



# The (stereo)typical student: how European higher education students feel they are viewed by relevant others

Sazana Jayadeva, Rachel Brooks & Jessie Abrahams

To cite this article: Sazana Jayadeva, Rachel Brooks & Jessie Abrahams (2022) The (stereo)typical student: how European higher education students feel they are viewed by relevant others, British Journal of Sociology of Education, 43:1, 1-21, DOI: [10.1080/01425692.2021.2007358](https://doi.org/10.1080/01425692.2021.2007358)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/01425692.2021.2007358>



© 2021 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group.



Published online: 05 Dec 2021.



[Submit your article to this journal](#)



Article views: 1095



[View related articles](#)



[View Crossmark data](#)

# The (stereo)typical student: how European higher education students feel they are viewed by relevant others

Sazana Jayadeva<sup>a</sup> , Rachel Brooks<sup>b</sup>  and Jessie Abrahams<sup>c</sup>

<sup>a</sup>Department of Sociology, University of Cambridge, Cambridge, UK; <sup>b</sup>Department of Sociology, University of Surrey, Guildford, UK; <sup>c</sup>School of Education, University of Bristol, Bristol, UK

## ABSTRACT

There is a growing body of scholarship on how students see themselves, and also on how they are conceptualised by other social actors. However, what has been less explored is how students believe they are seen by others, and how this impacts them. Drawing on focus groups with students across Europe – and particularly plasticine models students made to depict how they felt they were seen by relevant others – this paper will illustrate how the four most common ways in which students felt they were constructed were as hedonistic and lazy; useless and a burden; clever, hardworking, and successful; and a resource to be exploited. It will argue that such stereotypes had significant material impact on students' lives and how they experienced being a student. Finally, it will analyse how specific national contexts accounted for a range of variations in how students articulated these constructions.

## ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 24 March 2021  
Accepted 3 November 2021

## KEYWORDS

Higher education;  
students; stereotypes;  
Europe; comparative

## Introduction

There is a growing body of work on how students see themselves and understand their own role within higher education institutions (HEIs). Much of this has been stimulated by the changing policy context in many nations, in which scholars have been interested in exploring the extent to which market-based reforms have impacted on how students approach learning and their wider university experience. Within countries that have introduced relatively high fees, such as the UK and Australia, researchers have examined the extent to which students have taken up a consumerist identity. While some have argued that students now approach their studies in a much more transactional manner and often see themselves as consumers of education (e.g. Nixon, Scullion, and Hearn 2018; Molesworth, Nixon, and Scullion 2009; Williams 2013), others have suggested that the picture is more complex and that, even where students pay high fees, many remain strongly resistant to understanding themselves as consumers and place considerable emphasis on the contribution they themselves have to make to their education – rather than viewing their degree as a product that can be bought (e.g. O'Shea and Delahunty 2018; Tomlinson 2017). Indeed, Brooks and Abrahams (2020)

**CONTACT** Sazana Jayadeva  [sj355@cam.ac.uk](mailto:sj355@cam.ac.uk)

 Supplemental data for this article is available online at <https://doi.org/10.1080/01425692.2021.2007358>.

© 2021 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group.

This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>), which permits non-commercial re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited, and is not altered, transformed, or built upon in any way.

have shown how, across Europe, when students were asked to talk about their own identities within higher education (HE), they tended to foreground the centrality of learning and hard work. These patterns held, even across countries with different funding regimes and HE cultures. Nevertheless, the majority of research in this area has tended to focus on whether or not students have taken up a consumer identity, rather than teasing out broader views of their identity that may be held by students.

Other scholars have investigated the ways in which students are conceptualised by social actors such as policymakers, the media and the population at large. Within policy, students are increasingly positioned as ‘future workers’ – as a consequence, it is argued, of the primary purpose of HE coming to be seen by politicians and policymakers as labour market preparation (McArthur 2011; Nielsen and Sarauw 2017; Patfield, Gore, and Fray 2021). Dominant policy constructions do, to some extent, however, differ by nation-state. For example, Brooks (2021) has shown how the construction of students as ‘Europeans’ differs by European country according to the nation’s particular geo-political orientation. Furthermore, writing with respect to Thailand, in particular, Uerpaiojkit and Burford (2021) have shown how students have been seen within policy as important preservers of the national culture – an understanding that appears unique to this particular national context.

In relation to the media, Finn, Ingram, and Allen (2021) suggest that, within UK newspapers, constructions of students tend to coalesce around one of two tropes – with them either being seen as passive consumers and entitled learners, on the one hand, or as ‘fragile snowflakes’ and ‘PC [politically correct] warriors’, on the other. Similarly, writing with respect to TV shows, Calver and Michael-Fox (2021) have demonstrated how dominant constructions are often in tension – with students positioned as either ‘at risk’ and in need of protection or as posing ‘a risk’ to themselves, other students and/or the university sector. Moreover, constructions are not always constant across national borders. Indeed, Lainio and Brooks (2021) have contended that the extent to which students are positioned by the media as ‘family members’ (for example, reliant on parents for funding, accommodation and other forms of support) within newspapers differs quite significantly across Europe, influenced by both cultural factors and policy norms.

When we turn to societal perceptions more generally, a common construction, within Anglophone nations of the Global North, in particular, is student as hedonist or party-goer. Williams (2013) asserts that this understanding has a long history – maintaining that, until the 1960s, this was one of only two dominant constructions of students (the other being an individual devoted to his or her studies). Hubbard (2013), through an analysis of the portrayal of student drinking in UK newspapers, examines how students are constructed as leading lives revolving around hedonism rather than education and hard work. In doing so, he highlights a broader societal resentment towards students, who are viewed as over-privileged people living in a ‘bubble’, and as burdens on the economies of the cities in which they live as a result of their disruptive drinking. More recently, Sykes (2021) explores entrenched societal stereotypes of the partying and binge-drinking university student, and why such stereotypes endure despite being at odds with the lives of most students.

