

Asserting the nation: the dominance of national narratives in policymakers' constructions of higher education students

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Abstract

Drawing on interviews with 26 higher education 'policy influencers' from six European countries (Denmark, England, Germany, Ireland, Poland and Spain), this article considers the ways in which students were commonly understood by this particular group of social actors. It argues that, although a number of the characteristics of contemporary students identified by the interviewees are evident across many nation-states within Europe, they were frequently discussed and explained in terms of very distinct 'national narratives', with policy influencers often making reference to their country's specific history and culture. The implications of such narratives for European higher education and geopolitical relations more generally are explored.

Keywords: higher education, students, policy, national narratives, Europe

Introduction

In 2010, the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) came into being. This is described, on the EHEA's own website, as:

a unique international collaboration on higher education and the result of the *political will of 48 countries* with different political, cultural and academic traditions, which, step by step during the last twenty years, built an area implementing a common set of commitments: *structural reforms and shared tools*. These 48 countries agree to and adopt reforms on higher education on the basis of common key values – such as freedom of expression, autonomy for institutions, independent student unions, academic freedom, free movement of students and staff. For all these countries, the main goal is to *increase staff and students' mobility and to facilitate employability*. (EHEA, 2019, n.p., emphasis in the original)

It represents an attempt to standardise many aspects of higher education across the continent to enable students and staff to move unproblematically across national borders, and ensure that the region of Europe is perceived as a competitive player in the global market for higher education (Robertson, 2009). Scholars have suggested that the EHEA, and the Bologna process that helped bring it about, have tended to foreground values more commonly associated with an Anglo-American model of higher education (such as marketisation and competition) rather than those that have traditionally underpinned higher education in continental Europe (including collegial structures of governance and the autonomy of academic staff) (Slaughter and Cantwell, 2012). It is thus often argued that higher education systems across Europe are becoming more similar, with greater homogeneity observed in their approaches to teaching, methods of governance, and underpinning values (e.g. Dobbins, 2011; Moutsios, 2013; Voegtle et al., 2011). The pervasive neo-liberalism of the late 20th and early 21st centuries is also held to have contributed to such processes (Amaral, 2008; Wright and Shore, 2016).

Drawing on such analyses, this article considers the extent to which convergence is evident among key policy actors across Europe, particularly in relation to how they understand higher education students. Do they, for example, see all higher education students, wherever they study in the EHEA, as broadly similar, or do they differentiate between those in their own nation-state and other parts of the continent? Analysing such discourses employed by policy actors is important, not only in teasing out the extent to which European higher education is indeed homogenising and whether distinctions are made between students of different national origins, but also because the language used by policymakers and others who influence policy-making processes can have a significant impact on the ways in which social groups are understood and society more generally is shaped (Ball, 1990). Indeed, various empirical studies have shown how changes within elite discourse can have a concrete impact on policy (e.g. Williams, 2014). Research has shown, for example, that higher education students are aware of how they are discussed by politicians, and this can affect their own understandings (in this case, of their political efficacy) (Abrahams and Brooks, 2019).

The key argument of this article is that, rather than foregrounding shared characteristics of students across Europe, policy actors tend to emphasise their differences and, in explaining such differences, draw on what can be viewed as distinct ‘national narratives’. To help situate the arguments that are made later in this article, the following section discusses extant literature on ‘national narratives’, drawing on scholarship from political science and history as well as sociology and education. After outlining the methods used, the article then presents three examples of the ways in which national narratives were drawn upon to explain trends that, empirical evidence would suggest, are not unique to any one of the countries represented

in this study. Finally, the implications of such narratives for European higher education and geopolitical relations more broadly are explored.

