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## Higher education students as consumers: a cross-country comparative analysis of students' views

Achala Gupta <sup>a</sup>, Rachel Brooks <sup>b</sup> and Jessie Abrahams <sup>c</sup>

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

### ABSTRACT

The rapid expansion of neo-liberal regimes has effectively transformed how students – their role and purpose – are understood in society. Scholars, especially in the Anglophone North, have shown how dominant policy narratives tend to position students as consumers. More recent studies have begun to explore students' views of this construction. However, much of this work focuses on a particular country; thus, how students' opinions may vary across contexts remains largely underexamined. Redressing this gap, this article explores students' perspectives on being constructed as consumers in Denmark, England, and Spain. It discusses similarities and differences across and within these countries. The paper shows that most students find this construction profoundly problematic and counter to the ideals of education as a public good. Yet, different, often contrasting, themes from students' narratives signify the relevance of the funding regime and the level of stratification within HE sectors in shaping students' understanding of consumerist discourse across Europe.

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Higher education; Europe; students; consumer identity; comparative study

## Introduction

The expansion of neoliberalism has effectively transformed how we live our lives (Harvey 2007). It has had significant implications for a variety of social institutions, including education. Specifically, the influence of neoliberalism on the higher education (HE) sector has been discussed in the literature through examples of cross-national policy convergence, such as – within Europe – the creation of a European Higher Education Area (EHEA) and the Bologna Process (see Voegtler, Knill, and Dobbins 2011). Although whether these policy initiatives are indeed neo-liberal remains contested, scholars have argued that such reforms have resulted in increased marketisation, often leading to framing students as consumers in policy narratives (Sabri 2010) as well as by students themselves (Nixon, Scullion, and Hearn 2018; Tomlinson 2017). Studies focusing on this pervasiveness of consumerist discourse, however, tend to explore this phenomenon in Anglophone countries (such as England), with relatively less attention being paid to the

**CONTACT** Achala Gupta  [Achala.Gupta@soton.ac.uk](mailto:Achala.Gupta@soton.ac.uk)  University of Southampton, University Rd, Building 32, Highfield Campus, Southampton SO17 1TR, UK

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extent to which this construction is made sense of by students in non-Anglophone European countries (such as Denmark and Spain).

Specifically, drawing on focus groups conducted with 150 students in three European countries, this article generates a novel understanding of the construction of students as consumers; it does so by 1) offering a *comparative analysis* of how this identity is understood, focusing on the extent to which it is shared across Denmark, England and Spain, 2) exploring the ways in which *students* understand this, often imposed but at times assumed, identity – the consumerist discourse it generates and the implications it may have for HE practices, and 3) contemplating and discussing *the factors that may shape students' reflections* on this construction – including the similarities and differences that may emerge in students' accounts – across the selected countries.

Overall, this article argues that many students find this construction profoundly problematic and counter to the ideals of education as a public good. Nevertheless, the ways in which students articulated their views varied across countries, signalling the impact of the broader social context, especially funding regimes and cultural norms, as well as within countries, highlighting the influence of HE institutions (HEIs) one attends in determining students' understanding of their role and identity as consumers.

### Higher education students as consumers: a background

The construction of students-as-consumers is multifaceted, as we will explore in this section, but it is often discussed in alignment with rising competition among HEIs across European countries (Slaughter and Cantwell 2012). These neo-liberal policy-led structural transformations have been said to have deeply impacted HE practices – for example, HEIs are often so pressured to operate on principles of 'excellence' and 'innovation' that they struggle to uphold the ideals of the university as a public good (discussed in Wright and Shore 2016). Increasing alignment of HE practices and institutional perspectives signals growing similarities across HE sectors in European countries – although the extent to which this aspired homogenisation of the European HE system has been successful remains largely contested.

These governmental changes at the macro level and institutional reconfigurations at the meso-level have also been discussed in the literature in relation to their compounded impact on shaping the ways in which students' and staff roles and identities are understood at the micro-level. For instance, scholars, especially within Anglophone North, have suggested that while universities are increasingly deemed as service providers, students tend to be positioned as consumers – such discussions are particularly prevalent in various policy-level analyses across European countries (Sabri 2010; Wright and Shore 2016). For example, outlining the impact of the Bologna process on university staff and students, Moutsios (2013, 35) argues:

Within the university, management-based governance is dissolving the academic community by turning scholars into 'human resources' with no say for the affairs of their institution and students into temporary consumers (but also 'human resources' under formation)

Similarly, in the context of the UK's HE policy, Sabri (2010) offers a nuanced account of students' social positioning. She argues, 'Students are constructed as consumers who are "entitled to be taught well"' (196) and that the improvement of the "student experience"

and the provision of information to students, who are seen as paying customers, are key priorities in higher education policies. This dynamic between students and HE policy-making is crucial to understanding the views of various social actors, especially students', as discussed in this article, about the construction of students-as-consumers within the broader HE landscape.