There is relatively little work, however, that has explored how students themselves believe they are seen by others, and the impact of this on them. This seems a significant omission given the long-standing evidence of the impact of labelling and stereotypes on individuals’ understandings of themselves and their place in society (e.g. Becker 1973; Goffman 1959).

Some notable exceptions include Abrahams and Brooks (2019) who, drawing on data from England and Ireland, have suggested that students are sensitive to the ways in which they are constructed in policy; the manner in which they feel they are seen by policymakers can impact on the extent to which they see themselves as significant political actors. In addition, Sykes (2021) has shown how the societal construction of students as party-goers is so strong that students themselves often feel they have to conform to this ideal type in their social media postings and other public expressions of their identity, even when they are, in practice, spending the majority of their time studying, and partying relatively infrequently.

The rest of this article focusses specifically on these questions: how do students, across Europe, believe they are viewed by others, and what impact do such constructions have on them? Drawing on the data from focus groups we conducted with students in Denmark, England, Ireland, Germany, Spain and Poland – particularly, an exercise during these focus groups, in which students made plasticine models to depict how they felt they were seen by relevant others – we will illustrate how the four most common ways in which students believed they were constructed were as hedonistic and lazy; useless and a burden; clever, hardworking, and successful; and a resource to be exploited. We will show how many students experienced some of these stereotypes as not only being disconnected from their own experiences, but as leading to their hard work, effort, and contributions to the university and society being made invisible, and to their motivations and passions as well as their problems and struggles being trivialised. Furthermore, we will discuss how two themes that cut across all these constructions were the dominance of the idea that HE ought to lead to employment, and that Humanities and Social Science subjects were problematic and inferior to subjects in Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM). Finally, we will analyse how specific national contexts accounted for a range of variations in how students articulated specific constructions. First, however, we will outline our research methods.

## Methods

This paper draws on data from 54 focus groups conducted with 295 undergraduate students across Europe between November 2016 and October 2018. Six countries were involved in the project – Denmark, England, Ireland, Germany, Spain and Poland – chosen to provide diversity in ‘welfare regime’ (Esping-Andersen 1990), relationship to the European Union, and mechanisms for funding HE (see Table S1 in [Supplemental Information](#)). In each country, we collected data in three HEIs. Where possible, the HEIs were chosen to represent key elements of the diversity of the relevant national HE sector. For example, in Ireland, we chose one institute of technology, as well as two universities (one of which was among the most elite in the country); in Spain, one private university and two public universities; and in England, which has the most vertically differentiated system in our sample, institutions of different ages, which mapped onto different league table positions. We sought to include students who were broadly representative of the demographics of the wider institution in terms of disciplinary mix, gender balance and age (see Table S2 in [Supplemental Information](#)).<sup>1</sup> Because we were primarily interested in understandings of *national* students, we excluded international students.

We chose to use focus groups as this method of data collection offered a number of advantages in the context of our study. Focus groups helped generate lively discussion and

debate and allowed us to access collectively produced accounts of how participants felt that students as a group – and specific students as individuals – were seen, while also enabling us to speak to a relatively large number of students within and across the six European countries. In the focus groups, we asked students a range of questions about their understandings of what it means to be a student today. For the purposes of this paper, we draw on data from one activity undertaken during the focus groups: plasticine modelling. At the start of each group, we asked participants to make (individually, and not in discussion with other participants) plasticine models to represent how they thought they were viewed by ‘others’.<sup>2</sup> Students were subsequently asked to talk us through what they had made and why. This creative method, as discussed by Ingram (2011), is a useful tool for eliciting rich data as it enables participants to make tangible relatively abstract ideas, and allows greater time for reflection.

We chose not to define or limit which ‘others’ students should focus on when making their models, as we wished to understand broadly the main ways in which they felt they were seen, rather than, for instance, comparing how students felt they were perceived by different sets of ‘others’. As a result, in some cases the others to whom our participants refer are known others (family members, friends, or former and current classmates) while, in other cases, it is a more abstract other (politicians, ‘society’) or even an undefined other (‘people’, ‘they’). Through this research design we, therefore, allowed our participants to decide how best to capture how they felt they were seen by relevant others. The focus groups in Denmark, England and Ireland were conducted in English, while those in the other three countries were conducted in the national language and then translated into English prior to analysis. Informed consent was obtained in writing from all participants. This research was approved by the University of Surrey’s ethics committee (reference number UEC/2016/017/FASS).

In analysing the data, we considered each student’s plasticine model/s (some made more than one model) together with their explanation of the model/s. We also paid attention to how students responded or reacted to each other’s models. Data were first coded and analysed by country and then across countries. Both deductive and inductive approaches were used, the former informed by previous work on conceptualisations of students (see Brooks 2018 for details).

## **The (stereo)typical student: how students feel they are seen**

In this section, we will explore the four most common ways in which students felt they were constructed: as hedonistic and lazy; useless and a burden; clever, hardworking, and successful; and a resource to be exploited.

### ***Hedonistic and lazy***

In all six countries, we encountered a number of models that linked to the idea of students being lazy or leading easy and, in some cases, hedonistic lives. These included models of beds, three Zs to denote sleep, a TV, a sloth, and mugs of beer and bottles of alcohol. Indeed, in England, Ireland, Poland, and Denmark, in this order, this was the most common way in which participants felt students were viewed.

