



Higher education mobilities: a cross-national European comparison

Rachel Brooks

Department of Sociology, University of Surrey, Guildford GU2 7XH, UK



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ABSTRACT

Within the extant literature on patterns of mobility of European higher education students there is some recognition that these differ across geographical space – in relation to variations in national uptake of the European Union's Erasmus scheme, for example. However, strong similarities are also often identified – about the way in which mobility is desired by students, higher education institutions and national governments, and how this is stimulated, in part, by various European initiatives such as the commitment to forging a European Higher Education Area. Moreover, while scholars have critiqued normative expectations of mobility – pointing out, for example, that not all students have the necessary social, cultural and economic resources to support a period of study abroad – there has been less critical focus on the way in which constructions of the 'mobile student' vary spatially. This article draws on a dataset of 92 policy documents from six European nations to argue that, while some convergence is notable, particularly in relation to the ways in which student mobility is placed centre-stage within internationalisation strategies, key differences are also evident – with respect to: the scale of desired mobility; the characteristics of the imagined 'mobile subject'; the extent to which social justice concerns are brought into play; and the prioritisation given to outward mobility. These raise important questions about the degree of 'policy convergence' across Europe and the ostensible homogenisation of European higher education systems around an Anglo-American model.

1. Introduction

Europe represents an important – and yet often overlooked – space for scholars interested in international student mobility. Through efforts to develop a European Higher Education Area (EHEA), the European Union (EU) has pursued a highly managed, top-down strategy of convergence, with the aim of creating a strong higher education region that can compete with other parts of the world, and notably the US (Robertson, 2009). Student mobility has often been viewed as an important part of this project – particularly the Erasmus scheme¹, established in 1987, which encourages movement between member states of the EU, with the aim of facilitating economic integration (by normalising cross-border movement) and helping to foster a European political identity. The Erasmus scheme has also driven initiatives to standardise higher education across the continent, through the expectation that participating departments integrate their curricula and ensure that students' academic achievements abroad are formally recognised in their home institution. It is timely to explore such trends in the second half of the 21st century, as the UK prepares to leave the EU, and other European nations are reassessing their own relationship to their neighbours within the continent.

Within the extant literature on patterns of mobility of European

higher education students there is some recognition that these differ across geographical space – in relation to variations in national uptake of the Erasmus scheme, for example, and the relative attractiveness of particular European nations to mobile students (King, 2003; van Mol, 2014). However, strong similarities are also often identified – about the way in which mobility is desired by students, higher education institutions (HEIs) and national governments, and how this is stimulated, in part, by various European initiatives such as the Bologna Process. Moreover, while scholars have critiqued normative expectations of mobility – pointing out, for example, that not all students have the necessary social, cultural and economic resources to support a period of study abroad – there has been less attention to the way in which constructions of the 'mobile student' vary spatially. This article draws on policy documents from six European nations to argue that, while some convergence is apparent, particularly in relation to the ways in which student mobility is placed centre-stage within internationalisation strategies, key differences are also evident – with respect to: the scale of desired mobility; the characteristics of the imagined 'mobile subject'; the extent to which social justice concerns are brought into play; and the prioritisation given to *outward* mobility. These raise important questions about the degree of 'policy convergence' across Europe and the ostensible homogenisation of European higher education systems.

E-mail address: r.brooks@surrey.ac.uk.

¹ The scheme enables students to spend one or two semesters at an HEI in another European country.

The first part of the article situates the research within extant debates, focussing on, firstly, the extent to which studies have explored differences within overall patterns of student mobility and, secondly, the value of examining the constructions of student mobility and mobile students within policy across European nation-states. It then outlines the methods that were used in the empirical study, before moving on to examine the ways in which student mobility was constructed across six European nations. These constructions are then drawn together in the discussion, which considers the implications of the analysis for our understanding of European higher education in general and student mobilities more specifically.

2. Background

2.1. *The differentiated nature of student mobility*

Transnational mobility, it is argued, has become a key means of young people achieving a successful transition to adulthood – associated with obtaining education and white collar employment, and engaging in middle class consumption practices (Jeffrey, 2010). Moreover, Robertson et al. (2018) have contended that mobility should not be seen as merely a means of securing better education and employment prospects but, in itself, constituting a new space of identification and belonging. While clearly students are not synonymous with young people (many young people are not students, and some students are significantly older), higher education policymakers have increasingly valorised transnational mobility, implicitly (and sometimes explicitly) positioning it as a central mechanism for the production of strategic, cosmopolitan citizens, and often valuing mobile citizen-subjects more highly than their non-mobile peers (Brooks and Waters, 2011). Nevertheless, academic scholarship has shown effectively that this ‘mobility imperative’ is not played out in uniform ways. Indeed, the differentiated nature of student mobility has been a particular focus of scholarly attention. With respect to the global context, research has indicated how such flows of students have typically been from less affluent countries to richer, Anglophone nations and have thus had the effect of reinforcing geographical power inequalities (Brooks and Waters, 2011).

However, over recent years, the picture has become more complex, with nations that have traditionally sent large numbers of students abroad aggressively pursuing their own strategies for increasing inward mobility. China is perhaps the best example of this, with a declared ambition to receive 500,000 international students by 2020, and well-articulated plans at national, provincial and institutional level to achieve this goal (Gao and de Wit, 2017). Indeed, it has already overtaken Australia, France and Germany to become the third most popular destination country for international students after the US and UK (ibid.). In addition, restrictive immigration policies have affected student flows in countries that have historically been popular with mobile students. In the UK, for example, the severe restrictions on international students’ ability to work in the country post-graduation, in place from 2010 onwards, have had a significant negative impact on the number of incoming Indian students. Within Europe, student mobility is also differentiated. In general terms, the majority of mobility has tended to be from east to west. As a consequence, Kenway and Fahey (2007) contend that, when students return home after their studies, knowledge is ‘transferred’ from central points of power in the European system to more marginal locations; mobility schemes can thus be understood as means of ‘effecting cultural de- and re-territorialisation’ (p.32). Similar differences have been noted in relation to the Erasmus programme. Western nations such as Spain, Germany, France, the UK and Italy typically receive the most incoming students, while more geographically and politically peripheral countries, such as Bulgaria, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and Slovenia receive relatively few (European Commission, 2015; Statistics for All, n.d.). In explaining these patterns, King (2003) has suggested that national economic strength, perceived quality of the

higher education system and, in particular, language spoken have some influence. Overall, however, it is clear that patterns of mobility across Europe remain both complex and uneven (Shields, 2017).