Background

Within education research, ‘national narratives’ are most commonly discussed with respect to curricula and textbooks, arguing that the knowledge taught in schools is often selected to promote a particular view of the nation-state (e.g. Kotowski, 2013). Such perspectives articulate with a larger body of work, across the arts and social sciences, which explore the ways in which national narratives are formed and the functions they serve in wider society. Historians have, for example, contended that such stories are important parts of projects to create and justify new forms of governing – evident in the formation of nation-states in the nineteenth century (Anderson, 2006) and, more recently, in the project of European integration (Della Salla, 2016). Nations need to be *imagined*, as Anderson (2006) famously argued, because most members of such communities will never know, meet or hear their fellow citizens. Political scientists maintain that particular types of stories – namely ‘political myths’ – are important for legitimising specific forms of governance and, through forging a collective memory, establishing and then reinforcing bonds of community and solidarity (Bouchard, 2013; Della Salla, 2016; Flood, 1996). Moreover, international relations scholars have argued that national stories and political myths can help secure ‘ontological security’ (Giddens, 1991) for the nation-state. By this they mean that states, like the individuals in Giddens’ theory,

seek security in ways that ensure a consistency in the narrative and stories they tell about who they are, what they do and why. Narratives, including political myths, help

provide this confidence. They provide a way to sequence events and the environment so that social actors can make choices in the face of uncertainty, rooted in the familiar and the understandable. (Della Salla, 2016, p.526)

National narratives (and political myths) often share many key features. These include: claims to exceptionalism (i.e. why the nation should be considered unique, and the important ways it differs from others); an emphasis on transformational processes (to help make sense of highly disruptive social processes); the articulation of a utopian future; and the foregrounding of ideas about atonement and redemption (in which the nation shows that it is righting historical wrongs) (Bouchard, 2013; Della Salla, 2016; Kolvraa, 2016).

In addition, many national stories pay close attention to the boundaries around the nation; self-definition is often achieved through delineation of the ‘Other’ (Anderson, 2006). Such processes help determine ‘which strangers will be worthy of our sacrifices – in the form of taxes, loss of personal freedom, military service, etc. – and which will be excluded from sharing in the benefits of our community’ (Della Salla, 2016, p.529). Indeed, various historical studies have shown how national stories have had quite exclusionary functions – demonstrated, for example, in Nagle’s (2013) research on national boundary-making in Ireland and Germany in the early twentieth century, and Amia’s (2014) analysis of similar processes in contemporary Canada. National narratives may also be informed by and/or help reinforce wider geopolitical inequalities. Jarausch’s (2012) examination of German narratives (discussed further below) shows how a dominant Westernisation discourse served systematically to delegitimise the German Democratic Republic (GDR) and failed to address the more positive memories of some East German citizens. Similarly, various scholars have argued that Polish national narratives often assume a peripheral (geographical and political)

location, framed primarily in relation to Western Europe (Góra and Mach, 2010; Moes, 2009). Both examples reflect what Bakić-Hayden and Hayden (1992) have referred to as the ‘symbolic geography of eastern inferiority’ (p.4).

National narratives are often also backward-looking in nature. Jarausch (2012) argues that this has been the case in twenty-first century Germany, and has had problematic consequences. He contends that, at the time of writing, the dominant national narrative was about reunification, and that overcoming the post-war division of Germany ‘has provided a convenient end-point to a national narrative of imperial hubris, Weimar failure, Third Reich transgressions, GDR false start and eventual FRG [Federal Republic of Germany] redemption’ (p.339). He goes on to argue that this narrative is constructed as a ‘success story’, in which Germany recovered its dignity through political Westernisation and democratisation and was ultimately rewarded for its ‘recivilisation’ by the overthrow of Communism. This particular telling of the story has had the effect, Jarausch maintains, of closing down debate about current social and political issues unrelated to reunification, particularly those that are transnational in nature, such as how to deal with international terrorism, conflicts in the Middle East, and environmental degradation. Indeed, he maintains ‘the current fixation on the “peaceful revolution” has narrowed the focus to an analysis of the after-effects of unification and prohibited an intellectual opening to new kinds of problems’ (p.340). While national narratives can, as the example above attests, lag behind current realities, they are not, however, fixed. The boundaries established by such narratives can be challenged by groups who feel excluded from them (see Amia, 2014) as well as elite groups with considerably more power in society (Williams, 2014). In relation to the specific example of Germany, above, it could be argued that national narratives were reshaped only a few years after Jarausch’s (2012) article was published, in light of the 2015 migrant crisis in

Europe. Here, Germany chose to by-pass the usual rules of the EU's shared asylum system, in which migrants are meant to apply for asylum in the first EU country they reach, and allowed them entry, calling on other European nations to do the same (Bock and Macdonald, 2019).