Participants linked perceptions of students as lazy and/or hedonistic to what they felt was a prevalent view that university study was too easy and/or students did not take their studies seriously enough. This in turn was sometimes attributed to a lack of awareness about what exactly it was that students did, and, specifically, the amount of hard work they needed to put into their studies. According to some students, the kind of work that being a student involved was often not seen as constituting work at all:

I just think a lot of people [don't] realise that students have to work quite hard, just because things like school stuff and texts aren't seen as work. I think a lot of them see students more as zombies or vampires who sleep all day long and do things with their mates at night. (German student)

More commonly, however, participants linked such constructions of students to normative understandings of what the purpose of HE ought to be, and the related framing of study programmes stereotypically not associated with good employment outcomes – usually those in the Humanities or Social Sciences – as less serious courses, and of students enrolled on such courses as less serious learners than those enrolled on STEM programmes, for instance, which were seen as leading to good careers. As a Spanish Sociology student reflected:

The majority of people, when I tell them I'm studying Sociology, stop and say, 'What kind of sh\*t is that?' [...] they think I'm here wasting my time, because they don't see any clear opportunities which might result from it. So here I have also made a representation of a [cannabis] joint because there are a lot of people who think my course is just smoking joints all day.' (see Figure 1)

Humanities and Social Science students also felt that these study programmes were seen as being less challenging and demanding, both because the subject matter of these courses was perceived to be simple, and the courses typically had fewer contact hours. As a result, those studying such courses were thought to be lazy or to have a lot of free time at their disposal.

For instance:

I did a bed, because I have quite a few maths students in my friendship group and they have like seven hours a day, whereas I will have seven hours a week, so I think they get the impression of... I just lounge around in bed every day, whereas they're actually going to lectures and studying hard, so ... yeah. (English student, see Figure 2)



Figure 1. Model of [cannabis] joint.





**Figure 2.** Model of bed.

According to our participants, then, students studying certain programmes, particularly those in the Humanities and Social Science courses, were much more likely to be problematised as being lazy.

Alongside some broad similarities, there were also some notable differences in how the construction of the lazy student was articulated by students across all six countries. For instance, in Denmark – where not only was HE free, but students also received educational grants from the state – participants discussed how perceived student laziness was seen as a misuse of state funds. For instance, a number of students made models of coffee cups to depict how their educational grants were wryly referred to as ‘cafe money’ because it was felt that, despite being ‘paid to study’, most students used their time (and grant money) for other purposes:

the public sees students as someone who should be reading books all the time, they should be studying, but actually they’re at the café, drinking coffee! (see [Figure 3](#))

A number of Danish students described feeling constantly judged by everyone around them for not working hard enough to deserve the money invested in them, a sentiment which was powerfully depicted by one student who made an eye to represent being under surveillance.



**Figure 3.** Model of coffee cup.

In England and Ireland, particularly, students' descriptions of how they were viewed as lazy and leading an easy life typically revolved around the theme of alcohol consumption. The majority of participants in these countries made models of bottles of alcohol and mugs of beer to depict how students were viewed as heavy and disruptive drinkers as well as party animals. Some students described how apart from being portrayed in this way by the media, even friends and family from 'back home' imagined that their lives were an endless stream of parties and drunken escapades. In both countries, although many students discussed how there was a problematic binge drinking culture among university students – which, strikingly, they framed as being a typically British/Irish phenomenon – they emphasised that, in their experience, the majority of students did not drink as much as people imagined they did. In England, particularly, some students linked such constructions of students to massification. For instance, one student described how a warden at her university residence hall told her that while ten years ago students came to university to learn, they are now here for a 'bit of a piss-up, really'. Similarly, another English student observed:

the government see us [...] in a way [as] pests, [...] it's like, oh towns will get ruined because students are having fights and going out and smashing drinks [...] university is seen as really common now in a way and ... rather than like a few years ago when it was like only the elite sort of went to university [...] anyone can go now. So it's just [...] becoming a bit more of pests rather than, I don't know, elites and everything

Across all six countries, a large proportion of our focus group participants took exception to being constructed as lazy or hedonistic, viewing such stereotypes as not just being disconnected from the realities of most students' lives but also harmful. Many emphasised how such constructions made invisible the hard work that the majority of students invested



in their studies (often outside of ‘visible’ contact hours), and the high levels of stress many experienced as a result of the demands of their study programmes, and having to balance these demands with paid work, internships, and family responsibilities. In England, participants discussed how the stereotype of the heavy drinking student led to the trivialising of serious student problems by dismissing them as alcohol-related. Furthermore, echoing arguments made by Sykes (2021), some English students described how such stereotypes had also meant that they themselves had held false expectations about what student life would look like prior to entering HE.

Thus, our participants did not seek to present themselves – or to be viewed by others – as ‘effortless achievers’, in order to demonstrate ‘authentic intelligence’ or portray an image of being ‘cool’, as has been documented in some other studies which have explored the relationship between learner identities and narratives of hard work and effort (e.g. Jackson and Nystrom 2015). Indeed, the stereotype of the lazy and hedonistic student contrasted sharply with the main ways in which many of these students perceived themselves: as learners and hard workers (Brooks and Abrahams 2020).

### ***Useless and a burden***

Another theme that we encountered in the plasticine models made by our participants pertained to the idea that students were useless and/or burdens. This was an especially prominent theme in Spain and in England, but visible in the other countries in our study as well.

Across all six countries, one reason why participants felt that students might be viewed as useless or burdens related to the belief that the knowledge gained at university was not useful or not what was needed on the job market (this was sometimes discussed in terms of university study being too ‘theoretical’ or not ‘applicable’), as well as to the view that graduates of HE had poor employment prospects. A range of models were made to depict this construction, including a model of a student surrounded by two question marks (to depict uncertainty about what use their degrees will be in the future), and a model of a person with a huge head but no hands or feet (to depict how students’ knowledge is not applicable). Students enrolled on Humanities and Social Science courses were the most likely to describe themselves as being viewed as problematic for these reasons. For instance, a student in England, studying English and Art, made a model of a bucket without a bottom to depict how she was viewed by her family and school friends as:

doing a degree [that is] kind of pointless, like a bucket without a bottom! [others laugh] [...] the first question I get asked is, well what are you going to do with that? [agreement] And I’m like, ooh, don’t know. And they say, oh do you want to be a teacher? I’m like no. And so it’s just sort of pointless. And you can either see the judgement in people, or they just [...] say, well that, you’re going to be in loads of debt, waste of money, you know, just pointless.