While the quantitative evidence highlights the geographically circumscribed nature of international student mobility, various assumptions are nevertheless made within the literature about strong commonalities across nation-states. These are most frequently articulated with respect to countries of the Global North, but are increasingly applied to other nations, too. It is typically argued that international students are desired by both national governments and individual HEIs as a means of boosting income, demonstrating ‘international excellence’ and, in some cases, encouraging immigration (Lomer, 2017; Robertson, 2013). Similarly, various researchers have maintained that the motivations of individual students who are internationally mobile (and their families) are often strikingly similar, irrespective of their country of origin – particularly the desire to accrue capital to secure advantage in graduate labour markets (e.g. Bodycott, 2009). Within Europe, specifically, national governments, HEIs and individual students have all been strongly encouraged to facilitate or participate in regional cross-border mobility as a means of consolidating the European Higher Education Area. Moreover, EU mobility targets have been set, in the expectation that all member states will accord similar priority to this policy area. It is argued that such initiatives are part of the wider homogenisation of higher education systems across Europe around an Anglo-American model (e.g. Sam and der Sijde, 2014). The normative expectations of mobility, articulated in, for example, these European targets have been heavily critiqued by researchers who have pointed out that not all students have the necessary social, cultural and economic resources to support a period of study abroad (e.g. Mitchell, 2006). There has been much less of a critical focus, however, on the ways in which constructions of the ‘mobile student’ vary spatially – both across and within nations (although see Holdsworth, 2009, for a notable exception with respect to intra-national mobility). This article seeks to contribute to building knowledge in this area by focussing on policy constructions in particular.

2.2. *Policy texts as window on student mobility*

To date, policy texts – alongside various other structural influences – have been relatively overlooked within research on student mobilities (Geddie, 2015; Lomer, 2017). Indeed, Findlay et al. (2017) have suggested that much of the extant literature in this area is based on an implicit assumption that mobility is demand-driven (through the choices made by individual students and their families). While this rather over-states the position – and fails to acknowledge some of the important work on, for example, the actions and influence of individual HEIs (see Beech, 2018; Sidhu, 2006; Tannock, 2017) – it is fair to say that supply-side factors have received notably less attention from researchers. Policy can be seen as a key ‘supply-side force’ in the sense that it is an important means through which those who provide and benefit from promoting international study opportunities help to shape the pattern of cross-border student flows (Findlay et al., 2017).

Policy texts can be seen as one of the material objects upon which much mobility depends (Sheller, 2017), through giving meaning to this particular social process. Cresswell (2011) has argued that mobility is as much about meaning as it is about mappable and calculable movement, and thus as much an ethical and political issue as a utilitarian and practical one (p. 552). From this perspective, paying attention to the ways in which mobilities are discussed within policy texts and the means through which the figure of the ‘mobile student’ is constructed is a valuable endeavour. It can also be a useful corrective to the focus on student motivations and experiences that, as noted above, constitutes a large proportion of the research in this area. Indeed, Madge et al. (2015) have argued that, by focussing exclusively on student experiences, researchers run the risk of obscuring the important underlying power relationships that structure global knowledge economies; in

contrast, they advocate analysing ‘how historically produced political structures, institutional cultures and policies shape international student experiences and recruitment’ (Madge et al., 2009, p. 43). Such an analysis, they claim, helps also to problematize the idea that contemporary society is more mobile than ever. A similar position is adopted by Sheller (2017), who has contested the assumption that contemporary society is characterised by an enhanced freedom of movement – pointing to the significant intervention of governments and other policy actors. She notes the ways in which politics and policy are intimately involved in the ways in which ‘[m]obilities are tracked, controlled, governed, under surveillance and unequal’ (p. 631), often facilitated by the availability of big ‘mobile’ data. This is evident in the means through which international students are ‘securitised’ through the imposition of increasingly restrictive bio-medical measures by nation-states as a means of policing their borders (Geddie, 2015; Mavroudi and Warren, 2013). Indeed, Jenkins (2014) has argued that, within the UK, as a consequence of visa conditions set by the UK Border Agency, the university classroom has become a border site and university staff have become border agents who enforce particular behaviours among international students. Moreover, policy texts are influential documents, not least because they are usually written by those who hold considerable power. Thus, and as Lomer (2017) has argued, the language and concepts used within such documents are likely to become part of dominant, widely-accepted discourses which, in turn, can affect how particular groups of people are thought about. Policy discourses help to shape subject positions, which can limit the ‘horizons for action’ available to individuals (Ball, 2013). Lomer notes that this type of exertion of power may be particularly marked with respect to international students, as they often hold relatively little power within societies.