Indeed, now a growing body of scholarship, especially in the UK and Australia, discusses what students themselves think about this construction – how these perspectives are potentially shaped by the structural changes mentioned above and what impacts these may have on HE practices. For example, drawing on interviews with undergraduate students in a research-intensive university in the UK, Nixon, Scullion, and Hearn (2018) argue that the prevailing consumer culture within HE has created students as 'sovereign consumers' who are often preoccupied with making 'narcissistic' judgements about the quality of services university offers them. The authors maintain that such tendencies often nudge students to adopt the identity of instrumental and passive learners. Molesworth, Nixon, and Scullion (2009) suggest that students have indeed assumed a consumer identity – and as consumers, HE students are more concerned about their rights, focusing more on *having* a degree and not *being* a learner.

These conclusions have been challenged by other scholars who argue that students' views are more complex. For example, Tomlinson (2017) identifies significant variation in students' perceptions of themselves as consumers in HE settings, including the instances where students' understandings do not reflect the approaches an ideal student-consumer should take. In the same study, Tomlinson argues that students can *choose* to play this identity in one instance and decide to distance themselves from it in another instance, making the identity of students-as-consumers more fluid and relational. Building on Tomlinson's work on England's HE sector, Brooks and Abrahams (2018, 200) found another category of students who had 'never before engaged with the idea of consumerism', signifying the limited impact of policy narratives on students' perceptions of their role and identity.

## The study

This article is a part of a larger project that aims to explore a variety of ways in which HE students are socially constructed in European countries. Fieldwork for this project was conducted between November 2016 and October 2018. This article focuses on three countries: Denmark, England and Spain. These countries were chosen to represent some diversity of the European HE landscape (see below) and to understand how this variety shapes – or does not shape – the ways in which students understand themselves being seen as consumers.

## Key features of the sample countries and HEIs

These three countries vary significantly in terms of their socio-economic infrastructure (the economic model and governance regime), size of the student cohort (number of students enrolled across HEIs), state funding regimes for the HE sector (the availability of loans, scholarship support, for example), and the hierarchy of the HE sector (how HEIs are categorised, based on their relative status, for example) (see Tables S1 and S2 in

Supplemental Material). These factors were considered when choosing the countries to provide diversity in our sample, and they were expected to be relevant in shaping students' views. Indeed, as we show in the subsequent sections, our participants did refer to many of these (e.g. funding regimes) to substantiate their understanding of the social construction of student consumers.

Public expenditure on tertiary education is much higher in Denmark than in the other two countries in our sample – this is evident in terms of state expenditure on tertiary education (as % of Gross Domestic Product) across these countries (see Table S1 in Supplemental Material). Other key features of these countries that are relevant to the discussion in this article are:

- Denmark adheres to the norms of a social-democratic welfare regime, which is reflected in the financial support HE students are provided with here. At the time of fieldwork, no tuition fees were charged to full-time undergraduate students, and nearly 85% of students received need-based grants (of up to €9703). In addition, loans were available to students who were entitled to state grants.
- England operates a liberal welfare regime. In contrast to the Danish HE system, in England, full-time undergraduate students are typically charged £9250 tuition fees per year – no grants are available to students; however, they have easy access to loans to pay their tuition and maintenance fees if needed.
- In Spain – the country with a sub-protective welfare regime – about 71% of students pay an average of €1213 per year as tuition fees at the time of data collection. Although no loan services are available to students, nearly 30% of students receive need-based grants (of up to €6682). Thus, with regards to the funding mechanisms, Spain falls somewhere between Denmark and England.

Furthermore, the variety in the HE sector differs across all three countries. For example, we observe a greater institutional hierarchy in England, where the HE sector is more vertically differentiated than in many other countries (Hazelkorn 2015) – although, to a lesser extent, such a hierarchical model is also emerging in Spain with the growth of private universities alongside state-funded institutions of higher education (Perotti 2007). In Denmark, the variety in the HE sector appears in terms of the old and established institutions and newer HEIs with a greater vocational focus (Degn 2015). These different types of HEIs are represented in the three institutions where we conducted fieldwork in each of the three countries (see Table S3 in Supplemental Material). We have used labels HEI1, HEI2 and HEI3 in each country to refer to the three HEIs where focus groups were conducted.

### ***Participants, research method, and data analysis***

In total, 150 HE students participated in our study – distributed roughly equally across Denmark, England and Spain. We were largely successful in incorporating students from different backgrounds and varying characteristics (See Table S4 in Supplemental Material).

The data was produced through focus groups with students. In Denmark and England, focus groups were carried out in English; all focus groups in Spain were conducted in

Spanish. This article draws specifically on students' responses to one question we asked all our participants – 'what are your views on the construction of students as consumers?'. It might nonetheless be interesting to note that as part of the larger project that aimed to understand how HE students are viewed in European contexts, we asked students a series of questions concerning what it means to be a university student in their respective countries. We used creative methods to further enrich focus group discussions – we asked all students to make two plasticine models; one that represented how they saw themselves and the other to illustrate how they thought others (who exactly was open to interpretation) viewed them. We also solicited students' responses to the way in which they are portrayed in media, using extracts from national newspapers, as well as their understanding of popular constructions of students as political actors or future workers, for example. This approach to carrying out focus groups generated material that showed the complexity of student identities that have been reported in a more extended output from this project (Brooks et al. 2022).

