



**Rachel Brooks, Achala Gupta, Sazana Jayadeva, Anu Lainio, and Predrag Lažetić. *Constructing the University student: perspectives from across Europe*. Policy Press**

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This is a book review of Rachel Brooks, Achala Gupta, Sazana Jayadeva, Anu Lainio, and Predrag Lažetić's text *Constructing the university student: perspectives from across Europe*.

This book review aims to provide an insight into the key themes on a pertinent issue concerning the representations of undergraduate students in mainstream media across Europe. The key themes identified address the holistic landscape of what it means to be a student and how students navigate the complexities associated with being a student, addressing harmful stereotypes but also shedding light on images depicted within the public consciousness when considering the notion of the undergraduate student and how this can create fraught relationships between the student body and decision makers in multiple European contexts.

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Higher Education, as a sector, has become subject to an insurmountable amount of public and policy scrutiny in the last 15 years. In *Constructing the University Student: Perspectives from Across Europe* (2022), the authors take the reader on a thematic, careful, and systematic exploration of how the student body has potentially become homogenized through the massification and marketization of the Higher Education sector. The book is separated into seven chapters, including one conclusion that summarizes the discussion at a meaningful level. The book starts with an insightful first chapter that explores how the social construct of students navigating their undergraduate studies has potentially moved from that of a 'learner' to that of a 'consumer' due to the increased competition and marketization of Higher Education across Europe. This is an interesting framework to use as Brooks et al. draw on comparisons of student experience from across different institutions across the EU. These insights were a highlight of the text, as the student voice was respected and harnessed throughout. This discussion is continued in Chapter 5 (Future workers), which captures a large, student-led consortium of ideas whereby students foresee their role as participants in graduate employment differently, depending on where they study, with discussions on how to best return the money students have spent on their studies, through the notion of 'paying back' through 'contribution' to society. This sets the scene for the overall feel of the text, that while the larger narrative for some countries is that students who are paying large fees (the UK for example) can be seen as the 'consumer', but in contrast, some student bodies see university as a transformative experience, cultured by opportunities inside and outside of their chosen degree.

The creative methodologies, such as asking participants to symbolize their experiences of being a student through the use of playdough (see chapters 1 and 2), were an excellent way of allowing students to draw on the nuances of being university students. In Transitions (Chapter 2), students are seen to draw on the concept of 'becoming': does university study allow them to mobilize in a way that meets their intended goals? It became clear that for students, especially in Denmark where a consistent theme was that students wanted to 'give back', whereas students in countries such as the UK see gaining a degree as a means to access a job that equates to the money they have spent on their studies. Several themes are drawn from references to Channel 4's *Fresh Meat* (2011–2016) and other similar situation comedies from Polish and Danish television, whereby references to how students adjust to the transition of becoming a university student are discussed with regard to students' ability to become both social and political actors.

Chapter 3 (Citizens) continues by widening the narrative of the university student to that of activism (participating in student councils and other forms of student-led representation). It is rightfully asked whether this is accessible for students from working-class backgrounds, who need to work alongside their full-time studies and have little time to participate in activism meaningfully. The notion of 'resilience' is well noted here, drawing on the work of Jones (2011) and Savage (2015). Chapter 4 (Enthusiastic learners) is one of the more poignant chapters, consequently emphasizing that not all students are 'consumers', as discussed in previous chapters, but active participants in their learning and the wider university experience (engaging with voluntary experiences and research opportunities as examples).

Chapters 6 (Stressed) and 7 (Threats) explore the important issues concerning mental health and well-being, capturing concerns explored by staff working in HE (more so) and then by the media (less so). Identity politics is extensively explored within the UK context, with the student body consistently oppressed through messages around the 'value' of their degree depending on what they study. The stereotypes explored are useful and are often reflected in the increased pressure for students in HE to succeed and 'study faster, longer, and harder...'.

The narrative of the book sustains the view of 18-year-olds becoming university students for the first time, largely due to the representations of students explored mainly covering this age range. However, perhaps a wider discussion is needed around how the student body is discussed. Overall, this is an insightful study that provides a thought-provoking overview of how undergraduate students are observed through the lens of media representation, as well as how staff and students who are engaged with their studies see themselves as a community of practice. The marketization and increased competitiveness of Higher Education cannot be overlooked when discussing how students see their studies as more than a 'means to an end'; it is clearly a transformative experience of self-learning, critical thinking, and a better understanding of their relationship with their studies and what is important to them. This was a refreshing study, with conversations pertained within needing to extend beyond the 18-year-old first-year undergraduate.

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**Competing Interests**

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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