The small body of work that has explored how international students have been constructed within policy documents and other ‘supply-side’ texts have typically focussed on Anglophone nations. Lomer (2017) and Findlay et al. (2017) have both written about the UK. Lomer’s analysis of government policies contends that international students are represented in a range of ways: as ambassadors (related to assertions that they often exercise ‘soft power’, to the UK’s benefit, on return home, and concerns about decline in the nation’s global influence); as educational resources (in terms of the diversity that they bring to UK higher education classrooms); as in cultural deficit (referring to, for example, their supposed passivity in classrooms); as financial resources (for ensuring the feasibility of courses that tend to be unpopular among UK nationals, and for shoring up UK HEIs more generally); and as migrants (related to a broader UK context in which immigration is seen by many as a serious social problem). She notes that several of these constructions are in tension – for example, ‘Students who are supposed to be developing lasting respect and affiliation with the politics of a country are nevertheless interrogated by immigration officials and prevented from staying on after their degree’ (p.219). Similar tensions are noted by Findlay et al. in their analysis of a series of in-depth interviews with individuals responsible for promoting international student mobility within the UK, from the international offices of HEIs, inter-university organisations and the British Council (the body responsible for promoting UK education abroad). They argue this tension is particularly apparent with respect to messages about the wider significance of studying abroad; UK universities have had to find a way of marketing their study opportunities without being able to offer prospective students future employment or citizenship because of the UK’s strict immigration rules. Findlay et al. suggest that the UK HE sector has responded to this dilemma by drawing on a discourse of ‘global citizenship’. In this way, ‘international students wishing to study abroad as part of a wider desire to move internationally for more than study (i.e. for access to employment in the global economy and other international life opportunities) can be sold the possibility of studying abroad as a launch pad for later mobility’ (p.151).

Studies that have explored constructions in other Anglophone nations have focussed on the ways in which international students are

typically portrayed as economic objects in both policy texts and marketing materials. Karram’s (2013) analysis of such texts from Australia, Canada, the UK and US identified two distinct discourses. In the first, dominant in policy texts, international students were objectified as tradable objects in relation to national-level competitiveness, and very little was said about their day-to-day experiences. This discourse, she maintains, ‘uses the language of competition, laced with a sense of urgency, and constructs the international student population as a market rather than stakeholders in the migration process’ (n.p.). The second discourse, more common in institutional materials, focussed on means for supporting international students, used a language of accommodation and care, and positioned students and institutions (rather than national governments) as key constituents. Karram argues that this discourse is a subsidiary one and, while representing international students in a more positive manner, may ultimately serve to prevent change through ‘deflecting attention from the inherent inequalities of foreign student recruitment and regulation at a national level where students are constructed as markets’ (n.p.). There are some similarities here with Sidhu’s (2006) earlier work on dominant tropes in the higher education marketing materials of Australia, the UK and US. She notes, however, that while the UK and Australia commonly constructed the international student as an object of trade, rather different representations were evident in the US at the time of her research, informed by its desire to maintain its role as a world leader, both politically and economically. Thus, international students tended to be positioned as ‘valuable human capital with the potential to contribute to the American enterprise in the “global talent race” and as an ally who will uphold America’s interests overseas’ (p. 297). The subsequent sections of this article extend this analysis by focussing on dominant constructions of mobile students within policy texts across six European nations, only two of which are Anglophone.

3. Methods

The article is based on an analysis of 92 policy texts that were collected from six European countries (Denmark, England, Germany, Ireland, Poland and Spain). The countries were chosen to provide diversity with respect to their: ‘welfare regime’ (Esping Anderson, 1990); relationship to the EU; and means of funding higher education (tuition fees and student support). The data were collected as part of a larger project on the ways in which higher education students are understood across Europe, which pays particular attention to similarities and differences both within and between countries. In each of the countries, approximately 16 policy texts were selected for analysis. This number was chosen to ensure that the analysis across the larger project was manageable but also that some different perspectives could be captured. The sample of 16 typically comprised speeches given by government ministers for higher education, and key strategy documents, relating to higher education, produced by (i) government, (ii) staff and student unions, and (iii) business/graduate employer organisations (in most cases, four documents were selected from each of the four groups²). Documents were chosen on the basis of their: national significance; relevance to the project’s focus (on higher education students); and date of publication (the most recent documents were chosen from those deemed to be most significant and relevant). Those not available in English were translated prior to analysis.

An inductive, thematic analysis was conducted on the 92 documents, exploring the ways in which students are represented, and the conceptualisations of them that underpin the various policy measures. First, the documents were coded in NVivo – using codes derived, inductively, from the documents themselves and informed by the extant literature (see Brooks, 2017b). Second, the coded material was used to

² In Poland, no relevant employer documents were identified. Thus, the Polish sample comprises only 12 documents.

identify dominant themes across the dataset and make comparisons across the four groups of document and six countries. While the analysis in the wider project is as much on intra-national variation as it is on variation between nation-states, in this article the discussion focuses primarily on the latter – because of the desire to engage with arguments about the homogenisation of once-distinct national systems of higher education. As such, the nation-state is taken as a key unit of analysis. In response to criticisms of ‘methodological nationalism’, it is held that, in so far as international students are concerned, the nation-state remains important because of the way in which mobile students’ experiences can be significantly shaped by dominant national policy discourses, and the considerable time they spend focussed on the particular country in which they study (Lomer, 2017).

4. Policy convergence: foregrounding of internationalisation and mobility

Across all six countries there are some important similarities with respect to international student mobility. All of the nations either have their own internationalisation strategy, or strategic plans in this area are written into other key documents. For example, the Ministry of Education, Culture and Sport in Spain published extensive plans for the internationalisation of its higher education sector in its *Strategy for the Internationalisation of Spanish Universities 2015-20* (2016), while comparable documents have been produced by the Federal Ministry of Education and Research in Germany (*Internationalization of Education, Science and Research. Strategy of the Federal Government*, 2017), and the Ministry of Science and Higher Education in Poland (*Higher Education Internationalisation Programme*, 2015). Within these documents, international mobility – of students and, to a lesser extent, staff – is identified as a strategic priority. The similarity in the language used to talk about mobile students (and staff) and the policy imperatives outlined in these texts provides some support to those who have argued that we are witnessing an increasing degree of homogenisation and convergence of higher education around Anglo-American models (e.g. Slaughter and Cantwell, 2012) – for example, in the foregrounding of international competitiveness and the desire, underpinning many of the initiatives outlined in the policy texts, to engage more fully in a global higher education market. This is particularly marked in the non-Anglophone nations in the sample, which discuss explicitly the need to teach more courses in English rather than in the native language. (This is the case for the government documents; the position is contested within, for example, the Spanish union documents that oppose such changes on the grounds that they represent a move towards an Anglo-Saxon model of higher education, which they view in negative terms.)

