



*Eurostudents*

# CONSTRUCTING THE HIGHER EDUCATION STUDENT: A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF SIX EUROPEAN COUNTRIES

Jessie Abrahams and Anu Lainio

@Abrahamsjj @AnuLainio @EuroStudents\_

Lancaster 24<sup>th</sup> January 2017



# OVERVIEW

- Introducing Eurostudents
- Student Perspectives
- Media Perspectives
- Tentative Conclusions



*Eurostudents*



European  
Research  
Council

# RATIONALE FOR THE STUDY

- Higher education as common destination - one third of European young people now go on to HE. There are over 35 million students within Europe.
- Higher education as policy tool
  - For economic development
  - For social objectives (e.g. increasing social mobility)
- But no clear understanding of extent to which understandings of 'the student' are shared within or across nations
- Significant for, e.g., cross-border educational mobility and development of European Higher Education Area

# THEORETICAL FRAMING

- Globalisation of education policy and practice
- Mediation and enactment of policy
- Student identities
  - Consumers?
  - Political actors?
  - Future workers?

# AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

To generate new knowledge about social constructions of the higher education student

1. How are understandings of the HE student produced, shaped & disseminated by (i) policymakers, (ii) the media and (iii) HE institutions?
2. To what extent do these understandings differ within & across European nations?
3. How do students of different national & social backgrounds understand the role of the HE student?
4. To what extent are their understandings consonant with those produced, shaped & disseminated by policymakers, the media & HE institutions?

# SIX NATION COMPARATIVE STUDY

- Data collection in six European countries
  - Denmark, England, Germany, Ireland, Poland & Spain
- Chosen to provide diversity in:
  - Welfare regime
  - Date of accession to European Union
  - Level of tuition fees
  - Nature of student support system



# FOUR STRANDS OF DATA COLLECTION & ANALYSIS

1. Policy constructions  
*Rachel Brooks*

Policy texts  
Interviews with policymakers

2. Media representations  
*Anu Lainio*

National newspapers

3. Institutional perspectives  
*Predrag Lazetic*

Institutional websites  
Interviews with staff members

4. Student understandings  
*Jessie Abrahams*

Focus groups



# STUDENTS' UNDERSTANDINGS



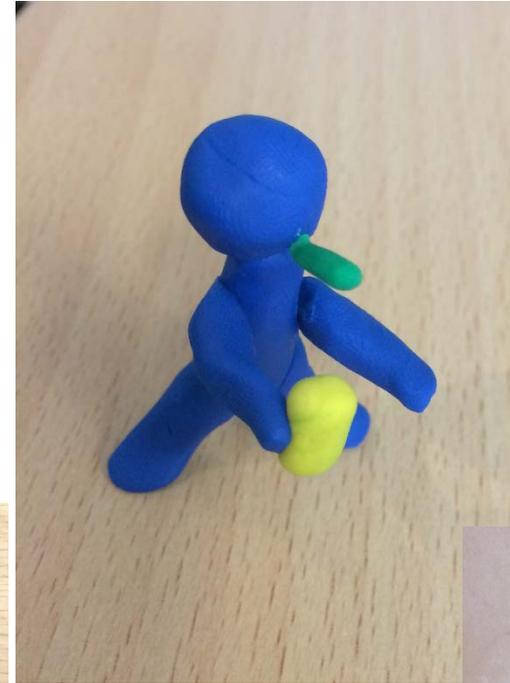
# STUDENT FOCUS GROUPS

- 9 FG completed in 3 countries (Denmark, England and Ireland)
- How students see themselves and how they feel they are seen by others
- Plasticine Modelling

## THEMES

- Students as Hedonists
- Students as Hard-Working
- Students as Consumers

# HEDONISTS



# HEDONISTS

*It seems like the media always likes to get the bad sides of students, like all the partying and that's all they want to talk about, not like what you're actually achieving or what grades you're getting*

*(ENG, HEI1, FG1)*

*Basically society thinks that we're all drunkards and that's all we do with our time up in college, rather than actually seeing the work we do.*

*(IE, HEI1, FG1)*

# HEDONISTS

*Definitely my family think I'm just like wasting my time, like partying, but as well like I get ill quite a lot, like I'm in and out of hospital all the time and nobody will ever take me seriously as soon as they find out I'm a student because they always put it down to alcohol, hormones, stress, but they never actually like think like, oh you're ill*

