

Students as political actors? Similarities and differences across six European nations

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Drawing on data from students, higher education staff and policymakers from six European countries, this article argues that it remains a relatively common assumption that students should be politically engaged. However, while students articulated a strong interest in a wide range of political issues, those working in higher education and influencing higher education policy tended to believe that students were considerably less politically active than their predecessors. Moreover, while staff and policy influencers typically conceived of political engagement in terms of collective action, articulated through common reference to the absence of a ‘student movement’ or unified student voice, students’ narratives tended not to valorise ‘student movements’ in the same way and many categorised as ‘political’ action they had taken alone and/or with a small number of other students. Alongside these broad commonalities across Europe, the article also evidences some key differences between nation-states, institutions and disciplines. In this way, it contributes to the comparative literature on young people’s political engagement specifically, as well as wider debates about the ways in which higher education students are understood.

Introduction

It is often assumed that students should be key political actors in society, protesting against what they perceive to be social inequalities and driving forward social change. In part, such assumptions are related to the relatively young age of the ‘traditional’ student and the associated belief that they are moving through a particularly idealistic phase of life, in which they are not afraid to challenge social conventions. However, as Williams (2013) has pointed out, such assumptions date from only the late 1960s, and are often based on a misreading of the activities of that particular period: only a small minority of students across the USA and Europe were actually involved in the campus protests of the 1960s. Students are, however, often compared to this stereotype, and frequently criticised for their supposed apathy and lack of political engagement (Sukarieh and Tannock, 2015). Taking these assumptions as a point of departure, this article considers the extent to which contemporary higher education students across Europe see themselves as political actors. It also compares their views with those held by higher education staff and policy influencers. As well as examining patterns across six different countries, it explores within-country variations. It thus seeks to contribute to the literature on young people’s political engagement

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specifically, as well as wider debates about the ways in which higher education students are understood.

To contextualise our arguments, we begin by outlining extant knowledge with respect to the political participation of students, and cross-national variation in the political participation of students and young people. We then discuss briefly the literature on European homogenisation in higher education, as this is also relevant to debates about how students across the continent are conceptualised.

Background

Although the body of research on students' political engagement is relatively small, some scholars have argued that higher education institutions (HEIs) can play important roles in developing students' political identities and capacity for engagement by, for example, facilitating encounters with those who hold differing viewpoints, providing relatively safe spaces for new solidarities to form, and bringing together a critical mass of those with particular political interests (Crossley and Ibrahim, 2012; Loader *et al.*, 2015). Moreover, despite longstanding criticism of young people for being politically apathetic (Marsh *et al.*, 2007; Pilkington and Pollack, 2015), students have often been at the forefront of various protests around the globe, taking a prominent stance on a variety of issues, not only those related to education (e.g. Macfarlane, 2017; Ancelovici and Guzmán-Concha, 2019; Guzmán-Concha, 2019). Research has also suggested, however, that the impact of higher education on political engagement is not always positive, with campus networks sometimes having the effect of closing down political engagement (Hensby, 2014; Brooks *et al.*, 2015b) and promoting individual competition rather than collective action (Giroux, 2011). Typically, this has been related to the wider environment within which HEIs are operating. Indeed, current sociological literature has argued that marketised HEIs often constrain student political engagement by encouraging them to behave as 'consumers'—focussing on only a narrow range of education-related issues (e.g. Abrahams and Brooks, 2019). Studies of students' unions have also indicated that, in some countries, such groups have become less activist in nature and more likely to serve narrow managerialist agendas (Brooks *et al.*, 2015a; Nissen and Hayward, 2017). More generally, Klemenčič (2014) has noted the difficulty of articulating a single collective student voice in mass higher education systems with increasingly diverse student bodies.

Although the studies cited above derive from different parts of the world, to date, there has been relatively little work on the extent to which the political participation of students, or indeed young people, varies cross-nationally. (Here it is important to note that the two groups are not synonymous—clearly not all young people are students and not all students are young.) It is often the case that research is conducted in one country (typically an Anglophone nation of the Global North) and then generalised to other parts of the world. Garcia-Albacete (2014) argues, for example, that while much of the research about young people's political participation within Europe over recent years has used the UK as a case study, her data indicate that patterns evident in the UK are not generalisable to other European countries—with rates of youth participation in formal and non-formal politics in the UK being particularly