Nevertheless, the transnational issues Jarausch (2012) points to with respect to Germany raise some broader questions about whether 'national' narratives are increasingly anachronistic in a globalised world where migration across national borders is common (Castles and Miller, 2009) and cultural homogenisation evident (Ritzer, 2008). The empirical evidence indicates however that national stories remain strong in this shifting context. Bouchard (2013) suggests that globalisation has frequently fostered national responses intended to protect local solidarities, and that stories, myths and narratives constitute a key part of such responses. He argues that 'the nation as a vehicle of myths ... is still a powerful actor on the world scale ... and it still possesses an amazing ability to redefine itself and to adapt to new environments' (p.285). Moreover, there is little evidence that supranational organisations have had much success in developing competing narratives of their own. With respect to the European Union (EU), Kolvraa (2016) suggests that the lack of traction of the EU's own political myths may be because a key part of the narrative, the utopian future, as originally stated – i.e. peace in Europe – has already been achieved. For younger generations of Europeans, in particular, peace is assumed as a fact of life and thus cannot operate as a utopian projection capable of generating emotional attachment. A similar conclusion is reached by Della Salla (2013) who contends that most successful narratives articulate a desirable end point, but this is largely absent in the case of the EU, beyond rather nebulous (and contested) calls for an 'ever closer union'. He also notes that, as a result of the migrant crisis of 2015, the European Union struggled to reach a clear position about where its boundaries were drawn, and who constituted the 'Other' (Della Salla, 2017). While some EU member states, especially those

on the front line of the migrant crisis felt the pressure ‘to identify the Others more readily and thus place a greater emphasis on territory and borders’ (Della Salla, 2017, p.551), other states, such as Germany, adopted a very different position, seeing the EU not as a fortress but a bridge to a more interdependent world (ibid.).

Variation is also evident in the ways in which relationships to Europe are woven into the narratives of individual nation-states (Lacroix and Nicolaïdis, 2010). Irish national narratives, for example, tend to position the Irish nation as the principal character in ‘European stories’ indicative of an absence of public reflection on the purpose and path of future European integration, but high regard for EU membership and its benefits (Hayward, 2010). In Germany, in contrast, European integration occupies an important place in national stories about Europe, which tend to foreground its benefits to the continent as a whole (Müller, 2010). Spanish narratives also promote European integration very positively – allying it closely with Spanish democratisation. Typically, ‘Europe is conceived of as Spain’s national project and thus the consecutive advancement of the integration process would serve to strengthen the country’ (Closa and Barroso, 2010, p.216). In Poland, however, very clear distinctions tend to be drawn in ‘European stories’ between the EU and the nation-state. Alongside this, Polish narratives frequently emphasise the peripheral location of the country – reinforcing the eastern border of Europe, protecting Western values and modernisation, and acting as an important agent of Europeanisation (Góra and Mach, 2010).

Clearly, ‘national narratives’ do not operate in a straight-forward ‘top down’ manner, in which they are taken up unthinkingly by policymakers and other social actors. Individuals are able to reflect on the veracity of the claims made in such stories, and make decisions about whether or not to deploy them in their sense-making activities. Nevertheless, this body of

work provides a useful framework for exploring some of the ways in which the various policy actors in the current research talked about higher education students in their own country – and, in some cases, the striking recourse to particular *national* histories when describing what some analysts might see as *cross-national* phenomena.

Methods

The data drawn upon in this article were collected as part of a project exploring how higher education students are understood in six European countries (Denmark, England, Ireland, Germany, Poland and Spain) – chosen to provide diversity in terms of: relationship to the European Union (particularly with respect to date of accession); welfare regime; means through which higher education is funded; and the extent and nature of any student support (such as maintenance grants and loans). The broader project also examined similarities and differences between the understandings held by a variety of relevant stakeholders within each of these countries (policymakers, the media and higher education staff, as well as students themselves), with the aim of ascertaining the extent to which understandings were contested within individual nation states, and thus feeding into debates about whether nations can be considered as ‘coherent educational entities’ (Philips and Schweisfurth, 2014). (See Brooks, 2019 and Abrahams and Brooks, 2019, for discussion of such intra-national contestations.)