*(ENG, HEI1, FG2)*

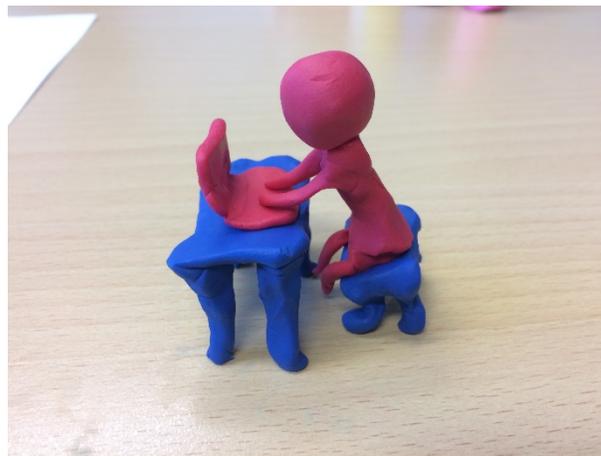
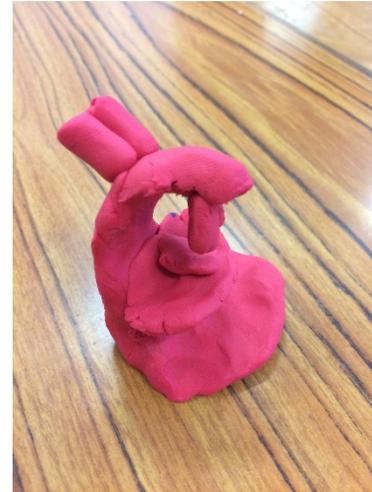


'IT'S LIKE IF YOU DON'T GO  
OUT, YOU'RE NOT LIKE A  
PROPER STUDENT'

*Mine's about people looking down because I don't drink and I don't go out at all and people just look down on you and it's like, oh why does she not go out and stuff? But it's cultural, so I don't go out. And also like when you don't get good grades and stuff in your class and people like look down, oh she didn't study that well and stuff.*

(ENG, HEI1, FG1)

# HARD-WORKING



# HARD-WORKING

*Yeah, my parents don't take me seriously in the sense of I'm at uni, they think ... if I'm asleep until like two o'clock in the afternoon, then that's because I'm being lazy, but they don't understand that I might have had a deadline for twelve o'clock, like midday, and I was up until four o'clock in the morning but that's not because I was lazy and left all my work till the last minute, but it could have been simply because of the fact like I'd completed my project and then realised that I did it all wrong, so I've got to start again like forty eight hours before.*

*(ENG, HEI1, FG2)*

# HARD-WORKING

*And I think you know the first thing someone thinks of when someone says 'student', is going out, partying, drinking, being young and not, you know, not quite as experienced. But yeah, student means study, which so you know is like we are trying to be the best we can be and trying you know to get out there and do something.*

*(ENG, HEI1, FG3)*

*I think students work really hard because a lot of them, actually everyone I know in college either is working full-time during the weekend or is working some of the weekend, sometimes in the week. So yeah, I think they're, it's a lot of hours and I think that people think we're just lazy and they're like, oh you don't have college till twelve o'clock, like you just stroll in*

*(IE, HEI1, FG1)*

# HARD-WORKING

*It's different to like back home where I'm from, so like around [City], the idea of being a student's very different to [Elite HEI], so there's a lot more drinking, rowdiness and like kind of people just expect you to like kind of do drugs and you just kind of float through. Whereas [Elite HEI], like to be a [Elite HEI] student, it carries a different like, there's something different about it, it's more like ... tame (laughs) in a sense! And yeah, it's like ... it's a good like status to carry around, so it's a lot more, you're respected if you go back home where I'm from, to have gone somewhere like [Elite HEI]*

*(ENG, HEI2, FG1)*



*It's someone like sleeping in a bed, because I feel like (...) when I tell people about my course [Criminology] (laughing) and like contact hours and stuff, I think people kind of have like an assumption of my course, and because it's not like, I don't know, it's not like a science course, it's not like really academic, they just kind of assume that I'm like, I don't know, like lazy, or that I don't have that many contact hours, so I'm like lazy and don't do that much work.*

*(EN, HEI2, FG3)*

# CONSUMER



# NOT FAMILIAR WITH CONSUMER DISCOURSE

I haven't really [thought about it before], that's why I haven't really said much because ... I don't, that's not the first thing that I really think of if you're a student, that you are, I suppose I just think you come here to learn, I haven't really looked at it in that way. I don't really have ... a wide opinion on it!