low. Studies that *have* adopted a comparative perspective have drawn attention to the impact of the wider social and political context. Kitanova (2019), for example, focuses primarily on the macro-level determinants of political participation,¹ using data from 18–30-year-olds from the 28 countries of the European Union who took part in the Eurobarometer survey. She argues that while individual socio-demographic variables are important, the broader national context is also a crucial influence. Indeed, she asserts that the level of democratic maturity is significant, with young people from established democracies, such as those located in Western Europe, more likely to be politically active than their counterparts from newer democracies, such as those in Eastern Europe that emerged from Communist rule only relatively recently. Developing a somewhat similar argument, Soler-i-Martí and Ferrer-Fons (2015) maintain that the way in which a country shapes the transition of its young people to adulthood—the dominant ‘youth transition regime’—can affect the place young people are able to take up in social space, which can, in turn, influence their inclination to become involved in formal or non-formal politics. Through examining factors such as the generosity of the welfare state, the percentage of young people in education, employment or training, and the average age of leaving the parental home, they suggest that in countries where the state takes greater action to divert resources to young people and reduce their exposure to risk, levels of political participation are higher. Nevertheless, this relationship is complex: while young people in nations where they occupy a more peripheral social position are less likely to be active in formal and non-formal politics, they are also *more likely* than their peers in other countries to become involved in protests.

The body of work that has pursued cross-national analyses of the political participation of *students*, specifically, is smaller still. Altbach (1991), writing almost two decades ago, argued that students can often have more influence in young democracies—as higher education is typically seen in such nations as an important engine of change, and students as legitimate political actors. Although there are apparent tensions with the arguments of some of the youth studies scholars discussed above, this argument is also made by Cini (2019) in his more recent study of the #FeesMustFall movement in South Africa. He shows how student protests during 2015 were successful in stopping the 10% increase in tuition fees that had been proposed at the University of Witwatersrand, as a result of the direct intervention of the South African president. With respect to students’ unions and associations (operating at the national or institutional level), a number of studies have argued that cross-national differences are significant. For example, writing about student politics across Africa, Luescher and Klemenčič (2017) contend that the mode in which students organise is directly related to national-level factors such as whether the state has created formal structures for students to be involved in national policymaking. Furthermore, Cini (2017) maintains that the nature of the national higher education sector can affect both the type of student protest and the response it receives. Comparing the UK and Italy, he asserts that as a result of the UK’s more managerialist higher education sector, UK university leaders tend to treat student mobilisations in a much more repressive manner than their Italian counterparts—for example, refusing to make any concessions to students’ demands and taking legal action to bring student occupations to a swift conclusion.

Our interest in the extent to which understandings of students as political actors are shared across Europe also articulates with broader debates about the nature of European higher education. There is now a significant body of work suggesting that, as a result of the Bologna reforms and the creation of a European Higher Education Area, previously distinct European higher education systems are converging around an Anglo-American model (Slaughter and Cantwell, 2012). What is less clear, however, is the extent to which understandings of what it means to be a student, and how students themselves conceive their social position, are also becoming more similar. While some studies have suggested that, across Europe, students are increasingly being seen as consumers (e.g. Moutsios, 2013), other research has indicated that important differences endure—at least as far as policy constructions are concerned (Brooks, 2018, 2019). Research within individual nations has also highlighted that how students are understood can differ by institution, particularly in countries with a high degree of institutional stratification (Reay *et al.*, 2010).

Informed by this literature, this article seeks to answer two main questions. First, to what extent do key higher education stakeholders view students as important political actors? Here, we are interested in the views of policy influencers and higher education staff, as well as students themselves. Second, we focus more explicitly on the views of students and ask to what extent these differ across Europe. We examine variation by nation-state, and also by institution and discipline of study.

Methods

To address these questions, we draw on data that were collected as part of a 5-year European Research Council-funded project. The project was intended to examine the constructions of higher education students across Europe, in general—and as part of this, we were interested in the extent to which students were seen as political actors. A key objective of the project as a whole was to explore similarities and differences across nation-states and within them. Thus, data were collected in six countries: Denmark, England, Germany, Ireland, Poland and Spain. These were chosen to provide diversity in terms of: welfare regime (Esping-Anderson, 1990); relationship to the European Union; mechanisms for funding higher education; and available student support (grants and loans). For the purposes of this article, we draw on a subset of the data collected for the project as a whole, namely: interviews with 26 policy ‘influencers’² and 72 members of higher education staff, and 54 focus groups with a total of 295 undergraduates. Staff and students were sampled from three HEIs in each country, chosen as far as possible to represent something of the diversity of the higher education sector in each country (e.g. in Ireland, we collected data from an institute of technology, as well as two universities of different statuses, and in Spain we included a private university in addition to two that are publicly funded). We also tried, as far as logistically possible, to recruit students who represented the broader make-up of their institution in terms of variables such as subject of study, gender and social class.³ We asked all those interested in participating to complete an initial ‘screening’ questionnaire and, on the basis of this, chose the focus group participants. In some cases, however, we did not have enough volunteers to be very selective and thus ended up with a sample that, with respect to some institutions, over-represented