This article draws specifically on 26 semi-structured interviews that were conducted, as part of the broader project, with a range of higher education ‘policy influencers’ across the various countries. In each nation, we interviewed at least one representative from each of the following groups: the government department for higher education (civil servant or minister); the national students’ union (and/or the national union for higher education staff); the

national body that represents the university sector and/or university leaders as a whole; and a national body that represents graduate employers or employers in general. Interviewees were typically identified through the relevant organisation's website and then emailed with a request for an interview and an information sheet about the project. In most cases, the individual who was contacted initially agreed to take part. In a few instances, however, they suggested a colleague whom they thought would be better placed to answer our questions. Although we sought to interview representatives from the same type of organisation across the six countries, it is important to recognise that the relative power of such groups is not always the same in each nation-state, nor are they always configured in the same way. For example, as we have argued elsewhere, there are significant national differences in the extent to which the national students' union has been able to exert political influence (Abrahams and Brooks, 2019). Moreover, the central government ministry of higher education in Germany has a more limited policy remit than its equivalents in other countries, because of the devolution of many higher education-related issues to the level of the Länder (federal states).

Interviewees were asked about how they understood or conceptualised higher education students; how they thought other social actors understood such students; and their views on specific constructions of the student (e.g. as a consumer, a political actor and a future worker). They were also asked to respond to an extract from an influential policy document from their own country. These documents were chosen because they related to key themes identified in a previous part of the project, when 92 documents from across the six countries were analysed (see Brooks, 2019 for overview and details). Typically, they related to a particularly significant and/or controversial recent higher education reform in the country. All interviews were conducted in English and lasted approximately one hour. In general, the English of all interviewees was very good, and there was no need for any translation. In one

case, however, an interviewee was less confident about his English, and so asked for our questions to be sent in advance of the interview. He had then made detailed notes, which he spoke from in the interview. It is worth observing that the interviewer's own positionality (a white British woman) is likely to have had an impact on the data collected. For example, it was notable that while the English interviewees often assumed a high level of understanding of the relevant policy context, this was not the case in the five other countries. More specifically, and in relation to the arguments developed later in the paper, the English interviewees did not employ the kind of national narratives evident in the five other countries. This may well have been because they assumed the interviewer would be familiar with the historical context in England, and did not need this to be explained or spelt out for her. All interviews were then transcribed and coded using NVivo. The codes were derived, inductively, from the interviews themselves, and also, in some cases, deductively, from the extant literature (see Brooks, 2018, for a discussion of previous empirical and theoretical work on constructions of the higher education student, which informed the analysis).

Understanding students through 'national narratives'

It was striking in many of the interviews with the policy influencers that distinct national narratives were drawn upon quite frequently to explain what were believed to be key characteristics of higher education students from that particular country – even if the available empirical evidence suggests that the characteristics were, in practice, shared by students in many other parts of Europe. In this section, we provide some examples of these key characteristics and national stories, before going on to discuss their significance in the section that follows. These examples focus on students as being: employment-focussed; politically apathetic; and interested only in academic (rather than vocational) qualifications.

Employment-focussed

A common theme across the dataset was that, over recent decades, students themselves, as well as the higher education sector as a whole, had become increasingly employment-focussed. This was evident, for example, in national policy documents where the construction of the higher education student as a ‘future worker’ was a common trope across all six countries (Brooks, 2019). Policy influencers also talked at length about how the role of the student had increasingly come to be understood in relation to the labour market, and (in Denmark, England, Poland and Spain) how steps had been taken to provide better information to prospective students about the labour market destinations and earnings of graduates from their chosen discipline, with the intention of guiding them towards degrees perceived as having better economic returns. However, while such themes were common across the six countries, they were typically discussed and explained in *national* terms, often with reference to very specific national histories. In Ireland, for example, the close relationship between higher education and employment was discussed by several interviewees. In the first extract below, a high-ranking civil servant, responsible for higher education policy, explains this in terms of Ireland’s experience of unemployment:

Ireland’s very big on employment [within higher education policy] you see because we’ve had such a long history of unemployment and under-employment, it’s deep in the policy DNA here, in a way it mightn’t be in other countries. Like we are all about how do we get jobs, how do we keep jobs, how do we fill jobs! How do we ... that’s our central core mission.