Making programmes more international – education in foreign languages will be included as an important criterion for the evaluation of the quality of teaching (Polish government document 1³)

In order firmly to establish a highly internationalised university system A world-class standard of quality must be attained in priority subjects taught in English and/or other international languages. (Spanish government document 2)

Implicit (and sometimes explicit) in many of the texts is an understanding that high levels of inward mobility by international students can be seen as a proxy for the quality of the entire national higher education system – for having reached a supposed ‘international standing’. This is demonstrated by the examples below:

... data on the international mobility of scientists, on international publications and on European integration forms a good basis for

analysing Germany’s position in the global knowledge-based society. (German government document 1)

The solutions proposed ... aim to improve the global position of the Polish higher education system and academic staff. They should make Polish higher education institutions attractive places to conduct research for foreign scholars as well as attractive places of learning for foreign students. (Polish government document 1)

The promotion and guarantee of the quality of Spanish universities, at national and international level, is an essential aim of university policy and aims to... [provide] ... information to society to promote the excellence and mobility of students and teachers. (Spanish government document 1)

In the last extract, from Spain, a direct connection is made between the need for robust systems to assure the quality of higher education provision and the mobility of international students. Here, mobility is presented as a proxy for international excellence – but a measure that will only be achieved if various quality-related reforms are implemented.

This type of convergence has been explained by Geddie (2015) in terms of the competitive policy borrowing that goes on between countries. Indeed, in her own research, which focussed on policies for international student mobility in the UK and Canada, she argues that ‘the introduction of policies in countries perceived as competitors often provided both idea and incentive to institute a similar policy’ (p. 236). She contends that this kind of competition between countries is a central mechanism for the mobility of certain policy ideas. Her analysis of UK policy documents on international student mobility produced between 2000 and 2010, and her interviews with policy actors in this area, suggests that the relentless policy innovation witnessed over this period was an attempt by the UK government to stay ahead in the race for international students. The degree of convergence evident in the policy documents from the six countries in this project also articulates with Karram’s (2013) findings with respect to the dominant discourses used to talk about international students in policy texts in the US, UK, Australia and Canada, in which international students are objectified as tradable units in relation to economic competitiveness of the nation-state. A later section of this article engages with this argument about the meaning attached to the figure of the mobile student and suggests that it is more complex and varied than Karram suggests. Nevertheless, her point about policy convergence is, to some extent, supported by the evidence from all six countries about the way in which internationalisation and international mobility are both placed centre-stage within policy discourse.

5. Policy divergence

While at a general level, the similarity between the broad focus of higher education policy, at least with respect to the focus on internationalisation and international mobility, is notable, a more fine-grained analysis of the policy texts reveals a rather different and more nuanced picture. In the following sections, evidence is presented to demonstrate the ways in which policy discourses differed by nation with respect to: the scale of desired mobility; the characteristics of the ‘mobile subject’; engagement with ideas related to social justice; and the prioritisation given to *outward* mobility.

5.1. Scale and geography of desired mobility

As indicated above, the majority of the discussion in the analysed documents focuses primarily on international mobility; the desirability of crossing national borders is emphasised. However, across the sample, mobility is not always understood in terms of what Finn (2017) has described as the binary between ‘hyper-mobility’ for overseas study on the one hand, and local higher education participation on the other

³ The full reference for this (and the other documents referenced in this article) is provided in Table 1. Due to limitations of space, it is not possible to provide details of all 92 documents analysed. The numbers refer to those used across the project as a whole.

Table 1
Analysed documents referenced in the article with identifiers.

Label	Full reference
Danish speech 3	Pind, S. (2017) <i>The key to a happier future</i>
Danish union document 2	DSF (Danish National Union of Students) (2015) <i>Progress Reform Problems</i> (in Danish)
English employers' document 2	Association of Graduate Recruiters (2016) <i>Association of Graduate Recruiters (AGR) Response to 2015 Higher Education Green Paper consultation</i>
English speech 4	Johnson, J. (2016) <i>Universities UK annual conference 2016</i>
German employers' document 1	BDA (Confederation of German Employers' Associations) (2017) <i>Education in 2030. The Educational Policy Position of Employers</i> (in German)
German government document 1	Federal Ministry of Education and Research (2017) <i>Internationalization of Education, Science and Research. Strategy of the Federal Government</i>
German speech 1	Rachel, T. (2017) <i>For good education in Europe: a successful Erasmus programme</i> (in German)
German speech 3	Rachel, T. (2016) <i>Education, Participation, Integration – Erasmus+ and Refugees</i> (in German)
German speech 4	Rachel, T. (2016) <i>Europe 2030: United We Stand</i> (in German)
Irish government document 1	Department of Education and Skills (2011) <i>National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030</i>
Irish union document 2	Union of Students in Ireland (2016) <i>Position Paper on the Funding of Higher Education</i>
Polish government document 1	Ministry of Science and Higher Education (2013) <i>Amendment to Law of Higher Education – Justification</i>
Polish government document 2	Ernst and Young and The Gdansk Institute for Market Economics (2010) <i>Higher Education Development Strategy in Poland to 2020</i> (Report prepared for the Polish government) (in Polish)
Polish government document 4	Ministry of Science and Higher Education (2016) <i>The Law on Higher Education: Ten Key Issues</i> (in Polish)
Spanish employers' document 1	Fundación CYD (2015) <i>Annual Report 2015: Executive Summary</i> (in Spanish)
Spanish government document 1	<i>Organic Law of 2001</i>
Spanish government document 2	Ministry of Education, Culture and Sport (2012) <i>The Socio-Economic Contribution of the Spanish University System</i>
Spanish speech 3	Íñigo Méndez de Vigo y Montojo (2016) <i>Speech at the Ceremony to Mark the Start of the University Year, in Cáceres</i> (in Spanish)

hand. Indeed, in both Poland and Spain considerable emphasis is placed on stimulating *intra-national* mobility, to encourage more movement between national higher education institutions. This is discussed primarily, although not exclusively, for students who are completing their studies and considering a job in higher education.