(EN, HEI2, FG2)



## Acceptance/ wanting to be a consumer

Well definitely because we're paying for a prod ... we're paying for a service [...] **as we're paying, we should be seen as a customer.**

(EN, HEI1, FG2)

## Rejecting the idea of consuming education

Like a customer kind of sounds like it's, like a business deal, I don't really like that, I don't feel like a customer, I just feel like a regular eighteen year old girl, just having a good time!

(EN, HEI2, FG3)

## THE INEVITABLE CONSUMER

I feel like we have to be [consumers], like it's just the situation we're in.

(EN, HEI3, FG1)

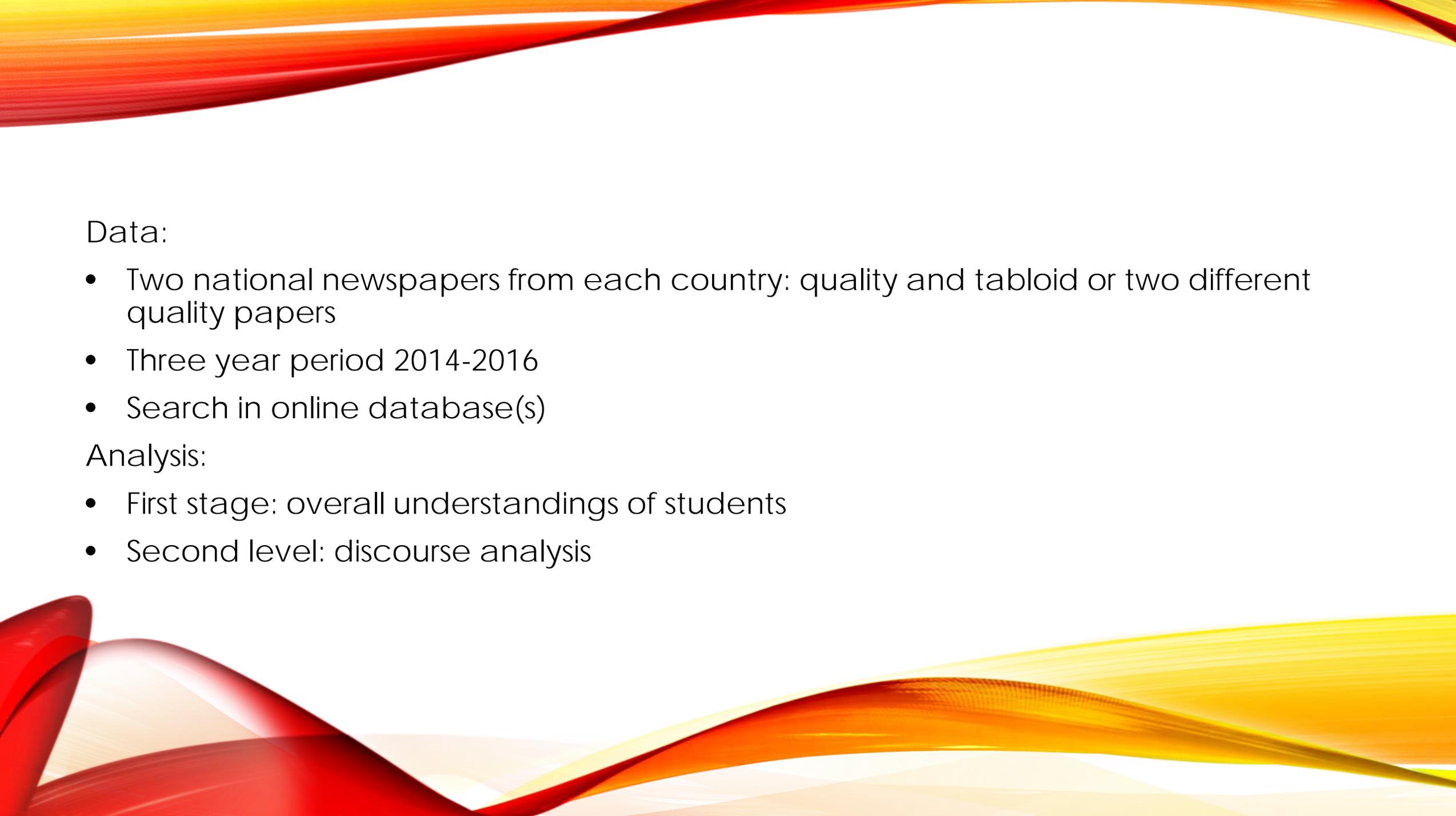
# POWER

General feeling that students were lacking the power afforded to other sorts of consumers.