Notable here is the comment she makes about the likely difference from other nations ('in a way it mightn't be in other countries'). She later goes on to say that this relationship between education and work is not contested in Ireland because of the manner in which it has been viewed historically, and the national consensus about the labour market gains that follow from higher education:

... we've been quite lucky, you know our, like there's a lot of contestation of a lot of things in Ireland but funnily enough, education hasn't really been one of them ... the connection between education, skills, labour market has never been contested, because it was always seen as a way of ... giving people security and good remuneration, you know. So again, I do think history is important.

These sentiments were echoed by others. The Irish employers' and university leaders' interviewees, for example, both emphasised the way in which education was a key part of the nation's history and culture, not least because it was seen as the most effective route out of poverty and into well-paid employment:

We actually take great pride in our system, you know, education generally in Ireland is held in very high regard for as much a part of our history and culture as anything else. I mean we're sort of, we were sort of colonised, very poor country, and education was, education and religion was the way out of it. And that value, that cultural value we put on education in this country is really hard-wired. (Irish employers' organisation interviewee)

... the expectations that the education system is the solution to ... success and happiness are very high, and that's been deeply engrained in the Irish psyche for 150 years, I mean since, since sort of the famine, when farming was seen as the least good option. (Irish university leaders' organisation interviewee)

The perceived distinctiveness of the Irish experience was thus often explicit in many of these narratives.

The Polish respondents also commented on the close relationship between higher education and employment but, in this case, it was not always evaluated entirely positively. One of the two government interviewees believed that Polish students focussed primarily on the labour market outcomes of their study, and that this differentiated them (in a negative manner) from their Western European counterparts:

I think that the Polish student population, perhaps along with the student populations of other post-Communist countries, are markedly different than their counterparts in, in Western Europe where the markets, you know, this whole capitalism thing has been for hundred ... for decades! And [in Western countries] ... this attitude towards finding your ... your success on the labour market perhaps is not as pronounced.

(Polish government interviewee 1)

He believed that Poland's relatively late embrace of capitalism explained the keenness of Polish students to secure well-paid jobs on graduation and think of their higher education almost exclusively as a period of labour market preparation. The second government interviewee drew on a somewhat similar comparison to explain Polish students' attitudes. As

far as he was concerned, students' expectations about the jobs they should be taking up on graduation were far too high, and they were often reluctant to work their way up within organisations. These were again attributed to Poland's recent economic and political history:

In my opinion, the demands [of students] are too high. It might be because of the opening of the Polish borders after the fall of the Communist regime. When I was a student in the 1990s, it was not so easy to cross the border as a student and to spend one year or six months abroad. Now it is, and the living standard is of course much higher in Western countries, and being able to look at a better life – it might be the reason why students have become more demanding. But in my opinion this is unfortunate; it is a bad way, really – because it takes time to learn how to work.

(Polish government interviewee 2)

Thus, while Irish and Polish interviewees remarked upon very similar trends among their student populations – trends that were evident in the other four nations, too – these were explained through national narratives, emphasising the distinctiveness of their particular historical trajectory. Discussion of wider transnational influence was notably absent.