A number of participants also discussed how the prestige attached to being a student had fallen because of increased participation in HE. As one German student who made a model of some pebbles put it, ‘students are as common as sand on a beach’. Indeed, according to some participants, a prevailing view was that contemporary students did not enter HE for the right reasons, but as a result of herd mentality or because going to university has come to be viewed as the next step after school. Thus, for many participants being a student

did not bring distinction in a manner they imagined it had in the past. In England, some participants additionally discussed how students studying at less prestigious universities were more likely to be seen in this way, while students at high-status universities were viewed as more serious and impressive learners. For instance, one student from the low-ranking HEI in our sample, reflected:

if I'm honest, I think society just now sees, especially, oh especially universities that are not [...] the Russell Group<sup>3</sup> universities [...] I definitely think that people just see it as just, oh well, go from school straight into uni, there you go, just go and do an extra three years.

Furthermore, in England alone, the financial debt that most students would graduate with was described as making them seem even more burdensome and problematic (depicted in a model of a dumbbell, see [Figure 4](#)):

I think the [...] sudden increase in volume of students recently over the past sort of ten or fifteen or twenty years, I think students are beginning to be seen as a bit of a burden, it's that everyone's [...] a student, everyone gets debt [...] if you're just like, I went to university, people are just like [...] you haven't figured out what you want to do yet or whatever, so [...] there's a lot of that sort of angle that I've experienced anyway.

While in England, students might be seen as indirectly posing a financial burden on the tax payer by accumulating substantial debt they could never pay back, Danish students discussed being seen as posing a financial burden on the government and the taxpayer in a more direct fashion. A number of students made reference to what they felt was a growing sentiment in the country – among politicians, universities, the media, and the general public – that the educational grants students received ought to be reduced and that students ought to contribute financially to their own education. For instance, one study participant made a model of a ball and chain to depict how students were seen not so much as an investment but as an expense: 'So they have to spend this money on us but they [...] don't really want to! [...] They feel that we should put way more resources into this project than we are.'



**Figure 4.** Model of dumbbell.

A striking pattern that we noticed in the Spanish focus groups was that a number of participants made models to depict how, because of the country's political and economic situation, Spanish students were viewed as inferior to students from other European countries, including by students from such countries. This perceived inferiority was discussed in terms of Spanish students' capabilities, work ethic, and future prospects. The following quotations illustrate how Europe formed an important frame of reference for many of these participants:

I've tried to focus on the view [of] the European general public [of] the Spanish situation. I think the most of them knew some information about the corruption [...] and all the social conflicts and the crisis, and everything is quite negative. I think [...] that European students tend to think that Spanish students are like different [from] the real students [...] more of them don't really study.

I have made a glass which is half full [...] what we have inside us would be our knowledge, and depending upon the country in which you were, the glass would be fuller or emptier. In the case of Spain, I think they probably see the glass as being empty, and in other countries they see the glass being fuller. (see [Figure 5](#))

Across all six countries, students varied in the extent to which they appeared to agree with how they felt they were constructed. For instance, a number of students were themselves concerned about their employment prospects (despite many Humanities and Social Sciences students critiquing stereotypes of their courses leading to unemployment). Nevertheless, many participants who had made models pertaining to the construction of students as useless and a burden expressed how it could be demoralising and stressful to be labelled in this manner.

### ***Clever, hardworking, and successful***

In contrast to the negative constructions of students described thus far, many students from all the countries in our study other than Spain – where this was a less prominent theme (and we return to this point in the Discussion) – described ostensibly more positive ways in which they felt students were commonly seen. A number made models to represent how students were viewed as clever and full of ideas, and as being 'intellectuals' and 'a budding elite'. In addition, many described being seen as hardworking, nerdy, or busy studying all the time (sometimes even too much). Participants also made models to represent how students were viewed as successful and socially mobile: people with good career prospects (better than those who did not go to university), who were on the right and most desirable track, and who were moving up in life. A range of models were made to portray these themes, including models of books, graduation caps, spectacles, a lightbulb, a person on a pedestal wearing a cape, a staircase (to signify social mobility), and a sweating face (to depict hard work), among others.

Students from STEM programmes or professional courses such as law were discussed as being viewed as very intelligent, hardworking, and high-achieving because of the subject they were studying. The following quotes are illustrative:

I think depending on what you are studying, people see... like for example, if I tell someone that I'm studying law, they're like, oh well a lot of the time in the library then you know! (Irish student)



**Figure 5.** Model of a half-full glass.

everyone thinks it's so "wow" to finish studies, and in my case, it was a field of study that usually leaves an impression, it was physics, so "wow" (Polish student)

Indeed, several students discussed how it was easy for law students and medical students to find residential accommodation because they were seen as studious people who would be good tenants (while students studying supposedly less challenging subjects were thought to engage in hedonistic and disruptive behaviour).

There were also some variations between countries. For instance, in England particularly, but also in Ireland, institutional hierarchy once again emerged as significant, with participants from the most elite universities in the sample saying that they were viewed as being particularly intelligent and hardworking, and especially likely to get good jobs and be successful. In Germany and Denmark, on the other hand, participants were more likely than in the other countries to describe students being viewed as successful in less obviously career-related

terms. For instance, some participants from the German focus groups made models of flowers to represent how people they knew viewed them as ‘blossoming’ through their participation in HE, and a Danish participant framed the positive perceptions surrounding participation in HE in societal terms, saying that students were seen as good citizens because they were doing ‘the right thing to do in our society’. The emphasis on success in non-career related terms is likely to be linked to distinctive national traditions of HE in these countries, and particularly to the influence of Humboldtian ideals of holistic learning and development.

While constructions of students as clever, hardworking, and socially mobile were largely viewed by our participants as positive constructions, there was some challenging of the perceptions underlying these constructions. For instance, some students disagreed with the idea that university attendance automatically correlated with intelligence, and even highlighted how making such a correlation could lead to the hard work that most students put into their studies, and the struggles and stress that they experienced, becoming invisible. As an English student, who made a model of a lightbulb, noted:

[...] a lot of the time people think that you come to uni and suddenly you just become smarter and [...] you’re doing all the reading and it’s no problem and you just come here and, like I said, reach sort of enlightenment – and that was sort of [what I meant by] that lightbulb – and it’s not [like that].