Focus groups were audio-recorded and transcribed in the language these were carried out – all Spanish focus groups were transcribed into Spanish and later translated into English for analysis purposes. This dataset was analysed using NVivo software and a thematic approach. We first coded each transcript, using codes that were produced both inductively from the data and deductively using extant literature (see Saldaña 2015); the coded material was then compared across and within countries, and themes identified (for a more extended discussion on methodological considerations, please see Brooks et al. 2022). This approach to data production has allowed us to make useful cross-national comparisons by identifying the similarities and differences across the three countries, but it also limits our ability to make more nuanced comparisons among students across social categories *within* the selected countries as we did not analyse the responses of students as individuals with varying social characteristics but as members of a group. Nevertheless, using this approach enabled us to explore institutional factors that may shape students' standpoints, which we discuss in the subsequent discussion.

The key themes that emerged from the data, in relation to the specific question of how students viewed their construction as consumers are discussed below. We first explore similarities across the three countries before discussing some salient differences.

### **Similarities across countries – students resisting the consumerist discourse**

The overwhelming majority of students resisted being seen as consumers. Most of them felt that the prevalence of student-consumer discourse, especially in policy and media, was 'absurd', 'unfortunate', and 'unnecessary'. Inevitably, across focus groups, the discussion of consumerism quickly moved on to the topic of high tuition fees and how this financial burden on students impacts the wider issues concerning equal access to HE. The majority of our participants considered paying a high fee for HE as 'wrong', 'unfair', or 'paradoxical in a welfare state' (as mentioned above, despite specific institutional variations, all countries in our sample operated on a welfare state module), and 'unjust'. Two key strands of discussions in relation to these were: 1) across countries, students stressed that education is a right and should not be perceived as a service or a product – although many of them acknowledged that in reality, education had been reduced

to a piece of paper, a degree certificate; 2) students highlighted the implications of consumerist discourse on their university experiences. We will discuss these in turn below.

### ***Education is a right, neither service nor product***

The majority of students across universities acknowledged that the construction of students-as-consumers tends to portray education as a ‘service’ or a ‘product’, reduced to a piece of paper that certifies their knowledge and skills, and the consumerist discourse often frames universities as service providers. However, most students across countries emphasised that they perceived education as a way for them to contribute to society and viewed their role in assisting their nation’s growth and development and using their skills and knowledge to realise their goal of making a better world. This resonates strongly with how students discussed the wider purpose of education more broadly across our dataset (discussed in Brooks et al. 2021). These views were particularly dominant in Denmark and Spain, where many students did not identify themselves as consumers (we will return to this later in the article). Notably, though, many English students also held these views, including a few students who clarified that even though they saw themselves as consumers, this perception did not necessarily mean that they viewed their education only in terms of its value in the job market. The following excerpts exemplify dominant narratives across countries.

[...] in the end it is the future of a country, and I don’t mean only university education, all levels. I don’t believe you can think of it [education] as a simple product, no, I don’t share that view at all. In fact, it [seeing education as a product] seems like a very cold attitude, and a very dangerous one, that idea is quite dangerous. (Spanish HEI2)

... it [education] is about being enlightened with the ideas, so you can change society afterwards. The consumer view doesn’t apply anywhere and you lose something by viewing everything as a consumer, everything like a corporation. (Danish HEI3)

... we’re going to university in order to learn how to contribute properly and to utilise ourselves properly. So I think that would end up causing some problems if we were just seen as sort of buying a degree or something. (English HEI3)

Furthermore, across focus groups, the discussions of consumerism in HE were closely tied to debates on equality and accessibility in HE. More generally, students across countries identified the impact of social class in mediating access to and experiences of HE (Brooks et al. 2020). Specifically, most students across countries maintained that the rapid marketisation of HE, seen primarily through the lens of high fees, worsened inequality in accessing HE among social groups. This discussion was particularly dominant in students’ narratives in England and Spain. In these countries, students acknowledged that in a society where education has become a valuable resource for realising social mobility, assigning high fees for studies at the HE level creates inequalities of opportunities. Here, students stressed that since a university degree is often desired for attaining the aspired living standard, putting a high price on it produces disparity and segregation in society.