female students and those from arts and social science backgrounds. In each institution, we conducted three student focus groups and at least four individual staff interviews. All interviews with policy influencers and members of staff were conducted in English. The focus groups were conducted in English in England, Ireland and Denmark. In Spain, Poland and Germany, however, they were conducted in the native language and then translated into English prior to analysis.

We first operated an open-ended approach to data collection, asking respondents in a very general way how they thought about students in their own country. In the student focus groups, this was preceded by an activity in which we asked them to make plasticine models of how they thought about their own identity as students, and how they believed others saw them. In the second part of the interviews and focus groups, we then moved on to ask respondents about particular understandings of students, and the extent to which they also saw students in this way. One of the constructions we asked about was students as ‘political actors’. It is important, however, to note that we did not define this term ourselves, as we were interested in how it was understood by others. As a result, political activity was conceptualised in a wide variety of ways, including participation in formal, informal and identity politics and protests, membership of community groups, and representation on the governing bodies of HEIs.

Drawing on this dataset, we first outline the ways in which students were seen as political actors by others, namely higher education staff and policy influencers. We then go on to focus more specifically on the understandings held by students themselves. Here, we outline various commonalities across the six countries in our sample, before highlighting some significant variations by nation, institution and discipline. In the final section of the article, we discuss the implications of these findings for our understandings of students in general and as political actors specifically.

Views of higher education staff and policy influencers

When higher education staff and policy influencers talked about the political engagement of students, they tended to contrast what they perceived to be the relative apathy of contemporary students with what they held to be their more effective and substantial activity in the past—particularly in the 1960s and 1970s. While most staff members described a small section of the student population as being politically active, they stressed that there was no longer a student movement or a unified student political voice. The following quotation represents a sentiment we encountered repeatedly in interviews:

I think that students played an essential role, for example thirty years ago, or even forty years ago, and in Europe since the revolution of the sixties, seventies [. . .] I think that the students played a central role in politics. And I think that that's not the case anymore. I think that not only in Spain but also in the rest of Europe. (Spanish staff member)

In such allusions to a putative ‘golden age’ of political participation, we see the arguments of Williams (2013) played out—there is little recognition that those who took part in the campus protests of the late 1960s comprised only a small minority of

students. Moreover, there is an implicit assumption that students *should* engage in political activity, typically understood as that stretching beyond educational issues.

When asked for their explanations for these alleged generational differences, respondents outlined quite a wide variety of factors. First, a number of policy influencers and members of staff—from across the six countries—believed that the composition of the student body had changed considerably over recent decades, and that this had had a direct impact on political engagement. Perhaps most starkly, a government official from Poland suggested that the opening up of higher education to students from more diverse backgrounds had had a negative impact on their propensity to engage with social and political issues:

I kind of miss the times when being a student meant being part of an elite that also sort of assumes the role of . . . of agents that work for positive change . . . and try to have an influence or to have an impact on [society], to influence it, in order to push it towards . . . better . . . solutions, outcomes. This was, this was very visible in Poland in the eighties, when the students were often . . . the first to show up in, on street demonstrations for example, protesting against . . . the old authorities. And right now, students don't seem interested in that anymore.