Some participants at the elite university in our sample in Ireland and England ridiculed stereotypes of them being more intelligent or having a better work ethic than people at other universities. For instance, a student from an Irish focus group who had recently entered the elite university in the sample after previously studying at a relatively lower-status university, exclaimed, ‘It’s like my IQ has gone up about a hundred points because I’m at [Name of University] now and that’s just like insulting!’ As discussed in the section on ‘Hedonistic and lazy’, then, far from being eager to present themselves as effortless learners, many of our participants emphasised their hard work.

In addition, some students discussed how stereotypes about students being intelligent, hardworking and successful put pressure on people to enter HE, when in fact it was not the right path for everyone. Finally, a handful of students questioned whether participation in HE really did bring success and social mobility, citing poor employment prospects for graduates.

### ***A resource to be exploited in the present or in the future***

Another theme we encountered in the models made by participants particularly in Denmark, Spain, and Ireland related to the idea of students being a resource to be exploited in the present or in the future. This theme unfolded in different ways in each of these countries.

In Denmark, a number of participants made models of clocks to portray how – given that their education was publicly funded – there was an expectation that they view it as training for employment, and move rapidly through their studies to enter the labour market. Our participants were extremely critical of such an understanding of students, feeling that it resulted in an impoverishment of the student role by restricting their ability to pick a subject of study based on personal interest (unless it was associated with good labour market outcomes), and to immerse themselves in the here-and-now of the education process and university experience (see also Brooks et al. 2021). For instance, one participant made a model of a running person with a book and a clock looming over them, and observed:



Society thinks that we should really run fast, or we should go through our study really fast [...] we don't have the time for just focus on [...] being good at it, we have to get fast, so we can come out...and take part [in] working [job market]. (see [Figure 6](#))

Such an understanding of the purpose of HE and the student role were discussed as leading to Humanities courses being devalued – and even shut down – because they were not seen as straightforwardly leading to employment.

Echoing the sentiments of the Danish participants to some extent, a major theme among our Spanish participants was that they were viewed by the government, employers, and people in general, as a cheap resource – or, as some put it, a ‘product’ – to be shaped, used, and exploited for their own ends, both in the present and the future. While in some cases, participants were referring to being conceptualised as workers-in-the-making (like in Denmark), in other cases they felt they were viewed as a source of income by politicians and universities, or as cheap labour by employers in the present. The majority of models made by our Spanish participants related to this broad theme, and included a model of a puppet with strings (to show how ‘society’ thinks that students can be ‘manoeuvred’), a Euro (to symbolise how students are a source of income to universities as well as cheap labour), and a briefcase (to symbolise how students will be workers in the future). Interestingly, in discussing how they were conceptualised and treated as a cog in a wheel or a pawn in someone else's game, some students drew on ‘market’ metaphors, positioning themselves as *products* rather than producers. For instance:

[students are seen as a] piece of sh\*t [...] they don't value you for your studies and neither do they see you as something productive, they see you as a product, but not as a person who can produce.



**Figure 6.** Model of running person, book, and clock.



As in the case of Denmark, Spanish students were very critical of being viewed in this manner, feeling that they ought to be recognised as developing people who were worth being supported rather than a resource to be exploited.

Ireland was the third country in our sample where the theme of students being viewed as resources to be exploited, now or in the future, emerged strongly. Similar to participants from Denmark and Spain, some Irish participants described how students were viewed as workers-in-the-making. For instance, one student made a model of a 'little person' to represent how students were all seen as going through the same 'cycle of life': they are understood as being 'here [at the HEI] to get a degree to get a job to work'. This student further reflected: 'I just feel like we're seen as little people that just do what [...] society wants them to do'. However, unlike in Denmark and Spain, some of our Irish participants also made models of babies and pacifiers to portray how students were viewed as being young people transitioning to adulthood (see [Figure 7](#) below). According to them, students were viewed as being in an 'incubator', 'unfinished', inexperienced, youthful, lacking in independence, and coddled, but also full of potential to do things *in the future*. In describing these conceptualisations of the student, some of our participants stressed that viewing students as people who would contribute in the future led to their present contributions to society being ignored.



**Figure 7.** Model of baby.

The theme of students' work and efforts not being recognised as substantial or valuable also emerged from a few plasticine models made by students in other countries (although not as a major theme). For instance, a German student observed:

I think many people [...] don't see the work associated with a degree, because it doesn't make a profit and it's not something you can measure in salary terms, it's something that the individual does for themselves and that's why you have the image: We just laze around, bide our time and eventually we finish and then start working and that's when we become part of society and it makes sense, but before that we're all just a waste of space.

Thus, regardless of how the idea of students being resources to be exploited in the present or future was articulated, students felt that such constructions led to a sidelining of them as individuals with interests, passions, hopes and also of their contributions in the present. (Lesko 2001; Pole, Pilcher, and Williams 2005).

## Discussion

In the paper thus far, we have illustrated the highly ambivalent manner in which students in six European countries appear to feel that they were viewed by relevant others. One of the strongest themes that cut across the plasticine models that students made was the dominant construction of HE as a path to employment – together with scepticism about whether degrees were, in fact, leading to employment at all. While it was only in Spain, Denmark, and Ireland that a large proportion of the focus group participants felt that they were seen as resources to be exploited in the future (or the present), the idea that the goal of HE ought to be employment and career advancement informed the other three key constructions of students discussed in this paper: students as lazy; useless; and clever, hardworking and successful. As we have illustrated, studying a course that was not stereotypically associated with good employment outcomes (usually in the Humanities and Social Sciences) was seen as identifying one as a non-serious learner, and even a lazy, hedonistic, and useless person, while those studying courses perceived as leading to promising careers (typically STEM and certain professional degrees, such as Law) were seen as intelligent, hardworking, and high achieving. The apparent dominance of the framing of HE as a path to employment reinforces understandings of the purpose of HE dominant in policy, while undermining and trivialising other understandings that many students appeared to hold (see also Brooks and Abrahams 2020; Brooks et al. 2020). We do not mean to suggest that none of our participants valued HE as a means to improve their career prospects. As we have discussed elsewhere (e.g. Brooks et al. 2020), this was an important goal for many students. What our participants took exception to, then, was being viewed solely as people who ought to be moving towards employment, as well as the belief that only certain pathways within HE (e.g. STEM courses) constituted career advancement.