I think especially in the UK where education is like still really like hierarchical and like there is class divides, I don't see why putting like consumerism on that, like excluding the poorest people from, when they're just as clever as everyone else, like I don't think that's right at all, like I think you should be able to come to university based on how clever you are and nothing else, like a lot of people don't come because they can't afford it and that's just I think very wrong. (English HEI2)

It seems to me that things are moving this way, because it wouldn't [be] like this if the universities and education were part of the public sector and truly universal. Now we know it's not like that, and if you do not have a minimum level of income you cannot go to university, not for all the stories they try to sell you along with promises of grants, in the end you discover it's rather more complicated to get into university than it might seem, therefore, we know that the people who are here are here because their economic situation allows it. (Spanish HEI1)

In addition to this critique of marketisation in HE, stemming *primarily* from the high financial cost of pursuing a university education, students, especially in Denmark but also in Spain, highlighted the impact of marketisation policies on programme choices available for HE students. This link to some market-driven policies in Denmark (Madsen 2019) was discussed in terms of reducing student enrolments in programmes that are relatively less successful in employing their graduates. Hence, students discussed the implications of market-driven consumerist discourse not only in terms of whether everyone has an equal opportunity to access HE but also in relation to which subjects they are offered.<sup>1</sup>

These findings suggest that many students were not just passive observers of neo-liberal HE practices; rather, they recognised the implications of such practices for how HEIs and they themselves are viewed in society. Students in our study not only were aware of these practices, but they also resisted the changes within HE that positioned them as consumers, making them not narcissistic, as Nixon, Scullion, and Hearn (2018) contend, but as responsible and agentic social actors who, as Tomlinson (2017) found in his study, 'do not conform to the ideal student-consumer approach' (450). Moreover, the majority of students who participated in our study maintained that education for them served a purpose bigger than just getting a job after graduation – and such thinking was deeply embedded in the discussion of the implications of the prevalent consumer culture for students' university experience, more broadly. We discuss this below.

### **Implications for students' university experiences**

This section explores students' perspectives on consumerist discourse in HE, discussing specifically what being a consumer actually meant to the students. The discussion below suggests that many students across the three countries saw students' consumer identity as a direct outcome of the rise in tuition fees, and they heavily critiqued consumeristic discourses for their implications for students' university experiences as learners. Specific ways in which students across focus groups framed the construction of students as consumers were: 'a dangerous one', 'unhelpful', 'narrow', 'limiting' and problematic, particularly in terms of its implications for their learning practices. As such, we found that most of our participants had a stronger learner identity than a consumer identity (cf. Molesworth, Nixon, and Scullion 2009) – the following excerpts illustrate students'



concerns about potential conflict between both identities and how they favour the former over the latter. Specifically, students across countries believed how consumerist discourse emanating from high tuition fees can make their educational experience more transactional.

it's just when you are paying for something . . . you expect to get a certain outcome of that . . . if you pay £9,000 to have a semester at university . . . then you might not get the grades that you wanted, you know, you could be a little bit like, yeah but I paid the money. And . . . I think you just become a different student if you like put money in it, then you would study in a different way. And I think that could be negative. (Danish HEI2)

I think they see us as clients, without paying any attention to how much you are paying for university. Even if you're paying only a little, you are still paying, so university education continues to be a product; and there are a lot of people at university, not because they want to learn things, but because they want to add the fact that they've got a university degree to their CV. And in the end, that's what you're paying for, to be able to put it in your CV. (Spanish HEI2)

I've like seen articles about students . . . blaming their academic staff or the university as a whole, because they didn't get a First . . . as much as you are paying for your education, it's also still your responsibility to then learn and do the work, and like if you don't get a First it, if you don't get the grade you wanted, it's not necessarily like, oh well I'm paying this much money, so I deserve this grade . . . just because you're paying for it doesn't necessarily mean you're guaranteed a certain grade, like you still have to put in the effort. (English HEI2)

Furthermore, the majority of students expressed concerns about how the construction of students as consumers can negatively impact their relationship with staff and other students. This again raises questions about the power relations discussed in Nixon, Scullion, and Hearn (2018) – for example, students in our study maintained that the prevalent consumeristic discourses enforce an 'impersonal', 'business relationship' driven by instrumental ideals and weaken the ethos of mutual trust and care that *should be* cultivated in the university settings between both staff and student (as also discussed in Brooks and Abrahams 2018). For example:

I don't want to feel as, or be seen as a customer either like because we are here to like . . . to . . . do, do something in academia some way. I think the best way to do that is not by being a customer, buying [an] academic product, like it should be way more about trust and caring and . . . yeah, stuff like that, instead of . . . yeah (laughs) a business relationship. (Danish HEI1)

I think it can be kind of a way of showing that, with the tuition increase, that it is turning into that kind of a system, that it is de-personalising the system, and it's veering in the direction that isn't something that we'd want. So I would understand it if it was a term used to kind of point out where the system's going wrong. But not a term that should be used in . . . to say this is what the system is and this is the way that, for example, a lecturer should treat it because . . . no! (English HEI3)

[. . .]You come here, you do what you have to do and then you leave and that's that, when in reality you can make your life here, you can have an impact at the university, you can actively participate within the university. It's also like taking value and weight from the students within the university. [system] (Spanish HEI1)

Although some scholars have argued that metaphors such as 'consumer' and 'customer', denote a passive student identity, whereas 'client' suggests students' role as negotiators

(Tight 2013), students in our study appeared to use the words ‘consumer’, ‘customer’ and ‘client’ interchangeably, focusing not on the specifics of these words, but how they collectively represent commercialisation of higher education and instrumentalisation of staff-student relationships. Importantly, although students recognised these implications of the consumerist discourse, they argued that they themselves resisted these practices in their everyday lives. This corresponds with the discussions about acts of *doing* and *thinking* HE *without* neoliberalism, and so producing counter-conducts in everyday HE practices (see, for example, Cannella and Koro-Ljungberg 2017).