The Polish employers' representative made similar comments, arguing that Polish students had come to see higher education as exclusively about preparation for the labour market. The language used by respondents from other countries was rather more restrained, but also positioned contemporary students quite pejoratively. For example, staff in both Germany and Ireland thought that students were more conformist than they had been in previous generations, and were thus less likely to take political action. Those in England, Ireland, Germany and Spain pointed to what they thought was the increasingly individualistic, self-absorbed and, in some cases, selfish outlook of many students, which they believed militated against becoming politically involved. A German staff member, for instance, observed: *'I guess they focus more on their own issues, just getting good degrees and things like that. [. . .] It's part of this tendency to . . . to conform, to find your place in the society as quickly as possible.'*

Some respondents viewed students more sympathetically, however, and linked their ostensible decline in interest and activity to the changing nature of higher education itself. For example, staff in Germany, Ireland and Spain all believed that students in their countries had less time available to commit to extra-curricular activities in general because of the reforms implemented as part of the Bologna Process. (In several countries, this had resulted in changes to course structure, patterns of evaluation and the time allocated for a particular degree, and was seen by some of our respondents as putting new pressure on students to be focused solely on their studies and complete 'quickly'.) In Denmark, similar themes were evident in relation to discussion of the 'Study Progress' reforms, which penalise students who take longer than the officially allocated time to complete their degrees and, across most of the nations, with respect to the increasing prevalence of part-time employment alongside a degree. The following quotations are typical:

They don't [. . .] have time to be political, they do not have time to watch the news because they are so stressed about everything else. And I wish they could be more political, I see it as a . . . oh they should be the ones getting involved in politics, but when . . . like when should they do this?

Between their working schedule and [...] exams [what can] I expect from them? (German staff member)

I think students are very busy [...] I mean they have a lot to study [...] they have a lot of ... practices, teaching, the lessons, the essays, exams! And then an increasing number of students are working, so that reduce[s] the time to engage in, in movements. (Spanish staff member)

Staff in Ireland, Poland and Spain, and some Spanish policy influencers, attributed the lack of political engagement to disenchantment with formal politics and, in the case of Spain, widely publicised cases of political corruption. Spanish respondents also believed that there had been more to protest about in the past (under the Franco dictatorship specifically), and that students now tended to be happier with their lives overall and were thus less likely to be motivated to take political action. Similarly, some Polish staff members said that because students in Poland already enjoyed free education and scholarships, they did not think they ‘needed something more from the system’. An important exception to this general trend was in England, however, where various members of staff believed that Brexit had been a big ‘wake-up call’ for students, triggering their interest in politics and increasing their awareness of the importance of being politically active.

In these discourses, we can see some stereotypical views of students being played out. Although there is now a large academic literature on the ways in which young people in general, as well as students in particular, are politically engaged (e.g. Vroman, 2003; Marsh *et al.*, 2007), views about their alleged apathy appear quite stubbornly engrained within the views of those interacting on a day-to-day basis with students (in the case of staff) and those formulating policy that directly affects the lives of students. Here, there thus appears a high degree of continuity with previous research that has documented claims of youth apathy made by politicians, social commentators and others with social influence (Marsh *et al.*, 2007; Klemenčič and Park, 2018). We return to the implications of this in the discussion section below.

Views of students themselves

Commonalities: politically interested but constrained

The vast majority of our focus group participants believed that they had the potential, at least, to be significant political actors—a view that was echoed, to some extent, in the staff interviews. Students from all six countries spoke of themselves as the political future of their country. In part, this was linked to the particular knowledge and skills they had gained through their degree programmes, as the quotations below illustrate:

[S]tudents have an influence on politics because they represent a large number of young people who bring new ideas into the world but who are old enough to stand up for these ideas and to consider them logically and to bring forward logical arguments. (Germany, HEI1⁴)

[W]e’re informed ... like the older people would just have a view from when they were younger and what they were told, but they didn’t know all the facts, whereas we would be more knowledgeable. (Ireland, HEI1)

Moreover, some focus group participants typically saw the space of the university as an important site, in itself, for political activity, while others emphasised the unique opportunity higher education presented, in terms of both time and space, for such engagement:

I think university students, as well as being adults and therefore having a little wider conception of things than students in secondary education . . . as a student you . . . have a little more time and you can organize [more easily] because of your proximity [to your fellow students]. (Spain, HEI1)

Nevertheless, across most of the focus groups, our participants also spoke of the factors that limited their political activity, or prevented them from being as engaged as they wished to be. This was, however, played out in varying ways in the different nations. In Denmark and England, for example, students typically felt ignored by politicians and others with power:

I think sometimes like the politicians and the government, they try to like encourage us, it's like yeah, engage the youth and everything, but they don't really listen, they don't really take it that seriously . . . [t]hey want the words but they don't want to do the work for it! (Denmark, HEI1)

I think we do [have a say], but we're not taken as seriously, like there's loads of like protests and everything that students do, whereas we're not being listened to by the government. (England, HEI1)