Indeed, another major theme that underpinned many of the stereotypes that our participants discussed is that students following Humanities and Social Science courses experience a great deal of stigma and feel they are seen as inferior – less intelligent, hardworking, and successful – compared to those following STEM or certain other professional courses. A number of previous studies have examined students' relationships to their subjects of study (e.g. Bradbeer, Healey, and Kneale 2004; Ashwin, Abbas, and McLean 2016), and have shown that different disciplines have different pedagogical cultures, which can mediate

students' understandings of their learner identities (e.g. Nyström et al. 2019). However, what has been studied less is how students feel that their subjects of study are perceived by relevant others, and how such perceptions might influence the manner in which they are viewed and treated. This paper contributes to addressing this gap.

While there were some broad similarities in how students felt they were constructed across all six countries in our study, there were also some striking cross-national differences, to which we will now turn. Spanish students were much less likely than students from the other countries in our study to describe being viewed by relevant others as intelligent, hardworking, and high-achieving, socially-mobile people. Our findings here are in keeping with a pessimism and dissatisfaction that we encountered at another point in the focus groups in Spain, when we asked students to make plasticine models of how they saw themselves – in Spain alone, students made models depicting hopelessness and frustration at their situations and possibilities (see Brooks and Abrahams 2020). Furthermore, only in Spain did students appear to feel that they were seen as inferior to or by their European counterparts. Indeed, Spain was the only country in which some students made models to depict how they imagined *European* others saw them; in all the other countries, students typically made models of how they felt they were seen by co-nationals (although we did not give students any instructions in this regard). Spanish students' narratives bear similarities to broader 'spatial imaginaries' that have been discussed particularly with respect to Spain. For instance, Bonal and Tarabini (2013) have argued that 'Europe' acts as an important frame of reference within Spain, with official discourse presenting a close alignment with other European states as a key means to facilitating social and economic progress. Although, the emphasis in students' narratives is different, the presence of Europe as an important (and superior) frame of reference is still evident (Brooks 2021). Spanish students' pessimistic assessments of how they were viewed by others – as well as their less than positive depictions of how they saw themselves (Brooks and Abrahams 2020) – can be attributed at least partially to the job market for graduates. At the time of data collection (2017–2018), Spain was one of the four EU member states with the highest rate of graduate unemployment (22.1%), while all the other countries in our study had a graduate unemployment rate below the EU average (14.5%) (Eurostat 2019).

The HE funding mechanisms in operation – and associated policy narratives – in the various countries also shaped to some extent the manner in which students felt they were seen. This was clearest in Denmark, where students' accounts of how they were viewed as lazy and/or useless and burdens was strongly linked to the idea of them being a bad investment of public money. Students' descriptions of how they felt they were seen bear similarities to how they were constructed in HE policy in the country. Brooks (2021) argues that in Danish policy documents, a prominent way in which students were constructed was as objects of criticism. S/he analyses how in these policy narratives, the quality of the student population was problematised and framed as being adversely impacted by increased participation in HE. Furthermore, students were criticised for not choosing study programmes that were aligned to the needs of the labour market, and for taking too long to complete their degrees. Indeed, the figure of the 'lazy' student has been used as a foil for introducing a range of reforms intended to encourage students to move through their studies at a faster pace (Ulriksen and Nejrup 2021). Such a problematisation of students, it is argued, is directly related to the high public cost of HE in the country (Brooks 2021; Ulriksen and Nejrup 2021). The plasticine models that the Danish students in our study made to depict how

they were seen by others – not just the government, but also the media and ‘society’ – suggest that such a framing of students was something that they encountered not just through policy narratives and the changes these narratives produced in how HE was organised, but also on a day-to-day basis, through broader societal discourse and stereotypes about spoilt, lazy, and inefficient students.

However, policy narratives do not necessarily reflect – or determine – the way that students are conceptualised beyond policy. For instance, Brooks (2021) argues that, in England, given the high personal financial investment that students make in their studies, and the state’s dependence on students as a source of income for funding HE, students were typically not constructed in English policy narratives as lazy, their choice of subject of study was not critiqued, and increased participation in HE was certainly not problematised. Nevertheless, students’ plasticine models suggest that such policy constructions do not necessarily translate into broader societal narratives about students, and students may still feel they are seen as objects of criticism by those around them. Moreover, English students’ accounts also suggest that while, to some extent, their supposed laziness or the uselessness of their degrees might be viewed as being the result of poor strategies of personal investment with consequences mainly for themselves, the idea of students being a burden on the country or society – through, for instance, incurring debt they will not be able to repay, and through hedonistic and disruptive behaviour – was not absent.

In some countries, students’ plasticine models reflected the significant impact of institutional affiliation – and, more specifically, how their HEI was positioned in relation to other HEIs in the country – on how they felt they were seen and treated. In both England and Ireland, students at the high-status HEI in our sample discussed how their institutional affiliation led to them being seen as intelligent, hardworking, and high achieving. Furthermore, in England some participants discussed how students at less prestigious universities were seen as less serious and motivated learners than those at Russell Group universities. This is unsurprising, given that England’s HE sector is the most vertically differentiated of all the countries in our study, with ‘research intensive’ institutions (such as Russell Group universities, including the high-status HEI in our sample) being richer, more selective, and better positioned in national and international league tables than HEIs which have more recently obtained university status (Raffe and Croxford 2015). While the Irish HE system is arguably less hierarchically organised than in England (Hazelkorn 2015), the high-status university in our sample was one of the most rich, selective and prestigious in the country.