Nevertheless, although we see students rejecting the language of consumerism and articulating in specific ways how it negatively impacts their relationships with education and other social actors in the HE sector, we also found some evidence of students accepting other practices associated with consumerism and marketisation of HE – these are discussed in the following section.

### **Differences across countries – influence of socio-economic context**

While there were significant similarities in students’ views, we also found notable country-level differences, signifying that while students, irrespective of their country context, rejected the notion of consumerism and gave similar explanations for doing so, there were also more nuanced national-level specificities in these discussions. Both similarities and differences denote the complexity of consumerist discourse in HE settings. In our data, these differences appear to be shaped by the larger socio-economic context in which students found themselves – factors such as prevalent funding regimes, cultural norms, and dominant policy discourse were prominent in influencing the ways in which students discussed further the construction of students as consumers, a connection often made explicit by students themselves.

#### **Denmark: students as investments, not consumers**

At first, the concept of students as consumers appeared to be alien to many of our Danish participants – Denmark was the only country in our sample where the majority of students did not initially understand this concept, which may have been because students are simply not seen as consumers in Danish HE policies (Brooks 2021). After we explained the concept by giving examples of other countries, a common response from students across Danish HEIs was that this way of viewing students simply ‘does not apply’ to their context. Students explained that unlike in other countries where students pay for their education, Danish students are not expected to pay any tuition fees and are usually provided with a stipend during the course of their degree programme – as such, the consumerist discourse remains virtually absent in the Danish HE sector, more broadly.

We get paid and somebody’s paying for our education, and I enjoy the welfare state of, of Denmark that, that’s the opportunities that we have . . . I wouldn’t say that we are customers.  
(Danish HEI2)

Neoliberal ideas are however prevalent in the Danish context. For example, the Study Progress Reforms, introduced in 2014, have sought to encourage students to move through their studies more quickly, so that they can enter the labour market sooner –

while entry to courses that are perceived as having poor labour market outcomes has been restricted (Madsen 2019). However, such ideas are not reflected in terms of the financial cost of higher education in Denmark to students themselves. This suggests the importance of the funding regime in shaping how students view themselves – because students did not pay for their education, they did not see themselves consumers. Besides the funding infrastructure of the Danish HE sector, another possible reason for students' rejection of consumer ideals may have been because of the broader cultural and societal norms regarding education in Danish society. Specifically, students considered the idea of conceptualising students as consumers conflicted with 'the Danish way of thinking of education' – students used the concept of *Dannelse*, which considers the purpose of education to be about realising personal growth and development rather than merely acquiring knowledge and skillsets to suit the market demand, to explain this (this concept was discussed in the way Danish students discussed their transition within HE, too – see Brooks et al. 2022). For example:

We're part of our education . . . we don't just stand [sic] in line buying an education . . . we're making it ourselves too . . . making it for each other . . . We don't just get a product . . . we don't just buy you know teaching and then . . . expecting to get knowledge, we also have to contribute ourselves. (Danish HEI1)

Because a customer usually doesn't have to make an effort . . . Like the customer goes in there and you give them something and then they go out again and they don't really think more about it . . . you're not really critical about it. But then, I don't think that that's how students are. (Danish HEI2)

As such, rather than being passive recipients of an education product (an education certificate, for example), Danish students regarded themselves as active contributors to the knowledge they received as part of their degree programmes – hence, the nature of the exchange between them and HEIs, students maintained, was not the same as the one between a consumer and a provider (as it is often framed in English policy documents, for example – see Sabri 2010). Considering education as a lifelong process and valuing education beyond just a completion of a degree programme, for example, were crucial and central to Danish participants' standpoints in our study.

Interestingly, the lack of consumer discourse in Denmark meant students did not have a 'consumer-like' relationship with the HEIs, as was the case for some of our English participants, but they still maintained they felt collective responsibility towards the state and society that funds their education. A few students across HEIs maintained that the funding regime within the Danish HE sector generates a discourse where students are seen as investments for the future. Indeed, in Denmark, policy documents understand students as 'part of a broader societal investment in education and the public benefits that flow from this' and position them 'not as the bearers of consumer rights, but as having certain responsibilities to society' (Brooks 2021, 169). Correspondingly, students felt obliged to act in a manner they thought they were expected to, which included progressing efficiently through their studies and contributing effectively to labour market demands after they graduated. Hence, rather than being seen as consumers, some students talked about being seen as investments.

