarkably similar accounts of how the experience of being a student had been transformed by policy reforms, despite pinpointing different reforms. In other publications, we have explored patterns involving the other three countries in our study.

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