Politically apathetic

When asked about the extent to which they saw contemporary students as political actors, many policy influencers (although not all) commented on what they perceived to be the lower levels of political engagement among the student body when compared to previous generations. In some cases this was qualified with reference to participation in formal politics, noting that students may be more likely to become involved in single issue

campaigns, for example, but were less likely to vote, join a political party, and get involved in student-led activism. In many ways this accords with the broader literature on political participation across Europe (Abrahams and Brooks, 2019). There is now substantial evidence that young people (of whom students constitute a significant proportion) in many different national contexts are less likely to engage in formal politics than in the past – not because they are uninterested in politics, but because they are often highly critical of the ways in which formal politics is practised (Pilkington and Pollack 2015; Stoker et al. 2017). There has been a corresponding increase in non-formal participation, but this has not offset entirely the decline in formal engagement (ibid.). Nevertheless, despite these general patterns, policy influencers again made recourse to national narratives in their explanations. Here, we firstly draw on evidence from Spain:

The role of students – they are the future, they will occupy the higher posts in society. I think the social movement is less important than in previous times. For example, in the 1970s the social movement of university students was very important – they were very much involved in the political transformation from a dictatorship to democratic society – but nowadays they are much more calm and passive concerning cultural and even political features of everyday life. It is [significant] that they are not playing an active role in changing society. (Spanish union interviewee)

Like the fact that, you know, all [students'] parents were born under the dictatorship and they have to work hard and ... and now everything is easy, we have been born in democracy and of course that's so much better. But somehow we take it for granted ... (Spanish university leaders' organisation interviewee 1)

In both these extracts, the interviewees suggest that students' relative lack of engagement in formal politics can be explained by the more peaceful political circumstances in Spain and, specifically, that they have been born into a democracy rather than, as was the experience of many of their parents, a dictatorship (under Franco).

In Poland, various interviewees also commented on the relative lack of political engagement by higher education students. Again, however, this was often explained in terms of factors specific to the nation-state. For example, even the member of the Polish students' union who was interviewed outlined that students in general tended not to involve themselves in political issues and, when they did, their activity was usually focussed on improving their own university experience, rather than engaging with any wider concerns. He explained these patterns largely in terms of Poland's Communist legacy. Under Communism, he asserted, students had made a clear separation between education-related issues, which were deemed to constitute a legitimate focus for student activity, and issues with provenance beyond the university walls, which were not. He explained: 'One of the main ideas [in the Communist period, which has endured] was to [focus] on the university and don't be political ... this was the way that they avoided political problems'.

Thus, in both Spain and Poland, there was little recognition of the commonality of experience across national borders or discussion of the various factors that are observed internationally – such as a disillusionment with politicians and the processes associated with formal politics, a lack of engagement with students (and young people in general) by politicians, and the growth of identity politics and single-issue campaigning (Kimberlee, 2002; Pilkington and Pollack 2015). Again, we see interviewees drawing on distinctly national stories to explain

trends than can be observed in many other European countries, as well as across the Global North more generally.

Interested only in academic qualifications

As we have discussed elsewhere (Brooks, 2019), in some countries in the sample, mass expansion of higher education has been problematised within policy on the assumption that it has led to an unhelpful focus on quantity rather than quality (of students). This is most marked in Denmark and Poland where full-time students are funded entirely by the state – clearly related to the political sensitivities associated with this significant public investment. However, across the six countries, a wider group of interviewees expressed reservations about the consequences of massification. A common theme in some of these accounts was the way in which the increasing popularity of an academic, university education had led to a corresponding decline in the status and take-up of vocational education and training. Despite the prevalence of these concerns, they were sometimes framed in distinctly national terms, and this was most apparent in Germany, where reference was made to the nation’s long history of providing high quality vocational education. This was articulated most clearly by the interviewee from the German university leaders’ organisation:

... I always thought that actually this, the fact that we had so many people opting for [the vocational] sector was proof of the high appreciation and good quality of the VET [vocational education and training] sector among the population in Germany ...
... But then a couple of years back ... something started to change and all of a sudden, the percentage of young people who opted for higher education kept going up and going up and going up ... it’s more than half of young people now go for higher

education, with all sorts of consequences, many of them undesired ... And you can't help thinking, 'Why don't you go to VET? It's very, very high level training and it should be equally prestigious'.