Here, the English focus group participants noted that they had taken action in the recent past (referring to protests over the substantial increase in tuition fees that came into effect in 2012), but asserted that the government had never listened to them as a group. They also believed that politicians tended to infantilise them which, they claimed, had the effect of limiting their political efficacy (see also Abrahams and Brooks, 2019). In Spain, however, students tended to think that it was the *media* that took this view:

I think they [media] ridicule the capacity of the political actor, of the student as a political actor . . . that they infantilise, 'Poor little thing'. (Spain, HEI1)

Furthermore, they claimed that while politicians *did* view them as a serious political force, they often took steps to ensure that their power was severely limited. Indeed, participants in one Spanish focus group commented:

It's in the psyche of society that students are seen as a bomb that can explode at any time, but if they [the students] are skilfully manoeuvred and modified they can become another tool for the system and fall into the hands of the politicians so that the country can function. (Spain, HEI1)

Thus, participants in all countries believed that specific constraints tempered their ability to exert political influence as students. Again, there is significant continuity with previous research (albeit in youth studies rather than education) conducted over the past few decades which has suggested that young people in general have little faith in their ability to change society. Indeed, Pilkington and Pollack (2015) have argued, with respect to the young people in their cross-national European research, that a paradox exists whereby youth 'are not so much "anti" politics but profoundly disillusioned with the current democratic system while continuing to be, in principle,

supportive of democratic reforms of government and seeking to “be heard” through it’ (p. 8).

Cross-national and intra-national variations

Despite the broad commonalities described above, whereby students in general across the six countries tended to see themselves as interested and engaged in politics, but constrained with respect to the change they were able to bring about, there were also some important disparities in the students’ narratives. Some of these were played out cross-nationally, while others were evident *within* individual nation-states. We explore these further below.

National differences. First, there were notable differences, by nation, in the extent to which students felt that it was important to be politically engaged. The starkest contrast was between students in Denmark, who held the strongest beliefs about the importance of political engagement, and their counterparts in Poland, who attributed much less significance to such activities.

[T]he political debate for me is not about saying something new all the time but fighting for a cause maybe. And I think that even though we’re probably just replicating stuff that’s always been said before, it’s important to bring that perspective into the public debate. And not just once but until it’s, it’s been heard! (Denmark, HEI1)

[Students] aren’t interested at all. I suppose that if you asked 10 random people on the campus about some important parliament acts that are to be voted [on], they wouldn’t know anything. They aren’t engaged at all. (Poland, HEI1)

Such differences may be related to the different histories of student politics in the two countries. For example, in Denmark, as in its Scandinavian neighbours, students’ unions have a long history and have constituted an important part of the political landscape for a considerable period of time. Such countries have typically had automatic and/or mandatory membership for all students, and significant resources upon which to draw (Klemenčič, 2014). Moreover, research suggests that Scandinavian students’ unions have been more resilient in the face of managerial pressures than such unions in other countries, and more successful in promoting an understanding of students as partners in a democratic model of higher education governance rather than as consumers (Klemenčič, 2012). In contrast, students’ unions in Poland have taken on a full range of functions only recently, largely as a result of the Bologna Process (Antonowicz *et al.*, 2014). Indeed, Klemenčič (2014) argues that in Poland, ‘the development of a national student representation had a turbulent history with periods of political fragmentation into different student bodies each of whose legitimacy was weakened by close association with political parties’ (p. 405). Such differences may also be related more directly to the broader political context. As discussed above, recent research has argued that differences between nation-states with respect to young people’s political participation (evident in, for example, the Eurobarometer data) are closely correlated with the period of time since democratic political structures were established (Kitanova, 2019). Thus, Kitanova (2019) contends

that the odds for young Europeans who live in a newly established democracy, such as Poland, to be politically engaged are 27% lower than the odds for young citizens in established democracies. It is possible also that our Polish respondents believed that, since significant political change had already been achieved in their lifetime (i.e. the fall of Communism), further political struggle was no longer needed. (This was not articulated within the student focus groups but was a view taken by some of our other interviewees.)