[I]n Denmark it works that way. Yes, we consume, we spend money from the Govt, which when we then become educated and we get a job, we will . . . earn money, we'll pay taxes and

we'll contribute to society in that way, so we're kind of giving it all back. So it's an investment for society instead [...] they're not throwing the money away, they're investing, investing them in people, which will then contribute to society afterwards. Yeah, but it is an investment from a Govt point of view. (Danish HEI3)

Indeed, many students clarified that the financial aid offered to them to study comes with the pressure to excel as 'ideal future workers' who pay taxes and boost the economy. They talked about being 'watched' by the state to ensure they progress well throughout their study and afterwards and being criticised if they failed to meet these demands (students are often discussed as objects of criticism in Danish policy narratives – see Brooks 2021). Many students across HEIs discussed the urgency 'to prove something', to meet the societal and governmental expectations from them – as such, although not in the same way as consumers typically do, they shared an exchange relationship with the state and society that pays for their education. Hence, the specific way in which neo-liberalism appears in society can have a significant impact on how students feel they are seen in society.

### ***Spain: students are increasingly seen as consumer products***

When discussing the construction of students as consumers, many Spanish students tended to compare Spain with other countries – some students (notably only those from the private university in our sample) contended that this construction does not apply to Spain because the Spanish HE sector is still dominated by public universities that charge substantially lower fees than many private universities do, making access to HE easier than it is the case in other HE sectors where students have to pay a lot more financially in order to pursue a university education.

I think ... we have more state universities, we have more grants, more options, more opinions, people from lower social classes, if I may put it that way, people who don't have the resources, can now have access to university. However, in other countries it is very difficult to get to university, they have to have a very good salary, so I think that in Spain everything is completely the opposite, it's easier to get into university. (Spanish HEI2)

Some students, while acknowledging that a substantial proportion of HEIs are publicly funded, considered that students still 'pay for their degree', and so saw themselves as 'clients' and the university as a 'company' and a part of the larger capitalist economy: 'In the end we are clients because society is based on money, people give their service in return for money, be it in education, be it in health, everything' (Spanish HEI2). These admissions were nonetheless often combined with a strong aversion towards rapidly marketising HE.

I consider myself as a client. When you're paying 1,700 euros a year it's no longer a right, in reality you're a client, it could make you embarrassed and shouldn't be like this. (Spanish HEI1)

In Spain, students across HEIs discussed noticeable transformations in the Spanish HE sector that appear to favour neo-liberal ideals. Students substantiated the view that the Spanish HE sector was moving *towards* marketisation by giving examples of the closing down of departments at Spanish universities, such as philosophy, because

although the subject was seen as having scholarly value, it was deemed less responsive to labour market demands. The majority of students, however, resisted the idea of viewing students as merely consumers of the services that the university provides them with.

I see the university as something more than a simple company in which you pay for a certificate. That is, I came here to become a person [to enrich myself] [. . .] Some lecturers can change your life and all that, and you can't put a price on that; and some students also. (Spanish HEI3)

The public good function of the university (as alluded to earlier) was defended most strongly by the Spanish students in our dataset. As discussed above, the marketisation of HE was seen by all our Spanish participants as harming the purpose and reducing the value of education in society. This is likely because the Spanish HE is currently *moving towards* privatised and marketised HE sector, making students feel more sensitive and more powerfully resistant to these neoliberal ideals – the sense of fear and resistance towards this change in the HE sector was also evident in the plasticine models students made that showed the negative impact of market-oriented education on students' everyday experiences (Brooks and Abrahams 2021). This can be contrasted with the case of England, where neoliberal changes have continued to be adopted for more than a decade now: many students, although they discussed consumerism in detail, were more attuned to themselves being constructed as consumers than many of our Spanish focus group participants (also see Brooks and Abrahams 2021).

In addition to the rise in tuition fees more generally across the Spanish HE sector, another aspect of neoliberalism that many students talked about was the growth of the private sector in HE. Students across focus groups discussed how the privatisation of HE makes consumer discourse increasingly relevant to Spain. The majority of students in public universities in our sample suggested that if they paid high tuition fees (to study in a private university), they would likely have better employment prospects upon graduation – 'depending on the price you will have better or worse employment, like if you want to buy a car, if you pay more you'll have the best' (Spanish HEI1). Students in both public and private universities in our sample maintained that private education is not merely about what they study in courses, but about networking for the benefit of getting better employment opportunities.

If you go to a private university you have to pay, but afterwards you are sure of a high-level job [by means of nepotism], oh yes, you are paying for your future, you are paying for your [eventual] job, your stability/security and your living standard. (Spanish HEI1)

Many students in the private university maintained that they themselves pay high tuition fees not only for the degree programme but also for making useful connections, thus improving their future career prospects (discussed in detail in Brooks, Gupta, and Jayadeva 2021). As discussed earlier, Spanish students were most resistant to the concept of understanding students as consumers. These discussions were closely coupled with ideas of credentialism and credential inflation in Spain. For example:

So, we are clients whilst we are paying such great sums of money, and you have to take into account that when you finish your degree you have to do a master's because if you don't you

know that your degree is not enough, it's like a piece of wet paper, and the master's is even more expensive, and it is because of [of] this that we are evidently clients. (Spanish HEI1)

Students talked about how they would receive greater returns if they invested more into their higher education by completing a postgraduate course after finishing their undergraduate degree programme. These discussions were often held in the wider context of youth unemployment in Spain, which at the time of data collection was 34.3% (the second highest of any EU country – the corresponding proportion was 11.3% in the UK and 9.3% in Denmark (Eurostat 2019)). It is in this context, that students felt that they were likely to have greater job opportunities for employment if they had more advanced-level qualifications.

