K8 Conwy 1 Thursday 6 December 11.30 - 12.00

The construction of higher education students within national policy: a cross-European comparison (0195)

Rachel Brooks[1] [1]*University of Surrey, Guildford, United Kingdom*

Introduction

It is often assumed within much of the academic literature and by many of those working in higher education (HE) that universities across Europe are homogenising, converging around an Anglo-American model as a result of neo-liberal pressures and the aim of creating a single European HE Area (Moutsios, 2013). However, this paper demonstrates that enduring differences remain – at least in so far as constructions of students are concerned. This has implications for both European policy and academic theorisation.

The paper draws on an analysis of 92 policy texts that were collected from six different European countries (Denmark, England, Germany, Ireland, Poland and Spain). The sample comprised speeches given by government ministers for HE, and key strategy documents, relating to HE, produced by government, staff and student unions, and organisations representing graduate employers.

Variation in constructions

Object of criticism

Firstly, there are considerable differences across the documents with respect to the positioning of HE students as objects of criticism. It is notable that while in the English documents, critical comments are generally directed at the providers of HE by the government and employers' organisations, and at the government by staff and students' unions, students themselves are constructed in largely very positive terms. In contrast, in Poland and Denmark, students are problematised. They are seen as too numerous, not of sufficient quality, and having made the wrong subject choices.

Vulnerable individual

While students are positioned as objects of criticism by the government in Poland and Denmark, they are understood, in contrast, as vulnerable, or at least *potentially* vulnerable, in

the other four nations. The source of this vulnerability differs considerably, however, across national contexts and between policy actors, and relates closely to the position the particular policy actor wishes to advance. In Germany, for example, students are understood by the government, not as 'digital natives', but as vulnerable as a result of the growth of new technologies – unless they are better prepared by universities. This underpins its digitisation strategy for the HE sector.

Investor or investment?

A further difference in the construction of students can be seen with respect to the concept of 'investment', which is drawn upon in many of the documents. This is most evident in whether they are considered as *individual investors* or part of a *societal investment*, and the implications for their rights and responsibilities that are argued to follow from this. The clearest articulation of the former position is seen in England, in a large majority of the government documents and ministerial speeches. This understanding of students is linked closely, in England, with a consumer rights discourse. The dominant discourse in the majority of countries, however, is one which positions students as part of a broader societal investment in education and the public benefits that flow from this. In such cases, students are understood, not as the bearers of consumer rights, but as having certain responsibilities to society.

Spatial provenance

Finally, a key difference across the policy documents relates to the way in which HE students are positioned spatially. Students are viewed as Europeans, part of a common European project, in many of the documents from Germany, Spain, Poland and Ireland, while such a perspective is notably absent from the Danish and English policy texts.

Explaining cross-European variation

Funding mechanisms

National differences in the construction of students can be explained, to some extent, by the different ways in which HE is funded in the various countries and the impact this has on relationships between the state and students. The high fees paid by students in England, and the state's dependence on this source of income for funding HE, explains why English students are not criticised in the documents – either explicitly or implicitly – in the ways in

which they are in some other countries. They provide a key means of funding HE, and alienating this group would presumably be considered a highly risky governmental strategy. Relatedly, the large size of the student population is much more likely to be seen as problematic in countries where fees are fully or largely covered by the state (as in Denmark, for example).

Domestic political context

The use of the figure of the 'vulnerable student' can be seen as a strategy – related to a universal principle (protecting the vulnerable) – that is used to justify a wide range of domestic policy measures: increased marketisation in England; the adoption of European standards in Spain; the introduction of more digital technologies in Germany; and consideration of new methods for funding HE in Ireland. The positioning of students as objects of criticism, while clearly different in emphasis, can happen for similar reasons i.e. it can constitute an important means of securing public support for particular domestic policy measures. Indeed, in Denmark, the criticism of students may, in part, be a response to public condemnation of 'lazy students' in the national press (Ulriksen, 2016) and also a means through which the government can reassure taxpayers that their money is being used appropriately (by requiring students to complete their education more quickly).

Geopolitical relations

A country's geopolitical position also informs the way in which it constructs its HE students. The strong framing of students as Europeans in Germany, Ireland, Poland, Spain but not in Denmark and England is largely consonant with the respective relationships these countries have with Europe, in general, and the EU in particular. Germany clearly has a long history as a founder member of key European associations and currently occupies a central position in the 'European project' (Kundnani, 2014). It is thus unsurprising that HE students in Germany are also imbued with a strong European identity within policy constructions. Within Spain, however, an equally positive orientation to Europe within policy has been explained in a rather different way: Spanish official discourse constantly underlines the advantages of Europeanisation as a means of advancing both social and economic progress (Bonal and Tarabini, 2013). In contrast, England and Denmark have notably different relationships with the EU, with Euroscepticism evident in both nations to varying degrees.

References

Bonal, X. and Tarabini, A. (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.

Kundnani, H. (2014) *The Paradox of German Power* London, C. Hurst and Co.

Moutsios, S. (2013) The de-Europeanization of the university under the Bologna process. *Thesis Eleven*, 119, 1, 22-46.

Ulriksen, L. (2016) *Students' time budget practices: This was the time of our lives.* Presentation to the SRHE annual conference, Newport, Wales, December 2016.

Word count: 998 words (excluding title and references)