Low inter-HEI mobility is a serious problem in Polish higher education. It frequently happens that someone studies at one HEI and then he/she is subsequently employed by this same HEI until retirement, frequently without any contacts with the global academic community ... In order to ensure the mobility of academic staff, it is proposed to introduce a rule that persons who have obtained a PhD at a given university would be allowed to be employed there only after working for two years in a different academic institution. (Poland, government document 2)

Another aspect, which also characterises the university teaching staff in Spain, is the low level of mobility in the Spanish universities, in the sense that there exists a high percentage of PDI doctors [post doctorate teachers and researchers] who have read their doctoral thesis in the same university at which they carry out their role of teacher/researcher. (Spanish employers' document 1)

In both cases, intra-national movement is claimed to improve standards of teaching and research, as postgraduates and staff are exposed to new ideas and ways of working.

In Germany, emphasis is also placed on intra-national mobility, but here it is discussed with reference to assumptions about incoming, rather than graduating, students. Higher education institutions are encouraged to move away from conceptualising their intake in terms of a discrete catchment area (based on the local geographical area) to an assumption that they will, in the future, be catering for an increasingly mobile population, with students willing to study at-a-distance (German employers' document 1). This is linked to broader debates about the need to engage more mature students and/or workers within higher education.

There is also divergence, across the six nations, with respect to the extent to which *intra-European mobility* is discussed. Documents from Spain, Ireland and Germany all devote considerable space to outlining the desirability of increasing intra-European mobility.

[We must] Promote the Erasmus + programme as a distinctive sign of our European vocation and our commitment to the principles and values that underpin the construction of Europe. (Spanish speech 3)

One of the features of Ireland's participation in Erasmus has been a relative reluctance of Irish students to engage with opportunities of the programme. The HEA [Higher Education Authority] should examine the reasons behind this reluctance and bring forward some measures to alleviate it. (Irish government document 1)

The German documents are explicit in linking intra-European mobility to the consolidation of a European political identity. The speeches given by government ministers articulate very clearly the perceived value of the Erasmus scheme in particular:

For the 'generation ERASMUS' a Europe with national borders is unthinkable. You feel and understand yourself as a European citizen! ... In the face of nationalism and foreclosure, we are focusing on more mobility of young people, trainees and students in Europe. For nothing defines the European identity more than personal encounters as well as experienced and lived cohesion across national boundaries. (German speech 1)

Such sentiments are also echoed, albeit to a lesser extent, within the Spanish documents. Spanish government document 2, for example, notes that placements abroad 'give students a better idea of what it means to be a European citizen'. In contrast, however, European mobility is rarely mentioned in the policy documents from England and Denmark.

Thus, while geographical mobility is a key concern of many of the analysed documents, the scale of this mobility varies considerably. Reference only to the 'hyper-mobility' associated with the movement of international students overlooks the importance attributed in some nations, although not all, to movement *within* the nation-state, and also the ways in which regional mobility (within Europe) is central to some nations' – but not others' – conceptualisations of desirable mobility. There are clear links here to the wider geo-political context, with Spain, Germany and Ireland seemingly keen to associate themselves closely with the European political project, while Denmark and England occupy a markedly different position. England's Euroscepticism has been widely documented across politics in general (Gifford, 2014), culminating in the vote in June 2016 to leave the EU. The absence of any discussion of mobility specifically within Europe (as well as very few references to other aspects of Europeanisation) can be seen as largely consonant with this wider political agenda. Danish Euroscepticism has also been evident – not in the 'hard' form played out in the UK, in which withdrawal from the EU is advocated – but in a 'softer' version in which

specific EU policies are critiqued (Fitzgibbon, 2013). Indeed, Denmark has witnessed both left-wing and right-wing party Euroscepticism, with a relatively high level of public opposition to both political integration and monetary union (Nielsen, 2015). As a consequence of this broader political culture, it is perhaps unsurprising that both England and Denmark refrain from positioning their higher education policies within European frames of reference and constructing the desirable mobile subject as primarily a European citizen-in-the-making.

5.2. Characteristics of and responsibilities for the inwardly mobile subject

Alongside differences in the scale of desired mobility are others that relate to the characteristics of the mobile subject and the imputed responsibilities for such students. Here, the focus is on those who *do* cross national borders. A first set of differences relate to whether they are perceived as merely visitors for the duration of their studies, or as future residents. Documents from both Germany and Denmark emphasise the value of inwardly mobile students as long-term stayers and, more specifically, future workers. This is positioned as a key reason for welcoming international students and ensuring they stay, rather than emphasising any particular contribution they may make to the higher education system itself (through increasing the diversity of the student body, for example).

... international students and graduates are in many cases ideal for the labour market and much needed skilled workers: they have language skills, a German university degree and are socially integrated. (German employers' document 1)

When ... any of you international students ... choose to study here, you bring knowledge, network and international mindset to our country ... And if you choose to stay, you contribute to the growth and prosperity of Denmark, by helping our businesses adapt to a global and increasingly connected world. (Danish speech 3)

It is notable, however, that while the German documents emphasise the economic contribution of such students, through the work they will do on graduation, the Danish documents highlight such students' future contributions to the welfare state, through the taxes they will pay. In both cases, students who leave directly after completing their studies are viewed in a negative light – either because of the loss to the labour force (more evident in the German documents) or because of their inability to pay back the cost of their tuition through future tax payments (mentioned only in the Danish documents).