In the plasticine models student made, there were also certain constructions of students that were conspicuous by their absence: for instance, students as consumers. A growing body of research has explored the impact of policies of marketisation on HE student identities, with many England-focussed studies arguing that having to pay high tuition fees has resulted in students acquiring a consumer identity and approaching their studies in a passive and instrumental manner (e.g. Nixon, Scullion, and Hearn 2018; Molesworth, Nixon, and Scullion 2009). In addition, research has shown that in UK newspapers, students are often portrayed as entitled and passive learners (Finn, Ingram, and Allen 2021). Moreover, English HE policy explicitly constructs HE as a market and students as consumers. Nevertheless, even in England, students did not make plasticine models that suggest that they felt they were seen as people ‘purchasing’ a degree, entitled learners, or people engaging with HE in an instrumental or transactional manner (e.g. to get a job). Indeed, as discussed already,

studying a subject that was not associated with good career prospects was often what led to students being viewed as useless or lazy.

## Conclusion

Our research highlights the substantial variations in how students believed they were seen – and, thereby, in their experiences of being a student. A number of studies have suggested that, as a result of policy convergence and global pressures, degree-level study and the ways in which students are conceptualised have become increasingly similar across Europe (e.g. Moutsios 2013). However, as we have illustrated in this paper, our study found – alongside broad commonalities in the ways in which students across all six countries believed they were constructed by relevant others – that national contexts shaped, in multiple ways, students' perceptions of how they were viewed. Moreover, even within individual countries and HEIs, there were considerable differences in how different students felt they were perceived, with subject of study and, in some cases, institutional affiliation emerging as powerful factors accounting for variations in this regard.

To some extent, the negative and sometimes ambivalent constructions of students that our participants describe resemble the problematisation of young people, more broadly – a demographic that is often seen as overlapping with students (see, for example, Finn, Ingram, and Allen 2021) – by older and/or non-student actors. However, it is important to note that, in some cases, the people who our participants felt viewed them in problematic or erroneous ways were *other students* (this came across most strongly in Humanities and Social Science students' accounts of being looked down upon by their counterparts studying STEM subjects). Therefore, it is not helpful to construct students as a category of people who always share similar views and contrast them with other social actors.

Finally, while we do not suggest that our focus group participants' perceptions of how they were seen by relevant others are necessarily an accurate indicator of the views of these other people, our research foregrounds the significant material impact that stereotypical constructions of students appear to have on the experience of being a student, and the need to take seriously how such discourses can not only impact the well-being and learner identities of current students, but also potentially impact prospective students' decisions to enter HE, the subjects they choose to study, and how they imagine their futures.

## Authors' contributions

The contributions of the authors of the paper are as follows: Sazana Jayadeva (lead author, data analysis), Rachel Brooks (writing), Jessie Abrahams (data collection).

## Notes

1. We also sought a diversity in our sample in terms of social class and race. However due to the particular method used (focus groups) and the practical limitations on sampling, we are not able to speak directly to individual experiences which may be mediated by class, race or indeed gender and age. This was also not the focus of this project as it sought a more macro level analysis, and it is recognised that the definition and significance of class and race are distinct in different national contexts.

2. We also asked participants to make plasticine models to represent how they saw themselves. We discuss these models in another publication (Brooks and Abrahams 2020).
3. The Russell Group is a self-selected group of twenty-four research-intensive universities in the UK.

## Acknowledgements

We would like to thank all those who kindly gave up their time to be interviewed or take part in a focus group. We are also grateful to the European Research Council for awarding a Consolidator Grant to Rachel Brooks (681018\_EUROSSTUDENTS). Finally, we are thankful to Achala Gupta for preparing the table of student characteristics which we have published as Supplemental Information.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

## Funding

This work was supported by the H2020 European Research Council [681018\_EUROSSTUDENTS] through a Consolidator Grant awarded to Rachel Brooks.

## ORCID

Sazana Jayadeva  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7894-2263>

Rachel Brooks  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8692-1673>

## References

- Abrahams, J., and R. Brooks. 2019. "Higher Education Students as Political Actors: Evidence from England and Ireland." *Journal of Youth Studies* 22 (1): 108–123. doi:10.1080/13676261.2018.1484431.
- Ashwin, P., A. Abbas, and M. McLean. 2016. "Conceptualising Transformative Undergraduate Experiences: A Phenomenographic Exploration of Students' Personal Projects." *British Educational Research Journal* 42 (6): 962–977. doi:10.1002/berj.3244.
- Becker, H. 1973. *Outsiders: Studies in the Sociology of Deviance*. New York: The Free Press.
- Bonal, X., and A. Tarabini. 2013. "The Role of PISA in Shaping Hegemonic Educational Discourses, Policies and Practices: The Case of Spain." *Research in Comparative and International Education* 8 (3): 335–341. doi:10.2304/rcie.2013.8.3.335.
- Bradbeer, J., M. Healey, and P. Kneale. 2004. "Undergraduate Geographers' Understandings of Geography, Learning and Teaching: A Phenomenographic Study." *Journal of Geography in Higher Education* 28 (1): 17–34. doi:10.1080/0309826042000198611.
- Brooks, R. 2018. "Understanding the Higher Education Student in Europe: A Comparative Analysis." *Compare: A Journal of Comparative and International Education* 48 (4): 500–517. doi:10.1080/03057925.2017.1318047.
- Brooks, R. 2021. "The Construction of Higher Education Students within National Policy: A cross-European Comparison." *Compare: A Journal of Comparative and International Education* 51 (2): 161–180. doi:10.1080/03057925.2019.1604118.
- Brooks, R., A. Gupta, S. Jayadeva, and J. Abrahams. 2020. "Students' Views about the Purpose of Higher Education: A Comparative Analysis of Six European Countries." *Higher Education Research & Development*: 151–168. doi:10.1080/07294360.2020.1830039.