Interestingly, he also emphasised what he perceived to be the national distinctiveness of Germany, by comparing the historical high status of the vocational sector with what he viewed as a very different situation in France:

I always thought that something's going wrong in France because ... everybody feels obliged to go to university ... everybody tries to go to a university because ending up doing an apprenticeship is considered a failure. And I always thought that it's different in Germany, and I thought that's very healthy that way and we should keep it that way. but now the problem is that something has changed, and that we're beginning to resemble the French situation in the sense that you're considered, by your uncles and aunts and parents and everyone else, something of a failure if you don't get into higher education.

Thus, in these two extracts, not only is Germany's assumed historical uniqueness emphasised, but concern is expressed at becoming too similar to other European nations such as France. Thus, national distinctiveness is both used as a frame of reference to discuss current changes, and positioned as something inherently valuable and worth preserving.

A somewhat similar discourse was evident in Poland, too. Here, various interviewees were critical of the mass expansion of higher education in the country, and suggested – in line with their German counterparts cited above – that an academic education may not be appropriate

for all of the large number of students currently enrolled in universities. The employers' interviewee also believed that, for many students, such an education was not the best preparation for subsequent employment – a view that he claimed was shared by numerous companies across the country. Similar points were made by the Polish union interviewee. Indeed, he claimed that:

[If] you have a kid, you want him/her to study [in higher education]. This is a curse of our system, because it shouldn't be like that. It's not always the best way to evolve, to go to first and second degree studies just after high school. I think there are other ways [routes] which would be more efficient for some groups.

In referring to massification as 'a curse of *our system*', it is positioned as a national phenomenon rather than something that has been witnessed across the world, and particularly within Europe. Moreover, in explaining this trend, the union interviewee focused on national-level explanations. He argued that, because, historically, in Poland, university-educated elites tended to enjoy high status and labour market rewards, people assume that the same outcomes will be experienced by the current generation of higher education graduates. Here, although there is no reference to the high quality of the country's vocational training nor any national distinctiveness in this respect – as was the case in the German data – the deployment of national explanatory frameworks is similar.

Discussion

Despite the significant steps taken to establish a European Higher Education Area (predicated on the idea of shared commitments and values, and standardised approaches to teaching and

assessment), the emergence of what is often thought to be a global higher education market, and many common trends across higher education systems (e.g. massification, increasing number of international students, closer relationships between universities and business), the dominance of *national* frames of reference within the data reported above is striking. The extracts from interviews with policy influencers in a number of European countries suggest that, in spite of the clear impact of globalising pressures and transnational influences within education (Lingard and Rivzi, 2010), significant change is often explained, by key policy stakeholders, through national narratives, which foreground a country's history and its ostensible difference from other neighbouring states. While such narratives are clearly not identical to the 'national myths' discussed earlier in this article – not least because they focus on education, rather than the development of a country more generally – they appear to share various features in common. Perhaps the most obvious of these is the focus on uniqueness, the ways in which the country in question is believed to have arrived at its current position through a very particular historical trajectory. This is evident in, for example, the reference to Spain's period under the Franco dictatorship to explain contemporary political apathy among students, and Ireland's experience of famine and colonisation to account for the high regard with which education is held and the employment focus of the Irish higher education sector as a whole. Undoubtedly, the values and orientations of students across the six countries in this study *are* informed, to some extent at least, by national histories, policies and priorities (see, for example, work on the enduring impact of some national political priorities within higher education, by Capano and Piattoni, 2011). However, the absence of recourse to narratives about transnational and global influence, when these are well documented in, for example, official policy documents as well as academic studies, is intriguing.

In many ways, the data presented above accord well with the arguments made by Jarausch (2012) in his analysis of national narratives in Germany. The data from this study, and that presented by Jarausch, show how the dominance of national stories can help to obscure various transnational and global issues, which transcend national borders yet often have a significant impact on the life of many individuals. The project data do not provide any evidence that, for the countries concerned, the foregrounding of national explanations impedes engagement with wider issues or cross-national policy initiatives. However, it does suggest that if policy influencers adopt this kind of lens, they may tend to underplay both commonalities across nation-states and the impact of influences beyond the nation-state – both of which may have consequences for cross-national collaboration and working. Such national narratives also support the contention that, despite claims about the death of the nation-state, it remains the primary unit of societal organisation, and continues to shape collective identities in important ways (Moes, 2009).