While the English documents share with these an emphasis on higher education students in general as future workers (Brooks, 2017a), they differ substantially in their construction of mobile students. There is little mention of their prospective economic contribution, and they are not seen as part of the future labour force that English HEIs are developing; a key objective outlined in English speech 4 is 'ensuring that the immigration system reduces overstaying, and making sure that only those who are able to make a strong contribution to the UK are able to extend their stay here'. Suspicions are raised about the motives of those who do want to stay in England on completion of their studies by invoking the figure of the 'sham' international student who attends a 'bogus college'. Such constructions have been evident in other English policy documents, too. Indeed, Lomer (2017), writing on the basis of her analysis of documents that focussed specifically on internationalisation (and which were published between 2000 and 2010), argues that international students are viewed as migrants and linked to the alleged problem of 'excessive' migration. Moreover, she contends, 'Although students are rarely explicitly linked with the threat of terrorism or the exploitation of the visa system to their own economic ends, they are monitored and surveyed as if they were' (p. 218).

The English documents also differ from those from the other five countries in their explicit differentiation between different 'types' of mobile student. As noted above, reference is made to those who take on

a student identity only, it is alleged, to secure entry to the UK:

...we need to root out abuse in our immigration system, and to this end we have already stopped more than 900 colleges from bringing both low-quality or sham students to the UK, who will not contribute to UK academic life and the research eco-system, demonstrating that student fraud will not be tolerated. (English speech 4)

Such undesirable students are contrasted with those that English policymakers *do* want to attract, namely 'the brightest and the best' (English speech 4). Interestingly, however, the problem with 'sham' students attending 'bogus colleges' is posited not to be related to the poor quality education that these individuals may themselves receive, but the wider implications for *domestic* students:

Our approach to fake colleges isn't just about migration numbers. It is also about maintaining the reputation of our HE sector. Low-quality providers don't just damage the brand of this great sector. They also hold back social mobility and prevent young people, especially from disadvantaged backgrounds who may be over-represented at them, from realising their potential and reaping all the benefits they hope to gain from a university experience. (English speech 4)

Here, there is clear evidence of the geographically circumscribed nature of social justice and limits to the ways in which the 'politics of responsibility' travel across national borders (Massey, 2004). As Brown and Tannock (2009) have argued with respect to the UK, as the number of international students has increased, so it has become harder for students to expect or require universities to pursue social justice:

With international students, there are no strong equity demands to accept students from disadvantaged social backgrounds, provide free or heavily subsidised student tuition, emphasise social science or humanities education relevant to students' personal identities or support the needs and interests of local communities surrounding college campuses as there are for higher education students domestically. (p. 384)

Various scholars have argued, or at least implied, that similar processes are likely to be evident across numerous nation-states, because of the ways in which responsibility for others has tended to focus on those who are geographically proximate. Such a focus is seen as a consequence of an emphasis on 'the exclusive meaningfulness of the local' brought about by post-structuralism and post-colonialism (Massey, 2004), and the absence of any democratic mechanisms for those who are not citizens of a particular nation to bring about change (Brown and Tannock, 2009). Nevertheless, evidence from the German documents raises questions about some of these assumptions. Across a considerable number of the German policy texts (and in all four groups of document), commitments to higher education students with a refugee background are evident.

We want to give access to higher education to all the newly arrived who wish to take up a degree course and have acquired the necessary qualifications. My Ministry is supporting the universities in this effort because they play a key role in integration through education. (German speech 3)

Establish a welcoming culture for international students, including those with a migration and/or refugee background; support international students until they successfully complete their studies and open up the prospect for them of remaining in Germany. (German employers' document 1)

While there is some disagreement among German policy actors about the precise measures that should be put in place to support this group of students, there is no dissent from the principle that help needs to be given, and that higher education has a key role to play in facilitating the broader social integration of those who have fled their

country of origin. In contrast to Gerrard's (2017) claim that 'the imagery of the refugee Other is politically deployed to enhance the notion of difference and Western progress, and thus ultimately fortify national borders and create the conditions for non-citizen spaces within national borders' (p. 888–889), some of the German documents specifically attempt to draw links between the experiences and social position of refugee students and German citizens who have been mobile for higher education for other reasons:

...the many people leaving their home countries and coming here are making us prove that we not only demand tolerance, but are tolerant ourselves. This is where Erasmus+ and its predecessor programmes achieved a great deal in the past and where invaluable contributions can be expected in the future because people who have had to cope in a foreign country can better understand the challenges that today's refugees are facing. Erasmus+ promotes intercultural understanding. (German speech 3)

While such statements may seem problematic in as far as they minimise the significant difficulties refugee students are likely to have experienced in their journey to Europe, they do at least attempt to contest dominant Othering discourses. Moreover, further attempts are made to underline the importance of such students' future contributions to German society, by emphasising their personal qualities and abilities:

I am firmly convinced that the promotion of these young people in the long term will be a benefit for our society. Many of the refugees are very motivated and efficient. (German speech 4)

Such sentiments are in line with broader migration policy in Germany, which has sought to establish a welcoming culture for refugees (although see Funk, 2017 for a discussion of some of the complexities of this). Thus, in the German documents, there are traces of what Madge et al. (2009) have called an 'engaged pedagogy', which 'take[s] responsibility to care and to imagine everyday academic practices from a multitude of different perspectives and centres' (p. 43). Here, student mobility is part of a constructive national response to an international refugee crisis – contrasting strongly with the way in which mobile students are viewed in England, as potential abusers of the higher education system, informed by a strongly anti-immigration agenda. With respect to the German case, we also see evidence of what Karram (2013) observed, in relation to one discourse about international students serving to deflect critique about another. Nevertheless, while she argued that, in Anglophone nations, a 'student support' discourse was used to 'cloak' a strongly marketised discourse, and thus protect it from criticism, in the case of Germany, in contrast, it appears that an instrumental discourse (about societal benefit) is being used to protect a more altruistic one from possible critique.

The evidence provided in this section has highlighted the considerable differences, across the six nations, in relation to whether mobile students are seen as temporary visitors or future residents; and whether all prospective students are desired, or only those willing to stay and/or who are of the highest academic calibre. Significant differences are also notable in relation to the implied responsibility for mobile students and the extent to which concepts of social justice are presented as geographically bounded. While such limits are clearly articulated in some of the English documents, a more expansive view is taken in nearly all of the German texts.