Second, although, as noted above, students in all countries talked about what they perceived to be the ways in which their political activity was constrained or limited by others, there were also differences in the extent to which students believed they were listened to by other social actors. This can be seen with respect to England and Ireland in the views politicians and other relevant policy actors have held about students. For example, a very positive speech about the value and contribution of the Union of Students in Ireland (the national body representing students) given by the then Minister for Education and Skills, Jan O'Sullivan (O'Sullivan, 2015) can be contrasted with the scepticism about students' unions in England articulated within various government documents and speeches (e.g. BIS, 2015, 2016) (see Abrahams and Brooks, 2019 for further discussion of this point). With respect to the media, while Spanish participants thought the student voice was largely misrepresented by newspapers and TV (see evidence above), their counterparts in Denmark held a more positive view. In the quotation below, for example, a Danish participant thought that the problems students face were often helpfully amplified by the media, which, in turn, could lead to considerable change:

Media is really good to . . . show . . . the rest of the society some of the problems that students have, for example, stress, and so in Denmark, because of the media, social media or like the national broadcasting television, we have a lot of possibilities as students to change the . . . student environment. (Denmark, HEI3)

Such differences may be related to the strength of Danish students' unions (discussed above), their long history of political involvement and their relative success, in the contemporary period, of ensuring that their role as democratic partner, rather than as the voice of student-consumers, continues (Klemenčič, 2012).

Third, differences by nation were also evident with respect to the focus of students' political activity. Whereas in most countries students tended to talk about being focused on only education-related issues (e.g. in relation to proposals to introduce or increase tuition fees, the structure of degree programmes and the time allowed to complete one's degree), in Ireland students were engaged in a broader range of social issues, including campaigns to introduce same-sex marriage and reform the abortion laws (Abrahams and Brooks, 2019). Here, the local socio-political context appears important—in Ireland, the campaigns for social reform have very successfully engaged the national students' union as well as young people more generally.

The differences outlined in this section thus constitute a useful corrective to assumptions made in some of the sociological and political science literature, noted at the start of this article, that patterns identified in Anglophone nations such as the UK and Australia can be generalised in an unproblematic manner to other countries of the Global North. They also raise some questions about how far we can assume that

students across Europe can be considered similar in their positioning as political actors.

Institutional differences. Students' views about the nature and degree of their political engagement also differed *within the same nation*. In some countries, this was evident at an institutional level, and appeared to correlate quite closely with the relative status of the university. In England and Germany, for example, students at the highest status institution in the respective national sample tended to have rather different views about political engagement from the views of their peers at the two lower status institutions in the same country. For example, focus group participants at English HEI2 (typically seen as an elite university) believed they would have an important future role to play in public life, asserting that they would be the intellectual—and possibly the political—leaders of the future. Although, like other English students (discussed above), they noted various constraints on their political engagement in the present, they implied that they did not expect these to continue to operate in their future lives. Such optimism and self-positioning (as a future 'influencer') was not evident in the other two English HEIs. Similarly, students at German HEI2 (also one of the highest status institutions nationally) talked about themselves as future political leaders in ways that were not observed at the other German institutions. The quotation below is illustrative:

[S]tudents can lead the creation of new ideas. You have to have someone to succeed today's politicians. That's why students are definitely the group that should feel a sense of responsibility to engage in that way. (Germany, HEI2)

Given the over-representation of those from privileged backgrounds within higher status HEIs (e.g. Boliver, 2016), it is likely that the patterns outlined above can be explained with reference to the assumptions that many students bring with them—that they are likely to go on to assume influential roles in society—which may then be reinforced by the institutional habitus that surrounds them. Students' perceptions may also be informed by an awareness of the pathways that others have taken from that particular institution into public life. Indeed, in England at least, there continues to be a strong association between having attended an elite university and entry to elite and politically influential occupations (Sutton Trust, 2019).

Differences between institutions were also apparent in Spain. While students from all three Spanish HEIs shared the views outlined above, about not being listened to by the media and sometimes being seen as a threat by the government, the level of political activity appeared notably higher at two of our institutions than the third. This was evident in the focus group discussions, and also the physical environment—such as whether or not campaigning materials were prominent on campus. The two HEIs with apparently higher levels of political activity were both public universities, while the third university was private. As the majority of the activity the students talked about was related to protests against fees, it is likely that those attending a private institution would be less concerned about this—as they have already made a positive choice to attend an institution charging fees—than their peers within the public sector.