### ***England: students as consumers without (proper) rights***

England was the only country in our sample where students discussed the construction of students-as-consumers throughout the focus groups, including in response to other more general questions we asked them, signalling that they already had a greater understanding of this construction than their counterparts in other countries in our study. This is likely due to the prevalence of consumerist discourse in both English policy documents (see Brooks 2021) and the media (Brooks et al. 2022).

Notably, only in the high-status HEI in England did students talk about the institutional rejection of consumerist discourse and appear to distance themselves from the construction of students as consumers and education as a product. However, many students did articulate that they pay significant amounts for their education, and they are often seen as consumers – this was again in contrast to Denmark, where students felt that the concept was entirely inapplicable. The majority of students in England agreed that students are consumers as they are ‘paying for a service’ and talked about the more general discourse on viewing university as a ‘business’, ‘It’s giving a service and it’s earning money to keep it running’.

[W]e are customers, like ... like it or not, at the end of the day we are paying, and we're paying for a service, and university is providing that service ... (English HEI1)

While the majority of students spoke about the negative implications of this construction (as discussed in the previous section), some students across HEIs in England also listed the benefits of viewing students as consumers – they suggested that as consumers, they have ‘greater flexibility’, ‘greater motivation to learn’, ‘ability to shape their university experience’, and they can potentially ‘hold universities and staff accountable’. For example:

I think it can be seen as a good thing, it makes universities kind of improve their performance because as consumers we're, as students, we're making the choice between which university and we're looking at what each university offers us. And so it makes universities improve because they want to get our money. But, and then I think it can also mean that maybe students value their education a bit more if they're consumers, because you know like you said, like it's an investment, they're paying for it [...] if you are a consumer, it makes you really think about whether it's the right choice for you. So I think it can be a good thing. (English HEI2)

One of the major themes that emerged from English focus groups across HEIs was that students felt they are ‘consumers without rights’ – i.e. while many students shared the view that they are increasingly seen as consumers, they spoke about not enjoying the same rights within the university as typically consumers do in other market settings. Students used the word ‘rights’ quite generically rather than in relation to particular rights, such as the right to complain, ask for repayment, and advise at the management level, which other national-level studies have already discussed in detail (see, for example, Molesworth, Nixon, and Scullion 2009; Nixon, Scullion, and Hearn 2018; Sabri 2010; Tomlinson 2017).

Specifically, students discussed that although how students are portrayed has changed with the increase in tuition fees (i.e. the students are often seen as consumers), the university system itself has not undergone a similar degree of change. Students maintained that strong adherence to traditional ‘teaching styles’, poor access to resources, including lecturers, and the lack of spaces available to students make it difficult for them to benefit fully from their university experience. These students claimed that they are simply not receiving value for money, as the high amount of fees they pay for their education is not reflected in the services they receive – ‘I don’t feel like my nine grand [£9000] is going towards what I’m getting!’. This was discussed particularly with regards to the education delivery and quality of teaching and learning support to which the students had access.

From my personal experience, I mean the lectures, there’s like 200 students in the whole lecture, even though in the seminars there’s like thirty students in the seminar, so we won’t have enough quality one to one times, especially some students might need extra help than others and . . . if they’re not willing, if they don’t have the time to allocate a specific time for one to ones then they’re not really meeting the standards of providing the service. Because each, different people have different needs and they need to be met if they’re paying, if everyone’s paying the same amount at the end of the day. (English HEI1)

Students talked about how the members of the senior management team at universities, who are paid a large amount of money, rather than students, may be the main beneficiaries of consumer practices in HE. They said if students were true consumers perhaps a significant proportion of that sum could instead be utilised more efficiently by bettering the university facilities, thus improving the experiences of students and covering some of the costs of education that students end up paying for, in addition to their tuition fee. Indeed, the remuneration of senior management in UK universities has been discussed in the literature as a governance issue arising from the shift ‘from collegial to more corporate forms of operating’ of HEIs, thus associated closely with the policy narrative on viewing students as consumers (Boden and Rowlands 2022, 263). In powerful ways, students were engaging positively with some aspects of consumerism even if rejecting the term.

## Conclusion

This article has provided a unique account of HE students’ views on the construction of students as consumers in three European countries. We have shown that irrespective of the specificities of HE sectors in Denmark, England and Spain, there are strong



*similarities* across these countries in the way in which students reject consumerist terminologies, how they understand the implications of consumer culture within HE, as well as how they critique the processes and practices involving the marketisation of HE more broadly. However, we have also noted crucial *differences* in students' perspectives and how these were shaped predominantly by the funding regime in each of our selected countries. The discussion this article has produced alludes to the complex ways in which students understand and appraise the construction of students as consumers.