5.3. Outward mobility

The discussion of international students in the previous section has concentrated on inward mobility. In this part of the article, we turn to the ways in which the documents discuss *outward* international mobility – focussing on the movement of students both during their degree and at the point of completion. In general, and as might be expected, considerably less space is devoted to discussing the mobility of home students than their international counterparts. However, this is not played

out identically across the six countries: in both Germany and Ireland outward mobility appears a more important policy issue than in the other nations. This is related to the way in which outward mobility is positioned as a central plank in the formation of particular political identities within many of the German documents and, within the Irish texts, is related to concerns about the low level of such migratory activity.

As has already been noted in the preceding discussion, German participation in outward mobility schemes is seen as a key means of fostering a European identity. Various speeches by government ministers argue that the Erasmus programme, in particular, has led to the formation of a distinct 'Erasmus generation' who are used to moving across national borders unproblematically (German speech 1). They also suggest that the value of this scheme needs to be given more recognition across Europe, and that access to it should be increased by providing more financial support and simplifying access (German speech 1). Alongside the contribution to strengthening a regional identity, the German documents also argue that encouraging outward mobility (in Germany and elsewhere) is an effective means of responding to nationalism and what Speech 1 describes as the inward-looking nature of much contemporary politics. Specifically, gaining experience of life in another country, through a period of outward mobility, is argued to bring about greater tolerance and less discriminatory attitudes. As noted above, such experiences, it is held, will enable populations in Germany (but also elsewhere) to understand better the plight of refugees.

Getting to know other people and cultures promotes tolerance. And tolerance is a key to peaceful coexistence in all societies. Tolerance is particularly relevant in view of the diversity of our society. The current situation is a good example: the many people leaving their home countries and coming here are making us prove that we not only demand tolerance, but are tolerant ourselves. (German speech 3)

Where the outward mobility of students is mentioned elsewhere in the policy texts, it is discussed largely in relation to more individual-level benefits. For example, in Denmark, concern is expressed in Union document 2 that, as a result of the 'Study Progress' reforms (introduced in 2014, to encourage faster completion of degree programmes), students will be less likely to take up opportunities for outward mobility, and thus lose out on an important source of cultural enrichment:

The student will not be able to study abroad where the semester is structured differently than at home. Thus, the students cannot go on exchange programmes because of the pressure of the next semester. They will therefore miss out on cultural exchange programmes and the opportunity to see new areas within their field of expertise... (Danish union document 2)

Moreover, policy texts from Poland emphasise the benefits to individual employability that can accrue from a period studying abroad. (These are also noted in some German documents.)

Polish membership of the European Union is a great opportunity for Polish students who are now able to choose the country, higher education institution and field of their study. Students have increasingly better opportunities to learn and obtain the skills required to function in the European labour market. (Polish government document 1)

There is also significant variability in the way in which the outward mobility of *graduates* is discussed. Pervading some of the English documents is an assumption that such young people are largely *immobile*. English employers' document 2, for example, notes that, unlike countries such as the US and Germany, employers in the UK are relatively uninterested in the subject of a graduate's degree; prospective students should thus not worry about choosing a vocational degree or one that is particularly tailored to the sector of the labour market they wish to enter. This discussion is underpinned by the clear assumption

that English young people are unlikely to be internationally mobile on graduation. It also signals that only a domestic audience is being addressed; prospective international students who are likely to move back home and enter a different national labour market on completion of their degree are thus entirely ignored. In contrast, in both the Irish and Polish documents graduates are constructed as potentially highly mobile – to the detriment of the nation-state. The Irish union documents, for example, warn that a possible shift in the way in which higher education is funded – from a system of means-tested grants to one based on income-contingent loans (ICLs) – may have a very negative impact on emigration:

The introduction of an ICL scheme will result in a significant increase in emigration of higher education graduates. ... While many commentators have argued that an individual who enters into a student loan arrangement has a moral and legal obligation to repay it, the fact of the matter is that emigrating to avoid repayment of debt is a rational action. (Irish union document 2)

In the Irish case, such arguments are framed by the wider context in which it is recognised that, even without such a loan scheme, many young people do emigrate in order to secure employment on graduation (Cairns, 2014), and that outward migration has been a characteristic feature of Irish society for many centuries (Fanning, 2018). The Polish documents express similar concern about the outward mobility of current and past graduates; indeed, several of the reforms outlined in the various texts are intended to encourage such mobile young people to return to Poland:

How should we encourage students and university researchers that are leaving for the best scientific centres in the world to come back to Poland and continue the research here? (Polish government document 4)

Implicit in the texts from all three countries (England as well as Ireland and Poland) is a sense that the ‘ideal national graduate’ is one who remains in her or his nation-state on completion of higher education – this is assumed in the case of England, and desired in Poland and Ireland. Nevertheless, there are notable differences in the extent to which current graduates are thought to meet this ideal. The inherent *immobility* of the graduate constructed in the English documents contrasts markedly with the highly mobile figure of the graduate that emerges from the Irish and Polish texts. Here, there are clear commonalities with the discussion of outward mobility during a degree. Thus, assumptions about the increasing homogenisation of the European higher education space (Slaughter and Cantwell, 2012) are brought into question by the evidence, cited above, about, firstly, differences in the priority seemingly accorded to outward mobility and, secondly, the purposes such mobility is deemed to serve. Indeed, the German documents differ markedly from the others in this latter respect, placing considerable emphasis on societal and political benefits, rather than merely those that accrue to the individual.