Disciplinary differences. There were also some within-institution differences that were evident across the focus groups. Indeed, students tended to have different views about their own political efficacy and engagement according to the subject they were studying. Typically, social science students were more politically engaged and interested than those from other disciplines, even when they were attending the same institution. (As we noted above, however, not all disciplines were equally well represented in our sample). Participants in German and Spanish focus groups reflected on such differences themselves:

[O]n the courses I've been enrolled on [history and education science], it was really important among the students to be politically active or at least to be well informed in seminars, as a basis for discussion etc. (Germany, HEI3)

I am doing a science degree . . . there is something in the social environment which they don't teach us as part of our course, so you have to look for it yourself [. . .] If you don't switch on the TV to watch the news you will not know about anything, because the lecturers don't tell you about the problems which occur around you unless there's a problem they've discovered which is related to your course. (Spain, HEI1)

Here, students suggest that the content of one's degree programme can influence participation, through the substantive content of courses.

Differences in political interest and engagement by discipline may, of course, be because students who are already more interested in politics and political issues tend to choose to study such subjects. However, there is also some evidence that social science subjects can inculcate greater political interest, awareness and engagement—not necessarily by making more time available to explore political issues, but by bringing about more profound changes in how students think about the world and their own place within it. This has been shown, for example, in Abbas *et al.*'s (2016) study of the impact of studying sociology in various HEIs in the UK, in which students became more aware of and active in relation to gender inequality, for example, and also in Muddiman's (2018) comparison of students studying sociology and business studies in the UK and Singapore. Muddiman argues that, in both countries, despite significant differences in the make-up of the higher education sector, the composition of the student body and the national context more generally, students studying sociology developed a greater sense of civic responsibility than their counterparts in business studies.

Discussion and conclusion

As we discussed at the start of this article, it has been a common expectation amongst social commentators and other social actors from the 1960s onwards that students should be politically engaged. Interestingly, none of our respondents questioned this assumption, although some did state that it should not be restricted to students—similar expectations should extend to all members of society. As we have documented above, however, a marked divide was evident across Europe between the perspectives of higher education staff and policy influencers, on the one hand, and students, on the other hand. Indeed, we have shown how, in many cases, a clear contrast can be

drawn between the relatively pessimistic perspectives of policy influencers and those working in higher education, who tended to believe that contemporary students are much less politically engaged than their predecessors—because of the absence of any strong and coherent ‘student movement’—and students themselves who articulated a strong interest in a wide range of political issues. Echoing some of the themes in the academic literature (e.g. Crossley and Ibrahim, 2012), students saw university as a particularly conducive space for developing their knowledge and skills, which they believed would better equip them for political engagement.

This contrast between the views of students and other key stakeholders suggests that, despite a now significant body of work demonstrating that young people are both interested in politics and politically engaged (e.g. Marsh *et al.*, 2007; Loader *et al.*, 2015), beliefs about youth apathy endure. This is particularly problematic given that the stakeholders discussed above constitute a group that has significant influence over students—either through day-to-day contact within spaces of learning (in the case of staff), or through the making of higher education policy (with respect to policy influencers). Perhaps reflective of this tension, our data also indicate that, across our six countries, students believed that their political efficacy was constrained—by politicians and also other social actors (such as the media, in the case of our Spanish participants) who tended to ignore them, infantilise them and/or take other steps to lessen their impact.

It is also notable that the two groups tended to define political activity in rather different terms. Most staff and policy influencers appeared to conceive of it, to a large extent, in terms of collective action, articulated through common references to the absence of a ‘student movement’ or unified student voice. More individualised forms of engagement, potentially pursuing diverse agendas, were not given the same weight. In contrast, students’ narratives tended not to valorise ‘student movements’ in the same way and many categorised as ‘political’ action they had taken alone and/or with a small number of other students. This disconnect goes some way to explaining the difference in perspectives. In addition, it suggests that a conception of student political activity informed by dominant social narratives about the events of the late 1960s and 1970s endures among many of those working in the higher education sector, which can serve to obscure other forms of political engagement. It is important to note, however, that while these data open up some interesting and significant questions about the political repertoires of students and how we conceptualise political participation (engaging with issues raised by Klemenčič and Park, 2018 and Weiss *et al.*, 2012, for example), our focus in this article is on similarities and differences in perception—between students, staff and policymakers, and across and within six European nations.