We found that the majority of students resisted the consumerist discourse within HE on the grounds of the ways in which such discourse has limited the understanding of education as merely a service or a product. Students acknowledged the negative implications of such a discourse on their learning experiences as well as their relationship with members of staff. The article has revealed that while some students see value in consumer discourses, most students across countries strongly condemn the construction of students as consumers as they find it profoundly problematic and one which stands in opposition to providing everyone equal access to education and, in turn, life opportunities. These findings contrast with some of the other research conducted, for example, in the UK, that argues that students approach their studies purely instrumentally (Molesworth, Nixon, and Scullion 2009; Nixon, Scullion, and Hearn 2018). They also deviate from the policy narratives that consider staff primarily as service providers and students as recipients of those services (Sabri 2010). Interestingly, the seemingly homogenised students' viewpoints on education as a right – and neither a service nor a product – do not appear to be an outcome of policy convergences to achieve neoliberal agenda in HE; rather, these represent instances of discursive protest against such policies, with students exercising their agency as key political actors in society (see Brooks et al. 2020). These observations suggest social actors' viewpoints do not always passively reflect policy standpoints, and as such, policies do not necessarily translate into everyday HE practices.

Alongside these remarkable similarities in students' views, we also found substantial differences in their perspectives on consumerism more broadly and how these fed into student identities more specifically. These differences in our data can be mapped onto the variations in societal context across three empirical settings, particularly their funding regimes and dominant policy narratives but also cultural specificities, as noted in the case of Denmark. For example, Danish students mentioned that the collective responsibility they experience towards the state and wider society is not necessarily how students in other countries where students contribute significantly towards the cost of their education may feel. Instead, for them, being seen as an investment was a more relevant discussion. This could be contrasted with English focus groups, where the majority of students did see the relevance of consumerist discourse in their everyday HE experiences and engaged more fully with various ways in which this construction is implicated with their educational experiences. As such, the consumerist discourse that often emerges in institutional contexts where students make personal financial contributions towards their education may not appear (at least in the same way) in countries where the state makes those investments *for* students. Indeed, a variety of factors, including the way in which neoliberalism exists in different countries, can impact students' views on consumerist discourse and their perception of its relevance to their everyday lives.

Furthermore, we have also observed differences in students' perspectives within countries and how these are likely to be shaped by the institution one attends. We did

not find such differences in Denmark, which may have been because, as compared to other countries in our sample, the Danish HE system is the least vertically hierarchical. However, we encountered a variety of contesting opinions among students in the other two countries with a relatively greater institutional hierarchy with the HE sector. For example, students from the high-status university in England and private HEI in Spain were more likely than their counterparts to distance themselves from consumer narratives. In England, we see this in the form of an institutional standpoint, where students remarked upon university leaders' insistence on rejecting the transactional discourses between staff and students. In Spain, while for the students in public universities, paying tuition fees was greatly problematic, it was not articulated as a grave concern in focus groups in the private university. This suggests that institutional *culture* can influence stakeholders' – in this case, students' – viewpoints about HE as a system and its practices.

Overall, we argue that the construction of students as consumers is more complex than what many contemporary investigations of this may have suggested. Students are likely to carry multiple views on consumerism simultaneously. These may vary from viewing this student construction in opposition to the practices it supports, such as rising inequality in accessing HE, to engaging positively with some of its other aspects, such as staff accountability. Notably, though, many of the comments students made establish that they are actively engaging with this discourse by sharing their concerns – these engagements suggest that instead of being passive learners and instrumental recipients of educational services, students have firm beliefs in education as a right and a public good and in its purpose beyond its returns in the labour market. This, we suggest, has implications for both policy and practice. It seems important that those teaching in higher education do not assume that students are motivated only by the desire to transition smoothly into the graduate labour market. Pedagogy must be sensitive to the various other aspects of a university education that are important to students – such as the opportunity to engage politically and contribute to wider society. Similarly, policy-makers would do well to heed the voices of students in relation to these broader goals and recognise that, for many, a degree is much more than a ticket to subsequent employment. Without this recognition, the disconnect between politicians and young people, well-documented across Europe over the past few decades, may grow.

## Note

1. It should be noted, however, that this Danish reform is driven by the aim of aligning the higher education sector more closely to the labour market. It is not a fully market-driven mechanism, as demand (with respect to students' subject choices) and supply (of university places) are not allowed to operate freely.

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## Author contributions

Our contributions to the article were as follows: Achala Gupta (lead author; data analysis and writing); Rachel Brooks (project conceptualisation; feedback on draft versions; writing some sections) and Jessie Abrahams (data collection, coding, feedback on an initial draft).

## Ethics statement

A favourable ethical opinion was secured from the University of Surrey's Ethics Committee: reference UEC/2016/017/FASS. All focus group participants were given a participant information sheet and signed an informed consent form prior to data collection.

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## ORCID

Achala Gupta  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-3172-8198>

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

Jessie Abrahams  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-7459-4791>

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