6. Discussion

As noted previously in this article, facilitating the cross-border mobility of students has been seen by the European Commission, and various other political actors within Europe, as an effective mechanism for strengthening the EHEA. Indeed, such policy measures can be read as part of what Slaughter and Cantwell (2012) maintain is the European Commission’s commitment to the rolling out of an Anglo-American model of higher education across the continent – based on norms established in the US and UK, rather than in countries of mainland Europe. Such arguments about homogenisation have also been put forward by various other scholars. Sam and der Sijde (2014) have contended that the three traditional models of university education in Europe (Humboldtian, Napoleonic and Anglo-Saxon) have been replaced by a single Anglo-American model, characterised by, *inter alia*,

competition, marketisation, decentralisation and a focus on entrepreneurial activity (see also Rossi, 2010). These analyses draw, to some extent, on broader understandings of the impact of neo-liberal globalisation and the reframing of policy, in which the role of the nation-state as the ‘natural’ scale of politics and policy has been brought into question (Ozga and Lingard, 2007) and, in practical terms, the state’s capacity to control education has been significantly limited by the growth of both international organisations (such as the OECD – and also the EU) and transnational companies (Ball, 2007).

The evidence presented in this article, however, raises some questions about these assumptions – at least as far as student mobility is concerned. While promoting student mobility was typically positioned as a key element of the international strategies that were promulgated by all six countries, significant differences, by nation-state, were also evident. These related to the scale of desired mobility – for example, the relative emphasis placed on intra-national, European or worldwide mobility – and, with respect to inward mobility, the types of student that were desired or at least welcomed. Here, the contrast between the central place accorded to refugee students within the German documents and the emphasis on recruiting only the ‘brightest and the best’ in the English texts was notable – linked to rather different articulations of the ‘politics of responsibility’ (Massey, 2004). Moreover, the strong focus on promoting intra-European student mobility evident in the Spanish and German documents (often linking clearly to a desire to inculcate a strong European identity among the young) was notably absent in the Danish and English texts. Here, there is clear evidence of wider political cultures within specific nation-states (for example, in relation to the strength of Euroscepticism) framing the construction of the mobile student. This analysis thus tends to support the position of those who have pointed to enduring differences between nations and the associated heterogeneity of the neo-liberal turn. For example, not all European nations have sought to establish a vertically-differentiated higher education sector (Abramo and D’Angelo, 2014) and significant differences remain in the way in which higher education is funded (Hüther and Krücken, 2014) and the extent to which European nations have embraced marketisation (e.g. Dobbins and Leišytė, 2014; Holttta et al., 2011; Jongbloed, 2011). Differences in constructions of the mobile student are similarly marked.

Alongside engaging in debates about European homogenisation, the article also speaks to conceptualisations of student mobility more specifically. Firstly, the analysis has underlined the complex and nuanced nature of the ways in which mobile higher education students are constructed within policy texts. They are clearly not presented solely, if indeed at all, as ‘tradable objects’ as in Karram’s (2013) study. The diversity of constructions across Europe, evidenced in the preceding discussion, feeds into the wider deconstruction of the ‘international student’. Madge et al. (2015) have argued that it is important to pay attention to the often-significant differences between individuals and groups who pursue cross-border educational mobility and the varied mobility practices and policies of different higher education institutions and staff – and thus problematize the idea of the international student as a singular category. This research adds to this list the variety in policy constructions across geographically proximate nations, while also explicating the nature of some of this variation. Secondly, the article has shown the clear relationships between constructions of mobile students and the broader political context – for example, the ways in which differing national positions in relation to the EU can have a significant impact on the framing of both the purpose and the desired scale of mobility, and the impact of societal debates about migration in general on the construction of internationally mobile students as either visitors or workers. For Germany, but notably not for any of the other nations in the study, welcoming international students was also framed as a key humanitarian gesture, again linked to the wider migration policies of the nation-state. This resonates with the work of some scholars who have explored the links between specific student mobility policies and the more general political environment. Geddie’s (2015)

comparative work in the UK and Canada, for example, while pointing to some broad patterns of ‘policy transfer’ (linked to competition between nation-states, as discussed previously), also notes the limits imposed by local political factors – particularly the lack of authority to address higher education issues at the federal level in Canada, and processes of immigration reform in the UK. Thus, reflecting some of the points made above in relation to Europe, she argues that the relatively ‘fixed’ nature of local politics and policies, and existing institutional and constitutional frameworks can disrupt the ‘smooth’ flow of policies across national borders. Thirdly, the article has suggested that the figure of the mobile student can often be considered as a proxy for aims and objectives not always straightforwardly related to student mobility. This is relevant to some of the national political concerns discussed previously – for example, the ‘sham’ international student invoked in the English documented cited above is presented as an embodiment of illegal immigration and located within a broader political discourse about the need to protect the state’s borders more robustly. A more common trope, across the sample of documents as a whole, is the mobile student as a proxy for having secured internationally-recognised ‘excellence’. There are commonalities here with the arguments made by Findlay et al. (2017) in relation to international student recruitment more generally. They contend that many of their respondents, involved in the marketing of study abroad opportunities, saw international student recruitment, not just as a source of additional money, but as a means of being seen to offer a global education brand and a component of being an ‘excellent’ university. Mobile students are thus valued as much as potent symbols of educational quality as they are as economic resources and/or objects of trade as previous cross-national research has suggested (Karram, 2013; Sidhu, 2006).

7. Conclusion

Drawing on an analysis of 92 policy documents from six European nations, this article has contended that, despite arguments that we have witnessed across Europe the rolling out of an Anglo-American model of higher education and the increasing homogenisation of policy and practice, significant national differences remain – at least with respect to the dominant policy constructions of mobile students. Many of these relate to local political factors, including, *inter alia*, migration, labour market dynamics and relationships with the EU. As well as demonstrating some of the specific ways in which broader global policy imperatives (in this case related to internationalisation) are ‘re-contextualised’ at the local level, it has also contributed to the deconstruction of the ‘international student’ as a singular category, and shown how the figure of the mobile student is often brought into play as a proxy for other concerns. While – by focussing exclusively on policy documents – it has not been able to provide any evidence about the ways in which dominant constructions impact on students themselves, the significant diversity in representations evidenced in the paper does at least suggest that very different messages may be taken up by prospective students about how they are understood and the welcome they are likely to receive in particular nation-states.

Declaration of interest

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