Indeed, the data presented above contribute to the limited body of comparative work on students’ political engagement. In contrast to the large number of studies that have either been conducted in one nation-state and/or generalised from research in the Anglophone Global North, our research has identified some cross-national differences with respect to students’ perceptions about the importance of engaging politically, the extent to which they believe they are listened to and the focus of their political activity. We have suggested that such differences can be explained by a variety of factors. These include some that are quite closely related to the history of

student engagement and participation. For example, we have shown that the Danish students in our sample placed more importance on being politically engaged and were more confident that they were being listened to than many of the students in the other five nations—which is likely to be linked to the well-established nature of Danish students' unions, their history of student involvement in decision-making and the relative success of the Danish student movement in resisting pressures to become merely the voice of student-consumers (Klemenčič, 2014). Other explanatory factors may relate to the national context more generally. For example, the relative lack of importance attributed to becoming politically engaged as a student, evident within the Polish focus groups, may be explained by their nation's relatively late transition to democracy—a factor that Kitanova (2019) has argued explains the comparatively low levels of political engagement among young people in Eastern Europe more broadly (and which raises some questions about arguments made by some scholars about the often-prominent political role of students within newer democracies; Altbach, 1991; Cini, 2019). In Ireland, high-profile national debates on two key social issues appear to have energised students, and encouraged their involvement in campaigns beyond the educational sphere. Such evidence suggests that it is important to remain sensitive to the particular social, political and economic contexts in which students are operating, which may shift quite considerably over time.

Our research has also revealed differences *within* nations, which have rarely been the subject of previous analysis. Such differences suggest that nations should not necessarily be seen as 'coherent educational entities' (Philips and Schweisfurth, 2014). For some of our focus group participants, experiences of (and attitudes to) political participation seemed linked as much to the institution at which they were enrolled and/or their subject of study as the country in which they were resident. Moreover, the identified differences indicate that HEIs may, in some cases, play an important role in facilitating political engagement and/or establishing norms about what constitutes 'appropriate' political activity. This may, however, be less related to any particular action taken within the institution and more to the composition of the student body, the extent to which it is positioned and viewed by students as an elite institution and, relatedly, its institutional habitus. Our data suggest that students' political engagement can also differ by discipline—either because particular areas of study (such as those in the social sciences) may attract students who are more politically engaged anyway, and/or because of the politicising effects of some degree programmes (Abbas *et al.*, 2016; Muddiman, 2018).

While the research reported in this article can only speculate about the explanatory factors that underpin the various cross- and intra-national differences it identifies, it is nevertheless important in highlighting the complexity of students' understandings of themselves as political actors. The significant variation in the extent to which students believed it was important to be politically engaged and the focus of their activities, for example, demonstrates some of the limitations of generalising from single-nation studies. Moreover, the differences both between countries and within them also suggest that conceptualisations of what it means to be a student vary from place to place. Political activity may constitute a key part of some students' identity if, for example, they are located in a country with a long history of student involvement in decision-making, at an institution that has provided their country with many politicians and/or

on a course that requires engagement with social and political issues. For others, however, their understanding of what it means to be a student is likely to be substantially different. While Europe may now have a single higher education area, the meaning attached to being a student seems—with respect to political involvement at least—to be highly differentiated.

It is, however, important to end by returning to the commonalities identified earlier in the article. In line with the findings of numerous studies of young people (albeit not students), our focus group participants across Europe, on the whole, had a high level of interest in political matters and believed they had the potential to be significant political actors. It thus appears imperative for those exerting social power and influence—and not least the higher education staff and policy influencers discussed in the earlier part of this article—to find ways to overcome the constraints felt by many of the participants and facilitate more fully their political engagement.

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Ethical guidelines

This research was carried out in accordance with the ethical guidelines produced by the British Educational Research Association alongside those of the University of Surrey, UK (where the research was based during the data collection phase). Ethical approval was gained from the ethics committee of the University of Surrey and University College London.

Conflict of interest

No conflicts of interest are reported by the authors.

Data availability statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

NOTES

¹ Political participation is defined in this study as engagement in formal politics—through voting and/or becoming a member of a political party, and/or joining a community organisation.

² The sample of policy influencers included at least one person from each of the following groups from each country: government official (civil servant or government minister); organisation representing university leaders (often called ‘rectors’ conferences’ in mainland Europe); national union representing students or staff; organisation representing graduate employers.

³ We did not set out to ensure that our sample included students who were members of a students' union or political party. However, during the focus group discussions, it emerged that a small number of participants were involved in such associations.

⁴ In all dissemination from the project, we have used a consistent labelling of HEIs, numbering them from 1 to 3 in each country.

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