**Media Perspectives**



## Data:

- Two national newspapers from each country: quality and tabloid or two different quality papers
- Three year period 2014-2016
- Search in online database(s)

## Analysis:

- First stage: overall understandings of students
- Second level: discourse analysis

# SAMPLING

<b>Student(headline) INCLUDING university OR higher education</b> (anywhere in the text) (sorted by relevance)	<b>2014</b>	<b>2015</b>	<b>2016</b>	<b>Total</b>
Daily Mail and Mail on Sunday	69	96	110	275
Guardian	457	762	692	1911

<b>Daily Mail 2014-2016 (n=150)</b>	
Articles not about students	32
Articles about international students	20
Articles included in the sample	98

<b>Guardian 2014-2016 (n= 150)</b>	
Articles not about students	32
Articles about international students	8
Arctiles included in the sample	110

# FINAL SAMPLE

	<b>Daily Mail (n= 98)</b>	<b>Guardian (n=110)</b>
<b>Average length</b>	527 words	1092 words
<b>Not written by journalist</b>	1	25
<b>Opinion pieces</b>	1	4
<b>Reference group</b>	38= students in general 32= individual(s) 19= specific group	37= students in general 30= specific group 20= general and specific
<b>Student voice</b>	18 (18,3%)	40 (36,4%)

	Daily Mail (n=98)	Guardian (n=110)
<b>Well-being of students</b>	39 (39.8%)	28 (25,5%)
<b>Students as consumers</b>	26 (26,5%)	70 (63,6%)
<b>Characteristics of students</b>	36 (36,7%) 10= positive 6= negative 3= exploiting the HE system 21= irresponsible/nuisance/hedonist	12 (10,9%) 5= positive 1= negative 1= exploiting the HE system 3= irresponsible/nuisance 4= infantile/immature
<b>Students and crime</b>	23 (23,5%) 19= victim 11= perpetrator 2= both	3 (2,7%) 2= victim 3= perpetrator
<b>Students as citizens</b>	16 (16,3%)	25 (22,7%)
<b>Students and learning</b>	3 (3,0%)	23 (20,9%)
<b>Students and employment</b>	8 (8,2%) 6= working while studying 3= future workers	20 (18,2%) 4= working while studying 16= future workers
<b>Students as political actors</b>	5 (5,1%)	19 (17,3%)
<b>International students</b>	5 (5,1%)	14 (12,7%)

**"BOOZING GAMES, BIN BAG OUTFITS... OUR FINEST YOUNG STUDENTS AT PLAY!"**  
(Daily Mail, 5.4.2014)

**"MINISTERS TELL STUDENTS TO CUT OUT THE PUB CRAWLS ... AS OXFORD'S ELITE CELEBRATE END OF EXAMS LIKE THIS!"**  
(Daily Mail, 28.5.2014)