The narratives presented above also speak to debates about the enduring importance of boundary-making and the identification of ‘Others’ in constructions of national identity. In the data from Poland and, to a lesser extent, Spain, the policy influencers compare their countries negatively to other European nation-states. Spanish students are seen as taking democracy for granted because of the country’s transition from a dictatorship, while Polish students are positioned as materialistic, demanding and job-focussed because of the country’s relatively late transition to capitalism. In contrast, the Irish and German interviewees present a more positive picture of their countries – taking pride in the employment-focus of their students, in the case of Ireland, and comparing the education system favourably with that of other European nations, with respect to Germany. Implicit and sometimes explicit in these stories is the sense of the ‘Other’ against which national understandings of students are

constructed. Again, there are similarities with broader analyses of myths and imagined communities, which have emphasised the key role played by conceptions of the ‘Other’ in the construction of national stories and identities (Anderson, 2006; Della Salla, 2016).

Within the policy influencers’ narratives there are also strains of older political geographies and power imbalances. Writing towards the end of the last century, Bakić-Hayden and Hayden (1992) noted how, within Europe, ‘the symbolic geography of eastern inferiority’ (p.4) often remains. They argue that the Orientalism outlined by Said (2003) took on a new form within Europe from the middle of the twentieth century:

This older symbolic geography was reinforced in the post-war (cold war) period by an ideological and political geography of the democratic, capitalist west versus the totalitarian, communist east ... No matter how different the historical contexts, there is a striking continuity in the nature and logic of the rhetoric as well as the image and terminology used to represent that dichotomy ... In this century, an ideological ‘other’, communism, has replaced the geographical/cultural ‘other’ of the Orient. (p.3-4)

They maintain that this has led to what they call ‘nestling Orientalisms’, in which there exists a tendency for each region to view cultures to the south and east of it as more conservative and/or primitive. Countries within Eastern Europe are ‘Othered’ because of their Communist past, and those in the south as a result of assumptions about their ‘undisciplined’ and ‘passionate’ cultures (Bakić-Hayden and Hayden, 1992). In the data presented in this article, we see hints of such geopolitical positioning, but played out in rather different ways. For example, the German interviewee draws a contrast with France, rather than a country to the

east or south, while the Irish interviewees discuss Ireland's distinctiveness without identifying a specific national 'Other'. With respect to Poland, an east-west dichotomy is drawn in the discussion about the employment-focussed nature of students but, interestingly, this is by one of the Polish interviewees himself, who appears to position Poland as 'Other' with respect to western European nations, on the basis of their different economic histories. This particular Polish narrative also reflects points made in the wider literature, and discussed above, about the common peripheral positioning of the nation and its frequent framing in relation to a more economically advanced western Europe (Góra and Mach, 2010; Moes, 2009).

Conclusion

This article has argued that, despite globalising pressures, the establishment of a European Higher Education Area, and well-documented empirical evidence that students face many similar issues across Europe, key policy actors frequently make use of 'national narratives' in discussing the contemporary higher education student. Moreover, they often explain students' perspectives with reference to what are held to be unique *national* histories and cultural backgrounds. Here, there are many commonalities with the broader literature, stemming from political science and history, which has suggested that, even under conditions of globalisation, 'national myths' remain strong, and indeed may in some ways be considered a response to global pressures.

These narratives are significant because of the light they shed on understandings of the European Higher Education Area. Despite arguments within the academic literature on the increasing convergence of higher education systems across Europe, the policy actors'

narratives suggest that, in some cases, national frames have reference have not yet been usurped by European ones. They are also significant because of the ways in which they conceptualise students. The language used in policy and by policy influencers can have significant effects. Words do more than name things, they impose limits on what can be said (Bacchi, 2000), and construct certain possibilities for thought by ordering and combining words in particular ways and excluding or displacing other combinations (Ball, 1990, p.18). Thus, the emphasis on students *as distinct from those in other parts of Europe* may have a bearing on how they are understood by other social actors, and by students themselves.

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