- Brooks, R., and J. Abrahams. 2020. "European Higher Education Students: Contested Constructions." *Sociological Research Online*: 1360780420973042.
- Brooks, R., J. Abrahams, A. Gupta, S. Jayadeva, and P. Lažetić. 2021. "Higher Education Timescapes: Temporal Understandings of Students and Learning." *Sociology* 55 (5): 995–1014. doi:10.1177/0038038521996979.
- Calver, K., and B. Michael-Fox. 2021. "Constructing the University Student in British Documentary Television." In *Reimagining the Higher Education Student*, edited by R. Brooks and S. O'Shea. London: Routledge.
- Esping-Andersen, G. 1990. *The Three Worlds of Welfare Capitalism*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press.
- Eurostat. 2019. "Unemployment Statistics." Accessed 19 March 2021. <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/products-eurostat-news/-/DDN-20190704-1>
- Finn, K., N. Ingram, and K. Allen. 2021. "Student Millennials/Millennial Students: How the Lens of Generation Constructs Understandings of the Contemporary HE Student." In *Reimagining the Higher Education Student*, edited by R. Brooks and S. O'Shea. 187–204. London: Routledge.
- Goffman, E. 1959. *The Presentation of the Self in Everyday Life*. New York: Doubleday.
- Hazelnkorn, E. 2015. *Rankings and the Reshaping of Higher Education: The Battle for World-Class Excellence*. Basingstoke: Springer.
- Hubbard, P. 2013. "Carnage! Coming to a Town near You? Nightlife, Uncivilised Behaviour and the Carnavalesque Body." *Leisure Studies* 32 (3): 265–282. doi:10.1080/02614367.2011.633616.
- Ingram, N. 2011. "Within School and beyond the Gate: The Difficulties of Being Educationally Successful and Working Class." *Sociology* 45 (2): 287–302. doi:10.1177/0038038510394017.
- Jackson, C., and A.-S. Nystrom. 2015. "Smart Students Get Perfect Scores in Tests without Studying Much': Why is an Effortless Achiever Identity Attractive, and for Whom is It Possible?" *Research Papers in Education* 30 (4): 393–410. doi:10.1080/02671522.2014.970226.
- Lainio, A., and R. Brooks. 2021. "Constructing Students as Family Members: Contestations in Media and Policy Representations across Europe." In *Reimagining the Higher Education Student*, edited by R. Brooks and S. O'Shea. 169–186. London: Routledge.
- Lesko, N. 2001. *Act Your Age!: A Cultural Construction of Adolescence*. London: Psychology Press.
- McArthur, J. 2011. "Reconsidering the Social and Economic Purposes of Higher Education." *Higher Education Research & Development* 30 (6): 737–749. doi:10.1080/07294360.2010.539596.
- Molesworth, M., E. Nixon, and R. Scullion. 2009. "Having, Being and Higher Education: The Marketisation of the University and the Transformation of the Student into Consumer." *Teaching in Higher Education* 14 (3): 277–287. doi:10.1080/13562510902898841.
- Moutsios, S. 2013. "The de-Europeanization of the University under the Bologna Process." *Thesis Eleven* 119 (1): 22–46. doi:10.1177/0725513613512198.
- Nielsen, G. B., and L. L. Sarauw. 2017. "Tuning up and Tuning in: How the European Bologna Process is Influencing Students' Time of Study." In *Death of the Public University?*, edited by Susan Wright and Chris Shore, 156–172. New York: Berghahn Books.
- Nixon, E., R. Scullion, and R. Hearn. 2018. "Her Majesty the Student: Marketised Higher Education and the Narcissistic (Dis) Satisfactions of the Student-Consumer." *Studies in Higher Education* 43 (6): 927–943. doi:10.1080/03075079.2016.1196353.
- Nyström, A. S., C. Jackson, and M. Salminen Karlsson. 2019. "What Counts as Success? Constructions of Achievement in Prestigious Higher Education Programmes." *Research Papers in Education* 34 (4): 465–482. doi:10.1080/02671522.2018.1452964.
- O'Shea, Sarah, and Janine Delahunty. 2018. "Getting through the Day and Still Having a Smile on my Face! How Do Students Define Success in the University Learning Environment?" *Higher Education Research & Development* 37 (5): 1062–1075. doi:10.1080/07294360.2018.1463973.
- Patfield, S., J. Gore, and L. Fray. 2021. "On Becoming a University Student: Young People and the 'Illusion' of Higher Education." In *Reimagining the Higher Education Student*, edited by R. Brooks and S. O'Shea. 10–26. London: Routledge.
- Pole, C., Pilcher, J., & Williams, J. (Eds.). 2005. *Young People in Transition: Becoming Citizens?* London: Springer.

- Raffe, D., and L. Croxford. 2015. "How Stable is the Stratification of Higher Education in England and Scotland?" *British Journal of Sociology of Education* 36 (2): 313–335. doi:[10.1080/01425692.2013.820127](https://doi.org/10.1080/01425692.2013.820127).
- Sykes, G. 2021. "Dispelling the Myth of the 'Traditional' University Undergraduate Student in the UK." In *Reimagining the Higher Education Student*, edited by R. Brooks and S. O'Shea. 79–96. London: Routledge.
- Tomlinson, M. 2017. "Student Perceptions of Themselves as 'Consumers' of Higher Education." *British Journal of Sociology of Education* 38 (4): 450–467. doi:[10.1080/01425692.2015.1113856](https://doi.org/10.1080/01425692.2015.1113856).
- Uerpaiojkit, T., and J. Burford. 2021. "Constructions of Náksèuk-Sa'a: Tracing Contested Imaginings of the Thai University Student." In *Reimagining the Higher Education Student*, edited by R. Brooks and S. O'Shea. 45–61. London: Routledge.
- Ulriksen, L., and C. Nejrup. 2021. "Balancing Time – University Students' Study Practices and Policy Perceptions of Time." *Sociological Research Online* 26 (1): 166–184. doi:[10.1177/1360780420957036](https://doi.org/10.1177/1360780420957036).
- Williams, J. 2013. *Consuming Higher Education. Why Learning Can't Be Bought*. London: Bloomsbury.