**FRESHERS' WEEK IS JUST A COSTLY WASTE OF TIME SAY STUDENTS**  
(Daily Mail, 4.10.2016)

**WHO SAYS STUDENTS ARE LAZY!**  
(Daily Mail, 12.10.2016)

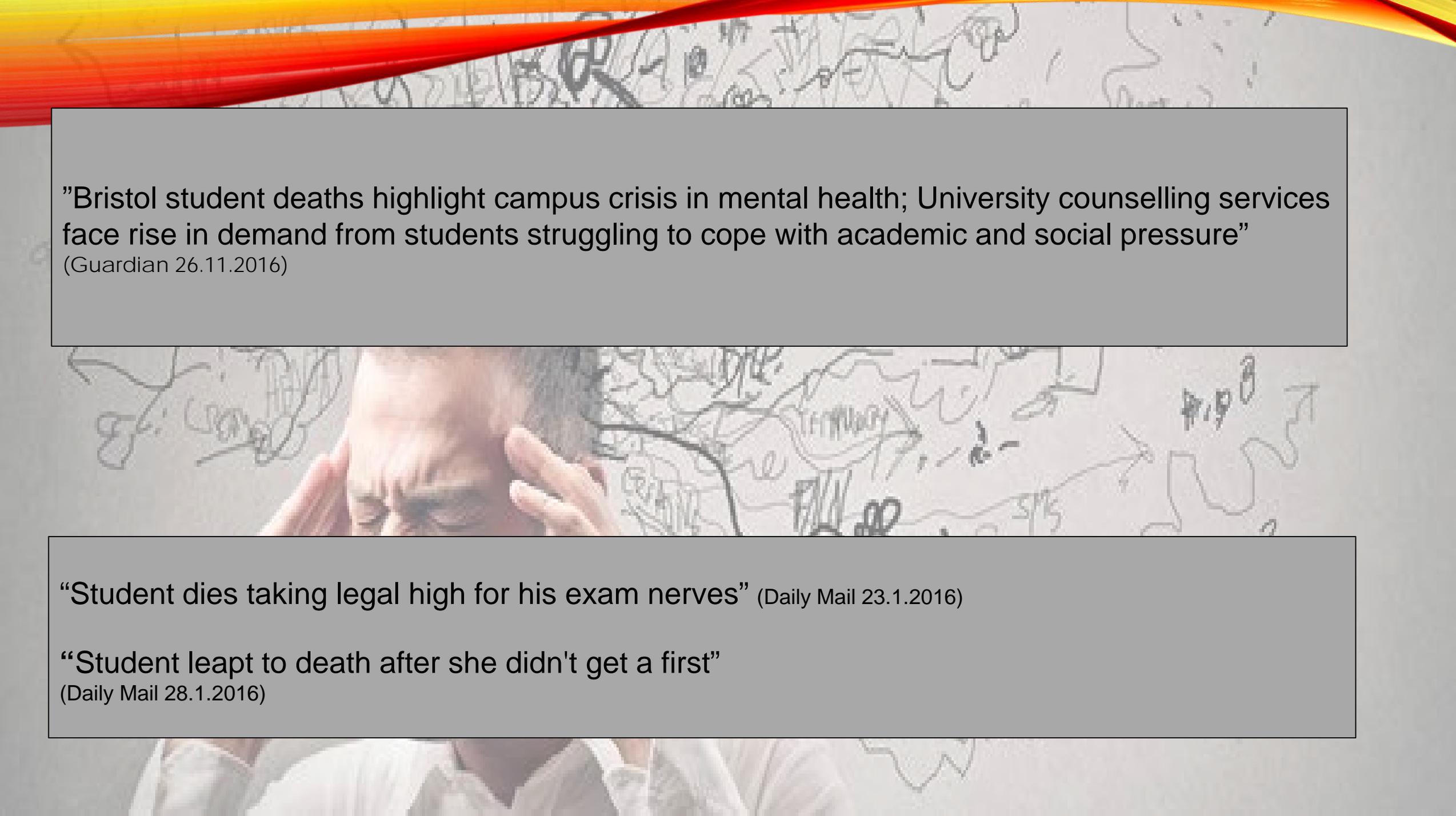
"Students are leaving university with debts of almost £50,000 - as a double blow of raised fees and sky-high interest rates kicks in. Changes to fees on their student loans mean they now pay around 18 times the Bank of England base rate - adding up to £5,000 to their debt before they even graduate."  
(Daily Mail 1.10.2016)

"Dissatisfied students want more contact time with teaching staff"  
(Guardian 4.6.2015)

"Two-thirds of students in England 'feel degree cost is not good value' " (Guardian 9.5.2016)

"Around one in three [students] complained that their course has been poor value for money and three quarters of students said their university had not provided enough information about how tuition fees are spent." (Daily Mail 4.6.2015)

"A counter-productive effect of the fees reforms is that some students are feeling, because they have paid all this money, their degree is going to happen without them having to do that much."  
(Guardian 28.4.2015)



"Bristol student deaths highlight campus crisis in mental health; University counselling services face rise in demand from students struggling to cope with academic and social pressure"

(Guardian 26.11.2016)

"Student dies taking legal high for his exam nerves" (Daily Mail 23.1.2016)

"Student leapt to death after she didn't get a first"

(Daily Mail 28.1.2016)

# TOWARDS A CONCLUSION...

## **Student perspectives**

- Constructed as 'hedonists', feel that this undermines them as 'hard workers'
- Not all students accept or want to be understood as consumers

## **Newspapers**

- Hedonist discourse not straightforward
- Consumer and wellbeing discourses interconnected

# CONTACT AND FOLLOW US

## Project Team:

Rachel Brooks (Principal Investigator): [r.brooks@surrey.ac.uk](mailto:r.brooks@surrey.ac.uk)

Jessie Abrahams (Research Fellow): [Jessie.Abrahams@surrey.ac.uk](mailto:Jessie.Abrahams@surrey.ac.uk)

Predrag Lažetić (Research Fellow): [p.Lazetic@surrey.ac.uk](mailto:p.Lazetic@surrey.ac.uk)

Anu Lainio (Postgraduate Researcher): [a.Lainio@surrey.ac.uk](mailto:a.Lainio@surrey.ac.uk)

## Website:

[www.eurostudents.net](http://www.eurostudents.net)

## Twitter:

@eurostudents\_



**European Research Council**

Established by the European Commission